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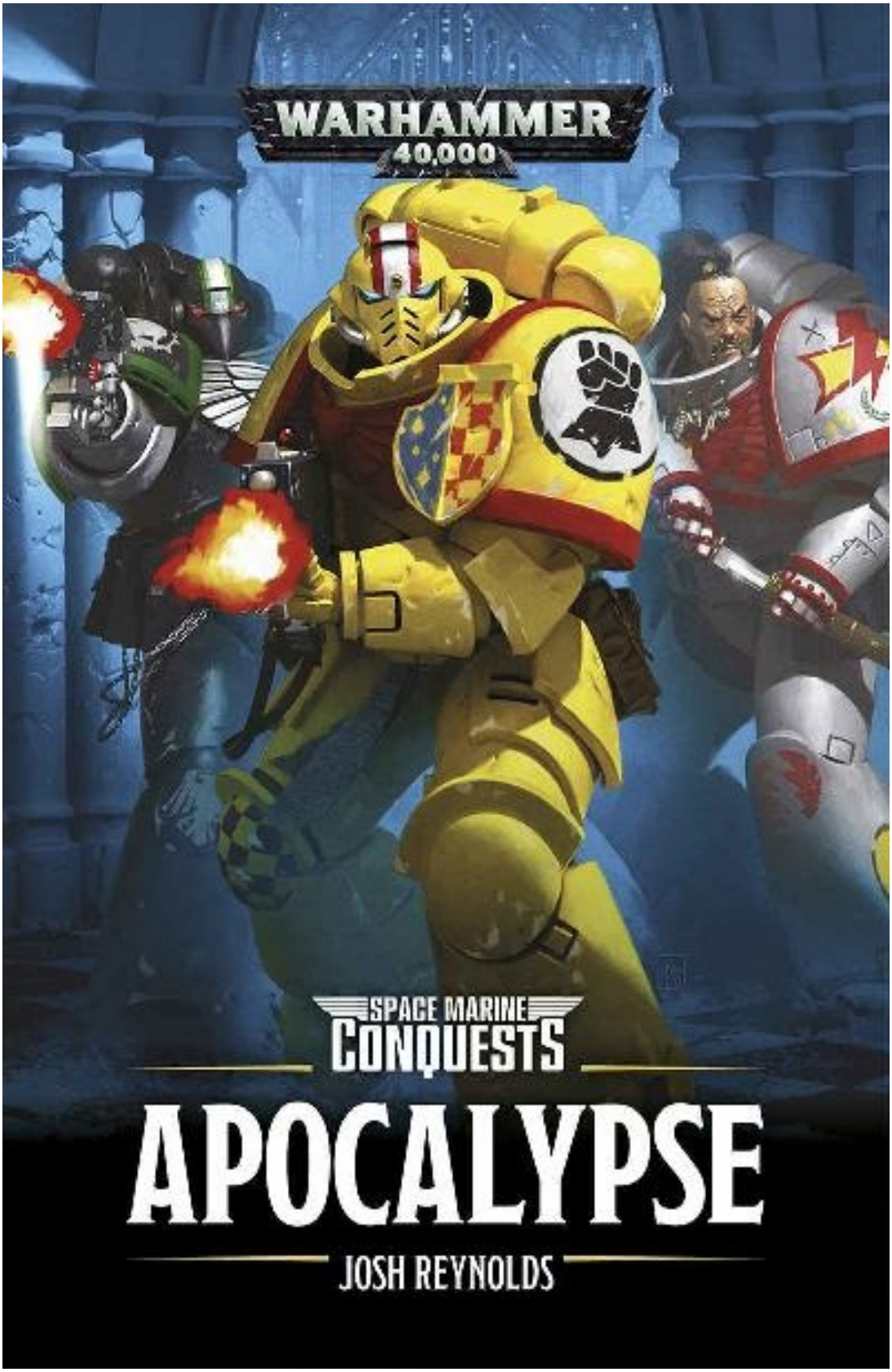
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An Extract from ‘Knights of Caliban’
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WARHAMMER 40,000

APOCALYPSE

JOSH REYNOLDS

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

00:10:50

Odoacer System, spinward edge

There was something screaming out in the dark, beyond the system’s edge.

The sound was raw. Animalistic. It spilled across the frequency bands like blood and flooded the vox-systems of *Silvana’s Martyrdom*, echoing eerily across the cavernous command deck of the Cardinal-class heavy cruiser. Ancient campaign banners hung from the cathedral arches, and towering observation plinths rustled, as if disturbed by the noise.

Commodore-Captain Aldo Ware listened to the scream, as he had every day for the past year. He strained, despite himself, trying to find some pattern in it, some sense that it might be a human voice, rather than just a sound. Sometimes, vox signals were caught in celestial eddies and twisted out of joint. They ricocheted among the stars until they were at last caught and deciphered, often centuries after they’d been sent.

Ware was an older man, born and bred to the void, with craggy features and thinning hair the colour of ice. His uniform was immaculate, thanks mostly to the constant attentions of his aide, Noels.

‘Your recaff, sir.’

Ware looked up and took the steaming mug from the man. Noels was big, ugly and imposing, built for boarding actions rather than for cleaning boots. He made for a surprisingly efficient aide, despite the unpleasant implications of his scarred features and massive, blunt-fingered hands.

‘Listen to it,’ Noels murmured, staring at the closest vox-station. ‘It never stops. Whatever it is must have died by now… but it doesn’t stop.’

Ware nodded. ‘No.’ The sound had been echoing for weeks. Whenever the ship’s vox-operators cycled through the channels, Ware had them stop on it, just to see if it had changed. But it hadn’t. It was always far away, never drawing any closer, never growing any louder. He knew that if it ever

changed, things were about to get worse. Even so, if a man could get used to such an awful thing, he had.

Suddenly tired of listening, he gestured sharply to a vox-operator, and the scream fell silent. He leaned back and sipped the recaff, grimacing in pleasure. It was unsweetened, as he preferred. The taste reminded him of long nights at a duty station, and endless labyrinths of reports. Better days. Before the sound. Before… all of it.

Ware glanced towards the viewscreen that stretched across the far side of the ship's command bridge. He already knew what he'd see. He'd stared at it long enough that it was etched on his mind's eye. One could not easily shake the image of a galaxy collapsing in on itself. It was as if the very concept of normalcy had been butchered before him.

Ware still remembered the screams of the ship's Navigator, as the light of the Astronomican flickered and went out. He could only imagine what sort of effect that moment must have had on her – a Navigator's whole purpose, their reason for being, was tied to that great light. To see it simply… blink out must have been the worst moment of her life. She still hadn't recovered. Might never recover.

He closed his eyes, trying not to remember. For an instant that seemed to stretch for an eternity, all of reality had gone as dark and as silent as the grave. And when the light returned, however weakly, it revealed vast shapes, rolling in the cosmic deeps. Monsters. Hungry immensities, feeding on wounded stars, or pawing at the innards of gutted vessels.

There had been so many of them. Things that were full of stars and heat, with teeth like broken comets. And smaller ones as well – things that crept and slunk through the lower decks. Things he'd only seen once before, when a ship he'd served on as a junior officer had suffered a momentary Geller field disruption during warp transit. Things he never wanted to see again. He took another gulp of recaff, trying to drown the memory.

'Any sign of the *Guelphian*, sir?' Noels asked, startling him. It was the same question Noels asked every day. The same question Ware asked himself, when he stirred from his nightmare-tainted sleep at the beginning of each duty cycle. Had they returned?

'No,' Ware said. 'No sign of her.' He looked down into his cup, trying to read his fortune in the leaves. 'Perhaps that is for the best.'

Noels nodded, stoic as ever. The *Guelphian* was among those ships that had gone out – on Ware's orders – and had not returned. Or worse, had come

back… changed. All but unrecognisable. Only the *Guelphian* was unaccounted for.

He held little hope that they'd see her again. His ship's astropathic choir had yet to fully recover from the sudden darkness. But what transmissions they had picked up on had been enough to give Ware some idea of conditions outside the system. Everything was in upheaval – strange voices prowled the ether, and ghost signals haunted the fleet's telemetry. The universe was coming apart at the seams.

Worlds – entire sectors – had vanished into the black, their fates unknown. New celestial bodies formed, reshaping the firmament about themselves, as if they had always been. Worse were the whispers of the return of the Emperor's holy sons – hope was an enemy. It gnawed at a man's certainty, and made him contemplate foolishness.

There was no hope. The galaxy was dying around him, and there was little he could do save watch and pray. He was not used to feeling so helpless. Old as she was, *Silvana's Martyrdom* was still a ship of the line, and capable of reducing a world to slag if he so desired. But all that power was as nothing compared to the horrors he'd seen in the months since the heavens had been rent asunder, and the distant stars extinguished.

His hands tightened about his mug. It had been nearly a year, but the horror of it all was still fresh. He remembered the flicker of weapon batteries, slicing the dark, punching through vessels commanded by those he'd called friends. All gone now, their wreckage drifting spinward. Whatever nightmares haunted them were left to do so alone.

'Might I ask what you're reading, sir?' Noels asked.

Glad of the distraction, Ware looked down at his book, and traced the gilded spine, seeking comfort in the sign of the aquila. He tapped the book with a finger. 'Sermons. From some preacher of note, though I fear I've never heard of them.'

'Not your usual reading material, sir,' Noels said gruffly.

Ware smiled. 'A gift. From his lordship.' His lordship was Cardinal-Governor Eamon, spiritual and material authority of the Odoacer System. The system was small, by the standards of the Imperium of Man – mostly agri worlds, with only two major planetary bodies. The world of Almace was the blue-green heart of the system, a cardinal world. Its ruler wasn't as bad as some, and better than most. Eamon wasn't the sort to bankrupt his own holdings with harsh tithes, but neither was he particularly spendthrift. No

more or less corrupt than most in his position.

Noels grunted. ‘A refit – or better, new ships – would have been nicer.’ It was said without any particular rancour. *Silvana’s Martyrdom* had been old even before the Great Rift had torn a bleeding hole in the galaxy’s gut. In sensible times, the ship would have already been decommissioned and salvaged for parts, her name bestowed upon another, more advanced, vessel. But these were not sensible times.

Ware chuckled. ‘That it would. Still, we’re not for the scrapper’s yard yet.’ He thumped the armrest of his command throne for emphasis. ‘The old girl has a bit of fight left in her, I think. One more, at least.’

Suddenly tired, he rubbed his face. His palm scraped against stubble. He needed a shave, but it seemed a useless affectation at the moment. Worse, a waste of water. Noels glanced at him, frowning. Ware forced a smile and sat back. ‘Status report?’

Noels straightened. Ordinarily, it would have been a junior officer’s job to deliver a report, but Ware loathed taking them away from their duties, unless absolutely necessary. Noels could summarise well enough, and Ware knew he’d already read the briefings. The big man cleared his throat. ‘The malfunction in the intake system on deck twelve has been corrected by the enginseers. All other systems performing within acceptable parameters.’

‘What about the Geller field fluctuations we detected last cycle?’

‘Negligible risk, according to the enginseer prime.’

Ware nodded. ‘Fine. What does Klemistos say?’

The chief astropath hadn’t been as badly affected by recent events as the Navigator, but not for lack of effort. When the Astronomican was snuffed out, it had been Klemistos who had cast his mind into the dark, and given warning of the horrors surging up in the absence of the God-Emperor’s light.

Noels scratched his chin. ‘A few scattered messages. According to him, there’s something interfering with astropathic transmissions. A sort of… static on the wind.’ He glanced at the viewscreen. ‘Not that there’s any wind out here.’

‘There’s a wind,’ Ware said. He rose from his command throne and stretched. Joints popped and muscles protested. Juvenat treatment aside, he was feeling his age. ‘We can’t feel it, but it’s there. A solar wind, slipping between the stars, and pushing all the heavens along a cosmic tide.’

Noels peered at him. ‘Kaminski?’

‘Hardacre. *Ode to a Starbound King.*’

Noels grunted. ‘Never read that one.’

‘You should.’ Ware stepped to the edge of the observation deck. Around him, the bridge of the ship hummed with activity. Every station below the command deck was manned, either by a rating or a servitor hardwired into a control throne. The atmospherics pumped a chill coolant across the bridge, lowering the temperature. It reduced the risk of heat fatigue in the ancient cogitators that ran most of the vessel’s low-priority systems.

Everything was performing as it should. On the viewscreen, he could see the rest of the fleet, strung out in a patrol formation. Besides *Silvana’s Martyrdom,* there were two cruisers – the *Crassus,* a Gothic-class vessel, and the *Drusus,* a Lunar-class – and *Orlanda’s Wrath,* an ageing Exorcist-class grand cruiser. Around them, a dozen Sword-class frigates acted as escorts. The fleet had been larger, once. This was all that remained, and he intended to see that it stayed that way.

The monsters had grown fewer, as the light of the Astronomican returned, if weakly. But other things had been left in their wake. Pirates and raiders haunted the asteroid belts that girdled the system, and in the wake of the dark, they’d come. They always had, but things were worse now. A weakened fleet meant freedom to attack at will. Ware had run himself and his crews ragged trying to be everywhere at once.

‘Something is out there.’

Ware turned. ‘Chief Astropath.’ Klemistos was tall and spare. A gaunt, withered husk of a man, he was clad in worn green robes, and leaned against a staff, topped with a golden aquila. He had no eyes – his sockets were scarred ruins, puckered and blackened. Like everyone else, he looked tired.

‘Did you hear me? Something is out there. Creeping towards us.’ Klemistos tapped an ear. ‘I can hear it.’ He looked around, as if whatever it was were close at hand. Crew members drew back, unsettled by Klemistos’ sightless gaze.

Ware stiffened. ‘Hear what, exactly?’

‘I cannot describe it.’

‘Try,’ Ware said.

‘I cannot.’ Klemistos frowned. ‘The universe is coming undone,

commodore-captain. The tides of the empyrean roll savage, and things long sleeping have since begun to stir. One of them is coming.' He shook his head. 'I've been trying to catch it these past weeks, but it keeps just out of my perceptions – as if… as if it knows. But I can hear it now… it's coming.' He leaned close. 'Do you understand?'

Ware could feel the eyes of the nearby crew on him. They were nervous. They were always nervous, these days. But they had reason to be. The galaxy was unravelling around them. So far, the system had been spared the worst of it, but for how much longer?

'Where?'

Klemistos pointed to the viewscreen. 'Out there. The spinward edge.'

Ware frowned. Asking for specifics from Klemistos was a waste of time. He looked down at the dregs in the bottom of his cup and gave them an experimental swirl. He was going to need more recaff.

He returned to his command throne. As he stepped onto the platform, holo-displays flickered to life and swarmed about him. They jostled for his attention, and he gestured, sending them fleeing. At his command, a star map flared into view. The spinward edge of the system. Not far. A few hours – a day, at standard power. Ware took another slow sip of recaff. An anomaly could mean anything – a stray astropathic signal, a solar flare. Or something worse.

Decision made, he activated the deck-vox. There were orders to be relayed. The fleet would split. His captains wouldn't be happy about it, but they would follow orders. That was the most important thing, these days. Discipline was what kept the fleet in one piece. Kept it functioning, despite the relentless pace of the past few months, despite the losses and dwindling resources. And not just the fleet. The system as a whole was a machine on the verge of breakdown.

The cardinal-governor had kept it running on sheer will, or so it seemed to Ware. The system was largely self-sufficient, which meant the lack of trade coming in wasn't as big a blow as it might otherwise have been. But there were already food shortages on a number of worlds, and it was getting harder to keep the fleet running on continuous cycles. Too, there was growing unrest in the outer worlds, not to mention among the bloody asteroid miners. Then, that wasn't particularly new.

None of it was, really. But whatever had happened to the galaxy was bringing it all to the surface, all at once. One crisis after another. He could

only pray that this – whatever it was – wasn't another problem for the pile.

Orlanda's Wrath, the cruisers and half of the frigates would return to Almace. Keel, the captain of *Orlanda's Wrath*, had protested, but Ware had ignored him. Keel was capable enough, but unimaginative. Dogged on defence, but lacking in initiative. He'd been passed over for command of the fleet twice, but seemed to bear no grudge. Indeed, when word had come that Ware was to be in command, Keel had been visibly relieved. Ware hoped that if the worst happened, Keel was up to the task of managing the fleet.

As *Silvana's Martyrdom* began to move, six frigates fell in on the heavy cruiser's flanks, their captains reporting in. Their faces flickered about him, as the command throne's built-in holo-display units whirred to life. They looked young to him. Too young. But they followed orders well enough.

'Establish vox-link to all ships in formation,' he said. Beneath the platform, the servitor hardwired into the throne controls gave a squawk of assent. 'All ships – lay in a new course. Grid one, point four.' The edge of the map. He paused. He felt Klemistos observing him, and Noels and all the rest of the crew. Waiting. Praying.

It was nothing. He was sure of it. Just one more noise, echoing out of the dark. Klemistos was just rattled – they were all rattled. But they had to be sure. He cleared his throat. 'All ahead standard. Thibault Excelsis formation.'

He hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

In the Imperial Navy, the ramifications of an error might not be felt for hours, days, weeks. A divergence in headings, a split-second hesitation before correcting course… It reverberated. A ship, even a small one, was not simply a vessel but a nation state of steel, and its captain, a king. Like a king, he had to be certain at all times. Ware had never felt less certain in his life than he had these past weeks.

Hours passed amid a litany of reports. Long-range scanners plied the stars, but found nothing out of the ordinary – the new ordinary, rather. But as they drew closer to the rim, the scanners grew less forthcoming. Something was interfering with the augur-systems.

By the time they reached the grid-point, they were all but flying blind. Ware ordered his small fleet into a defensive formation. Minutes became hours. Hours stretched. Ware barely moved from his throne. He could feel the wind rising. There was a storm brewing, out there between the leering stars.

'You feel it as well, don't you?' Klemistos murmured. He stood behind the

command throne, leaning against his staff, head bowed.

‘Yes. What is it?’ Ware asked.

Klemistos shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’ He shivered. ‘But it is almost here.’

‘Then we’re just in time,’ Ware said. He licked his lips, the fifth cup of recaff churning in his gut. He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. He stared at the viewscreen, willing something – *anything* – to happen.

He blinked. The blackness had seemed to twitch. He rubbed his eyes. Behind him, Klemistos abruptly clutched his head and grunted, as if in pain. Ware glanced at him in concern. ‘Klemistos…?’

‘*It’s here,*’ the chief astropath hissed.

‘Incoming warp signature,’ a rating cried suddenly, turning from her duty station.

Ware sat upright. ‘Identify it. Report when you have something!’ A babble of voices filled the deck, as everyone began shouting at once. He stared at the viewscreen. Something was happening, out there in the black. As if space were being folded back in on itself.

‘Maybe it’s someone coming to check on us,’ Noels said. ‘Last time we were docked, there were whispers – they say one of the Emperor’s sons has returned to lead the Imperium back to glory.’ Ware had heard the same whispers. Could that be it, then? Was relief finally on its way for their beleaguered system?

‘No,’ Klemistos rasped. He screamed, his staff falling from his hand. The astropath folded up like a puppet with cut strings, clutching his head, howling in agony. As Noels stooped to see to him, Ware found he couldn’t look away from the viewscreen.

At first, there was only the void. An unsettled ocean of stars. Then – light. Bright and raw, ripping upwards through the fabric of the universe. Stars blurred and stretched, contorting in cosmic agony as the firmament came unglued and spread, as if to allow the passage of something awful into reality.

‘Report,’ Ware said hoarsely. Then, more firmly, ‘Report, damn it. Someone tell me what we’re seeing. What is that?’

A moment later, he got his answer. The void convulsed again, spewing light. The ship that emerged from the unfolded space was larger than it had any right to be. To Ware’s horrified gaze, it seemed as if it had somehow grown,

in the centuries since it had first left the orbital dry dock of its commissioning, and become something too massive – too monstrous – to be perceived at a single glance. A thing alive, rather than a construct of mortal hands.

It was a leviathan of the under-realms, clad in barnacles of ritual and faith, but not any faith that Ware recognised, save from dim memories of childhood nightmares. Its slate-grey hull bristled with weaponry and grotesque decoration – undulations of metal which resembled vast, pitiless faces; sweeping gargoyle-laden buttresses and towering statuary that crouched or stretched from precarious positions. Great plates, carved with immense sigils that stung his eyes and leagues of coiling script, covered the curve of the hull. Enormous comm-towers, shaped like titanic, screaming faces, blared unceasing messages of malign devotion across all communication wavelengths.

Ware tried to blot out those voices, to ignore them. He'd heard such things before – only once, and that had been enough. His soul twisted in him, trying to flee the wrongness of the vessel that now filled his viewscreen. It hurt him to look at, and he could hear Klemistos weeping, somewhere behind him. Even Noels – unflappable Noels – seemed shaken.

'God-Emperor above,' the aide rasped. He clutched the back of Ware's throne for support. 'That's not a ship, it's…'

'An abomination,' Ware croaked. Hololithic projections of the frigate captains spun about his throne, as his subordinates demanded orders. Servitors squalled binaric death cries in their cradle-stations, bleeding oil and sparks onto the deck. Some of his crew clutched at their ears, as monstrous frequencies overwhelmed the vox-systems. Others spun away from their stations, eyes bleeding, mouths open in silent pleas. They convulsed and whined like beaten animals, or tore at their own flesh, as if trying to dig the sound out.

'What's – what's happening to them?' Noels whispered.

'Cut the vox. Cut it now,' Ware said. 'Before we lose everyone.' He fought back the surge of nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. He spotted the book the cardinal-governor had given him, lying forgotten on the deck. He retrieved it. His mouth was dry. He felt old and ill, and knew, in his heart, that he'd been right and wrong all at the same time. He licked his lips.

'All hands to stations. Roll out the guns. The Archenemy is here.'

The warp convulsed and vomited forth pilgrims.

The first, and largest, of them was at once cathedral and warship, hallowed and abominable. Its name, scrawled on its hull in the language of a dead world, was *Glory Eternal.* And it was. Every deck plate and scrap of hull resonated with a chant to the glory of the Ruinous Powers. It was a note in a glorious hymn.

It was not the single note. Others joined it. Ships of all shapes and sizes, the only uniformity the loyalties of their crews, burst from the warp, adding their own voices to the hymn. Two ships, ten, a dozen, more. Small vessels, mostly – frigates and corvettes, a swarm of escorts and fighters. There were others. Heavy cruisers and light.

But none so large as the *Glory Eternal.* It easily dwarfed the waiting heavy cruiser and its miniscule escort. Aboard the great vessel, its captain and commander studied the viewscreen with a smile of satisfaction.

Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash was tall and proud, as befitted a true son of Lorgar. His bare head was shorn smooth and tattooed from crown to chin with the three hundred approved Sigils of Faith. His slate-grey power armour was unadorned, save for a profusion of prayer scrolls and holy script nailed to the edges of each section of the ancient Mark III battleplate. He stroked the prayers, murmuring the words without looking.

He had memorised them all, of course. And thousands more besides. Prayer was the bedrock of the soul. It set deep foundations and supported the spirit in troubling days. Only through prayer and meditation could one find the truth of their being and set their feet on the correct path. Only by listening when the Dark Gods spoke could one know peace.

If only those who now quaked in his shadow could know the same peace. He stared at the vessels, wondering what sort of men might be looking back at him. Were they afraid, these slaves of a dead god? Or were they mad, like so many of their ilk, blind to all things save duty and obedience? He pitied them, regardless. If only they would listen to the song in their hearts, and accept the truth of things.

But such was not to be. Not here, not this day. He could taste his crew’s anticipation. Their eagerness to shed blood in the name of the gods. Men were meant for either the knife, or the stone. Wield the one, or be bent across the latter.

Amatnim did not give the order immediately. Pleasure deferred was pleasure magnified. So it was said by the slaves of the Dark Prince. And the skull taken in haste was a skull wasted, as the adherents of the Blood God were

wont to insist.

Instead, he watched as the enemy readied themselves for one last battle. Hands clasped behind his back, he counted the moments, allowing their despair to build. They would see his might, and hope would dwindle. The Lord of All Things would be pleased, even as his rival, the Great Gamesman, would feed on the desperate hopes of those unwilling to surrender to the inevitable. A man's soul was never more appetising than when it slid along the razor's edge.

He turned a serene gaze upon his crew, and the command deck of his vessel. The *Glory Eternal* had been a battle-barge, once. A mighty warship, its hull painted azure and gold, its crew native to the Five Hundred Worlds, and with a different name. It served a new master now. He had taken it in honest combat, face to face and blade to blade, and he cherished that victory even now, these many centuries since.

Some among his brothers mocked him for such notions. To them, the ways of open war were for lesser souls – only chattel fought in the mud. But Amatnim held fast to the teachings of the Crimson Lord, as well as the Urizen. There was more glory in an honest blow, struck well, than in all the schemes of the cunning. There was hope there, and despair. Blood and satisfaction. The gods fed well from the struggles of simple men.

He felt the crew's anticipation grow – a murmuring crescendo, swelling in the vaulted expanse of the command deck. Even the slaves wired into their control thrones babbled in excitement as their withered fingers played across antiquated cogitator panels. The bestial overseers who maintained control of the crew howled and thumped the deck with split hooves and the stocks of their guns. The great cathedral bells hanging from the highest points of the deck were rung, setting the stifling air to twitching. Clouds of incense stirred as the vague shapes of half-formed Neverborn hissed and wailed, begging for a moment of satisfaction – just a taste of the deaths to come.

Amatnim spread his arms, like a conductor before his orchestra. Every eye, mortal or otherwise, was upon him, and he allowed himself a moment to indulge in the sensation. He raised his hands, and then brought them down in a sharp gesture.

'Fire,' he said.

A moment later, the *Glory Eternal* shook down to the lowest decks as the macro-cannons, fusion beamers and plasma projectors which studded its form gave vent to the ship's killing fury. Battle-klaxons sounded, alerting duty

stations. Amatnim tilted his head, eyes closed, listening to the shrieks of his crew as death was doled out in grandiose fashion.

He did not need to look to know that the rest of the fleet was following suit. The void was aflame with the fires of destruction. The servitors hardwired into the sensor-alcoves spat static as the enemy responded – dying beasts, snapping uselessly at their killers. He barely listened. The ship's crew knew their business, and he was content to let them kill as they wished.

When he at last opened his eyes, he saw that the firmament was alight with burning debris. Enemy frigates hung like sparks in the black, tumbling slowly in place. Some were being boarded by the smaller vessels under his command. Others belonged to his fleet – the unlucky few whom the gods demanded as the price of victory.

Casualty reports came in, in the form of raw data spilling from the blistered lips of the servitors. His gaze found the enemy heavy cruiser, great wounds torn in its hull, bleeding fire and plasma. Not destroyed, not yet, but grievously wounded. He wondered whether they would continue the battle to the bitter end, or whether they would seek to escape. Either was a satisfactory conclusion to this opening engagement.

'It is beautiful,' he said to no one in particular. He spoke simply to etch his voice upon the air. To cast his words to the warp, so that the gods might hear them, and know that he appreciated the boons they had bestowed upon him.

'There is grace in silent death, and beauty in the cold fire of ships burning in the void. Vibrant hues paint the black, and in their turning I see the glories to come.' Hands behind his back, he contemplated the words, and found them lacking. Some among his Legion prided themselves on their ability to weave words, to win wars with oratory. Amatnim was not one of them. His rhetoric was one of example – he led by doing, rather than saying.

And yet, the desire to improve was ever there. The search for perfection was among the cardinal virtues the sons of Lorgar aspired to. To perfect oneself, even as one accepted the imperfections. To hope, even in despair. To kill, but in sublime fashion. These were the pillars of their church, set deep by the hands of the gods.

One followed the will of the gods in all things, if one wished to prosper. That was why he stood here, on the bridge of this vessel. It was the will of the gods. This was his quest – his mission. Though the Dark Council had set him on his path, they were but the mouthpieces of the gods. Even as Amatnim was their hand.

‘And I shall reach out, and claim glory in their name,’ he murmured, extending his hand towards the dying ships on the viewscreen. ‘Sing them a song of greeting, brothers,’ he continued, speaking over the deck’s vox-link. ‘Force them to their knees, so that we might pass in honour and peace.’

Reports from his subordinates flitted across the vox. Two ships claimed, in the name of the gods. Four burning bright, every soul aboard offered up. ‘These deaths I give unto you, O great ones,’ Amatnim said. ‘Take them, and bless me with victory in the trials ahead.’

‘We have met the enemy, then.’

‘And successfully, Lakmhu.’ Amatnim turned. ‘Hello, brother. Come to watch?’

Lakmhu, like Amatnim, was clad in battleplate of an archaic mark. His power armour was daubed crimson, and inscribed with innumerable sigils and cramped lines of script, copied from certain volumes kept in the holy libraries of Sicarius. Lakmhu had once venerated another god, and served as his priest. Now, he bowed only to the Ruinous Powers. He spoke with their voice, and walked in their shadow as a Dark Apostle.

Trails of parchment hung from the plates of his armour, and swirled about his legs as he walked. A heavy tome with a dark cover made from human hair was chained to one hip, and another was strapped to his chest-plate, its pages stirring every so often like a thing alive. He carried a heavy crozius in one hand, its length decorated with runes of power and holy abomination. His other rested on the holstered shape of a heavy bolt pistol, hanging low on his hip. Behind him came the hulking shapes of his blade slaves – twin warriors, possessed by feral Neverborn and bound to Lakmhu’s will by ancient rites.

They had been Space Marines, once. Now, they were something else. They retained the shape of men, but it was a shape broken and twisted into a contorted parody of humanity. Clad in the broken remains of crimson power armour and ragged robes, their flesh bulged through scarred plates of ceramite, and was lumpen with unnatural tumours of fat and muscle. Their arms were too long, their legs too thick and bent at wrong angles, and their heads were like dollops of melted wax, thrust into golden helms. These were wrought in the shape of the Urizen’s beatific face, and surmounted by crowns of candles.

The pair wielded daemonic blades, forged from the living talons of a Neverborn king. Or so the stories said. The swords were longer than Amatnim was tall, and even the blade slaves needed two hands – or, rather, claws – to

wield them. The weapons sweated smoke, and strange sigils glowed along the length of each dark blade as they lay at rest across their wielder's shoulders. Amatnim eyed the creatures warily. He gestured to the viewscreen. 'See, Lakmhu. It is even as the portents promised.'

'As you interpreted them, you mean,' Lakmhu corrected, harshly. 'The gods but give us seeds, Amatnim. It is up to us to collect the harvest.'

Amatnim frowned. 'Do you doubt me, brother?'

Lakmhu did not meet his gaze. 'I doubt all things, save the gods. Victory is a gift that we do not yet have in hand. Let us not crow over it prematurely.'

Amatnim grunted and turned his attentions back to the viewscreen. Frigates ceased to exist, consumed by fire. The *Glory Eternal* roared forward, brushing aside the wreckage of lesser vessels. Slaves murmured communications from the rest of the pilgrim-fleet, as the last of them appeared. The *Glory Eternal* was but the first note of an iron song that would ring out from one edge of the system to the other.

Amatnim had spent decades building his fleet, one ship at a time. He had enslaved the savage populations of a hundred barren worlds, and set them the task of crafting the vessels he required. He had made pacts with twisted Mechanicum renegades, and bargained with daemonic craftsmen. All because of a dream. A wonderful dream, of a god with golden eyes and a voice fit to soothe the troubles of a galaxy. A dream that had sent him on a quest of centuries, building ships, building an army, building influence. He had made himself a rival to demigods and daemon princes, all in the name of a dream.

And now, he was here at last. Glory was within his reach. He turned from the viewscreen. 'Take us towards the core. Plot a straight course, where possible.' Slaves and bestial crewmen scurried to obey.

'What about the outer worlds?' Lakmhu asked.

'What about them?'

'We should consolidate our gains. We cannot afford to allow ourselves to be–'

'The outer worlds have been promised to our fellow travellers, to do with as they wish.' Amatnim looked at the Dark Apostle. 'Would you have me go back on my word?'

Lakmhu frowned. 'If it was given in error, yes. We cannot trust the conquest of this system to lesser souls.'

‘Some of those souls belong to our brothers.’

Lakmhu made a dismissive gesture. ‘Not all in our Legion are equal, Amatnim. Some are little better than chattel. Milk-bloods and by-blows, raised up in recent centuries, their only purpose to die in the name of the Urizen.’

‘Like your slaves, then.’

Lakmhu glanced at his bodyguards. The creatures growled softly, the sound distorted by the vox-amplifiers built into their battleplate. ‘They are blessed. The Neverborn have made them strong. Stronger than they might otherwise have been.’

‘Well, we’ll never know now, will we?’

Lakmhu gave him a sharp look. ‘I did not come to be insulted.’

‘Then why did you come?’

‘I wish to oversee the deployment of our forces. Swift subjugation of this system is imperative. Every moment could bring reinforcements. The ether is alight with whispers of a crusade, stretching from the broken husk of Terra. A crusade such as the galaxy has seen only once before…’

‘The ether is alight,’ Amatnim repeated, somewhat mockingly. ‘Just say daemons told you, brother. That is who you heard it from, isn’t it?’

Lakmhu bristled. ‘And if it was?’

Amatnim grinned. ‘Then I know how much credence to give such whispers.’

‘The Neverborn speak with the voices of the gods.’

‘And the gods are known for their sense of humour.’ Amatnim gestured airily. ‘Do not trouble yourself, brother. It is early days, yet, and I have some small strategic acumen.’

‘Your arrogance grows tedious, *brother.* Remember whom you serve, and who speaks on their behalf here.’

Amatnim paused. Lakmhu was tendentious, even for a Dark Apostle. He turned and pointed. ‘And you would do well to remember that I am not your Coryphaus, brother. This fleet is mine, not yours. You have the ear of the Dark Council, but so do I. You are, at best, my equal in this endeavour.’ Amatnim spoke without rancour. Anger only served to feed Lakmhu’s ego, and that was large enough as it was.

Lakmhu grunted. ‘A wise man admits when he has reached the limits of his

knowledge.’ His tone was chiding, but there was an undercurrent of fury.

‘And be assured that I shall let you know when that happens.’ Amatnim smiled, knowing it would further infuriate the other Word Bearer. ‘You were never a field soldier, Lakmhu. You have ever preached from the safety of the artillery line. I do not begrudge you that – your weapon is your voice, and there is precious little room to employ such a tool in the trenches. Do not think that I have not considered the ramifications of my chosen strategy. Yes, we will leave potential foes in our wake. But consider the quality of those foes… even as you consider your own.’

Lakmhu’s face was stiff. Amatnim could smell the anger bleeding off him. The Dark Apostle wanted to activate the accursed crozius he held and strike Amatnim down. His blade slaves growled gutturally, and their swords scraped eerily against ceramite as they swung them away from their shoulders.

Amatnim waited, his expression mild. Lakmhu waved his slaves back, and gestured to the viewscreen. ‘What about that cruiser? It is not yet destroyed,’ he said.

Amatnim shrugged. ‘But it is no longer able to stop us. If those who follow in our wake wish to dispatch it, let them. If it survives, then it is as the gods will. But it is of no more import, regardless. Let it wallow in its agonies. We have other prey to seek out.’ His smile was wide and savage.

‘Almace awaits.’

CHAPTER TWO

12:10:09

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Tyr's Oath dived through the black and into the blue.

Aboard the Thunderhawk gunship, fifteen of the Emperor's angels, drawn from three Chapters, waited to spread their wings. Warriors, both Primaris and otherwise, in the heraldry of the Imperial Fists, the Raven Guard and the White Scars, reclined in their restraint thrones – an unusual gathering, even in these strangest of days. The thunder of the engines reverberated up through the compartment, and made casual conversation all but impossible. Even so, the recycled air twitched with the static of encrypted vox communication.

Heyd Calder studied the other passengers – the Raven Guard in their streamlined battleplate, and the White Scars with their tokens and talismans. Like night and day, and both equally different to his own impassive, yellow-armoured brothers.

The Primaris lieutenant wondered what they were saying to one another. If they were anything like the quintet of Intercessors who served as his bodyguard, they were mostly discussing the battle to come, with varying amounts of eagerness and stoicism. He let his gaze rest on his brothers, in their yellow battleplate, bearing the crimson insignia of the Third Company. He had led them, and others, into battle often since his awakening. But nothing like what awaited him, he suspected.

Tyr's Oath held representatives from the three Chapters that made up the relief fleet. Though fleet was, perhaps, a generous term for such an assemblage of vessels – the *Silent Horseman,* a White Scars battle-barge, and two strike cruisers, *Raven's Valour,* from the Raven Guard, and the *Capulus*, from his own Chapter. Besides these vessels were a handful of frigates, drawn from the fleets of all three Chapters.

Regardless, it had made all speed for the Odoacer System, once word of the cardinal-governor's request had reached Guilliman's ears. They had reached

Almace in good time, despite the inability to make longer warp jumps.

Below, in the capital city of Almacia, the cardinal-governor awaited them. There would be ceremonies, triumphs and fetes aplenty in the coming days, in anticipation of inevitable victory – or simply to convince the world's populace of such. A time-consuming tactic, but often effective. A distracted populace was one not likely to panic.

Tyr's Oath shuddered slightly, and atmospheric klaxons sounded, alerting the passengers to the gunship's successful descent from orbit. Calder's helmet vox-link crackled. *'Atmospheric entry successful,'* the gunship's pilot said. *'Making our approach.'*

Calder sat back. They would be landing soon. 'Acknowledged. Defences?' They'd been given the transmission codes to bypass Almace's frankly primitive orbital defence network, but ground defences were another matter.

'Nothing to worry us, lieutenant. Static anti-aircraft batteries at the reported coordinates. Antiques.' The pilot sounded almost insulted.

'A stone can kill as easily as a bolt-round,' Calder said.

'Acknowledged.'

The vox clicked off, and *Tyr's Oath* continued its descent. Calder patted the hull plate behind his throne affectionately. The Thunderhawk gunship was old, as the Imperial Fists judged such things. It had seen battle across five systems and two sectors, been knocked from the sky twice and almost completely gutted once, in its storied career. But it had been repaired and rearmed, made fit for purpose every time. Duty ended only in death. That went for machines as well as men.

Calder wondered, sometimes, where that left him. He was neither machine nor man, but something else entirely. Primaris. The last hope of a crippled empire – and perhaps one that had come too late. But regardless, they would try.

The Indomitus Crusade marched across the galaxy, driving away the dark and lending aid where it could. Sometimes, that aid did not arrive in time – the void was lit by a thousand pyres, as worlds burned. But other times – at Baal, at Rynn's World and a hundred others, the Lord Commander of the Imperium had cast the enemy back.

As they would do on Almace.

He leaned back in his restraint throne, and checked his battleplate's internal

chronometer. They had some time until they reached Almacia, the planet's capital. He activated the throne's built-in hololithic projector. Every throne had one, for en-route mission briefings. The projector was hard-linked to his battleplate, and the twitch of a finger was sufficient to control the shimmering display before him. Fleet auguries played across the air, joining the rest of the reports, all woefully out of date.

Calder sat in silence, studying the projections that flickered before him. The Odoacer System had been all but forgotten, even before the galaxy had cracked in half. It had been a bequest, donated to the Ecclesiarchy in less fraught centuries by its former rulers, the Kabalevskys. Almace, the core, had become a cardinal world, and the centre of an Ecclesiarchial hegemony comprising more than a dozen planets, most little more than feudal enclaves or epsilon-class industrial centres. Planetary tithes came in the form of agri-resources or mineral production, or, failing those, manpower.

If Odoacer had any claim to value, it was due solely to the extensive asteroid mining facilities scattered across the system core. Hundreds of valuable elements were scraped daily from the asteroid fields that hung in the void. Most were shipped to nearby systems, while the rest were processed for use in-system.

But asteroid mines, valuable though they might be, were not why they had come. At least, that was Calder's assumption. In truth, he couldn't say why Guilliman had dispatched a relief fleet to the Odoacer System. Politics, perhaps. Guilliman's return, while heralded by most, had caused friction with any number of the ancient bureaucracies that prowled the Imperium, including the Adeptus Ministorum. Calder suspected that it was because he was at once proof of the Emperor's divinity, and a staunch opponent of unthinking superstition – a conundrum that the Ecclesiarchy had yet to solve to their satisfaction, though they'd spent a good deal of their time of late trying.

Having dealt with a number of representatives of the Imperial bureaucracy since his awakening, Calder had some sympathy for the primarch. He kept such thoughts to himself, however. It was not his place to express such sentiments, invited or no. Even so, he wondered if Guilliman had launched the Indomitus Crusade, in part at least, to escape Terra and the abyssal pettiness of its politics. It had certainly come as something of a relief to Calder, even given his position as Huscarl.

Originally, the Huscarls had been drawn from throughout the ranks of the Imperial Fists in order to create an elite body capable of defending Rogal

Dorn in battle. With the primarch's passing, the position had faded into irrelevance, becoming one more forgotten ritual added to the heap.

But now, with Guilliman's return, and the sudden influx of Primaris warriors to their ranks, the Chapter had reconstituted the Huscarls, albeit with a different focus. One better suited to this new age of eternal war. Calder was among the first of their number, chosen as much for his political acumen as his martial prowess. He did not consider such assumptions boastful – merely factual. He had allocated effort to the study of war on every level, not just strategic and tactical, but social and cultural as well.

War, waged well, was swift. But its effects reverberated through the survivors in often unforeseen ways. The rebellions of the future had their genesis in the wars of today. Societal discontent, misplaced idealism, repressive political infrastructure – all these things were as deadly as any invasion. Calder had studied, and taught himself how to see the stress fractures in societies as easily as he might discern the weaknesses of a barricade. A planet could only be properly defended if its foundations were firmly set. Attempting to protect a world in the midst of a revolt was an untenable goal.

Attempting to protect a galaxy amid such chaos was even more of a challenge. He thought, perhaps, that was why he had been chosen to lead this mission over the others, despite his lack of rank. He glanced at Suboden, suddenly aware of the White Scar's gaze. They had not met prior to the command to come to Almace. There had been too much to do, too many preparations to make.

This was the first time he'd even seen his opposite numbers in the flesh. He studied them. Sael Karros, a lieutenant of the Raven Guard's Fourth Company, and Suboden Khan. Karros wore black, and his armour bore little to distinguish it from that of the other Raven Guard. He was a gaunt, pallid-faced warrior, with eyes like black pits and a soft, rasping voice. Suboden, on the other hand, was loud and brash. At least in comparison.

Suboden was neither Primaris, like Calder, nor lieutenant like both Calder and Karros. Instead, he was khan of the Stormwrath Brotherhood, and captain of the White Scars Fifth Company. His own warriors referred to him as the Master of Spirits, though Calder had no frame of reference to contextualise such a title.

He wondered what was going through the khan's mind. What did he make of being seconded to the command of an officer his junior? Was he resentful?

Puzzled? Calder considered what his own reaction might be, and tried to gauge the other Space Marine's mood. After a moment, he pushed the thought aside. He would know soon enough. Suboden was no Imperial Fist, to hide himself behind walls of stoicism. The White Scars believed in confronting problems head-on, and swiftly. If there was an issue, the khan would approach him before long.

As he turned his attentions back to the data-flow for Odoacer, he cross-referenced information on the surrounding systems. The cogitators aboard *Tyr's Oath* were archaic but powerful, and he'd made sure to requisition as much information as possible for study. If he were to lead a successful defence, he needed access to every available detail.

The Odoacer System had been isolated since the formation of the Great Rift. With the Astronomican still in disarray, travel was limited to short jumps, and then only when necessary. Nonetheless, elements of the defence fleet had tried to seek help in nearby systems – including several that had been engulfed, at least temporarily, by the Great Rift. These attempts had resulted in thirteen separate fleet engagements, as per the reports.

'I'm surprised that they have a fleet left.'

Calder blinked, and looked up into the brutal, blunt features of Suboden. The White Scar stood over him, clad in his battle-scarred, snow-white power armour, his hair unbound and his moustaches threaded with gold.

'A testament to the skill of the officer in charge,' Calder said, studying the other Space Marine.

Unlike Calder's own Mark X battleplate, Suboden's was an older variant, with articulated armour panels on the torso and a raised gorget. The gorget had been pierced in places, allowing a number of rawhide thongs to be threaded through the holes. These were attached to bone and bronze amulets of varying shape and size, each bearing a single sigil. Suboden touched them occasionally, as if seeking reassurance.

Suboden snorted. 'Maybe.' He studied the projection, his dark eyes flicking quickly across the reams of information. Calder turned his own attentions back to it. 'You aren't like the other Fists I've met,' Suboden said, after a moment.

Calder glanced at him. 'I know. I am taller.'

Suboden grinned. 'Not that. Most would content themselves with hard data – resources, materials, the strength of walls and the bodies to set atop them. But

you are reading social histories, studying pict-feeds of feast days and public speeches by the cardinal-governor and his councillors.'

Calder paused the feed and looked up. He was becoming annoyed by the White Scar's interruptions. 'Yes. What of it?'

'I am curious.'

'As am I. Hence my study of these ancillary matters.' Calder gestured, and the data-feed continued to unspool. 'A world is not made of walls, but people. To gauge the strength of the former it is best to know about the latter.'

'Spoken like a true iterator,' Suboden said.

Calder paused the data-feed again. The White Scar was interrupting intentionally, he was certain. A test of some sort, perhaps. They had not yet had much time to acclimatise to one another. 'I am a Huscarl. I defend worlds. To defend a world, I must know its strengths and weaknesses, even as you must know the limits of your engines.'

Suboden grinned. 'No offence meant, brother. It was a compliment. I am told, in your day, iterators were spoken of with honour.' He straightened. 'These days, they are often grey little drabs who speak in empty platitudes and squawk for aid at the first sign of resistance.' He frowned. 'Or they were, before the galaxy was torn asunder.'

In your day. The words sank into him like arrows. He looked back at the data-feed. Time had passed him by while he slumbered in the stasis-vaults. Thousands of years, in fact. He felt a sort of numbness at the thought – such a number was hard to contemplate with any rationality. In the 31st millennium, it had seemed as if the Imperium of Man might bestride the galaxy as a colossus, and its people claim every world as their birthright.

Now, the empire he had helped to build was a broken animal – fierce and stubborn, even in its death throes. Heroic in its refusal to succumb to a mortal blow that had been delivered thousands of years before men like Suboden were born.

The stasis-vaults had been all but emptied now, and the first generation of Primaris Space Marines loosed to join their Chapters, or to fight at the primarch's behest in the Unnumbered Sons. And still, it did not seem to be enough. Calder had made a study of the galaxy, in the years since his awakening. It would take more than warm bodies to throw back the dark. The Imperium tottered on rotting foundations, and there was much work to be done. Odoacer was but the start.

‘Do you think we are to garrison this little system then?’ Suboden sounded disappointed.

Calder gestured, and a series of industrial reports streamed across the projection. Intake from the asteroid mining facilities had dropped precipitously. Reports of sedition, sabotage and worker-related disturbances were appended to these figures, as if by way of explanation. He made a mental note to investigate further, at a more practical date.

‘If it requires such,’ Calder said.

‘I was promised a glorious crusade. If I’d wanted to patrol the same stars day in and day out, I would have remained at Armageddon. At least there, I could be sure that there were orks to fight.’

Calder looked at him. ‘If you had remained at Armageddon, there is every possibility that you would be dead, and of no further use to the Imperium or the Lord Commander.’ Armageddon had been swallowed by the edge of the Great Rift, and what few reports escaped the embattled system were not positive.

Suboden laughed. ‘Careful, *lieutenant.*’ He wagged a chiding finger. ‘Show me the respect due my rank, if you please. I am very sensitive.’

Calder frowned, and was glad that his helm hid his expression. ‘I meant no disrespect, *khan,*’ he said, emphasising the title. ‘But to answer your question – I do not know. Our orders were the same as yours… to make all haste to the Odoacer System, and put ourselves at the disposal of the cardinal-governor.’

Suboden laughed again. ‘And isn’t that a pretty thing? Do you think he will know what to do with us, this priest-king?’ He shook his head, and tapped his amulets. ‘Why they let such petty shamans rule entire worlds, I cannot fathom. Nothing good ever comes of it.’ He turned. ‘What say you, shadow-brother? Come, sit by the fire and share your thoughts.’

Calder looked past the White Scar. Karros had freed himself from his restraint throne as well, and stood silently nearby, studying the data-feed. Like Suboden, he wore no helm, and his pallid features looked almost ghostly in the light of the projection. ‘Insurrection?’ Karros murmured, not looking at either of them. He gestured to the feed. ‘Systematic insubordination, acts of sabotage… protests on the outlying worlds. A revolt.’

The Raven Guard spoke with a terseness that Calder appreciated. Karros was not one to waste words. Calder nodded. ‘I have considered that possibility.

But the data shows instability, rather than open insurrection. The system is well within the margin of error.'

'That's a no, then,' Suboden said.

'It is unlikely,' Calder said. He paused. 'On the matter of instability, we should discuss the chain of command.'

Suboden grinned. 'I wondered whether you would broach that topic, brother.'

'It seems sensible to do so now,' Calder said. 'The khan outranks me, and you, Karros, are my peer. I am therefore open to the possibility of a more… *fluid* command structure than might otherwise be considered.'

'Politely stated,' Suboden murmured.

'I am… aware of the difference between us,' Calder said carefully. 'I am Primaris, you are not. I am an Imperial Fist, you are not. Our ways of war are not incompatible, but they are different. The strategies I enact might be at odds with your own.'

'Guilliman put you in command,' Karros said.

Suboden nodded, his smile gone. 'And that, in the end, is that, brother. Have no fear that we will undermine you, even unintentionally.'

'I know no fear,' Calder said.

Suboden laughed. 'And that is how I know that we are more alike than not, brother.' He gestured absently. 'It is you the primarch put in command. I am no builder of walls, or great defender of them. Nor, I think, is our honourable third, Karros?'

Karros straightened, as if suddenly recalling their presence. 'War is a storm-fraught sea, and bastions but hapless ships, captive to wind and wave.'

Calder looked at Suboden. 'That's a no, I think,' Suboden clarified.

'I have no taste for garrison work,' Karros added.

'Which, again, is doubtless why the primarch put the son of Dorn in command.' Suboden looked at Calder. 'I tender my heartfelt sympathies, brother. The burden is yours.'

'Then I will endeavour to bear it with honour,' Calder said. He smiled, briefly. 'Thankfully, I have you two to aid me.'

'That is a significant advantage,' Karros said, no hint of amusement in his

voice. ‘I am quite skilful at war.’

Suboden chuckled. ‘And I am even better.’ He laughed more loudly, at the affronted expression on the Raven Guard’s sallow features. ‘Cheer up, brother. I meant no disrespect.’ He pointed to the projection. ‘Now that is settled, let us get back to more important matters. We are not many, for such a task,’ he said. The glare of the projection made his hawkish features resemble a skull. ‘Three brotherhoods…’

‘Demi-companies,’ Calder corrected, absently. Suboden smiled and touched his brow, in a gesture of acknowledgement.

‘Demi-companies, then. Half-strength, at best. We are a frayed rope pulled taut.’

‘A strong enough knot can hold anything.’

Karros grunted and looked at the projection. His black eyes narrowed. ‘We are not ropes or knots and we cannot defend the entirety of this system. Or even this world.’

‘No,’ Calder agreed. ‘But we can make it inhospitable.’ He looked at Suboden. ‘I have calculated fifteen potential landing zones around Almace that an enemy can make optimal use of, given the rough telemetry we have to hand. More will likely reveal themselves after we begin our preparations.’

‘Then you do think this system will be attacked,’ Suboden said. His eyes lit up, and his smile was wide. ‘Excellent.’

Calder gestured, causing the projection to change position. ‘I think the probability is well within acceptable parameters. The Lord Commander would not have sent us, if he believed that the probability was negligible. Therefore, it is best to assume an assault on the system is imminent, if not already underway.’

‘If it was underway, wouldn’t we know?’

‘Communications grow patchy further from the core,’ Calder said. ‘The Odoacer System is immense – empty space, asteroid fields… If the enemy are not here, they may well be elsewhere, but still nearby. This system has been attacked multiple times – it is conceivable that those assaults were preliminary engagements.’

‘And which enemy is that, do you think?’ Suboden stroked his chin. ‘Orks?’

‘We will find out in due course, I expect.’

‘The landing zones,’ Karros said, bringing them back on topic.

Calder nodded. ‘I am calculating optimal/sub-optimal comparisons. We will find the best landing zone for our needs, and attempt to render the rest unworkable. If we are successful, the enemy will be forced to use the path we give them, should they invade.’

‘No point in waiting, then,’ Suboden said. ‘Send the necessary telemetry to our command frequencies, and we can begin as soon as the preliminaries are out of the way.’ He paused. ‘Speaking of which… at some point, we should also alert someone that we’ve arrived. I’d hate to have to kill anybody we might need later.’

‘Already in progress,’ Calder said. ‘I sent out a standard compliance request five hours ago. They are in the process of responding.’ He frowned. ‘Liturgical rhetoric is an inefficient method of communication.’

‘Best not to mention that to them,’ Suboden said. He looked at Karros. ‘Well, Karros… ready to turn this world into a murder-trap?’

‘Start as we mean to go on,’ Karros murmured. ‘I’ll take the first seven potential landing points and you take the remaining eight?’

Suboden nodded. ‘We could dice for the fifteenth, if you like. Just to be fair about it.’ He smiled. ‘I will provide the dice, of course.’

Karros snorted and turned back to the projection. Suboden laughed and looked at Calder. ‘Had much dealings with the Ecclesiarchy then, brother?’

‘Some. On Terra.’

‘Then you know what awaits us.’ Suboden’s smile was hard and sharp. ‘A wolf-pit, most likely. They will not be happy to see us.’

‘We were invited,’ Calder said. But he knew Suboden was right. The Adeptus Ministorum had a tense relationship with those they venerated as the Emperor’s wrath made manifest. Few Chapters viewed the Emperor with the same piety as the Ecclesiarchy, and that made for difficult dealings, on occasion.

‘No, they asked for aid. Guilliman chose who to send. Have you asked yourself why? No, don’t answer. I suspect so. So have I. So has Karros, come to that. Three less pious Chapters you could not ask for. And yet, we are of the First Founding. There is stature, in such things. Our shadows stretch further than the sun allows.’

‘Politics,’ Karros said, not looking at either of them.

Calder shook his head. ‘If that is the case, we will deal with it.’

‘You will deal with it, you mean,’ Suboden said. He turned as a new klaxon sounded within the compartment. The vox crackled as the gunship’s pilot spoke in Calder’s ear.

‘Making our final approach.’

‘We’ve arrived,’ Calder said. The projection winked out as the compartment shuddered. The pitch of the Thunderhawk’s engines had changed. They were descending. The restraint thrones deactivated as one, and Calder rose to his feet, the servos of his battleplate making little sound. He looked at Suboden and Karros. ‘Ready yourselves. It is time to meet our allies.’

‘Such as they are,’ Suboden murmured. Calder ignored him and checked his sidearm. Around him, Space Marines stood as the compartment shook with the reverberations of the gunship’s landing. Warriors in yellow, black and white readied themselves for disembarkation. Calder’s Intercessors moved to the front. He took note of the looks they received from some among the White Scars and Raven Guard. Wariness, tinged with what might have been resentment.

‘Status of the landing zone?’ Calder asked, pushing the thought aside.

‘They’ve rolled out the honour guard,’ the pilot said. Calder could hear the hint of a smile in his words.

‘Good. That means they’re taking this seriously.’

The compartment shuddered again as the gunship touched down. The echo of turbines cycling filled the air, as the magnetic clamps of the forward ramp released. As the ramp descended, a wash of noise and scent filled the compartment. Music and incense, the smell of human sweat and gun oil, the sound of boots striking stone. The cheers of a crowd, lapping at the edges of his perceptions, like the crash of waves against a distant shore.

Calder was first down the ramp, and the auto-senses of his battleplate instantly compensated for the difference in light and temperature. He stopped at the centre of the ramp and scanned his surroundings, letting his armour’s sensors build him a map of their immediate location. The gunship had landed atop one of a dozen immense, flat plinths that jutted upwards from the city’s highest point like the peaks of an orderly mountain. The city itself stretched in all directions – a vast spiral of towers and hab-blocks that encircled a massive cathedral-like edifice that reached almost to the stars.

‘Babyl,’ Karros murmured, over the vox. The Raven Guard had donned his helm.

‘Yes,’ Calder said, understanding the reference.

‘What?’ Suboden growled. ‘What am I missing?’

Calder glanced at him. Like Karros, Suboden wore his helm, its horsehair crest spilling across his shoulder-plates like a mane. ‘A child’s fable, from Terra – a tower built to reach the stars,’ he explained. ‘To reach the gods.’

‘And what happened to it?’

‘It fell,’ Karros said.

Suboden grunted. ‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it,’ Calder said. ‘Come. We shouldn’t keep them waiting.’

The landing platforms were connected to the cathedral-like structure by immense covered walkways of raised stone. Each walkway was lined by enormous columns of marble and gold, and decorated with busts of saints, angels and other iconography. From the columns were hung great banners, bearing the seals of the Holy Synod, and the battle-banners of the Adeptus Ministorum. The columns stretched from the landing platforms back to a series of semicircular porticos, which were similarly decorated. Through the curtain of rippling banners, Calder caught sight of a massive archway, easily twice the height of a Primaris, and crafted from jasper and jade. The doors housed within the archway were opening slowly, and Calder detected the faint throb of pneumatic pistons.

Along the walkway before them, soldiers in red and white had assembled in four disciplined rows, two to each side. Their uniforms were the colour of blood, and their armour as white as that of Suboden and his warriors. A standard Cadia-pattern issue, Calder noted, though of considerably more expensive manufacture. Their lasrifles were chased with gold, and were of similar high quality to their armour. All bore the sigils of the Adeptus Ministorum prominently upon their uniforms.

Overhead, cyber-cherubs flitted, swinging smoking censers to sweeten the air. Priests in red moved through the ranks, murmuring softly to their charges. As Calder set foot on the platform, the troopers stiffened and raised their rifles in salute. The vox-casters built into the columns began to blare a static-laced hymn in High Gothic. The sound swelled, as the troopers lent their voices to the effort.

‘Are they singing for us, do you think?’ Suboden asked, as he joined Calder.

Calder didn’t reply. From somewhere below the walkway, he could hear the

roar of a crowd – they were singing as well. A sensor pinged and he turned, glancing up at a cherub crouched atop the gunship. The tiny creature had a pict-recorder built into its infantile skull. The lens whirred and flashed, and he realised that what it saw was being broadcast elsewhere, likely to the crowd below. More cherubs, similarly burdened, circled overhead, their tiny wings thrumming uselessly as cybernetic anti-grav units held their foetal shapes aloft.

'Ugly little things,' Suboden said with distaste.

'But useful, I suspect.' Calder started across the platform. Karros and Suboden walked alongside him, the Intercessors padding in their wake. Behind them, the rest of their honour guard assembled at the foot of the gunship, and followed.

The hymn rose in volume, and at the opposite end of the walkway, the doors had opened. The cardinal-governor's delegation had arrived – a dozen men and women in robes, some clutching a staff and a crozius, others swinging golden censers in slow, stately circles. Cardinal-Governor Vell Eamon was easy to identify, clad in the silk and silver vestments of the Holy Synod, and clutching a heavy, sheathed blade across his chest.

As Calder strode to meet him, he studied the man. He was tall, for a mortal, and well built beneath his robes. There were few signs of indolence on his features, and he moved with a casual grace, rather than arrogance.

'I expected him to be fat,' Suboden muttered across the vox. 'They're always fat, these ones.'

'Or very thin,' Karros added.

Calder said nothing. He had studied the available records on Eamon on the journey to Almace. The cardinal-governorship was hereditary, which was unusual. Members of the Adeptus Ministorum rarely had families. The Ecclesiarchy often didn't allow it, though special dispensation could be granted, in the right circumstances. Keeping the Odoacer System under Ecclesiarchial control probably counted.

Eamon had been trained from birth to rule, and his ascension to cardinal had been without obstacle. And he had ruled well, by the standards of the Ecclesiarchy. Tithes were collected, and civil unrest kept to a minimum. The system was a backwater, almost intentionally so. And yet… something was missing. There were gaps in the records. Missing moments, scattered throughout Almace's history. Not just in regard to Eamon, but his predecessors as well.

Calder was not, by nature, suspicious. He studied available facts and came to the best conclusions possible. But here, the facts did not quite add up. And so, he observed Eamon closely, gauging his body language, the look on his face, his heart rate and temperature. Adding to the picture he'd assembled. Seeking the flaw that he felt, but could not identify.

As the cardinal-governor drew close, the ranks of troopers closed behind him, still singing. Suboden grunted. 'A pretty drill.'

'Symbolic,' Calder said. 'They are the walls of the city, closed to us until the cardinal-governor welcomes us in.'

Suboden glanced at him. 'They make for tiny walls.'

'But there are many of them.' Calder stopped at the midpoint of the walkway.

The cardinal-governor proceeded until he and his party reached Calder and the others. Eamon was sweating beneath his vestments. All of them were. Idly, Calder checked the temperature, and realised that it was quite high. His battleplate prevented him from noticing such things, mostly.

'I bid you welcome, honoured guests,' Eamon began. His voice was strong and carried far, thanks to the vox-caster carried by one of his companions. Cherubs circled like carrion birds, fighting for space in the air directly above them. 'I am Cardinal-Governor Vell Eamon the Sixteenth, Master of Almace and Lord-Interceding of the Odoacer System.' He turned slightly as he spoke, so that the watching cherubs could more easily record his face.

The spiel continued for some time. Calder tuned out, and spoke quietly with the others across the vox. 'We are being recorded from thirty-seven different angles,' he said.

'Pict-feeds are being broadcast below,' Karros said. 'This Eamon seems to believe in public displays of power.'

'He's being smart,' Suboden said. 'Showing that we are here may calm any unrest before it begins. Cunning.'

'Or desperate,' Calder said. Eamon was gesturing. The preliminaries were coming to a close. He focused on the cardinal-governor. 'I was under the impression that the Ecclesiarchy was not allowed to maintain a standing army,' he said out loud. 'Or does the Decree Passive not apply to heads of state?' The statement was designed to throw Eamon off.

The cardinal-governor gave a startled smile. 'I– what?' A murmur rose from

those accompanying him. Calder had interrupted the ritual, thrown off the rhythm of the procession. He gestured to the troops.

'This is an army, is it not?'

Eamon licked his lips, but laughed. 'I can see why it might seem so. But you are mistaken, I assure you. Each member of the Holy Synod is allowed a contingent of bodyguards, equivalent to his status and responsibilities. As I am a cardinal-governor, and my responsibilities include this system and everything in it, my bodyguard is quite… substantial. Strictly out of necessity, I assure you.'

Suboden gave a rumble of laughter. 'I warned you, brother. These priests are to words as we are to war.' Another slash across propriety's knees. Calder wondered whether Suboden understood what he was doing, or whether he simply scented metaphorical blood. The murmurs were louder now, and even the cherubs looked startled.

Eamon gave the White Scar a wary glance. '*Bi unigk magtahk gij bainah*,' he said, somewhat haltingly. Suboden stared at him for a moment. Then, with a wide smile, he leaned towards the cardinal-governor. Eamon twitched, but did not retreat.

'*Chiy shudargah kheleer yaridago*… Very good, cardinal-governor. Though your pronunciation could use some work. Khorchin is not an easy tongue to learn, for one not born of Chogoris.'

Eamon bowed his head. 'My thanks, O khan. Your praise enlivens my soul.' He straightened and stepped back. 'I formally welcome you both to the cathedral-city of Almacia – heart of this world, and bastion of the Faith Imperial.' He extended his hand, and the ranks of soldiers split with a crash of boot-heels, forming themselves into a corridor extending from the landing pad to the portico and the archway.

'Please follow me. We have much to discuss.'

Calder turned to one of his Intercessors. 'Kenric. Watch-pattern epsilon. Easy stance.'

'Acknowledged, lieutenant.' The five Intercessors broke off from the formation and took up positions around the edge of the landing platform, marking the official limits of the Space Marines' jurisdiction. It was a purely ceremonial gesture, but would serve to put their hosts at ease. He nodded in satisfaction as Suboden and Karros conveyed similar orders.

'This is now the most heavily guarded landing platform on this planet,'

Suboden said as Eamon led them away. Calder nodded, even as he glanced up at the cherubs bobbing awkwardly in their wake. The creatures were still recording everything.

‘We won’t need them,’ he said.

‘Speaks the confident man.’

‘Easy to be confident with you at my back, khan.’

Suboden laughed, causing several of the cardinal-governor’s coterie to toss wary glances in their direction. The three Space Marines ignored them.

At the archway, a pair of warriors were waiting. They wore red robes and stylised carapace armour, and carried heavy suppression shields, marked with sigils of faith and purity. Each had a sword sheathed at their side, and featureless golden helms beneath their cowls. The pair fell into step with Eamon, scattering his lesser companions, and the cherubs fluttered over them, tracing contrails of incense about their heads.

Calder glanced at Suboden, who shrugged. It was a minute gesture, but spoke volumes. The cardinal-governor had left his most impressive bodyguards at the archway – much could be read into such a choice. Perhaps he was attempting to appear humble, or possibly implying that he had no fear of Guilliman’s envoys. Maybe it was simply a ceremonial decision, and of no more import than the presence of the cherubs.

‘I had you land here because I thought we might visit the primus strategium,’ Eamon said, glancing at Calder. ‘My military advisors are waiting for us there. There will, of course, be a feast in your honour, but I’d hoped to bring you up to speed with the situation beforehand. If that is acceptable?’

‘It is preferable, in fact,’ Calder said. Even as he spoke, his power armour’s auto-senses scanned and recorded his surroundings for later study. All information was grist for the mill. The more he accumulated, the more successful his eventual strategy would likely be.

Already, a rough schematic of Almacia was forming in his mind’s eye, just from what little he’d seen so far. Areas of weakness were noted and catalogued, as were potential strong-points. The soldiery was well equipped and adequately drilled, the equal of any Astra Militarum regiment he’d seen. A point in Eamon’s favour.

But the city itself was a warren. Like many Imperial cities, it had not been so much built as grown. It sprawled across Almace’s main continental land mass, stretching in all directions. That would make it difficult to defend. Parts of it

would need to be sacrificed in order to preserve the whole, in the event of a siege.

He pushed the calculations to the back of his mind. There would be time to worry later, when he had a clearer picture of the troubles facing the system. He concentrated on his immediate surroundings, taking in the great murals which decorated the longest stretches of wall. They depicted the great victories of the Ecclesiarchy, in the eternal war for the soul of man. Heroic paladins trod across the broken bodies of heretics and idolaters, as priests spoke to the faithful, urging them to stand and die in the name of Holy Terra. In other murals, angels, clad in golden armour and crimson robes, spun in through sunlit skies, casting roses and ammunition down upon these eager penitents.

'My father was a patron of the arts,' Eamon said. Calder looked down at him, and the cardinal-governor gestured to the murals. 'Quite a famous painter – Tertius Arcenoux. Do you know him?'

'No.'

Eamon frowned. 'No. I suppose you wouldn't. I've heard of your kind, you know. Giants among giants. What do they call you?'

'Primaris.'

'Is that your name?'

'I am Calder. Heyd Calder, Lieutenant of the Third.'

'Would you prefer that I refer to you by your rank, or by your name?'

Calder hesitated. It was an unusual question, and one he had never been asked. 'Rank,' he said after a moment. 'Familiarity might become an obstacle to our goals here.'

Eamon nodded. 'As you wish.' He turned away. 'We have arrived.'

Ahead of them, a pair of withered servitors, wearing censer-masks that seeped sweet-smelling smoke, and heavy robes of crimson, hauled open a pair of doors. The cherubs hurtled into the room ahead of the procession, their pict-recorders whirring.

The chamber beyond was large and circular. Great windows of stained glass occupied the far wall, looking out over the northern districts of the city. The light streaming through them threw a shroud of colour over the stone floor. Tables of dark, polished wood were scattered about, covered in paperwork and surrounded by small crowds of Administratum and Ecclesiarchial

officials. Ordinators and curators argued over some point of data, as scribes hurriedly recorded the debates. Priests in red vestments prowled the edges of these conversations, interjecting when appropriate. Servo-skulls darted through the air, competing for space with the cherubs.

All discourse ceased, however, when the cardinal-governor and his guests arrived. As the servitors shoved the doors open, every eye turned to watch. Calder heard the intake of breath, and murmured conversations. He knew that at that very moment, a thousand calculations were taking place. Almacia was a centre of power, both secular and spiritual. Politics was as natural to its inhabitants as breathing.

'They're eyeing us like hungry vespids,' Suboden said, over the vox. 'I can feel the knives in my back already.'

At the chamber's heart was a recessed section of the floor, encircled by a wide walkway of thick wood. The wood had been artfully carved with scenes illustrating the Emperor's divinity. Cogitator alcoves had been built into the wood, and intricately decorated control nodes jutted from its inner ring. Floating above the recessed part of the floor was a massive hololithic display. A circle of the censer-helmed servitors had been hardwired into the floor, and their articulated, arachnoid limbs of brass and steel plied the display, rotating it and changing it, at the commands of those standing on the walkway.

Eamon led them up the steps onto the walkway. Calder was surprised to find that it could bear his weight. As promised, the cardinal-governor's military advisors were waiting for them. Eamon gestured respectfully to the first of them.

'Honoured guests, may I introduce Canoness Solana Lorr, of the Order of the Broken Sword. She is my good right hand, in these troubled times. Her order has missions on most worlds in the system.' Lorr bowed shallowly, and Calder dipped his head in respect. He had fought alongside the warriors of the Orders Militant before, and so he studied her with some curiosity.

Lorr was a tall woman, built broad and heavy. Her battleplate was the colour of ash, and her hair was shorn to the quick. Lines of tight script had been tattooed along the curve of her skull, trailing down from her hair line to vanish beneath the gorget of her battleplate. Robes of crimson hung loosely over her battered armour, and several smoking censers swung from her belt.

One of the cherubs alighted on her shoulder, cooing in a voice like a crackle of static. She idly rubbed the creature's chin with a knuckle as she regarded Calder. 'It is an honour to meet you. My order, small as it is, stands ready to

fight at your side. Our blood is your coin – spend it as you must.'

Calder nodded, slowly. 'It may well come to that, canoness. If it does, you may trust that I will seek the best price possible.' She smiled at his joke, but the expression was a brittle thing, and sharp, as if she were only doing what was expected of her.

Hurriedly, Eamon gestured to the man standing beside her. 'And this is Swordmaster Domenico Tyre, of the Cardinal's Crimson, commander of my household bodyguard.' Tyre was clad in much the same fashion as the warriors who had accompanied Eamon, with golden carapace armour and crimson robes. Unlike them, he carried only a blade, and wore no helm. His face was a mass of scar tissue and bionics, as if he'd been torn apart and rebuilt on more than one occasion. What was left of his hair was a lank, colourless mass that hung untidily down the left side of his skull. One eye had been replaced by some form of primitive targeting array, while the other was of a subtler cybernetic design. When he smiled, his teeth were steel.

'Greetings, noble lords,' he said, in a harsh, buzzing voice. At some point, he'd sustained injuries to his larynx and had it replaced. 'I look forward to fighting at your side, come the day.'

Calder nodded, as he had to Lorr. No lower, or longer. It was clear that they were peers, rather than one being subordinate to the other. Tyre bowed to Eamon, and gestured to the hololith. 'We've managed to reconstruct the pict-signal sent from the mission on Corpal,' he rasped. Lorr's face tightened at his words.

'And?' Eamon asked.

Tyre gestured, and the servitors stationed below began to chant in binaric. Their limbs flashed, and Calder was reminded of spiders weaving a web. The projection expanded and thinned as a new image flickered into view.

The pict-feed was distorted by static, but Calder recognised the view easily enough. An agri world – low industry, simple materials. There was no sound, only the image of screaming people, flames snapping in the background. 'Corpal. A rimward world. There was a minor shrine to Saint Silvana on the central continent.' Eamon spoke flatly, with no hint of emotion. 'A population in the low millions, I believe.'

A woman's face filled the feed. Older, scarred. Blood matted her greying hair, and obscured a portion of her face. 'Sister Superior D'vina,' Lorr said. 'She transferred to the mission on Corpal five years ago.' D'vina was speaking, hurriedly, but became distracted by something off-screen. She

whirled, a bolt pistol in her hand. Calder saw the pistol kick, and D'vina's face twisted in a snarl. The pict-feed played around, and Calder realised that it was likely being recorded by another of the cyber-cherubs.

Figures raced through the smoke. Some wore ragged fatigues, others wore nothing at all, save a profusion of abominable tattoos. They charged towards D'vina, and she gunned them down with lethal accuracy. More Battle Sisters were visible around her, most of them wounded, but all still fighting.

As for the foe, Calder recognised them easily. Fanatics – the lost and the damned. They bore the signs of their damnation openly. They had pledged themselves to the fell powers that lurked beyond the threshold of the Great Rift, and had become both less and more than what they had been. 'The Archenemy,' Karros murmured, from beside him.

'*Abominatus*,' Suboden growled.

'The Enemy of All Man, come fast upon us,' Eamon said in a hollow voice. Calder glanced at him, and saw the telltale micro-indicators of anxiety upon the cardinal-governor's face. But not fear – almost as if Eamon were seeing something he'd expected at last come about.

More fanatics poured towards the small cohort of Battle Sisters, and were reduced to pulped ruin. Despite this, it was clear that the Sororitas were falling back, if in disciplined fashion. When something crimson flashed in the smoke, Calder realised why. 'Look, there – to the left,' he said quietly. Even as he spoke, there was a muzzle flash, and a Battle Sister's head burst.

'That was a bolter round,' Suboden said.

Something red stalked out of the smoke, its visage at once grotesque and terribly familiar. It had been as they were, in ages past. But now, battleplate that had once adorned a defender of humanity was warped and twisted, like fire-scarred flesh. Thorny growths burst from blistered folds of metal, and abominable sigils had been etched everywhere. Even the boltgun the apparition clutched had undergone a monstrous metamorphosis, becoming a twisted reflection of what it had been.

'Traitor,' Calder said in the silence that followed the creature's appearance. 'Isolate and magnify the image.'

Tyre looked at him, and then at Eamon. The cardinal-governor nodded. 'Do it.'

The terrible image spread, and a low moan swept the chamber as people saw it. Eamon gestured, and his guards sealed the chamber with a crash. 'Word of

this does not leave this chamber,' he called out, his voice quieting the sudden babble. 'If one whisper slips from your lips, I will have you hung from the highest spire of this holy city.'

Calder ignored the resulting murmur. He studied the thing before him, its armour, the way it moved. 'Not one I recognise,' he said. He looked at Suboden. 'You?'

'Word Bearers is what they call themselves,' the White Scar said after a moment.

Calder heard an intake of breath, so low that a normal human wouldn't have noticed it among the ambient noise of the chamber. He caught sight of Eamon, and saw that the cardinal-governor was unsteady on his feet. Tyre caught his master's elbow, and helped him stand. Eamon bowed his head, hands clasped. He began to pray. Calder turned back to the image. 'Continue to play the recording.'

There wasn't much more. The recording device was plucked from the air by an errant shot. The last images were of D'vina trying to rally her Sisters as the Chaos Space Marine rampaged through their ranks, moving with terrible speed. The twisted warrior smashed Battle Sisters from their feet, even as they tried to bring him down. Then, the image froze and broke apart. For long moments, there was only silence.

Then, Eamon signalled the servitors. The hololithic projection expanded. 'The Odoacer System, in all its glory,' he said softly. 'As I said, that recording came from Corpal.' He gestured, and a set of coordinates were illuminated. 'It's on the edge of the outer sector, close to where we suspect the enemy entered the system.'

Calder's eyes narrowed as he studied the flickering hololith. There were several notable discrepancies, when compared to his earlier briefings. 'You are missing three worlds,' he said. He pointed. 'There, at the system's edge.'

'The Rimward Sisters, yes. Agri worlds. Barely populated. Most of the work was done by field-servitors.' Eamon shook his head. 'They're gone.'

'Gone?' Suboden asked.

'Vanished. Consumed by the Noctis Aeterna, as I believe you refer to it.' Eamon gestured to the holo-servitor, and the image rotated. 'First contact was reported here, at the spinward edge of the system. Commodore-Captain Ware, commander of the system defence force, reported a celestial anomaly. He took *Silvana's Martyrdom* and its escorts to investigate, with the remainder of the

fleet divided into defensive pickets.’

‘That is not standard Naval procedure,’ Calder said.

Eamon nodded. ‘Standard procedure is rarely applicable these days. We have had to adapt. Ware wished to ensure that the system core was defended. Too, he saw little reason to waste resources – if *Silvana’s Martyrdom* couldn’t handle whatever it was, the rest of the fleet would stand little chance.’ He frowned. ‘He was a good man. Solid.’

‘He failed, then,’ Suboden said.

Eamon glanced at him. ‘We lost contact. Whether *Silvana’s Martyrdom* was destroyed, or merely disabled, I cannot say.’ He paused. ‘It could be that she still fights, somewhere out there.’

‘Unlikely,’ Suboden said. ‘One antiquated vessel – however dauntless her crew – could not survive against such an enemy unsupported. They undoubtedly perished.’ The White Scar gestured. ‘The enemy entered the system, destroyed *Silvana’s Martyrdom* and pressed on…’

Eamon nodded, and the hololithic image rotated again, condensing. Planetary signifiers were illuminated. ‘They burned worlds to light their way,’ he said softly. One by one, three of the signifiers went dark. ‘You saw what happened at Corpal. We’ve also lost contact with Junker’s Folly and Hopewell.’ He glanced at Tyre.

‘The planetary defence forces likely had little time to respond,’ Tyre said. ‘With so little warning, they’d probably only begun to mobilise when each attack started. Long-range telemetry suggests orbital barrages in each case. Quick. Decisive. Infrastructure destroyed, communications disrupted… easy prey.’

‘They seem to have moved on quickly enough, after the first.’ Calder watched as reams of raw data percolated across the surface of the hololith. ‘Barely slowing to consolidate any gains. The world burns, a few ships break off to land troops, and the fleet moves on.’

‘Why wouldn’t they? These worlds hold no strategic value,’ Suboden said.

Calder looked at him. ‘Then why attack them at all? Why expend the resources?’

‘As well as producing agri-tithes, they’re shrine worlds. Well, two of them. Hopewell is a mortuary world. Was a mortuary world, I should say.’ Eamon smiled thinly. ‘None of the worlds in this system are of any great strategic

value, as I'm sure you are aware. We are self-sufficient, but nothing more.'

Calder looked at him. 'This makes little sense. If not conquest or conversion, then what is the goal? Destruction for destruction's sake?'

'The actions of the cursed ones often make little sense.' Suboden stroked his wispy beard contemplatively, tugging on the braided end. 'But you're right. They do not seem to be interested in conquest, or raiding.'

Karros spoke up, then. 'No. They're making straight for Almace.'

'A good assumption. But where are they now?' Calder asked.

Eamon grimaced and looked at Tyre. The swordmaster's smile was grotesque and mirthless. 'Gone.'

'What do you mean, *gone*?' Suboden demanded.

'Just that, my lord. Vanished into the wilderness between the rim and the outer core.'

Eamon spoke up. 'This system is larger than it looks – much of it is empty, save for asteroid fields and other celestial phenomena. And our augury systems are out of date and stretched to the limit besides. At the moment, it is all we can do to keep the regular trade lanes monitored.'

Tyre grunted. 'Once they reach the core-edge, we'll spot them.'

Calder nodded. 'But by then, it'll be too late.' He stared at the projection, calculating. 'At current speed, they'll likely reach the core system in seventy-two standard hours. From there, it's an additional forty-eight to Almace. We must make ready.'

Karros and Suboden exchanged glances. 'He's right,' Eamon said quickly. 'While I would dearly love to know the reason this system has been afflicted with this horror, that knowledge is of secondary importance to ending it.' He clasped his hands before him. 'All of the remaining resources of this system are at your disposal, lieutenant. If the Emperor's own begotten son trusts you, then I can do no less.'

Slowly, the cardinal-governor sank to one knee, and spread his arms. Tyre and Lorr glanced at one another, and Calder at once understood that this was unusual. Cardinals, especially those who ruled worlds, were not supposed to abase themselves, even before the Emperor's Judgement made flesh. 'Will you help us, son of Dorn?' Eamon asked, softly.

Calder looked at Suboden and Karros. Then, he nodded.

‘We will do as we must,’ he said.

CHAPTER THREE

14:00:00

Odoacer System, spinward edge

The holo-display was the colour of blood. Leering, daemonic faces bulged from the surface of the projection, mouthing obscenities. Amatnim irritably waved a hand through them. ‘Be gone,’ he murmured. The daemons subsided grudgingly, sinking back unseen into the circuitry of the hololithic projector.

While the places beyond real space offered sanctuary to the followers of the Primordial Truth, they also came with their fair share of annoyances. Ships that prowled those cosmic seas long enough often picked up vermin, of sorts. Minor daemons and peculiar manifestations plagued the systems of the *Glory Eternal*. A small price to pay for the power that came with such things, but the more obnoxious entities often chose the most inopportune moments to reveal themselves.

Around him, his captains murmured among themselves. He watched them through hooded eyes, weighing them individually and as a group. They were a glorious assemblage, culled from the thousand Chapters of the Legion. Word Bearers all, for only the faithful could be trusted in these times. All were armed, for he did not fear them. And in any event, he too bore weapons. By his side hung his faithful axe-rake. It, like the bolt pistol holstered on his hip, had seen him through a thousand crusades, and would see him through a thousand more, gods willing. He wondered how many of his followers could say the same.

Some led only a few warriors. Others commanded small fleets. But all had bent the knee to him. The Dark Council had seen to it. The wise men of Sicarius had perceived the way the winds of fortune were blowing, and had thrown their weight behind Amatnim and his destiny. The gods had set their shoulders to the wheel of his fate.

But that was not to say that those wicked old men did not intend to take advantage of his triumphs. They had sent their servants and slaves to watch him. To wait and scheme in his shadow. Lakmhu was one such, as were many

of those now assembled on the command deck. An army of spies and plotters. Amatnim smiled, and knew that they would be wondering what the expression meant. His every utterance was dissected for meaning and purpose. Such strife was infuriating, for all that it fed the gods. It was an obstacle.

But obstacles could be overcome, with proper planning.

‘We shall take each mid-system world in turn, one at a time,’ he said, studying the holo-display. ‘We shall illuminate our path to Almace by the light of world-pyres.’

‘Consolidation?’ one of his subordinates, Kespu, asked. A tall, gangling creature – skeletally thin, even in his ornately wrought battleplate. His red armour was studded with precious gems and gilt, and he wore robes of brightly dyed damask. Kespu was accompanied by a coterie of scuttling daemonborn – the malformed offspring of lesser Neverborn and mortal parents. The twisted creatures hid their abnormal shapes within cowls and robes, and busied themselves scratching Kespu’s utterances onto the scrolls they held, as they murmured softly to one another in their bleating tongue.

Amatnim acknowledged Kespu with a nod. ‘No. We continue to strike, and move on, as we have been. When we reach mid-system, Ashu and Kallabor will break off from the main advance.’ He looked at two of the Word Bearers to his left. He knew them only by reputation. Ashu had fought at Calth, or so he claimed, and his battleplate, like Amatnim’s, was scraped grey. He was a line soldier, built for war and good at little else.

Kallabor, on the other hand, was of the new breed, raised up from mortal existence in the decades following the retreat from Terra. His armour was the colour of a new wound, and, judging by the smell, had been etched with holy acids recently. Glass vials and clay jugs, marked with sigils of binding, hung from his battleplate. He recalled that Kallabor was a diabolist by inclination, as many among the captains of the Legion were.

Lakmhu stood just behind him, and Amatnim wondered whether the Dark Apostle had been whispering into the other’s ear, only moments ago. Kallabor was exactly the sort of warrior Lakmhu preferred – boastful and devout in equal measure, but powerful in his own way. And foolish enough not to realise that his power was nothing more than a gift.

Amatnim gestured to the system display. ‘You will continue to raid the outer worlds – slaves and supplies are the priorities. Burn everything else. By the time we’re done, this system will be a pyre, marking our triumph.’

Ashu folded his hands in salute, but Kallabor bristled. ‘Send someone else,’ he growled. ‘I will not be denied my fair share of glory, brother.’

Amatnim did not look at him. He imagined that Lakmhu was smiling. For all his oratorical skill, Lakmhu was predictable. ‘You are denied nothing. All contribute, in their own way. And all are rewarded.’

‘If all are the same, then there should be no issue. Send another.’

Amatnim sighed, softly. He could feel the eyes of the others on him. Their gazes were calculating and cold. Brotherhood was a fluid concept, at times. The gods favoured those who seized their moment, and showed initiative.

He turned and fixed Kallabor with a steady stare. ‘And who would you suggest, brother? Kespu? Apis? Which of your brothers should step up, where you falter?’

‘I do not falter.’ Kallabor flexed his hands, and Amatnim felt the tug of the warp.

‘Then do your duty.’

‘I do.’ Kallabor spread his arms, and looked around. ‘I challenge a weak leader, as the gods command. Their hands are upon my shoulders, and they have turned their faces from you, Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash.’

The words were part insult, part ritual. An old rite, one of the oldest in the Legion. The gods gave their favour with one hand, and took it away with the other. It was the duty of the faithful to punish those who had lost the goodwill of the Ruinous Powers. To be a Bearer of the Word was to serve one of the most murderous meritocracies in existence. Only the strong and the clever survived. Thus were the gods entertained.

But this was not the gods’ will. This moment belonged to another. Amatnim met Lakmhu’s gaze, and saw the Dark Apostle’s lips twitch, as if restraining a smile. Tiresome Lakmhu. So short-sighted, for one so blessed.

Amatnim turned his attentions back to Kallabor. ‘Is that the way of it, then?’ he said. ‘Is this truly the moment you wish to do this?’

‘It is past time,’ Kallabor said, smiling. He reached for a clay jug and scraped the wax seal away with a flick of his thumb. ‘You take too long, brother. The gods demand a feast, and you feed them scraps. Almace awaits, and yet we waste our energies on lesser targets. Why do you dawdle so?’

Amatnim stepped away from the hololithic projector as the others made room. He could hear some among them making wagers, and laughed.

Kallabor flushed, thinking it was directed at him. ‘I do not dawdle, brother. I merely take my time. This is not a war of conquest, whatever you might think. It is a battle for the soul of our Legion.’

Silence fell, at these words. Amatnim nodded and looked around. ‘Yes, you heard me. We know about souls, don’t we, brothers? We make use of them the way a merchant makes use of coin. We hoard them and barter them, we sell them piecemeal or all at once. We are the farmers of the gods, and it is by our efforts that they are nourished.’

He turned, keeping Kallabor in sight, but seemingly paying him no heed. A calculated provocation. ‘The gods have spoken, and I obey. Almace holds something of value, and it is my quest to find it – to bring it before the Dark Council, so that it might raise up our Legion. That it might unite us, in a way we have not been united since the Urizen turned his eyes from us.’

An intake of breath. Murmurs. Some angry, some thoughtful. As it always was. Amatnim felt the pulse of the warp beating in his head. Something was coming, climbing up out of the abysses of Kallabor’s clay jugs. The other Word Bearer was murmuring the words of binding. Amatnim let him mutter. While another might have silenced his opponent then and there, Amatnim recognised the value of the opportunity at hand. Kallabor was giving him a gift, whether he realised it or not.

‘The galaxy burns with righteous conflagration, brothers. And where are we? Where are the Bearers of the Word, the Chosen of the Gods? Why do we not lead our cousins from the Eye of Terror in a grand crusade, the equal of that ancient war that brought us here? Why do we let others lead the charge?’ He made a fist. ‘We lack unity. We seek sublimity at the expense of purpose. But not for much longer.’

He turned, presenting his back to Kallabor. Inviting him to make his attack. ‘That is why we are here, why we burn a path to Almace. To find the thing which will unite us, as we once were.’ He locked eyes with his subordinates, each in their turn – inviting them to disagree. None did. This was not their moment of challenge.

‘Enough talking. Turn, Amatnim. Meet your fate.’

Amatnim turned. ‘Meet my fate? Have you added divination to your bag of tricks, Kallabor? Have you seen my future then? Tell me – what is it?’

‘Death,’ Kallabor said. He flung out his hand, and the air rippled about him. There was a smell, like sour milk and burnt meat, and a sound like tearing silk. Something bled into sight, talons striking the deck as it hurled itself

towards Amatnim.

The daemon was a simple thing – an amalgamation of hunger and pain, given flesh by the word of a god. It was all teeth and loose, gangling limbs, a cyclone of talons and gnashing jaws. It wailed as it sped towards him, in a voice that was at once that of a frightened child and a demented ancient.

Amatnim steeled himself, but did not draw a weapon. It was not necessary. Instead, he flung out a hand, fingers spread, and caught the charging Neverborn by its waxen skull. It thrashed for a moment, confused by its abrupt stop. Thorny tendrils lashed out, scraping across his armour and flesh. 'Stop,' Amatnim said simply.

It stopped. A half-formed maw gave vent to a shrill whine of confusion. 'Sit,' he murmured. The daemon sank down on its excess of limbs, shuddering and whimpering. Amatnim heard a murmur pass through the ranks, and allowed himself a smile. He studied the daemon for a moment, and then turned his gaze onto Kallabor.

'Is that it, brother? One little half-made thing? Is that all you have to throw at me?'

Kallabor stared at him in incomprehension. 'What–? How…?'

Amatnim whistled. The daemon stiffened and rose, undulating around so that it faced its summoner. It growled softly. Eagerly. Kallabor was not a kindly master, Amatnim suspected. 'Let us see how you deal with such a tiny thing, eh?' he said. He gestured, and the daemon sprang towards Kallabor, howling. Acidic slaver flew from newly sprouted jaws as it barrelled into him, knocking him back.

Word Bearers scattered, shouting and cursing. Kallabor bellowed as the daemon tore at him, its claws easily slicing through ceramite. He shouted an incantation, exorcising the creature. It came apart in his hands, dribbling away into nothing. But the damage had been done – his vials and jugs had been cracked or shattered. While they might resist terrestrial weaponry, the claws of daemons could cut through most things.

Filmy shapes solidified about him as he lurched to his feet. More Neverborn, and these not under his control. Most diabolists were wise enough to mystically harden the tools of their trade, to avert just such a catastrophe. But some, like Kallabor, were lazy as well as overconfident. They never considered the dangers of the Neverborn they wielded like tools.

Something with the face of an angel and the claws of a crustacean cooed as it

clutched at the diabolist, seeking to embrace him. He cursed and snatched at the bolt pistol holstered on his hip. More daemons took shape around him – a raw, red-skinned thing with horns of brass and a face like a flayed skull hooked his arm as he tried to fire. A thing that was all jointed legs, with a face like that of a lion, chortled as it lashed out at him with heavy, iron hooves. Kallabor fell back, his bolt pistol thundering.

He did not call for aid. He was brave, if nothing else. Or perhaps it was pride that stilled his tongue. Regardless, Amatnim watched respectfully as the diabolist was slowly but surely torn apart by his own daemons. Kallabor stumbled, and they fell on him like wolves. They bore him down in a wave of teeth and claws, and he was borne to the deck in silence. The first of the daemons, the angel-faced concubine of Slaanesh, rose, her pretty jaws dripping red. She delicately licked her lips, as she fixed a nearby warrior with her black, blank gaze. ‘He was sweet,’ she purred. ‘Will you be sweet?’

Amatnim put a bolt shell in whatever passed for her brain. As her body came apart, the other Word Bearers followed his example. Bolters, pistols and various other weapons thundered across the observation platform, and the daemons were reduced to bubbling ichor. Amatnim strode over to what was left of Kallabor.

Incredibly, the diabolist was still breathing, though it was a tenuous thing. He had been gutted and hollowed, his armour ripped open and the flesh within scooped away. Garlands of yellow fat decorated cracked bones as exposed lungs flexed and shrank. One heart was gone, plucked out and eaten, but the other still beat fitfully. Amatnim sank to his haunches beside the dying warrior, and peered down at him. ‘A good try, brother,’ he said softly. ‘But you failed. And your soul is forfeit. The gods receive you as you deserve.’ He reached into Kallabor’s ruined chest, caught his remaining heart and tore it loose. Kallabor twitched, sighed, and was gone.

Amatnim stood, still clutching the heart. He looked about him, and took a bite of it. Then, he handed it to Kespu. ‘Eat, brothers. Eat of Kallabor’s heart and take some of his courage into you. Honour him, for he was faithful, in his way, if foolish.’

As the others gathered around, Amatnim turned to find Lakmhu glaring at him. ‘How did you accomplish that?’

‘Accomplish what?’

‘The daemon, brother. You stopped it with a gesture. That is not possible, save for one blessed by the gods.’

‘And you have answered your own question.’ Amatnim smiled.

Lakmhu snorted. ‘Truthfully, brother…’

Amatnim raised his hand. On the palm of his gauntlet was carved a circular sigil.

‘A sign of binding,’ Lakmhu said. He turned to watch as deck-slaves dragged what was left of Kallabor away. His armour would be stripped and sent to the ship’s armoury, if it wasn’t stolen en route. What remained of his body would be ground into nutrient paste and fed to the slaves of the gunnery decks, after the gene-seed had been harvested.

‘Kallabor was a second-rate diabolist. His bindings were slapdash. A child could have undone them, given a chance. It was only a matter of time before something he summoned hollowed him out and wore him like a mask. I’ve saved him the humiliation of that, at least.’ Amatnim watched as the other Word Bearers finished devouring the heart of their fallen brother. ‘Will you take your fair portion, Dark Apostle?’

‘I have courage enough for my purposes.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘So I see.’ He brought his palms together with a resounding crack, catching the attention of the others. ‘Now. As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted – we will reach mid-system in a matter of hours.’ At his signal, the hololithic projection changed, displaying not a system, but a single world.

‘The world is called Pergamon, according to the records our data-slaves harrowed from the last world.’ Amatnim gestured, and the projection expanded. Data spilled through the air, most of it of no interest to anyone save him. Amatnim had found that too often logistics were the bane of his Legion. They could not see the forest for the trees. ‘It is a tithe-hub for this part of the system. Everything heading to or from Almace comes through here. Orbital dockyards form an artificial belt about the planet. There are also minor orbital defences scattered across these coordinates.’ He twitched a hand, and red runes blazed to life on the projection.

‘What sort of defences?’ Kespu rasped.

Without turning, Amatnim said, ‘Minor, as I said. Nothing to threaten any vessel larger than a frigate. We shall brush them aside and take control of the orbital dockyards, where possible. From there, we will land troops at eight predetermined coordinates.’

‘An auspicious number,’ Lakmhu said. There was a hint of approval in his

voice.

‘When one goes to war, one seeks the approval of the Lord of Skulls. Such has it ever been, so must it ever be.’ More runes flickered to life on the projection. ‘There are more than fifteen hab-zones on this world. Most are small – a few million souls. Easy meat. I will lead the assault here – Pergo, one of the larger cities.’ Another run was illuminated. ‘Apis, you and your brotherhood will support me. The rest of you may choose your own targets.’ He turned to look at the others. ‘We will consider this a testing ground. If we cannot take this world, then Almace is beyond us.’

He allowed that to sink in, trusting that they were sensible enough to see the truth in his words. When he judged that they understood, he swept out a hand in a gesture of dismissal. ‘Return to your vessels and ready yourselves for war.’ He paused. ‘Ravage and burn the unbelievers. Bring them the truth, in flame and iron, and raise great pyramids in the name of the Pantheon. Do as you were born to do, brothers – and know that the gods love you for it. *Gloria Aeterna*.’

‘*Gloria Aeterna,*’ Apis, Kespu and the others responded. Glory Eternal. One of many oaths that the sons of the Urizen swore on an almost daily basis, but the one Amatnim cherished the most. It was a pledge. A promise. Serve the gods, and be granted glory; fail, and be forgotten.

‘A pretty speech,’ Lakmhu said, as the others departed. ‘You almost make me believe that the gods favour us over all others.’

‘And do they not?’

Lakmhu sneered and looked past him, at the projection. ‘I still see no sign of strategy here. For all your fine words, we seem to be following the simplest of raider’s tactics. Where are your vaunted stratagems, your cunning ploys?’

‘You do not see them, because you are not looking. The outer worlds are no threat to us, and expending the effort to bring them to heel will waste time, for little gain. Too, they are expendable, in the eyes of our foes. Besides raw resources, they hold little military value. So, I will make them gifts to my subordinates. As we advance towards the core, our more… distractible brothers will break off to take slaves and build pyramids of skulls, as is their wont. Their foolishness will not hinder us. Indeed, they will help us, by cutting the enemy’s lines of supply.’

Lakmhu smiled thinly. ‘I see your game. You seek to prevent others from following Kallabor’s path. You offer them easy glory, to fill their souls.’

‘Is that so wrong, brother?’ Amatnim asked. ‘This way, they are of use.’

‘You are a coward.’

Amatnim snorted. ‘If you believed that, you would have already made your move, rather than allowing Kallabor to test the waters for you.’

‘I had nothing to do with that.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘As you like.’

‘Why Pergo?’

Amatnim paused. ‘A commander must be seen to take the field, on occasion.’

‘Yes, but why that field, in particular?’

Amatnim frowned. ‘Speak plainly, brother. What exactly are you accusing me of?’

‘I have heard your reasons for laying siege to this world. It is a waste of time, in my opinion – but I understand your intent. A wise warrior learns his limits before attempting to exceed them.’ Lakmhu gazed at the projection. ‘But I know you well enough by now to know that you must have some other goal. So I ask you plainly – why Pergo?’

Amatnim hesitated. At times, he forgot how clever Lakmhu could be, when his temper was held in check. It was what made the Dark Apostle so dangerous. ‘The Apostolic Libraria – a repository of Ecclesiarchial wisdom,’ he said finally. ‘One of them, at least. Imagine having written so much about the gods and their worship that you needed a second world just to house the books. Or a hundred.’

‘Blasphemy,’ Lakmhu said, with a thin smile.

‘Depends entirely on your perspective, I suppose.’ Amatnim gazed at the rune representing the city. ‘This system belongs not to industrious craftsmen or warmongers, but to clergy. Hoarders of knowledge and speakers of litany. Even as we are.’ He looked at Lakmhu. ‘They are much like us, though we both deny it,’ he said.

Lakmhu frowned. ‘Careful, brother. Jesting aside, that *is* blasphemy.’

Amatnim grinned. He could hear the ire in the other Word Bearer’s voice. ‘You know, some say that they use a corrupted version of the Urizen’s own words to guide their false church. That they built their self-righteous fortress atop foundations made from the bones of Colchis. What do you think of that,

brother?’

‘I think it is ridiculous. They are weak. If they followed the word of Lorgar, they wouldn’t be. We would not prey upon them as we do.’

‘It must not be, and so it is not, eh?’

‘That is the way of all things, brother,’ Lakmhu said sanctimoniously. He sniffed. ‘All of this, then, so that you can burn a few books?’ He laughed harshly. ‘Is that your idea of a suitable offering to the gods?’

‘Do you know what I was, before we first set our feet on the path of enlightenment?’ Amatnim gestured to himself. ‘I was an Iconoclast, brother. I rode wings of fire and plied my axe-rake against the wisdom of ages.’ He knocked a knuckle against his grey shoulder-plate. ‘I was part of the Ashen Circle. It was my privilege to murder the history and culture of a people, all in the name of the Urizen. And I do the same, here and now.’

‘Nostalgia, then,’ Lakmhu said dismissively. ‘The bane of many a warrior. Somehow, I thought you above such things.’

Amatnim smiled sadly. ‘How one so wise can understand so little…’ He turned, hand sweeping out to indicate the projection. ‘This, brother, is the heart of them.’ He shook his head. ‘Our enemy values this place more than a hundred forge worlds. Trust me on this. Destroying this world makes a statement. It makes our intentions clear and draws the eyes of the gods to us, while at the same time weakening the resolve of our foes. All strategic gains. And, of course, it will lend us new allies…’

Lakmhu glared at him. ‘What new allies are you talking about?’

Amatnim scrolled through reams of information with a wave of his hand. ‘I have studied thousands of hours of data, and correlated sixteen points of interest in the immediate area. These are the major trade lanes for this part of the system. And these…’ He gestured, and several points on the map were illuminated. ‘These are sites of pirate activity.’

‘Pirates?’ Lakmhu said, puzzled.

‘Yes,’ Amatnim said, smiling. ‘Reinforcements, you could call them.’

‘We have a fleet – what do we need with a few ragged pirates?’

‘The orbital defences of Almace will be of a margin greater than those possessed by this world. We have neither the numbers nor the fortitude to plough through them as we will do here.’

Lakmhu grunted in sudden understanding. ‘You intend to herd them before

us, like chattel?’

‘If needs must. But they may well have more uses than that. Pirates have haunted the wild spaces of this system for generations. They may know of ways to penetrate defences, or secret routes by which we might avoid detection. Failing that… they will serve as a ready-made shield to allow us to close with the enemy, and gut them.’

‘And why would they do this? Pirates are not soldiers. They do not serve the gods as we do.’

‘Perhaps not. But in time, they might. If we show them the rewards that await them in service to the Pantheon, and the Urizen. Burning Pergo – spitting on the colours of those who have hunted them – will go a long way to convincing them. Regardless, they will come in handy when it comes time to lay siege to Almace.’

‘And why must we lay siege at all, eh?’ Lakmhu glared at him. ‘Why must we do this? Why fight in the mud, when we sail the stars?’

‘I have told you, brother. The gods will it.’

‘If they do, they have not said so to me.’

Amatnim turned back to the map. ‘Maybe you are not listening, brother. Clear some of those hymns from your ears and maybe you’ll be able to hear them.’

Lakmhu paused, as if chewing over some problem. Then, ‘I have been thinking about your speech, from before. Pretty as it was, I find myself puzzled.’

‘A common occurrence, I suspect.’

Lakmhu didn’t rise to the bait. Amatnim gestured for him to continue. The Dark Apostle cleared his throat. ‘We both know that what we seek is not what you claimed. If it were, our masters would be here – not us.’

Amatnim frowned. ‘Perhaps.’ He sighed and ran a hand over his pate. ‘There was truth, amid the hyperbole. We are broken. Not as badly as Fulgrim’s lackeys, or so thoroughly as Angron’s curs, but we… bend beneath the weight of our own hubris. Surely you must see that as well as I.’

Lakmhu looked away. ‘We remained a Legion, while others crumbled.’

‘Did we? I think we are a Legion in name only. The Urizen is silent, our wars are fought at the behest of others, and those who lead us spend more time fighting each other than our true foes.’ Amatnim shook his head. ‘We are

broken, brother. We simply do not realise it. We must be one again – one faith, one army, one brotherhood. But first, the impure must be purged.'

'And how do you plan to do that?'

Amatnim looked at him. 'You know the answer, brother.'

Lakmhu was silent for a moment. Then he laughed. 'I should kill you now.'

'You've tried already. Or will you continue to insist on the pretence that Kallabor wasn't your doing?' Amatnim snorted. 'No, brother. You won't kill me. If you do, this fleet will crumble, and any hope you have of completing your own quest crumbles with it.'

'You do think highly of yourself, Amatnim.'

'Someone must.' Amatnim pointed a finger. 'Erebus is a deceitful snake.'

'And Kor-Phaeron isn't?'

'Kor-Phaeron is old. And he was the Urizen's mentor. What is Erebus, next to that?'

'He is the Hand of Destiny. The Anointed of the Gods.'

'Is that why he bows to Abaddon? Is that the gods' will, do you think – or is it Erebus currying favour with one he thinks is mighty enough to protect him, when the Urizen returns from his pilgrimage?'

Lakmhu bared his teeth. Anger flashed in his eyes, and his blade slaves grunted eagerly. They could sense the violence in him, and they slid their swords from their shoulders in readiness. Amatnim stepped back, one hand on his axe-rake. 'Kor-Phaeron has always been the soul of our Legion. His words guided Lorgar, who guided us. Erebus uses us – uses *you* – for his own advancement. That which I seek will prove him false, once and for all. And then he will be cast into the outer dark, where he belongs.'

Lakmhu shook his head. 'You continue to speak blasphemy, brother, despite my warnings. Were you any other, I would break you here, and leave your carcass as a warning for others.' He pointed his crozius at Amatnim. 'But I spare you, because I need you. We shall know which of us is right, when the day comes. But until then… until then, I spare you.'

Amatnim laughed. 'As I spare you, brother.' He looked back at the projection. 'I think that moment comes fast upon us, though. My quest nears its end.'

'And yet we waste time on a library,' Lakmhu said. 'Why not simply

bombard it from orbit, then, the way we have the others? Why waste time burning it by hand? The same goals would be accomplished, and we would spare our forces unnecessary casualties.’

‘I thought you spoke for the gods, brother? Which do you think they would prefer? This victory must be symbolic – a show of power. Something too great to ignore.’ He shrugged. ‘Still, I am a faithful man. Let the gods speak, then. I am here, and I listen with great eagerness.’ He stood patiently, head tilted. When no answer was forthcoming, he sighed and turned to the Dark Apostle. ‘There. I suppose that is plain enough. Now come, brother. Cheer up. It is not every day that you get to burn a repository of falsehood.’

CHAPTER FOUR

17:15:09

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

The welcome feast was an ordeal. Calder endured it with the patience of Dorn. He chafed at the thought of work going undone, but maintained a facade of polite stoicism. Suboden and Karros fared better – the Raven Guard had done his best to make himself even more inconspicuous, while Suboden had gone the opposite route.

Like Calder and Karros, the khan had shed his battleplate. He was clad in thick, colourful robes and a mantle of eagle feathers that draped his broad shoulders. His hair was bound in a neat braid with golden wire, as were his moustaches. It contrasted strongly with the dark, plain uniform of unfamiliar design that Karros wore.

The khan padded through the crowded chamber like a tiger on the prowl, haughty and proud. Ecclesiarchial notables scattered before him, and aristocrats trailed in his wake, whispering. There were few of the latter in attendance. The noble families of Almace were a spent force, mostly absorbed by the Ecclesiarchy over the centuries. But some remained; they preened like gaudy peacocks amid the crimson tedium of the Ministorum representatives, or the grey monotony of the Administratum bureaucrats.

Amongst these warring hues wandered officers of Eamon's 'bodyguard', looking out of place and uneasy. Calder had tried engaging a few of them in conversation, but they seemed overawed and had little to say. They provided him little refuge from less welcome conversational partners, such as those who now had him cornered. A group of noteworthy individuals – masters of trade and finance, overseers and Administratum adepts.

A whirlpool of interminable conversation lapped at him. Bureaucrats, deacons and functionaries chattered to each other and him, battering at his walls with incessant questions relating to inanities such as the latest fashions on Macragge or the weather on Ardium. Fortunately, his training had prepared him to endure such things.

‘Do you eat, then, my lord?’ a heavyset man said, drawing Calder’s wandering attentions back. The man held a plate filled with foodstuffs – crustaceans, processed grains, slices of the native cheese – and nibbled on something green. ‘Only I did not see you partake of the meal, earlier.’

‘Nor did I,’ an older woman said, looking up at him. Her dress was worth more than the average worker made in their lifetime, and heavy with artificially grown gemstones. Calder could read the signs of multiple juvenat treatments on her too-tight flesh. ‘Is our humble provender not up to the standards of Holy Terra and Ultramar?’

‘My apologies. It has only been thirty-six standard hours since I last consumed my weekly allotment of nutrient paste,’ Calder said in a bored tone.

They goggled at him. Calder smiled. A younger man laughed. ‘A joke?’ he said, almost hopefully.

‘No,’ Suboden said, appearing behind the young man and startling him. The White Scar held a goblet in one hand. It looked absurdly small in his grip. ‘The sons of Dorn have no sense of humour. They think it inefficient. I, however, know many jokes.’ He leaned towards the older woman, his smile wide and feral. ‘Would you like to hear one?’

The mortals scattered like frightened birds. Suboden straightened and chuckled. ‘I thought you were a politician, brother. Don’t you know how to talk to them?’

‘I was talking to them. I did not wish to frighten them.’

‘And that’s your problem, brother. They grow overly familiar.’ He took a swig from his goblet. ‘They seek to draw us into their petty circles of influence. Can you feel it? Like stepping into a nest of grass-vipers.’

‘It is their nature,’ Calder said.

‘Ignorance is no excuse for heresy,’ Suboden said. ‘They’re weighing us, brother – mark my words. Feeling us out. Trying to decide how best to make use of our presence. Whether our arrival means Eamon is weak – or stronger than he’s ever been. Whether the rumours of invasion are true. You can hear them whispering, as well as I. It’s worse than Ultramar. It’s worse than Armageddon, come to that.’

‘You speak as if Chogoris is free of such things,’ Calder said, as Suboden snagged a decanter from a passing servant. The startled man yelped and fled.

Suboden poured himself another goblet of wine, and sniffed it. ‘Not free, no.

And hardly any more subtle, though it pains me to admit it. It is the nature of man to scramble for any advantage, when the seasons change.' He took a sip and licked his lips. 'Good vintage,' he murmured. Then, 'I do not blame them, brother. Or Eamon for encouraging them. Which he is, in his way. It is simply tedious. When your tent burns, do you waste time arguing about how the fire started, or do you put it out?'

'Sound advice. Perhaps we should switch places.'

'Oh no. This is your burden, brother. Bear it in good humour, and leave the rest to us.' Suboden drained his goblet and refilled it. 'I'm surprised to see you out of your armour,' he said. 'Did you have that uniform specially made for the occasion?'

'In a sense,' Calder said. All Huscarls were provided with the same uniform, tailored to their massive frame. The outfit was black and simple, after the fashion of Post-Unification Terra, with yellow piping, and the Chapter sigil pinned to their chest. 'There are occasions when battleplate is more hindrance than help.'

'True. Few of our brothers, whatever their Chapter, would admit such.'

'I am not my brothers. Neither, I think, are you.'

Suboden snorted. 'You do not know many of us, then.' He smiled. 'We laugh as we kill. We find joy in the hunt. In war.' He gestured to his mantle. 'This is as much my armour as my battleplate. And this chamber – merely another field of war. I am happy here. You sons of Dorn find little joy in anything save your walls. At least, so goes the conventional wisdom.'

Calder frowned, but refused to be baited. 'Where is Karros?'

'Sampling the local cuisine,' Suboden said, nodding to one of the tables that lined the chamber. Karros hovered near it, peering at the food on display with seeming confusion. He was surrounded by a crowd of chattering nobles, talking around him.

'He looks puzzled.'

'An act. Our brother plays up his inhumanity, so that those watching him underestimate him. They think him blind to their jibes and ploys. He is taking their measure, even as we do, in our own ways.'

Calder nodded. In that moment, he realised perhaps why Suboden and Karros had been selected to accompany him. Both, like him, had dealt with mortals extensively – Suboden, during the war for Armageddon, and Karros,

during the Jottun Uprisings. Watching them at work, he saw new ways of approaching old problems.

Then, that was the Lord Commander's method of operation. Learn by observation. A strong tenet, if a touch more passive than Calder was comfortable with. The Imperial Fists preferred to learn by doing. Wisdom was earned through pain.

He found his gaze drawn to the far corner of the chamber, where Eamon sat, surrounded by scribes and advisors. The cardinal-governor was dressed modestly, and speaking to one of his deacons. Suboden followed his look. 'What do you make of him?'

'Dedicated. If he is corrupt, he hides it well.'

'He hides it not at all.' Suboden looked around meaningfully. 'Then, perhaps that is to his credit. He seems willing to listen, which is more than most of them.' He set his goblet aside and upended the decanter, drinking straight from it. 'Petty little men, with their petty little kingdoms. Sometimes I wonder why we waste time, playing the dutiful servants.'

'Would you rule them, then?'

'No. But it might make things easier.' Suboden glanced up at Calder. 'I have heard that Guilliman thinks along the same lines. He intends to set his sons above certain potentates, on certain worlds within the Ultramar System. Or so I'd heard.'

'And how did you come to hear that?'

Suboden tugged on his moustaches, grinning. 'You think we do not have our eyes and ears, in the crusade? I expect you do as well.'

Calder looked away. In point of fact, the Chapter did – something he had been unsettled to learn, upon rejoining his brothers. All Chapters, especially those with ties to Terra, had their own networks of spies these days. Some were more effective than others. In recent months, Calder had trained his own personal network of scribes – teaching them what to look for, and what to disregard, in the millions of reports he collected from across a variety of systems. 'I know no more about what the Lord Commander intends than you do.'

Suboden nodded. 'That is not a denial.'

Calder glanced at him. 'What do your brothers make of it?'

Suboden shrugged and took another swig from the decanter. 'The khans have

not held a council to discuss it. Indeed, what is there to discuss? Ultramar is his, and the gene-sons of Guilliman obey the edicts of their father. As we would, should the Great Khan return from the Hunt of Ages. As would your brothers, should Dorn return.'

'Guilliman is not Dorn,' Calder said.

'Nor is he the Great Khan.' Suboden peered at him. 'The galaxy rests on a blade's edge, brother… balanced between victory and defeat.'

'Which side does it tip towards?'

'I suspect we will not know, until the final moment.' Suboden reached up and set a comradely fist on his shoulder. He smiled widely. 'That is the fun of it.'

Calder smiled, if only for a moment. It faded a heartbeat later, as Suboden said, 'He's hiding something, of course.'

Momentarily puzzled, Calder said, 'Who? The Lord Commander?'

Suboden snorted. 'Almost certainly. But no. Our host. He's hiding something. I can smell it on him. He's happy to see us… but it doesn't reach his eyes. He's worried.'

'His world is under threat of invasion.'

'That's not it.' Suboden snatched a goblet from a passing tray and handed it to him. 'Drink. It puts them at ease.' He tugged on his moustaches again. 'They've all got their secrets, these little men. Can't be a king without a few secrets.'

'Secrets are not my concern. Only the defence of this world.'

'Admirable. I– oh. The little king calls for you, brother. Best see what he wants.'

Calder turned, and saw Eamon looking in their direction. He nodded to Suboden, and made his way to the cardinal-governor's side. Eamon dismissed his associates with an impatient gesture, and they scattered. One or two of them shot baleful looks at Calder as they went. He pretended not to notice. He'd have had to kill them, otherwise. 'Cardinal-governor,' he said by way of greeting.

Eamon gestured. 'What do you think of it, then?'

'What?'

'The wine, lieutenant.'

Calder looked down. He'd forgotten he was holding it. The goblet was perplexingly small in his grip. It was not gold, but was decorated to appear so, and deceptively soft. The slightest twitch would serve to crush it. He took a sip of the wine, and found it palatable, at best.

'Not to your liking?' Eamon asked. The cardinal-governor was smiling slightly, as if amused by the sight. 'There are other vintages available.'

'They would be wasted on me. My body isolates and neutralises toxins, rendering it an issue solely of taste and smell. And I find the taste of fermented grapes somewhat lacking.' He gave the goblet an experimental twitch, but the odour did not alter.

'And yet you continue to drink.'

'One must be polite, in mixed company.'

'Politesse,' Eamon said.

'You sound surprised.'

'I did not expect it. Your kind are not known for your decorum.' He raised a hand before Calder could speak. 'My apologies, that was uncivil. Yes, I was surprised.' He looked down into his own goblet for a moment. Then, 'What is he like?'

'Who?'

'The Lord Commander. Guilliman.' He hesitated. 'It is him, isn't it? It's not just… propaganda, from Terra?'

'If it were, do you think I would answer honestly?'

Eamon frowned and looked away. 'I suppose not.'

Calder was silent for a moment. 'I do not know him,' he said. 'I have met him only once, and then only briefly. But I knelt before him without thinking, such was the power of him. Though he is not my gene-sire, he is of the same… materials. They exude – *exuded* – the same strength. The same… sublime grace.' His voice grew soft. 'Had he ordered me to, I would have set myself against all the foes of mankind, barehanded and alone.'

Eamon took a sip of his wine. Calder noticed that his hand was trembling. 'Why did he send you here?' Eamon asked.

'You asked for aid.'

'No. Why you, specifically?'

Calder considered the question for a moment. Then, ‘I am a Huscarl. One of the first, for this new era.’ He flexed his free hand. ‘Once, that term was reserved for those chosen to guard our primarch, both on the battlefield and off. Now, it means something quite different. It is why I was chosen to lead this mission.’

‘You guard worlds, rather than lords,’ Eamon said.

Calder nodded, pleased by the cardinal-governor’s understanding. ‘We are good at guarding things. And Guilliman is wise enough to allow us to do what we are best at, rather than forcing us into an unsuitable role.’

‘Are there… many of you?’

‘Not enough. Never enough. But there will be more, before the end of this crusade. We shall build a wall of worlds, to hold back the long night. And on each, a single watchman to ward it, come what may. We are Huscarls, and that is our oath.’

Eamon was silent, for long moments. ‘Will you be enough, though?’

Calder considered this. ‘You expected more of us,’ he said. ‘Perhaps Guilliman himself, come down in fire and glory to rescue you from the fiends in the night.’

Eamon shook his head. ‘I expected nothing, lieutenant. Not you, certainly not the Risen Son. We are not important as worlds or systems go. And the reach of the Ecclesiarchy is not as long as we like to imagine. That Guilliman considered us at all is a blessing from the God-Emperor, though some do not see it so charitably.’

Calder frowned and set his goblet down – gently. ‘Rebellion?’ he asked, quietly. He looked around the chamber, at the wide array of faces and titles on display.

‘I wouldn’t dignify it with that term, no.’ Eamon dabbed his lips with his napkin and sat back. ‘Discontent is a more accurate word, I think. I have been… soft-hearted.’ He smiled bitterly. ‘I have shown tolerance for the dissenting, and sympathy for the unhappy. I have… allowed certain members of the Ecumenical Council to abuse my favour, in order to keep the peace on Almace, and in the wider system. I have even spared the lives of those aristocratic families that sought to destabilise my position.’

Calder considered this. ‘Unwise,’ he said.

Eamon nodded. ‘Very much so, I expect. The Kabalevskys gave this world to

the Ecclesiarchy. Some of their descendants decided that they wanted it back, some time ago. Tried every trick in the book to unseat me. I finally had to exile the lot of them. It taught the rest to be quieter about their ambitions. But…'

'They still seek to undermine you.'

'Not intentionally, I think. But yes.' Eamon's smile slipped. 'Most of them aren't even aware that we've been invaded. They would panic – or worse, incite panic in others.'

'That is the reason for this feast, then.'

'A bit of ceremony, before things become awkward.' Eamon leaned forward. 'Some of them will not believe it, even after we tell them. They will assume it is a game on my part, or some attempt to shore up what they consider my faltering regime. Already, there are whispers that the Holy Synod is to be petitioned for my removal, and a new dynasty installed. Some believe that the Kabalevskys will return in the world's darkest hour, like the kings of Old Night.' He chuckled and shook his head. 'I did what was needed, and now I find that I can do nothing at all. Except wait.'

'There is much you can do, cardinal-governor. Yours is the voice which commands. I will need you to use it, in the near future. Necessity is a bitter pill for the powerful and the weak alike.' Calder looked down at him. 'You are not what I expected, cardinal-governor. That is to your credit. Do not lose hope now. Not when salvation is but a handbreadth away.'

Eamon nodded. 'Huscarl indeed,' he said. He turned, and Calder saw a soldier – a junior officer, by his insignia – hurrying through the crowd. The man bent respectfully over Eamon's chair, and murmured quietly into his ear. Calder was able to hear his words easily enough, however, and when Eamon rose, he wasn't surprised.

'The enemy has been sighted.' Eamon pitched his voice low. As Calder followed the cardinal-governor from the chamber, he signalled Suboden and Karros.

The time for feasting was over.

Scribes and messengers were hurrying through the halls of the cathedral-palace as they made their way to the strategium. Scrivener-servitors etched lines of ink across reams of parchment as officers spoke to one another in cramped alcoves. There was a sense of anticipation on the air – and not a little fear.

‘I’m told you brought a fleet,’ Eamon said as they approached the doors. ‘I fear we may need it, weak as our own system defence force is at the moment.

‘Two strike cruisers and a battle-barge, as well as escorts,’ Calder said.

‘A small fleet,’ Eamon said doubtfully.

‘The *Silent Horseman* alone could defend this system,’ Suboden said, his tone betraying his annoyance. ‘That battle-barge weathered the fire storms above Armageddon, and burst the heart of an ork rok with its prow.’

‘The *Capulus* and *Raven’s Valour*, while not so large, are equally blooded,’ Calder added. ‘Two strike cruisers and a battle-barge are a fleet unto themselves, not counting the dozen frigates that escort them.’

‘A better fleet than what you have now, at least,’ Suboden said. ‘Were the situation different, I might strike your head from your shoulders for such an insult.’

Eamon nodded hurriedly, his eyes wide with alarm. ‘I meant no insult, my lords.’

Suboden grunted and looked at Calder. There was a glimmer of cold amusement in the White Scar’s eyes, and Calder suddenly realised that Suboden was only pretending to be angry, though he could not fathom why. Perhaps simply for the fun of it.

‘We take no insult,’ Calder said, and Eamon gave him a grateful look. He stopped. ‘If you could go ahead, cardinal-governor. I wish to discuss a private matter with the khan.’ He nodded to Karros. ‘Karros will accompany you.’

‘I shall leave you to it, then.’ Eamon paused. ‘Lieutenant – I do not know whether or not you… eat as a man might, but if you would do me the honour, I would like to extend an invitation to break your fast with me tomorrow. I feel there will be much to discuss, and I find I often work best over a meal.’

Calder nodded. ‘I will attend.’

Eamon nodded. ‘Good. I will meet you in the strategium.’ He left them, his bodyguards falling in around him, and Karros following after. Suboden watched them go and chuckled. Calder frowned.

‘Why the pretence?’

‘You noticed.’ Suboden sounded pleased. ‘A man like Eamon needs reminding about our nature, every so often.’ He tapped his amulets. ‘They confuse their authority for true power. They cannot be allowed to chastise us, however mildly, and escape censure. Else they will grow bold.’ He frowned.

‘Our brothers, the Wolves, made that mistake once. We learn from their errors.’ He bared his teeth in a grin. ‘Too, it put you in his good graces. Where he fears me, or Karros, he will cling to you.’

‘He should not fear me, then?’

‘Not in the same way he fears us. We are wolves, prowling the dark. You are a mastiff, guarding the herd. You see?’

Calder shook his head. ‘I should not have agreed to dine with him.’

Suboden stroked his moustaches. ‘Never turn down food when your host offers it. It is rude. Besides, it will aid the illusion that you are on his side.’

‘Am I not?’

‘You serve the Lord Commander, brother. Last I checked, he wasn’t here.’ Suboden clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Come. Let us see what games the enemy is playing.’

Swordmaster Tyre was waiting for them in the strategium, along with Canoness Lorr. He was scowling as data scrolled across the floating projection. He glanced at them as they arrived, and the crowd of officers and scribes surrounding him evaporated at a terse gesture. ‘A long-range debris-trawler spotted them, my lords. It’s unmanned, save for an enginseer to keep the servitors functional. Luckily, he’s more observant than most of them.’

The hololithic image flickered, and a pict-feed appeared. It showed a debris field – a graveyard of broken vessels and cosmic junk. Every system had them, places where forgotten things congregated and were picked over by salvagers for anything of value. Tyre pointed at a crimson dot on the feed. A brief flare, as of engines firing. ‘Telemetry indicates that they came out of the debris field here. If they’re staying close to the rest of the fleet, that means that it should be… here.’ A set of coordinates was illuminated. ‘From that, we’ve extrapolated the position and formation.’ More runes flashed into sight.

‘What about the trawler?’ Calder asked.

Tyre gestured dismissively. ‘They destroyed it a few moments after the feed was transmitted.’ He frowned. ‘That’s them, though. I’m sure of it.’

‘What world is that?’ Calder asked.

‘Pergamon,’ Tyre said. ‘It’s one of the larger worlds – a tithe-hub. There are orbital dockyards and numerous transit points. Captain Keel is already planning to take the system defence fleet out and meet them there – it’ll take him a day, maybe two to reach them. If we can hold them there, it might buy

us a few days more.’

‘Pergamon has substantial orbital defences,’ Calder said, studying the data.

‘As I said, it’s a tithe-hub. There’s frequent pirate activity around that area. Too, there’s the library…’

‘The library,’ Eamon echoed. He closed his eyes. ‘Holy Throne bless and keep us.’

‘What library is this?’ Suboden demanded.

‘The Apostolic Libraria – a repository of liturgical texts, numbering in the millions,’ Calder answered, before Eamon could. ‘One of the largest of its type in this sector.’

Suboden snorted. ‘Hardly a strategic objective.’

‘It is the most important thing on that planet,’ Canoness Lorr said, speaking up for the first time. ‘A commandry of my order guards it, and the Sisters Dialogous who see to the maintenance of its contents. The texts there are part of the foundation of Ecclesiarchial canon. The seeds from which the Imperial Cult germinated.’

‘They’re breaking the pattern,’ Karros said. He gestured to the pict-captures. ‘With the other worlds, they employed an epsilon-montero formation – static wedge, with an emphasis on alternating orbital strikes. They landed few troops, and only after most of the world was on fire. But here…’

‘A test run,’ Calder said. The others looked at him. ‘This world is the second largest in the system, and the most well defended next to Almace.’ He paused. ‘They’re practising.’

‘Practising?’ Lorr snarled. ‘*Practising?*’

Tyre placed a hand on her shoulder, and leaned over to murmur something. She shrugged him off and turned her glare on Eamon. ‘We must preserve the library, no matter how many lives it costs.’

‘And how would you have me do that, canoness, when we are here, and it is there?’ Eamon said. ‘Captain Keel is taking the fleet – it is in the God-Emperor’s hands now.’

Lorr bared her teeth. ‘We have a fleet of ore-haulers, of pleasure-yachts and trading vessels in orbit right now. Commandeer them all. My Sisters will board them, and we will meet the foe with fire and steel.’

‘Even if I could do that, it would take too much time.’ He met her glare

without faltering. ‘I need you and your Sisters here, to protect this world and all that it contains.’

Calder expected Lorr to protest further. Instead, she stiffened and turned away. ‘Pergamon is lost,’ Eamon said. ‘But its loss can buy us victory. We must begin the work of the final hour and make of Almace a rock which might withstand the tides of abomination.’

His voice rang out, and scribes, officers and servants stopped to listen. Calder saw that this too was a test. Eamon was readying himself for the grand speeches to come. The cardinal-governor looked at Tyre. ‘It is time, I think, to make my flock aware of what faces us.’ He looked at Calder. ‘Past time, perhaps.’

Tyre frowned. ‘There’ll be unrest. Every world in the core will be screaming over the vox for troops and ships that we can’t give them.’

‘Let them scream. They might distract the foe.’ Suboden peered at the star map and stroked his beard. He looked at Calder. ‘How much time do you estimate we have before they arrive, brother? A few days? A week? Or only hours?’

‘If they’re stopping at every world between Pergamon and here – a week. Perhaps less, depending on how much of a fight the remains of the system defence fleet can put up.’

Suboden nodded thoughtfully. ‘Time is a valuable commodity in any campaign. The more time you have, the higher your walls grow. How much time do you need to make Almace impregnable, brother?’

‘More time than we have.’

Suboden laughed. ‘No false pride there, then. Fine. How much time to make the defences adequate for purpose?’

Calder answered immediately. ‘Two weeks. Possibly three.’

‘That, I can buy you.’ Suboden traced a line across the hololith, causing the image to flicker. ‘There are a number of points between here and the enemy where we might meet them to our advantage. Give me command of the system defence fleet, and I’ll take the *Silent Horseman, Raven’s Valour* and half of the escorts we brought. With that, we might be able to bloody them sufficiently for our purposes.’

‘What about Pergamon?’ Eamon asked. Suboden’s plan would leave him only the *Capulus* and a handful of escorts to defend Almace. Workable, but

unpleasant.

Suboden fixed him with a steady gaze. ‘You said it yourself – it is lost. But its loss will buy us the time we need to get into position. The enemy will be drugged by victory – overconfident. Easy meat, if we are clever.’

‘You will not be able to beat them,’ Calder said. ‘Preliminary reports put their fleet at numbers far in excess of our own.’

‘Yes, but you are assuming their fleet will maintain integrity as it travels coreward.’ Suboden’s smile was hard, and cruel. ‘If they were us, they might. But they are not, and it will not. I have hunted this prey before, brother. They will not be able to resist the outlying worlds, any more than orks could. It is their nature to prey on the defenceless and the weak. And we will use that to our advantage.’

Calder paused. ‘How?’

‘Refugees,’ Karros interjected.

Suboden nodded. ‘Some always escape. Sometimes they allow them to do so, if only to prolong the hunt. So as they hunt the refugees, we will hunt them.’ He clapped his hands together. ‘We will drag our prey into the dark, like the great cats of the plains, and the enemy will have little idea what has occurred.’

Calder nodded. The White Scar’s plan was simple and effective, if callous. ‘And if they investigate…?’

‘Then we flee. We draw them off, further and further from Almace. Some will press on, but we will peel away their numerical superiority, if all goes well.’ Suboden turned from the projection. ‘We of Chogoris are as the wind. Always moving, always racing. We chill the blood and steal the breath of our foes. It runs through us and carries us to victory.’ He made a fist. ‘Let me be the wind, Calder. I will run our foes to their deaths.’

Calder gazed at the White Scar. Releasing Suboden’s brotherhood to hunt would leave him down almost a third of his force. But, by the same token, forcing them behind walls had its own disadvantages.

Joint operations between Chapters had ever been fraught affairs. Even the most congenial of Chapters had its own preferred method of war. To ignore it was to risk angering allies. Too, his command, though ordered by Guilliman himself, was a tenuous thing. He was outranked by both Suboden and Karros. Though they had bent the knee to him thus far, they would only obey so long as their experience was not dismissed out of hand.

All of this flashed through Calder’s mind in moments, followed by rapid calculations. ‘Air power,’ he said. ‘I will need pilots capable of keeping the skies clear, for evacuation and extraction.’

Suboden grinned. ‘Of course. I can leave you as many wind-riders as you like. So long as the rest of us are free to hunt the stars.’

Calder nodded. ‘Your plan seems solid enough.’

Suboden glanced at Karros. ‘Solid, he says. High praise, from a son of Dorn.’

‘But I cannot give you command of the system defence fleet,’ Calder added. He pointed to Eamon. ‘Only he can.’

Suboden wheeled about and fixed the cardinal-governor with a patient stare. ‘Well?’ he rumbled. ‘Shall I take your scraps of steel and forge a blade from them?’

Eamon looked away from the projection, his face tight and pale. ‘Do I have a choice?’

Suboden’s smile was not friendly. ‘You always have a choice, cardinal-governor. As the Khwarzm were known to say, the tree of woe has many branches…’

‘But it has only one trunk,’ Eamon recited, absently.

Suboden nodded. ‘Even so.’

‘I will need to convene the Ecumenical Council. The things you want – I must put them before the councillors.’

‘And if they say no?’

Eamon frowned. ‘They will not.’ There was an undercurrent of savage anticipation in Eamon’s voice, and Calder thought of what the cardinal-governor had said earlier. Whatever his past weaknesses, Eamon seemed determined to erase them.

Calder nodded. ‘Good. Then we can begin.’

CHAPTER FIVE

18:00:00

Pergamon, Secundus-grade tithe world

Alarm klaxons pierced the air, echoing through the rockcrete halls. A tide of humanity filled the corridors of the Administratum building, shouting, shoving, weeping and whispering. Most were menial drones or Ministorum scribes, about the business of their diverse masters. Palatine Shalla Cern ignored them, and they parted before her like minnows in front of a shark. They knew her, at least by reputation, and feared her.

The commandry Cern led was small – less than a hundred Battle Sisters, their remit extending only to the grounds of the Apostolic Libraria. At least, in times of peace. During war, she was second-in-command of the planet's military. It was in that capacity that she and her bodyguards had made their way across the city from the library.

The journey had not been without incident. The city was breaking down – panic ruled the streets, despite the best efforts of the enforcers. The evacuation efforts were taking too long and the city's defence bunkers were already full. But Cern had no time for such concerns. There were other matters that required her attention. The enemy were on their doorstep, and she intended to greet them with fire and steel.

Cern was a tall woman, and willowy beneath her grey battleplate. She was young, for her rank, but had earned it the hard way, as her augmetic arm attested. It was a fine thing, artfully wrought and without the glitches common to such prosthetics. Holy verses had been etched into its panels, and a miniature promethium cylinder was hidden in the forearm. A flick of the wrist, and a spurt of cleansing flame would wreathe her artificial hand.

Besides the hand, she had a bolt pistol holstered at her side, and a power maul in her fist. Two Battle Sisters of her commandry followed in her wake, boltguns held at the ready. They swept the corridor with hard, flat gazes, and no one dared hinder them.

‘Witless grox,’ one murmured, as she stepped past a trembling scribe.

Cern glanced back. ‘They’re frightened, Cassila. A day they thought impossible has come.’ Cassila flushed slightly at Cern’s chiding tone.

‘Forgive me, palatine. I spoke out of turn.’

‘There is nothing to forgive, Sister. Merely keep such observations to yourself, in the future. You never know who might be listening.’ Cern gestured upwards, where a cyber-cherub crouched atop a lintel, watching them with augmetic eyes.

The creatures were everywhere, on every planet of the system. Or so Cern had heard. They kept watch for the cardinal-governor, or perhaps even the Holy Synod. Or maybe, they watched only because that was what they were programmed to do. Still, one could never be too careful. More than one Sister had paid for the sins of a loose tongue and a free opinion.

More alarms sounded. These were different in pitch. As they passed by one of the great stained-glass windows that lined the far wall, Cern saw slow streaks of fire painting the night sky. ‘Debris alarms,’ Cassila said, looking up. ‘They must have reached the orbital defence array.’

‘Quicker than we expected,’ the other Battle Sister, Gurna, said.

‘They always are,’ Cern said. ‘Calculations are rarely as accurate as we might like. Remember that for the future.’ She stopped and turned. ‘There may come a time when you are in my place, with the fate of your Sisters on your shoulders. Calculations, estimates, auguries and telemetry – all of these are fallible. Only faith can be trusted. Allow it to guide you, and it will always lead you to victory.’

‘Or to Pergamon,’ Cassila said with a slight smile.

‘No one said victory was instantaneous,’ Cern said sternly. ‘Now be silent, both of you. We have an example to set.’

But as she continued down the corridor, she couldn’t help but glance at the windows. The ancient glass quivered slightly in its frames. It would shatter at the first impact of the debris falling from orbit. The city itself would buckle. It might survive, but not in one piece. Streaks of slow flame stretched across the dark skies, and she wondered at their number. More than she’d expected. Too many.

The attack on Pergamon had not come as a surprise to Cern. She had expected it for some time, given the warnings from Almace and Canoness

Lorr. In the days since that first, brief astropathic message, she had worked diligently to ready her mission, and Pergamon, for war. She had commandeered vessels, organised evacuation procedures and prepared the planetary defence levies for what was to come.

But it was not enough. It was never enough. A hard lesson, learned early in her days at the schola progenium. Time was the one commodity that could not be hoarded. It could only be spent, either foolishly or wisely. She hoped she had done the latter.

‘The sky is on fire, Duran,’ she called out as she stalked into the strategium. The chamber was circular. A glass dome surmounted the roof, its facets etched with an expensive, if inaccurate, star map of the system. Data-alcoves lined the walls. Within each, a servitor, hardwired into the orbital defence array, rattled off reports in grating monotone. Officers of the planetary defence levy scrambled to calculate potential landing zones and organise Pergamon’s defenders to repel the enemy.

‘I had noticed, thank you.’ Pernik Duran was overall commander of the levies for Pergamon, but Cern and her Sisters were outside the chain of command. They’d achieved an easy equilibrium after a memorable, if gruelling, bout in the training cages during her first year on Pergamon.

Cern smiled thinly. ‘You’re welcome.’ She waved Gurna and Cassila back, and they took up positions to either side of the door. ‘How bad is it?’

‘Very.’ Duran was a tall man, and stocky. A scion of one of the oldest Crusader houses of Terra, he showed no sign of worry, despite his assertion. He wore heavy carapace armour over a set of crimson robes and had a power sword sheathed at his side. ‘The defence platforms are antiques, and the enemy are not particularly bothered by losses.’

Cern bared her teeth. ‘Neither are we.’

Duran smiled. ‘Unfortunately, they outnumber us.’ He gestured to the hololithic defence projection flickering at the centre of the chamber. A pitiful handful of tacticum analysts surrounded it, making notations and updating the projection as the servitors reported changes. Most of them were older – the upper echelons of Pergamon’s military were retired, or on some form of extended punishment detail.

Cern shook her head. ‘Not all of them are planning to land. They never do.’

‘Not all. But enough. It will come down to blades.’ He looked at her. ‘Are your Sisters ready for what is to come?’

‘If we were not, I would not be here.’ She slapped the bolt pistol holstered on her hip. ‘We will fight them for as long as we are able.’

A servitor squalled suddenly and shuddered. The withered creature thrashed in its alcove and slumped, smoke boiling from its contact nodes. Another orbital defence platform had been destroyed. The feedback was hard on the servitors – more than one hung limp from their nest of cabling and nutrient feeds.

‘We’ve lost a third of the orbital defences,’ Duran said, as attendants hurriedly tried to douse the twitching servitor with retardant foam, before it started a fire. A moment later, as another servitor convulsed and fell, Duran added, ‘Two-thirds.’ He drew his blade and a whetstone. Slowly, he began to scrape the stone along the blade. ‘They’ll pass through the gauntlet soon, Sister, and then will come a true testing of our faith.’

‘You look forward to it.’

‘Don’t you?’

Cern ran a hand over her close-cropped hair. ‘No. I am certain in my faith. But I am not certain in my ability to defend the Apostolic Libraria from the forces arrayed against us.’

Duran nodded. ‘We will die.’

‘Those are not comforting words, brother.’

‘We will die well.’

Cern snorted. ‘Better, if not by much.’ More alarm klaxons sounded. Impacts were being registered as the first comets of debris reached the planet’s surface. The murmur of voices grew heated. Heads turned as the doors to the strategium were flung open with a dull boom. ‘Oh look. The lord deacon has arrived.’ She gestured surreptitiously, and her bodyguards relaxed. It wouldn’t do to gun down the planet’s de facto ruler.

Not yet, at any rate.

‘At last. His wisdom has been sorely missed.’ Duran’s voice was utterly deadpan.

Deacon Holmere was a gaunt, sallow-faced man, draped in crimson and white. He wore no crown of office, but his grey hair was pulled back from his sharp features in a tight braid. A servitor clomped in his wake, filling the air with sweet-smelling smoke from the dozens of censers attached to its withered husk. Cyber-cherubs fluttered about him, squealing to one another in

binaric, their optic sensors recording everything for posterity. He was trailed by a coterie of bodyguards and hangers-on. Cern recognised some of them – minor nobility, agri-bosses and traders.

Most of their kind had fled the moment word of the enemy's approach had reached them. They'd joined the grand exodus of trawlers, barges, corvettes and yachts making for the safety of Almace. Some had even volunteered to carry refugees, once Cern had promised not to execute them and commandeer their vessels for the holy cause.

Those that remained were either fools or ambitious. Or both. She studied them, noting which ones seemed nervous, and which seemed eager. Either might prove troublesome.

'Greetings, my lord deacon,' Duran began. The Crusader stepped forward and bowed. 'As you can see, we have begun–'

'What is the meaning of this?' Holmere snarled, interrupting him. 'Why was I not informed that the attack had begun?'

'We thought it fairly self-evident,' Cern said. Holmere had been her burden for almost a decade. A minor functionary given more authority than he could handle, he spent most of his time living well off whatever he could skim from the planetary tithe. He had surrounded himself with a nest of cronies and lickspittles, and paid little attention to anything that did not directly benefit him. The perfect planetary overseer, in other words.

Holmere rounded on her. 'What?'

'The sky is on fire and has been for hours. You would have noticed, had you stepped outside your pleasure-palaces.' Cern met his glare with a beatific smile. Holmere had no concept of what was occurring. For him, war meant pirates, or the workers of some isolated agri-facility getting revolutionary ideas. He was scared. She could see it in his eyes.

Holmere frowned. 'Canoness Lorr will hear of your disrespect.'

'If we survive the next few hours, I'm sure she will.' Cern made to turn away, but Holmere caught her arm.

'I am the ruler of this world. You do not turn away from me.'

Cern looked at his hand and then at him. He released her and backed away hastily. 'Don't threaten me,' he snapped.

'Did you hear me threaten him?' she asked Duran.

'It was a very intimidating glare.'

‘I should have you both shot for insubordination,’ Holmere said, face flushed with embarrassment. He didn’t understand that he was nothing more than a distraction now, that his authority had been superseded the moment the enemy had been sighted. She traded glances with Duran and he frowned.

‘Oh, very well,’ she murmured.

‘Thank you,’ Duran said. He looked at Holmere. ‘As of this moment, your authority over this world has been supplanted by my own, as per Ecclesiarchial Dictate Signum Crucis. You will acknowledge this.’ Duran waited.

Holmere frowned, likely trying to recall what that particular dictate entailed. He glanced at his clique, as if considering his next move. None of them were soldiers – Duran held the reins too tightly for that. But a fair few thought themselves warriors. Though the Adeptus Ministorum frowned on duelling, it happened, especially among those families tied to the Ecclesiarchy by blood. They were touchy, these holy bloods. Their ties to the system’s rulers made them arrogant, as well.

Thankfully, most of them had eyes only for the hololithic projections that danced across the air before them. The air chimed and a scattering of pict-displays, sent from an external augur array, flickered into view. Cern saw the city, a spread of hab-blocks and towering structures that spread down one slope of an immense crater. She’d been born in a hive. Pergamon, with its sloped contours and spillage of streets, had taken some getting used to. The city spread like grey mould, clinging to the curve of the crater, and stretching downwards to the vast lake that had formed at the bottom. The water from that lake fed the city, and several others besides.

Beyond the city, the night sky had turned a dull, angry orange. Slashes of heat marred the horizon, and servitors intoned impact coordinates. One stiffened in its alcove and blurted a warning. ‘Impact at grid coordinates alpha-zeta-epsilon imminent. Imminent. Imminent. Impact in twenty… nineteen… eighteen…’

Instinctively, Cern looked up. ‘I don’t see it,’ she began, but she heard the great glass dome flex and whine in its frame. Cracks appeared, running across it like spiderwebs. A moment later, the building shook as a dull boom echoed through the chamber.

‘Impact registered,’ the servitor said in the silence that followed.

‘Ground all air traffic,’ Duran said to an aide. ‘Anything still in the sky in the next hour won’t be there for long. Tell Klostmeyer to ready the anti-air

batteries.’

Holmere spluttered. ‘You can’t do that. How are we supposed to leave the city?’ He indicated his coterie with an outraged gesture.

‘There’s always the grav-train,’ Cern said.

Holmere grimaced. The grav-train was clunky and archaic – a relic from more primitive times. The network stretched across the planet, but was currently running over capacity, thanks to the tide of panic sweeping the world. People were running, seeking sanctuary or a way off-world.

‘You won’t be leaving the city, lord deacon,’ Duran said, fixing Holmere with a stern eye. ‘Pergo is the capital – the centre without which this world will not hold. You are the moral and spiritual authority, as ordained by Cardinal-Governor Eamon. Your place is here, among your people.’

Holmere stared at him. ‘What?’

‘You heard him, lord deacon.’ Cern gestured and her bodyguards closed the chamber doors and positioned themselves to intercept any attempt at flight. ‘The hour of your glory has come around. You will need to prepare speeches, sermons, a triumphal address.’

‘Then… victory is-is certain?’

‘All things are certain when one has faith, my lord,’ Duran said. He gestured to two of his officers. ‘Escort the lord deacon and his attendants to the bunkers below. See that they are comfortable. I will join you directly.’

Cern’s bodyguards opened the doors at her nod, and she watched as the lord deacon was escorted out. ‘Very neat,’ she said. Duran accepted the compliment with a nod.

‘Once he’s safely in the bunker he can panic to his heart’s content.’

‘You’ll have to kill the silly bastard before this is through – you know that, don’t you?’ She looked at him. ‘Otherwise he’ll attempt to undermine you once he figures out how precarious his position has become.’

Duran looked away. ‘I honestly don’t think we have that long.’ He looked up at the display. ‘They’re not in position for a siege. They’re ignoring the major landing zones and concentrating on the cities themselves. This is an assault. I don’t think they care about taking this planet – or this city – in one piece. They’re after something else.’

Cern’s hand fell to her power maul. A sudden premonition struck her. She looked at Duran and he nodded. ‘Yes. I think they’ve come for the Apostolic

Libraria,’ he said.

‘Then they know,’ she said softly. ‘Have you alerted Almace?’

‘Our astropaths were struck dumb and blind a few hours ago, and the inter-system vox-relay is experiencing interference.’ Duran sighed and lifted his sword, studying his reflection in its polished length. He lowered it and looked at her. ‘The first of their ships have entered the gravity well – or soon will. All that remains is to do as we have sworn and pray the Emperor guides our hands.’

Cern hesitated, then clasped his shoulder. ‘Die well, Duran.’

‘You too, Sister. If the worst comes to pass…’

‘I know what must be done.’ Cern turned away. ‘I pray only that I have the strength to do it.’

‘Status,’ Amatnim murmured. Around him, the *Glory Eternal* rocked, as if in the throes of passion. And perhaps it was. For a vessel like this, war was as love. Alarms blared and the voices of the crew, human and otherwise, rose in accompaniment.

‘We’ve entered the planet’s gravity well. Shields holding,’ one of the Word Bearers stationed on the observation deck replied, his helm’s vox-grille turning his words into a growl. Then, with obvious glee, he added, ‘*Acryx’s Sigh* wasn’t so lucky – she’s gone.’

‘That was…’ Amatnim struggled to recall the name of the frigate’s captain. ‘Eran Bucco? A brother of the Third Hand, wasn’t he?’

‘Aye, my lord – and a more pestiferous jackal there never was.’

‘Speak not ill of the glorious dead, brother – whatever cause they might give you,’ Amatnim said with mild reproach. He peered at the warrior. ‘Kelim, isn’t it? You were also of the Third Hand, I recall.’

Kelim nodded. ‘Briefly, my lord.’ The way he said it implied that he did not much miss those days. Things had changed in the years since the Warmaster had cracked open the Eye of Terror and cast forth the light of truth across the galaxy. The old ways, already fraying, had unravelled completely. Brotherhoods had become hosts and hosts had shattered into brotherhoods once more, as the in-fighting of the Dark Council grew ever fiercer. The old ways of waging war were no longer applicable in a galaxy that was coming undone.

Klaxons sounded as the deck shuddered like a wounded beast. Slaves

scurried in all directions, attempting to douse fires or carry orders to duty stations. Word Bearers bellowed litanies of war down below, on the command deck. On the viewscreen, the void was aflame.

Ships burned in the black. Not so many as it seemed at first glance, but enough to make Amatnim repress a wince. Their target's orbital defences were stronger than he'd anticipated – or maybe the fleet was simply less disciplined than he'd hoped.

Antiquated orbital defence platforms unleashed salvoes of torpedoes into the teeth of their advance. Escorts intercepted most of these, however unwittingly. The other worlds all had some minor defences – platforms of laser batteries or single-launch plasma lances, more useful against space debris or lone pirate vessels than an enemy fleet.

But this was different. Deadly. Beams of silent destruction glittered in the dark as his fleet returned fire. The slaves wired into the vox-alcoves rasped reports from his captains – damage estimates, firing solutions, manoeuvres, demands for action. Warriors like Kelim filtered the noise from the information, keeping him up to date.

Through it all, Amatnim watched, standing at the edge of the observation deck, riding the rhythm of battle. The gods' voices were clearest here, in these moments, when it was all balanced on a knife-edge. One lucky shot, one unforeseen fluctuation in the *Glory Eternal*'s shields, and his glories would be nothing more than a forgotten promise. The gods were fickle, and ever-hungry for twists and turns in the lives of those who entertained them.

'Status,' he said again. He didn't turn. Vibrant hues stretched across the viewscreen, as a defence platform was reduced to debris. It tumbled away, caught by Pergamon's gravity and drawn planetwards like a fiery comet.

'The *Hawk of Sicarius* and *Night's Angel* are moving into launch position at grid-points eight and thirty-seven, respectively,' Kelim said. 'The *Slaughterqueen* is taking heavy fire from the second quadrant defence platforms – she can't break the line.'

'Divert *Olympia's Bane* and the *Ucephalot* – have them run interference. We need the *Slaughterqueen*'s landing bays more than we need them.'

'Should I tell them that?' There was an undercurrent of dark amusement in Kelim's voice. Amatnim considered it, but only for a moment.

'No. They understand their place in this design, as do we all.'

Amatnim crossed his arms. Void war had never greatly appealed to him. It

lacked the immediacy of ground operations and required more forethought. On the viewscreen, his fleet encircled the planet, attacking from all directions – or so it seemed to the casual observer. In truth, it was a precise ballet of calculation and statistical analysis. Every ship was but one part of the great mechanism of the fleet. Only when all acted in accordance was success assured.

He watched as a frigate tumbled in its death throes. Its plasma drive sputtered silently, venting the vessel's lifeblood into space. It was still intact, however, and he made a note to organise salvage teams. The orbital dockyards here were small – insignificant, compared to those of Sicarius – but use could be had of them, if they survived.

Prompted by the thought, he glanced at Kelim. 'Status of the dockyards?'

'Unknown,' Kelim said. 'We have landed troops in the docking bays, but given the confusion, it is hard to get an accurate report. I can try to make contact.'

'No. Leave it for now. No need to distract them. If it is the will of the gods, they will be successful. If not – they won't.' Amatnim turned his attentions back to the battle. Ships forced their way through the storm of fire unleashed by the defence platforms and pierced the stratosphere. Landing troops was an imprecise business; there were too many variables. You had to breach a world's gravity well, put yourself at its mercy and hope your vessel was strong enough to weather the inevitable ground-to-air flak. But it had to be done.

'My lord, it is time.'

Amatnim turned to see Apis stepping up onto the observation deck. The other Word Bearer was every inch the soldier – his battered crimson battleplate was free of writing or sigils, save for the Legion symbol on one shoulder-plate. He had a modified, drum-fed boltgun slung under his arm from a heavy leather strap. Extra drums of ammunition hung from his heavy combat rig, alongside a sheathed knife and a number of grenades. He held his helm in one hand. His other rested atop his boltgun.

Apis' features were covered in an intricate latticework of tattoos – Amatnim recognised them as lines taken from the sermons of Kor Phaeron. Apis was a blunt, plain-spoken Colchisian – one of the last of that generation of warriors who had followed Lorgar first through the desert, and then to the stars. He was loyal to the values that had carried them all so far – one of the few who had never questioned, even in his hearts, the path the Urizen had set them on.

Not a fanatic. Not a zealot. Simply a believer. Amatnim admired that. The manifold complexities of the universe were boiled down to utmost simplicity in Apis' mind. The gods commanded, and he obeyed. Amatnim wished, on occasion, that he could share such an uncomplicated outlook. Instead, he was blessed – or cursed – with a higher understanding. Like Kor Phaeron, he saw the universe for what it was. He saw the mistakes, the cracks in the glass, and was driven to repair them.

'Good,' he said. He turned to Kelim. 'You have command. Keep us in one piece if you would, brother.'

'If the gods will it, my lord,' Kelim said. '*Gloria Aeterna*, brothers.'

The ship shuddered around them as they descended into its bowels. Slaves ran to and fro on matters of urgency. The thunder of the gunnery decks and the howls of monstrous overseers reverberated through the corridors. Battle-servitors – crooked, insect-like machines infested with lesser daemons and dark technologies – hummed arrhythmically in their alcoves, awaiting the unlikely event of a boarding action. All was as it should be.

Lakmhu was awaiting them in the launch bay. 'I detest gunships,' the Dark Apostle said. 'Too much can go wrong.' His blade slaves crouched behind him, glaring balefully at any unwary enough to get too close to their master.

'Feel free to stay behind, brother,' Amatnim said. Around them, the bay was full of noise and confusion. Gunships of all shapes and sizes were being readied for launch by slaves and a paltry few servitors. Some of the gunships had been in the Legion's service since Calth. Others had been scavenged from battles since, repaired and refitted and made ready for war.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'I would,' Apis said. Lakmhu spun, fixing the other Word Bearer with a glare.

'Curb your tongue, Apis. You are barely an officer, and only by virtue of your hardiness. Do not presume to converse with us as equals.'

Amatnim clapped Apis on the shoulder-plate. 'Apis has no equal, brother. He is without peer in the art of organised murder. Tell him about Conqueror's Due, Apis, when we were with the Iconoclastic Brotherhood.' Amatnim laughed. 'Oh, how we made those great statues dance.'

Lakmhu snorted impatiently. 'I have heard the story.'

'Good stories deserve to be told more than once.'

‘As I said, I have heard it. We should use drop pods. It is more efficient.’

‘Were this a siege, I might. But this is a blitzkrieg, to borrow an antiquated term. A rapid strike, to cut the heart from the enemy.’ He looked at Apis. ‘We’ll need to be fast – don’t let them dig in. Mortal or no, those fanatics are tenacious. If they manage to fortify that structure, we could be days burning them out. And they’ll make us pay for every one.’

Lakmhu laughed. ‘Surely you are not frightened of a few mortal warriors?’

Amatnim smiled. ‘Have you ever fought the Battle Sisters, Lakmhu?’

‘No.’

Apis snorted and Amatnim quieted him with a gesture. ‘Ah. Then to answer your question, no, I am not frightened. I am, however, wary. They are skilled, zealous and lacking in even the rudiments of a sense of fear.’

‘A shame, then, that they serve a false god,’ Lakmhu said.

‘Yes.’ Amatnim turned to Apis. ‘Gather your cohort. I would have you with me when we land. We will strike for the library as soon as we reach the landing zone.’

Apis bowed his head. ‘*Gloria Aeterna*, my lord.’

‘*Gloria Aeterna*, brother.’

‘Unimaginative clod,’ Lakmhu said, as the other Word Bearer left. ‘Why you favour him I shall never understand.’

‘No, I don’t expect you will, brother. Are you certain you wish to accompany me with the first wave? That has never been your preference.’

‘It is not my preference now. But it must be done. I– what is that *clamouring*?’

Amatnim smiled. ‘Our slaves make ready for war.’

The gunships and assault landers had begun to load their cargoes. Hundreds of mortals climbed the boarding ramps to cram themselves into every available space. Those who survived the descent would join the attack.

Amatnim watched them board their landers with bemusement. The mortals were, for all intents and purposes, numberless. Culled from a thousand worlds as the *Glory Eternal* made its fiery pilgrimage across the galaxy, they were the remains of various revolutions and rebellions, of broken regiments and faith-blind cults. Thousands of soldiers, pilgrims and lunatics, bound to Amatnim’s will by their belief in the Dark Gods.

‘Chattel,’ Lakmhu said, as rank upon rank of mortal warriors climbed aboard a nearby landing barge. Some sang as they went. Others chanted and danced, spinning in tight circles or twitching and creeping in curious ways. Bells rang and cymbals clashed. Great staves topped by steaming censers were held aloft to sweeten the air. Interspersed in this ecstatic tide were islands of discipline, but they were few and far between.

‘Fellow travellers,’ Amatnim corrected. ‘They worship as we do and are blessed in their own ways. Their lives are a gift to us, brother, to be used in good cause.’ He gestured to the mortals. ‘Look at them, brother. Do you truly think that they are less faithful than we?’

‘They are chattel, Amatnim. Little souls, scuttling in the shadow of our greatness.’

‘All souls have their uses in the eyes of the gods, Lakmhu.’ Amatnim looked at him. ‘Or do you think your worth is greater than theirs?’

‘I am not so naive as to think the gods care for anything other than blood and souls,’ Lakmhu said piously. ‘Our glory is to serve them up both. Let others seek favour or claim the love of the gods. I am content to be faithful. To be a Bearer of the Word. It is our fate to serve the Pantheon and enact their will upon the universe. We shall spread the word of Lorgar from one side of the galaxy to the other.’

‘Yes. When do we plan on starting that particular crusade, brother?’ Amatnim laughed. ‘Because it seems to me that we are no longer at the forefront of the Long War, that others have supplanted us as we become veritable hermits.’

‘Speak clearly, brother.’

‘You know well enough of what – of whom – I speak. Erebus licks the Warmaster’s boots and hinders the efforts of his own brethren.’ He fixed Lakmhu with a steady eye. ‘Deny it if you like. I know the truth.’

‘Kor Phaeron’s truth.’

‘As I said, I know the truth.’

‘Sophistry.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘Perhaps you’re right. But I notice you do not deny my assumption. Because you know in that, at least, I am right.’ He tapped Lakmhu’s chest, provoking a warning grunt from one of the blade slaves. ‘Erebus’ loyalties have always been suspect and his faith is decidedly self-

centred.’

Lakmhu brushed his hand away. ‘Careful, brother. My patience is finite.’

‘And still you do not deny my statement. Perhaps because you harbour some doubt, eh?’ Amatnim leaned close. ‘Tell me, brother, is it Erebus who wishes me dead – or just you? And if it is him, why then does he fear me?’

‘The Hand of Destiny fears nothing,’ Lakmhu snarled. ‘Least of all some swollen-headed legionary who never had the courage to question the doddering pronouncements of a creature like Kor Phaeron.’ As he spat the words, his blade slaves growled in support.

Amatnim stepped back, hands spread. ‘Ah, and there is the bile our Legion is infamous for. The poison that burns in all our veins. A heady venom of envy, spite and wrath.’ He was provoking the other Word Bearer now, enjoying his anger.

‘Spite is but strength, envy merely the seed of ambition and wrath is the reward of all who oppose us.’ Lakmhu waved his blade slaves back. ‘These things are what drive us. Mock them if you will, but know you mock your brothers at the same time.’

Amatnim was about to reply but paused. Though the slaves continued to work and the mortal warriors continued to board, the Word Bearers who were present were watching the confrontation closely. Such duels of words were what passed for entertainment among the Legion. They were tests of will, wit and wisdom. If he was judged to have failed, he would have to contend with more than just Lakmhu.

‘You are wrong, you know,’ he said, choosing his words carefully. ‘I have questioned Kor Phaeron often. He at least holds to those traditions, unlike Erebus.’

‘Erebus does what the gods ask of him, and only that.’

‘And they ask him to serve Abaddon, then? To keep us weak so that we cannot threaten the Warmaster’s claims of ascendancy?’ It was an old accusation – almost ritual, at this point. Some Word Bearers believed it to be gospel. Others thought it simply one allegation amid thousands of similar claims. The members of the Dark Council had spent centuries waging a war of contention with each other.

‘Abaddon was chosen by the gods–’ Lakmhu began.

‘As were we,’ Amatnim said. ‘Are you any less faithful than Abaddon?’

Amatnim looked around. ‘What about you, brothers?’

Lakmhu stiffened. ‘What do you mean?’

Amatnim smiled. ‘When the Warmaster shattered the Cadian Gate in his futile impotence, all the devils left hell for warmer climes – us included. We all followed where he led. Now the galaxy burns once more, and we shake the stars with our march. A beautiful, glorious time to be alive, wouldn’t you say, brothers?’ He paused. ‘Perhaps it was a reward for our faith.’ He laughed, and others laughed with him. Bitterly. Angrily. But together.

Lakmhu glanced around. Amatnim knew the Dark Apostle was making the same calculations he was – or perhaps trying to figure out a way of strategically withdrawing from the argument. ‘You speak dismissively of one the gods have chosen to enact their will.’

‘And Erebus does not, when he thinks the Warmaster’s spies aren’t listening?’ Amatnim shook his head. ‘Lakmhu, my brother, you know as well as I that though we all inevitably serve the same masters, we are not on the same side. It stings my conscience to know we are at odds.’

Lakmhu laughed bitterly. ‘Not even you indulge in such a vice as that, brother.’

Amatnim frowned. ‘Without conscience, man is no better than an animal. It was his conscience which drove the blessed Urizen to set himself against his father and brothers, Lakmhu. It was his conscience that brought us here, to this moment amidst all moments. It is conscience that drives me here.’

Lakmhu shook his head and looked away. ‘It is lucky for you, brother, that the gods favour the foolish and the mad. That is all I will say.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you’ll have more to say before the hour is out. You’re quite voluble, even at your most solemn.’

‘Only in defence of the truth,’ Lakmhu snapped.

‘The truth… do you remember when we used to debate its nature, rather than blindly defend it?’ Amatnim asked, softly. ‘When we cast our arguments like javelins and wielded rhetoric like shields? When our name meant something.’

Lakmhu stopped. ‘I…’ He looked away, gazing at his blade slaves, as if seeing them for the first time. ‘Yes,’ he said finally. ‘Those were more innocent times. Before the scales dropped from our eyes and all was revealed to us. When we saw the truth for what it was.’

‘Only it wasn’t the truth, was it?’

Lakmhu spun. ‘Amatnim…’ he began, warningly.

Amatnim looked around. ‘It wasn’t, was it, brothers? There is no one truth, is there? The truth is a multifaceted thing. That is what the Urizen taught us. That the truth is the headwaters of a hundred great rivers, and to find it, you must follow one. But we do not all follow the same river. And because of that – we fight. Like the little desert tribes, we wage war over water, while the men of the cities – men like Abaddon – build dams.’ He sighed. ‘Once, we were the ones chosen to guide the galaxy to the truth. But now we are supplanted in our own duty by one who sees the truth only as a means to an end.’

Heads nodded, and murmurs of quiet assent filtered over the vox. The clamour of preparations had faded, and the rumble of the guns seemed like a storm on the horizon. Amatnim looked at Lakmhu. ‘You’re right, brother. I make sport of us. Because we deserve it. We took something glorious and we carved it up between us, without care for what might come of it. We took handfuls of the truth and enshrined it until it grew stagnant and sour. Until it tasted of nothing save poison.’

They were all watching him now. Even Lakmhu. Amatnim allowed himself a brief flicker of pride. ‘We drink this poison, brothers, for it is better than dying of thirst. But what we should be doing is breaking the dams.’ He paused, letting the moment stretch. ‘That is why I have led us here, brothers. This system is the first crack in the dam.’ He bowed his head. ‘The water – the truth – will flow free, as the gods will.’

Apis raised a fist. ‘*Gloria Aeterna*,’ he growled. The others followed his example, and the words beat on the air.

‘*Gloria Aeterna*, my brothers. Now – get aboard the gunships. We have a world to burn!’ Amatnim raised both of his fists as the other Word Bearers snarled in eagerness. They made for their vessels, filled with righteous fire. Amatnim turned to find Lakmhu glaring at him. He laughed at the expression on the Dark Apostle’s face.

‘You have only yourself to blame, brother.’

‘You baited me.’

‘Yes, I did. But you allowed yourself to be baited.’ Amatnim looked up at the gunship. ‘We should get aboard. It is almost time to launch.’

Lakmhu didn’t move. ‘Why?’ he said softly. ‘Why can you not simply accede to the inevitable? Why must you try to provoke me?’

Amatnim turned. The question surprised him. There was something akin to concern in Lakmhu's voice – not the usual wrath, or spite. It made him uneasy to hear it. 'Why must you incite others to challenge me?' he asked, after a moment. 'Because that is what your faith, as misjudged and mistaken as it is, drives you to do. As my faith drives me. We serve the gods in our own ways, brother.' He paused. 'I hope, one day, you will see that. Otherwise I will have to kill you. And that will be a sad day indeed.'

He left Lakmhu standing there and climbed the boarding ramp. He did not look back to see if the Dark Apostle followed.

CHAPTER SIX

18:10:06

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

When Calder was shown into the strategium, Eamon was sitting on the terrace, watching the sunrise. ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ he called out.

‘Yes.’ Eamon’s guards – Crusaders – fell in behind Calder, moving with admirable silence for men in armour. The Crusaders watched Calder warily, with hard, flat eyes. He suspected that they were calculating how to cripple, or even kill, him. He was tempted to ask what conclusion they’d come to. It would be an interesting conversation, if nothing else.

Eamon laughed. ‘Genuine agreement, or more politesse, Huscarl?’ He dismissed his guards with an elegant wave of his hand. They turned and departed without hesitation.

‘I have some sense of aesthetic appreciation,’ Calder said as he stepped through the double doors onto the terrace. He saw a cybernetic cherub scuttle away into the curtains of artificially cultivated ivy that draped either side of the terrace, and wondered if this meeting was being recorded. ‘Suboden Khan should be meeting with Captain…’

‘Keel,’ Eamon supplied.

‘He should be meeting Captain Keel at any moment now. The fleet will start for Pergamon at the earliest opportunity.’ Calder looked up, scanning the sky for any sign of ships leaving the orbital dockyards that cluttered the upper stratosphere.

‘The Ecumenical Council hasn’t met yet,’ Eamon said with faint protest. ‘Formal permission has not been extended…’

‘There isn’t time, unfortunately.’

‘Better to ask forgiveness than permission,’ Eamon said. He smiled weakly. ‘No matter. They will agree, ex post facto. We will ensure it.’

Calder nodded and moved on. ‘Lieutenant Karros will complete the landing

zone preparations. From there, we must begin the work of readying Almace for war.'

'You think it will come to that?' Eamon asked, pulling apart a sweet pastry. Calder recognised the food as a planetary staple – sugared breads filled with cooked fruits. There were substantial orchards to the south-west. Almost the entirety of the planet's southern hemisphere was given over to agri-production, including a form of native grain.

'I think it is a strong possibility.'

'The fleet will not be able to turn them back?'

'The fleet will not attempt to do so. Suboden is not a fool. He will attempt to bleed them, and draw them off, but if the preliminary reports from Pergamon are accurate, their numbers are such that it won't make much of a difference. When they arrive – not if – we will be cut off and isolated.'

'Suddenly, I've lost my appetite.' Eamon pushed his half-eaten pastry aside. 'What about evacuation?'

'A waste of resources,' Calder said bluntly. 'Evacuations on the scale you're suggesting are often accompanied by panic, riots, civil unrest. There is enough of that going on at the moment.' Calder set one of the data-slates he held upon the table. 'Speaking of which, I've compiled several potential threat matrices, with breakdowns along cultural, political and economic lines.'

Eamon took a swallow of recaff, but made no move to examine the data-slate. 'How many is several, lieutenant?'

Calder paused. 'One hundred and forty-three.'

Eamon winced. 'I've heard your sort don't require sleep.'

'We do, but not as much as a normal human.'

Eamon looked up at him. 'Are you? Human, I mean. Do you consider yourself such?'

Calder frowned. 'Of course. What else would I be?'

'More? Less? Something else.'

Calder shook his head. 'I am human. That word contains multitudes. I am one of them.' He set down another data-slate. 'These are the areas of the cathedral-palace I will require access to immediately. An analysis of potential weak points must be made.'

Eamon picked up the data-slate. ‘Some of these areas don’t exist,’ he said after a moment. Then, more forcefully, ‘You’ve made a mistake.’

‘Doubtful. I have studied the composite schematics for this structure. All of these areas exist and are potential weak points in my defensive preparations.’

‘Well, if they exist, I assure you, I’ve never seen them before. I’ll ask my staff, however. Some of them have been cluttering up the place for centuries…’ As the cardinal-governor spoke, Calder watched his jaw twitch – a small thing, invisible to the unaugmented eye. He traced the twitch and took note of the variety of micro-expressions occurring across Eamon’s face. For a baseline human, the cardinal-governor had impressive self-control, but Calder recognised the signs of falsehood as clearly as if they were stamped on the man’s brow. Eamon was hiding something.

For half a second, he considered confronting the man with his observations. But that might have repercussions. There were other ways of learning what he needed to know. Ways that didn’t endanger his working relationship with Eamon. A relationship that was necessary for the successful defence of Almace.

‘That would be ideal,’ he said finally. ‘Thank you.’

Eamon flashed a quick smile. ‘I am at your service, lieutenant.’ He gestured to the rest of the data-slates. ‘Now, what other problems have you brought me?’

The next three hours went quickly. Calder had made estimates of everything, ranging from ammunition consumption to ration distribution timetables. Eamon’s gaze was growing foggy as the discussion proceeded. Even the cardinal-governor had his limits, it seemed.

When they’d at last finished, Calder said, ‘You will convene the Ecumenical Council today. We must begin defensive preparations within a day’s cycle.’

‘Is that an order or a request?’ Eamon asked, as a servant cleared away his plate and cup. He gestured, forestalling Calder’s reply. ‘Yes, I intend to. I would ask that you be present. Your requests will carry more weight if you deliver them in person.’

‘You wish me to intimidate the council into acquiescence.’

Eamon blinked. ‘Are we past the stage for politesse, then?’ He waved a hand. ‘Never mind, yes. Most of them will not admit that what we face is a system-wide threat. They insist it is the work of raiders, of rebels. They do not want to confront the looming apocalypse.’

‘A curious word.’

‘An old word. It means, literally, an uncovering. A revelation.’

‘Religious.’

Eamon nodded. ‘Sometimes.’ He scratched his chin. ‘It’s the slowness of it, I think. We’ve convinced ourselves that the ending is a thing of sudden fury, rather than a slow suffocation. We see fires on the horizon and think that is where they will stay. But they never do, do they, lieutenant?’

‘Not in my experience.’

‘And that is why I need you there. I need your experience. You are proof that we stand at a precipice. If you cannot convince them then they will not be convinced.’

‘And if that is the case?’

Eamon looked out over the rail of the terrace. ‘I have a responsibility to this world, to this system, as well as the souls that dwell within it. I have been neglectful. Soft, perhaps. Seeking to balance charity and tyranny. That changes today.’

Calder felt satisfaction at those words, but also something else – a flicker of what might have been regret. He had read the initial reports of his Intercessors, of Karros’ warriors and the White Scars as well. By their standards, the people of Almace were well treated. By the standards of the wider Imperium, this place was a paradise. Even Guilliman might have been impressed. And now, perhaps forever, it was transforming into something else. Ploughshares would be beaten into swords, and a place of worship given over to war.

As Calder left him there, staring out over his city, he wondered if that was why Eamon had looked so defeated as he said those words, rather than triumphant.

Suboden Khan reclined in his command throne, half watching the hololithic reports that circled him like vultures. He took in the information at a glance, processing it and filing it away for later consideration. A sense of anticipation gripped him, making concentration difficult. ‘It feels good, doesn’t it, Kanim?’ he said to the warrior standing beside his throne.

Like Suboden himself, Kanim was built for battle. But where his khan wore all white, Kanim’s armour was daubed blue in places – notably on his right arm and shoulder-plate. He wore a crystalline force hood over his bare head

and held a highly stylised staff in his hands. Kanim was a Stormseer – a Librarian, a *zadyin arga*, a master of lightning and speaker to spirits of prophecy and storm.

His battleplate was covered in lines of delicate Khorchin script. From his belt hung tanned and stretched ork scalps, upon which more lines had been inked by a steady hand. A tulwar was sheathed at his side, its horsehide sheath decorated with the tusks and dried ears of more greenskins. Kanim tapped the pommel of the blade and said, 'Yes, my khan. Better than wasting our time destroying landing zones.'

'Yes. That is a waste of our talents.' He paused. 'Rukn seems to enjoy it, though.' The thought of the chief of the brotherhood's Scouts made him smile. Rukn was old. As an aspirant, Suboden had learned the art of the silent kill from him, and more besides.

'Rukn is strange,' Kanim said. He leaned against his staff, running his fingers over the equine shapes carved into its length. He murmured to himself – or something else – as he did so, and Suboden felt an almost electric pulse.

'True. What do the spirits say about our chances, shaman?'

'That we have the same chance as any man – and better than most.'

Suboden laughed. 'Good! I'd hate to start out under a cloud of ill-omen.' A vox-pulse chimed on the throne's comm-panel and he straightened in his seat. 'Ah, at last. They're here.'

'Are you certain that this is necessary, my khan?'

Suboden smiled lazily. 'We must have no light between our shields, shaman. Two fleets become one. I intend to impress the importance of unity upon them in person, so that there is no mistaking my commands for requests.'

The Imperial Navy was not, as a rule, fond of the subordinate role. Especially when it meant submitting to those they saw as intruders upon their demesnes. The void was their sea to ply, and they were protective of their independence. Kanim understood this well enough. It was much the same for he and his brothers. But independence had its place and its time, and this was neither.

Kanim nodded. 'As you judge best, my khan.'

'I hear a hint of disapproval in your voice, shaman.'

'Only a hint, my khan.'

‘See that it stays that way,’ Suboden grunted. He drew his tulwar and set it across his knees in preparation for what was to come. He doubted he would have to use it. There were few things more intimidating to officers of the Imperial Navy than the ships of the Adeptus Astartes. The White Scars battle-barge was far more advanced than any vessel in the system defence fleet. It was built to wage wars alone, in the deepest shadows of known space.

By itself, the *Silent Horseman* could shatter the Navy’s remaining vessels. When paired with the rest of the ships under Suboden’s command, it would be a force to be feared. They would harry the foe, bleeding them of men and materiel as only a White Scar could. They would ride across the stars and laugh as they killed.

Suboden forced the smile from his face as the captains of the system defence fleet were shown onto the bridge by a Chapter-serf. He studied them with hooded eyes, noting their nervousness. That was good. Nervous men were more apt to pay attention.

‘Welcome,’ he said.

At the sound of his voice, they tensed. They were a motley handful, most well past retirement age, or too young for their command. Their records and commendations were listed on the projections that hovered about his throne. Jonas Keel, captain of *Orlanda’s Wrath,* had the most seniority. Captain Ogilvy, of the *Crassus,* was a retired commodore-captain, with almost a century of active military experience in her favour. In contrast, Captain Belmont, of the *Drusus,* was young – inexperienced, but with over a dozen commendations to his name. The captains of the frigates were much the same – a mix of old and young, veterans and aspirants.

He was reminded of Armageddon, and his time with the fleets there. They had been bled white by the decades of war, and there had been too many beardless faces at the strategic briefings for his liking. Then, perhaps it was simply the way of things – the old gave way to the new. In time, warriors like him might be supplanted by those like Calder – better able to weather a rapidly changing universe.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind, wondering which of those before him would seize the moment and speak first. That would be the one he would need to convince. The others would follow, like good cattle. ‘Well?’ he asked. ‘Speak up.’

‘Careful, you’ll frighten them,’ Kanim murmured in Khorchin, voice pitched low.

Suboden gestured irritably. Keel coughed, straightened his coat and stepped forward. He stood ramrod straight, one fist pressed to his chest. ‘Keel, milord. I… ah…’

Suboden waited for him to elaborate, but the man appeared to have forgotten what he was going to say. It didn’t matter. The White Scar sighed and leaned forward. ‘Greetings, Captain Keel. I welcome you, and these others, aboard my vessel. I thank you for agreeing to meet with me at such short notice.’

It galled him, somewhat, to be polite. They knew why he was here and what he wanted. But he had to at least pretend to ask. Otherwise, they might prove obstreperous, and then he would have to kill some of them.

Keel looked nervous. They all looked nervous. Suboden did not blame them. He knew he was an intimidating presence even when he was smiling. Perhaps especially when he was smiling. Kanim gave the captain a supportive nod, but Keel paid him little notice. His eyes were on Suboden and the heavy tulwar laying across his knees. That was good.

‘You are in command of the system defence fleet now,’ Suboden rumbled.

Keel nodded jerkily. ‘I-I have that honour.’

‘It is good you think of it that way. I am told a brave man died to make it so.’ Suboden stroked the horsehide sheath that hid the tulwar’s killing edge. He looked past Keel, at the other captains. The fleet was pitifully small, by the standards of the Imperium. But it would do. Even the smallest blade could kill, in the right hands. ‘In any event, it doesn’t matter. As of this moment, I am taking command of the fleet. All vessels will obey my orders. Any captains who wish to submit their resignations may do so.’

The captains looked at one another, startled, save for Keel, who looked… relieved? Suboden pushed the thought aside. ‘If you wish to surrender your responsibilities, be quick, though. I will brook no delay in setting course for Pergamon.’

‘You – ah – you cannot take command without orders from the cardinal-governor,’ Keel said, looking as if he’d rather be anywhere else. Suboden stared at him, wondering if this was defiance or simply an excess of duty.

‘We have that.’

‘And the Ecumenical Council…’ Keel began, hesitantly.

‘Will agree, in their own time. But there is no time to wait for them to convene and voice that agreement. Thus, I meet with you.’ Suboden let his

gaze rest on each of the captains in turn. Judging them. Weighing what he saw against the stories their records told. ‘Do any here wish to contest my orders?’

Keel turned, studied the others, and then looked back at Suboden. ‘No, milord,’ he said. ‘They’ll follow you to the Eye and back, if you ask it.’ He stood straight and stiff, jaw set. In that moment, Suboden knew him for a good officer, whatever his earlier hesitancy. The burden of overall command lifted, Keel had instinctively fallen into the role of able second. Suboden knew he could count on the man to ride herd on the others and keep them in line. That boded well.

‘That is good. But luckily I do not think we have to travel that far to find the enemy.’ Suboden rose from his throne. ‘Back to your vessels. Make ready. We shall depart at the earliest opportunity.’ He turned to Kanim. ‘Go with them,’ he murmured in Khorchin. ‘Take their measure. I want to be certain that they’ll do as I say without hesitation.’

Kanim nodded. ‘As you command, my khan.’ He thumped the deck with his staff. ‘Come, my friends. Allow me to escort you to the launch bay.’

As they departed, Suboden turned. ‘Well, brother? What are your thoughts?’

The commander of the Raven Guard cruiser *Raven’s Valour* stood just behind his command throne, frowning. The other Space Marine had observed his meeting with the captains in watchful silence, as was the way of his Chapter. Sometimes they were so quiet it set Suboden’s teeth on edge. He doubted Keel and the others had even noticed that the Raven Guard was there. ‘If we are to fight together we must know each other’s minds, Raquen.’

Raquen was short for a Raven Guard. They tended to the tall end of the spectrum. But he had his Chapter’s pallid complexion and dark eyes. His head was shorn smooth, save for a flat Mohawk of grey hair. Old shrapnel scars pulled parts of his face in different directions. It made trying to read his expression difficult.

‘They are barely holding on,’ Raquen said flatly. ‘Their morale is shaken, their current commander is hesitant, and they have taken too many losses of late. They need a victory, or they’ll splinter at the first engagement.’

Suboden nodded. ‘My thoughts exactly. Suggestions?’

Raquen paused. Suboden gestured. ‘Speak up, brother. Now is the time to make your opinion known. Once we are on the hunt, I’ll have little patience for it.’

‘Little victories,’ Raquen said. ‘We pick the bones – follow the enemy, hit

them when they're distracted.'

'Good. Those are my thoughts as well.' Suboden leaned back, satisfied. It was good when commanders agreed on a course of action. Things would flow more smoothly. The less he had to take into consideration, the better. 'You'll take secondary command of the cruisers *Crassus* and *Drusus*, as well as a third of the escorts. *Orlanda's Wrath* will ride with the *Silent Horseman* and the remaining escorts. We'll divide the fleet into two for the first engagement. Draw them in, and we'll spear them in the flank.'

'And afterwards?'

'We break contact. Bleed them and draw off. We'll split into smaller forces and scatter, only regrouping when necessary.'

Raquen nodded slowly. 'Take them piecemeal, rather than head-on.' He rubbed his battered features. 'Where do we start?'

Suboden gestured to one of the hololithic projections that surrounded his command throne. 'Where else? Pergamon. By the time we arrive, they'll have taken that world, or broken themselves on it. Either way, they won't be in any shape to resist.'

He gave a tiger's grin. 'And then we will paint the stars with their blood.'

Kanim only noticed Keel was missing when they reached the launch bay. Leaving the others in the hands of their escorts, he retraced his steps. It would be an inauspicious omen to lose one of their captains before they'd even set out.

He found the mortal standing at an observation port. Great windows of void-hardened glass rose in high cathedral frames. Through them, the Stormseer could see frigates drifting like drowsy leviathans through the sea of stars. 'Beautiful,' Keel said softly.

'Is it?'

Keel jolted. 'I– my apologies, lord, I did not…' He gestured to the windows. 'I was distracted by the view, I'm afraid. A failing of mine I have yet to correct.'

Kanim waved him to silence. 'No offence taken or meant, commodore-captain. I am sorry if I startled you.' He stood in silence beside Keel for a moment. Then, 'You comported yourself well. Suboden Khan is not often impressed.'

'He did not seem impressed to me.'

‘You still have your head.’

Keel laughed sourly. After a moment, he said, ‘We’re going back out there, aren’t we? You’re stripping the system bare and taking us into battle.’

Kanim nodded. ‘We are.’

‘What about Almace?’

‘We are leaving the Imperial Fists strike cruiser *Capulus* and a complement of escorts. They know about defending worlds. Almace is in good hands.’

Keel nodded. ‘Truth is, I’m relieved. I’m not… I wasn’t cut out for fleet command. A ship I can handle. You know where you’re at with a ship. Everyone does their job, and everyone lives to see another day. But a fleet – too much talking. Too much politicking. It feels like you have to oversee their ships, as well as your own.’ He sighed. ‘I don’t know how Aldo did it, honestly.’

‘Aldo?’

‘Commodore-Captain Ware.’ Keel scrubbed a hand over his unshaven chin. ‘Good man. Good commander. I wish…’ He trailed off. ‘My apologies again, my lord. I shouldn’t have wandered off.’

‘Sometimes the spirits take us off the path, so that we might learn something new.’ Kanim gazed at Keel, and saw the ghosts of regret and yearning coil about him. The strands of the man’s fate were stretched almost taut. His destiny was close to being decided, whether he was aware of it or not. Part of the Stormseer was tempted to follow those strands back to their beginning, to read the story of the man before him. But there was no time for such idle diversions. Not now, not here.

Keel looked up at him. ‘I think I’m too old to learn anything new.’ He looked around. ‘This is a fine vessel, though. I used to think *Orlanda’s Wrath* was the most beautiful ship this side of Mars, but this one outshines her.’ He paused. ‘Funny name, though.’

Kanim chuckled. He was starting to see why a captain with as much seniority as Keel had never been promoted to command his own fleet before now. Keel made to apologise again, but Kanim waved it aside. ‘Originally, this vessel was dubbed the *Plainsmaster,*’ he said.

‘You changed the name?’ Keel sounded aghast. Kanim smiled. The Imperial Navy had many superstitions. Names featured heavily in many of them.

‘Sometimes, things change. In this case, it was in honour of the battles it

waged in the sea of stars above Armageddon.' He looked at Keel. 'Under Suboden's command, it fought alongside the ships of the Imperial Navy. We bloodied the *hain*–' He paused, noticing the look of confusion on Keel's face. 'Orks,' he clarified.

'I don't speak Khorchin.'

'I did not expect you to do so.' Kanim smiled. 'We killed orks with your kind. Now we will kill other enemies. But only if you do as we say.'

Keel nodded. 'We'll follow where you lead.'

Kanim paused. 'No hesitation. Is it so heavy a burden, then?'

It was Keel's turn to smile. There was precious little mirth in it. 'As I said, I'm not cut out for command. A ship is about the limit of my competence.'

'A man who knows his limits builds walls for himself.'

Keel laughed. 'Walls serve to keep the enemy at bay.'

Kanim nodded. He was coming to like Keel. The man was no fool, and had few illusions as to his place in the scheme of things. Some might have called it a lack of confidence, but Kanim knew it to be anything but. Keel was a stone, set into a river. Whichever way the river went, the stone would not move. For better or worse, it held its place. As Keel would. He saw it now, more clearly than before.

And he saw other things besides. The spirits whispered a word in his ear, and Kanim felt the prick of icy claws upon his soul. His smile did not falter, though suddenly he knew that Keel was not the only one coming to the end of his thread.

For a moment, the air about him seemed red with the blood of the fallen. The moment passed, as quickly as it had come. But as they walked to the landing bay, Kanim could not help but tighten his grip on his staff, seeking comfort in its solidity.

There was death on the air. Only time would tell whose.

CHAPTER SEVEN

30:00:16

Odoacer System, spinward edge

Prince Ganor Kabalevsky awoke suddenly, heart thudding. Panicked, he wondered where he was. But only for a moment. He felt the familiar throb of the engines through the hull, like a giant's pulse. He was aboard his ship. His vessel, a Havoc-class frigate called *Kabalevsky's Wrath*, hung at the outer edge of the Axim Cluster, near the system's spinward edge. They had been docked at the wolfshead facilities there for a standard week, since their last run-in with the system defence fleet.

Ganor had won the frigate in a card game, and had made it one of the most feared vessels in the outer sector. Twice, he'd fought his way out of traps set by the system defence fleet, trusting in the vessel's firepower and speed to carry his crew to safety. This third time, however, they'd come closer than he liked.

He looked around. His private quarters stank of spilled alcohol and sweat. He fumbled for the *hjen* pipe, longing to suck the sweet-smelling smoke into his lungs. It was the only thing that could calm him when he felt the way he did now. The pipe was empty, more was the pity. Annoyed, he swept it aside and clambered out of bed, ignoring the protests of his bedmates. He didn't immediately recognise them. They weren't members of his crew – they were from the facility, then.

Wolfsheads were a fact of life in a system like Odoacer. Outlaw refuelling stations, run by renegade Mechanicus magi, or wildcat entrepreneurs. They purchased asteroids off the books, avoiding the notice of Administratum bureaucracy. They were willing to refit and repair private vessels for a price – sometimes money, but occasionally more esoteric prizes. Ganor and the other pirates who haunted the system's fringes were only too willing to pay those prices to stay one step ahead of the system defence fleet.

Shrugging into his robe, he snapped his fingers. 'Get out.' They protested in slurred voices. He sighed and reached for the shuriken pistol hanging in its

holster from the bedpost. They scrambled out of bed and out of his quarters as he drew it. The xenos weapon felt pleasingly warm in his grip. Like his ship, he'd won it in a card game.

He laughed softly and looked around his quarters. They were a mess. Empty bottles and dirty clothes littered the floor. He dimly recalled having recently shot his servant. 'That'd explain it, then,' he murmured. He ran his palms over his shorn scalp and studied himself in the mirror that hung along the far wall.

He was tall and spare, with an aristocratic bearing. Tattoos marked his face, neck and bare chest. He'd had them done by a renegade aeldari of his acquaintance – the same aeldari he'd won the pistol off, and a coat as well. The tattoos were special – good luck, or so the xenos had sworn. They bound Ganor's soul to his flesh, or some such rot. He traced the swooping angles and curves idly, admiring himself.

He was the very picture of Almacian aristocracy. He frowned. Only he wasn't, not any longer. The Kabalevsky name had been one to conjure with, as the saying went, but now it was as dust. The familial holdings were gone, their titles bartered away to lesser clans. And all thanks to one man.

'Eamon,' he said, making the name sound like a curse. The cardinal-governor himself had signed the orders exiling Ganor and his family, banishing them from Almace. His father had died soon after, drowning himself in a bottle. His mother had faded to a shadow of her former self, until one day there had been nothing left of her at all. Just a body, sitting in a corner, murmuring to people who weren't there.

And all for what? Treason, they'd said. Was it treason to attempt to undo a gross error? The Ecclesiarchy had no right to the throne of Almace, whatever the law of bequest said. 'It was ours,' he murmured, staring at his reflection.

It was yours.

Ganor paused, as he always did when he heard the voice. It had been with him for as long as he could remember, though it had grown loud of late. His reflection seemed to smile at him.

The throne is yours, by right. Almace is yours.

'Yes.' Idly, he traced his tattoos. He remembered the way the aeldari had grinned at him, and the look of surprise on its inhuman features as he'd shot it.

Filthy creature. Trying to trick a prince.

‘Yes, filthy,’ he said absently.

He made a good living, preying on the trade routes that stretched the length of the system. More than enough to keep his crew happy, and himself in the luxury he deserved. The system-merchants of Odoacer were fat and weak. Easy prey, if you had the nerve. Occasionally, when he could talk some sense into his fellow captains, they even managed to take a rogue trader or two. There was enough plunder there to see them through a standard year, if they were careful.

It isn’t enough.

‘No,’ he said softly.

You deserve more.

‘It is mine by right,’ he said out loud.

He rubbed his temples, trying to recall what had woken him so suddenly. It had been a dream. Or had it? He’d seen… What had he seen? The images were hazy, hard to decipher.

There had been a light–

The light of truth.

And a battle standard, burning.

The standards of your foes.

And something… someone else. A man – no, not a man. More than a man. A Space Marine. Ganor shivered. He’d seen them, in his youth, but only at a distance. They’d towered over his parents and the other nobles like demigods of war.

He closed his eyes. His head ached with the weight of sleep.

No more time for sleep, young prince. They are coming. The Bearers of the Word will show you the way.

The vox-unit in his quarters chimed. Slowly, he turned to it. He stared at it dully.

Answer it.

He glanced at his reflection, and for a moment, he didn’t recognise himself. He felt a thrill of fear run through him, but it quickly faded. What was there to be afraid of here, or in all the galaxy? Was he not Prince Ganor Kabalevsky? Was he not the true heir to the throne of Almace?

The vox-unit chimed again. Urgently. He answered it.

And his reflection smiled.

Pergamon, Secundus-grade tithe world

Amatnim strode across the marble floor, the echoes of his steps preceding him. Mighty pillars, carved to resemble coiling stairways and now crowded with pilgrims, rose to either side of him. Beyond them, immense bookcases filled the walls from floor to ceiling. Millions of books filled this repository. Ancient texts, diligently compiled across the centuries by the adherents of a dead god. Now, many lay scattered across the floors, and loose papers sifted through the air like falling snow.

The floor shook, as an explosion gripped the street. Pacifying the city was taking longer than he'd anticipated. Its defenders were tenacious, driven to extremes by their false faith. Every street, every crossing, would be consecrated in blood before the end.

Somewhere, daemons were howling in pleasure as they loped through the dying metropolis, hunting souls. He felt their savage calls resonate through him, and felt a brief flicker of pity for their quarry. But he quickly quashed it. Such was the well-deserved fate of all who failed to acknowledge the gods. Ignorance was no excuse for such sacrilege.

And yet… was it not the task of he and his brothers to purge such ignorance from the species? Was it not their duty to bring the truth to those blinded by lies? What was truth to a dead man, save a eulogy? He sighed, unable to answer his own questions, and annoyed by the distraction. He had other matters to think about. Pergamon had not yet fallen. The city had not yet fallen. But it would.

He passed through an archway shaped like a rising angel and into the northern chamber of the library. The massive chamber was circular and rose to a domed roof, decorated with an enormous mural depicting some noteworthy event in the planet's history. It had three floors, the upper two shaped like rings so that those above might look down on the ground floor. Large shelves lined the curving walls on each floor, and a forest of stone pillars rose from the level, passing through the upper reaches to support the roof. Spiral staircases encircled many of these pillars, connecting the different levels.

This was but one part of the library – a dozen more chambers of similar size and shape encircled the central tower, which seemingly doubled as a bastion. Each was connected to the central tower by a short causeway, dominated by

security archways. So far, his followers had had little luck breaching those archways, thanks mostly to the efforts of the library's defenders.

Throughout the chamber, mortals, clad in the stained remnants of old uniforms and plundered armour, flung books into a great pile, laughing as they laboured. As the eminent Kor Phaeron had written in his seventy-fifth treatise on faith, joy was found only in servitude. Amatnim watched the mortals and nodded in satisfaction. 'Good,' he murmured.

'My lord?'

Amatnim turned. 'Yes, Apis?'

'Something for your collection, my lord.' Apis extended the volume. 'Poetry, I believe, though I am no judge of literary merit.'

Amatnim laughed. 'A trait we share, brother.' He opened the book gently, mindful of the ash and blood that stained his gauntlets. Outside, an explosion rocked the street. Boltguns growled and the screams of the dying drifted on the wind, like the sweetest music. 'How goes it, then?'

'The city is on fire.'

'Our doing?'

'No.'

Amatnim looked up from the book. 'They set their own city on fire?'

Apis reached up and removed his helm. His face was streaked with sweat, blood and ashes. 'Someone did.'

'Well. That is the calibre of our opponents. Destructive in defeat, as well as victory. What about the central bastion?'

Apis hesitated. 'The defenders are proving obstinate.'

Amatnim laughed. 'That's one word for it.' The convent of Battle Sisters occupying the bastion were putting up a fierce resistance. He'd expected no less. 'Have we found the lord deacon yet?'

'Fortified bunker farther up the crater slope,' Apis grunted, watching as an entire shelf of sermons went into the fires. 'Set deep into the bedrock. We haven't cracked it yet, either. Dusep is in charge. You know how he enjoys such puzzles. If he weren't so good at spouting catechisms, I'd swear he was one of Perturabo's curs.'

Amatnim nodded. 'Yes. What is it he always says? Something about sieges…?'

‘Sieges are the whetstone of a soldier’s faith,’ Apis recited.

‘That’s it. Very well. Leave him to it. If nothing else, it keeps the defenders preoccupied.’ That was Amatnim’s way of war – divide the enemy, prevent them from making any sort of concentrated defence. The key was to have subordinates who could be trusted to pursue their own initiative. It made little difference whether they did so out of loyalty or ambition, so long as they succeeded.

The city would be theirs by nightfall or the morning after, if things continued apace. Once they found the lord deacon, he would be convinced to send out a message calling for the peaceful surrender of the remaining defence forces. Most of them would ignore him, but some would seize the opportunity to join the winning side. They always did. Humans were pragmatic creatures, at heart, and for the unenlightened, one god was the same as another. They would learn the difference soon enough.

‘I do not see the Dark Apostle anywhere,’ Apis said. ‘I wonder if the gods have gifted us with his death.’

‘Careful, brother. I can get away with such blasphemy, but you cannot.’

Apis frowned. ‘He is all bluster, that one. Not a real warrior.’

‘No. But his blade slaves are, and he will set them on you with no hesitation.’

‘Why do you put up with him?’

The question was just shy of impertinent, but Amatnim treasured these brief moments of informality. Apis was a good soldier – loyal and faithful. A hundred such, and he could have conquered any world, any system. ‘He serves Erebus, and Erebus is part of the Dark Council.’

‘As is Kor Phaeron.’

‘Exactly.’ Amatnim held up the book, balanced on his palm. ‘Equilibrium. That is our way – we worship all gods equally, and so enjoy the boons and blessings of the Pantheon. One master might lead us astray. Many masters keep us to the path, for despite all their pulling and pushing, or even because of it, we can but go forward. The Urizen was wise and foresaw that without such balance, we might become as Fulgrim’s catamites or Angron’s lunatics. In every host, there is balance – many leaders, sometimes working at odds, to ensure that the will of the gods is manifested.’

Apis grunted and shook his head. ‘Sometimes I think I prefer the old ways,

with Lorgar at our head and our guns aimed at the enemy, rather than each other.’

Amatnim nodded, though he knew it had never truly been like that. The Urizen had pitted his sons against each other even before they found the truth. He had tested their faith through competition and fostered rivalries. The strongest, the most faithful, had risen, and those weak of faith or lacking in skill, had fallen.

Just like now. This too was a time of testing. The galaxy was in upheaval. A great revelation was in process, and the Bearers of the Word would need to be ready. The Urizen waited, letting his sons sharpen their sacrificial knives on each other to weed out those unfit to serve him in the apocalypse to come.

Amatnim knew that he would be found worthy. The gods had whispered this to him, even as they’d set his feet on the path to glory. He would fight at Lorgar’s side again. But first, the truth would be revealed. The Legion would at last pass the test the Urizen had set. Amatnim would be the one to show them the way.

A cry made him turn. A Word Bearer thudded towards them, forcing a pair of Sisters Dialogous before him. ‘I found these rats scurrying for safety, my lord,’ the Word Bearer rumbled, his helm’s vox-grille turning his voice into a growl. ‘You wished us to take prisoners. I thought it best to bring them to you.’

Amatnim nodded. ‘Yes. And they’re in one piece. Very good… Gormlek, is it?’ He paused. ‘You came with the Dark Apostle, I believe?’

Gormlek struck his chest with a fist and bowed. ‘I have that honour, my lord.’

Apis snorted, and Gormlek glanced at him. His helm, wrought in the shape of a daemon’s snarl, seemed to twist into a grimace, but he said nothing. Amatnim motioned for Apis to be silent and turned his attention to the women. They were both old, by the standards of mortals. Their hair was grey and cropped short, and their wrinkled faces were like cracked sandstone. Both were bruised and bloody, their hands bound before them by strips torn from their own robes. But they stared at him in wary defiance.

‘Do you know this book?’ he asked them, holding up the volume Apis had brought him. ‘Do you recognise it?’ He waited. When no answer was forthcoming, he gave a terse nod. Gormlek growled, grabbed one of the women by the neck and drove two fingers into the small of her back. She spasmed as her vertebrae cracked, and cried out in pain.

‘A bit harder and Gormlek would have crippled you,’ Amatnim said. ‘A bit higher and you would have died. Do you know this book?’

The woman spat at him. Amatnim nodded, and Gormlek drove a finger into the base of her skull. She staggered as he released her, and her companion was forced to catch her before she fell. ‘A bit higher, a bit harder, and he would have punctured your skull. You have one more chance. Do you know this book?’

‘Yes,’ the other woman said, her voice hoarse. ‘Yes, damn you, we know every book in this library. Every book, every shelf, every page.’

‘Good. That means you know this place well. Tell me – where is the vault?’

The woman stared. ‘What vault?’

He sighed, reading the lie in her eyes – and the calculation. He considered torturing it out of her but knew it would be futile. He realised that he’d made a mistake, mentioning the vault. They’d die before they told him, now that they knew why he was here.

‘As I expected. Burn it. All of it.’ Amatnim tossed the book aside. ‘Turn their lies to ash, my brothers. Teach them the penalty for such heresies.’

The women howled in despair. Not for themselves, he knew, but for the books. In a way, he admired such devotion. Would that more servants of the Dark Gods had such dedication to their words. Gormlek reached for one, chortling. But he paused, hand outstretched. ‘My lord, do you hear–?’

Amatnim did. He recognised the hiss of superheated air an instant before Gormlek’s head was reduced to bubbling slag. ‘Take cover,’ he bellowed. ‘Ambush!’

Even as the words left his mouth, boltguns sang, their harsh rumble-crack splitting the air. Mortal slaves fell, bodies torn apart by the high-velocity rounds. Blood slopped across the marble. Amatnim took a step back as small impact craters formed on his armour. An automatic targeting array spun across his visor, tracing the trajectories back to their point of origin. His hand fell to the bolt pistol holstered at his side, even as the targeting runes locked on to heat signatures and flashed crimson.

He drew and fired smoothly, already in motion. Around him, Apis and the few other Word Bearers present sought cover behind pillars and toppled shelves. Amatnim slid into the lee of a pillar, beside Apis. ‘Six targets, second level, dead ahead,’ he said, without preamble.

‘Four more, third level, to our left,’ Apis growled. His boltgun roared as he sprayed the bookcases on the second floor of the library. ‘They’ve caught us in a crossfire. You have my word that the sentries will be punished for this, my lord.’

‘Given the situation, I suspect that they have already gone to meet the gods. But I thank you for the assurance regardless, brother.’ Amatnim activated the command vox-channel. ‘Report. Casualties? Besides Gormlek, I mean.’

The others sounded off from their positions throughout the chamber. No further Legion casualties as yet, though their mortal servants were dying in droves. Then, that was what they were for. Every bullet they took was one less to strike a brother. Indeed, a mortal’s greatest joy was to die for their master. Their blood consecrated the ground and their screams were as music to the gods, who would consume their small souls and make them as one with the Primordial Truth.

Apis winced as a ricochet dug a bloody groove across his cheek. He hastily donned his helm. ‘We were overconfident,’ he said, as it locked into place. ‘We assumed that the causeways were the only way in or out.’

Amatnim nodded. The air was full of ash and burning paper, and his auto-senses fuzzed and whined as they attempted to compensate. ‘Given the rate of fire from the third level, I’d say they brought a heavy bolter.’

‘And a meltagun, given the state of Gormlek’s head,’ Apis said. He leaned around the pillar and snapped off a shot. ‘They must have followed the inobservant fool right back to us.’

‘Well, he’s paid for his mistake.’ Amatnim heard the telltale hiss of superheated air again. ‘Down.’ He and Apis crouched as the unseen meltagun vomited a wash of heat. An unlucky cultist was caught full in the chest and came apart in a cascade of burnt flesh and scalded bone. ‘They’ll try grenades next. To flush us out.’ He tracked the path of the meltagun, estimating the position of its wielder. The clouds of smoke and paper hampered his targeting array, but he fired regardless.

His faith was rewarded by a sharp cry, and a glimpse of a grey-armoured form, stumbling briefly out of cover. Though the battleplate they wore was inferior to that of the Word Bearers, it still gave them some protection. ‘Apis.’

‘I see her.’ Apis’ boltgun cracked, and the Battle Sister spun away, half her head gone.

‘Moving,’ Amatnim said, hurrying towards the dead woman’s position,

firing as he went. Apis and another Word Bearer followed, covering him. As Amatnim reached another pillar, he heard a shout and the roar of a heavy bolter. ‘Cover,’ he growled, gesturing for Apis and his companion to seek safety. The two Space Marines dropped flat and began to crawl. Amatnim stepped out from behind the pillar and fired, his shots smashing through shelves and sending an avalanche of books spilling onto the floor.

With the enemy momentarily distracted, Apis and the other Word Bearer managed to reach him. Amatnim recognised him as Yatl – another of Lakmhu’s lackeys. He nodded amiably to the warrior, wondering if Yatl would seek to take advantage of the situation. A shot in the back, and the Battle Sisters as the obvious culprits.

‘Where did they come from?’ Yatl growled, loosing a burst at the second level.

‘There must be some way in or out of the central bastion that we missed,’ Amatnim said. ‘We need to conduct an auspex sweep, grid by grid.’ He reloaded briskly, ignoring the chunks being chewed from the pillar. ‘I want it found, before they have a chance to seal it again.’

Apis signalled acknowledgement and bent forward. Amatnim heard the click of the vox as he swung out from behind the pillar and snapped off a shot blind. His targeting array spun, momentarily clear. It highlighted less than twenty potential targets. ‘Less than I thought,’ he murmured.

‘Maybe they’re attempting to escape,’ Yatl said. He bent around the pillar and fired. ‘Come out, you cowards,’ he bellowed a moment later. ‘The Dark Gods thirst for your souls!’

‘Yes, I’m sure that will convince them,’ Apis muttered.

‘Would you have me ask them nicely?’

‘I would have you stop yammering and show some fire discipline,’ Apis growled.

‘Enough,’ Amatnim said. ‘They aren’t trying to escape. This is a reconnaissance in force.’ He activated his vox-link, so that the others could hear him. ‘Now that they’ve lost the advantage of surprise, they’ll be retreating. We cannot let them get away. Ready yourselves.’

A chorus of clicks assured him that the others had heard and would obey. Though they had spent millennia in the Eye of Terror, his warriors were all veterans and still held to the discipline that had carried them through the Great Crusade and the Heresy. Those who did not soon found that faith alone

rarely carried the day. You needed fire and steel to back it up. ‘On my mark,’ he growled.

Opposing fire began to slacken. He recognised the tactical pattern – he’d used it himself, often enough. The women would be falling back in stages, through the forest of shelves and pillars. Some would move, the rest would provide covering fire. They would take up new positions every few moments, fire and retreat.

Aided by the inbuilt systems of his battleplate, he analysed the rate and direction of enemy fire until he’d pinpointed a gap in the pattern. ‘Now,’ he said. He swung out from behind the pillar and fired again and again, as he advanced through the storm of falling paper and ash. Apis and Yatl followed his example, flanking him, their boltguns lightning up the shadows between shelves.

Amatnim could see them now, grey shapes in carnelian tabards, retreating through a ruin of toppled shelves and blasted pillars. He could hear the hunting howls of the surviving cultists as they loped through the chamber, following their masters. He fired again, and a woman screamed. She fell, and one of her Sisters caught her by her robes, dragging her backwards. The wounded woman continued to fire her boltgun, despite the trail of red smeared on the floor in her wake.

‘Brave,’ Apis said.

‘Wretched animals,’ Yatl said.

Amatnim said nothing. Yatl was wrong, but he would learn in time, if someone didn’t kill him first. He paused, and the other Word Bearer stalked past, chanting loudly. Apis stopped as well, head cocked. ‘Something?’ he asked.

‘Why this way?’ Amatnim said. He turned, scanning the heights. He could hear bolter fire above, and the vox crackled with voices. And something else – a fluctuation of static, interference on the vox-link. ‘Listen.’

Apis turned. ‘Is that a vox signal?’

‘Yes. But a signal for what?’ Amatnim whirled. ‘Yatl – pull back!’

‘What?’ Yatl paused. The interference rose to a shrill whine, and Amatnim caught Apis by the shoulder-plate and jerked him back as something monstrous stepped into view. The hulking machine shouldered aside a shelf, sending it crashing to the floor. A vox-caster strapped to its chassis blared a hymn to the God-Emperor, and the hateful sound filled the chamber,

drowning out all but the loudest explosions.

‘Dark Gods, what is that?’ Apis muttered, across the vox.

‘They call it a Penitent Engine,’ Amatnim said. The Penitent Engine was a skeletal frame set atop two jointed legs, with two long arms. Within the frame, a pilot writhed in a nest of wires, tubes and chemical injectors. The woman was emaciated, her scarred and bloody form shrouded in a filthy tabard, and chains strung with funerary bells. Her face was hidden beneath a cowl marked with the sigil of the Ecclesiarchy. Wasted limbs twitched, and an arm swung out with a groan of pneumatic pistons. At the other end was the seared nozzle of a heavy flamer, surmounted by the jagged blade of a chainfist.

Yatl was hurled backwards by the blow, the chainfist drawing sparks from his battleplate. He cursed and crawled back towards Amatnim and Apis, his armour bleeding lubricant and smoke. The Penitent Engine stomped after him, its controller twitching in her harness.

‘Get him up,’ Amatnim said as he tried to draw a bead on the pilot. She was exposed – intentionally so – but the war-engine’s movements made it difficult. It thrashed so erratically, his targeting display had a hard time catching up. Its chainblades tore through shelves and pillars as it clomped towards them. The vox-caster blared prayers and curses as the pilot twitched in something that might have been religious ecstasy.

‘Ambush?’ Apis said as he dragged a cursing Yatl back the way they’d come. From above came the sound of boltguns. The other Word Bearers had realised what had happened, and they paused in their advance to shoot at the rampaging machine. The Penitent Engine replied in kind, its heavy flamers washing across the upper levels, and setting shelves and Word Bearers ablaze.

‘Distraction,’ Amatnim said as the vox crackled with pained screams. ‘Grenade.’

‘I should–’ Apis began, but Amatnim shook his head. Chainblades hacked through the pillars and cut down any cultist who got too close. He was forced to duck aside as a twitching body hurtled past, trailing ragged lengths of intestine.

‘Grenade. Now.’

Apis unhooked a grenade from his armour and tossed it to Amatnim. Amatnim paused, waiting until the engine was preoccupied with the warriors above, before sprinting towards it. He primed the grenade as he ran, knowing

he would only get one chance.

The Penitent Engine spied him as he drew close and whirled, chainblade screaming as it slashed towards him. He fell to his knees and bent backwards, sliding across the blood-slick floor. The chainblade bit the air just over his head, and he twisted, hurling the grenade into the nest of cables, pistons and wires that hung from its back. The machine turned, following him as he rolled to his feet, bolt pistol spitting.

His shots pierced a number of cables and fat sparks of electricity danced on the air. The pilot shrieked out nonsense litanies, her tattered lips peeled back from rotten teeth. The subsequent explosion cut those short. The Penitent Engine staggered, bleeding oil. The chainblades struck the floor, digging into the ancient marble. Fire gouted from the heavy flamers and washed across the floor, driving Amatnim back.

The pilot's ragged tabard was set alight, as were the spilled puddles of oil. She shrieked and thrashed in her harness, forcing the war-engine to its feet. Its movements were noticeably slower this time, more awkward. The brutal grace it had displayed earlier was gone. The pilot's cowl was wreathed in flames as the Penitent Engine staggered towards Amatnim. He backed away, firing. Past the machine, he saw Apis and several other Word Bearers approaching. They opened up on the war machine, and the pilot screamed, as if the engine were a part of her. Instinctively, she turned, filling the air with fire.

Amatnim darted forward through the flames. He caught a handful of cabling and hauled himself up. He shoved the barrel of his bolt pistol against the pilot's burning cowl and pulled the trigger. The Penitent Engine made a sound, deep in itself, like the groan of a dying beast. Then, with a hiss of pneumatics, it sank down, the pilot's carcass hanging limp in the frame. Amatnim dropped to the floor as it fell.

'Keep moving.' He waved Apis and the others ahead. 'We've wasted enough time as it is.' He moved to where Yatl lay. 'Can you move, brother?'

'With help.' Yatl made to haul himself up, awkwardly. 'My armour's power unit was breached. Joints are seizing up.' He looked up at Amatnim. 'Repairable, with time.'

Amatnim helped, supporting him. 'I'm curious, brother – do you recall Erebus' sermon, on the slopes of Sabine?'

Yatl looked at him. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'Suffer not the weak, for they break the will of even the strongest among you.'

‘Yes. A good speech, despite the speaker.’ Amatnim lifted his bolt pistol meaningfully. ‘Do you understand why I asked you the question?’

Yatl hesitated. ‘Yes.’

‘You are one of Lakmhu’s. I know this and you know this. But now, you are also one of mine. Do you understand?’

Again, Yatl hesitated. Amatnim leaned close, until their helms were almost touching.

‘Yes, brother. I understand.’ It sounded as if Yatl were biting off the end of every word.

‘Good. Now stand.’ He spotted a crowd of cultists, edging through the ruined shelves, their weapons extended before them. ‘You there – come here and support this warrior.’

The cultists hurried towards them and eagerly took Yatl’s weight, though it bent them nearly double. ‘Take him back to the gunships.’ Amatnim tapped Yatl in the chest. ‘Remember this moment, brother. It is in your best interests.’

‘Artfully done, my lord,’ Apis said approvingly as Amatnim joined him and the others. ‘Mercy has a keen edge.’

Amatnim checked his bolt pistol’s ammunition. ‘Let us pray it is so, brother, else I might wish I had killed him here.’ He looked up. ‘Sound off. Does anyone have eyes or augur-sign on our quarry?’

The vox crackled. *‘I see them. They’re heading for the causeway.’* He knew the voice – a low, oily purr. A warrior named Saper. One of Apis’ followers.

Amatnim gestured, and Apis and the others started towards the causeway. ‘Can you intercept?’ The roar of the Battle Sisters’ heavy bolter sounded, from somewhere above.

‘Not at the moment. They have us pinned. My apologies, my lord.’

‘No matter. May the gods watch over you, brother.’

‘And you, my lord.’

‘They’ve split up,’ Apis said.

‘Buying time. Someone is trying to get back into the bastion. We must see that they don’t.’ He started forward, the others following. They broke into a run, hurdling fallen shelves and chunks of broken pillar. They moved swiftly through the makeshift labyrinth, heading for the entrance to the causeway.

Even delayed as they were, they were faster than the Battle Sisters.

But the chamber was enormous, larger than a cathedral, and filled with obstacles. Amatnim's auto-senses were stretched to their limit, seeking ways around the growing flames and through the forest of shelves. Too, he kept an eye out for more surprises like the Penitent Engine. But none revealed themselves.

'There,' Apis said suddenly. Amatnim turned and his targeting array homed in on several grey forms hurrying through the growing conflagration.

'After them,' he said. He took aim at the distant figures, and a targeting rune settled over one. He fired, and the shape pitched forward. Apis and the others moved up, taking their own shots as they advanced. The Battle Sisters backed away, weapons growling.

The causeway entrance rose above the shelves, an ornate gothic arch, decorated with stone flowers and angelic figures. Dozens of lumen-torches flickered silently in their sconces, casting their glow across the flat, semicircular steps. The Battle Sisters retreated through the archway. Two of the surviving eight remained behind, taking cover behind the ornamental pillars that lined the causeway.

Amatnim led the way, letting their shots impact against his armour. A foolhardy thing, perhaps, but sometimes one needed to make a show of it. Apis and the others followed his example, and the rearguard were dispatched with a flurry of well-placed shots. As they stepped over the bodies, he saw the others making for the opposite end of the causeway. Another archway waited there – this one sealed. The door was an iris of adamantium and ceramite plates. He suspected that whoever had built it had foreseen this very moment.

The iris cycled open as the Battle Sisters raced for the archway. Amatnim fired, emptying his bolt pistol. Apis stopped beside him and did the same, trying to bring their quarry down before they reached safety. Three fell, but the others slipped through the iris. It began to close with a grinding sound. Grenades did nothing to halt its progress, serving merely to fill the causeway with smoke and debris.

Amatnim reached the archway even as the door slammed shut. He stared at it for a moment, then his gaze travelled up to the pict-caster set into the apex of the archway. It was housed in a skull, set back into an alcove. The lenses in its eye sockets whirred and clicked as it recorded him. With deliberate slowness, he reloaded his bolt pistol and fired, destroying the skull and the device it contained.

He turned as the others reached him. ‘How many?’

‘Three my lord. Two are dead. The other…’ He gestured.

Amatnim saw one of the Battle Sisters crawling towards them through the smoke, a trail of crimson stretching in her wake. Her battleplate was ruptured, and her tabard rags. Blood stained her face and neck. Her teeth were bared, and she held something clutched to her chest. Apis looked at him. ‘Should I kill her, my lord?’

Amatnim was silent for a moment, watching her draw close, bemused by her determination. If only that resolve could be harnessed in good cause. ‘Look at her, Apis. Is she not beautiful, in her dying wrath? Glorious.’ He gestured. ‘Yes, brother. Grant her peace.’

Apis took a quick step towards the crawling woman and kicked her over onto her back. He lifted his boltgun and then spun back, hand raised. ‘My lord! Get back–’

The explosion lifted Apis from his feet and hurled him forward. The shock wave drove Amatnim back against a pillar, and he cursed as his visual feed blurred. He wrenched his helmet off and was immediately struck by a wash of heat, and the smell of cooking flesh.

Apis lay nearby, his grey battleplate burned black. He groaned and began to push himself upright. ‘Grenade,’ he grunted, his voice edged with static. Servos creaked and whined as he rose, bits of marble sliding from his armour. The other Word Bearers had been knocked sprawling as well. None of them were injured – the grenade hadn’t been enough to pierce their armour.

‘Yes,’ Amatnim said. He shook his head. He could hear the thunder of bolters from close by. ‘If any of the others are taken alive – shoot them.’ He knocked on the archway.

‘Now, find a way through this. I want to be in by nightfall.’

Cern stared at the security door, wondering if the enemy would breach it. She could hear the clang of blows, echoing through the antechamber of the gatehouse. The heart of the library was a bunker of adamantium and ceramite. A Titan could crack it, but even a god-machine would need time to peel the bastion open. Her eyes flicked up. A mural of the Emperor’s grace as witnessed by Saint Jopala covered the flat ceiling. It had been painted centuries ago, and was beginning to flake away.

She rubbed her eyes, wondering if it was a sign. The enemy was more determined than she’d feared. Disciplined as well. She’d fought the dogs of

abomination before and they tended to lack the capacity to form coherent strategies. But these monsters were soldiers. They would find a solution, eventually. One of the causeways would fall. And then it would be over, bar the dying.

She felt nothing at the thought of her own death. Next to the destruction of this place, what was death? She coughed, tasting ash. So many books, so much wisdom – all gone. All that remained was to ensure that what was buried beneath this bastion stayed there. That was her duty, and she would see it done, one way or another.

She sighed and turned at a soft touch on her elbow. A lay-Sister waited, holy cloth unfolded across her arms. Cern laid the boltgun she'd been using across it. The lay-Sister nodded and bore the weapon away, to clean and reload it. To ready its spirit for the next battle.

'Status,' Cern said. Her voice was a hoarse whisper. Too much smoke. She cleared her throat and repeated herself.

'Only two others made it back, besides you,' Gurna said. She motioned a servitor forward. The withered automaton wore red rags about its shanks and was stooped from the weight of its augmetic prosthesis. It dragged another ferrocrete bulwark into place before the door as two of its fellows moved to weld the portal shut with plasma torches.

Cern nodded, feeling tired. 'It was a calculated risk.' She'd hoped to do enough damage to drive the foe from the library, at least briefly. But the Archenemy was tenacious.

'We're running low on ammunition as well,' Cassila said, her voice similarly hoarse from smoke and shouting. Her youngest bodyguard looked pale and shaken. This was her first real experience of war, Cern recalled.

'We're low on more than that,' Gurna muttered.

Cern looked around. Fewer than half of her commandry still lived. Of those, a third were too wounded to stand. A poor showing. She ran a bloody hand through her hair. 'The God-Emperor provides. Every moment we endure is a moment more Almace has to ready itself. We bleed so that they might live.'

Cassila bowed her head and murmured a prayer. Gurna laughed.

'If the Ecumenical Council lets them, you mean. I can't see those fools allowing Eamon to turn their pretty world into a fortress, any more than the lord deacon allowed us to here.' She spoke with a smile, but there was a real bitterness in her words.

‘The God-Emperor will speak to them,’ Cern said, and she dearly hoped it was so. Canoness Lorr would ensure it – she had a tendency to interpret His words in the most aggressive manner possible. She frowned as she thought of her superior. She had not got along with the other woman. Lorr had more faith than most, but she was dogmatic, and she took pleasure in punishing weakness, something Eamon had chided her for more than once.

They’d clashed often, in the commandry councils. Eventually, Lorr had grown tired of the disagreements and sent Cern away. Somewhere she was still useful, but couldn’t argue. She sighed again and thought about how ridiculous those arguments seemed now. How she’d give her good arm to have Lorr and the rest of her order beside her now.

But it was better this way. Hers was a holy purpose, and one she would hold fast to, whatever came of it.

A cyber-cherub flitted into the antechamber and landed heavily on her shoulder. The creature squalled and tugged at her ear. She swatted at it, causing it to leap into the air. She looked at Gurna. ‘See to the defences. I want this place ready if they manage to get through.’

‘It will be done, palatine.’

Cern nodded in satisfaction. The cherub flitted away, message delivered, and she followed it through an access shaft into the central bastion. The bastion was like a spike of adamantium driven into the slope of the crater that Pergo occupied. The library had grown around that spike. The bastion had three levels. The uppermost had been sealed off, as had the lowest level. It was the lowest that she was concerned with, at the moment. It contained that which she had been sent to Pergamon to protect.

For the moment, it was safe. The time was fast approaching when she would have to destroy the vaults and what they contained. It was the only way to prevent it from falling into the hands of the foe. But not yet.

She followed the cherub into the bastion’s tacticum chamber, where a quartet of the oldest members of her commandry controlled the citadel’s automated defences. Concealed multi-lasers and sensor-directed heavy bolter emplacements studded the exterior of the central bastion, and these swept the nearby streets with mechanical efficiency. The enemy had managed to get into the library regardless, but the streets were filled with the bodies of their slaves. Idolaters and worshippers of abomination died in droves.

‘Is all well, palatine?’ Forna, the eldest of the four, asked, as she turned from her control alcove. Her battleplate hung loose on her shrunken frame and one

of her eyes had been rendered milky by an old wound. She was bald, and litanies had been tattooed across her head and neck.

‘For the moment, Sister.’

‘And what of Yuliana? Has she fulfilled her penance?’ The other three women stopped and turned at this. The question hung on the air for a moment.

Cern nodded. ‘Yes. Our sister has made her peace with the God-Emperor. May she lie still, in the grave she chose.’ Her stomach roiled as she spoke. Yuliana had not deserved her fate. Few condemned to a Penitent Engine did, in her opinion. But some sins could not be forgiven, no matter how much you might wish otherwise. ‘She reaped a glorious toll in fallen souls before she succumbed.’ In truth, Yuliana hadn’t dispatched as many of the foe as she’d hoped. It had been difficult to smuggle the war-engine out into the library by the secret ways – all now destroyed – and, in the end, she’d accounted for few of the renegades, though she’d killed dozens of their slave creatures.

Forna sighed in relief, and turned back to her cogitator panel. ‘That is good, Sister. As she wanted, and we all prayed.’

Cern looked at the chamber’s central viewscreen. ‘Have you managed to re-establish the vid-link with central command?’

‘Yes, palatine,’ one of the others said. ‘But it is not stable.’

‘As long as I can speak to the Crusader.’

The viewscreen squawked and flickered. The screen flared, and Duran’s battered features appeared. The vid-feed wavered, cut by lines of static. Heb looked tired. ‘Sister. You still live.’ He sounded pleased. Cern laughed.

‘So do you.’

‘I’m as surprised as you are.’

‘What news, brother? How are things on your side of the city?’

‘They are at the doors. Estimates put them inside in three hours, maybe less.’

Cern grimaced. ‘How did the lord deacon take the news?’

Duran smiled. ‘Badly. He’s still weeping in a corner somewhere.’

‘Will you let them take him?’

He snorted. ‘Of course not. I’ll remove his head myself, before then.’ He looked at something off screen. ‘According to what few reports I got before we sealed the doors, you’re in much the same situation.’

‘Yes. Though I suspect that we have more than a few hours. A day, perhaps. Unless they get creative.’ She paused. ‘Were you able to make contact with Almace?’

Duran shook his head. ‘If help is coming, no one mentioned it.’ He pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘A fleet might be en route, for all I know. It won’t arrive in time for us. Maybe you…’

‘No. The God-Emperor has given us a task, and we will see it done. None of us will survive.’ If Forna or the others were disconcerted by this, they gave no sign.

The lights flickered, and she heard a dull thump, far above. An explosion – a melta bomb, perhaps. She smiled mirthlessly. It would take more than that to get through those doors. ‘It will be finished soon, for good or ill.’ Duran’s image wavered and stabilised. The signal would be lost shortly. Too much atmospheric interference. Too many conflicting signals. ‘Duran – if we do not meet again…’ She fell silent, stumbling on the words.

‘It was an honour, Palatine Shalla Cern,’ Duran said.

Cern smiled. ‘God-Emperor be with you, Crusader Pernik Duran.’

‘May He–’ Duran began. A moment later the signal disintegrated, and Cern was left staring at a black screen.

‘Yes, brother. May He be with us both,’ she said softly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

35:13:16

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Hololithic maps swarmed about Calder in ever-increasing numbers. He was reminded of the strange breed of avian that infested the upper reaches of the city. The birds were small and ugly, and normally preyed on a native species of vole-like rodent that nested along the edges of the highest rooftops. They in turn were hunted by the cybernetic cherubs that infested the cathedrals and sanctuaries.

But the birds also flocked in their hundreds across the plazas and boulevards of the lower city, feeding on the scraps of the food stalls there. They spun about the unwary, seeking to snatch food from their hands. As the maps snatched at his confidence.

Almacia was not a hive city in the traditional sense. It was something less refined, more organic. It was akin to a vast cathedral, colonised by the vermin that lived in its walls. The city had spilled outwards and downwards from the central cathedral-palace over the course of slow centuries. Layer upon layer, stretching ever lower, until it sank new roots of rockcrete into the earth. A mountain made of gold and steel.

The cathedral-palace formed the spine of the city. Its spires stretched high enough to pierce the atmosphere, allowing for suborbital docking – though that was only allowed rarely. Its foundations had originally been a hab-dome built over an immense aquifer. Those foundations had been strengthened over the centuries, turning the aquifer into a gigantic, industrial well, capable of feeding the city Almacia was to become. The cathedral-palace itself was a towering bastion, built in roundel layers – each ring comprising boulevard corridors, sanctuaries, gardens and hab-units.

Originally meant as a place of quiet contemplation, it had become something more once the system had come fully under Ecclesiarchy control. From the rings had sprouted docking platforms, walkways, streets and plazas, all balanced on a network of causeways and viaducts that stretched down to the

forested valleys far below. Along those stony routes had grown new places – temporary hab-shelters, water extractors and trading posts for those making the long journey from the highest places to the lowest.

The foundations of the city – colloquially known as Low Town – were now a jungle of industrial slums and hab-blocks, encircling the few remaining knots of pitiful greenery. Beyond the edges of the slums, the hills and forests of Almace rose wild. There were other cities, other townships, mostly built up around a central landing zone or water extractors and ore-scraping facilities, but none was so large as Almacia. Atmospheric vessels of varying types and manufacture carried tithes and passengers from the outer rings of the habitable zone to the city.

He gestured, calling up the map of the area designated as High Town. The oldest part, where the first hab-domes had been established, was situated about the crown of the cathedral-palace. It resembled a wheel, with the vast structure's spires as its spokes. Within those wheels were small, concentric rings of pleasure gardens and noble residences, as well as the few licensed upper-class mercantile quarters, where the rich bought what the poor grew.

On this map were highlighted a number of residences and holdings, all of some interest. Some provided ready-made observation posts or landing zones. Others belonged to families or individuals who were hostile to Eamon, or resistant to Calder's plans for the city. Another gesture brought up the Administratum files of these individuals, in order of importance.

Calder studied them for long moments. A series of pict-captures, recorded by the flocks of cyber-cherubs that roosted in the highest spires, flashed across the display in chronological order.

'The work of Eamon's spies?'

Calder tensed, and turned. He hadn't noticed Karros enter the strategium, despite his enhanced senses. Either he'd allowed himself to become distracted or Karros was simply that good at avoiding notice. Calder thought he knew which was more likely. He nodded to the Raven Guard lieutenant and said, 'Yes. They have their uses.'

'Ugly little creatures, though.'

'Servitors are not known for their aesthetic value.'

Karros smiled. 'No. I suppose not.' He joined Calder and looked up at the projection. 'I know some of these faces. They are the ones calling for our heads, for daring to suggest destroying their pleasure gardens and personal

launch ports.’

‘The great and the good,’ Calder said. ‘This world, much like Terra, has an infestation of ornamental aristocracy. I am making note of those who might be of use – and those who might hinder us.’ He gestured to a pict-graph, representing the layered tangle of bloodlines that made up Almace’s gentry. ‘Which houses to develop relations with, and which to excise from the body politic.’

Karros blinked. ‘And this… aids in the defence of the world?’

‘Strong foundations are necessary if you wish the wall to withstand the first blow.’ Calder looked at him. ‘Cities, worlds, systems… they fall because something undermines them. Some weakness, some flaw in the defence. Some flaw in their defenders, in the strategy, in the people themselves. My task is to eliminate as many flaws as possible in the time available.’ He looked back to the pict-graph. ‘Unfortunately, it is proving complicated. I had assumed that the Ecclesiarchy would not have such close ties to the local nobility.’

‘It has been several centuries,’ Karros said. ‘They are human, all said and done.’

Calder snorted. ‘All too human.’ He shook his head. ‘So many of them.’

‘Holy bloods, they call them, on some worlds,’ Karros said. ‘Families tied to the Ecclesiarchy by blood or marriage. Crusader houses, many of them. The rest – aristocrats, like anywhere else.’

‘You don’t care for them.’

The Raven Guard grunted. ‘More trouble than they’re worth. The Ecclesiarchy is labyrinthine enough – add in the schemes of noblemen and trading houses, and things become overly complicated.’ He paused. ‘Watch yourself with them, brother. Do not attempt to weave webs with spiders. We do not have time for subtlety. Cut straight and true.’

‘Do not worry, brother. I learned my art in the halls of Terra. They think themselves cunning, but they are as jackals to me – scavengers, and easy to predict.’

Karros frowned, but did not press the issue. ‘Speaking of jackals, how did Eamon’s meeting with his council go?’

‘Why do you think I have this projection up?’ Calder said.

Karros laughed. ‘That well, then?’

‘Gains were made, losses were taken.’

‘And did they take note of you, brother?’

‘Extensively.’ Calder paused. ‘But that is a worry for later.’ He shifted the projection to another set of data. Karros moved closer, studying a set of tactical projections.

‘How did you come by these?’

Calder turned. ‘I used comparative analysis of fifty-seven recorded engagements by Imperial forces against similar raiding forces. In twenty-eight of those engagements, elements of the Word Bearers were noted as playing a significant strategic part.’

‘Have you ever fought them yourself?’

Calder paused. ‘No.’

Karros nodded. ‘They’re a slippery lot. Cunning. They think in circles. They’re not soldiers, not really. More like the canoness. You understand?’

‘No.’

Karros looked at him. ‘Your problem is that you think of them as you think of us. But they are not us, Calder. They will not come at this world the way we would. There will be some similarities, of course. Some overlap in tactics. But at the end of the day, they do not measure victory as we do. And they do not believe in defeat.’ Karros tapped the side of his head. ‘Remember. They are not us.’

Calder nodded, but said nothing. Karros was right, perhaps, but also wrong. The enemy were Space Marines. Whatever else, at their core, they were warriors of the Legiones Astartes. And they would fight like legionaries. They would fight as Calder would fight, as Karros would and Suboden. But he asked Karros’ advice regardless. ‘Tell me how they fight.’

‘The Word Bearers are misers. They rarely risk their own skins, if they can help it. They’ll send in chaff to soften the defences. They’ll drop them in their thousands on the city, and wait for them to die.’ Karros shook his head. ‘Then and only then will they come.’

Calder nodded, filing the information away. It would be of use in compiling a strategic map of the campaign to come. ‘And on that note, what do you have to report?’

Karros tapped the projection. ‘The potential landing zones have been dealt with. Those that could be rendered unsuitable, have been. The rest have been

prepared.’

Calder glanced at him. ‘Booby traps?’

‘Improvised explosives, in most cases. Whatever vessels land will suffer for it. They will not disembark unscathed.’

Calder nodded. ‘Has Rukn reported in?’ The master of Suboden’s contingent of Scouts was a taciturn warrior, and old for a Scout. But effective, as well as swift.

‘Not yet. He’s on his way, though. The White Scars are no less efficient than we, for all their pageantry.’

Calder smiled. ‘A good word for it.’

Karros laughed. ‘Suboden would be the first to admit it. Like the Wolves, the Scars wear their barbarity as a mask. They pretend to be simple-minded reavers, when in reality they are anything but.’

‘Speaking of pretence, look at these, with your saboteur’s eye and tell me what you see.’ Calder gestured and the projection changed, becoming a two-dimensional schematic of the cathedral-palace. Lines of red and yellow formed, running up and down its length. ‘Yellow lines are transit conduits.’

‘And the red?’

‘Should not be there.’

Karros frowned. ‘Secret passages?’

‘Hundreds of them.’

Karros rubbed his chin. ‘Given the age and nature of this place, it is likely riddled with such things. What did Eamon say about them?’

‘That they didn’t exist.’

Karros looked at him. ‘He lied?’

‘He gave it his best attempt,’ Calder said. ‘He is hiding something. There are dead spaces on these maps. Secret routes. Lift shafts.’

‘Escape routes?’ Karros said. He sounded intrigued.

‘I do not think so.’ Calder shook his head. ‘He is being evasive. It is infuriating.’

‘What do the records say?’

Calder grunted. ‘They’re encrypted.’

‘Break the encryption.’

Calder looked at him. Karros shrugged. ‘If he is hiding something, then we should find out, don’t you think?’

Calder sighed. ‘I do not have time for mysteries, brother.’ He shook his head. ‘Why can nothing ever be simple?’

‘Because the universe is not simple. It is made from manifold complexities, all pushing and pulling against one another in ways we can but dimly perceive.’ Karros tapped a finger against Calder’s shoulder-plate. ‘My advice – don’t try. Be ready, be wary, but do not let it consume you. If there is treachery afoot, it will be revealed in due time. And if not, then it was never worth concerning yourself about in the first place.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

‘Of course I’m right. I am very good at this, as I said.’ Karros scratched his chin. ‘High Town is easily sealed off. The main thoroughfares are wide and readily defensible, from air and ground assault. Low Town is the issue.’

‘And if they take Low Town, they threaten the foundations of the upper city.’

Karros blinked owlishly. ‘You think they’ll try to bring it down?’

‘I would. Take the Low, shatter the High, mop up what’s left.’

Karros looked at him. ‘Destructive.’

‘Efficient,’ Calder said. ‘But if conquest is their aim, they’ll use the foundations to move upwards. They’ll take the causeways, the aeroports and landing pads, moving upwards wherever they meet the least resistance. We currently lack the manpower to defend the entirety of Low Town.’ He looked at Karros. ‘Suggestions?’

Karros was silent for a moment. ‘You have not taken into account our greatest resource – the population.’

‘Arming the population is not feasible. They lack training and discipline. Most will flee or hide.’

‘But there are those among them who will not.’

Calder paused. ‘You mean the criminal gangs?’ Low Town was rife with crime. The gangs varied in size from a few individuals to more complex organisations, focused on inter-system smuggling or extortion. He had a compilation of the most recent reports on such activity, but had determined them to be low priority.

‘They may lack the discipline, but they’ll have a form of training and an existing network to exploit. The guilds as well – labourers, dockyards, the etherport – all have some form of organisation you can take advantage of.’ Karros brought up the files and illuminated grid sections on the map. ‘Look – here. Low Town has over thirty major criminal operations under observation.’

‘And each of them probably has the equivalent of a private army, willing and able to carry a weapon.’ Calder nodded. ‘A solid plan, brother. I will need to speak to the planetary magistrate at once.’ He routed a coded vox-pulse to one of the private ethercraft that Eamon had put at their disposal. A responding ping told him that the ship would be waiting for him in the nearest landing bay. He paused, and then glanced at Karros.

‘Do you wish to accompany me?’

Karros smiled. ‘I thought you’d never ask.’

Rukn leaned back and scraped the edge of his knife down the branch, stripping off the bark. He sat on a flat stone, overlooking the Saint’s Rest – a wide expanse of hard-packed, blackened earth, flattened over the centuries by thousands of landing craft. Trees hugged the edge of the expanse, and among them lay the hab-units and guidance towers of a tertiary landing zone. A single, suborbital telemetry array lurked to the north, angled towards the stars.

Rukn’s bare arms were sinewy maps of scar tissue, and his face bore the traces of shrapnel and blade wounds. Three pale ritual slashes marked one tanned cheek, a sign of his ascension to manhood, many centuries past. He wore a warrior’s topknot, and his thick beard was bound into a single plait, held together by intricately carved bone rings.

He sniffed the wind as he sliced away another strip of bark. The air was thin here, and cold. The mountain peaks rose so high that they seemed almost to scrape the underbelly of the stars. A paved road, bordered by solid causeways, led down through the crags, and into the valleys below. It reminded him of home, but only a bit. Chogoris was a flat world, for the most part, and the mountains distant.

But Almace was a world of curves and slopes. The system had extensive asteroid fields, and most of the worlds in it had suffered from meteor impacts within the last millennia. Now, forests spread across the impact sites, flourishing due to the lakes that filled the craters. Between these craters, and the mountains thrown up by their creation, the world was tumultuous and rocky. The mountains were the only place where ships of any size could safely make an orbital descent. And so, he and his students had come.

A dozen Space Marine Scouts, clad in the white of the Chapter, moved swiftly about the landing zone, hard at their trade. To a man, their hair was unbound, or cropped short, as was the tradition. Only a proven warrior could wear a topknot. They carried a variety of weapons, for Rukn believed a warrior should be prepared for any eventuality.

Several sunk sensor triggers into the hard earth, and planted krak and frag mines at carefully calculated intervals. Others strung monofilament wire through the buildings overlooking the landing zone, or erected deadfalls and drop-pits. Rukn oversaw their efforts, doling out the occasional grunt of satisfaction or dismissal.

This was the third potential landing zone they had prepared for the enemy. Of the initial fifteen the Imperial Fists had identified, five had been targeted for destruction. The remaining ten had been split between the warriors of the White Scars, the Raven Guard and the Imperial Fists. Each Chapter would prepare the areas in their own way. Those closest to Almacia were being fortified and garrisoned. The ones further out were being rigged with traps and automated defensive emplacements.

Rukn was not privy to the overall strategy at work, but he thought he'd guessed it well enough. The Imperial Fists had a good head for such things. The areas Calder had identified corresponded closely with Rukn's own assessment of the planet.

There were few places anything of any size – such as troop carriers – could land safely. Not without pounding the area flat, first. And even then, moving equipment and men across such terrain would take time. Too, the enemy had shown a willingness – a preference, even – to capitalise on existing landing zones. That made sense. Making use of an enemy's infrastructure was an old trick, and one Space Marines often used to great effect. It allowed for swift deployment, despite the obvious dangers.

If you were canny you could turn a planet's substructure into a weapon. Paths could be diverted or booby-trapped, landing zones used to coordinate flak batteries, and vox-grids given over to false encryptions. That was what they were doing here, and all across the world. Giving their foes a trickster's path to walk – many options, all of them bad.

But such preparations required time, something Rukn sensed that they did not have much of. They would do what they could in what was available, but it wouldn't be enough. The enemy would land troops, and then it would be a fight.

The vox-bead in his ear clicked. Rukn looked over at one of his charges, crouched near the treeline. The Scout gestured. ‘There’s a depression here. Perfect place to set up one of those automated guns the Imperial Fists gave us.’ The guns were stripped-down assault cannons with a dual drum feed, mounted on anchored plinths. Their machine-spirits were primitive, even by the standards of remote weapons – they would fire until their drums ran dry, and then power down. They weren’t built for punishment the way a Thunderfire cannon was, but they performed their duty well enough.

The White Scar studied the landing zone with a hunter’s eye, marking the places where multiple gunships might touch down. There was always a pattern to it. The winds were high here and they would be under fire from automated flak batteries. He paused, calculating. He gestured with his branch. ‘No. There, to your left. Grid point tertius-quintus. Set it up there.’

The Scout didn’t argue. ‘Pressure plate or motion sensor?’

‘Motion sensor with timed sequence,’ Rukn said. ‘We don’t want it firing until they’ve started to disembark.’

The Scout nodded and set about the task with commendable diligence. Rukn watched them work, wondering, as he often did these days, whether they were the last such warriors he would ever train. The galaxy was changing around him in ways he couldn’t fathom.

He thought of the Imperial Fist – Calder. The way he and his Intercessors towered over others, the way they moved with a grace that even Space Marines could not match. Their kind were on Chogoris now, learning the ways of the brotherhoods. The thought unsettled him. Many of these Primaris were not from Chogoris. They were Terran, from the days before the Great Khan had lost himself to legend. They did not even speak Khorchin. Yet, they had been welcomed into the Chapter’s ranks. They were needed. Every blade had value, whatever its shape or origin. Or so he’d been taught.

He remembered his first glimpse of those new brothers. So like those he knew, and yet not. At first, he’d thought them machines or mutants. How else to explain such dissimilar similarity? They even smelled different.

Was this how humans felt, when they met his kind? If so, he could understand their hesitation. It was as if the future were a hungry wolf, pacing just beyond the fire’s light. Eventually, it would come for Rukn and those he called brother. Only time would tell whether they would survive. Whether they would continue, or whether they would fade from the galaxy, as the ancient Thunder Warriors had, in the days of Terra’s unification. As he

considered this, the snarl of the vox pulled him from his reverie.

‘Rukn. Are you there, old wolf?’

The voice was that of Torag, the Uquillian, the master of the Fifth Company’s air support. Rukn sighed. ‘I’m here, Uquillian.’

‘At least someone is. I half feared Suboden would leave me here with nothing but ravens and labourers for company.’

‘Is that any way to speak of our allies?’

‘Do I speak false?’

Rukn laughed. ‘No. Birds and builders they are. I wonder what they say of us.’

‘They are likely too much in awe to say much,’ Torag said. The Uquillian was arrogant, in the way of all birds of prey. Too much time hunting the skies had given him an inflated notion of his own prowess. Rukn remembered when Torag had been one of his, before the Uquillian had earned the right to wear a warrior’s topknot. Torag had been taciturn, then, and inattentive. He sighed.

‘Yes. I am sure that is so. What do you want, Uquillian?’

‘I’ve completed the destruction of the last of the landing zones in the north-western grid. I wanted to see whether you required assistance…’

Rukn frowned. ‘You’re no better at lying now than you were as a Scout, Uquillian.’

The vox crackled for a moment. Rukn could imagine the Uquillian’s face as he tried to decide whether or not to argue the point. In the end, Torag grunted sourly.

‘What are we doing here, old wolf?’

Rukn knew the question was rhetorical. He decided to annoy Torag by answering it as if it weren’t. ‘Once, I rode with the Master of the Hunt himself, Uquillian. As did you. Then, we chose to join Suboden’s *Ming-han* when he went to Armageddon. And we stayed with him when he left. And now, we are here.’

‘A bad decision, in retrospect.’

Rukn snorted. ‘You sound upset.’

‘I am upset, brother.’

‘Would you like to discuss it?’

‘Don’t patronise me, old wolf.’

Rukn snorted. ‘You’re angry, then.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Static crackled for a moment. *‘We should be with the khan. Not here.’*

‘It is up to the khan to choose where we should be.’

‘He made the wrong choice.’

‘Be sure to tell him that, the next time you see him.’

‘You know what I mean, brother. Why are we here? The Raven Guard could complete these preparations as easily as we can. Why waste our skills here, when we could be out there, hunting the foe?’

‘Why waste time hunting the foe, when the foe is coming here?’

‘Why let them come here at all, when we could paint the stars with their blood?’

‘Careful, brother. Someone might accuse you of being poetic.’

Torag laughed. A harsh sound, like the croak of some great bird of prey. *‘Surely you feel the same way, Rukn.’*

‘Even if I did, I have my orders, as do you. We stand with the Imperial Fists and the Raven Guard, under Lieutenant Calder’s command.’

‘He’s no Imperial Fist.’

Rukn ceased his whittling and sighed. ‘He wears their colours. He espouses their way of war. He venerates their primarch. What would you call him?’

‘Unnatural.’

‘Your biases are showing, Uquillian,’ Rukn said. Torag, like many, shared his concerns and was more willing to voice them, regardless of who might be listening. ‘Just because you’re short…’

Torag growled, and the vox signal twitched like a thing alive. *‘Do not mock me, old wolf. You know damn well what I mean. He is Primaris. He is not like us.’*

‘That is true. He is taller, and his insides are more crowded. But beyond that, we are the same.’ Rukn bent back to his whittling. He considered sharing his own unease, but Torag had irritated him. Torag had always irritated him, even as a Scout.

‘It is not seemly that he be set over us, merely because he is…’

‘What? Who would you have had the khan put in charge? He would not thank you for that, brother. We would still be doing as we are now, and more of us besides. At least this way, some among our brotherhood taste battle.’ Rukn chuckled. ‘Be generous of spirit, brother.’

‘You’re one to talk.’

‘One of us must be sensible.’

Torag growled again, a low rumble of discontent. Insulted perhaps, he deactivated his vox, leaving the conversation unfinished. Rukn waited a few moments, to see if the Uquillian would return, and then turned back to his duties.

The problem with his brothers, by and large, was that they prized foolish things. What was honour, next to victory? What was glory, next to survival? Rukn had never seen the point of such ephemeral desires. To be, to serve, was enough for him. To do what he was good at, and be allowed to do it well, was all he had ever desired. Suboden Khan, at least, understood that, and had allowed him to remain as a teacher for the younger warriors, and those who had yet to earn their scars and scalp locks.

He sighed again and turned his attentions back to his students. He stabbed his sharpened stick into the ground and stood, loosing an annoyed grunt. ‘Not there, fools,’ he roared, as abashed Scouts turned, dismayed expressions on their faces. ‘Consider the angles of fire. Recalculate and reposition those guns. Hurry now.’

Rukn looked up. Somewhere above, the khan was riding into battle. For a moment, Rukn wished he was with Suboden and the others. He laughed to himself and tugged on his beard. The enemy would be here soon enough.

He merely had to be patient.

The precinct-fortress sat on the edge of the mid-city, guarding the boundary between high and low. Mid-Town was a narrow stretch of high-end hab-units and shopfronts – a twilight space between the rich and the poor. Here, the well-to-do could slum without actually going to the slums and the poor could pretend to be rich, if only for a few moments.

Karros had seen many such places in his centuries of war. ‘A lie,’ he murmured, as the grav-tram descended into the stew of narrow streets. The tram was one of Eamon’s personal transports, marked with his sigil. It was meant to carry the emissaries of the cardinal-governor – and their

bodyguards – into the lower areas of the city, to conduct the business of state. The grav-units set into its undercarriage hummed loudly, straining against the weight of its current passengers even as the archaic chassis rattled about them.

‘What?’

Karros recalled that the vox-link was open. ‘This place. It is a lie.’

Calder glanced at him. ‘I was not aware a place could be a lie.’ He stood near the doors, arms crossed. His head was bent slightly, to keep from damaging the bottom of the roof. Benches lined the sides of the cab, and the windows were of hardened glass.

Through the windows, Karros could see other grav-trams – smaller and less powerful than the one they were in – travelling slowly between the tiers of the city. There were more primitive forms of transport visible as well. Communal transit platforms carrying hundreds of people rose and fell at designated shaft-points, their machinery spewing oily smoke and sparks. There were also large stone stairways for the thousands of pedestrians to move along quieter routes.

‘A figure of speech.’

‘I’m aware,’ Calder said. Karros heard the smile in his words.

‘Forgive me, brother, I’m not used to one of you having a sense of humour.’

‘An Imperial Fist, or a Primaris?’

‘Both. Either.’ Karros looked down. His auto-senses detected a faint tremor in the engines. The tram was old, and like so much in the Imperium, coming apart at the joins. He wondered if it could be fixed. Then he wondered if it should be fixed.

Karros often found himself wondering about such things. It was a failing, he knew. Doubt was a flaw in the armour of the soul, but nonetheless – he doubted. He wondered, even about the simplest of things. Some among his Chapter thought that made him overcautious. They thought his doubt made him hesitant to commit to a strategy. He often found himself subordinated to others. Always second, never first. Always the shadow, never the caster.

That suited him.

‘Why a lie?’

He looked up. Calder was watching him. The Imperial Fist was unsettlingly observant, at times. ‘Better to say it is an illusion. A mask that people can slip on, to pretend to be something else. And when they ascend or descend, the truth is revealed. Places like this are playgrounds of falsehood. They hide the

sins of the wealthy and conceal the degradation of the poor.’

‘You sound as if you have made a study of such a place.’

‘Haven’t you?’ Karros tapped on the window, tracing shapes in the condensation that collected in the corners. ‘You seek to emphasise strength. I look to the flaws. Exacerbate the resentment of the lowest, and you can cripple a city. The Raven Guard wage little wars, to win big ones.’ He rubbed a thumb and finger together, letting his armour’s tactile-senses examine the condensation. ‘I could take this city with five warriors. Maybe ten.’

‘And if I were guarding it?’

He’d expected the question. Anticipated it. But not the tone. There was no anger in it. No implied chastisement. Only curiosity. He paused, but only for a moment. ‘Twenty. Maybe double that, if you’d had time to prepare the defences.’

Calder nodded. ‘I estimated fifteen.’

Karros wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or merely a statement of fact. Before he could reply, the grav-tram’s landing klaxon gave a whoop. The tram shuddered as it settled onto a designated plinth, beneath the watchful gazes of stony saints and angels. The doors juddered open with a hiss, and a metal walkway clattered down.

Calder ducked beneath the frame and stepped out onto the street. Karros followed, scanning their surroundings. If someone was planning to attempt an assassination, now would be an ideal moment. As he stepped down onto the pavement, he blink-activated a dull rune on his helm display. A dizzying array of images flashed into view, crowding at the edges of his vision. His warriors had set up thousands of pict-recorders throughout the city in order to assemble a working tactical map for Calder.

A rune flashed, alerting him to a stray vox signal. Someone was talking on an encrypted channel close by. Innocuous enough in a city. But then, perhaps not. Through the feed, he watched as men and women slunk into view. He watched them watch him and Calder walk along the avenue. It was somewhat disconcerting to see himself from above.

‘We’re being watched,’ he said. Around them, people drew back. Karros’ battleplate registered spikes in adrenaline in the closest. Fear. Fight or flight. Those were the reactions the Adeptus Astartes provoked in those unused to their presence. Familiarity allowed a normal human to pretend that a Space Marine was just like them, but for the differences in height and mass. But in

the back of their mind was always that first terrible impression – *here be monsters.*

‘Yes.’ Calder’s head twitched, and Karros knew he was studying the feed as well. ‘Not just by human eyes.’ Karros glanced up and saw the distinctive foetal shape of a cyber-cherub flitting across the gap between two buildings.

He’d amused himself their first night on Almace by capturing several of the cyber-cherubs and back-tracing their pict-streams. Two had led him to members of the Ecumenical Council. The third had belonged to Eamon. Spies were common among the upper classes of the Imperium. Everyone who could afford them had several. The Ecclesiarchy was no different. Mostly, the spies watched each other.

But the arrival of Space Marines was often akin to a stone dropped into still waters. Every action made ripples. He knew Calder could feel it as well – tension was increasing by the day, and the number of spies was growing. These were just the ones they’d noticed.

As if reading his thoughts, Calder said, ‘It was worse, on Terra. Every two-bit bureaucrat has their own spy network. They practically trip over each other in their hurry to report to their masters.’

‘You’d think we were the invaders.’

‘We are,’ Calder said. ‘We just happen to be the ones on their side. The precinct-fortress is just ahead.’

Karros spotted it as soon as Calder spoke – a forbidding structure of flat, sharp angles, studded with weaponry. The precinct-fortress was meant to be a command centre and bastion in the event of civil upheaval or an invasion, and was built to survive anything up to a direct orbital strike. Irregular bulwarks of ferrocrete blocked direct street access to the outer walls, and there were no buildings within a block. Enforcers patrolled the bulwarks, accompanied by cyber-mastiffs.

The heavy adamantine gates groaned as they slid open, allowing Calder and Karros to enter the precinct courtyard. Enforcers and Administratum clerks watched them warily as they crossed the yard. ‘They do not seem pleased to see us,’ Karros murmured.

‘Why should they be? Our presence is a sign that something has or is about to go badly wrong for someone. They are probably hoping it is not them.’

The entry hall was akin to a cathedral in size and shape, with armoured windows of hardened glass lining the upper reaches and tall support pillars

stretching back from the main gate to the internal portcullis. A pair of riot-servitors stalked along the line of pillars on jointed insect-legs of steel, their rotor-cannons tracking the two Space Marines, their organic components hidden behind layers of armour plating.

The walls of the entry hall were unadorned, save for the inspirational quotations carved in large letters every few yards. Mortals scattered before them, finding other places they urgently needed to be. Klaxons sounded somewhere deep in the fortress, and vox-casters crackled at every archway, alerting the enforcers to crimes in progress, or civil unrest in Low Town. There were at least a thousand enforcers on duty at any given time in Almacia, with another three hundred – mostly retired – standing by on reserve.

No one sought to stop them as they made their way across the hall. ‘Someone told them we were coming,’ Calder said across the vox-link.

‘Hard to hide our approach,’ Karros replied. His armour detected more than a hundred different sensors scanning them. Like the rest of Almacia, the precinct-fortress was a mixture of functional and obsolete. He watched one of the riot-servitors settle onto its sextet of haunches, weapons powering down. ‘Have you spoken to the magistrate yet?’

‘Not since the welcoming feast, and then only briefly.’

Karros grunted. ‘Have you thought about how you’ll approach this matter?’

‘Directly and politely.’

‘I wasn’t aware Imperial Fists knew the meaning of the word polite.’

‘We know it. We simply ignore it most of the time.’

They came to a set of wide steps, stretching from one side of the hall to the other. The steps rose upwards at a steep angle, and were occupied by hundreds of clerks and civilians, all moving quickly in different directions. As the first of them caught sight of the two Space Marines, the crowd began to part, allowing Calder and Karros to ascend unhindered.

At the top of the steps, a phalanx of enforcers awaited them, arrayed protectively about their magistrate. The woman cleared her throat loudly as Calder came to a halt before them. The mortals were armed, but wisely kept their weapons aimed elsewhere.

‘Magistrate Guill,’ Calder said in greeting.

Magistrate Guill was a narrow, austere woman of indeterminate age. Her

uniform was clean and pressed, her buttons and boots shiny, but the carapace armour she wore had seen much use, and there were flechette scars on her face.

‘My lord,’ she said. ‘I was told you were coming but I did not expect you so soon.’ Despite her words, her tone betrayed little of the nervousness Karros had come to expect. Likely, her agents had warned her of their arrival. Why else meet them here, with armed guards and in the open? There were more strings of influence in a city such as this than either he or Calder could pluck in a lifetime.

Calder did not acknowledge her pretence. ‘I doubt that,’ he said. Karros nodded approvingly. If she wished to play the flustered bureaucrat, she was free to do so. It made no difference to their objectives. Calder reached up and removed his helm, letting her see his face. ‘I will make this brief. We both have other duties. There are fifteen major criminal syndicates active in this system, not counting the pirate bands that haunt the rimward stars. I want the leaders of the five largest organisations brought to me within twelve hours.’

Guill blanched. ‘I can’t do that, my lord! That’s beyond our capabilities. I–’

He cut her off. ‘You are accepting protection tithes from at least three, by my calculations. Comparisons of summary judgements, arrest reports and witness statements make for solid circumstantial evidence.’ Karros blinked in some surprise. Calder had indeed done his research. The Imperial Fist fixed the magistrate with his gaze. ‘Your heart rate is elevated, and I can smell fear in your sweat.’ He smiled. ‘There is no need to be frightened. I am not in the habit of wasting valuable resources when they can still be of use.’

Guill swallowed and looked around. Karros judged that she was holding on to her composure by her fingernails. ‘They won’t come willingly. Even if you promise safe conduct…’ The excuse was weak. Given the look on her face, even she knew it.

‘I did not specify that they should come willingly. Only that they be brought before me. How they arrive is up to you.’ Calder paused. ‘Living is preferable.’

‘Why?’ She paled, even as the word left her mouth.

Calder was silent for a moment. Then, ‘A city is only as strong as its weakest point. Criminals are a weak point. In times of societal stress, they will seek their own advantage. I wish to convince them that that advantage lies with me, rather than the enemy. Bring them to me in twelve hours. Or I will find them myself.’

Guill shuddered slightly. ‘As you command, my lord.’

Calder nodded and pulled his helmet back on. ‘My thanks, magistrate. I will allow you to return to your duties now.’ He turned away and started down the steps. Karros waited a moment, studying the enforcers until they began to shift nervously, before following.

As they left, Karros nodded approvingly. ‘Very direct. Not very polite, though.’

‘Really? I thought I was. She is still alive, after all.’

Karros laughed.

CHAPTER NINE

40:00:05

Pergamon, Secundus-grade tithe world

Amatnim sat back on the broken plinth. Books and data-slates were stacked untidily beside him, and as he finished perusing each in turn, he tossed it into the waiting fires nearby. He was studying a book of liturgical reminiscences from the 38th millennium when he caught sight of Lakmhu stalking towards him. The Dark Apostle roughly shoved past the guards Apis had stationed at the entrance to the forum where the purge was being conducted.

‘Come to join the good work, brother?’ Amatnim called out, without looking up from his reading. He licked his thumb and turned the crackling pages. The tight, spidery script was written in a dialect of High Gothic that had been archaic before the end of the Great Crusade. Carefully, he tore out a page, crumpled it, and tossed it into the fire.

‘Why not simply set the shelves – or this entire structure – on fire?’ Lakmhu demanded. Amatnim sighed and flicked the book into the greedy flames. He rose to his feet.

‘For the same reason we didn’t burn the planet from orbit.’ Amatnim picked up another book and began to flip through it. ‘How many pyramids of skulls did you build, then? Do we have any slaves left?’

‘The answer to both questions is enough,’ Lakmhu said flatly. He looked around. ‘Some escaped.’

‘Yes, I expect that they did.’ Amatnim frowned. The orbital dockyards had proven more difficult to take than he’d anticipated. Dozens of vessels – trading ships, mostly – had escaped the attack, their headings unknown, but easy to guess. ‘We’ll catch them.’

‘Will we?’

‘Someone will.’ Amatnim picked up another book and began to strip it of pages. ‘We have hunters aplenty still in orbit or prowling the trade lanes. And

we will have more, soon enough. Once word gets to the rim.’

‘And then what?’

Before Amatnim could reply, a hunched slave scuttled over, scaly features split in an ingratiating expression. It burbled something in the broken tongue of its kind and Amatnim smiled paternally. ‘Apis sent you? Has he found it then?’

The creature nodded so fiercely, its whole body shook. Amatnim tossed the book he was holding over his shoulder. ‘Excellent. Take me to him.’

‘Take you to what?’ Lakmhu demanded. ‘Did you not hear what I said?’

‘Yes. I am simply unconcerned. They always escape. Tides of refugees roll ahead of us against the rock of Almace, taking tales of our power with them.’ Amatnim started after the slave as it scurried away, moving in a peculiar, serpentine fashion. ‘We know where they are going. And we want them to go there.’

Lakmhu followed him. ‘It would better serve us to offer them up here. The Neverborn press close, murmuring for the blood of the unworthy.’

‘And? A few days more or less will not harm their appetites.’

‘The gods–’

‘The gods put me in charge, brother, remember?’ Amatnim didn’t turn, but he could feel displeasure radiating from the Dark Apostle. ‘How long did those you summoned earlier last? A few hours? Less? The Neverborn, for all their divine glory, are but brief things, seeking their own satiation above all else.’ Especially on worlds like these, saturated in the false faith of the corpse-worshippers.

‘As are we, at times, brother,’ Lakmhu said pointedly.

Amatnim laughed. ‘Yes. But unlike a Neverborn, I won’t fade from reality when my belly is full. Let them wait, Lakmhu. Once we reach Almace, we shall cast a thousand and one souls into the great river and draw them to the surface. But not here. Not now.’

‘You would deny the gods?’

‘I deny them every day and twice on holy days.’

Lakmhu studied him silently. ‘Was that supposed to be a joke?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think you went mad at some point, brother, and we didn’t notice. Else you would not speak such blasphemies.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘Perhaps! And if I am mad, then the universe is mad with me. For see how it unfolds itself to grant me passage. The drawbridge of Castle Perilous lowers, and the Sangreal beckons.’

‘What?’

Amatnim glanced at him. ‘Myths and legends, brother. Just myths and legends. But without them, what is faith save hollow dogma? What are we, save mechanisms of meat and instinct? There must be something greater, else we are less than we imagine ourselves to be.’

‘You have an alarming tendency to spout gibberish when you’re excited,’ Lakmhu said sourly. Amatnim ignored the jibe. The slave had led them to the causeway. The great door was a twisted, blackened ruin now, after almost ten hours of effort. Apis had led hunter-killer teams into the network of corridors and access tunnels beyond, in order to run down the last of the enemy garrison.

Similar efforts were underway throughout the city, as Amatnim’s followers finished off the last of Pergamon’s defenders with bloody efficiency. The lord deacon had been found dead, slain by his own guards, likely to prevent him from capitulating. The commander of the planet’s armies had died soon after in an attempt to break through the Word Bearers’ lines. Dusep had sent Amatnim the man’s head as a token of respect.

Apis was waiting for him on the other side of the gate. His battleplate was streaked with soot and gore, and he held his helm under one arm. He nodded to Amatnim, and ignored Lakmhu. ‘We’ve found it, my lord. Took almost ten sweeps but we’ve located it at last.’

‘Excellent. You haven’t approached it, then?’

Apis grimaced. ‘Couldn’t, until now. Moment we got close, we activated concealed defence alcoves. They were sensor-numbed. Not even heat leakage to give them away. They contained a pair of battle-servitors.’ He leaned over and spat a gobbet of acidic spittle onto the ground. ‘Like nothing I’ve encountered outside of a Mechanicum facility.’

‘How many casualties?’

‘Mervoe and Shuyn from my own host. And that bastard, Karayites, from the Red Star Brotherhood.’ Apis frowned. ‘We also lost nearly thirty of our bondsmen. Those things scythed through them like it was harvest season.’

Lakmhu laughed. ‘Perhaps if you’d waited for aid…’

Apis looked at him but said nothing. Amatnim clapped his subordinate on the shoulder. ‘It’s of no importance, brother. The task is accomplished. That is all that matters. Lead the way. I’m eager to see our prize.’

Apis dismissed the slave with a gesture and led them across the causeway into the central bastion of the library. Everywhere were signs of hard fighting – shattered bulwarks and scorch marks on the walls. Spent shell casings covered the marble floors. And the bodies – too many to count, all of them mortal. If there was one thing the Word Bearers had learned in their exile, it was how to let the mortals absorb the bulk of the enemy’s fire. The cultists were often only too happy to do so. Death in service to the Legion was a glorious thing.

‘Fewer of the enemy than I thought,’ Lakmhu said as he stepped over a corpse clad in grey battleplate. She had died hard, and the broken bodies of her killers rested around her.

‘I did warn you,’ Amatnim said. ‘They fight like Khorne’s own.’

Lakmhu grunted. ‘Speaking of which – listen. They clamour at the threshold.’

Amatnim had heard it as well. The harsh panting of unseen beasts. The scrape of brass claws against the walls of time. If he turned his head just right, he could almost make them out, hunched and eager. They whispered to him in harsh sibilants, demanding release. He stopped, sighed and glanced at Apis. ‘Are there still foes abroad, brother? Or have you killed them all?’

Apis frowned. ‘There might be a few.’

‘Good enough.’ Amatnim looked at Lakmhu and gestured resignedly. ‘Go ahead, brother. Wouldn’t want to disappoint them, would we? If we do, they might not answer us when we actually need them.’

Lakmhu smiled and spoke a single word – not one meant for a human throat, but somehow he managed. It echoed on the air like the peal of a bell. The smell of blood intensified, a sour, coppery odour that quickly grew overwhelming. Nearby bodies twitched and jerked, as if being worried by unseen dogs. The sounds of claws, of brutal whispers, grew louder and louder. Red smoke boiled upwards from the battle-torn bodies, congealing into gangling, lanky shapes. Not human, but something closer to a violent act given form. More than a dozen skull-faces the colour of clotted blood had formed, shuddering with vicious need, snapping wildly at the air with teeth

like brass shrapnel.

‘Khorne’s huntsmen,’ Apis breathed.

Amatnim nodded. Bloodletters. The daemons twitched at the name of their lord and swung hideous faces towards him. One took a step, raising the great, steaming blade it held. Amatnim stepped forward, extending his palm. The sigil of binding was still etched there, and the daemon twisted away, hissing.

‘Jerk their leashes, Lakmhu, or I’ll do it for you,’ Amatnim said. ‘Now.’

Lakmhu carved a sigil on the air with his crozius, and the bloodletters turned their ugly gazes on the Dark Apostle. He spoke to them in their own tongue, and Amatnim winced at the sound. Eight of the creatures crouched on their haunches like attentive hounds. The others scattered, loping down the nearest access tunnels and through bullet-scored hatches, hunting their prey.

‘They’d best keep their blades to themselves,’ Apis growled. ‘My warriors won’t hesitate to send them back to the Blood God if they get… rambunctious.’

‘They know the scent of their prey, never fear,’ Lakmhu said, looking down his nose at the other Word Bearer. ‘And if your warriors are stupid enough to raise a weapon against them, they deserve whatever fate awaits them.’

‘Enough, both of you. Apis – the vault. Now.’

Apis shook his head. ‘My apologies, my lord. This way.’

The vault sat at the bottom of a convoluted stairway. Blood stained the steps, and spent shell casings rolled away untidily as they descended. Bodies had been dragged into side passages or simply kicked down the steps to the chamber at the bottom.

The chamber was large and circular, lined with rounded pillars and alcoves. In the latter, plinth-mounted statues stood staring down at the invaders. ‘The servitors were disguised as statues,’ Apis said. He motioned to an empty plinth. ‘The first we knew of them, they were leaping down right on top of us.’

The signs of that battle were everywhere – torn bodies lay huddled in the corners, or scattered in pieces across the floor. The twisted, blackened remains of the two servitors were in the centre of the chamber, in a wide circle of ash. A Word Bearer stood over them, a flamer cradled loosely in his hands. Two others stood sentry before a heavily reinforced doorway. ‘Any sign of life?’ Apis said.

‘Nothing,’ the Word Bearer with the flamer said. ‘If they’re in there, they’re keeping quiet. We’ve already disabled the environmental controls and the oxygen circulators. It’s probably quite stifling in there, now.’

‘Maybe they suffocated,’ one of the others said with a chuckle.

His companion laughed. ‘Maybe they killed each other in desperation. Wouldn’t that be funny, Apis?’

‘No, Gernt,’ Apis said. ‘It wouldn’t.’

‘Well, I think it’d be funny,’ Gernt said.

‘Quiet,’ Apis said, as Amatnim stepped past him and went to the door. The vault was not of a kind he recognised. He suspected it was akin to a bunker, and that the library had been built around it. He leaned close, running his hands along the visible joins. There was no obvious way in. On the other side, probably. He tilted his head. There was a faint hum just audible on the vox.

‘Ghost signal,’ he said. He looked at Lakmhu and tapped the side of his helm. ‘Hear it, brother? Someone is receiving vox messages in there.’

‘From where?’ Lakmhu asked.

‘Let’s find out.’ Amatnim stepped back.

‘Should we blow it open?’ Apis asked, running a hand along the door. ‘I have the remaining melta charges handy. Might bring down the roof, though.’

‘No. There are easier ways. Look there, at the pillars.’ Amatnim gestured. ‘There are sensor nodes in every pillar. The locking system is automatic. They need someone to open the door from the outside.’

‘We probably should have taken prisoners,’ Gernt said.

‘No. They wouldn’t trust such a task to someone who could be taken captive – or killed so easily.’ Amatnim kicked at the ash around the remains of the servitors for a moment and grunted. ‘There we are. As I thought.’

Lakmhu growled impatiently. ‘Why are we here? What is in there that’s so important?’

‘Do you ever think about faith, brother?’ Amatnim said as he sank to his haunches. He plucked the blackened skull free of the ashes and examined it. Wires hung from it, and strange devices, now warped by heat, clustered the skull like barnacles.

‘Constantly,’ Lakmhu said.

‘Have you ever wondered if we’re wrong?’ Amatnim stood, still clutching the skull. He looked at the Dark Apostle. Lakmhu was staring at him in incomprehension.

Finally, he said, ‘I have not.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you have.’ Amatnim paused. ‘Neither have I, come to that.’

‘Then why ask the question?’

‘Someone must.’

‘I was right. You are mad.’

‘Faith unquestioned is a blade untested,’ Amatnim said. He extended the skull. ‘They do not question. That is why they worship a corpse.’

‘And we worship the Pantheon.’

‘Yes. The four paths to the Primordial Truth.’ Amatnim pulled the skull to his chest and flicked ash from its crumbling crown. He held it gingerly, careful not to crush it, and continued to brush away ash until a metal barcode was revealed, set into the skull. ‘We follow all in moderation, and thus avoid truths becoming lies.’

‘Even as the Urizen taught us.’

‘And yet Erebus encourages some among our brothers to follow one god or the other, when it suits his purposes. As if offering their souls up in sacrifice…’ Amatnim glanced slyly at Lakmhu, watching to see if his jibe had struck home.

‘If they are not strong enough to wield the blade, then the stone is their fate,’ Lakmhu replied, with pious certainty.

‘Yes. Sometimes I wonder, though… will it ever be our turn, to lay on that stone?’

‘Only if we fail.’

Amatnim held the skull up to the closest pillar. An unseen sensor blurted a code-sequence. Scanning pulses danced across the skull, reading the barcode, as it would have done when the servitor had been functional. There was a hiss of escaping air, and hidden pneumatics groaned to life. Amatnim crushed the skull and cast the pieces aside as the great door began to open. ‘There we are. Come, brothers. Let us see what there is to see.’

Pressurised air jetted from unseen vents as the vault cracked wide. Amatnim

waved the others forward and drew his sidearm. Gernt was the first through, and as he stepped into the vault, a heavy weapon opened up, driving him back against the frame of the portal. He returned fire, his boltgun roaring. ‘I count six hostiles, possibly more,’ he spat, as the others sought cover to either side of the opening. Impact craters opened on his battleplate and he sank down, cursing. ‘I could use some help.’

‘Patience, brother,’ Apis said. He plucked a frag grenade from his belt, but before he could throw it, Amatnim caught his wrist.

‘No. I don’t want anything damaged. Lakmhu – send in your hounds.’

Lakmhu gestured and the bloodletters surged forward through the doorway and into the vault. Screams and shouts followed. Amatnim stepped through as Apis dragged Gernt to his feet. The vault was not as massive as he’d assumed. Rather, it was a utilitarian space, crammed with scrivener-plinths, where scribe-servitors hunched, their mechanical limbs twitching across spools of parchment. More parchment lay in heaps and drifts, every inch covered with lines of script. Tables had been overturned at the rear of the vault, and he spied robed adepts crouched behind them fearfully, aiming weapons that had likely not seen use in decades. Among them were half a dozen Battle Sisters – the hostiles Gernt had noted.

One of the women hefted a heavy bolter. It was braced across one of the overturned tables, and she let it drift with a gunner’s grace. Servitors were blown to bits even as they continued at their labours. One of Apis’ warriors staggered, sparks and pressure fluid spilling from his battleplate. The other Battle Sisters immediately consolidated their fire on him. The warrior fell like a toppled tree and did not move. The bloodletters reached them, then. The woman with the heavy bolter kicked back from the table and swung it about.

A daemon rolled away, screeching. Steam rose from its red flesh. Something about the rounds had hurt it more than he’d expected. Materialised Neverborn could be banished with enough damage, but Amatnim suspected there was something else at play. Some form of blessed ammunition, perhaps.

One of the other women – the leader, he thought – turned her weapon on the closest servitor and blew its shrivelled brains out. ‘Destroy the recorders,’ she roared. ‘Grenades.’

‘Stop them,’ he said. Targeting runes settled over a scribe’s pale, frightened features and he fired, reducing the man’s head to a red mist. Apis and the others followed suit as the bloodletters rampaged among the defenders. A few grenades made it, and explosive fragments peppered Amatnim’s armour, but

the majority of the servitors continued their work, uncomprehending and unaware of the battle going on around them.

It was over in moments, though it seemed to take much longer. The Battle Sisters died standing, daemon-blades cutting them down, even as bolter-fire chewed their frames. The scribes were next, and the bloodletters howled as they collected skulls with savage abandon.

Soon, only the woman he'd identified as the leader remained. She took cover behind the servitor plinths, using them to make her way towards one of the alcoves that studded the far wall. Whatever she was going for, Amatnim knew he couldn't allow her to reach it.

He paced swiftly after her. Right on her heels, he reached for her. But at the sound of a sharp 'click', he jerked back. The woman spun, her fist aflame. He avoided the blow, but she continued to move. Her knee caught him in the side, and he stumbled, off balance. The burning fist cracked across the side of his helm, and the heat caused his display to flicker. He drew his axe-rake and swept it out, driving her back, knocking the crackling power maul from her other hand. She was fast, her power armour lending her speed, but he was faster. He landed a blow that tore a ragged hole in her armour, and the meat within.

She staggered, somehow still on her feet, backing towards the alcoves. Blood stained her mouth and chin as she bared her teeth. He circled her, getting between the wall and her. She lurched forward, burning fist raised. He caught the blow, felt the heat envelop his hand and forearm. He chopped his blade into her side and pulled, wrenching her augmetic arm from the shoulder housing in a flurry of sparks. She screamed then, a gasping, gurgling cry, and he sent her tumbling away with a twitch of his blade.

He studied the burning hand for a moment, and then tossed the artificial limb over his shoulder. 'You fought well. But the end was never in doubt.'

She fumbled at the ground, trying to rise. A quick diagnostic scan showed major internal injuries, broken bones and ongoing blood loss. She would be dead in moments. Daemons crept close, splintered fangs bared in eagerness. Red, raw things, their muscles moved like pistons beneath crimson flesh. They scraped their brass blades across the walls and floor as they circled her, tasting her blood on the air.

One, unable to contain itself, darted forward. Amatnim caught it by the horn as it lunged past him, and gave it a sharp jerk, snapping whatever passed for its neck. The body dissolved like molten metal. The other Neverborn drew

back, snarling in frustration.

‘There was no need for that,’ Lakmhu said disapprovingly.

‘Keep them under control and I won’t have to do it again.’

‘Let them have her. What does it matter?’

‘Keep them back until I say otherwise. I wish to speak to her.’ Amatnim dropped to his haunches beside the woman. ‘They will have you before you die, if I let them. Indeed, they will make the moment of your death stretch for hours, before they lose their hold on the materium. Do you understand me?’

She shook her head, coughing. Blood splattered the stones.

He tried again. ‘You are strong. I can help you. I will help you. Simply ask, and I will keep them from you. I will give you that much – if you but ask.’

He could not be certain she understood him. Pain had dulled her mind to animal simplicity. She tried to crawl away, her body barely responding. It was only when he caught sight of the bolt pistol, laying half hidden beneath a fallen servitor, that he understood. He reached out, caught the weapon with the hook of his axe-rake, and dragged it towards her. She caught it with a groan, and the gathered daemons hissed in pleasure. She slumped and rolled, painfully, slowly, until she could aim the weapon at him.

Amatnim did not move. He crouched and waited. She pulled the trigger. There was a loud ‘chunk’. The bolt pistol was empty. He smiled. ‘The gods yet have need of me, it seems. But your part in this has come to an end, I fear.’

She fell back. Breathing in short, ragged gasps. The daemons leaned close, eyeing him warily. They hungered for her soul. He removed his helm and set it aside as he hunkered over her. ‘Ask, and I will give you peace,’ he whispered into her ear. ‘Just ask.’

She spat in his face. He sat back and wiped her blood from his cheek. She gave a rattling sigh, and went limp. He crouched for a moment longer, giving her soul the time it needed to depart. Then he rose, rubbing her blood between his fingers. He looked at the Neverborn. One of the creatures rose on its hooves, its angular, narrow body stretching as it thrust its skeletal features close to his own. It spoke, in a voice like stones rolling through broken glass. The words slipped from his mind the moment he heard them. But he understood regardless. The others rose as well, converging on him.

He smiled. ‘My apologies, but she was mine – my kill. There are other souls

in this place. Have them, if you would.' His smile faded. 'But this one was mine.'

He held the daemon's gaze for long moments. It gave a contemptuous snort and turned away, dragging its blade along the ground. The others followed it as it loped away, out of the vault, seeking new prey.

'You take chances, my lord,' Apis said from behind him.

'The gods love a gambler.' Amatnim looked down at the dead woman. 'She was strong. Mad, but strong. It is a shame that they are blind to the glories of the Primordial Truth. A hundred of them would be the equal of a thousand cultists.'

'They say some have come to know the truth. Only a few, though.' Apis drew a combat knife from his belt. 'I will add her skull to the pyramid.'

Amatnim gestured. 'No. Leave it where it is. We have plenty for the pyramids. If Khorne wishes this one in particular, he may collect it himself.' He turned and looked at the alcoves. 'What was she after?'

Lakmhu gestured with his crozius. 'Likely the controls to those flamer-jets set into the ceiling. I think she meant to incinerate this vault and everything in it.' He joined Amatnim and looked down at the body. 'You should have let the Neverborn have her.' He glanced around. 'This – this is why you blazed a path through this system? Parchment. The tattered philosophies of a dying regime?'

Amatnim picked up a length of parchment. 'Look at it.'

'Why would I sully my eyes with such filth?'

'Is that any way to talk about the writings of the Urizen, brother?' Amatnim allowed himself a small surge of pleasure at the look on Lakmhu's face. The Dark Apostle snatched the parchment from him and scanned it.

'No. No, this isn't– Why is this *here*?' He dropped the parchment and picked up another handful. And another. Becoming more frantic with each. 'What are they doing with his words?'

'Transcribing them.' There were books scattered about. The work of the mortal adepts, Amatnim thought. He leaned close to a servitor, studying the primitive vox-relay attached to its spine and skull. The automata had been converted into living receivers. Information filled their heads, and they scratched it down. He'd seen it before on other worlds, but this time, the relays were short range. Whoever was on the other end was close. So close.

He smiled.

At last. After all these centuries… Amatnim had found him.

‘They are *defacing* them. They are twisting his words…’ Lakmhu spun, teeth bared. His crozius snapped out and a servitor’s head burst. ‘Defilers. Apostates!’

‘Servitors,’ Amatnim corrected. ‘They lack the capacity to understand the enormity of their crime, brother. Indeed, I doubt these even know that we’re here.’ He lifted a tangle of parchment. ‘To answer your question, yes. This is why we are here. What would you say if I told you that this is not the first chamber of this sort that I have discovered?’

Lakmhu stared at him. ‘How many?’

‘More than you’d expect, less than you might hope.’

‘They… they *feast* on us. On our writings, our wisdom. Like carrion birds.’ Lakmhu sounded horrified. ‘How has this happened?’

‘What do you notice about these?’ He held up the parchment, and the Colchisian glyphs that had been scratched across them. ‘Look closely. Look here – at the placement. The shape of the glyphs, the writing is from top to bottom, rather than across.’

Lakmhu frowned. ‘They were written by a Colchisian.’

‘Yes. And recently.’ Amatnim’s smile faded. ‘For more than a hundred years, I have followed his trail, this lost brother, from world to world, system to system, always a decade or more behind. But now… now, at last, I’ve caught up with him.’

‘A traitor?’ Lakmhu said, his disbelief evident.

‘A prisoner.’

Lakmhu snarled again, and the energy field of his crozius flared as he tightened his grip on the haft. ‘They dared take a Bearer of the Word captive?’

‘They worship the corpse of a god, brother. There is little such creatures will not dare.’ Amatnim looked around the chamber. ‘This is the object of my quest, brother. Kor Phaeron himself set me this task. To find the Lost One and bring him home.’ He smiled. ‘And Erebus set you to stop me.’

Lakmhu paused. Amatnim leaned close. ‘Now you are starting to see. You ask yourself why. What reason could the Hand of Destiny have to fear the return of this lost brother? And how was he lost in the first place? How did he

come to be in the hands of our foes for so many centuries?'

Lakmhu stepped back. 'I don't know what you are implying, brother, but choose your words carefully. Erebus would not do this. He would not have a part in this madness.'

'Then why set you to dog my heels? To hinder or perhaps even kill me?' Amatnim raised his hands in a calming gesture. 'These are the questions any brother of our Legion might ask, Lakmhu. And a Dark Apostle especially. You know the machinations of the Dark Council, the strife between hosts, the bitter rivalries between brothers. Dissension, decadence and despair – it has been the story of us since Nuceria, when your master slew our brightest soul. And for what?'

'To ensure victory,' Lakmhu growled.

'And yet we lost.'

'Not all victories come on the battlefield, brother.' Lakmhu thumped his chest with a closed fist. 'We served the will of the gods, as we do now.'

'Yes. As I do.' Amatnim bowed his head. 'The gods have given me this quest, and I will complete it. My only question is will you help me, or will you allow your loyalty to Erebus blind you to the truth?' He extended his hand – a gesture of brotherhood, even on Colchis. Some things were universal.

Lakmhu shook his head. 'I…' He turned, looking at the chamber and its contents. 'You are mad. This is mad. All of this…'

Amatnim noticed Apis surreptitiously raising his boltgun. He twitched a hand, and the other Word Bearer subsided. He needed Lakmhu, for the moment at least. The Dark Apostle's death would bring questions – and questions would bring challenge. There was no telling how many spies Erebus had inserted into the host. Lakmhu was simply the most obvious, the one meant to attract the most attention.

Erebus was cunning – one of the few grudging compliments Kor Phaeron had ever paid him, in Amatnim's hearing. Amatnim still wasn't sure why Erebus wanted to prevent him from succeeding in his mission, but he was certain that the self-proclaimed Hand of Destiny would stop at nothing to do so.

But if he could turn Lakmhu, reveal the truth to him…

'Victory hangs by a thread, brother. Will you help me?'

Lakmhu looked up. Before he could answer, however, an alert-chime sounded over the vox. Amatnim cursed. ‘What is it?’

The reply was garbled and static-ridden. ‘*…leet inbound…enemy vessels…*’

Amatnim turned to Apis. ‘Get upstairs. Burn everything. I will see to this place.’

‘We’re easy targets, scattered on the ground,’ Lakmhu said. ‘They won’t hesitate to pound this world flat, to kill us.’

‘I am aware. That is why I chose to use gunships.’

Lakmhu grunted. ‘Perhaps I should not have questioned you, then.’

‘Was that an apology, brother?’

‘It was as close as you’re going to get. What do we do with this place?’

Amatnim pulled a grenade from his belt. ‘Incendiary grenade. My own design. We shall reduce this place to ashes, and all its secrets with it. Now that I have seen it.’ He motioned to the doors. ‘Go, brother. Wouldn’t want you caught up in the purifying conflagration, would we?’

‘Amatnim…’ Lakmhu began.

‘Go, brother. We shall talk more, later.’ He could smell smoke. The burning had started again, now that the fighting was done. Every volume of lies in this place would be consigned to the flames, one at a time, before they departed.

It would take time. But anything of importance did.

Amatnim turned and tossed the grenade. There was a flash, a surge of heat.

And then, the cleansing fire.

CHAPTER TEN

48:40:00

Pergamon, Secundus-grade tithe world

Ships burned like stars in the black.

Soundless and furious, cruisers hammered at each other. Gun batteries filled the void with punishing light. Thousands died with every passing second.

Suboden Khan laughed. It was a low, throaty sound, the purr of some great cat as it tasted the blood of its prey for the first time. He reclined in his command throne, hololithic data-feeds flickering about him. He paid them only the scantest attention. The vox-systems of his throne crackled with the voices of his captains.

As he'd predicted, the enemy had decided to give chase to those few vessels that had escaped Pergamon. The hunters had strung their vessels out in a loose formation, the better to isolate their chosen prey. They had not been expecting an attack, and now they suffered for it as their quarry slid away into the dark.

'Glorious,' he said. On the bridge viewscreen, a vessel – not one of his – died a torturous death, spilling its innards across the starscape. 'Glorious,' he repeated, louder. He leaned forward. 'If we but had a few more ships…'

'It would still not be enough,' Kanim said from behind him. 'You know this, my khan. We have caught them by surprise, but only for the moment. They will turn on us soon and bite back.'

Suboden tossed the Stormseer a sour look, but said nothing. Kanim was right. They had caught the foe by surprise, but that was all. The enemy were preoccupied with Pergamon and its orbital dockyards. The majority of their vessels were in formation to attack a planet, not defend against a hostile fleet. But they were already moving into position. New lines of fire were being drawn, and confusion was giving way to eagerness.

For some warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, void-war was deemed an

unpleasant necessity – a thing to be done, and quickly. But for others, it was as the sweetest of mare's milk. Those Space Marines often came to command their own vessels. They plotted courses and manoeuvres the way their brothers plied a blade. There would be some of those on the other side. 'How long?' he murmured.

'My khan?'

'How long, shaman? How long do you think those captains have sailed the stars? Since Horus let himself be damned? Longer?'

Kanim was silent for a moment. 'Does it matter?'

'Of course it matters. Look – there. Those ships, closing on our starboard. That's an Einboldt formation. Archaic. Only the Iron Hands still use it with any regularity. Ships' drives have changed some in the thousands of years since that formation was used.' He barked an order and the Chapter-serfs on the bridge snapped into action.

'We are stagnant, but they are worse,' he continued, as the *Silent Horseman*'s great engines fired and the battle-barge began to come about. He tapped his head. 'Frozen up here, not just in the way of things, but in the way of thinking about things. They are still fighting the last war. Always that war. But we have had many new wars, to learn many new ways of doing things.' He raised his sheathed tulwar from his lap, in silent signal.

The battle-barge shuddered, as its batteries roared. A frigate convulsed like a wounded beast, twisting on a ruptured core. Another ploughed on, soaking up the fire. It was tougher. Its time in hell had given it a thick skin. But even the thickest skin can be pierced. Another twitch of the tulwar, and the *Silent Horseman* galloped towards the enemy, prow first.

Suboden heard an intake of breath from Kanim, and chuckled. 'Be at peace, shaman. I have done this before.'

'Ork vessels come apart like paper compared to these.'

Suboden laughed. 'Yes, they built them strong, in those days.' He leaned forward, teeth bared, a predator on the hunt. 'But we built them stronger still…'

The moment of impact was loud. Klaxons screamed warnings. The bridge quaked. Sparks dripped from blown cogitators, and servitors squealed in their thrones. A flare of light filled the bridge viewscreen. The *Silent Horseman* shook as it tore through the burning cruiser. The battle-barge remained in one piece, its hull scorched and scored.

Suboden sat back, satisfied. Damage estimates filled the vox. The battle-barge had suffered some structural damage, but not as much as it might.

‘A gamble,’ Kanim said. ‘One that could have cost us.’

‘But it didn’t,’ Suboden said. ‘War is a gamble, shaman. We wager heavily, and play the tiles we’re dealt.’ He gestured, and the projections about his throne shifted. Hull sensors mapped the battle, identifying allied vessels and a few enemy ones. Some of the ships facing them had haunted the space-lanes of the Imperium for generations. Suboden marked these as priority targets and relayed the data-packets to the rest of the fleet.

Kanim watched him, frowning. ‘This is not the time for old grudges.’

‘It is the perfect time. Mark me – these will be the ones to pursue us, or to harry the refugees. If we can draw them off…’ The bridge shuddered. Another wave of klaxons added their voice to the cacophony. Suboden cursed. Void warfare carried with it certain inevitable difficulties – debris clouds were one. The death of a ship often momentarily blinded the sensors of its slayer – metaphorical blood in the eyes.

As the glare cleared, he saw their attacker on the viewscreen, still at the edge of their firing range, drawing closer. A pattern of lights danced across the screen, and the *Silent Horseman* twitched in pain. The enemy ship slid through the carnage like a tiger, shouldering aside wreckage, guns thundering.

It was a monstrous thing, grown fat and foul in the warp. Suboden stared at it, knowing in his hunter’s heart that it was the enemy flagship. The heart of their fleet, as the *Silent Horseman* was the heart of his.

‘Someone’s looking for a fair fight,’ Kanim said. ‘It’s a battle-barge. I think. Or it used to be.’ The Stormseer grimaced, as if gripped by a sudden illness. ‘Wind’s teeth, I can feel the wrongness of it from here. It’s a thing of madness, that ship. Better that it did not exist.’

‘I agree.’ Suboden licked his lips, considering. Possibilities played out in his mind. But only one course was truly viable. Only one made strategic and tactical sense. He growled softly and slumped. ‘We’ve got their attention. Time to turn tail.’

‘What if they don’t follow?’

Suboden stroked his beard. ‘They will. We will give them reason enough.’ He raised his tulwar. ‘But for now, sound withdrawal. It is time to vanish into the tall grass.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder moved briskly down the corridor, passing through the shafts of light that marked the high windows to either side. A knot of scribes scattered before him, whispering to one another. He heard every word, but did not react. They feared him enough already.

As ever, the corridor was full of mortals, moving in all directions. The cathedral-palace never slept. The Ecclesiarchy was ever hard at work, saving the souls of the lost, or so they claimed. Calder shared Guilliman's view of them. When he had last walked the world, before being put into stasis, the Ecclesiarchy was nothing more than a burgeoning cult.

He stopped. For the first time since his arrival, he paused to study the statues that huddled in the alcoves beneath the windows. Saints and heroes he didn't recognise, carved in marble, to adorn a corridor that only a few thousand people would see.

What would Dorn make of this? he wondered. Would he share Guilliman's opinion? Or would he see some value in this – in the Ecclesiarchy itself? Calder stepped closer to one of the statues. A man, clad in robes. Fierce looking.

'Sebastian Thor.'

Calder turned. Canoness Lorr stood nearby, watching him. He nodded respectfully. 'Canoness. You have business with the cardinal-governor?'

'Had.' She came to stand beside him. 'Do you know the story of Thor?'

'I do.'

She nodded. 'There are some who think Eamon will follow in his footsteps. That he may well become Ecclesiarch, in time.' She looked at him, her scarred features giving nothing away. For a human, Lorr was hard to read. 'I have wondered – is that why the Risen Son sent you here?'

'I was sent to defend this world. That is all I need to know.'

Lorr looked back at the statue. 'I do not believe you.' She was silent for a moment. Then, 'Your warriors have been asking questions. Disturbing the equilibrium of this place. It would be better if they did not.'

'Better for who?'

She didn't reply. Calder studied her. Lorr had all but avoided him since his arrival. Tyre had been his main point of contact. Calder decided not to press the point. He could not afford to alienate the canoness at this juncture. So,

instead, he returned his attentions to the statue. They stood in silence for several moments. Her reserve was impressive.

‘I offended you,’ she said after some time.

‘No.’

Lorr grunted. ‘I am glad.’ She stepped back. ‘You should go. I have taken up enough of your time. The cardinal-governor will be waiting.’ She turned and continued on her way. He made no move to stop her. Only when she had lost herself in the crowded corridor did he continue on, still thinking on their confrontation.

As before, Eamon was awaiting Calder in his chambers. The cardinal-governor reclined in a chair on the balcony, sipping a mug of recaff and studying a data-slate. ‘Good morning, lieutenant,’ he said in greeting, as his bodyguards closed the doors behind Calder. ‘I trust you had a pleasant evening.’

Calder nodded. ‘Progress was made. Astropathic reports indicate that Suboden Khan has engaged the enemy near Pergamon.’

Eamon set his data-slate aside. ‘And?’

‘Too soon to tell.’

Eamon sat back. ‘I suppose a miraculous victory was too much to ask for.’

‘The battle has only just begun.’ Calder stood at ease, hands clasped behind his back. He spied several attendants standing silently, just out of view. The serfs avoided his gaze with studious reserve. They barely even acknowledged him. He wondered if adjustments had been made to them, or whether they were simply well trained.

‘I suppose so. The Ecumenical Council is demanding another meeting. I will not be able to put them off for long. The plans you submitted for approval are… extensive.’ He glanced up, and Calder noticed a solitary cyber-cherub crouched at the top of one of the chamber’s large bookshelves. The creature was branded with a mark he recognised from his files – not one of Eamon’s, then.

‘Not for approval,’ Calder said. ‘Merely to make you aware of what will be done.’ He was used to such word games. Eamon was attempting to exert a soft authority, likely for the benefit of whoever might be watching, via the cherub.

Eamon sighed, somewhat theatrically. Again, for the benefit of the spy.

Calder found it somewhat disconcerting how much of Eamon's time consisted of such play-acting. The cardinal-governor walked a daily tightrope between tyranny and weakness.

'I'm told you went to Low Town. Might I inquire as to the reason?' Eamon set aside his mug and began to strip. Two of his attendants came to his aid, pulling off his robes and gently folding them. Beneath the robes, he wore a crimson bodyglove, studded with sensor nodes. Carefully, a third attendant helped him don a set of training armour. It resembled carapace armour, and had the weight, but little of the durability.

'To speak to the planetary magistrate.'

'Guill? Why?' Eamon flexed his hands, as his attendants slid a pair of bracers over his forearms. 'Some matter I should be aware of?'

'We require reinforcements. I intend to get them.'

'From Low Town?'

'Low Town will be where the heaviest fighting takes place. It seemed appropriate to begin my efforts there.' Calder watched as one of the attendants brought Eamon a blunted duelling sabre. 'Have I interrupted something?'

'No. I can do more than one thing at a time. One of my few skills.' He whistled, and something lurched out of a corner, pulling aside a dust cover as it moved. It was a servitor, though of a higher quality than Calder was used to. This one was not one of the mass-produced, lobotomised labourers so common to the industrial sectors of the Imperium. Instead, it was a thing of grand artifice – narrow and murderous looking, with carefully balanced artificial limbs, and ornate carvings covering its armoured torso. The only bit of flesh visible was around its eyes, which peered out from behind a mask of wrought brass. It was studded with religious iconography, and its arms ended in short, blunt blades. Power cables and nutrient feeds emerged from its helm like braided hair and spilled down its back to a streamlined power unit.

'Beautiful, isn't she?' Eamon said.

'It was a woman?'

'Oh yes. One of the finest swordswomen ever produced by House Helmawr, of Necromunda. She ran afoul of an acquaintance of mine. She kept bad company, and was consigned to be made over into something more useful. They left her skills intact, but took everything else.' Eamon presented his blade with a flourish, and the servitor copied the gesture with its bladed limbs. 'She was a gift, from the aforementioned acquaintance. Even a cardinal-

governor must keep his skills sharp, for all that I will never be allowed on a battlefield.'

The servitor lunged. It was swifter than Calder had expected. But so was Eamon. He parried its blow and backed away. 'So, you're drafting criminals, then? Is that wise?' He spoke without difficulty as he parried a second blow and riposted, driving the servitor back.

'It is necessary.'

'I hear that phrase too often for my liking.'

Uncertain as to how to reply to such a comment, Calder settled for saying nothing at all. Eamon and the servitor continued their dance. From Calder's perspective, the cardinal-governor was competent. Any Space Marine aspirant could have defeated him, but it would require some effort on their part. As far as normal humans went, he was exceedingly skilled.

Calder himself was more than competent with the blade. He had learned the art of it from its greatest student, Sigismund. Or, rather, those trained by Sigismund. Instinctively, his hand fell to the hilt of his power sword as Eamon avoided a blow that would have spilled his intestines on the floor, had he been half a second slower and the blades not been blunted. 'What else? How goes the landing zone preparations?'

'All completed. Elements of the Raven Guard and the remaining White Scars have been dispatched to the other cities to aid in the defence efforts. Most will remain here, in support of my own Imperial Fists.'

Eamon stopped. The servitor paused as well. He looked at Calder. 'It sounds like you've already written off Joyner's Rest and the other cities.'

Calder nodded. 'We lack the forces to defend every weak point. Therefore, we must choose. Almacia is the capital, and the only city with a functioning docking spire. It is unlikely that the enemy will devote more than a third of their resources to taking the rest of the planet. They will converge where the defence is strongest, in order to secure a quick victory. If we can hold Almacia, and maintain fleet coherency…'

'Then we might stand a chance.' Eamon chewed his lip for a moment. 'Are the odds truly stacked against us?'

'They are.'

Eamon laughed. 'No false confidence, then?'

'There is no purpose in obfuscating the obvious. A realistic appraisal of our

chances is preferable to a well-intentioned lie. Only through accurate data can I make the proper projections.'

'I see. I suppose you've used up all that politesse I noted earlier.'

'I assumed it was not necessary between us, at this late date.'

Eamon gestured and the servitor retreated to its alcove. He handed his sword to one of his servants and went back to his table. He sat down and poured himself a goblet of wine. 'If that is the case, then I might well ask why you've been questioning my people about the schematics for the cathedral-palace.' He looked at Calder over the rim of his goblet. 'I thought we had already cleared all of that up.'

Calder did not reply immediately. Lorr had asked him a similar question. He had expected Eamon to avoid the topic. He wondered if his meeting with Lorr had been as much happenstance as it had seemed, or whether it had been a probing strike. Was this simply another duel? The thought irritated him.

'No. You refused to answer my questions so I sought the answers I required elsewhere.'

'And?'

'They also refused to answer.'

'Because there are no vaults. There are no hidden places here. And if there were, it would be my duty to defend them against any who might seek to open them.' Eamon spoke carefully. Slowly. Calder weighed his tone and emphasis, and decided that Eamon was asking him to forget his question.

'I was sent here to defend this world,' he said with equal deliberation. 'To do that, I must have access to every part of it. Every secret place and hidden route.'

'And you have been granted that access.' Eamon did not quite meet his gaze. Calder would have been impressed if he had. Few humans could, for any length of time. 'Or are you accusing me of lying?'

'Are you?'

Eamon refilled his goblet. 'Are you a worshipper of the God-Emperor, lieutenant?'

'No,' Calder said. 'I serve Him. But I do not worship Him.'

'Do you doubt His divinity, then?' Eamon looked at him, his face suddenly worn and haggard looking. It wasn't simply his recent exertions, but

something else. ‘I have never been to Terra, but I can feel Him nonetheless.’ He touched his chest. ‘I feel the resonance of His voice here, in my heart. He speaks – you have but to listen.’

‘I have two hearts, cardinal-governor. Which one is it that He speaks to?’

Eamon shook his head, his eyes sad. He slumped in his chair and drained his goblet. ‘You mock me. I forgive you.’

‘I do not mock you. The Emperor of Mankind is a fixed point. Divine or not, we both serve Him. Which is why you will tell me what I need to know.’

‘I have!’ Eamon snapped. He paused, realising what he’d done. ‘Forgive me. But these vaults you speak of, these hidden paths – I do not know what they are. I cannot tell you what I do not know.’

Calder said nothing. Eamon waited, as if expecting a reply. When it didn’t come, the cardinal-governor sighed. ‘You don’t trust me, do you?’

‘Trust is earned.’

Eamon winced. ‘And haven’t I earned it, yet?’

Again, Calder said nothing. Eamon looked away, his gaze coming to rest on the great books that occupied the shelves around the chamber. ‘Have you ever read the classics, lieutenant? Govanna’s *Historia Regum Terra*, for instance. Or Penton’s *The Riddle and the Throne*? Histories of the Imperium, written by the most learned scholars of the ages.’

‘I do not read fiction,’ Calder said simply. He’d found that most of the texts written in the past ten thousand years were little more than children’s stories. A nugget of truth, in a shell of complete fabrication.

Eamon turned. ‘You would see them that way, wouldn’t you? You lived it. Do you remember the day the Emperor drove the monsters from Terra?’

Calder hesitated. He barely remembered those days. He’d been a child when the Traitor Legions had laid siege to Terra. Sometimes, he had flashes of running and hiding from purple-armoured warriors. Of his brother’s screams as they flayed him alive, so that they might have his bones and skin to wear into battle. He recalled the look on his father’s face as they dragged him into the open, guttural laughter shaking the air.

As always, he pushed those thoughts down. He was not that child any more. He was Primaris. The ultimate weapon, built for the last war. And nothing more would be taken from him. Not by traitors or daemons or xenos.

‘They were not monsters then,’ he said. ‘Not all of them.’

Eamon nodded. ‘Regardless, so much of what the Ecclesiarchy has built came from the ashes of that great conflagration. We pulled together the framework of the Imperial Creed with bloody fingers, and crafted a faith from hearsay and hope.’ He struck his chest with a fist. ‘We did it. *Us.* We saw what was needed, and we did it. We united mankind in its darkest hour. And we have held them together since then, whatever has come – so many times, disaster was averted only by faith and fire.’ He gestured to the shelves. ‘You call it fiction. I call it hope. We give hope, lieutenant.’

Eamon snatched up his goblet and took a deep swallow. ‘And you hate us for it,’ he continued. ‘Not without reason, I admit – some among the Holy Synod have yielded to temptation. But for every one who falls, a hundred more stand firm. Because we *believe*. Our belief sustains billions and yet you cannot bring yourself to trust us. To trust me.’

Calder looked around the chamber, at the great shelves of books and the ornate fireplace. At the high windows, looking out over the city. He considered his reply from every angle, remembering Suboden’s warning as he did so. Eamon was trying to divert him. To anger him, perhaps. It was a distraction. A ploy to avoid revealing whatever it was that he was hiding. What this planet was hiding.

More and more, he was becoming convinced that Guilliman had sent him here not just to defend this world, but to ferret out whatever secret it held. Whatever it was might mean the difference between victory and defeat.

He turned back to Eamon. ‘Irrelevant,’ he said firmly. ‘I do not hate you. You are a strange thing to me, for when I last walked the galaxy, you did not exist. And yet, the more I learn of you – of the Ecclesiarchy – the more I find that it is unpleasantly familiar. You are the shadow on the cave wall – a little thing, magnified by false perceptions.’

‘Lieutenant–’ Eamon began.

Calder continued, not giving him a chance to speak. ‘This debate serves no purpose, save as a distraction. I do not care what you have done, or why you have done it. I do not care why you seek to hide it from me. I care only that you hinder me in the performance of my duty. Thus far, I have allowed it. But the time is coming when I will not take no for an answer, cardinal-governor.’

Eamon went still. ‘Is that a threat?’

‘It is a promise.’

Calder left without waiting to be dismissed. As the doors to Eamon’s

chamber closed behind him, he activated an encrypted vox-link. ‘Karros, brother. Meet me in the strategium.’

Karros responded almost immediately. *‘Is everything alright, brother? You sound almost angry. Very unusual, for you.’*

‘I am fine. But we have matters to discuss.’

Calder cut the link. He realised that he’d stopped again before the statue of Sebastian Thor. He stared at it for a moment, before the whirr of tiny wings alerted him to an observer. He turned, slightly. Almost a dozen cyber-cherubs watched him. The tiny automata were perched on the other statues, or in the corners. Their eyes whirred and clicked, capturing his image for unseen observers.

Calder held those blank gazes for a moment.

Then, deliberately, he turned and continued on his way.

Karros sat back on his haunches. ‘Interesting,’ he murmured. He crouched on the ledge of a cathedral spire, overlooking a wide avenue colloquially known as Fell’s Triumph. The eastern reaches of High Town spread out below him in splashes of grey and gold. Clouds of industrial smog and incense drifted over the buildings, obscuring much of the street below. A sudden rush of birds agitated the clouds, as they spilled upwards into the sky above.

‘Brother?’ Solaro, a Reiver, crouched behind him. Karros glanced at the Primaris. Like the Imperial Fists, his command was split roughly fifty-fifty between new and old. The Chapter believed in integration where possible. Then, they had always been adaptable. Solaro was the only one of his kind here. The other five Raven Guard perched at various points on the roof were, like Karros, of a more traditional bent. Solaro normally commanded his own squad, but Karros wanted to observe him in the field.

‘Calder is losing his patience for the cardinal-governor’s games,’ he said, answering Solaro’s question. He stretched discretely, flexing each muscle in its turn, easing the flow of fatigue-poisons. It would be some time before he had to rest, or even cramped up. He’d once perched on a similar rooftop for close to a week, awaiting the perfect moment to end the life of an ork war-leader. He closed his eyes, remembering the oily taste of the rain that day, and the rough, bellowing speech of the greenskin as it addressed its followers in crude mimicry of an Imperial commander rousing the troops.

He’d taken the creature’s head off with his first shot. Its followers had succumbed to raucous infighting some minutes later. Orks were nothing if not

efficient when it came to establishing a new chain of command. Luckily, it made them easy prey.

‘Why has he indulged the mortal for so long?’ the Reiver asked. ‘At the first sign of deceit, we should have removed him from power.’

‘Ah, Solaro. I forget sometimes that not all of you Primaris are as old as Calder. You are barely three decades into your duty.’

‘Long enough to know better than to indulge such foolishness.’

‘Not foolishness,’ Karros said. ‘Wisdom. Deposing Eamon would result in increased civil unrest. And other than his unwillingness to discuss certain matters, Eamon is more useful where he is. He provides a necessary buffer between us and the Ecclesiarchial bureaucrats who rule this world.’

‘He’s a wall, you mean,’ Solaro said.

Karros glanced. ‘Was that humour, brother? How unexpected.’

‘A slip of the tongue,’ Solaro replied.

‘It wasn’t a reprimand, Solaro. Even the sons of Dorn make jokes on occasion. I– ah. There we are. Right on schedule.’ Karros turned as one of the sensors he’d placed on the street below registered movement. The avenue was lined with bulk warehouses, linked directly to an array of transit lifts. The lifts were ancient technology – gravimetric suspension systems that could carry a void-hardened cargo platform to the orbital docking spires above the city. Once the platform had its load, it would descend at speed, until reaching the base of the lift.

In peacetime, the lifts made the journey hundreds of times a day. They had been rendered inoperable until the current crisis was past by teams of civilian engineers. Or, such was supposed to be the case.

Someone had ignored the edict. According to the warriors he’d set to watch, the lift in Warehouse 32-Omega had been active fifteen times in the past three days. That was more than merely suspicious, given the circumstances. It was potentially treasonous.

Karros had decided to investigate, while there was still time to indulge in such amusements personally. Calder lived for his way of war – of numbers and strategies. But Karros enjoyed taking a more active role. He’d never lost his taste for shadow war.

Down below, a civilian transport had come to a stop on a side street behind the warehouse. It was a heavy vehicle – rugged, built for mountain travel.

Whatever they were bringing down from orbit, they were planning to take it out of the city.

Five men climbed from the vehicle. There were thirty more in the warehouse. Karros blink-activated an augur-rune on his display. The rune controlled the feed from the pict-recorders Solaro and the others had surreptitiously mounted around the outside of the warehouse. The feed, filtered through his helmet picter, filled a corner of his display. Activating a second rune, he isolated the faces of the men who disembarked, and ran them against the list of persons of interest Calder had put together. ‘Interesting,’ he said.

‘Heretics?’ Solaro said.

‘Maybe. They’re also criminals, at least according to Calder’s files.’ Karros raised a hand, signalling the other Raven Guard. ‘They’re armed, but nothing that should trouble us. I want prisoners, if possible. Chayn, Deron – I want that orbital lift out of commission. Permanently. The rest of you, especially you, Solaro, follow my lead. We’ll conduct a standard smash and sweep. Don’t bother giving chase if they run. Concentrate on the ones who stand and fight – or try to hide.’

Solaro nodded. ‘When you say prisoners…’

‘I mean in one piece.’ Karros stood. ‘Go.’ Without waiting to see if the others were following, he leapt from his perch and slid down the slope of the spire. Ancient tiles splintered and cracked beneath him, but he paid them little heed. Instead, he concentrated on the sudden drop ahead, and the necessary calculations for what came next.

When he hit the edge, he leapt, angling his body just so. The others did the same, one after the other. Between their enhanced frames and the strength-augmenting fibre bundles of their power armour, there were few leaps that a Space Marine could not take on faith.

Ordinarily, he would have employed stealth. It would have been easy for him and his men to infiltrate the warehouse and subdue those inside. But sometimes it was preferable to make a statement. Whoever was inside thought that they could flaunt their crime under the noses of the Emperor’s chosen. Such hubris could not be allowed to go unchallenged.

Thus, the leap.

The roof of the warehouse was made from recycled sheet metal – a local variety. Thin, but durable. Not durable enough to survive the impact of a fully

armoured Space Marine, travelling at high speed, however.

Karros barely felt the moment of impact. The sheet metal buckled around him, and the support frame bent away from its contact points. It barely slowed his descent, and he plummeted towards the ferrocrete floor below in a cloud of torn metal and busted frame. He landed with a crash, the gyroscopic stabilisers built into his armour keeping him upright. The floor cracked around him, and dust geysered.

Two point three milliseconds after impact, he was already moving. His armour's auto-senses built a map of his surroundings as he ran towards the closest identified target. The warehouse was a massive square of space, broken up only by walkways and storage berths. The transit lift rose from its centre – it was a derrick-like structure mounted on a flat plinth, stretching upwards through the roof and high into the air.

There were men scattered about the lift, and mountains of crates. Most of the men were busy unloading the transit lift, but the rest turned – slowly, so slowly – as Karros raced towards them. He drew his bolt pistol and fired, letting the targeting runes guide his aim. Three shots and three men fell, not dead, but perhaps wishing they were. Around him, Solaro and the others fired their own weapons. Precise bursts hammered the air. Men dived for cover as crates of contraband were chewed to flinders.

Karros slid to a halt, firing again, driving men back from the transit lift. A mortal, desperate or perhaps simply optimistic, came at him with a blade. The sword was the sort hive gangers might carry – a chopping blade, with none of the grace or balance of a proper weapon. Karros caught the blow on his forearm and swiped the blade from its owner's hands. Before the man could run, Karros caught him by the throat and sent him flying into a knot of his fellows. He pivoted, firing, forcing the rest of them to keep their heads down as he turned his attention elsewhere.

His picter-unit was linked to those worn by Solaro and the others. He saw what they saw. His warriors had spread out through the warehouse and were following his example. They fought to disable, rather than kill, but it didn't make much difference. Mortals fell, bones broken, bodies pumping blood from wounds that would eventually prove fatal without medical attention. Karros paid them little attention. If they lived, they would be questioned. If they died, they died. What mattered was that his warriors were following orders.

Autoguns roared and crude explosive rounds bit into his armour,

momentarily rocking him. He turned, back-tracking the trajectories. His bolt pistol boomed in response, and runes flashed, signalling that the targets were down. His auto-senses focused on a group of men heading for the transit lift, trying to escape perhaps. He stalked after them, signalling Solaro with a vox-click as he did so. Through his picter, he spotted the Reiver racing across the top of a nearby stack of crates, combat knife in hand. There was no need to give an order – the Primaris knew what to do.

Solaro vaulted from the crates and crashed down, knife flashing. Men fell, their hamstrings sliced clean through. Their screams scattered the rest. Only one continued towards the transit lift – a heavyset man, clad in a silk jacket and battered military fatigues. A name flashed on his display, as his armour's sensors identified the man – Kormas Belloq. One of the gang leaders Calder had wanted to see. Karros cycled through the frequency band. When he found the one used by the enforcers he sent a coded data-pulse containing a pict of Belloq, and their current location. He estimated that the enforcers would arrive by the time he and his warriors had done what they'd come to do.

Belloq carried a heavy autogun with a bulky ammunition drum, and he laid down a withering field of suppressive fire. Solaro was knocked sprawling. His battleplate was lighter than Karros' own, and while it protected him from harm, it wasn't as good at absorbing impacts. He rolled away from the gunfire, seeking cover. Karros pressed forward, drawing the gunman's attention. 'Good shot,' Solaro voxed.

'He's had training,' Karros said. That wasn't in the files, but it didn't surprise him. He moved quickly, but without haste. He was curious as to Belloq's plan. Where was there to go?

Belloq backed away, retreating towards the transit lift. Karros laughed. The man had courage, at least. Not everyone would risk an orbital ascent. Then, not everyone had Space Marines chasing them. 'Chayn – status,' he said.

'Mission accomplished.'

There was a dull boom as a plasma charge went off. Metal groaned and smoke rose up and boiled outwards, flooding the area around the transit lift. Belloq spun, eyes wide. He cursed and turned back as Karros approached.

The autogun roared, spitting high-velocity rounds. Karros walked through the fusillade, his battleplate registering and recording the impacts. The rounds weren't heavy enough to punch through his armour, but they were far in advance of the usual ganger trash. 'A good weapon,' he said. He boosted his vox, so that his voice boomed out like thunder. 'How did you come by it?'

‘I paid for it,’ the mortal spat. He emptied the ammunition drum, and made to eject it. Karros sprinted forward, and slapped the empty weapon from the man’s hands.

‘I’m sure,’ Karros said. He caught the man by the throat, hoisted him up and propelled him backwards, against a crate. ‘You are a smuggler.’

‘I’m a–a businessman,’ the mortal choked out, as he clawed uselessly at Karros’ forearm. Karros observed him for a moment, slightly impressed by the man’s defiance. Unaugmented humans were normally terrified of Space Marines. Then, perhaps this man had seen worse in his time. Perhaps it was simply hubris. Karros slammed him back against the crate, knocking the wind out of him.

‘You were using the transit lift to smuggle in weapons? Why?’

Belloq glared. ‘To sell. Why else?’

‘To who?’

Belloq looked at him as if he were insane. ‘Everyone. We’ve heard the rumours. The system is under attack. Weapons make people feel safe. Every two-bit aristo and deacon is looking to gun-up their bodyguards.’ He stopped his struggles. ‘Why haven’t you killed me yet?’

‘Who said I wanted to kill you?’

‘Enforcers are moving in from either end of the street,’ Solaro murmured, across the vox.

‘I know. I alerted them.’ Karros leaned close to his sweating prisoner. ‘Your name is Belloq. You make your money selling black market off-world narcotics and stolen merchandise, bought wholesale from pirates and smugglers.’

The man’s eyes widened. Before he could speak, Karros continued. ‘Unless I miss my guess, you have an appointment with my brother. I expect you shall keep it directly once the enforcers have you in custody. For your sake, I wouldn’t resist.’

Karros signalled the others. ‘Time to go.’ He let Belloq fall, and tapped him on his bald head, hard enough to make the man wince.

‘Remember what I said. If I have to find you, you won’t enjoy the experience.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

57:00:00

Odoacer System, coreward edge

Ashu leaned forward on his command throne, a grisly smile stretched across his pallid features. The Word Bearer flashed obsidian teeth and growled in pleasure. ‘Look at them, Slave. Ripe and fit for plucking.’

Slave nodded. ‘Yes, O munificent one.’ He looked at her. She was tall and willowy, like all those born in the void. Her skin was as colourless as Ashu’s own, and she wore silken raiment, plundered from an aeldari trading vessel. Her face was hidden beneath a silver mask, wrought in the shape of a daemon’s leer, and silver chains girt her wrists, waist and neck. The chains were connected to Ashu’s throne.

‘Once you might have been among them, eh?’ He pointed to the viewscreen and the straggling column of refugee vessels that stretched across it. ‘Fearful and blind to the predators on your trail.’

‘Never, my lord. I was fated to serve you. As the gods will.’

‘It is good you know that, Slave.’ He glanced at the ritual brands that coiled about her bare arm. He’d put them there himself, and more besides. He marked all of his slaves, so that they might never hide their allegiances. He had something of a collection – enough to act as crew for his vessel, *Callyon’s Yearning.*

Even more than his slaves, the Slaughter-class cruiser was his pride and joy. He had strangled its former captain as she sat in the throne Ashu now occupied. It had carried him through two centuries of war since then, and had never failed him.

Alongside *Callyon’s Yearning* were a handful of smaller escort vessels – raiders and pirates, mostly. At least one was the province of an extended clan of devoted followers of the Primordial Truth – ten generations of daemon-worshippers had crewed the creaking scow, and the vox echoed with their chants and hymns.

Ashu turned his attentions back to the refugees. At least a dozen vessels, most of them small – pleasure yachts, short-haul trading vessels and one antique troop transport, making their way slowly out of one of the innumerable debris fields that littered the system. Most were from Pergamon, but at least one was from farther afield. He knew, because he'd been tracking it since reaching the system's core edge.

Amatnim had set him a pleasurable task – burning worlds and disrupting shipping throughout the outer worlds. There wasn't much to do, but he'd managed to amuse himself. The system was a backwater, but a vital one. Hundreds of petty shipping lanes and trade routes stretching in an invisible web between a few badly defended worlds. His holds groaned with slaves and plunder.

He glanced at Slave. 'What shall we do with these, my pet? Shall we offer them up to the beasts of the void? Or shall we strip them bare and add to our bounty?'

'Whatever you desire, O most magnanimous of masters.' He could hear the resentment in her voice – like a lovely tune, just at the edge of his perceptions.

'Yes. A good answer, my lovely one.' He caught her chin with a finger and drew her close. He could smell her fear now, hidden beneath a miasma of incense and sacred oils. She hated him and feared him, and he found it delicious. 'You are wise in your generation, Slave. It is why you are honoured above all your fragile kind. Where would I be without your sagacity, my dear?'

'Wherever the gods willed you, my lord.'

Ashu considered this, and laughed. 'Yes. Luckily for both of us, they have willed me here.' He released her and leaned back. 'Take us in. All ahead full. I want them to see us coming. It makes for sweeter sport.'

The engines groaned, and the cruiser's speed increased. The deck plates shivered in their housings and Ashu licked his lips at the thought of the pleasures to come. He had been a soldier for as long as he could recall. It was not battle he enjoyed, so much as what came after. He always had. On the charnel-fields of Calth, he had spent many nights plundering the treasures of that world's broken cities.

He'd always looked forward to a good looting. So many offerings to be placed on the altars of the gods. So many blessings to be received. He stroked his grey armour, tracing the sigils carved into the ceramite by the hands of his

first slaves, now dead these many centuries. Some had met their fate on the altars, others had died in battle. One, he'd killed in self-defence after a summoning gone wrong. He missed them, sometimes.

None compared to Slave, of course. She'd been bred to servitude, born in the bowels of *Callyon's Yearning*, like the rest of the bridge-crew. He brushed his fingers along her spine, enjoying the animal fear that seeped from her pores. She wanted to kill him, he suspected. But she dared not. Her frustration mingled with her fear in such delightful ways. He looked forward to the day when he finally offered her up to the gods. Her screams would be as the sweetest music.

She stepped behind his throne, dragging her chains after her. He did not reprimand her for moving without his permission. Other matters had his attention. His quarry was within range of his weapons batteries and had not yet noticed him. Or if they had, they were resigned to their fate. He studied the ships, puzzled.

Something was wrong. The vox was silent. It should have been filled with screams of panic by now. He gestured with a finger. 'Scan the frequencies. They're being too quiet.'

His slaves snapped to attention, and he watched them work in satisfaction. The bridge of a ship was no place for a Space Marine. Some among his brothers didn't agree. They didn't trust slaves or mutants, or even cultists. But Ashu knew the trick of it. Fear was a chain stronger than any forged by man. It bound the soul, leaving the body free to work.

'Patch them through to my vox-channel,' he said. 'Continue to close. Once they're within firing range, destroy the closest vessel.'

The frequencies buzzed like wasps – empty of all sound save static. Ashu stiffened. They were being jammed. Someone was jamming his prey's sensors. Why? He signalled one of his crew. 'Back-trace the jamming signal. Find it. I want to know why–'

'Incoming,' a slave shrieked, suddenly. Alarm klaxons wailed. Ashu jolted in his throne as impact alarms added their voices to the cacophony. 'Multiple impacts. Shields holding!'

'What was that?' Ashu demanded. But even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. A trap. The convoy had been used as bait, to lure him in. He grimaced as another convulsion wracked the command deck. 'Get me a firing solution,' he roared. 'Contact the captain of the *Malice…*'

‘It’s gone, my lord,’ Slave said demurely.

Ashu turned. ‘What?’

‘Gone, my lord. As is the *Skulleater* and *Lucius’ Blade*. They’re both burning off our bow.’ She gestured at the viewscreen. Ashu stared in incomprehension. His escorts were dying and he was blind to their killer. He hammered at the controls on his throne, bringing up hull-feeds and long-distance telemetry. The commanders of the remaining escorts were screaming for orders, but he had none to give them.

On the viewscreen, motes of deadly light stretched from unknown sources. Another escort tumbled away, ruptured, venting air and corpses. Hololithic data unspooled before him, as he searched for the attackers to no avail. They were jamming his sensors as they’d jammed those of the convoy.

He looked up, as sparks cascaded across the bridge. Slaves yelped in pain, and beat at the flames that clung to their rags. Telemetry runes blinked on his display, isolating potential power sources. They were using the debris fields to mask themselves. He could feel it. Cunning. ‘Come to a new heading,’ he snarled, and rattled off coordinates. ‘Get us in broadside range of the debris. Now!’

The ship’s turning felt ponderous to him, though he knew it was anything but. Even as it did so, he felt that he’d missed something. Something important. The broken stretch of the debris field came into view. ‘Magnify.’ The image expanded. ‘Again!’

He saw them then – a sleek, black monster, crouched in the dark. A strike cruiser. It was surrounded by handfuls of smaller vessels. These frenzied forth as *Callyon’s Yearning* came about. They swarmed like flies. ‘Prime the defence turrets – knock them out of the void.’ He felt the rumble as the gunnery decks opened up.

Something was still off. One ship – even a strike cruiser – wasn’t an ambush. There was something he wasn’t seeing. ‘We’ve come about, my lord,’ a slave cried.

‘Tell the lance batteries to fire – now! Target the debris fields. If we can cause a chain reaction…’ He trailed off as the answer came to him. He knew what he’d missed. ‘No, belay that. Engines, reverse full. Quickly!’

Too late.

He felt the shields buckle as vessels broke free of the convoy and fired. A lucky hit, or well calculated. They’d hidden well, using the civilian vessels

first for bait, and then for cover. Cold. He could almost admire such ruthless pragmatism. If only they weren't trying to kill him. 'Send a distress signal – alert the fleet…'

Shield generators overloaded and flickered out throughout the cruiser. His throne's display flashed, as the smaller vessels swarmed his own, attacking from all directions. They'd drawn him in, pulled him into position and now he would pay for it.

Fires were burning unchecked below on the command deck. Damage reports came in across the vox, even as it crackled and died. He made to push himself to his feet, but stopped as he heard the clink of chains. 'Slave?'

Loops of silver chain settled across his neck. Surprised, he fell back. The loops tightened, as crewmen crept through the smoke towards him, carrying jagged shards of metal as if they were spears and knives. He forced his head up, seeking Slave out. She was braced behind his throne, using all of her weight to try to strangle him. Angry, he clawed at the loops, and dragged them away from his throat. Links popped and snapped, even as the others reached him.

They came at him in silence. He killed the first, and the second, with his bare hands. And the third and the fourth. But still they came. Determined. And the loops of chain drew tighter and tighter about his throat. Slave was singing as she hauled her improvised noose back. A hymn, he thought, though he couldn't think where she might have heard it from.

They pinned his arms with their bodies, held his legs. No fear in them now. He wondered if there ever really had been. As they fumbled for his sidearm, he looked up at Slave. 'I'm very proud of you,' he gurgled, as two of them hefted his bolt pistol in trembling hands, and placed it awkwardly to his brow.

It was done in an instant.

Callyon's Yearning followed its commander a few moments later.

Amatnim watched as ident-runes spun across the projection. The sensor-feeds showed the orbital dockyards above Pergamon. Damaged as they were, they were still functional. Another blessing from the gods. The world had offered stiffer resistance than he'd expected. Or maybe it had simply been the gods' way of preparing him for the true test to come.

The *Glory Eternal* trawled the stars now, on a slow heading to Almace. A few ships followed in the battle-barge's wake, those who'd made it through the assault unscathed, and weren't deployed elsewhere. It would take time for

the rest of the fleet to make repairs, rearm and catch up. Hence his lack of hurry. Amatnim was not of a mind to sacrifice a numerical advantage out of impatience. Unlike some.

He glanced at Lakmhu. The Dark Apostle stood nearby, staring at a telemetric projection with ill-disguised impatience. Now that he knew what was at stake, he seemed to vibrate with fanatical exuberance. If Lakmhu had been in charge, they would already have been in orbit about Almace, engaged in another siege. And they would have paid a heavy toll.

The gods thirsted for blood, but they desired victory above all else. Too often, Amatnim's brothers allowed themselves to be blinded by the former, and lost sight of the latter. That, as Kor Phaeron had often said, was the issue with Erebus and his ilk. They traded victory for success. They would rather win a thousand skirmishes than a war. And that was why, when the Urizen returned, his wrath would fall upon them.

They had been given a gift, and they had squandered it. Freed from their chains, they had immediately sought new masters. They had turned on one another, and made the Legion into a battleground. But soon, that would end. With the prisoner of Almace freed, and all secrets come to light, Erebus would lose his standing in the Legion at last. The stalemate between factions would end and the true faith would be united once more.

Amatnim closed his eyes, just for a moment, imagining the glories to come. Would Lorgar acknowledge him, as Kor Phaeron had promised? He wished it so. He hoped that the Urizen would see the light in him and find it familiar.

As if reading his thoughts, Lakmhu grunted. Amatnim turned. 'Yes, brother?'

'Another barnacle adds itself to our hull.'

Amatnim glanced at the sensor-feed. A pict-display from one of the battle-barge's launch bays showed transport ships sliding into waiting berths, as crews of slaves raced to greet the new arrivals. 'How many does that make?'

'Fifty-six,' Lakmhu said, watching the data twist across the projections. Sometimes it made faces at the Dark Apostle. There were daemons in the circuitry, Amatnim knew. Little ones, mostly. Brief sparks of the Great Fire. Amusing, in moderation.

The newcomers were pirates. The system was infested with them. They lurked in the asteroid belts and debris fields that marked much of the rim expanse, venturing forth to attack lone vessels or raid the farthest worlds.

Amatnim had sent envoys among them, soon after entering the system. They were a ready-made fighting force, they knew the territory, and they would require little direction for his purposes.

‘Excellent.’ Amatnim smiled, pleased. It was always better when they came of their own free will, when they acknowledged the might of the gods and bowed their heads.

‘They are useless. This is useless. What purpose does it serve?’

Amatnim sighed. A theatrical gesture, and one he knew annoyed the Dark Apostle. ‘It serves our purpose, and through us, that of the gods.’

‘We are wasting time. These stragglers will only slow us down.’

‘We have time to waste. What is time, save a collection of moments gifted us by the gods? Who are you to attribute greater or lesser value to any given moment?’ He smiled. ‘I think you forget yourself, Lakmhu.’

Lakmhu turned, tattooed features twisted into a bemused expression. ‘Was that supposed to mean something? What is this gibberish that drips from your lips, Amatnim?’

Amatnim put on a bland expression. ‘Why, are these not the words of Mekesh the Rancorous, as written in the forty-second Epistle of Ruination?’

Lakmhu frowned. ‘The homilies of Mekesh are forbidden, as you well know. Erebus himself has decreed it so.’

‘Erebus makes many decrees.’ Amatnim sighed sadly. ‘How is a humble soldier such as myself to keep up?’ He made a show of examining himself. ‘I trust my battleplate is the correct shade, this cycle?’ The Dark Council had decreed that there were only a certain number of proper colours for battleplate, if it was to be painted. Deviance from the permitted shades was punished harshly. Unfortunately, the list of approved hues changed almost daily, much to the consternation of the devout.

Kor Phaeron had explained it to Amatnim, once. Such little things kept the faithful snapping at each other over matters of dogma, and left Erebus free to do as he wished. He was like a stone dropped into a pond. The ripples he created affected the whole of the Legion, and often for the worse. That was why he had to be removed – but not just removed, erased. As if he had never been. All influence stripped, all supporters gone. Otherwise, he would simply be a martyr. And Kor Phaeron knew all about the power of martyrs.

Lakmhu shook his head. ‘There is no paint on your armour.’

Amatnim nodded, as if in thanks. ‘Ah. That is true.’ He smiled widely. ‘Once again, you have quieted my fears, Lakmhu. Truly, you speak with the voice of the gods themselves. I am in awe of your piousness.’

Lakmhu’s expression was that of a man tasting poison. His hand twitched towards the ritual blade sheathed at his side, and Amatnim’s smile widened. ‘Do not think harshly of me, brother. I know it would be easier if I were a fool, but I am not. And this is not foolishness. We come to do a great thing, it is true, but we cannot forget our Legion’s purpose in our haste to claim glory. One soul at a time, or a thousand at once, we must bring them all to the light of the Primordial Truth. Only then will the gods see us and know us as their truest sons.’

‘There are some who might disagree with you on that score,’ Lakmhu said bitterly. He turned away. ‘Not just in our own ranks.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘And so? Is your faith so brittle that the scepticism of lesser souls can cause it to break?’ He stepped up beside the Dark Apostle. ‘For shame. What would Erebus say to that?’

Lakmhu stiffened and glared. Amatnim grinned. ‘Faith, brother. You should try to muster some. If the gods did not wish them here, they would not be here. As you would not be here.’ He grinned. ‘Besides, the ranks of our chattel grow thin. We need more warm bodies, and these degenerates will play the part well enough. They are eager for war, and we will give them one.’

‘They won’t be enough. You saw Kelim’s report. The White Scars are here. The lapdogs of the Corpse-Emperor have come and we are out of time.’

For once, Lakmhu was right. While the appearance of the White Scars at Pergamon had been brief, it had made an impression. Amatnim had hoped to avoid conflict with their degenerate cousins, but when man wished, the gods mocked.

‘They lacked the numbers to meet us head on,’ he said. ‘Else why would they retreat?’ It seemed right, in a strange sort of way, that they had come. Ten thousand years ago, the White Scars had been instrumental in preserving the lie of the Imperium. That they should be here now, attempting to preserve another lie, was only fitting. ‘Ashu and the other outriders will be more than enough to keep them occupied.’

‘That might prove difficult,’ Kelim said. The other Word Bearer strode towards them, followed by a gaggle of mutant crewmen. He barked a command, and they scattered to their stations. ‘Just received a vox-burst.

From Puloc, of the *Butcherblade*. He was just attacked by our cousins in white two grid points spinward. Lost most of his escorts, and his ship is all but gutted. He managed to smash up one of theirs, but it was all he could do to keep his ship in one piece.'

'Disappointing, but what does that have to do with Ashu?'

'He was three points coreward, running down refugees from the outlying worlds. You know how he likes easy prey.'

'Yes, and…?'

Kelim laughed. 'It wasn't so easy.'

Amatnim turned. 'Dead?'

The other Word Bearer shrugged. 'We've lost contact with him. I suspect so.'

Amatnim grunted. Not unexpected, but worrisome all the same. 'White Scars?'

'Unknown.'

Even more worrisome. Amatnim ran a hand over his head. 'Our cousins always did favour hit-and-run attacks…'

'And they've always been good at concealing their numbers,' Lakmhu said. 'They may have pickets strung across the core, waiting for us. They'll be gnawing our flanks from here to Almace. We should hunt them down now, before they bleed us further.'

'No. That's what they want.' Amatnim frowned. He gestured to Kelim. 'Scan all frequencies. I want to know what's changed.'

'We know that they're here,' Lakmhu protested. 'What else do you need?'

'Why they are here, and not at Almace.'

'It's obvious, isn't it? They're buying time – and you're giving it to them.'

'Yes, but who are they buying time for? What is waiting for us at Almace?' He looked at the Dark Apostle. 'The White Scars are pragmatic – they would not leave Almace unprotected. If they are here, then someone is there.' He looked at Kelim. 'Find out what you can. In the meantime, I'm going to greet our new recruits. We may well have need of them, before too much longer.'

Lakmhu followed Amatnim out onto the observation deck above the landing bays. Down below, the last of the transports carrying the pirate representatives

settled into a berth with a growl of thrusters. There were hundreds of them – petty war-chiefs and their bodyguards, militaristic separatists and gaudily clad buccaneers. The mad, the lost and the vile. Every system had them, to some extent. The closer to the Great Rift you went, the more of them there were. Almace was very close indeed.

The bay echoed with the noise of their gathering. To Lakmhu, it was akin to the chattering of apes. Sub-human trash, good for nothing more than sacrifice. Then, that was Amatnim's reason for seeking them out. They needed chattel, and Amatnim had found it. Even so, it was distasteful. Mortals were best kept at a distance, where their weakness would not infect others. Too, Lakmhu preferred a higher quality of pawn.

He glanced back. His blade slaves stumped in his wake, moving with ponderous grace. They stank of treachery and the warp, and their bodies writhed beneath their ravaged battleplate. They were, at once, his greatest sin and his greatest blessing.

He studied the closest. Dumeen, he thought, though he couldn't be sure. The other was Ortalu. Had been Ortalu, a hundred years ago. Dumeen met his gaze blankly. There was something moving behind his mask. They were still changing, both of them. Becoming more and more the perfect weapons the gods required.

It was an arduous process to create such slaves. It had consumed the lives of over a hundred witches, and a piece of Lakmhu's own soul. But the deed was done, and they were his. As much a part of him now as his hands. They would fight and die for him, if need be. He looked back at Amatnim and wondered whether it might well be necessary.

Erebus' commands had been explicit – Amatnim was to be converted rather than butchered, if possible. Lakmhu had spent months allowing Amatnim to think him nothing more than another fanatical attack dog. He'd tested Amatnim, sending the overly ambitious against him, all in an effort to maintain the cohesion of the host Amatnim had built.

It was a delicate balancing act, one that required him to act the fool. To resist his natural impulses. Amatnim was arrogant, believing himself blessed by the Pantheon, when nothing could be further from the truth. Erebus had explained it all so clearly before they'd departed Sicarius. What Amatnim planned might shatter the Legion to its very bedrock. The unity they'd maintained in the wake of the retreat from Terra and the wars that followed would vanish in an instant if he were allowed to succeed.

Unfortunately, he was too good a commander to waste on the altar of necessity. Erebus played the long game. He never sacrificed a pawn without cause. The gods had shown him that Amatnim would prove useful in the coming carnage. The Legion needed a war-leader like Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash. But they did not need the secret he sought to come to light.

Something would have to be done. Victory was necessary in order to maintain Amatnim's reputation as a commander, but he could not be allowed to free the prisoner he sought. Lakmhu did not truly understand that part. For whatever reason, Erebus feared this lost brother. He'd considered using that to his advantage, but then thought better of it. Whatever Amatnim's opinion of him, Lakmhu was no fool, else Erebus would never have set him this task. But for the moment, his only concern was surviving long enough to think of a way to achieve his aims.

Amatnim laughed. Lakmhu turned to see him conversing with Apis. The grey-clad Word Bearer and his followers watched the pirates from the edge of the deck, boltguns held at rest. Lakmhu studied the warrior discreetly, wondering if he was the way into Amatnim's heart. Amatnim trusted Apis – which was unwise, but understandable. Apis was the perfect tool – blunt, plainspoken and dutiful. He had no ambition save to serve. With a hundred like him, Amatnim would have had no need for a host.

If Apis counselled him to consider Erebus' words, Amatnim might listen.

'Step aside, fools,' someone murmured from behind him. Lakmhu looked back. One of his own followers, Yatl, stood some distance away, kept at bay by the blade slaves.

'Yatl,' Lakmhu said, gesturing for his bodyguards to step aside. 'What news?'

Yatl hurried towards him, moving stiffly due to the wounds he'd taken on Pergamon. 'Kelim was right, curse him,' he said. 'Ashu is dead. So are Tochus and Cloom.' Lakmhu had set his subordinate to confirm Kelim's report. Amatnim hadn't said anything about either Tochus or Cloom, which boded ill.

'The White Scars?'

Yatl nodded, as he looked down at the pirates. 'It's like they're everywhere at once.'

Lakmhu grunted in consternation and turned away. 'Or there are more of them than we think. We could be sailing into a trap.' After what he'd seen on

Pergamon, he could almost believe it. It made no sense that the Imperium, weak as it was, would leave a world like Almace undefended, or as good as. Especially now.

‘What do we do?’ Yatl hissed.

‘What we have been doing. Wait and watch.’

Yatl hesitated. Lakmhu looked at him. ‘What is it?’

‘What if he’s right?’

Lakmhu frowned. ‘You know that he is not. He has allowed himself to be blinded by that doddering lunatic, Kor Phaeron, as so many of our brothers have.’ He leaned close. ‘Or do you doubt the word of Erebus?’

Yatl looked away. ‘No, my lord.’

‘Good. Go. I tire of looking at you.’ He turned away, as Yatl bowed. He felt a twinge of regret. Yatl had been a loyal enough servant, but Amatnim had planted a seed of doubt in his hearts. Lakmhu could smell it on the warrior’s breath. Soon, Yatl might try to spread that doubt to others. The time was fast coming where a third blade slave might be added to his coterie. Doubt could not be allowed to fester.

Down below, the noise levels were rising. The pirates were boisterous, making enough racket to fill the bay. Some of it was excitement. Mostly it was fear. The *Glory Eternal* was not a daemon-vessel, but it was still imposing in a way that mortals would find off-putting. Lakmhu found it equally distasteful, albeit for different reasons.

Amatnim had carefully purged his ranks of the most obvious daemonic influences after they’d entered the system, unleashing them on the rim worlds. Ships and crews changed by the warp had their own ideas about how to conduct a military campaign. It was often more akin to a predator stalking easy prey – all instinct and hunger.

That act embodied Amatnim’s philosophy, as far as Lakmhu was concerned. A discarding of the blessings the gods had given them, in favour of more mundane methodology – a denial of the obvious, in favour of the traditional. It had taken weeks of argument to even get him to agree to unleashing the Neverborn on Almace, if they ever arrived. Amatnim preferred to use the more malleable human cultists and renegades as chattel, rather than relying on the truest children of the gods. More evidence of his lack of faith. More proof of his unworthiness.

And yet… the gods seemed pleased. Lakmhu could only conclude that they wished for Amatnim to succeed. That the prisoner he sought was fated to be freed, in some fashion. What happened after would be telling – perhaps the gods would remove their hand from Amatnim at the moment of his victory. He would not be the first champion to be raised up, so that he might be hurled down from a greater height. The gods had a sense of humour, after all. For now, Lakmhu could but do as Erebus had commanded. He would preserve Amatnim from his own foolishness, and continue to test him – to seek his weaknesses. And when he had found them… well. His blade slaves stirred, sensing his sudden desire. He waved them to silence. ‘Be still,’ he murmured.

Dumeen growled softly. He could feel their hunger. It was a palpable heat, and they sniffed at the air, eager for mortal blood. He traced a sigil before them, tightening the bindings about their souls, and they grudgingly subsided.

A skirl of crude, bone pipes caught his attention. Mutants clad in sackcloth and plundered armour tramped across the deck, piping an eerie tune. It was a wild, frenetic thing, a whirling dissonance of shrill noise and stamping hooves. They were followed by an honour guard of mortal cultists, all bearing Amatnim’s personal heraldry on their battered carapace armour. As they took up positions around their lord and master, Amatnim extended his hand to Lakmhu. ‘Come, brother. It is time to formally greet our new allies.’

‘Am I to be included then?’

‘Always, Lakmhu. Come. Let us not keep them waiting.’

The cultists and bestial musicians escorted them as they descended the steps leading down from the observation deck. Amatnim did so with stately speed, one hand on the pommel of his axe-rake. Lakmhu hung back, allowing the other Word Bearer to have his moment. The gathered pirates drew back as they reached the lower deck.

‘Welcome,’ Amatnim said. His voice carried easily, despite the cavernous space. ‘To see you here fills me with joy.’ He swept their ranks with his gaze as they fell silent.

Lakmhu followed his example. Few met his eye, and those that did, did so only with great reluctance. Pirates and outlaws, surviving on the system’s fringes, they had no discipline and no real use beyond their ability to die in place of one of his brothers. But they were plentiful, and almost an army – a fleet, if one were being charitable. Close to a dozen frigates and a handful of smaller vessels, mostly repurposed ore trawlers or private yachts, had responded to Amatnim’s call. Not many, in the grand scheme of things. But

enough for their purposes, he concluded grudgingly.

He could see daemons lurking among them. Little things, bound to no god, or one too small to be known. Things of spite and malice, they clung to their hosts, whispering in voices only some could hear. Some among the pirates bore more familiar markings – he saw the shadow of Khorne's blade on several, and smelled the faintest odour of Nurgle's rot seeping from the pores of one. Two were entwined in the loving embrace of Slaanesh, though they likely did not realise it. Even Tzeentch had his playthings here – secret witches and dabblers in haruspicy and fortune telling. It was no wonder they had come so readily. The gods were already in them, driving them to whatever doom awaited them.

He watched Amatnim cajole and compliment the mortals, acting as if their presence were not a burden but a gift. Amatnim had a way with mayflies. Even Erebus admitted that, though only in private, and only to Lakmhu. It was rare that someone who could speak so eloquently and with such fervour did not take up the crozius. Perhaps that was for the best. As a Dark Apostle, Amatnim would have had undue influence. As it was, he was little more than an indulged pet.

It was clear enough what Kor Phaeron saw in him. There was a fire, there. A blazing kernel of faith that was Amatnim's only true saving grace. Which made everything else about him a frustrating puzzle.

'Who speaks for you?' Amatnim said at last. Muttering was the only reply. The assembled captains glared at one another with wary dislike. It was only to be expected, Lakmhu thought. They were rivals, after all. 'Come, come,' Amatnim chided. 'Surely there is one among you who is trusted enough to take part in my councils of war? I would treat you as allies, not as dogs.'

Lakmhu stifled a snort. Amatnim glanced at him, but said nothing.

There was some shuffling in the crowd, and the gleam of half-drawn blades. Lakmhu heard the click of weapons and the whine of power packs. He half-raised his crozius. Finally, a gaudily dressed figure stepped forward. The pirate was tall and gangly, but richly dressed. He wore a coat of iridescent material, and his head had been shaved to the quick. Tattoos covered his vulpine features, and a plethora of weapons hung from him – blades, mostly, and grenades. An aeldari shuriken weapon was thrust through his belt, and his hand rested protectively over it.

'I am Ganor, Prince of the Outer Sector.' As he spoke, Lakmhu saw the shadow of something monstrous and stinking of sickly-sweet perfumes

looming above him. The Dark Prince had his hooks set deep in the soul of this one. He wore desire and ambition like armour. His need was a silken halo, throbbing in time to his heartbeat.

Laughter greeted his proclamation, and Ganor turned, shuriken pistol in hand. He fired smoothly, and a pirate screamed. The others fell silent. Above the bay, Apis and his warriors had raised their weapons, taking aim at the crowd. Amatnim raised a hand, gesturing for peace.

‘Prince, is it?’ he said, smiling. ‘You are royalty, then?’

‘I was.’

‘And now?’

‘I still am.’ Ganor didn’t quite meet Amatnim’s eyes, but Lakmhu was impressed nonetheless. He was either brave, or a fool, or both. Regardless, the gods clearly favoured him. ‘They say you plan to take Almace.’

‘I do.’

‘For yourself?’

‘No. Once I have what I want, the planet is of no concern.’

Ganor nodded slowly. He glanced at the rest of the pirates, and then back at Amatnim. ‘Can I have it?’

More shouting. Lakmhu wondered if Ganor would have to shoot another of his fellow captains. At this rate, they were going to run out. But Amatnim silenced them with a sharp gesture. ‘If you wish. If you can take it. Perhaps I will even help you.’

Ganor nodded again. ‘Then my ship is yours.’

‘I never doubted it,’ Amatnim said. He looked around. ‘What about the rest of you?’

Silence, but only for a moment. One by one, they all shouted their oaths.

Amatnim turned to Lakmhu. ‘It seems our fleet has grown, brother.’

‘So it seems,’ Lakmhu said. ‘Only time will tell if it is enough.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

65:08:30

Odoacer System, coreward edge

The troop compartment of the Thunderhawk shook as the gunship set down its landing gear. Proximity klaxons wailed, and smoke from damaged engines filled the compartment, but Ariq's helm filtered the noise and toxins out. The White Scar could hear shots striking the gunship's hull, and the grinding roar of the craft's assault cannons clearing the deployment zone of hostiles. If all had gone according to plan, they would be in the launch bay of the enemy vessel.

Things had come to a head rather quickly. The foe had learned well the lessons of the last few encounters. Distance meant death. They'd closed quickly this time, looking to board the *Silent Horseman*. Suboden had responded in kind, launching every gunship in the battle-barge's bays into the void. A vessel's shields were only good against weapons batteries and lance-fire. Gunships could slip right through and use a craft's own launch bays against it, if the pilot was skilled or lucky, or both.

Suboden's brotherhood had perfected the strategy, employing it many times in the unceasing void-war above Armageddon. But this ship was no ork hulk. Instead it was a sleek cruiser belonging to a long-excommunicated Legion. Ariq was eager to test himself against foes other than greenskins. He'd learned all he could from orks. Time for some new lessons.

The squad vox-link crackled. *'We're in, sergeant.'*

'Acknowledged,' Ariq said. 'Open the doors.'

The pilot chuckled. *'If you insist. Prepare for opening.'*

'On your feet, my war hawks,' Ariq rumbled. He rose from his restraint throne. 'We have a crew to butcher and a ship to take. Up, brothers, up!' He went to the rear of the specially modified compartment and hit a release valve on the armoured cell that occupied it. The cell opened with a hiss of cold, recycled air, revealing the massive shape of a Dreadnought. Ariq hesitated,

staring up at the tribal totems and savage decorations which marked the scarred, white chassis of the ancient war machine. Then, steeling his nerve, he pounded a fist against the embossed sarcophagus. ‘Wake up, Malamir. It’s time.’

‘At last,’ Malamir rumbled. The Dreadnought’s voice was accompanied by a growl of static. He flexed his power claw eagerly as he stepped out of his cell. The deck shivered beneath his grinding tread. ‘Keep your tulwars sheathed, little brothers. I will clear a path.’

‘Take your time, old man,’ Ariq said, as he quickly stepped aside, allowing the Dreadnought to stomp past. ‘Don’t burst a gasket.’

One of the Dreadnought’s optic sensors rotated in its housing. ‘Is that you, Ariq? It must be. Only you are so foolish as to speak to me so.’

‘And here I thought we were friends, old man.’ Ariq grinned up at the blinking sensor. He knew Malamir could see him, in some fashion. ‘Leave some for us, please?’

Malamir was silent for a moment. Then, ‘No promises.’ The Dreadnought turned his attentions to the rest of the squad. ‘Get out of my way, little brothers.’ Then, more loudly, ‘Out of my way, I said.’ The Dreadnought shoved his way towards the disembarkation point, forcing the rest of Ariq’s squad to scramble out of his path.

A moment later, the ramp of the gunship opened like a flower of metal and heat, dropping to the deck with a thunderous clang. Malamir stumped down the ramp, ignoring the weapons fire that danced across his chassis. ‘Is that all the greeting you can muster, insects?’ he growled, as he reached the deck. ‘Don’t you know who I am?’

Ariq laughed, despite the shots that glanced off of his battleplate. At the top of the ramp, the White Scars returned fire, giving ululating yells as their shots struck home. ‘I don’t think they do,’ Ariq shouted. ‘Tell them, grandfather!’

‘I am Malamir of Yhuzan,’ the Dreadnought roared, his vox-casters set to maximum. ‘I am the White Wolf of the Lakes. Hear my howl.’ His assault cannon cycled to life. He pivoted, letting the weapon play across the hold with a high-pitched whirr. Hundreds of rounds were loosed in a matter of seconds, and the rate of fire was such that those assault fighters still berthed in the hold shook on their struts, or collapsed utterly.

Fuel canisters exploded, filling the hold with burning rivers of promethium. Malamir advanced through the inferno, his assault cannon singing. Wherever

he turned, mortals died, or new fires sprang up, adding to the blaze.

‘Go.’ Ariq’s voice echoed across the squad-vox. He was moving even as he spoke. Strange alarm klaxons wailed and the walls of the bay quivered like a fearful animal as he ran. His bolt pistol bucked in his hand as targeting runes danced across his helmet’s display. He fired without regard for the smoke, advancing through the heat and flames of Malamir’s rampage towards the greatest number of targets. His squad fanned out in his wake, bolters thundering. They would take the bay, and then move on to whatever passed for a command deck on heretic vessels. It was the quickest way to take a ship like this – kill its command staff. From the bridge, whole decks could be isolated, the life support cut off, power rerouted. If the spirits of rain and war were with them, they might even be able to salvage the vessel once the system had been purged of foes. But failing that, they’d scuttle it and send it into the heart of the nearest star.

He felt the deck twitch beneath him and knew more gunships were arriving, swarming into the open bays. ‘They made a mistake, not running,’ one of the others – Kersh – grunted. ‘Should have tucked tail the moment they caught our colours.’

‘Shouldn’t have come here at all,’ Ariq replied. ‘Shouldn’t have followed the whispers of the wrong spirits, shouldn’t have sold their souls to devils. Lots of things they shouldn’t have done. Too late to make up for it now.’ A targeting run settled onto a flailing mortal’s back. He snapped off a shot, and watched with satisfaction as the round punched through the man, ripping him open and painting the air red.

‘They owe a blood-price, and we will collect.’

‘The first gunships have secured the landing bays,’ Kanim said, watching the hololithic projections that hovered in the air. Most were pict-feeds, transmitted from the helms of the White Scars assault squads relaying the boarding efforts.

Suboden Khan nodded and sat back in his command throne. ‘Good.’ He signalled one of the bridge serfs. ‘Pass the order to press the assault to the escorts and attack craft, but tell them to concentrate fire on weapons arrays and thrusters. Let my warriors do their work.’

He turned his attentions back to the viewscreen, satisfied that his orders would be relayed correctly. There was no point in having serfs if you didn’t trust them to see to their assigned tasks properly.

The hunt was going well. The enemy fleet was scattered, for the most part,

raiding the outlying worlds. That made them easy prey. At least for the moment. Attack craft from *Orlanda's Wrath* had scouted ahead, relaying the enemy's numbers and position. There were only a few vessels this time – a cruiser of an unknown make, and a trio of escorts that looked to have been cobbled together by someone with a macabre sense of humour.

Suboden had divided the fleet into two, and then again. *Raven's Valour,* with the *Drusus*, was making for the other side of the debris belt, moving into position to intercept potential reinforcements. *Orlanda's Wrath* and the *Crassus* had engaged the enemy alongside the *Silent Horseman.*

'Are you sure it was wise, sending the gunships?' Kanim asked.

Suboden shrugged. 'No. But our brothers needed something to do, and they practically invited us aboard. If Ariq and the others can take that vessel out of the fight without us having to engage, so much the better.' He stroked his beard, smiling thinly. 'We must conserve all available resources, shaman. Including what ships we have left.'

They'd lost at least three escorts since engaging the enemy at Pergamon, and hundreds of attack craft. Thousands of crew were dead, their bodies jettisoned into space, or stored below decks. Every skirmish wore them down a little more, and used up a bit more of the weapons stores. The cruisers would need to rearm and refit themselves soon. But that would mean falling back to Almace. And they couldn't do that, not yet.

On the viewscreen, the attack craft launched by *Orlanda's Wrath* duelled in the black with the enemy's gunships. Sensor-feeds showed the ruptured remnants of boarding torpedoes drifting near the *Silent Horseman.* Idly, Suboden magnified the images. Crimson-armoured figures floated in the void. Some were still alive – it was hard to kill a Space Marine, even a traitor. They struggled free of the wreckage, and pushed themselves off, attempting a controlled drift towards the battle-barge. A desperate tactic.

'Look at them, shaman. If they were anyone else, I might admire them.'

Kanim grunted, but said nothing.

Suboden pressed the point. 'Were we in their position, would we not attempt the same? Whatever else, they have courage, at least.'

'We would not allow ourselves to be caught so easily,' Kanim said. 'If you listen to spirits rather than your own soul, they will inevitably lead you astray. You should alert nearby attack craft before one of them manages to reach us. I'd rather not have to hunt one of those abominations through the bowels of

the ship.’

Suboden gestured sharply, and a serf relayed the order. Anti-personnel batteries opened up from concealed ports along the lower starboard hull of the battle-barge. Swiftly, the floating crimson shapes were reduced to shredded masses of meat and metal, to join the rest of the debris.

‘Keel is unhappy,’ Kanim said.

‘Is he?’

‘We’re using his people as bait.’

‘We’re protecting them.’

‘Even so.’

Suboden grunted. ‘He has said nothing of this to me.’

‘It is easy to see. His face hides nothing during the command briefings.’

‘And the others?’

Kanim frowned. ‘Ogilvy accepts it. She’s a hard one. Too old not to understand. Belmont is too frightened of making a mistake to notice.’

Suboden relaxed slightly. ‘Will he cause trouble?’

‘No. He knows what’s at stake.’

‘Then why bother telling me, shaman? Information without use is nothing more than gossip. If Keel is angry, let him be angry. So long as he fights, his emotional state is of little concern.’ Annoyed by the conversation, Suboden called up a telemetry display, studying the enemy’s disposition. ‘They came looking for us,’ he muttered.

Kanim looked down at the display. ‘How can you tell?’

‘Here’s their positioning when we first sighted them. Look at the way they’re spread out. They’re maximising the range of their augurs.’ He tugged on his beard. ‘They’ve probably already sent a distress signal, unless Raquen managed to intercept it.’

‘They’re bait?’

‘No. Scouts. We’re being hunted.’ Suboden looked at the viewscreen. New stars blossomed in the black. An escort – one of theirs – twisted in place as barnacles of plasma spread across its hull.

He stiffened. Something was amiss. He saw what it was a moment later.

‘Ogilvy is out of position. I’ve warned her about that before.’

‘She is not the only warrior to forget her place in the line amid the heat of battle,’ Kanim said meaningfully.

‘She’s old enough to know better.’

‘So were you.’

Suboden laughed. ‘Luckily, I had you by my side to chastise me, shaman.’ He sat back and shook his head. ‘We will finish them off and fall back into the asteroid field. And then do it all again tomorrow.’

‘That is the way of it, my khan.’

‘So it is,’ Suboden murmured. He watched the viewscreen, knowing that all decisions had been made. There was nothing to do now but wait for things to resolve themselves as they must. He was impatient. He knew this, and strove to correct the flaw. But it was hard, especially in moments like this.

Void-war was so slow. It lacked immediacy – the rush of blood and the smell of death. It was a war of numbers, waged across light years. Too, it was a game of nerve, of cost and benefit. Ships might drift closer and closer, only to pass by without ever firing a shot. Battle was only joined when it was a sure thing – or there was no other choice. It was a game for hunters – or murderers. Not for warriors. And Suboden was a warrior first, and a hunter second.

He envied those who’d boarded the enemy vessel. He wished he were leading them personally. But such was not his duty. A khan could not limit himself to a single battle – he had to attend to the greater war.

Still, at least he was here, rather than on Almace. He could only imagine the boredom that must be gripping Karros and Calder, with nothing and no one to fight. Even as he thought this, however, his hand felt the hilt of his tulwar and he longed to draw it, to put it to use against the enemy. He glanced up, and saw Kanim staring at him. The expression on the Stormseer’s face was unsettling.

‘What is it, shaman? Do the spirits whisper to you?’

‘Always, my khan.’

‘And what do they whisper?’

Kanim looked away. ‘That you will get your wish.’ He sounded old, and tired. ‘There is death on the wind, my khan. Theirs and ours.’

Suboden thought about this for a moment, and then grinned fiercely.

‘Good.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Ord lifted the last slab of ferrocrete into place, blocking the northern processional past the Pilgrim’s Gate. ‘Arc-clamp,’ he said. Mortal engineers hurried forward, tools in hand. He readied the clamp as they began to drill holes in the slab. As with the rest, it would be bolted to the street, so that bulwark would be all but unmoveable. Sparks flew as the mortals worked, and Ord watched them impatiently. There were another ten bulwarks to build at staggered intervals before the gate could be considered secure.

The Pilgrim’s Gate was small, as such edifices went. A simple archway of carved stone, marking the causeway connecting Mid Town to High Town. Heavy, flat steps rose from the street, through the archway, carrying pedestrians – pilgrims – to the heights of the cathedral-city. Soon, the plaza before it would be completely blocked off by ferrocrete bulwarks and intertwined strands of razor wire stretched across the street.

Ord thought it a thing of sublime beauty. The citizens of Almacia did not seem to agree. Proximity klaxons sounded and angry shouts filled the air. Traffic, both pedestrian and otherwise, was being diverted down the few remaining side streets that hadn’t been collapsed or blocked off, resulting in a traffic jam almost sixty miles in length.

The local enforcers, with aid from the cardinal-governor’s bodyguards, were overseeing civilian operations, keeping them a safe distance from the defence preparations. And from the Imperial Fists.

Ord was one of three stationed at this gate. The rest of the demi-company were scattered throughout the city, seeing to the preparations elsewhere. When the enemy arrived, they were to command these bastions, as only they could. He clicked the vox-link that tied him to his brothers. Geert stood atop the gate itself, aiding the cardinal-governor’s guard in positioning several heavy weapons. Caln was working at the opposite end of the plaza, seeing to the preparations there. Both responded with clicks of their own. They needed no words. The sound was enough to let him know their position.

Ord closed his eyes as a breeze kissed his face. His helm was clamped to his thigh. He’d often found that working bareheaded helped engender confidence in mortal workers. His helm was too impassive. Without it, he could almost pass for human.

‘Hot work, my lord.’

Ord looked down. The engineer in charge looked up, mopping at his face with a grimy handkerchief. The man’s name was… Tahj, Ord thought. A native of Low Town, normally responsible for the maintenance and repair of the access roads that led through the foundations of the city.

‘My body temperature is chemically regulated,’ Ord said.

Tahj nodded, as if he’d heard similar statements before. He continued to wipe at his face. ‘The air settles in these streets something awful. Gets stifling in the lower parts of the city. You wouldn’t know about that, I expect.’

‘No. I am only just arrived.’

Tahj sniffed, leaned over and spat. ‘Still… hot work.’

Ord looked at him. ‘Did you require something?’ Humans were usually in awe of his kind. Tahj didn’t seem the sort to be impressed with anything, however. It was somewhat annoying.

‘Nope. Just passing time.’ Tahj wiped at his neck and retrieved a flask from his coveralls. He took a quick slug and offered it to Ord. ‘Care for a nip?’

‘I do not… nip.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

Tahj nodded again. ‘Don’t think I could do without a bit of a drink.’ He took another pull on the flask, as if for emphasis.

‘No?’ Ord asked, without quite understanding why.

‘Nope.’

They stood in silence, for a time. Tahj seemed in no hurry to go anywhere. Ord stared at the engineer, trying to fathom a method of breaking this particular siege. He decided a change of strategy might prove effective. ‘Is work progressing satisfactorily?’

Tahj took a leisurely glance at the bulwarks. He took another sip from the flask. ‘I expect so,’ he said eventually. ‘Yours?’

Ord found himself nodding. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s good.’

Ord nodded again. He was finding the rhythm of it now. It was not a transfer

of information, but simply noise for the sake of noise. He could not see the purpose of it, but he would not be found wanting.

Despite this resolution, he was relieved when the wailing of enforcer sirens broke the silence. He heard the growl of engines and felt a tremor run through the street. Suddenly, the engineers and labourers at the bulwarks shouted and scattered. A heavy vehicle – some form of ore-hauler – slammed into the unanchored slabs and ploughed over them with a grinding rumble. It was almost as big as a battle tank, but not so imposing. There was an enclosed cab, and a massive cargo-bed in the rear. The wheels were meant for rough terrain, and easily carried it over the fallen bulwarks.

A warning klaxon sounded as the vehicle thundered straight for them. Tahj spat out a mouthful of alcohol and flung himself to safety. Ord, with preternatural calmness, considered his options before deciding that disabling the vehicle was the best. There was no telling who was behind the wheel – killing a frightened civilian would cause more trouble than it was worth. He pulled on his helmet as the vehicle barrelled towards him, klaxon still wailing.

At the last moment, he dived aside and caught hold of one of the rungs on the side of the cab. As he pulled himself up, he heard a shout from the cargo-bed, and saw a man clad in stained labourer's clothes, wearing a bandolier of ammunition, lean over the edge. He gripped an autogun in both hands and fired. Ord ignored the drizzle of shots that caromed off his battleplate and continued to climb, drawing his combat blade as he went.

Targeting runes flashed as he detected three more mortals in the back of the vehicle – all armed. The others were firing at a trio of pursuing enforcer rumblers – heavily armoured personal vehicles, built to withstand gunfire and small explosions. The rumblers resembled Space Marine assault bikes, save that they were fully enclosed, and topped by flashing lights and vox-casters. The rumblers, unlike the ore-hauler, couldn't make it past the tumbled bulwarks and screeched ignominiously to a stop.

Ord considered the situation, and concluded that the occupants of the ore-hauler no longer counted as civilians. The others in the back had noticed him now, and were panicking. They fired wildly, their shots barely scraping his paintwork. He paused, studying them, then turned and leapt from the top of the cab onto the front of the vehicle, crumpling the frame with his weight. In a smaller vehicle that might have sufficed to disable it. This one would require a more significant outlay of effort. He scanned the hood, letting his augurs read the shape of the engine beneath.

A moment later, he slammed his knife down, piercing the hood and driving the blade into the machinery beneath. A sharp twist sheared through pistons and hoses. Lubricant spurted, dappling his arm as he withdrew it. The ore-hauler groaned and juddered, belching black smoke from its vents. It ground to a halt almost in the shadow of the Pilgrim's Gate.

He stood and turned. They were still shooting at him.

'Do you require assistance, brother?' Geert asked, over the vox.

'No.'

'You appear to be under attack.' That was Caln.

'A momentary inconvenience. The enforcers are already moving to take them into custody.' Ord dropped to the street as the rest of the ore-hauler's passengers boiled out of the cab. Like the ones in the back, they were dressed in a variety of styles and carrying the sort of weapons civilians were not allowed to possess. Criminals, he assumed. Perhaps trying to escape into High Town before it was sealed off.

'Lay down your arms and you will be spared,' he rumbled, setting his vox to maximum volume. Casually, he flipped his knife into the air and caught the hilt. 'Resist, and I will be forced to chastise you.'

Autoguns roared. Several of the men made a break from the Pilgrim's Gate. Ord darted into their path. His knife licked out, and a man's head rolled free of a spurting neck-stump. He caught a second with a blow that broke ribs and punctured organs. The third fell back towards the ore-hauler, emptying his ineffectual weapon into Ord as the Space Marine closed in on him. He caught the barrel of the weapon and crushed it easily.

As he caught the man by the throat, an alert-chime sounded. His battleplate's systems had been running an ident-check, matching the facial characteristics of the gunmen to Lieutenant Calder's list of the planet's known criminals. It appeared that his captive was a person of interest. 'Your name is Guln Veel. My commander wishes to speak to you.'

His captive was badly scarred. One of his eyes was white from some long-ago injury, and his florid features were riven by furrows of torn tissue. He clasped helplessly at Ord's fingers, trying to break his grip. 'Let me go! Let me go!'

'No.' Ord turned, as a combat shotgun boomed. He saw the last of Veel's companions fall, a smoking crater in his chest. Enforcers picked their way through the broken bulwarks, smoking weapons in hand, and one came

towards him. A heavyset woman, her carapace armour bore insignia of rank.

‘You caught our fish, my lord,’ she said as she saluted. ‘Regulator Fein.’

Ord tossed Veel to the ground. ‘Take him with my compliments, regulator.’

‘You have our thanks, my lord,’ the enforcer said as she knelt. She rolled Veel over and planted a knee in his back, as she grabbed his hands in one of hers. A moment later, she had the restraints on. ‘Veel was the last name on your commander’s list. He must have heard what happened to the others. He’s got friends in High Town who might’ve hidden him.’

‘His intentions are irrelevant as he has been captured.’

Veel gave a protesting groan as Fein dragged him to his feet. ‘I don’t suppose you know why he wants them?’ she asked, hesitantly. Ord looked at her. She stepped back, dragging Veel with her. ‘Sorry, my lord.’

Ord felt a flicker of sympathy. Mortals lacked the guiding certainty of Adeptus Astartes training. It drove them to ask needless questions about matters that did not concern them. He inclined his head, and sheathed his knife.

‘Apology accepted, regulator.’

Calder studied the data-feed with satisfaction. The defensive preparations were proceeding apace, with little objection from the civilian populace. Eamon was making regular speeches, and his subordinates were spreading messages of calm through the populace.

Around him, the strategium echoed with the sounds of orders being relayed and requests for ammunition and assignment being processed. Calder revelled in these moments, though he would never have admitted it out loud. The quiet before the storm, when the full artistry of defence was on display.

He heard someone enter the chamber and turned. It was Tyre. ‘We have a problem,’ the swordmaster said without preamble. He tossed a data-slate onto one of the desks in the strategium and looked up at Calder. ‘I just got an emergency vox signal from the Primus asteroid facilities. There’s been a civil disturbance.’

Calder looked down at him. ‘I was assured there was no risk of such an occurrence.’

‘What can I tell you? Someone decided now was a good time to make a bid for worker’s rights.’ Tyre sounded more amused than anything else, though it was hard to read his buzzing tones. ‘The enforcers stationed there should be

able to handle it, but if not, sterner measures may be called for.’

‘Meaning?’

Tyre shrugged. ‘New workers will be easy enough to procure once the planet is safe.’

‘You will kill them.’

‘We can’t have an armed uprising on our doorstep on the eve of an invasion. Those facilities are too important to Almace’s survival.’

‘I was not voicing an objection,’ Calder said. ‘I will point out, however, that the mining facilities are extensive, and the miners know them well. Any armed response will likely be met by an application of asymmetric tactics on their part. They will not stand and fight. They will engage in hit-and-run attacks, as well as sabotage. The struggle will be protracted, and attaining victory before the enemy arrive is likely unfeasible.’

Tyre frowned, but did not object. He knew that Calder was right, whether he wanted to admit it or not. ‘So what would you suggest?’

‘Leave them, for the moment.’ Calder looked back at the projection.

‘Leave them?’

‘You stated that the enforcers would attempt to handle them. Let them do so.’

‘And if they can’t?’

‘Then we will deal with them,’ Karros said. Tyre whirled, startled. The Raven Guard stood just behind him, head tilted, the data-slate Tyre had deposited in hand. He scanned through it as he joined Calder atop the observation platform. Tyre’s frown deepened, but he sketched a shallow bow and turned away.

‘You shouldn’t tease them so, brother,’ Calder murmured, when the swordmaster was out of earshot.

‘My apologies,’ Karros said. ‘I’ve had a report from the warriors I sent into Low Town. You made an impression on Guill. By all accounts, she’s rousting every criminal in the city. In fact, we should be hearing from her quite soon.’

Even as he spoke, an alert-chime sounded. The doors to the chamber opened and a group entered – enforcers, mostly, escorted by a phalanx of the cardinal-governor’s guard. Cyber-mastiffs prowled in their wake.

Trapped between the enforcers was a smaller group of civilians. As the

group came to a halt, the enforcers forced the civilians to their knees at the base of the observation dais. Three men, two women, all kneeling on the hard marble floor, manacled and chained. The cyber-mastiffs prowled around the chamber, their artificial gazes locked on the prisoners. One of the enforcers – a heavyset woman, clad in ornate carapace armour, stepped forward. ‘Regulator Fein, my lord. I bring a gift from Magistrate Guill.’

Calder nodded and descended the dais. ‘Please convey my thanks, regulator. If you will wait for a moment, this will not take long.’ He turned, studying each of the civilians in turn. ‘You are the leaders of the five largest extra-legal organisations on Almace. Smuggling, prostitution, gambling, banned substances, weapons sales, theft, murder, piracy.’ He ticked off each on his fingers. ‘Between you, you control most of the crime on this world, if not the system.’

Only one of them attempted to meet his gaze – a bald, broad-faced man in a silk jacket and battered fatigues. Kormas Belloq. His file scrolled across Calder’s display – charges of racketeering, extortion, murder and smuggling were the highlights. Belloq was an animal, but a cunning one.

‘We know who we are,’ he said harshly. ‘We don’t know who you are.’

Calder looked down at him. ‘Who I am is obvious. I am the Emperor’s wrath manifest. His fist upon your shoulder. When I speak, it is with His voice. My commands are His. That is all you are required to know.’

Belloq spat on the floor and tensed, as if waiting for a blow. Calder did not deliver it, and waved off the enforcers when they moved to do so. Calder looked at the other criminals. ‘It is good that you are not cowed. Cowards are of little use to me. I need soldiers.’

One of the others – a woman with tribal scarring on her cheeks and her hair cropped short – laughed sourly. ‘We’re not soldiers, though.’

Calder looked at her. Again, a file appeared. Stella Drumm – charges of assault, incitement to riot, extortion and arson were high on her list. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘You are officers. You all lead armies, however undisciplined. You have access to manpower, supplies, weapons and skills that will be useful. I am commandeering that access.’

‘What do we get out of it?’ a short, scarred man growled. Guln Veel – racketeering, tithe-evasion, kidnapping and drug-trafficking. That left the other two – Pul Deeks and Cana Jurst. Both were narcotics dealers and murderers-for-hire. Deeks was a slim man, void-born. Jurst was a muscular woman with a shaved head and steel teeth. Neither met his gaze.

‘You get to survive,’ Calder said.

‘You’ll kill us if we refuse?’ Drumm asked.

‘Yes. Here and now. Those who agree will be allowed to divide up the operations of those who refuse.’

‘Doesn’t do us much good if we die in battle,’ Veel said.

‘Like you’re planning to be on the front line,’ Belloq said. Veel lunged for him and got an enforcer’s baton across his ribs for his efforts. Belloq laughed and looked at Calder. ‘What about after? If we survive – what then?’

‘You are no longer my concern at that point. What you do is up to you.’

The criminals looked at one another. Calder saw Drumm nod slightly, and Belloq grunted. ‘Fine. We’ll do it.’

Calder nodded. ‘You will liaise with Swordmaster Tyre. I will require accurate data as to the resources available to you. If you shirk your new responsibilities I will personally hunt you down and kill you, as well as every member of your organisation. Is this understood?’ He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to. Even Belloq blanched, but Calder noticed that he was looking at Karros. He turned away. ‘Dismissed.’

As the enforcers escorted Belloq and the others out, Calder joined Karros at the top of the dais. ‘Expertly done, brother.’ The Raven Guard sounded amused.

‘I work with the tools I am given.’

‘Is that what they are, then?’

Calder nodded, studying the projections above. ‘Every soul on this planet is a tool. They must be, if we are to defend this world. Every warm body is another brick in the wall.’

‘I know that saying. Dorn, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

Karros was silent, for a time. Then, ‘They say that you met Dorn.’

Calder glanced at him. ‘Yes.’

‘You spoke with him?’

‘Once.’

Karros’ expression was hard to read. ‘What was it like?’ he asked, softly.

Almost hesitantly. ‘What was it like to speak to your primogenitor?’

Calder paused, wondering how best to answer. How to explain that a demigod had seemed tired, almost worn down to mere mortality? How to explain how Dorn’s walls had crumbled in those last, fraught months? He possessed no words that could do justice to such sadness. Finally, he said, ‘I shall remember it always. He was our father and our teacher. The soul of us, and the foundation upon which we are built.’

Karros sighed and nodded. ‘What would he – would they – think of us now, I wonder?’ He looked around the chamber, at the faded murals and signs of age and wear on the walls. Calder followed his gaze, taking in the cracks in the stones, the tarnished metal of the braziers, the faded draperies. There were echoes of glory here, but the best days of this palace – of this world – were long past.

‘He would be proud, I think. They would be proud. The galaxy is a pyre, but we endure the flames and press on. We are wounded, but not defeated. They would be proud of us, brother. As Guilliman is proud, though we are not his sons.’ Calder looked down at the Raven Guard. ‘As I am proud to fight alongside you and Suboden. Whether this ends in victory or death, I am glad to have this moment, and to serve beside such warriors as you both. Wherever they are, whatever their fate, our gene-fathers see us and *they are proud*.’

‘I want to believe you are right, brother. With all my hearts, I want to believe.’ Karros smiled sadly. ‘But I cannot help but feel you are wrong. That they would see us – see this – and know only disappointment. To know that all they bled for has come to this.’ He grunted and shook his head. ‘Such thoughts are wasteful though. They serve no purpose save morose rumination, and we have more important matters to discuss.’

‘You wish to go to the asteroid mines.’

Karros blinked. ‘Yes.’

Calder allowed himself a brief smile. ‘I know how your Chapter thinks, brother. You seek the oblique approach in every strategy. You think that they will attempt to take the mines?’

‘I think that they must. The asteroid belt is a ready-made fortress, from a certain perspective. The equipment there could easily be repurposed into de-facto orbital defences, and the void-trawlers turned into everything from troop transports to fireships to limited engagement fighters. Their hulls are designed to withstand debris that would cripple a frigate. Slow as blazes, but with a debris-lance or a plasma-cutter mounted on them, they’d make deadly

opponents for enemy vessels moving through the asteroid field. If the enemy are smart – and we have seen little to suggest otherwise – they'll move to claim control of the asteroid field, as well as the facilities there.'

'And the revolutionaries that Tyre mentioned?'

'We will deal with them,' Karros said firmly. 'One way or another, they will not be allowed to use this situation to their advantage.'

Calder nodded. 'You know your business, brother, as well as Suboden knows his. If you believe that this is where you are the most useful, I will not argue.'

'And that, brother, is why Guilliman put you in charge.' Karros' smile was sharp. 'Build your walls, and I will see that the enemy cannot dig them out from under you.' He paused. 'But before I go…' He tilted his head up, and gave a birdlike trill.

A slim shape appeared as if from nowhere. Karros gestured, and the Reiver stepped forward. A Primaris, like Calder, the Reiver wore lighter-weight ceramite armour, streamlined for greater mobility and silence. Calder wondered where he'd been hiding. 'This is Solaro – one of my best.'

Calder nodded, somewhat taken aback by the other Primaris' stealthy approach, and Solaro bowed. Calder looked at Karros. 'And why is he here?'

'I thought you might find him useful, regarding the matter we discussed earlier. Solaro is adept at being in the right place at the right time. He knows how not to be noticed. A skill I have always found to be helpful.' Karros pointed at the Reiver, whose stoic expression betrayed nothing of what he might think about the discussion. 'I make you a gift of this blade, brother. Use it as you see fit.'

Calder bowed his head. 'I thank you for the gift, brother. I will put him to good use.'

Karros thumped his chest in salute. 'I am glad to hear it. Build strong walls, Calder. I will see that the enemy are bloody before they reach them.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

72:09:32

Odoacer System, coreward edge

The mutant whimpered as Amatnim plucked a goblet from the tray it held. More mutants – decrepit, worm-pale things born on the lowest decks of the *Glory Eternal* – circulated through the ship's strategium, offering drinks and sweetmeats to the gathered Word Bearers. Amatnim watched them. They made him curious, these creatures. They always had.

Was this, then, what the gods wanted? Was this the end result awaiting humanity, should the gods triumph over their great foe – enforced servitude, strangers in their own flesh, cowed and barely human at all? He remembered similar drudges aboard similar vessels in the days before the Great Liberation. Perhaps there was no difference. Humanity would serve one god or another, would be ruled by one brotherhood of demigods or the other. Perhaps that was simply the way of it.

He banished the thought with a swallow of wine. It was an excellent vintage, plundered from some aeldari trading enclave. Light, crisp, with a hint of strange spice. He had come to prefer their wine to that made by humans – the bitterness of a failed race added something to the taste. He looked around the chamber. Lakmhu wasn't drinking, of course. Dark Apostles were abstemious sorts, even those that devoted their prayers to the Dark Prince. But the others seemed to be enjoying themselves. That was good. A bit of cheer before the bad news.

He took another sip and cleared his throat. The gathered Word Bearers fell silent. 'I am certain that you have all noticed that we are under attack,' he said. He activated the strategium's star map – an immense hololithic projection that filled the chamber. Motes of light representing star clusters and celestial phenomena surrounded the Word Bearers. Half-visible shapes squirmed just beneath the glare, like eels in murky water.

At Amatnim's gesture, a series of runes representing the fleet flashed to life. Other runes representing the elements of the fleet he'd sent out as predation

forces flickered as well. There were fewer of these now than there ought to have been. Worse, they were retreating, as per the latest reports. ‘We’ve lost four vessels since Pergamon. Four battle-tested ships, as well as escorts and assault craft.’

‘The White Scars,’ Apis said. Murmurs accompanied this statement. Amatnim called up a pict-capture. It bloomed to his right, spreading like paint across a canvas. It showed a distorted image of an asteroid field, and bursts of light that all of them could identify as macro-cannon fire.

‘Yes – and no. This is a frame from the sensor-feed of *Callyon’s Yearning.* Even in his final moments, our departed brother Ashu served the Legion. This is the vessel that killed him.’ The pict-capture was rotated and magnified, so that the ship hidden amongst the asteroids was revealed. Black. Sleek. At once stripped-down and lethal. The hull was sloped strangely, perhaps to better baffle sensor sweeps. ‘That, my brothers, is no White Scars vessel.’

‘Corax’s whelps,’ Lakmhu growled. ‘They often flock with the Khan’s jackals.’

Amatnim smiled. ‘And what about this one?’

The pict-capture wavered. Changed. A new image – another field of asteroids, and beyond them, a world of blues and browns. ‘This is Almace. The image you’re seeing was provided courtesy of our new allies.’

More murmurs at this. Apis and the others had little patience for mortals. Amatnim pressed on. He magnified the image. A speck of yellow beyond the asteroids grew into a wedge-shaped cruiser, marked with a sigil shaped like a clenched gauntlet. Impossible to misidentify that livery. Like those who bore it, it had not changed in millennia.

‘The sons of Dorn,’ Apis said. A sigh ran through the chamber.

‘What does this mean?’ Kelim asked. He’d proven himself in the attack on Pergamon, and Amatnim had raised him up to replace Ashu in his council of war.

‘It means we are in for a fight,’ Apis said. Several of the others laughed.

‘We’re already in a fight,’ Amatnim corrected. ‘We just didn’t realise it.’ He dismissed the pict-captures. ‘Their strategy is simple, but effective. They are forcing us to contract our forces as our captains try to avoid being picked off piecemeal. Their numbers are small, but they’re putting them to good use. I underestimated their pragmatism.’

Kelim studied the placement of the fleet's ident-runes. 'They're ignoring our attacks on the outer worlds and focusing on the isolated wings of our fleet.'

'I would do the same,' Apis said. 'Worlds can be rebuilt after victory is won.'

'Perhaps we should simply do as they wish,' Kelim said. He looked at Apis. 'Come together, and then smash them in open battle.'

Apis shook his head. 'They won't play that game. They'll isolate stragglers and bleed us, until we give chase and then they'll vanish, until the whole process starts again. Smart.'

'If they will not come to us, we must go to them,' Lakmhu growled. 'We must cut off their avenues of retreat, encircle them in a ring of iron and crush them.'

'That will take time,' Amatnim said. 'And all the while, Almace fortifies itself.'

Lakmhu looked at him. 'You weren't worried about that earlier.'

'That was before I realised why they were employing this particular strategy. If the Imperial Fists garrison that world, every moment we waste gives them time to dig in just a little deeper.' He turned to the Dark Apostle. 'We are not Iron Warriors, brother. I don't know about you, but I have never enjoyed sieges. Too, there are elements of at least three Chapters of our milk-blood cousins involved in this defence. That implies that our presence here has been noted by elements outside the system. There is no guarantee that reinforcements aren't en route even now.'

Kelim grunted. 'Even so, we need to bring them to battle. All the data indicates that we outnumber them significantly. Even half our fleet should be enough.'

Amatnim nodded. 'I would prefer they not dog our heels the entire way, even if that means splitting the fleet to deal with them. The problem is we don't know where they're going to strike.'

'But what if we did?' Kelim asked.

Amatnim looked at him. 'What do you propose, brother?'

'We know the rules now. I say we beat them at their own game. We draw them in to ground of our choosing and strike. If the gods are with us – one strike is all we will need.'

Amatnim smiled. 'An excellent plan. Are you volunteering to play the

huntsman?'

Kelim paused, considering. Amatnim was pleased by his hesitation. Kelim was smart. He saw that the request was at once an honour and a challenge. If he succeeded, he might win high acclaim. If he failed – likely, he would be punished. If he survived. But even presented as a request, it was a command. And he was wise enough to realise it. He nodded. 'I will run them down, my lord, and offer them up to the Lord of Skulls.'

'Excellent. *Lorgar's Word* will make a fine flagship. It's fast and durable. Take the *Ucephalot*, the *Skullhound* and *Dagmar's Penitence*, as well as any of our new auxiliaries who wish to go. I suggest paying attention to the refugee convoys. They'll be looking to protect them. Or perhaps use them as bait. It's what I would do in their place.' Amatnim turned. 'The rest of the fleet will continue to Almace.'

'What of the ships still in dry dock?' Apis asked.

'Leave them. Skeleton crews only. The carrion birds will be picking over Pergo for months yet, and there'll be slaves and salvage aplenty to aid in the repairs. Too, we may need to regroup, and Pergo will be the perfect fallback position.'

'You fear defeat,' Lakmhu said. The others fell silent. Apis' hand fell to the pistol at his hip. Amatnim glanced at him and Apis relaxed.

'I do not fear, brother. I am prepared. Contrary to popular opinion, one must consider the possibility of setbacks when one plans a military campaign. If the gods turn their eyes from us – and you're a liar if you think they are not fickle – then it is best that we are ready with a contingency. Pergo will make an ideal staging area. It can be made defensible readily. The population – what's left of it – is adequate for labour purposes. And more importantly, we already control it.'

Lakmhu made as if to argue further, but instead settled back, frowning. He had been unusually quiet since the revelations in the library. That was good. It meant he was thinking.

Amatnim waited a moment and then continued with the briefing. But all the while, he watched Lakmhu. He watched too as Yatl murmured in the Dark Apostle's ear. He did not have to guess as to what they were saying. Yatl was his now as much as Lakmhu's, and it was Amatnim's words that the warrior whispered to his former master.

Lakmhu would make a strong ally if he could be turned from his chosen

path. But if fate decreed otherwise, Yatl would be there to put a knife in.

He felt no satisfaction at the thought. It was all so unbearably tedious. Once, the Legion's factionalism had been nothing more than competition. Now, it was a war, fought not with gun and blade, but with words and deeds. Every host was a campaign in and of itself, often splintering in victory as easily as in defeat.

Sometimes, he thought the gods demanded more than a man could give. More blood, more pleasure, more hope, more despair – it was all too much. It turned warriors into slaves. The gods could not help that it was their nature to demand worship – to take all that was given. Like a roaring fire, they fed on whatever they were given, spreading and rising unchecked. Most men were wise enough to feed them only a little. There were always some fools who just wanted to watch everything burn.

But from the ashes, new growth would rise. From the fires of this victory, the Word Bearers would be reborn, and the Urizen would have no choice but to return to them.

Or so the gods had promised.

Prince Ganor Kabalevsky stood at the centre of the strategium chamber, one hand on his shuriken pistol. 'Quiet,' he said. Then, more loudly, 'Quiet! I invited you here to talk – not scream at each other like frightened pilgrims.'

The other pirates kept shouting. A dozen of his fellow captains crowded his vessel's strategium. Some, like Amina Dheel and Fisher Hoon, he knew well. Others, like Skinner Jade, he knew only by reputation. All of them had clawed out an existence on the fringes of the Odoacer System, preying on merchant ships and pilgrim convoys. But like him, they wanted something more out of life. The problem was, none of them could quite agree as to just what 'more' might be.

Hence his invitation to them to come aboard his ship and talk. His vessel, like the rest, drifted near the Word Bearers fleet. Close, but not a part of it. Far enough away to run, if negotiations took a wrong turn. It was also one of the largest vessels in the impromptu pirate flotilla that now trailed in the Word Bearers' wake. That gave him a certain seniority, not that the others would admit it.

The strategium chamber was old, and hadn't seen the attentions of an enginseer in decades. Bundles of loose cabling spilled from the ceiling, and the ancient stonework was chipped and grimy. The flagstones of the floor were covered in the detritus of a thousand similar war councils. The hololithic

projectors had stopped working years ago, and he'd been forced to invest in old-fashioned star maps, bought at exorbitant prices from rogue traders and black market merchants.

It was also too small for this sort of meeting, but there was no way he was letting any of his peers near the bridge of his ship. Trust was a precious commodity among pirates, but there was no reason to test it unduly.

At last, annoyed by their shouting, he drew his shuriken pistol and fired, shattering a lumen and raining glass down on the chamber. They fell silent at once and turned towards him as a group. He studied them, frowning.

Ganor knew two things about pirates. One – they were, by nature, eminently pragmatic. Two – they had little respect for authority, especially of the assumed sort. To the eyes of his fellows, he had committed the cardinal sin of seemingly discarding pragmatism and taking up the mantle of leader. He'd known this, going in. But someone had to do it, and he'd thought that it might as well be him. After all, he was royalty.

Had been royalty, before the Adeptus Ministorum had stolen his family's holdings and stripped them of their titles and tithe-privileges. He remembered his mother weeping, as Ecclesiarchial thugs had stripped their home down to the bare walls.

He brushed the memory aside even as he spoke to his guests. 'My apologies, but we won't get anywhere shouting at one another like this.'

'Who are you to give us orders, Ganor?' Amina Dheel stepped forward, shoving several others aside. She was a big woman, with the muscles of a labourer and a face that might have been pretty once, in a certain light. A variety of tattoos, cruder than his own, covered her bare arms, neck and face. Golden rings perforated her earlobes, nostrils and lips, and her hair had been pulled back into a fraying braid. 'For that matter, who are you to speak for us?' There were mutters at this. Dheel seemed to be the spokeswoman.

Ganor made a placatory gesture. 'I understand your anger, brothers and sisters, but someone had to stand up.'

'Why you?' Dheel pressed.

'A better question is, why not any of you?' Ganor swept the group with a challenging gaze. 'Why didn't any of you seize the opportunity fate has handed us?'

'Throwing in our lot with monsters requires consideration,' Dheel said.

Ganor laughed. ‘We’re all monsters, woman. Every one of us.’

‘Not these kind of monsters,’ someone snarled. Fisher Hoon. He was a pale man, covered in keloid scars and wearing a battered set of carapace armour. ‘I’m all for plunder, but…’ He trailed off, shaking his head.

‘But what?’ Ganor said. ‘Don’t tell me you’re afraid?’

‘You’re not?’ Dheel said.

‘No. Because I see the opportunities before us for what they are. Almace is ripe for the plucking. And you heard them – they don’t want it. They’ll go back to whatever hell spawned them when they’re finished.’

Hoon laughed. ‘Yes, because you can always trust men covered in dried blood and skulls.’ He spat and shook his head. ‘You’re an idiot, Ganor. You hear only what you want to hear. They can’t be trusted.’

‘Then why haven’t you left yet?’ Ganor looked at them. ‘Why haven’t any of you left? If you’re so scared – so fearful of seizing this opportunity – why are you still here?’

‘Because they’ll fire on us if we do.’ That was Skinner Jade. Old, as pirates judged things, with a prosthetic arm and a metal plate where part of his skull had once been. He had scars where old tattoos had been scraped from his flesh, and wore filthy fatigues. He ran his mechanical claw through his wispy hair and continued. ‘Can’t have us talking to the enemy, can they? It’s already too late. We got too close. Too greedy. Now they have us.’ He coughed and looked around, rheumy eyes skittering over the others. ‘Ganor is right. Our only chance is to throw in with them and hope they’re telling the truth.’

It wasn’t quite the sterling endorsement Ganor had been hoping for, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Jade had influence among the younger captains – he held to his word, which was rare, and was always willing to join forces if the price was right. The same couldn’t be said for Hoon or some of the others.

‘Jade is right. The time is now. Almace – the system – is ours, if we but reach out and take it. The Imperium has forgotten us, travel outside the system is all but impossible. We could divide the Odoacer System up between us, brothers and sisters.’

‘Between those of us who survive, you mean,’ Hoon said.

‘To the winners, the spoils.’

‘You don’t know that they’ll win.’

Ganor shrugged. ‘My contacts on Almace have told me everything I need to know,’ he said. ‘As have yours, I’m sure. There’s barely a company’s worth of Space Marines on that planet. You saw what our new benefactors did to Pergo. You think they won’t do the same to Almace?’ He looked around. ‘Face facts, brothers and sisters. The cardinal-governor’s time is coming to an end. The people will see and rise up. Hell, they’re already rising up on the outer worlds – even in the asteroid facilities near Almace itself.’

Dheel snorted. ‘Optimistic of you, Ganor. More like riots than uprisings – and let’s not even get started on the asteroid miners. Those rock hounds don’t care about anyone who isn’t void-born. Not exactly an army.’

‘Doesn’t have to be, sister–’

‘And don’t call me sister, you jumped-up, wannabe aristo ponce. You think you’re the only one whose family got driven to the fringes because they crossed the Ecclesiarchy?’ She looked around. ‘Jade’s right. This is a mistake. Picking sides in a war is never smart. We should’ve just stuck to picking the bones, like we always do.’

Hoon nodded. ‘We’re far enough away – we can go. They won’t chase us. Why bother?’ There were murmurs of agreement. Running sounded better than fighting any day.

‘And then what?’ Ganor snarled. ‘Eh? And then what? How long before the Ecclesiarchy sends their new Space Marine attack dogs to purge our enclaves? And what if Amatnim wins? Would he spare us, do you think?’

‘He would not.’

The voice – deeper than a man’s and hideously resonant – caused them all to turn. Dheel and some others went for their weapons, but paused as they saw the Dark Apostle step into the chamber, his monstrous blade slaves trudging in his wake. Lakmhu had his helm clamped to his thigh, and his scarred features twisted into an unsettling smile. ‘Even if you do join us, there is every likelihood that we will butcher you, one and all. That is because you are meat, and destined for the fate of all meat.’

‘Then why should we help you?’ Dheel hissed. Her hand was on her plasma pistol. Ganor surreptitiously reached for his own weapon. If Dheel made a move, he would need to respond. Though he wasn’t sure whose side he would take.

‘More importantly, how did you get aboard my ship?’ he said.

Lakmhu laughed. It was an ugly sound, like meat hitting a butcher’s block. ‘I

go where I wish. I kill who I like. The gods stand at my shoulder and their blessings are upon me.' His eyes blazed with an unsettling light.

'That wasn't an answer,' Ganor said. He drew his pistol. The blade slaves tensed, growling softly. They were hideous things – not Space Marines any more, but something else. Like walking tumours. The swords they held hurt the eyes if you looked at them too long.

'You do not deserve an answer. Sheep do not question the shepherd. If you try to depart, we will kill you. We will board your ships and take your crews, and use their blood and yours to paint your hulls a pleasing crimson. And then your ships will serve us regardless.' He spread his arms. 'Rejoice, for your choices have narrowed to one. There is freedom in servitude, if you choose the right masters.'

'The hell I will,' Hoon snarled. Before any of them could react, Hoon had his weapon out – a bolt pistol. It boomed. One of the blade slaves slid swiftly in front of its master and intercepted the shot. Black ichor pulsed from the wound, and the creature grunted, but seemed otherwise unharmed. Hoon stared, as if in shock at his own actions.

Lakmhu gestured, and his creatures lunged. They were faster than Ganor had thought possible – faster, even, than Space Marines. Despite their bulk, they were crimson blurs. He heard the shrill scrape of their blades, and Hoon screamed once. Just once. The other pirates scattered, as the hulking creatures slid through them, blades extended behind them. Hoon stayed where he was. Silent. Staring.

Then, he unravelled in a torrent of red. Meat and viscera flopped wetly to the floor as his bisected frame unfolded and slid down the shaft of his splintered spine.

Lakmhu used his crozius to scoop up a length of intestine. He whistled, and the blade slaves returned to his side. He offered them the intestine, and they fell upon it greedily, fighting like hungry dogs for a taste, jaws snapping in the ruins of their helms.

As they squabbled, he looked at Ganor. 'Come. He wishes to speak to you.'

'A council of war,' Ganor said, glancing at Dheel and the others.

Lakmhu grunted dismissively. 'Something like that.'

Amatnim smiled as Lakmhu showed Ganor in. The pirate looked almost comical amid the dour crimson shapes of the Word Bearers. A clown. A jester. But there was something in him – a seed that might yet blossom into

greatness, if it were properly nurtured. And that too was the duty of his Legion. Lorgar had bequeathed unto them responsibility for the souls of mankind, from the greatest lord to the meanest drudge. Amatnim intended to fulfil that responsibility.

'Ah, welcome, Prince Ganor. Welcome.'

Ganor bobbed his head, and took a wary glance around. His ambition burned in him like a flame, but it was tinged with fear. Amatnim set a comradely arm about his shoulders. 'I am told that you have some knowledge of Almace, and the void around it. Is this true?'

Ganor flinched slightly at the weight of Amatnim's arm, but nodded. 'I do. I was born there.' He frowned. 'My family…' He trailed off. Amatnim nodded sympathetically.

'I understand. It is ever the way with the followers of the Corpse-God. The same story, stretched across centuries. They take what rightfully belongs to others, and claim it as their own.' Amatnim brought up the system map. 'What can you tell me about these mining facilities here, dotting the asteroid fields around the planet? We've seen them here and there, but most of them are isolated, which is why we've ignored them. But the asteroid field between us and Almace is thicker than I anticipated, and riddled with them – hundreds, even.'

'That's a good estimate, my lord,' Ganor said, peering at the display. 'They grow by the decade. Used to only be a few, but now the asteroid field might as well be a city.' He scratched his chin. 'When I was a boy, pirates used to raid them regularly.'

'But not now.'

Ganor cleared his throat. 'No. The facilities here now have defensive capabilities the others mostly lacked. It's basically a chain of interlinked forts. Not good ones, but more than any ship could handle on its own.' He leaned close, frowning. 'They've got hop-ships, weapons. That makes them too dangerous to be profitable.'

Lakmhu laughed. 'You do not know what that word means, mortal.'

Ganor bristled. 'I know enough,' he said hotly. At his tone, one of Lakmhu's slaves gave a grunt of warning, but the mortal paid little heed. 'Just like I know that they aren't happy with the way things are.'

Amatnim nodded. 'They slave for unfriendly masters.'

‘That they do, your lordship. Not a pleasant life, being a roughneck. I should know – I have plenty among my crew.’ Ganor scratched his cheek. ‘They might be amenable to a change of employment, you might say.’

Lakmhu snorted. ‘We have plenty of slaves.’

Ganor’s hand dropped to his pistol. One of Lakmhu’s blade slaves raised his weapon, the edge resting perilously close to Ganor’s throat. The pirate froze. Amatnim sighed and pushed the weapon aside.

‘Control your hounds, brother.’

‘You control yours,’ Lakmhu said, glaring at the pirate. Ganor stepped back, stinking of fear. Amatnim shook his head.

‘Regardless, he is correct. Those facilities are too dangerous to be left sitting. We must take them, before they become an impediment.’ He turned. ‘That will be your task, brother.’

‘Mine?’ Lakmhu said. ‘Send Apis. I would be in at the kill.’

‘And I would that you were there. It is a vital task, brother. And one I entrust to you.’

Lakmhu grimaced. Amatnim could feel the Dark Apostle’s frustration. The bloody helms of his beasts twitched, as if they’d caught a scent. Amatnim gestured for Ganor to step back, and then, more discreetly, for Apis to put away his sidearm.

One of the blade slaves lunged, unable to control itself – or perhaps at Lakmhu’s instigation. The creature roared and swept its blade back for an overhand blow as it moved towards him. Amatnim twitched aside, and the blade narrowly missed him, before slamming into the floor. He could feel the heat of the runes etched into its length, even as he drove his fist into the side of the creature’s head, momentarily stunning it.

Daemonically empowered though they were, the blade slaves were still limited to some degree by the physiology of their husks. They were faster than any legionary, but they still had bones and hearts and nerves. It was just a question of reaching them swiftly enough.

Before it could rip its blade free, he had an arm about its neck, and a hand clamped to the top of its skull. He drove a knee into its spine, and wrestled it to the floor, pinning it beneath his weight. It was undignified, but effective. He heard Lakmhu shout, and the creature ceased its struggles.

‘Release him,’ the Dark Apostle said. There was a hint of a plea, there. But

no apology. Amatnim sighed and looked at Lakmhu.

‘No.’

Then, with a jerk and a twist, he tore the creature’s head from its shoulders. The body thrashed like a dying serpent, and the survivor gave a keening, inhuman wail. He rose and tossed the head at Lakmhu’s feet. ‘I told you to keep them under control. If you do not obey, there is no place for you here.’

Lakmhu snarled and raised his crozius, but stopped as he heard the telltale click of weapons being readied. Apis and the others in the chamber had their bolt pistols aimed at the Dark Apostle. He bared his teeth and glared at them. ‘Treachery,’ he said.

‘Pragmatism,’ Amatnim said. ‘There is glory enough for all of us, brother. Do not fear. I will not deprive you of your just due.’

Slowly, Lakmhu lowered his weapon. Without a word, he turned on his heel and departed, followed by his remaining slave. Amatnim made no move to stop him. He turned back to the map.

‘Now, where were we?’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

76:00:07

Odoacer System, coreward edge

Raven's Valour shuddered as lance-strikes burned its flanks. Commander Raquen pounded a fist against the side of his command throne in frustration. The bridge viewscreen was a flurry of static, and barely half the strike cruiser's hull-mounted sensors were responding. Luckily, the weapons batteries were still operational.

'Fire,' he snarled.

The order was relayed to the gunnery decks in dull monotones by the bridge servitors. A moment later, the strike cruiser shuddered again, this time in satisfaction as its guns roared. Disruption macro-cannons spat streams of ionised deuterium atoms across the black, as heavier Hecutor plasma batteries unleashed photonic salvoes.

'My lord, incoming transmission from the *Silent Horseman*,' a bridge serf called out.

'Put it through,' Raquen said as the bridge shook again. A hololithic projection flickered to life before him, revealing Suboden Khan's hawklike features.

'Status, brother?'

'They were waiting for us – in the debris field between us and the core. As soon as we hit our target, they hit us. It seems you are not the only hunter in these stars, khan.' Raquen winced as a wail of feedback cut through the vox. 'You were right – it was too easy.' Below, he saw servitors twitching in their thrones as blood seeped from their data ports. 'They used their own slaves as bait to draw us in.'

'We're making for your coordinates now – can you hold out?'

'We don't seem to have much of a choice,' Raquen growled. 'They've got us boxed in, two to one. Both heavy cruisers. I haven't managed to identify them

yet.’

‘We can name them after we reduce them to scrap. Hold fast, brother.’

Raquen cut the transmission and sat back. Damage estimates scrolled upwards across his helmet display. His battleplate was connected to the command throne by a number of contact ports, allowing him to swiftly receive and synthesise the data. At the moment, all he was receiving were various flavours of bad news.

They’d been caught in a pretty trap. *Dorn’s Hand*, the frigate that had been accompanying *Raven’s Valour*, was burning somewhere off starboard. Communications were a confused garble of static – likely, their vox-array had been damaged – but from the few images he’d got from the hull sensors, they didn’t look to be in good shape.

The *Drusus* was gone as well – the cruiser had been torn nearly in two by a lucky salvo. If any of its crew were still alive, they soon wouldn’t be, once its engines reached critical mass. Raquen felt a flicker of regret. He’d quite liked the cruiser’s energetic young captain. He supposed the mortal was dead now. The ship’s bridge had been struck full on.

The bridge shook again, and he was nearly wrenched from his command throne. ‘Report,’ he barked.

‘They’re circling…’ a bridge serf said, coughing slightly. Smoke hung thick over the bridge now, and the circulation systems were faltering. ‘It’s like they’re waiting, my lord.’

‘Maybe we damaged them more badly than we thought,’ Raquen’s second, Geris, said. The other Space Marine stood at a tacticum console, where he’d been analysing the enemy’s firing patterns. He turned. ‘Or maybe they’re waiting for reinforcements…’

Raquen turned. ‘Have we re-established contact with *Dorn’s Hand*?’

‘No, my lord,’ a serf said.

‘Bring up a sensor-feed, if we’ve got one. Patch it to my command throne.’

A hololithic image, badly distorted, flickered into view. The frigate was turning slowly through the void. Raquen could tell that it had lost power. Its thrusters were burning, but it was going nowhere. Already, swarms of gunships and assault boats were streaking towards it. The few attack craft available to *Raven’s Valour* were attempting to intercept, but they wouldn’t be enough.

And beyond the dying frigate, the enemy hung in the void and watched. Waited. Guns primed and ready. But not moving in for the kill. Raquen saw it then – they were waiting. But not for reinforcements. ‘Divert secondary power to the augur array,’ he said. ‘Do a sweep. Look for pingbacks, especially deeper in the debris field.’

‘My lord?’ Geris said.

‘Do it. *Now.*’

Raquen watched *Dorn’s Hand* convulse. If its engines overloaded and went up, they would catch the edge of its death throes. But if they moved, they’d be exposing themselves to the enemy. He laughed softly. Damned if they did, damned if they didn’t.

Geris cursed. Raquen didn’t look at him. ‘How many?’

‘Two definites, at least twice that in potentials. Battle cruisers by the look of them. They’re masking their signatures with the debris field. What are they waiting on?’

‘The *Silent Horseman*,’ Raquen said. ‘This is a kill-box. They drew us in, and now they’re using us to draw in the rest of the fleet. Check our communications.’

A squeal of feedback filled the bridge. Raquen closed his eyes. ‘Jammed,’ Geris said. ‘They let us make contact.’

‘Suboden will rush in, guns blazing. And then they’ll strike. Even if the fleet manages to break off, casualties will be high.’ Raquen sat back. There was no good option. Their shields were faltering, their guns were running dry and their hull was bleeding fire. Soon, the assault boats would come, slinking through the black, and then there’d be no time for anything but fighting. No way to warn the White Scars, no way to escape.

There was only one sure way to prevent Suboden from falling into the trap.

‘The choice is out of our hands.’ He pushed himself to his feet. ‘We must warn the fleet. Ready all guns. Come to a collision heading with the nearest enemy vessel on my mark. And begin preparations to overload the plasma reactors.’

‘My lord?’ Geris asked, quietly.

‘We need to send up a flare, brother. A warning to break off.’ Raquen clasped his hands behind his back. ‘One way or another, I intend to give them that warning. Three ships saved for the price of one. A good bargain.’

‘It would be better if we were not on the ship in question,’ Geris said.

‘Yes, well, you can’t have everything.’ Raquen looked at the viewscreen. Alarm klaxons wailed as the ship slid to a new heading, engines groaning. He gestured. ‘Set collision course. Prime all guns. Engage.’

Raven’s Valour began its last flight. Raquen knew that Suboden would detect their destruction and break off, retreating into the debris field – or perhaps farther than that. What was left of the fleet would be saved. A satisfactory conclusion. He smiled.

‘Now… let us show them how ravens die.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder did not wait for the guards to open the doors to the council chamber. He pushed them aside, and shoved the doors open. The Ecumenical Council was in session, and the air was thick with cloying clouds of incense. Over twenty deacons, aristocrats and priests of rank sat arrayed about the table, accompanied by their scribes and adepts. Most of them were talking over one another, either arguing some point or directing complaints to Eamon, who sat at the far end of the table. Tyre stood behind his chair, hands clasped behind his back. The swordmaster nodded to Calder as he caught sight of him, and a slight smile spread across his scarred features.

Heads turned as Calder made his way to the centre of the chamber, steadfastly ignoring all attempts by servants and guards to stop him. Eamon looked up from the stack of documents he was examining and stood. ‘Lieutenant, to what do we owe this unexpected visit?’ He smiled. ‘Come to commandeer the ornamental gardens on the southern edge of the spire for the defence effort?’ Deacons and priests laughed politely, but Calder could sense their concern.

‘The enemy is approaching sensor range of Almace,’ he said, without preamble. His voice, amplified by his helmet’s vox, carried throughout the chamber. Silence fell. The smile slipped from Eamon’s face.

‘You’re certain?’

‘I’ve received an astropathic communication from Suboden Khan. His efforts to bleed the enemy fleet have met with little result. Their numbers have, in fact, swelled.’

Eamon closed his eyes. ‘How is this possible?’

‘Pirates,’ Tyre said. ‘The outer sector and the asteroid fields are full of them.

Most are no threat, but get enough of them together…'

'Surely even a horde of pirates is no threat to the vaunted ships of the Adeptus Astartes?' a priest called out. Murmurs of assent rose from the crowd. Calder nodded.

'They are not. The enemy fleet, however, is not solely composed of stolen cutters or badly maintained frigates. There are at least ten warships remaining, including a battle-barge. And most of them are heading this way, even as we speak.'

'Can the system defence fleet not slow them down?' someone called out. 'Else what is it good for?'

'The fleet has taken substantial losses doing just that,' Calder said. 'They are still doing it. But they will not be able to draw off the bulk of the fleet. We must ready ourselves for the siege.'

'What about our orbital defences?' a woman asked. She was clad in the traditional garb of one of the planet's noble houses – thick robes of crimson, layered with rectangular scales of gold and silver. 'And is there not still a cruiser in orbit?'

'One cruiser against a fleet?' a deacon said dismissively.

'It is better than nothing,' she snapped. 'Perhaps we can use it to evacuate…'

'And go where?' Eamon said. Though he spoke quietly, everyone fell silent. 'Where would you go, Artesia? Would you abandon your family's holdings, the people of this world?' He shook his head. 'No. The enemy are no longer a storm on the horizon. They are here, and we must make ready to withstand them.'

'More so than we already have, you mean?' another deacon interjected. 'How much more must we do?'

'And what have you done, exactly, Avrich?' Eamon asked. 'Besides clutter my desk with official complaints about your ornamental ponds being drained?' He looked around. 'What have any of you done to ready your dioceses for what is coming?' He paused. 'I will tell you – nothing. You have left the preparations to me, and to our saviours. As if by ignoring the issue, you can make it go away.'

A murmur of protest rose at this, but Eamon shook his head. 'No. I have given you every opportunity to contribute. Instead, you have wasted time pretending the problem isn't there. The time for argument is past.'

The murmurs grew louder. Calder could see that the council was not used to being chastised. Eamon glanced at him and then gestured to Tyre. ‘Swordmaster – bring this meeting to order.’

Tyre stood, drew his sidearm and fired into the air. A shocked silence fell. Eamon sighed and nodded. ‘Thank you, Domenico.’

‘My pleasure, cardinal-governor.’

Eamon looked at Calder. ‘Well, lieutenant? What’s first?’

Calder looked around the chamber. He could smell fear on the air, and see resentment in every eye. The representatives of the Ecclesiarchy were not used to being powerless.

‘Preliminary preparations have been completed. All that remains is the dispersal of forces to preapproved locations. The city has three major arteries – to the east, the west and the south. We will collapse the westernmost causeways, leaving the eastern and southern approaches viable for a ground assault.’

‘Would it not be better to collapse them all?’

‘No. The enemy will enter the city. That much is a given.’ Calder saw the looks on their faces, and softened his tone. ‘Reports from Pergamon indicate that they have the numbers and the materials to do so. This city was not designed to withstand a conventional siege.’ He turned back to the hololithic projection. ‘Thus, we must ensure that if they are going to enter the city, they do so on our terms.’

Eamon spoke up for the first time. ‘Collapsing the western causeways will all but seal off the lower sections of the city. Millions will be trapped, even with the evacuation efforts that are already underway.’ The cardinal-governor sounded tired. Calder looked at him.

‘Yes.’

‘Are we to abandon them?’ From Eamon’s tone, Calder suspected that he already knew the answer. The question was for the benefit of his subordinates, then. Calder felt a brief flicker of annoyance – there were currents here that he could but dimly perceive, and he disliked being used in such a way. Nevertheless, he answered.

‘Some must be sacrificed to maintain the whole.’

The words hung in the air for a moment. Then, one of the Ministorum priests spoke up. ‘A pretty enough death sentence,’ he said. He was a small man,

built heavy, and dressed in plain robes. Shaggy, greying hair merged with a tangled beard to create a grizzled lion's mane, but the eyes within it were a vibrant green. Calder knew his face from reports – Tabrain Hast. He was responsible for the shrines in Low Town, and oversaw a contingent of nearly a hundred subordinate priests. Thanks to them, a number of civil disturbances had been headed off before they could erupt into violence.

'How many of our flock must die to preserve the rest?' Tabrain turned to Eamon. 'Such arithmetic is beyond me, brother.'

'Cardinal-governor, Tabrain,' Tyre said, with a touch of warning. 'Not brother. Not here. Best you remember that.'

'I remember enough, Domenico,' Tabrain growled. He turned his glare on the other man. 'I remember Eamon's promises of rescue – of salvation. Instead, we are to let our chapels burn, and the faithful with them. And for what?' He looked around, and Calder saw a few others nod, as if in agreement.

'The promise of victory,' Calder said. They turned to look at him. Most looked hurriedly away, save for Tyre and Tabrain. The heavyset priest frowned.

'A pyrrhic victory,' he said.

Eamon spoke up. 'But a victory. Else what was it all for?' He moved among his subordinates, meeting the eyes of each. 'We did not ask for this burden, but it has fallen upon us. The God-Emperor, in his eternal wisdom, has set us to bar the way of hell. We will bleed for it. We may perish.' He made a fist. 'But we will do this thing. That is our purpose. We are His voice made flesh, and it is for us to carry out His will. We can do no less.'

'And what about the rest of us?' Another priest spoke up. Calder glanced at him. Dipesh Klein, the lord deacon of Feingard's Landing – one of the smaller agri-cities on the southern coast. 'You've sent a handful of Space Marines to each city to prepare defences. But that's nowhere near enough to protect us.'

'In all previous contacts, the enemy focused on the planetary nerve centre. Other cities and urban hab-sprawls came under attack only in the latter stages of the siege. So long as Almacia stands, they will not come for you in force.'

'Can you promise that?' the noblewoman – Artesia – asked.

Calder paused, weighing his answer. 'No. I can promise nothing save that we will do as we must to defend this world.'

Before another uproar could begin, Eamon clapped his hands for silence. ‘I propose that we bring this council session to a halt. Those of you who wish to return to your dioceses should do so now. The rest of you may stay here, if you wish. I will, of course, extend the cathedral-palace’s hospitality to any who wish it.’

As the meeting broke up, Eamon joined Calder, Tyre trailing in his wake. ‘Tyre tells me Lieutenant Karros and a contingent of Raven Guard set off for the asteroid mining facilities this morning. I trust he understands the value of those facilities, both to Almace and this system?’

‘He does,’ Calder said. Karros had assured him that he would bring the mines under control swiftly. How he intended to do that, exactly, Calder wasn’t sure. But he trusted Karros to find the most efficient path forward.

‘And what about the system defence fleet – is there any way they can reach us, before the enemy?’

‘Unlikely. I left the decision to Suboden Khan.’

‘Was that wise?’

‘He’s more experienced in void warfare than I am, and he better understands the capabilities and value of his ships.’ He decided not to mention that Suboden’s last message had been a garbled mess. The astropathic choirs were suffering as much from the presence of the Archenemy as the more mundane communication systems. Perhaps more.

As far as his calculations went, the *Silent Horseman* no longer figured in them. If Suboden still lived, then Calder had no doubt that the khan would do what he could to reach Almace. If he did not, doubtless he had died bravely.

Eamon frowned. ‘Answer me truthfully – how much time?’

‘A few days at most. The fleet bought us more time than I expected, but it won’t be enough. Work will continue until the last moment, but this city is suboptimal, in terms of defensive strategies. There is not much we can do.’ Calder looked down at Eamon. ‘I have formulated a dozen theories as to the purpose behind this attack. None of them are satisfactory.’

Eamon stiffened, and then turned away. Hands behind his back, he started towards the windows that overlooked the city. ‘Does it matter?’ Eamon asked, as Calder fell into step beside him.

‘Without knowing why I cannot know if the defensive preparations are adequate.’

‘I’m sure you’ve done the best you can…’

Calder looked at him. Eamon flinched back. Calder heard the scrape of steel, and knew that Tyre had his hand on his sword. He ignored the swordmaster and focused on Eamon. ‘You are hiding something. We both know this. There is a sixty per cent chance that this obfuscation directly relates to the current situation.’ He shook his head. ‘I told you that the time was coming when I would not take no for an answer.’

Eamon stopped. Calder could read the nervousness in his body language. He noted the way Tyre set himself, just out of the corner of his eye. The swordmaster’s hand had dropped to the hilt of his blade. Calder was unarmed, but he calculated eight ways of disarming Tyre without killing him. He hoped that it wouldn’t come to that.

‘Is that time now?’ Eamon asked, softly.

Calder gazed out the window, for a moment. ‘You have thirty-six standard hours to decide your next course of action.’ Without waiting for a reply, he turned towards the doors, brushing past Tyre as he did so.

‘I suggest you pray on it.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

A dozen black-armoured forms trudged across the surface of the asteroid. Karros had point, as was his privilege as commander. Above him, the stars spun, cold and wild and heedless. The asteroid was pitted with lightless chasms and marked by mountains of silicate. It was one of a dozen larger bodies, comprising part of the inner region of the belt that girdled Almace. A planetoid in all but name.

A web of man-made structures stretched across the inner belt, connected by leagues of shunt-tubes and orbital causeways. The mining facilities had grown, stretching from one asteroid to the next with every passing century. Now, the Primus facility was a city in and of itself. Smaller outposts dotted the belt, reachable only by jump-craft or ore-hauler.

Karros’ battleplate scanned his surroundings, noting the high level of iron-nickel and other valuable elements. Even after all this time, there were deposits yet unplumbed. There were only a few asteroids of similar composition in the belt. Most of the rest were carbonaceous, or silicate-rich. All showed signs of mining.

Around the Raven Guard were signs of industry – ore-scrapers rose like iron ziggurats over great holes gouged in the surface of the asteroid, and pipelines

meant to carry fuel stretched between far-flung outposts. Unmanned docking platforms towered over everything, and a canopy of gantries and cabling stretched between them.

A shadow passed over the Raven Guard. A servitor-controlled ore-hauler drifted far overhead, thrusters aiming towards the nearest docking station. Karros watched it for a moment, noting the thick hull, built to withstand celestial debris, and the scooped, ram shape of its prow, the better to push past chunks of rock and ice. As if reading his mind, one of his warriors, Deron, murmured, ‘Strap a few guns to it and it’d make an acceptable assault boat.’ He spoke across an encrypted vox-channel. No sense in alerting anyone of their arrival before they absolutely had to.

‘I was thinking explosives,’ Karros said. ‘Like the fireships of ancient Ilium.’ Past the ore-hauler, and above, he could see a column of refugee ships navigating the asteroid belt. Their immense shadows darkened the asteroid’s expanse, like the sudden fall of night. There weren’t many of them, and most of them were small – private yachts and the like. They’d fled across a system, only to find themselves in the eye of the storm once more.

‘Speaking of ships, why are we walking?’ another warrior asked. This one was called Spiros. ‘Why not simply take the gunship in?’ The Thunderhawk that had brought them to the asteroid was concealed some distance away, awaiting Karros’ orders.

‘I didn’t want to risk getting knocked out of the void by a mining laser or a debris-battery.’ Karros glanced back. ‘That would be quite humiliating, don’t you agree?’

Spiros grunted.

‘No sensors, this way. No alarms,’ Deron said.

Karros smiled. ‘A gunship would have been picked up on short-range augurs, even with the sensor baffles. Their system is built to detect minute debris particles – a speck of rock the size of your thumb can punch a hole in something vital out here. They’d have spotted us, even if they weren’t sure what we were.’ He looked around. ‘But this way, they won’t see us coming.’

‘Unless they look out a porthole,’ Spiros said. ‘Or there are scanners we didn’t detect. Or they noticed the gunship when it landed.’

‘Yes, if any or all of those things happen, they’ll be waiting for us,’ Karros said, with a slight sigh. ‘Do you have a point, Spiros, or are you just being your usual optimistic self?’

‘Merely contributing to the overall strategic picture, brother.’

‘And I thank you for that. But in the future, consider saving those contributions until I ask for them.’ Karros looked back at the other Raven Guard. ‘Are we clear?’

‘Clear,’ Spiros said. He sounded suitably chastened, and Deron and the others chuckled throatily. Karros allowed himself a smile. A certain structured informality was often of benefit, but only off the battlefield.

‘Good.’ Karros turned back and paused. ‘Down.’ As one, the Raven Guard sank down, crouching so that the camo-cloaks they wore covered them completely. A moment later, a maintenance scow trundled close by, overhead. Augurs set into its hull scanned the nearby machinery, looking for damage or flaws.

‘The enginseers are still working,’ Deron murmured. The vox-link crackled slightly with background interference.

Spiros laughed. ‘Even revolutionaries aren’t foolish enough to interfere with the servants of the Machine-God going about their duties.’

Karros waited until the scow was out of augur range, and rose to his feet. ‘Come. The enforcers will be arriving soon. We need to be there to meet them.’

‘We don’t need them,’ Spiros said. The others murmured agreement. None of them had been particularly impressed by Regulator Galba and his enforcers. They were a sloppy lot, and brutal. Unsurprising considering the nature of the posting – this was a punishment detail, in practice if not in name. Karros had scanned Galba’s file on the journey. It was littered with infractions, mostly violent. He had a reputation for brutality. It was no wonder Tyre had assumed that Galba would simply execute the miners.

‘No. But they need us. That is why we are here. To keep the situation from complicating matters any further.’ Beneath his feet, the rocky surface of the asteroid gave way to ferrocrete and rusty metal. Up-close, this part of the facility resembled a factory, save for the atmospheric shielding that obscured large sections. Shunt-tubes and enclosed walkways extended from it in all directions, connecting to various towers and pods. Hundreds of heavy solar generators were visible, clustered like barnacles at the base of the main structure, their receptor-cells angled to catch the light of the sun.

His helmet’s auto-senses clicked and hummed, bringing the exterior of the main facility into sharp focus. His tactical helm display selected possible

entry points. He gestured. ‘Spiros, Chayn, left, with me. Deron, you and the others, make your way to the right – get the airlocks open on the tertiary gantries and hold them until the enforcers arrive.’

‘Lethal force?’ Deron rumbled.

Karros paused. ‘Non-lethal, if possible. We don’t want to kill them. Not yet.’

‘They’re insurrectionists,’ Chayn said. It was not a protest, or an accusation. Merely a statement. Karros glanced at him.

‘Yes, and potentially useful ones. Non-lethal.’

Clicks of acknowledgement sounded on the vox. There would be no more talking from here on out. Not until the mission was complete.

They moved quickly after that. While they had maintained a controlled pace in their approach, this was discarded now in favour of speed. Servos hummed as motive fibre bundles bunched and twisted, lending extra speed to an already powerful stride. Concealed air-jets helped them maintain a solid footing as they bounded towards the main facility.

Karros conducted a localised frequency scan as he moved. He could hear the miners talking to one another. Their attentions were firmly fixed on the enforcers who were attempting to breach the facility. The rebels had welded most of the access hatches and rigged the rest with mining explosives. By the time he’d swung himself up onto an entrance gantry, he’d identified which was which, and headed for the closest of the booby-trapped hatches. He motioned for Spiros and Chayn to spread out on the gantry. As Karros advanced down the walkway, the other two covered him.

The access hatch was a solid piece, with a simple pressurised release mechanism. He ran a hand along the frame, letting the tactile sensors in his gauntlet build him an image of what awaited on the other side. A crude explosive, meant for opening up new holes in the rock. It was wired to the release mechanism.

Karros waved the others back and retrieved a melta charge from his combat rig. The thermal putty would burn, even in a vacuum. He moulded it around the release mechanism and activated the timer before backing away quickly.

The explosion was silent. A flare of brilliant white and then a sudden rush as air escaped from the entry chamber. Karros tore what was left of the door from its hinges and cast it aside. Then he was through. He raised his boltgun and fired at the release mechanism for the inner bulkhead. A solid kick and he was into the facility proper.

The entry chamber was a wide, high stretch of featureless walls, cut by a web of interconnected gantries and observation platforms. Thousands of pipes ran beneath the gantries, forming an almost solid floor of rounded metal.

Klaxons were sounding, their shrill cries echoing eerily through the expanse of gantries and observation platforms, illuminated by a few flickering lumens. The pull of depressurisation abated as Chayn and Spiros followed him, their bulk all but sealing the apertures. Karros gestured to the inner bulkhead, and Spiros wedged it shut. Chayn raised his boltgun and fired, silencing the nearest klaxon. More sounded, in the depths.

Karros motioned for them to spread out as he checked the auspex built into his vambrace. There were no guards, but he hadn't expected any – not immediately. They would be relying on the booby-traps as early warning systems. The auspex pinged. They were coming. His auto-senses detected the low hum of an approaching grav-shunt. The boxy tram-like vehicles ran along rails built into the sides of the gantries. Chayn and Spiros took up positions to either side of him as the lights of the shunt washed over them.

As the shunt slowed, Karros raised his bolter and fired a precise burst, shattering the lumens overhead. As darkness fell, the Raven Guard scattered. He heard shouts from the shunt and someone activated a secondary light on top of the vehicle. The new light spun wildly and he avoided it easily. Chayn and Spiros did so as well.

Through his picter-unit, he watched them converge on the shunt, as he did the same. There was no need to worry about them calling for reinforcements. Short-range frequency emitters built into their battleplate would jam the vehicle's vox-equipment as well as any handheld communication devices the passengers carried.

The shunt began to reverse, back along the line, as he drew close. Karros leapt from the gantry and crashed down onto the roof. He slung his boltgun and punched a fist through the top as autogun fire perforated it, drawing sparks from his armour. With deliberate slowness, he began to peel the metal back like foil. The shunt shuddered as Chayn and Spiros joined him. Shouts of panic rose from the passengers. There were fifteen of them, all smelling of sweat and fear. They fired wildly. They'd expected enforcers and got something much worse. When he judged the hole large enough, he dropped through it.

His weight caused the shunt to sway wildly as he rose to a stoop. He knew that from their viewpoint, he filled the vehicle. 'Lay down your arms and you

will not be harmed. There will not be a second warning.’ Chayn and Spiros peered in through the openings on either side, their boltguns aimed at the passengers.

Weapons clattered to the deck. Karros nodded. ‘Good. Now. Take us to your leader.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Eamon opened his eyes as the transit platform shuddered to a stop. One of his bodyguards opened the cage and stepped out into the corridor. The Crusader paused, one hand on his sheathed blade. Several heartbeats passed as the bodyguard studied the corridor ahead. ‘Clear,’ he murmured. His voice was scrambled by the vox-distorters built into his featureless mask. Eamon didn’t know why. A tradition of their house, he suspected.

‘This isn’t necessary,’ Eamon said.

‘Our life for yours,’ the one standing behind him said. Eamon turned.

‘Be that as it may, I’m perfectly safe down here. I am the only one with access.’ The Crusaders stared at him in silence. Eamon sighed and turned back to the corridor. ‘Never mind. Come. He’ll be waiting.’

The Crusaders fell into step with him, one to either side. He ignored them, as he always did. It had been harder, when he was younger. He hadn’t been so used to shadows then. Now it was second nature, like so many things.

The corridor was barren by the standards of the cathedral-palace. It still resembled the colony ship that the structure had once been, with bare grating and hull-plate walls. Access hatches and air shafts ran above and alongside it, hidden from view. He knew that legions of servitors, most several centuries old, worked unseen in those places, labouring to keep the heart of the citadel beating. Tangles of cabling and conduit-sheathing hung from the ceiling, in places. There were no statues here, no pillars or murals. Only bare metal and ferrocrete. No cyber-cherubs, either, which was something of a relief.

No spies had ever come this deep into the city’s heart. Not even his own. No one could be allowed to know the secret of this place. It was his burden alone, and had belonged to his family since time out of mind. It was passed down from parent to child, back to the first of his line. Back to Terra itself.

In time, he would have to take a wife, or nominate an heir. Some child, plucked from the Low Town slums and trained in the schola progenium to shoulder the burdens of rulership. More than one of his ancestors had started out that way. The thought of doing the same to some unknowing innocent

made him slightly ill. But needs must, when necessity drives. Perhaps it wouldn't come to that. Perhaps it would all end here.

The enemy his family had feared for so long were on their threshold at last. They would be here all too soon, and Almace would suffer as it had never suffered. The sick feeling in his stomach grew worse. 'Would that it had never come to this,' he murmured. One of the Crusaders glanced at him. He didn't know their names, though he'd asked often enough. He couldn't even be sure that they were the same ones every time. Only Tyre knew, and he refused – politely – to tell Eamon anything. Another tradition.

Sometimes, he thought he was caught fast in a cage made of tradition. Wherever he turned, a new one seemed to rear its head. He took comfort in knowing that all of them had purpose, whether he understood it or not. Some things had to be taken on faith.

The corridor ended at a bulkhead. It could only be accessed by a biometric scanner. There were shallow alcoves to either side of the bulkhead, and as he and his bodyguards drew close, a pair of angels lurched from them. The angels were clad in filthy robes and golden, beatific death masks. They had no wings; instead, each possessed a profusion of jointed, artificial arms, all of which were tipped with a variety of weapons.

Eamon stopped. The two combat-servitors were, like many such automata, things of sublime craftsmanship. They had not been mass-produced, but instead assembled by the hands of trusted Mechanicus adepts. Each was as individual as a snowflake, and as deadly as a squad of infantry.

The angels undulated towards them, moving with that peculiar boneless grace that some servitors possessed. Beneath their robes, unseen limbs flicked and twitched, propelling them with inhuman swiftness. They uttered mechanical hisses as they drew near, the vox-emitters built into their masks warming up. Then, one spoke. '*Identify.*'

Eamon pulled back his sleeve, exposing a scarred forearm, and drew a thin blade from within his robes. Quickly, he drew a bloody line down the inside of his arm. Then, he extended it to the angels. The servitors crept close, like wary hounds. Thin filaments – biometric sensors – extended from ports on their masks and brushed against the wound. One of the angels looked up, the blind eyes of its death mask fixed on Eamon's face. '*Access granted.*'

'Thank you,' he murmured. The guardians retreated to their alcoves. Eamon glanced at his bodyguards. 'I go alone from here.' They didn't protest. They never did.

He went to the bulkhead and placed his hand against the biometric augur built into the frame. Hundreds of hidden sensors flickered to life, scanning him for weapons and God-Emperor alone knew what else. It took only a few moments. The augur chimed, and the locking seals of the viewing port set into the bulkhead released with a slow sigh of stale air. Eamon leaned close and peered into the darkness beyond the bulkhead. The inhabitant of the chamber had no need of artificial light. ‘I am here.’

‘What news?’ The words shuddered through Eamon, deep and awful. The voice of the being he knew only as the Anchorite. The secret hidden at the heart of Almace.

‘They are coming. They will be at our walls soon.’

‘And the others?’

Eamon shrugged. ‘He is an Imperial Fist.’

A low rumble of monstrous laughter shook the air.

Eamon stepped back, unable to repress a thrill of fear at the sound. He had known the prisoner since childhood, but it never became any easier to be in his presence. ‘He knows that I am hiding something.’

‘And so?’

‘We have kept this secret for centuries. I cannot be the one who fails to protect it.’

The Anchorite was silent for several moments. Then, another laugh. Softer, this time. ‘Have you ever considered that it is not up to you to decide such matters?’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I am saying that we are but tools in His hands. And a tool does not question its use.’

‘And what if he should discover the truth?’

‘That you are here, implies that he already suspects.’ The Anchorite fell silent. ‘You were followed.’

‘What? Impossible.’

‘I have grown sensitive in my confinement. I can hear the beating of two hearts.’

‘My bodyguards…’

‘No. I know the sound of their hearts. This is new. Someone followed you.’

Eamon felt suddenly weak. ‘No. No. Not like this. What should I do?’

‘What you have always done, young Eamon…’ The Anchorite’s words reached out to him, as it had done throughout his life, and the lives of his forebears. There was comfort in them. Purity and certainty.

‘Have faith.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

79:06:20

Odoacer System, coreward edge

‘We have found them, my lord.’

Kelim looked down at his aide. The tall, gaunt mortal was clad in rich, oxblood robes and ceremonial carapace armour. Colchisian runes marked his cheeks and brow, and lined his fingers. Prayer scrolls hung from his armour and rustled softly in the recycled air of the command deck. He stank of incense and rot, despite his tidy appearance.

‘Are you certain?’

‘I would swear it on my life, great one,’ the creature simpered, with obsequious humility. Timp – that was his name. Timp. A foolish name for a foolish creature. A magister, he called himself. The leader of a minor cult, grown large enough to be of some use.

‘That is good, Magister Timp. Because it is your life I will claim in recompense if you have played me false.’

The mortal blanched and began to babble assurances. Kelim waved them aside. He reclined in his command throne, listening to the ship’s eager snarl. There was a daemon-spirit in the cruiser’s engines, and veins of ichor ran through its pitted hull. In a few centuries, *Lorgar’s Word* would no longer be a ship, but something else. Something glorious. He hoped to still be its commander on its day of apotheosis, if only to see its final shape.

He stroked the armrest of his throne, as if it were the ruff of a hound’s neck. ‘Easy, girl,’ he murmured. The ship responded with a sound like a funerary bell. It smelled blood on the cosmic wind. The enemy was on the run, seeking safety.

Kelim had harried the White Scars for days, ripping at their flanks, giving them no time to make repairs or rest their engines. He knew the Khan’s whelps of old, and knew that to give them a moment’s peace was as good as

handing them victory. But even so, he was wary. Though their fleet was depleted, there was still the battle-barge to consider. No easy prospect, that – though a part of him was eager to test his skills against prey of such quality.

Luckily, he had plenty of chaff to throw at it. He brought up a sensor map of the area, noting the positions of his fleet. The cruisers *Ucephalot*, *Skullhound* and *Dagmar's Penitence* followed *Lorgar's Word* in a rough wedge. Their auxiliaries ranged ahead and around them, screening the larger vessels from attack.

He knew the commanders of the three cruisers by reputation. The *Ucephalot* was commanded by Kespu Dimmak, a singer of dark hymns and a cunning agitator. One of Amatnim's favourites. *Dagmar's Penitence* was under the yoke of the Thessalonian – a hooded enigma whose origins were unspoken. Some whispered that he was a Neverborn, playing at war. Those same whispers said he owed his physical form to Lakmhu. Whatever the truth of it, he was almost certainly one of the Dark Apostle's hounds.

And then there was Gorham. A vox-rune blinked. 'Speak of the daemon and he shall appear,' Kelim murmured as he tapped it.

'They're making for Almace, Kelim,' Gorham said without preamble. The commander of the *Skullhound* was a fleshless nightmare. He'd flensed his own head at some point, leaving only raw muscle over the bone. It gleamed wetly, even through the remove of the hololith. Brass sigils had been affixed to his cheeks and brow, hooked into the red meat.

'As I expected, brother. We've cut their little fleet in half. They no longer have the numbers to operate in isolation.'

'Blood God's luck, that, eh?' Gorham chortled, and Kelim resisted the urge to frown. Gorham was a fool, but he was right. It had been luck that had seen their quarry slip his trap. And only luck had prevented him from losing more ships than he had when the Raven Guard had decided to overload their reactors and ram themselves into the cruiser *Gallowstongue*. While not so battered as their prey, his ships had taken enough of a beating to warrant returning to Pergamon when they had run the White Scars to ground.

It irked him not to be in at the kill – but the thought of having his newly acquired ship blown out from under him irked him even more. Besides which, he thought it best to be visibly elsewhere when Amatnim and Lakmhu finally decided to settle the matter between them. He was not certain yet which side suited his ambitions best. Amatnim was a generous lord, but blithely pragmatic. Lakmhu demanded more loyalty, but had the ear of Erebus – or so

he claimed. The wisest course seemed to be to wait until a victor emerged, and then immediately and publicly purge those whose loyalties were to the defeated party.

'I demand right of first blood, brother,' Gorham growled. *'One of them is trailing behind. I want it.'* Pulled from his reverie, Kelim gave a negligent gesture.

'By all means, brother. Break yourself on their guns if you like. I'm sure the Blood God will approve of your sacrifice.'

'Are you trying to dissuade me or encourage me, Kelim?'

'Whichever pleases you most, brother.'

Gorham laughed. *'That is why I like you, Kelim. You're vermin, but honest.'*

Kelim tamped down on a spurt of anger. Regardless of how things went, he might have to deal with Gorham. 'High praise,' he murmured. 'They should be coming into visual range any time now. Do as you will, but be swift. I can't have you compromising my strategy any more than you already have.'

'Is that what you call it, brother? A few daemonhosts chained up in boarding torpedoes is hardly a plan.'

'Because you're only seeing the surface elements, Gorham. And that is why I am in command, and you are asking my permission to get yourself killed.'

He cut the link before Gorham could reply and sat back. 'Sometimes, I despair at the state of the Legion.' He looked at Timp, hovering near his shoulder. 'Are they ready, Timp?'

'Yes, my lord, and eager to die in your name,' Timp said with a wide smile. 'They are the gate, and your hand is upon the key.'

'Then consider the gate thrown wide. As soon as we're within range to do so, fire at will.'

Timp nodded and turned. He barked an order, and it was relayed across the bridge. Kelim listened as his crew hustled about their duties. If he strained, he could hear the murmur of the Neverborn, waiting just beyond the veil. They were eager and impatient.

There were thirteen boarding torpedoes in the bays, awaiting launch. Each one had been daubed in protective sigils and sacred unguents to carry it safely to its target. Aboard each were volunteers from among the mortal crew – those who'd allowed themselves to become doorways to the Primordial Truth. Like the torpedoes, they too had been specially prepared, their flesh cut with

holy pictograms and their bellies full of the nectar of the gods. Unarmoured and unprotected, their fragile bodies would shatter upon impact. But what would arise from them would be beautiful indeed.

The Neverborn would swarm the ships of the foe, overcoming them and claiming the vessels in the name of the Word Bearers. Triumph and triumphal sacrifice, all in one. The gods would see him and bless him at last. And Amatnim – or Lakmhu – would surely be pleased with the addition of several new ships to the fleet.

Kelim smiled as proximity klaxons sounded. The enemy had been sighted.

Victory was at hand.

Suboden Khan leaned forward on his throne. 'Estimated numbers?' The command deck of the *Silent Horseman* was quiet. Subdued. The banners and totems that hung far above him stirred in the recirculated air, but the sound of their rustling was swallowed up in the drone of servitors.

Kanim shook his head. 'Too many.'

'That is not an estimate.'

'But it is a fact.'

Suboden accepted this and sat back. Tactical projections swarmed his throne – each one a decision yet to be made. Should they run – or fight? 'Four cruisers, including a ship of the line – dozens of smaller craft,' he murmured. 'And us with three, and no escorts to speak of. Not to mention we're limping at half-speed so the *Crassus* can keep up.'

'We could abandon her,' Kanim said. Suboden glared up at him.

'We've shed blood with them, shaman. You know better than to suggest that.'

'Due diligence, my khan. Someone must.'

Suboden grunted and tugged on his moustaches. He'd considered it himself. Kanim knew that. That was why the shaman had said it. The *Crassus* was venting plasma and its hull had been breached in numerous places. It was staggering in their wake like a stallion that was too stubborn to die. But death caught you in the end, however stubborn or fast you were. The only question was in whether you chose your own death, or it chose you.

'Ogilvy is a good woman, a proud daughter of the Imperium. She will understand.' Kanim spoke softly. Suboden's frown deepened.

‘And if she does not?’

‘She will. It must be done, my khan. Someone must hold them back. We must reach Almace. Our guns will be needed. The spirits say as much.’

‘I am not inclined to care. They have been singularly unhelpful thus far.’

Kanim smiled and nodded. ‘They said you would say that.’

Suboden shook his head. ‘*Crassus,* report,’ he said, signalling a crewman to activate the command channel. Static was his only reply. Communications had become more difficult the longer they were out here. Something in the ether, or so Kanim claimed. The shaman believed that the void-spirits were growing restless as the enemy polluted the stars with their presence. Suboden thought that was as good an explanation as any.

Whatever the reason, it was getting harder to stay in contact over long distances. If all the vessels in his impromptu fleet had been of the Adeptus Astartes, it would not have worried him. If, if, if. He shook his head. Might as well hope the Warhawk would return and aid them, as wish for that. He grunted and tried to contact *Orlanda’s Wrath.*

Suboden shifted impatiently in his command throne. Kanim glanced down at him, features pensive. Suboden frowned. ‘What are the spirits saying, shaman? What do they say to you?’

‘Fire and death,’ Kanim said flatly. ‘Always fire and death.’

‘The enemy’s,’ Suboden said.

Kanim said nothing. ‘Contact established, my khan,’ a crewman said. ‘Vox only.’

Suboden turned. ‘So long as I can speak to them. Keel – do you have a visual on the *Crassus?*’ Keel had proven himself an adept battle-captain, if slow in taking the initiative. And if he survived, a satisfactory fleet might be rebuilt around him.

The vox made a sound like a strangled felid. *‘–ay again, Silent –orsema–’* Keel’s voice seemed to be coming from far away, as if he were at the other end of a great tunnel. On the projection before his throne, Suboden could see the ident-rune signifying the Exorcist grand cruiser coming about. He frowned.

‘What is he doing?’

‘He’s falling back towards the *Crassus,*’ Kanim said.

‘Now he takes the initiative. Idiot. I need his ship in one piece.’ Suboden gestured to a serf. ‘Tighten up the frequency. Try to re-establish contact. Quickly.’ He turned back to the projection. Blinking runes swarmed slowly towards the *Crassus*. Escorts and assault craft. The enemy had realised the cruiser was dead in the black. ‘They’re coming into firing range.’

Kanim nodded. ‘It looks like the spirits have made the decision for us.’

Suboden nodded. He paused, for a fraction of a second, considering the myriad consequences of his next actions. Departure preserved his vessel, and the assets within it. They would be needed on Almace. That was certain. And yet it irked him to leave warriors – even mortal ones – on the field. He glanced at Kanim and found that the shaman was smiling. ‘Oh shut up,’ Suboden muttered. Then, more loudly, ‘Bring us about. Intercept course. I want us between the *Crassus* and the foe.’ He thumped the armrest of his throne. ‘If they want a fight, then by all of the spirits in the mountains we’ll give them one.’

Suboden felt the deck shudder as the battle-barge began the slow process of turning back. He gripped his sheathed tulwar, and felt his hearts speed up their rhythm. Perhaps this was for the best. Running had not suited him. ‘Scramble assault craft,’ he said. Around him, the command crew snapped into action. ‘I want their fighters intercepted. Concentrate macro-cannon fire on the lead cruiser. Target the rest with the bombardment cannons. Let us see if we can break up their formation.’

Kanim grunted. ‘What?’ he murmured.

Suboden looked up at him. ‘What is it, shaman?’

‘Something…’ Kanim shook his head. ‘The wind is blowing in the wrong direction.’

‘We are in the void. There is no wind.’

‘Even so. It feels as if all the spirits are screaming. As if something is coming…’

‘My lord, the lead enemy cruiser is launching boarding torpedoes,’ a serf called out.

Suboden tore his gaze from the Stormseer and turned. ‘Target?’

‘Everywhere, my lord.’

The air inside of the boarding torpedo was thick with the smell of blood and incense. Markus idly tested the chains that bound him to the inside hull. He

was one of thirteen volunteers aboard this vessel, and he could hear the others murmuring, praying or singing softly. Like theirs, his flesh was cut into more pleasing shapes, and marked with ash and holy oils. Infection had already crept in, leaving the wounds livid and weeping.

His bones moved within him, snapped by the force of the torpedo's launch. The vessel was meant for the blessed ones, not mere mortals. A sign of their favour. Every jolt and judder sent new paroxysms of agony through him.

It was a good pain. A gift, even. He grimaced as something stirred in his guts. The cold radiated by the hull bit into his back, numbing his shoulders and hips. But there was a fire in his belly, stretching up through him. The fire whispered to him. Sang to him. ***Soon, child, soon,*** it rumbled. Even at a whisper, it was akin to the roar of a conflagration. A hungry, grasping sound that tugged at every nerve in his body. ***Soon, you will split like the sweetest fruit, and give way before me. I will wear your skull to war, and carry it with me to his throne. Khorne sees you, child. Khorne waits for you, little brother.***

'Yes,' Markus whispered. 'Oh yes. Take my bones and meat, and make of them a glorious ruin, O prince of fire and shadow.'

The presence within him growled in satisfaction. ***I will, little brother. Your fat will oil my blade. Your bones will be my chest-plate and your scalp, my loincloth. I will eat of you, and spit your blood upon my path, to mark it. Rejoice.***

Its growl thrummed through him, and he stiffened in delight. To be torn asunder by a prince of murder was all that he had ever desired. To cast himself into the fires of blood and slaughter was a gift greater than any a man might receive.

And well deserved, little brother, for did you not take the skulls of the worthy, and spill seas of wine-dark blood? Did you not commit slaughter in our father's name? Rejoice. Call out to him, so that he might witness this moment…

'Rejoice, brothers and sisters,' Markus said. The harsh croak of his voice echoed, silencing the others, save for the singers. 'Rejoice. For we are blessed beyond all others.' Chains clinked as heads turned towards him. Stiffly, and painfully. Once, Markus had led such a congregation to war. They had daubed themselves in blood and ash, and bared their flesh to the weapons of the foe – all so that the Blood God might look upon them with a moment's favour. And now, here was his reward at last.

Another thrum of pain reverberated through the hollows of him. He could feel the presence within growing larger. Stronger. The closer they drew to their target, the more powerful it became. But though the key was in the lock, it had yet to be turned. Only through blood sacrifice could the sons of Khorne frenzy forth in all their crimson glory.

We are here, little brother. We crouch at the threshold, waiting for you to throw wide the gate. You shall be the spark which births a glorious conflagration. Rejoice!

'The Allslaughter descends, brothers and sisters – and we are its red edge,' Markus intoned. 'Chosen by the blessed ones, who carried his word to us on cosmic winds. They give us this glory, my friends – they sacrifice their own joys, for us. So that we might know the joys of the abattoir, such as none have known them.'

The boarding torpedo was shuddering. Dim lumens flickered, and he could hear the hiss of escaping air. Proximity alarms moaned. The enemy was firing upon them. But it did not matter. The blade descended and no power in the universe could halt it.

He saw faces pressed against the bloody flesh of his fellow sacrifices. Eager and impatient, the sons of Khorne clawed at the skeins of meat that barred their path. The thing within Markus growled in pleasure, and he felt his wounds strain and split at the sound. Blood poured and pooled upon the deck, the heady reek of it thick in his nostrils.

'*Gloria Aeterna,* brothers and sisters,' he croaked. '*Gloria Aeterna!'*

The others answered him in kind. *'Gloria Aeterna!'*

The klaxons were louder now, the lumens impossibly bright. Blinding in their intensity.

'Gloria Aeterna!'

His heartbeat sped up, so fast that he thought it would burst. The torpedo was shaking fiercely, as if it might fly apart at any moment. Between the cracks in the hull, he saw a red glow, growing brighter and deeper and he heard the howl of the thing within him.

'Gloria Aeterna!'

Markus closed his eyes.

'Gloria Aet–'

'*Impact,*' a tactical servitor droned.

‘Penetration?’ Suboden demanded. Sirens wailed, as crew shouted from their stations. The battle-barge had intercepted a few of the torpedoes, but not all. On the viewscreen, Stormhawk interceptors hurtled through the void, duelling with the enemy’s own attack craft.

‘*Negative penetration,*’ the servitor replied. ‘*Scanning… scanning… secondary impact. Tertiary. Negative penetration.*’

‘That’s something to be thankful for, at least.’ Suboden studied the tacticum overlay that flickered about his throne. Ident-runes moved in all directions. One of the enemy cruisers had managed to slide past the *Silent Horseman* and engage the *Crassus.* Communications were still out, and he could only watch as the two vessels spun in a slow, fiery gavotte.

Broadsides lit up the void, as the two cruisers passed each other. Shields were of little use at such close quarters. It was down to endurance, and the *Crassus* had precious little of that left. She died in silence, her guns spitting fire at her killer. The cruiser that murdered her succumbed a moment later, caught by a lucky broadside from *Orlanda’s Wrath*. It whipsawed away, shedding fragments of hull plating. Its guns still blazed as it spun slowly away, the flickers of light punching into nearby frigates. One was consumed. Others reeled, coming to new headings, seeking escape, as the *Silent Horseman* raged towards them.

The command deck trembled as the bombardment cannons roared again. While normally used to pound a planet flat, the dorsal-mounted cannons could be put to great effect in ship-to-ship combat. Frigates hung burning in the void as the high-powered warheads shredded their hulls like paper. The remaining enemy cruisers were standing off, launching boarding torpedoes and fighter craft.

‘They want our hides for their *ger*,’ Suboden muttered.

Kanim nodded. The Stormseer leaned on his staff, watching the carnage with a flat gaze. Suboden couldn’t say what the shaman was searching for, but part of him hoped that Kanim didn’t find it. ‘A good ship is worth much. The *Silent Horseman* would be a mighty prize.’

‘And that gives us our opportunity. We can hold them – give Keel a chance to reach Almace.’ Suboden activated the command channel, hoping that at least a few of his remaining ships would hear it. ‘*Orlanda’s Wrath,* all escorts, reverse thrusters – retro-burn. Fall back to designated rallying point alpha-zeta–’

His command was interrupted by a sound like the clashing of many cymbals,

and the skirling of pipes. He hunched forward, hands clasped to his aching ears as the sound grew shrill. Through narrowed eyes, he saw the bridge serfs collapsing, their bodies convulsing in apparent agony. ‘What…?’ he croaked.

‘Witchery,’ Kanim hissed. The Stormseer leaned against his staff, blood leaking from the corners of his eyes. ‘Powerful. I…’ His words were lost in a sudden clamouring that came from everywhere and nowhere at once.

The air pulsed with greasy light. It spun and danced across the deck in malign fashion. The vox spat a stream of gibberish – children’s voices, raised in song; a woman, weeping; animals snarling over a scrap of squealing meat; flies humming in their hundreds. The din grew unbearable, seeming to fill the entirety of the bridge.

Beneath the cacophony, Suboden heard the voices of his crew raised in alarm. Requests for assistance echoed through the vox, all but drowned out by the malignant noises. Something was aboard the ship. He could hear it crawling between the deck plates, and tramping on the outer hull. Sensor-feeds began to flicker and go black.

Quickly, despite the pain radiating through his skull, he cycled through the remaining feeds, searching for the cause of it all. He spotted one of the crashed ships, crumpled atop the *Silent Horseman*’s dorsal section, amid the forest of turrets and sensor relays. It was a small thing – barely a fighter craft. There had been people aboard – he could see what was left of them smeared across the hull, or tangled in the wreckage. But there was something wrong with the corpses. They were moving. Twitching. As if something were trapped within them, fighting to be free.

‘Kanim – shaman, look,’ he growled, magnifying the image.

Kanim shook his head and peered at the images. He spat a single word in Khorchin. Suboden nodded. ‘We have been tricked,’ he said, his voice harsh.

On the feed, the convulsing bodies had begun to bubble and steam, despite the lack of atmosphere and heat. The raw flesh split like overripe fruit, and something forced its way free, something too large to fit in such a small space, something larger than a man or Space Marine, something with great wings that snapped out to their full extent, even as the feed went black. Suboden cycled through, and saw similar scenes repeated across the hull – a great legion of nightmare shapes was now clinging to his ship.

There was a sound from above, like the clangour of a great bell. He knew what it was, even if he couldn’t see it. It was the sound of a monstrous axe, striking the hull. Again and again and again. Hacking itself a path right to the

bridge – not just through the physical substance of the vessel, but through the very idea of its solidity.

‘Impossible,’ he muttered.

‘Witchery,’ Kanim said again, his voice hoarse.

Suboden snarled and shoved himself to his feet. Rage and helplessness thrummed through him – the latter was a feeling he was not used to. He looked at Kanim, hoping that the Stormseer had some suggestion, but the other White Scar simply shook his head. There was nothing to be done, save endure.

The sound grew louder. Suboden drew his tulwar, and cast aside the sheath.

The chill air turned treacle-thick, and the coolant mist billowing from the cycle-vents turned an ugly shade of crimson. Suboden heard the crash of blades and the stamp of hooves. The mist thickened and rose, like a serpent readying itself to strike.

And then something made of rage and fire stepped from it. A face like an open wound twisted into something that might have been a smile. Teeth like knives gleamed in the light. Wings stretched, filling the command deck, end to end. Beneath these wings, red shapes took form – lean and thirsty, they prowled about like hounds at the feet of their master.

‘*Yaksha,*’ Kanim spat. Lightning crawled across his armour as he slammed the ferrule of his staff down. Suboden raised his tulwar, igniting the artificer powercells within it.

With a roar, the Neverborn charged.

‘It worked, Kelim,’ Kespu said. Kelim could hear the anticipation in his voice. *‘I can hear the Neverborn singing from here. We should make the kill now. Take them, while they’re preoccupied.’*

‘By all means, Kespu. Which would you prefer? The cruiser perhaps? Take care, lest you wind up like Gorham.’ The *Skullhound* was dying, its communications severed. In its death throes, its guns blindly chewed the flanks of its allies. Kelim gestured to Timp. ‘Tell our main batteries to target the *Skullhound*, before they accidentally destroy one of us.’

Timp hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. He snapped to, robes swirling. Kelim turned back to the holo-screen, and Kespu. ‘Any communications from the Thessalonian?’ As he spoke, the *Skullhound* met its end, blazing away into ragged tatters of hull and endo-structure. *Lorgar’s*

Word purred in pleasure. The death cry of another ship was its favourite sound.

‘None, of course. He is not one of us, Kelim. And he is eager, besides.’

‘So I see.’ Kelim watched as *Dagmar’s Penitence* closed with the enemy’s remaining heavy cruiser. The two ships traded fire with almost stately aplomb. Ordinarily, void-war was a thing of cold, distant calculus. A game of numbers and calculations. This close, it was more like a brawl, and every vessel a punch-drunk fighter, swinging blind and hoping to connect. That was why he’d decided to invoke the Neverborn. There was an old Terran axiom – the odds weren’t even, unless they were on your side.

He enhanced the visual feeds. Daemons crawled across the hull of the battle-barge – tearing up armour plates, swarming into the weapons batteries, or capering wildly atop sensor towers. Only a few of the boarding torpedoes had struck home – the rest tumbled broken amongst the battle-debris, their cargoes screeching in soundless frustration as they watched the carnage unfold about them, out of reach. The Neverborn would not last – even this close to the Great Rift, they could not maintain their hold on reality forever. So long as the blood ran, they would have sway.

But that was good enough. The battle-barge would be easy prey. ‘Kespu – bring the *Ucephalot* into a flanking position. I want that battle-barge.’

‘*Together, then?’*

‘There is enough glory for the pair of us, brother. Let the Thessalonian have his fun. And Gorham gave us an opening. We may as well exploit it.’ Kelim glanced at Timp. ‘Take us in. All ahead full.’

The axe swept down, crunching into the deck. Suboden staggered back, his hearts thundering. The Neverborn whirled, wrenching its weapon free in the process. It seemed to change shape from one moment to the next, like a plume of smoke caught in a charnel wind. One moment, it filled the deck. In the next, it was only slightly larger than him. Back and forth, as if it could not decide what it wished to be. Or perhaps it simply didn’t care.

It roared again – a sound like no animal or man had ever made. Instead, it was the clangour of steel and the snapping of bones. Its voice was that of violence itself. Suboden cried out in pain as the noise assaulted his senses. A knotted, rust-coloured fist knocked him from his feet and sent him skidding across the deck.

As he forced himself to his feet, he saw his crew fighting – dying. Klaxons

screamed, and White Scars flooded the deck, attempting to stymie the daemonic intrusion. A white-armoured body was cast into the air, all but bisected by the slash of his opponent's axe. Another warrior was pulled from his feet by one of the reptilian hounds that had accompanied the larger Neverborn, and shaken so fiercely that his spine snapped.

Lightning seared the air, as Kanim shouted his defiance. Tulwar in one hand, staff in the other, the shaman was the living eye of the storm. Where he walked, daemons were cast screaming back into the realms between. But he could not be everywhere at once.

The gigantic Neverborn fastened its white-hot gaze on the Stormseer, as if sensing that he posed the greatest threat to its existence. It turned from Suboden with a dismissive snort. Suboden stabbed his tulwar into the deck and levered himself to his feet. The servos of his battleplate responded sluggishly as he started after the creature. 'Kanim – behind you, shaman,' he roared.

Kanim turned, even as the axe descended. The Stormseer lashed out and the daemon stepped back, its body wrapped in lightning. It roared and its wings gave a great flap, knocking the Stormseer sprawling. A massive hoof slammed down, nearly crushing the life from him. Kanim scrambled aside, but was caught by a glancing blow from the axe. He crashed down hard, denting the deck. His staff rolled free of his limp grip.

Suboden cried out and leapt, slashing his tulwar across the daemon's back. A flood of steaming ichor spattered the deck. It spun, axe hissing out, doglike muzzle twisted in a snarl. Suboden felt the heat of the blade as it passed within a hair's breadth of taking his head. A normal man would have died with the first blow. His enhanced reflexes and speed were the only things standing between him and death. He slashed out again and again, trying to lead the hulking Neverborn away from Kanim.

Something struck him from the side, knocking him to the deck. One of the hound-things snapped its jaws shut on his forearm and began to worry at him, jerking its frilled skull back and forth with bone-rattling force. He'd dropped his blade and was forced to seize his combat knife. The thing's teeth cracked the ceramite, and he could hear the hiss of acidic drool burning away white paint. He slammed the knife into the side of its malformed skull, piercing whatever passed for its brain.

As he used the blade to lever open its jaws, Suboden felt the deck tremble. He managed to roll aside, even as the daemon's axe sank into the already

dissolving body of the hound-thing. The blade gashed his chest a moment later, knocking him backwards. His chest-plate smouldered, power cables leaking fluid. Something inside him had been broken, and he coughed blood. Another blow sheared part of his shoulder-plate off and numbed his arm. Desperate, he closed with the creature, knife held low.

A great claw fastened about his head and shoulders, and he was wrenched from his feet. The daemon lifted him to the level of its piggish eyes and bared its teeth in a grin of triumph. Suboden matched its grin with his own, and slashed out with his knife. One of the hateful eyes went out and the creature shrieked. It hurled him across the deck and he slammed into a cogitator bank, before rolling to the floor in a cascade of sparks and broken metal. He fumbled at the smashed cogitators, trying to pull himself to his feet.

The daemon laughed gutturally as it approached. Unintelligible curses dripped from its lips like molten brass as it readied its axe in preparation for taking his head.

Then – a flash of azure. The daemon screamed. Suboden saw Kanim thrust his staff forward like a spear, lightning writhing about the totems that adorned it. Crackling strands of electricity ensnared the daemon, looping about its limbs and neck like chains. Blood dripped from Kanim's nose and eyes, matting his moustaches and beard as he sought to bind the creature. He chanted, his voice a hoarse roar. He hauled back on his staff, drawing the strands of psychic lightning taut. The daemon staggered, arms outstretched, hooves scraping burning gouges in the deck.

Suboden quickly reclaimed his tulwar. Kanim wouldn't be able to hold the daemon for long. 'Strike, my khan! Strike true,' the Stormseer bellowed. Suboden lunged, ignoring the drag of his damaged battleplate and the ache of his wounds. His tulwar's power field hummed as he rammed it up into the daemon's chest. He angled the blade for where he hoped its heart would be. There was a moment of resistance, and then a gust of stinking heat that stripped the remainder of the paint from his gauntlets. Something like tar spilled over him, smearing across his face, blinding him as the daemon howled in apparent agony.

The howl went on and on, rising to unbearable heights. Suboden forced the blade deeper, seeking something solid. The howl spiralled up into a shrill shriek that crashed against his senses, and he staggered, off balance. He fell to his knees as the daemon came apart in gouts of sticky ichor. For a moment, Kanim's lightning licked over him, burning the filth from his ravaged battleplate.

Panting, Suboden met the Stormseer's crimson gaze. 'Do you still live, shaman?'

'For a given value of the word,' Kanim croaked. He spat blood onto the deck and wiped at his eyes. Suboden looked around. The command deck resembled a slaughterhouse. The last of the daemonic hounds had fallen to bolt shell and blade. Many of the serfs were dead – butchered by the now-vanished Neverborn. Several White Scars were mingled amongst these bodies. The survivors picked their way through the dead, weapons at the ready. Smoke hung thick on the air from damaged equipment, and torn cabling dangled, hissing and spitting.

The viewscreen was riven by static, but Suboden could make out one of the enemy cruisers closing in fast on the *Silent Horseman*'s port side. The inter-ship vox was down, and few of the crew were capable of manning their stations. Suboden hauled himself towards his command throne. The tacticum displays flickered in and out, but he could read the situation regardless. The enemy were within range, and the *Silent Horseman* was wounded.

Down below, fresh crew were dragging aside the dead, and manning empty stations. Suboden watched them, regret gnawing at him. If they'd had more time, just a few moments…

'Suboden,' Kanim said softly.

Suboden looked up. The enemy were still closing on the *Silent Horseman*. But now, standing firm between them, was the battered shape of *Orlanda's Wrath.*

'Keel,' Kanim said, and it sounded like a sigh. Suboden looked at him, and Kanim shook his head. Suboden felt a chill, and turned back to the viewscreen.

The weapons batteries of *Orlanda's Wrath* vomited silent fire, and one of the enemy ships twisted like a wounded wolf and fell away, dying. The heavy cruiser spat death full in the face of the enemy, and brief blooms of hateful light shivered in the dark as escorts were consumed by the fusillade.

'Vox them – all channels. Now,' Suboden said, half in wonder, watching as Keel set himself against the foe. Static rasped across the vox. Motes of fire danced across the black. Then, Keel's voice. Thin with fatigue and distorted by static.

'If you're going to go, khan, now is the time. Our firing tubes are dry and we're being held together by prayers and good intentions. We can't hold them

off much longer.'

'You are a brave man, commodore-captain,' Suboden said. He relaxed slowly, hands flexing. Kanim wouldn't meet his gaze, and he wondered if the shaman had foreseen this moment.

'Make it count, is all I ask. Save Almace.'

'They're diverting power to forward engines,' Kanim murmured.

'She's an old bitch, but she's got a bit of bite left,' Keel continued. Suboden knew that the captain was no longer speaking to him. *'They're going to feel it. Emperor damn me if they don't. They're going to know who we were. All ahead full.'*

As he heard Keel's command, Suboden barked orders, hoping he had enough crew left to see them enacted. The deck shuddered as the battle-barge began to withdraw. Battered escorts closed in, shielding the larger vessel. Not many of those left either. He looked at Kanim. 'The spirits told you this would happen, didn't they?'

Kanim nodded. 'I saw the skull beneath his skin,' he said.

On the viewscreen, *Orlanda's Wrath* arrowed ponderously towards the closest of the enemy cruisers. The crimson vessels continued to fire, lashing the oncoming ship with waves of punishment. But she didn't stop.

When the impact came, it was akin to the birth of a new star – a flash of brilliant white, splitting the dark in two. The command deck shook as the reverberations of the conflagration rippled outwards through the void. Klaxons whooped and crew fought to compensate as the light swelled, filling the viewscreen. A halo of fire radiated in all directions. Smaller vessels were consumed instantly, swept aside as if by the hand of a giant.

'Status?' Suboden asked, as the glare faded. Damage reports rolled in. He looked around the bridge, seeing only corpses and smoke. He bent his head, suddenly weary. The remaining enemy vessel listed badly. It had been caught at the edge of the conflagration, and was in no shape to pursue. Part of him wanted to finish the task – to break it. To take a toll of scalps in payment for Keel and the others.

'Orders, my lord,' a serf coughed.

Suboden was silent for long moments. Weighing his choices. Then, with a grunt, he said, 'Bring us about. Broadcast the new heading to all surviving ships.' He slumped back into his command throne. There was blood in his

armour, and in his mouth. Even as Kanim had foreseen. He swallowed and looked at the shaman. Kanim’s face was a mask of bruises and blood, but his eyes were determined. He nodded.

Suboden laid his tulwar across his knees. He would not sheathe it until the battle was done. One way or another.

‘Set course for Almace.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

80:04:40

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Eamon listened as his officers spoke, but took little of it in. Outside, the sky was the colour of an open wound, and crowded with aircraft. Every aristocrat with sense was getting out of the line of fire. They were fleeing the city in droves, heading for estates in the mountains or valleys. Most, he knew, would drag the earth over themselves until the shooting had stopped. Then they would seek to deal with the victor.

Though the thought repulsed him on a spiritual level, he could not find it in himself to judge them too harshly. He wanted to flee himself. But where was there to go? And, in any event, he could not abandon his charge.

The thought of the Anchorite sent a pulse of fear through him. Calder would know by now, or soon enough. Then – what? Execution, perhaps. It wasn't fair, but what was in these trying times? He closed his eyes, and tried to calm the thudding of his heart.

The strategium chamber echoed with the sounds of petty disagreement. Half of the officers were noble-born, and they bristled at having a man like Tyre in command. Ordinarily it was kept under control, but tension had a way of widening the cracks. Long-simmering resentments were coming to light, and Tyre wasn't helping matters.

He heard the swordmaster curse and bellow, and his aristocratic subordinates return fire. They wanted to concentrate the defences on the estates and properties of their clans. Those officers whose only family was the Ecclesiarchy disagreed. Tyre fought to calm both sides in his usual manner – by insulting both parties. Back and forth it went, all of them steadfastly ignoring the fact that none of them were in charge, and when it came down to it, Calder would determine where and when the companies of the regiment mobilised.

'You look ill.'

Eamon opened his eyes. Canoness Lorr was studying him with her usual flat gaze. She stood beside his seat as always, her hands clasped behind her back. He could not tell what was going on in her head. Had never been able to, in fact. He'd always found her impassivity oddly comforting.

'Are you worried?' he asked, forcing a smile. Her expression didn't change.

'If you perish, morale will suffer.'

Eamon snorted and tried to pay attention to the argument, but it all seemed so pointless. Lorr was still looking at him. Her eyes pierced him to the quick. They narrowed slightly. 'What is it, my lord?' she murmured intently, leaning close.

Eamon hesitated. Lorr knew that there was a secret at Almace's heart, though not what it was. She knew that it was his responsibility – and by extension, hers – to guard it. And she took that responsibility very seriously.

For an instant, just one, he considered ordering her to eliminate the threat. She would do it, he knew. She would do it with a hymn on her lips. She would kill Calder, whatever the cost. All to preserve the secret.

But he could not say the words. Could not ask her to do such a thing. Could not bring himself to commit such treachery, even in good cause.

He shook his head. 'Nothing,' he said softly. 'Not sleeping well. I'll be fine.'

'You drink too much,' she said bluntly. 'That is why you do not sleep.'

He forced a smile and nodded. 'Perhaps you are right. Excuse me.' He stood. Officers turned, some making to rise. He waved them back to their seats. 'Keep talking, gentlemen. I'm listening.'

As the argument resumed, he went to the window and looked out over the city. His city. Beautiful and sad in equal measure. There was so much he'd wanted to do. Reforms he'd hoped to implement. It took time. It always took time. But now, there was no time.

He bowed his head and tried to pray, but couldn't think of the words. He looked up, at the face of the God-Emperor, captured in coloured glass. A proud face, wise and kind. He knew that this depiction was based on his own great-grandfather. No one alive could remember what the Emperor of Mankind had truly looked like. Even the official accounts differed. Every writer seemed to have his or her own idea of who the God-Emperor had been.

Eamon, as a theologian, had his own thoughts on the matter. They were often contradictory, and he had yet to write them down, but he'd always intended to

compose a monograph on the subject of such diverse perceptions and their meaning for the faithful. But it seemed blasphemous to even consider the subject with anything less than fervent awe. It seemed blasphemous to question.

But he couldn't help it. His life had been full of questions, from the very beginning. Things were no simpler now than before. The Anchorite cautioned him to have faith, but faith in what – the God-Emperor? Calder?

Or maybe himself.

Questioning his own decisions had become second nature to him. A planetary governor, even a cardinal-governor, could not afford to act on impulse. Too much depended on his decisions. His first instinct was to ensure that the Anchorite remained a secret. But another part of him wondered if it was not meant to be. Why else would Guilliman have sent Calder and the others, unless it was to protect the Anchorite? This world – this system – meant little in the greater scheme of things.

Past the glass, he saw the faint impression of the refugee vessels crowding the suborbital docking spires. Hundreds of them, mostly small. The larger ones hadn't made it. Rather than thousands of survivors, there were hundreds. All bringing their own stories of terror and armoured monsters.

Lorr had been against letting them dock. She'd insisted they were tainted. Their survival proved that they had succumbed to the blandishments of daemons. Only by agreeing to allow her Sororitas to debrief the survivors – overseen by the Imperial Fists – had he managed to keep her from massacring them wholesale.

He glanced surreptitiously at her. She was watching the arguing officers like a hawk, her hand tapping at the haft of her power maul. Tyre looked at her every so often, and Eamon knew something was passing between them. Finally, she snatched her power maul up, activated it and slammed it down, cracking the table and silencing the military officers.

'Enough,' she snarled.

'The canoness is correct,' Eamon said, seizing on the silence. He looked around the table, meeting the gaze of every man and woman in uniform. 'I have a planetary sermon to give. I expect this matter to be resolved by the time I have completed it. Otherwise I will turn over command of the armies to the canoness…'

Tyre sat back, smiling crookedly. 'Suits me,' he said, with an air of triumph.

Lorr laughed harshly, and her eyes blazed with interest as she took in the suddenly very nervous officers. ‘A burden I will bear gladly,’ she purred.

Eamon nodded. ‘I leave you to it, then.’ His bodyguards fell into step with him as he swept from the chamber. He allowed himself a small smile.

If only all such difficulties were so easily handled.

Data spooled across the strategium feed. Sensor telemetry, augur-feeds, long-range calculations. Reports by private vessels. All of it saying the same thing. The enemy was at the gates. Time was up. Their fleet was smaller than it had been, but still large enough to lay siege to Almace, providing they successfully navigated the asteroid belt.

Calder felt something akin to satisfaction. It was good that the moment had arrived. Now he would see whether his preparations were enough. He turned from the projection and activated an encrypted command channel.

‘*Capulus* – report.’

The vox squalled and whined for long moments, until a voice replied. *‘Strike cruiser* Capulus *moving into final position, lieutenant.’*

‘Good. Wait until the enemy have taken up orbit before launching strikes. Concentrate on the southern hemisphere. Maintain vox silence.’ He paused. ‘If the battle turns, withdraw from the system. Return to the crusade.’

There was a pointed silence. And then, *‘And tell them what?’*

‘That we failed.’

‘Noted. Dorn be with you, lieutenant.’

‘And with you, *Capulus.*’ Calder cut the channel. The *Capulus* would wait just out of sensor range, behind one of Almace’s moons. When the enemy arrived, the strike cruiser would do what it could. They all would. Whatever came, they would not be found wanting.

He turned again to the sensor-feed from the asteroid mining facilities. Karros had managed to calm things down significantly, but they were still tense. The Raven Guard’s last report had mentioned that he was entering talks with the leaders of the uprising. He flicked through the feed, cycling farther and farther out from the facilities. To the very edge of the asteroid belt. And there, in the distance – a gleam of light, growing steadily brighter.

‘I estimate a day, maybe two.’

Calder stiffened. He hadn’t heard Solaro enter the chamber. The Reiver

seemed to have no more substance than a shadow when he put his mind to it. ‘Report.’

‘You were right,’ Solaro said. Calder turned. The Raven Guard stood a respectful distance away, at the foot of the dais. Calder gestured for him to ascend. ‘He’s hiding something. Took me a few days, but I followed him to a vault – or perhaps a crypt. Hidden at the heart of this place. The locks are biometrically encrypted.’

‘Other defences?’ They spoke over one of the dozen encrypted vox-channels that the Raven Guard employed. To anyone capable of listening in, it would simply sound like static.

‘Combat-servitors. Antiques. Easy enough to slip past.’ Solaro shrugged. ‘I could do it again, if you like. With a few skin samples, I could beat the encryption.’

Calder paused, considering. ‘What else?’

It was Solaro’s turn to pause. ‘He was talking to someone.’

‘Who?’

‘I couldn’t determine that. Himself, perhaps. Or maybe a prisoner?’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Who else would you keep sealed away like that?’

Calder nodded. A fair point. Solaro leaned back against the rail of the dais, the very picture of ease. The Reiver had an informal manner. Karros seemed to encourage a certain lack of discipline in his warriors. ‘Would you like me to procure a skin sample?’ Solaro went on. ‘I can be in and out within the hour.’

‘No. Did you record your discovery?’

Solaro hesitated. Calder gestured. ‘I know you record everything. Give it to me, please.’ Solaro sighed and extracted a data-spike from a hidden port on his vambrace. Calder took it and weighed it contemplatively on his palm.

‘What are you going to do?’ Solaro asked.

Calder closed his fist gently about the data-spike. ‘Deal with the matter directly, but politely. As a Huscarl should. Where is Eamon now?’

‘The Pulpit,’ Solaro said. It wasn’t the chamber’s official title, but it suited it well enough. The cathedral-palace’s central vox-caster station occupied the uppermost spires of the structure, where blue skies began to give way to the

troposphere.

Calder turned. ‘Come with me.’

They made their way quickly to the central transit-shaft, despite the crowded corridors. Since the enemy fleet had been sighted, the cathedral-palace had seen a boom in its population. Not just troops, but scribes and officials. They packed the corridors of power, shouting to be seen and heard by the cardinal-governor’s staff. The lord deacons of the outlying cities wanted reinforcements; representatives from the trade unions wanted the bulwarks pulled down – or more of them put up – in their competitors’ territories; lay-priests and missionaries demanded the cardinal-governor’s ear; and the spokespeople for the noble families wanted to be evacuated.

Despite the furore, the crowds parted before Calder. Scribes and noblemen alike scrambled from his path as he made his way down the main artery of the cathedral-palace, Solaro trailing in his wake. Any not fast enough were shoved aside – if, gently. Cyber-cherubs followed at a discreet distance, artificial eyes recording everything.

‘I hate those things,’ Solaro murmured as they entered the transit platform. Both Primaris wore their helms, and spoke through the vox. ‘They should know better than to spy on us. It is almost heresy.’

‘They should know better than to do many things. And yet they do them all the same.’

Solaro laughed. ‘True enough.’ He looked at Calder. ‘They can’t tell us apart, you know. The humans, I mean.’

‘We’re human.’

‘Unaugmented humans.’

‘Are they colour-blind?’

Solaro studied him for a moment.

‘They can’t tell the difference between a Primaris and a brother of the First Founding.’

‘I suppose to a child, all giants look alike.’

Solaro grunted. ‘My brothers can tell the difference.’

‘As can mine. But then, we are not children.’ Calder looked at him. He wondered why Solaro was confiding in him. Perhaps it was simply that they were both Primaris. It was easier to talk to someone who understood, even if

they wore a different heraldry. ‘They will accept you, in time. It might be decades, or centuries, but there will come a day when there is no difference between us.’

‘They think I am to replace them.’

‘You are. As every recruit is meant to replace a veteran.’

Solaro was silent for a moment. Then, ‘Have they accepted you?’

Calder didn’t reply. The transit platform juddered to a halt, and the doors opened. The hall beyond led directly to the Pulpit. The corridor was mostly glass, save for the marble floor. The glass was void-hardened, and the frames that held the panes looked like gold, but were actually made from a ferro-ceramite blend. The Pulpit extended off the side of the spire. It was a circular chamber, its outer walls studded with vox-antenna and aerial relays. From within, a voice could be sent from one side of the planet to the other, as well as to the vessels in orbit.

To either side, and above, the skies were visible, as well as the orbital docking platforms that stretched upwards into the black. Tiny motes that were ships moved across the heavens, seeking safe berths against the encroaching storm. Calder watched them for a moment. The docklands of Almace were not so large as some he’d seen – compared to those of Terra, they were barely there at all – but they were large enough to provide a tempting target for the enemy.

The docklands had their own defences – several wings of attack craft and macro-cannon batteries. Enough to see off a casual raid. There was no telling if they would survive what was coming. Calder had ordered several squads of Intercessors to lend their efforts to the defences. Hopefully, they would be enough.

Eamon’s guards were waiting for them at the end of the corridor. The Crusaders didn’t move as Calder approached. He stopped as they raised their shields and locked them together. He detected the slight hum of a power field. ‘I need to speak with him.’

They didn’t move. Nor did they speak. Tyre had mentioned something about a vow of silence, though he hadn’t given any particulars. Calder suspected he knew the reason. Behind him, he heard the sound of a combat blade being drawn from its sheath. The Crusaders tensed. Calder waved Solaro back. ‘No,’ he said.

He studied the Crusaders. A man and a woman this time, by their body

language. Both tall, their forms hidden beneath carapace armour and heavy robes, and their faces obscured behind featureless helms. He didn't want to kill them. He held up the data-spike. 'I know,' he said simply. 'I know what he's hiding. I would speak with him. Let me pass.'

The slightest of twitches was the only sign that they'd heard his words. His battleplate detected the faint murmur of an encrypted vox conversation, and he relaxed slightly. He knew that they would stand aside. A moment later, he was proven right. The shields parted. Calder glanced at Solaro. 'Stay here.'

He stepped past the guards into the Pulpit. The chamber was circular, with a high, vaulted roof. The walls were covered in vox-recorders and relay equipment, and a dais occupied the centre of the floor. The dais was surrounded by a palisade of vox-casters, each manned by a robed acolyte. Several of these glanced fearfully at Calder as he entered, but Eamon waved them to stillness, as he completed his latest address to the planetary population. 'And we will persevere, my friends. For that is our holy sovereign's will. Have no doubt of that. The time of tribulation is upon us, and we will not be found wanting. Go in glory, my children, and stay in peace.'

The cardinal-governor stepped back, as a triumphal ode started up. A choir of acolytes began to sing into a set of smaller vox-casters just below the dais. As their voices swelled, Eamon joined Calder.

'A good speech.'

'I have some small skill in that regard, I admit.' Eamon looked around. 'That it should have come to this… I cannot help but feel this is the Emperor's judgement upon us. Upon me.'

'And have you done something to deserve His wrath?'

Eamon smiled bitterly. 'A straightforward way of asking me what I'm hiding, lieutenant. Then, I expect no less from a son of Dorn.' He paused. 'You had one of your warriors follow me. To the crypts at the heart of this city.' He glanced at Calder, as if expecting a denial.

Calder nodded. 'I did.' He held up the data-spike. 'He recorded what he saw.'

Eamon looked away. His shoulders slumped, not with resignation but with something Calder thought might have been relief. 'And?' he asked, softly.

'Answer my question.'

‘Or what?’ Eamon asked. There was no defiance there, Calder judged. Simply curiosity. As if Eamon wished to know all the facts before making a decision. It was as if he had been expecting this moment for a long time.

‘Or I will confine you to your quarters and breach the crypt. I have no more time for these games. I need to know what’s in there.’

‘You won’t kill me?’

‘To execute you at this juncture would be to risk a civil revolt. If this city falls, it will not be due to my foolishness.’ Calder looked down at him. ‘It would make things significantly easier if you were to simply tell me.’

Eamon laughed softly. ‘Yes. I expect so.’ He looked at the data-spike. ‘You were more cunning than I gave you credit for. Then, maybe this is the God-Emperor’s will.’ He sighed. ‘Answer me this – what are the chances of our survival at this moment? If all goes well.’

Calder answered immediately. ‘Forty-eight per cent.’

Eamon raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s a bit higher than I expected.’ He shook his head. ‘And yet, not high enough to be a certainty. Very well.’ He looked at Calder. ‘I will take you to the Anchorite. And may the God-Emperor have mercy on my soul and yours.’

Almace, Primus Asteroid Facilities

It had taken a long time for the miners to decide on a spokesperson.

Karros found it heartening. The lack of a leader implied that this was no organised rebellion, but instead a populist revolt. So far, he had seen little to indicate that there was anything more sinister than unhappy labourers to blame for the situation. That meant it could be dealt with quickly.

The enforcers occupied the outer facilities while the miners had been allowed to maintain control of the inner facility and transit-paths. This arrangement sat well with neither side, but there was an equilibrium to it, so long as the Raven Guard occupied the middle ground. The factions had decided to meet in the no-man’s-land between the outer and inner facility – a labyrinth of gantries and causeways that stretched in all directions.

Karros stood on a platform at the heart of the web of steel, the commander of the enforcer detachment beside him. ‘They’re here,’ Regulator Galba said. Galba was a heavyset man, ill-shaped for the tight confines of the mining facilities. He gestured towards an approaching grav-shunt with his shock maul.

‘I am aware. I detected them some time ago,’ Karros said.

‘We should take them into custody as soon as they step onto this platform.’

Karros looked down at the man. ‘We will not.’

Galba shifted nervously. ‘I said that we should. Not that we would.’

Karros studied the man for a moment longer. He didn’t particularly care for Galba. The regulator was a brute and a simpleton, the perfect commander for a punishment garrison. But this was no longer a punishment garrison – it was the front line. He turned away as the shunt came to a stop. Spiros whistled softly. Karros glanced up. Figures in hazard suits and ash-cloaks crowded the highest gantries, just out of auspex range. Galba saw them a moment later. He cursed and groped for his sidearm.

‘Ambush. I knew it. Can’t trust these stinking–’

Karros silenced him with a gesture. ‘If it were an ambush, they would have already started shooting. Likely, they are here to prevent you from doing as you just suggested. Now be silent.’ He stepped forward to meet the miner’s representative. Startled, she stumbled and fell back. He looked down at her, scanning her features and comparing them to the pict-captures of facility labourers.

‘Reyes,’ he said. ‘Sedalia Reyes. Ore-loader, primus-class.’ She was dark, for a void-born. And compact. She wore an ore-loader’s bodyglove, and had a gear-belt cinched about her waist. A number of tools hung from it, including a plasma-cutter. The thin, blade-like device was meant for cutting through solid rock or metal. She also had an autogun slung across her shoulder.

She stared up at him, eyes wide. Karros reached out his hand. ‘I am Lieutenant Karros, of the Raven Guard.’

Reyes averted her eyes, as Karros drew her to her feet. ‘You’re… you’re bigger than I thought,’ she mumbled, as she adjusted the autogun. ‘I didn’t– I’ve never seen one of you before.’

‘I am considered small for my rank,’ Karros said.

She gawped at him. ‘What?’

‘Never mind.’ He paused. ‘You are brave to meet us in the open.’

‘Someone had to. My lord,’ she added, quickly. She straightened, and said, ‘What did you want to say to us?’

Karros let the red gaze of his helm play across the catwalks and gantries

surrounding him, before answering. There were hundreds of them, now. Some young, some old. He knew that Spiros and the others could kill them all, if he gave the order. But to do so would be a waste, and required too much time. ‘The system is under attack. The enemies of man ride fast upon the gates of Almace. You stand between your world and the ships of the foe.’

‘Not my world,’ Reyes spat, suddenly defiant. ‘This here is my world. Just this. I’m void-born and bred.’

‘You are an Imperial citizen, rock-cur,’ Galba snarled, raising his shock maul. ‘And you will do a citizen’s duty!’

‘Quiet,’ Karros rumbled. Galba blanched and stepped back. Karros looked at Reyes. ‘They will take these facilities as well. Almace alone will not satisfy them.’

‘There’s thousands of leagues of tunnels,’ she said half-heartedly.

‘And how long can you hold out when you lose access to hydroponics and the hydrogen recyclers? Or when they begin exposing parts of the facility to the vacuum? We can survive that. You cannot.’ Karros released her. ‘If you wish to have any hope of survival, you will listen to me.’

‘What– what about our grievances?’

Karros paused. She was brave, if nothing else. ‘And what grievances would these be?’

‘They were going to abandon us,’ Reyes said. She glared at Galba as she spoke. ‘Seal the facility, destroy the generators and leave us to suffocate. That’s why we took over.’

‘Protocol demands–’ Galba began, his face flushed.

‘Protocol is suspended,’ Karros said. ‘You are both hereby seconded to my command, by order of the cardinal-governor.’ He boosted his vox. ‘You are all hereby placed under my authority. You are no longer miners or revolutionaries. You are soldiers. If you cannot fight, some other task will be found for you. But from this moment on, you answer to me. I will now give you a moment to voice any objections you might have.’

Galba coughed. ‘My lord, this is highly questionable. These rock-curs can’t–’

Karros gestured. Spiros caught Galba by the skull and *twisted.* The regulator gave a little squawk as his bones snapped. His boot-heels thudded against the floor as Spiros let him slump. Chayn and the others raised their boltguns,

covering the remaining enforcers. Karros nodded. ‘Objections noted.’ He looked down at Reyes. ‘What about you?’

‘N-no, my lord,’ she whispered, staring at Galba’s body.

‘Good.’ He turned to the enforcers. ‘Which of you is second-in-command?’

One of them stepped forward, somewhat hesitantly. ‘Enforcer Desh, my lord,’ he said, with a shaky salute. Karros reached down and tore the sigil of rank from Galba’s sleeve. He extended the patch to Desh.

‘You are now Regulator Desh. Do a better job than your predecessor and you might even survive.’ He turned, letting his red gaze play across the crowded gantries. ‘That goes for all of you. Obey my orders and you may well live to continue your labours. Disobey and die – either at the hands of the enemy, or mine. Those are your only choices.’

He drew his bolt pistol and hefted it meaningfully.

‘I suggest you decide quickly.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

The bulkhead hissed open, releasing a gust of chill, stale air. Ancient recyclers kicked on, stirring the atmosphere. Calder followed Eamon into the dimly lit chamber, his auto-senses immediately registering a towering presence to his left. He turned, hand falling automatically to his sidearm. ‘You wanted to see what I have been hiding,’ Eamon said. ‘Here he is. Lieutenant Calder – meet the Anchorite.’

‘Welcome.’

The voice was at once awful and comforting. Calder paused, hand on his weapon, as the Anchorite, huge and monstrous, stepped into the light. The ancient Contemptor Dreadnought was a towering presence, bipedal and hulking, with only the basest resemblance to a human shape. A giant of ceramite and iron. A war machine from a forgotten age, its hull marked with sigils of purity and prayer scrolls. Its arms ended in two great, crushing claws that flexed and whined idly.

Calder stared. Contemptor Dreadnoughts were rare these days. The machine bore no heraldry, and no colours. It was grey and bare of all ornamentation. The ancient war machine observed him with glowing optical sensors, but made no move towards him. ‘You are a new thing, under the sun,’ it – he – rumbled. ‘Have all of the sons of Dorn grown so in stature over the centuries of my isolation?’

‘No. I – we – are a new breed. Or perhaps an old one, depending.’ Calder pulled his hand away from his bolt pistol. ‘Who are you?’

‘Young Eamon told you. I am the Anchorite.’

‘Your name.’

‘I have no name. The man I was – is dead. I am all that stands here. A humble bearer of words. Look. See.’ Lumens flickered to life, revealing the walls and the innumerable lines of script carved into them.

Calder looked from the walls to the Dreadnought. ‘Bearer of words,’ he said flatly. A sudden anger pulsed in him. He thought he knew now why Eamon had been so reluctant to reveal this particular secret. ‘A peculiar phrase.’ He looked at Eamon. ‘Explain. Now.’

‘Leave him, son of Dorn. This is not Eamon’s doing, nor the doing of his ancestors. They are and have been my captors – my hosts – for longer than you have been as you are. And not by their choice, I assure you.’

‘Who are you to assure me of anything? A nameless traitor, hidden in the heart of this city. By rights, I should execute you both.’ He tried to hold Eamon’s gaze, but the cardinal-governor shook his head and looked away.

‘Do you know what an anchorite is, boy?’

Something in the Dreadnought’s tone brought Calder up short. ‘I am not familiar with the term, no,’ he said, after a moment. A quick tactical analysis told him that if the Anchorite decided to attack, there was little he could do to harm the war machine. Listening was the best of bad options.

‘A man of faith, who confines himself so as to become closer to his god. That is what an anchorite is, and that is who I am.’

‘And who is your god?’ Calder asked.

‘Who do you think, boy?’ The Anchorite leaned close. ‘There is only one god in this universe, and He sits upon a throne of gold.’

Calder stared up at the Dreadnought, momentarily nonplussed. ‘What?’

‘The God-Emperor, boy. It’s in the title.’ The Anchorite made a sound that might have been a sigh. ‘Theology was never your Legion’s strong suit. Good at building, but not thinking, as Lorgar used to say.’ Another soft, hissing sigh. ‘Lorgar. Salvation and damnation in one. Poor, foolish Lorgar. He couldn’t see that it was a test – a test of our devotion. Of our faith. Then… none of us did.’

‘Except you?’ Calder asked.

‘Not even me. Not at first. I was as angry as any of them. I thought, how dare He deny us, His truest sons. How dare He cast our works into the dust. But things changed, at Calth.’ The Anchorite raised his talons, and studied them. ‘I saw what we were doing, down there in the dark, and thought it only just. An eye for an eye. The scions of Ultramar had torn down our temples and shattered our fanes – had put the faithful to the sword. Was it not just to seek recompense? To meet like with like?’

The Dreadnought turned, ancient servos whirring. ‘Then, an epiphany. A crash of understanding, amid the tumult of war. I saw the futility of it all. Ouroboros, the serpent that devours its own tail. They broke us, and we sought to break them. But we had become stronger for the breaking, and so too might they. And then what? More wars? More vengeance, meted out across the tapestry of the galaxy?’

There was a sound. Calder wondered if the ancient warrior was laughing – or weeping. The Anchorite stretched out a claw and touched the words etched into the metal of his cell. There was something almost wistful in the gesture. ‘I saw then that the cycle could end only one way. So I stopped. I set aside my blade, and bent my knee. I waited for my cousins – for Guilliman’s sons – to kill me, there in the dark. And they might have. But fate had other plans in store.’

‘They spared you,’ Calder said in disbelief. None of this made any sense. It was madness, and yet the evidence was before him.

‘In a manner of speaking.’ The Anchorite made a sound that Calder was now certain was laughter. ‘I was put in chains, and interred in an oubliette. Left to rot for the rest of that war. When my brothers broke themselves on the walls of Terra, I sat in the dark, and prayed for their souls. Things answered me, seeking to sway me from my penance, but I am no stranger to such spirits. The deserts of Colchis were thick with them, like fleas on a cur’s back. I banished them from me and continued my prayers.’

A sudden thought occurred to Calder. ‘This time we speak of… you were not interred in a Dreadnought then.’

‘No. That came later.’

Calder glanced at Eamon. The cardinal-governor cleared his throat. ‘The Anchorite attempted to take his own life. Not the first time, but the most successful, necessitating the procurement of an amniotic sarcophagus.’

Calder had trouble fathoming such a thing. He turned to look at the hulking Dreadnought. The ancient warrior seemed to slump, as if in shame. ‘Why?’

‘I am weak.’ The Dreadnought turned. ‘We were all weak. Weak of soul, weak of body and will. We allowed all that we had built to fall to ruin, for the lies of a few.’

‘Absolution lies only in death,’ Calder recited.

‘Indeed, cousin. But my absolution is denied me. Century upon century I persist. I share my wisdom with the those of the true faith. The faith my brothers – my gene-father – turned from.’

Calder paused, wondering if he’d heard correctly. ‘You share your wisdom?’

‘I was quite the scribe, in my youth. I wrote down the pronouncements of the holy, and committed every prayer to memory. I read one of the first copies of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, that most sacred of texts. See – here, the great passages inscribed upon these walls. Is it not beautiful?’

Calder felt a chill race through him, though he could not say why. He turned, truly seeing the markings for the first time. He looked at Eamon, seeking some answer to a question he could not voice.

‘The Anchorite has been one of the voices guiding the Ecclesiarchy from the beginning,’ the cardinal-governor said softly. ‘So much of what we are is thanks to him, though we have diverged somewhat in recent centuries.’ Eamon’s smile was a brittle thing. Calder wondered what it must have been like for a mortal to learn that the origins of his faith lay in the ramblings of a mad legionary, confined to a war machine.

‘All rivers must find their own way,’ the Anchorite said. ‘Such is the nature of faith.’

‘How?’ Calder asked. ‘How… how did any of this happen?’

‘Mercy,’ the Anchorite said. ‘The future is always born in mercy. It’s giving, or the lack of it. Guilliman spared me. I do not know why. Maybe he saw what I saw. That the way forward could not be built on a foundation of treachery and vengeance. Or maybe…’ He trailed off, servos grinding as he turned away from Calder. ‘I do not know. I know only that I persist, and in persisting, am driven to speak. To share what I learned that day.’

The Anchorite fell silent. Calder felt a peculiar flash of pity for the ancient warrior. ‘He did not speak of you,’ he said.

‘What?’ The Anchorite’s head turned, gears protesting.

‘Guilliman. He did not speak of you when I was assigned this task. Why?’

‘How should I know? Perhaps he has forgotten me.’ A dull rumble of mechanical laughter followed. ‘That would be fitting, I think. A fair reward, for one such as I.’

‘He has not forgotten you,’ Eamon said softly. Calder looked at him. Eamon cleared his throat. ‘After our initial request for aid was ignored, I used a certain code sequence, devised by the primarch when the Anchorite was first given into my ancestor’s keeping.’ Eamon traced his fingers across one of the litanies scratched into the wall. ‘He knew, even then, that the Archenemy would come for their prodigal brother. Perhaps not for millennia, but eventually.’ He looked at Calder, his eyes wet with unshed tears. ‘And now, they have.’ He swallowed. ‘I knew. I knew, the moment we were cut off, the moment contact with the other systems was lost, that the day had come around at last. So I sent a message, hoping that it would find him. Find you.’

Eamon’s voice was thick with emotion. There was fear there, and grief. But also hope. Calder understood. He looked at the Anchorite. ‘We lack the manpower and resources to resist a conventional siege for long.’

‘It will be anything but a conventional siege, I suspect.’ The Anchorite shifted his weight, and the cell shook. ‘My brothers and I espoused a different philosophy of war to most. We believed the quickest blow was best. Dig for the vitals immediately.’ He gestured with a claw for emphasis. ‘If they are here for me, they will attack the cathedral-palace. That will be their focus, to the exclusion of all else.’

‘So I have surmised.’ Calder turned to Eamon. ‘We will need to isolate the cathedral-palace. I had hoped to use it as a supply route between fronts. But if their end goal is to acquire your–’

‘Guest,’ Eamon interjected.

‘Prisoner,’ Calder went on. ‘Then we must prevent that at all costs. We will need to split the city – destroy transit routes, seal access paths and barricade every gate and tunnel. Parts of the city must be sacrificed to save the whole.’ His mind was already conducting the necessary calculations. His earlier strategies were nothing but ash, now. New ones would be required. In a way, it was a relief. It was a simpler thing to defend one area than an entire city. Necessary resources could be freed up and put to better use elsewhere and new defensive measures implemented. But there was no time to complete them all before the enemy arrived. Some would have to be done under fire.

He spared only a brief thought for those he’d impressed into service to

defend Low Town. Their sacrifice was more necessary now than ever. The blood they would shed would buy him the time he needed to make the cathedral-palace inviolate.

His own blood too, come to that. And that of his warriors, and Karros and Suboden. And Eamon as well. All their lives were mortar for his walls.

In the end, that was a price he was more than willing to pay for victory.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

83:00:30

Odoacer System, coreward edge

Amatnim slumped in his command throne, watching the end of his quest approach. Almace was a vibrant orb even at a distance. It was ringed by a wide halo of stellar debris – asteroids and dust, turning with infinitesimal slowness, like a great wheel. Beyond it, an array of orbital defences and dockyards crowned the world.

‘Beautiful, is it not?’ he said to Apis. The other Word Bearer stood nearby, hands clasped behind his back, the very image of the soldier at rest.

‘It looks like a target to me.’

‘But a beautiful one.’

Amatnim studied the hololithic data-feeds from the long-range augurs. The orbital defences were archaic but well maintained, unlike those they’d encountered above Pergamon. The fleet would take heavy losses just getting into position, and there were few of them left as it was. But it would be worth it, in the end. And besides, the gods only promised glory – not that you would live to claim it.

He’d given orders for the rest of the fleet to take up an approach formation to navigate the debris field. The sooner they were through, the better. The *Glory Eternal* anchored the centre, with the remaining cruisers to either side. Frigates and pirate vessels ranged ahead and on the flanks. Assault craft arrowed in front, hunting the foe.

Apis coughed discreetly, alerting him to the presence of a newcomer. Amatnim didn’t turn. ‘What do you want, Lakmhu?’

‘Kelim has not reported in,’ Lakmhu said from behind his throne.

‘Don’t you have an assault to be preparing for, brother?’

‘Others can oversee the chattel. I wished to speak to you – before the end.’

Amatnim glanced up at the Dark Apostle. Lakmhu wasn't looking at him, but at the viewscreen. Yatl stood behind him, alongside Lakmhu's remaining blade slave. The creature glared at Amatnim and shifted its weight, as if in anticipation of an attack. Yatl's gaze was unreadable, though he had his helm clasped under his arm. Amatnim smiled and turned away. 'Speak, then, O worthy emissary of the gods. Unburden your soul, I beg you.'

Lakmhu grunted. 'Kelim has not reported in.'

'So you said.'

'Are you not concerned?'

'Not particularly. We are not pursued. If he failed, then at least he might have taken them with him. And if he succeeded, he will join us soon enough.' Amatnim smiled. 'And are you concerned, then? Or was this merely a pretext to chastise me?'

Lakmhu did not turn his gaze from the viewscreen. Amatnim realised that he was studying the debris field. 'Our forces are depleted. Can we truly take this world?'

'Perhaps. I am not planning on it, however.' Amatnim gestured to the distant planet. 'No. I want only one thing from this world. And once I have it, we can burn Almace to glass for all I care. Or leave it to the children of the gods, if that is your preference.'

Lakmhu laughed softly. 'Not mine, but the gods might well appreciate it.' He looked at Amatnim. 'Once this is done, there will be a settling of accounts between us, brother. I will have recompense for what I have endured.'

'And what have you endured, brother, that was not of your own making?'

Lakmhu frowned. 'Am I to blame, then, for your attempts at provocation?'

Amatnim made a show of considering this. Then shook his head sadly. 'The Urizen had a saying about provocation, did he not? Remind me of it.'

Lakmhu's frown deepened. 'Provocation is the soil in which knowledge flourishes.'

'And there we are – wisdom at last.' Amatnim pushed himself to his feet. Lakmhu's blade slave grunted and grasped the hilt of its weapon more tightly. 'This game between us is one of provocation. We push against one another, testing and challenging each other. The truth is a garden of forking paths. We have each chosen a path and are determined to lead the other down it. Now, I know that my path is the correct one – but so too do you. But the garden is the

same, whatever the chosen path.'

Lakmhu laughed. 'Fine. You wish to speak of truth – do you truly believe that what you seek will undo Erebus? And if so, that the result will mean a stronger Legion?' He grinned mirthlessly. 'Or will it be our end? That is my fear, brother. That your path leads to the doom of us all, and you are too blind to see it.'

Amatnim frowned. 'I think you underestimate us.'

'And I think Kor Phaeron has fed you a steady diet of half-truths and spite. Throughout this whole affair, you have insisted on your path – on your truth, to the exclusion of all others. You play the philosopher, but you are nothing of the sort. You want me to walk your path, but you will not even consider mine.'

'And why should I? I know Erebus well enough to know that he is not worthy to be my master. Nor is he worthy of being yours.'

Lakmhu shook his head. 'That is not for such as you – or I – to say. The gods choose us. We do not choose them.'

'There, at least, we agree.' Amatnim crossed his arms. 'You are right. When this is done, all accounts will be settled. Not just between us, but for the Legion as a whole. All secrets will be brought to light, all truths revealed. An apocalypse, in the ancient sense of the word. Then you will know the truth, as I know it.'

'Or you will know my truth,' Lakmhu said pugnaciously.

'We shall see. For now, brother, you have your orders. See to them.'

Lakmhu's lip curled in a sneer. '*Gloria Aeterna*, brother.'

'*Gloria Aeterna*, Lakmhu.'

Lakmhu gestured to his blade slave and turned to depart. Amatnim let him get halfway to the steps and then said, 'Yatl – stay.'

Yatl hesitated, but Lakmhu nodded and the warrior relaxed. As the Dark Apostle departed, Yatl turned to meet Amatnim's gaze.

'You owe me a debt,' Amatnim said. 'You recall this?'

'I– yes.' Yatl bowed his head. 'What would you have of me, my lord?' The way he asked the question said he already knew. Amatnim had little sympathy for him. Yatl was ambitious and foolish in equal measure. Such men soon fell afoul of the wicked and the wise alike.

‘I think you know.’

Yatl paused. ‘Lakmhu is loyal, my lord.’

‘I suggest learning how to dissemble if you wish to have a future as a provocateur, brother. He is not loyal. He is a blade at my back, and I grow tired of waiting for him to strike. So I will do it first. Kill him. Kill him and be exalted in my sight. Will you do this?’

Amatnim knew what Yatl’s answer would be, even before he’d asked the question. Yatl would make the attempt, because he knew Amatnim would compensate him fairly. And because he feared the consequences if he said no.

‘I live but to serve the chosen of the gods, my lord,’ Yatl said, head bowed.

Amatnim laughed. ‘A very careful choice of words. The Urizen would approve.’ He gestured dismissively. ‘Go. I leave the details to you.’

‘You were blunt with him,’ Apis said. ‘Was that wise? He might just tell Lakmhu…’

‘I have no doubt he will. And even if he doesn’t, Lakmhu will suspect him regardless. He might even attempt to kill him. Poor Yatl will be forced to defend himself.’

Apis frowned. ‘You don’t care if he succeeds, do you?’

‘No. I simply want Lakmhu preoccupied until we have succeeded in our quest.’

‘Why not simply kill him?’

Amatnim sat down in his throne. He considered his words, before replying. ‘Because I am not yet sure which of us is on the right path through the garden.’ He looked at Almace. ‘But once we have our prize in hand, I will be. And then I will know which of us is right and which of us is wrong. I will know which of us serves the right master. I will know which of us is the Urizen’s truest servant…’

He leaned back, eyes closed.

‘I will know which of us the gods have truly blessed.’

The deployment bay was in tumult as Apis descended the gantry stairs. It was a pleasant sort of confusion, however. He’d always found it comforting. The sound of ammunition hoppers being loaded, of assault vehicles being readied, the crash of steel and the cursing of warriors – no, soldiers.

Apis did not think of himself as a warrior. He was a soldier through and

through. Discipline was his dogma, and he held to it with all the fervour he could muster. Warriors looked at battle as a lover. Apis knew that it was a task to be accomplished.

He watched as something that had once been a Predator battle tank scuttled across the deck on jointed legs of meat and iron. Past it, he spied Lakmhu and his closest followers making for a gunship. Idly, his hand settled on his sidearm.

An easy shot, even from here. One pull of the trigger, and the threat was ended. But he restrained himself. Not out of fear, or worry – but respect. Amatnim wanted Lakmhu alive. It was a mistake, but it was Amatnim's to make. Apis just hoped he wouldn't be among those who paid for it.

He knew that both Amatnim and the Dark Apostle thought him a fool. They thought him a pawn, and unambitious. Apis was both, and content to be so. But that did not make him an idiot. Things were coming to a head between them. Lakmhu would be forced to retaliate, even if Yatl failed – or refused Amatnim's command. Amatnim was counting on it. But Apis intended to see that any such retaliation was unsuccessful. Indeed, he intended to make sure that Lakmhu never even got the chance to retaliate.

Too, he wanted to check on his own followers – to make sure that they were ready for the battle to come. He continued his descent, noting the immense queues of mortal warriors waiting to file into the bellies of dropships and troop landers. Behind them waited red-daubed battle tanks and assault vehicles.

Some of those in the queues were cultists. Others had been soldiers of the Astra Militarum or planetary defence forces. All now served the Primordial Truth. Apis watched as a Leman Russ, studded with censers and skulls, trundled up a loading ramp, its crew singing an off-key hymn.

'A sight to stir the ichor, is it not, captain?'

Apis turned as a familiar voice cut through the noise. He recognised two of his men – Saper and Gernt – sitting on overturned ammunition drums nearby.

Saper, as always, was sharpening a combat blade – one of half a dozen he kept on him at all times. Most were standard issue, others were of xenos manufacture – including one he'd taken off of a rak'gol clutchmaster – and at least one that was daemon-tainted. Saper never drew that one. Instead, he left it to murmur incessantly in its wolfskin sheath.

Gernt was having his head shaved by one of his slaves. Oil made from the

fruit of the strange trees that now grew in the ship's hydroponics bay was smeared over his scalp and cheeks, before a straight razor marked with ugly sigils was scraped across his flesh. Another slave carefully reassembled his boltgun, murmuring prayers over each shell. 'Is that you, captain?' Gernt called out. 'I can feel your disapproving glare from here.'

'You shouldn't let a slave assemble your weapon,' Apis said as he joined them. 'Or get close to your neck with a knife.'

'Probably not,' Gernt said, as he turned his head, and the slave carefully applied the ritual razor across his cheek and jaw, scraping away offending hairs. 'Still, you really should let him shave you, brother. He's a wonder with a razor, this one. If he had any spine, he'd make a fine killer.' He chucked the slave under the chin affectionately. 'Wouldn't you, meat?'

'As my lord wills,' the slave murmured, haltingly. His body was marked with brands of ownership and servitude.

'Very obliging,' Saper said. Apis frowned. Slaves never lasted long when they caught Saper's eye. He liked to break and bend them into more aesthetically pleasing shapes for the entertainment of those who shared his enthusiasms. Whole religions had sprung up below decks based around avoiding Saper's notice.

But he kept his foolishness off the battlefield, and that was all that mattered. Like Gernt, he was a satisfactory line soldier, capable of following orders or acting on his own initiative, depending on the circumstances. There were precious few soldiers left in the Legion these days.

'He's got that look, brother,' Gernt said. Saper nodded.

'Well, it has been several days since he last complained about the state of the Legion.'

'True. One must vent choler, lest it choke one.'

'Remember Ulum? He choked on his choler.'

'I thought he choked on blood?'

'Well, he was very angry about the blood.'

'Are you two finished?' Apis asked.

'For the moment.' Gernt borrowed Saper's knife and examined his reflection in the blade. 'Satisfactory. You may go, meat.' The slave bobbed his head and hurried away. Gernt looked up at Apis. 'Come to give us our marching orders, brother?'

Apis turned and looked out across the bay, watching as several troop transports rumbled towards the assault landers. Vox-casters mounted on the hulls blared doleful, droning hymns to the Lord of All Things. ‘We’ll be accompanying Amatnim to the planet’s surface.’

Saper chuckled. ‘You did well catching his eye, brother. We will go far, with him.’

‘That isn’t why I did it, brother.’

‘Of course not,’ Saper said. Gernt laughed.

Apis looked at them. ‘Our Legion is dying, brothers.’

‘I told you,’ Gernt muttered. Saper sighed.

‘Be silent. I am being serious. The Urizen has abandoned us. Kor Phaeron, Erebus, the rest of the Dark Council, they war with one another while the galaxy burns around them. The Black Legion conquers new territories, the Death Guard march in the shadow of Mortarion’s wings, even the godsdamned Emperor’s Children seem more united now than they ever have been. And where are we? Where are the forerunners – those of us who saw the truth and embraced it earliest?’

‘I can’t speak for Saper, but I’m right here,’ Gernt said.

‘I’m slightly to the left of him,’ Saper added.

Apis shook his head. ‘This is not the time for jokes, brothers.’

‘The universe is boiling in its own bile. Now is the perfect time.’ Gernt rose to his feet and idly cuffed the slave assembling his boltgun. ‘You’re doing it wrong. Go away.’ The slave scrambled away, whimpering. Gernt began to disassemble the weapon. ‘Why did you come down here, Apis? Are you worried? You should be. Saper and I are both worried – aren’t we, brother?’

‘I am distinctly uneasy with the current situation,’ Saper said. He drew a knife and tossed it into the deck, puncturing the metal with ease.

‘But that’s natural, isn’t it?’ Gernt looked around. ‘The gods keep us worried, so we keep to the path they have laid out for us. It’s the way of the galaxy.’

‘And what path is that?’ Apis said. ‘Where will our path take us?’

‘Ah. There it is. He thinks we’ve chosen the wrong side, brother,’ Gernt said. ‘Is that it? Should we have thrown our lot in with Lakmhu, then?’

‘No.’ Apis shook his head. ‘But Amatnim thinks he will throw in his lot with

us.’

Saper laughed. ‘That won’t happen this century.’

‘No,’ Apis agreed. ‘That is why I’m down here. Come with me.’

They looked at one another, but followed him without question as he made his way towards the waiting gunships. Some of the craft were chained to the deck, like predatory beasts. They twitched and cycled their empty weapons at anyone who drew close. Others were relatively new, their machine-spirits as yet uncorrupted by exposure to the warp.

Gernt leaned close. ‘What are we doing, captain?’

Apis didn’t reply. He pointed towards a bulky craft studded with religious paraphernalia, its hull covered with barnacle-like censers. ‘There. The Dark Apostle’s gunship. You know the pilot?’

‘Yes. Decimo, of the Savage Tabernacle. Good pilot. Bad at everything else.’

Apis nodded. ‘Do you see him?’

Gernt turned, scanning the crowd of crew and warriors that moved to and fro among the launch plinths. ‘There,’ he said, indicating a small group of warriors standing nearby. They broke out in raucous laughter as one of them gesticulated, obviously embellishing some tale of glories past. ‘He’s the one flapping his mouth.’

Apis glanced at Saper. ‘Fetch him.’

Saper grinned and drew one of his knives. ‘In how many pieces?’

‘One, preferably. I just want to talk to him.’

Saper frowned but loped towards the gathering. Gernt leaned close. ‘I ask again, captain – what are we doing?’

Apis smiled. ‘Making sure we’re on the right path.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Lakmhu sat back in his restraint throne, his crozius across his knees. Around him, the gunship’s passenger compartment rattled and shook. Thick bands of incense wafted through the stultifying air and mutant serfs scuttled along the nave, checking the weapons and wargear of the Word Bearers seated to either side of the walkway.

The gunship was one of two accompanying a trio of assault landers to the mining facilities. A small army, but an army nonetheless. Every warm body

that could be spared had been roused and made ready to take the facilities. Once the main facility was under control, they'd spread to the others. Each would fall in turn, until the entire belt was under Amatnim's control. Or, rather, under Lakmhu's control. He smiled.

A grunt caught his attention. His blade slave crouched nearby, glaring at nothing in particular. The creature had been agitated since its twin had died. He wondered if that was due more to the nature of the rituals used in its creation, or some lingering remnant of the man it had been. Either way, it was growing annoying. It refused to sit still, and instead paced blindly or snarled at anyone who got too close. Especially Yatl.

Poor, ambitious Yatl. Lakmhu could read his aide's uncertainty. Yatl had wisely said nothing, but he was smart enough to know that Lakmhu was already aware of his treachery. As was Amatnim. His hands closed about the haft of his crozius and he frowned.

He glanced around the passenger compartment of the gunship. Fewer warriors than he would have liked. Amatnim had only given him a handful of true warriors to oversee the efforts of several hundred chattels but it would be enough. All of them were loyal to him, of course. He'd made certain of it. The only question was Yatl. And even that wasn't so much a question of if, as when and how.

Lakmhu closed his eyes, and tried to centre himself. Meditation was another tool in the arsenal of the faithful. It helped order the mind and calm the spirit. Two things necessary for a man to successfully commune with the Primordial Truth.

He listened as Neverborn whispered to him, just beyond the veil of consciousness. They showed him things, sometimes. Memories of a future that would never be, or predictions of a past that had never been. Lies mixed with truth, and truth leavened by lies. They scratched at the walls of his psyche, demanding entrance, pleading for aid, enticing and inviting. Little daemons, most of them. Even the strongest were but minor sparks compared to the great conflagrations he'd seen summoned by Erebus.

But they could be useful nonetheless. They flocked to the black radiance of his soul, knowing that he could – he would – open the way for them, eventually. He could feel the soul-heat of his brothers as the Neverborn gathered about them as well. Word Bearers collected minor daemons the way a cur collected fleas. Most never even noticed the insubstantial parasites clinging to them.

Amatnim had none. Lakmhu had often wondered why that was. Why daemons avoided him. Seemed to fear him, even. He'd concluded that the gods had marked the warlord, somehow. Either for greatness, or damnation. He wasn't sure which, yet, but he knew which he preferred. He opened his eyes and found his blade slave watching him. He extended his hand and the creature snuffled at it. 'He will pay for murdering your twin, never fear,' he murmured. 'For that blasphemy and all the rest.'

The bulkhead at the other end of the compartment hissed open, admitting Yatl. 'They're ignoring our requests to land,' he said, as he made his way down the nave of the compartment. 'I do believe that Amatnim's pet pirate overstated the welcome we would receive.'

Lakmhu snorted. 'If you had to defend this world and such unrest occurred, what would be your first instinct, brother?'

'I would quash it. With prejudice.'

'Exactly. There are Imperial Fists on this world – and White Scars. Neither are known for their soft feelings towards baseline meat.' Amatnim had known. Lakmhu could feel it in his water. He'd known, and sent Lakmhu to die – or to expend his strength on a useless endeavour. But Lakmhu was determined to confound those expectations.

He would take the facilities and hold them. He would make use of them. Perhaps even employ them somehow against Amatnim. He imagined asteroids jostled loose from the belt, hurtling into Almace's atmosphere, and smiled. Wouldn't that be a surprise for the conquering warlord?

'Like as not, that facility is now an enemy fortress,' he continued. 'One we must take.' Landing klaxons whined and Lakmhu pulled on his helm. The gunship began its descent.

'So let us take it.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

85:40:00

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder pushed the great doors to the chambers of the astropathic choir open, ignoring the agitated clicks of the entry-servitors whose routine he'd upset. He had no more patience for such ceremonies. His mind was akin to a box, filled to overflowing, its former order given over to confusion.

Had Guilliman known, when he'd sent them here, that they would discover the Anchorite? Had he hoped that secret would remain hidden? Or perhaps the opposite? The primarch's fraught relationship with the Ecclesiarchy was well known. Perhaps this was part of some greater gambit on the Lord Commander's part.

Calder didn't know, and not knowing frustrated him. He was trained to see the patterns in such things, and yet this pattern defied logic. The existence of the Anchorite was a secret that might well destroy the Ecclesiarchy. Or, at the very least, shatter it into opposing camps – even more so than it already was.

Maybe that was Guilliman's aim.

He shook his head, banishing the thought even as it occurred to him. Whatever Guilliman's reasons, Calder was here now and knew the truth. His strategies would have to be adapted to compensate. If the Anchorite was the enemy's goal, it gave him a point to defend. And he would do so, regardless of the cost.

The choir-guard met him in the vestibule. There were ten of them, clad in heavy carapace armour, ornately decorated with the images of saints and cherubs and overflowing with purity scrolls. Each wore a thick cloak of Imperial purple and a helm wrought in the shape of an angel's face. They levelled wicked-looking power glaives as he came to a halt.

'Lower your weapons,' a voice called out, from deeper in the chamber. 'The lieutenant is expected.' The guards stepped aside for Calder. He passed them without a backward glance.

The chief astropath was waiting for him. She wore thick red robes over her frail form, and a crimson cloth over her ravaged eyes. If she had a name, she had not shared it, and he had not had the inclination to ask. ‘A belated welcome, my lord. You have not visited us in some time.’

‘My apologies,’ Calder said. ‘Other matters have demanded my attentions. Has there been any message from the Lord Commander?’

She shook her head. ‘It is quiet, my lord. Save for an unpleasant scratching at the walls of our souls.’ Her smile slipped. ‘That particular sound is getting louder. Before long, we will not be able to risk lowering our defences.’

‘Nor would I ask you to do so, unless the need were great,’ Calder said. If the astropathic choir was compromised, they would be cut off entirely. He looked around the chamber, taking in her assistants and servants. The room felt crowded, despite its size. The walls were decorated with murals drawn from the life of the God-Emperor and His sons. Gold-skinned cherubs crouched in the rafters, murmuring softly to one another. Sanctified combat-servitors crouched in their sentry-alcoves, watching for any signs of warp-taint in the members of the choir.

The chief astropath nodded. ‘You wish to send a final message? I cannot promise that it will reach its destination, but we will try.’

‘Yes. A request for reinforcements. I fear we may need them.’ He paused. ‘Has there been any word from Suboden Khan, or the system defence fleet?’

‘None, my lord. I hear echoes occasionally, of voices. Of messages yet to be sent. But nothing else.’ She leaned against her staff. ‘If they still live they are being very quiet.’

Calder nodded. ‘If that is the case, perhaps it is for the best.’ If Suboden still lived, he would likely be making for Almace. Either way, he could not afford to factor the *Silent Horseman* into his strategy. An alert chimed in his ear. The vox crackled with a dozen voices. Somewhere far below, an alarm klaxon began to wail. One of the guards stepped into the chamber.

‘My lady – my lord. The enemy has been sighted just past the asteroid belt. We must seal these chambers in preparation for the siege.’

‘I will leave you to it, then.’ Calder turned towards the door.

The chief astropath gestured. ‘Before you go, we have heard from the astropath assigned to the mining facilities, my lord. It seems your warriors have begun preparations for the enemy’s arrival. Lieutenant Karros wished to pass along his intentions to thin their numbers.’ She shook her head. ‘I think

he will have his work cut out for him, myself.'

Calder paused at the door. 'We all will, my lady. We all will.'

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

The landing bay was a utilitarian space, given over to the most basic of necessities – one of a dozen on this side of the facility. Once, ships would have been entering and exiting the bay in a near-constant stream. Now, ore-cutters sat in their berths, awaiting launch.

Karros studied the vessels. They were of a size with a gunship, but less graceful, and little more than reinforced hull-bays, engine compartments and control pods. Each of these pods was inhabited by a servitor-pilot hardwired into the vessel's systems. Each also had a small array of equipment designed to shatter debris or cut through wreckage.

'The enginseers have rerouted backup power in each to the las-burners, as you requested,' Reyes said, slapping the hull of the closest. Karros glanced at her. She looked exhausted but determined. That was good. He needed them determined. 'We normally use them to cut through debris. But they'll do some damage if they get close.'

Karros nodded. Las-burners were little more than scaled-down versions of ship-mounted lances. If enough of them were aimed in the right direction, it'd be a good impression of a lance battery. 'How many?'

'A few hundred. The fuel cells burn out if we keep them running too hot for too long. The power you'd need to tear through an undamaged hull… might get one good shot, or two, depending.' She ran a hand through her hair. 'Think it'll be enough?'

'No. But it doesn't have to be. What we start, the orbital defences might be able to finish. And if not them, then the *Capulus.*' Even then, by itself the strike cruiser would have little hope, but Karros saw no reason to say so.

'And if not?'

Karros looked over the ore-cutters, estimating the likelihood that any of it would work. From what he'd seen of the enemy fleet, precious few of their vessels were ships of the line. Most were repurposed merchantmen or barges, carrying troops and supplies for the ground forces. Those would be their targets. 'Then we will have done our duty, and well.'

She nodded, and fell silent. Then, hesitantly, 'Why did you kill Galba?'

The question didn't surprise him. In fact, he'd been expecting it long before

now. Perhaps she'd needed the time to gather her courage. 'Galba was the face of oppression, was he not? You think about what you hate about this place, and it's Galba's face you see. Or saw. I made a strategic calculation designed to win you over.' He looked down at her. 'Did it work?'

She laughed sourly. 'Yeah. They loved that bit where his neck popped.' She frowned. 'You'd have killed every one of us, if we hadn't backed down right then.' It wasn't a question, but he thought it deserved an answer regardless.

'Yes. My orders were to deny the facilities and their resources to the enemy. If I couldn't do it one way, I would have done it the other.'

She shuddered slightly, a sick look on her face. 'I told them, you know. I said you'd do it. That's why some of them have gone to ground, I think. The others are just stubborn – they think whoever wins will be open to dealing with us on more even terms.'

Karros nodded. 'Never underestimate the value a human being places on their life – or the lives of their kin. Whole worlds have sold themselves into slavery of one sort or another, just for the promise of protection. It is the nature of man to survive, even if that survival comes at a high cost.'

'You're going to hunt them down afterwards, aren't you?' she asked, after a moment. He could hear the pain in her voice. The regret. Part of him felt it as well – though not for the same reasons, he suspected. For her, they were kin – friends and creche-mates. For him, they were resources that were going to waste.

'No. That is a task for the enforcers.' Karros smiled, trying for levity. 'If any of us survive.' He could tell by her expression that it hadn't worked. He sighed. Mortals were more complicated than many of his brothers wanted to admit.

'Brother.' Spiros' voice cut in over the vox. Karros waved Reyes to silence.

'What is it, Spiros?'

'Gunships. Three of them. And a handful of assault landers.'

Quickly, Karros blink-activated the picter rune on his display. A sensor-feed of the exterior of the mining facility appeared. He cycled through the feeds, studying the approaching vessels from the various angles. The gunships were of an unfamiliar type – archaic looking, and sinister. They had been daubed in crimson paint, and covered in the sort of grotesque decorations that the traitors favoured.

The landers, on the other hand, were easily recognisable. Wide-bellied, slow-moving vessels that weren't normally used in void transport. Briefly, he considered ordering his own Thunderhawk to make an attack run, but decided against it. While they might be able to down one of the landers, they'd definitely alert the enemy to the Raven Guard's presence.

'Status,' he murmured.

'They've sent landing codes,' Spiros said. He sounded amused.

'I assume you didn't reply.'

'No. It seems to have made them angry.'

'Good. Angry opponents are easier to defeat.' He watched the gunships swoop low over the facility, and the landers wallow in their wake. He estimated the enemy numbers at multiples of a hundred. Given the nature of the vessels, most of those would be mortal troops. The Word Bearers had ever relied on sacrificial lambs. That would be their undoing. 'Time to get into position. Alert the others.'

'What is it?' Reyes asked, as he cut the feed. 'Are they attacking?' She sounded frightened, but did not let it show in her face. Karros was pleased.

'Yes. Are your people ready to meet them?'

Reyes blanched, but nodded. 'We've wired the main entrances, as you commanded. But left docking platforms twelve through sixteen open. Think they'll go for them?'

'Almost certainly. I doubt they have the patience to cross the surface the way we did. They'll make for the openings we left, and trust to numbers to carry them past any defences. That has always been their way.'

'You've fought them before?'

'Often enough to know how dangerous they are. Which is why we have to end this quickly, before they have a chance to change the rules of engagement.' Karros gripped her shoulder, but gently.

'Have no fear, Ore-loader Reyes. The Ravens are with you.'

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder stepped down out of the grav-tram. Birds hurtled skywards as he strode across the ferrocrete platform towards the waiting Stormtalons. The aircraft were painted in the heraldry of the White Scars, and Chapter-serfs moved among them, readying them for take-off. The pilots stood some

distance from their craft, watching Calder approach.

The faint wail of distant klaxons echoed across the city's aero-ring. The ring was a belt of reinforced berths, originally the property of the city's upper classes, extending outwards from the larger landing plinths. It had been the home for a variety of private craft, all now repurposed or moved elsewhere.

The White Scars pilots had made themselves hard to reach since Suboden's departure. They had followed his orders, and conducted sweeps of the surrounding area, but their commander, Torag, had refused to meet with him to discuss their part in the wider strategy. Calder had given them as much leeway as possible, recognising their intransigence for what it was – a protest at being left behind. But the time for leeway had passed.

The White Scars eyed him warily and murmured to each other in Khorchin. Calder stopped at a respectful distance, aware that the serfs had ceased their labours and were watching him as well.

The White Scars, like the Space Wolves and the Dark Angels, were particular about their personal honour. They were warriors first and foremost, and soldiers second. He knew that Torag in particular saw this duty as an imposition. Suboden had provided a much-needed buffer between Calder and the wilder elements of his brotherhood. Without him, Calder was forced to impose his authority the old-fashioned way.

As much as he wished that he didn't have to force the issue, he had to ensure that Torag followed his orders. That meant confronting him here, on the ground he'd claimed as his own. But better here than in the field.

Torag stepped forward to meet him as he drew close. The Uquillian was a sight, even among the White Scars. His power armour was of an older mark, and he considered it a canvas upon which to enact his artistic vision. Braids of woven hair, strung with eagle feathers, hung from his shoulder-plates, and his helm was decorated with another profusion of feathers, its narrow snout painted to resemble an eagle's beak. Both of his hands were bionic, the fingers tipped by golden claws.

'You are the Uquillian,' Calder said. Torag nodded silently. Calder held out his hands, palms up. A Chogorian sign that he'd come weaponless. 'I am Calder. I would speak with you.'

'Speak, then,' Torag said after a moment.

'The enemy is at our walls.'

Torag laughed, and the other White Scars laughed with him. 'We have ears,

Primaris.’ The way he said it, the word sounded like an insult. Calder let it pass. Torag was trying to provoke him.

‘Good. Then you will have no trouble following my orders.’

Torag stopped laughing. For long moments, he studied Calder. Then, ‘They say you walked on Terra, in the days before.’ He crossed his arms and watched as Chapter serfs fuelled and rearmed nearby aircraft. Calder nodded.

‘I did.’

Another moment of silence. ‘What was it like?’

Calder thought for a moment. ‘Crowded. Even after… everything.’

‘You remember this?’

Calder frowned. ‘Some.’ The process of becoming Primaris had set his mind alight. Many of his memories had become ash, burnt away to make room for new thoughts. ‘Do you remember anything of… Uquill?’ He stumbled over the unfamiliar name.

Torag grunted. ‘I remember the smell of the great western sea, and the sound of gulls. The way a fish twitched, as I cut open its belly.’ He twitched his head. ‘That is all.’

Calder nodded. ‘Good memories, though.’

‘I have made better ones away from that place. I ride the wind now. And I gut things more deadly than any fish.’ Torag paused. He reached up and removed his helm, revealing flat, scarred features. His scarred head was hairless, save for his long moustaches and beard, all neatly bound. A bionic eye whirred and clicked as he looked out over the horizon. He closed his organic eye and tilted his head, as if sniffing the air. Then, he leaned over and spat. ‘I can smell the stink of them, even here.’

‘They have not landed yet.’

‘Even so. They come, and the wind brings word of them.’ Torag looked at Calder. ‘You want us to greet them.’ It wasn’t a question.

‘I want you to do what you do best.’

‘And what will you be doing?’

‘What we do best.’

Torag grunted and ran a palm over his shaved pate. ‘A good plan.’ He looked away. ‘I dreamt that an eagle circled a mountain peak three times, and fell

from the sky.’

Calder stared at him, uncertain as to how he should answer. Torag smiled. ‘A good omen,’ he said. Calder relaxed.

‘Was it?’

‘No.’ Torag pulled his helmet on. ‘We will burn them from the skies. And then you can grind what’s left into the mud of this sad place. Then we will go somewhere else, and do it again. Until the eagle falls from the sky.’

The Uquillian turned away, and raised a fist. His warriors set up a ululating cheer. Calder waited, but Torag seemed to have no further interest in conversation. He looked up. The sky was clear. But only for the moment.

Soon, it would be full of fire.

Eamon stood in the Anchorite’s cell, watching the Dreadnought scratch runes in the wall. Though he could not hear the alarms, he knew they were sounding. The bells were ringing throughout the city – in every city. Almace’s time had come, and the enemy was at the gates. Even now, those with the ability to do so were seeking safety in the reinforced shelters set deep within the city. Others were readying themselves as best they could for what was coming. Private armies assembled in the dioceses, as humanity’s guardians prepared the defences. It was all quite stirring, in the abstract.

Up close, it was nerve-wracking. A set of gilded armour awaited him in his quarters. Another heirloom, passed down from parent to child, through a hundred generations. Today would see him finally put his martial skills to the test. A part of him was excited. Another, larger part, was fearful. Would he pass this test of his will and courage? Or would he fail? Was it even up to him – or was he merely a bit player in the story of another?

He looked at the Anchorite, wanting to ask all of those questions. The ancient warrior had been the one constant in his life, and it seemed only fitting that he should have the answers now. He plucked at his robes, uncertain as to how to begin. As ever, the Anchorite saved him the trouble.

‘My brothers are here, then. I can hear them knocking on the door of this world.’ The Anchorite continued to scratch runes into the wall. Eamon nodded.

‘The lieutenant estimates a few hours before they come into range of the orbital defences.’

‘He is canny, that one. The primarch was wise to send him.’

‘Should we survive this, I will tell him so.’

The Anchorite gave a rumble of laughter. ‘I am sure he will appreciate your opinion on the matter.’

Eamon paused, considering. Then, he said, ‘Why are they coming for you?’

The Anchorite turned. He studied Eamon for a moment. ‘I do not know. I had assumed all knowledge of my existence would have been purged. Then, perhaps they simply never stopped looking…’ His frame twitched slightly. ‘We were sent to die, you know. Calth. It was meant to be a grand purgation of the Legion – all those elements too mad or too disciplined to endure the coming change. I wonder, sometimes, if they know that. If my brothers realised that, even as they died.’

‘Did you?’ Eamon asked, softly.

‘Oh yes. But only afterwards. I realised that Lorgar had betrayed his own sons, and more than once. That Kor Phaeron and Erebus had done so as well. We were guided by traitors from the moment the God-Emperor set foot on Colchis.’ The Anchorite studied his talons, as if seeing them for the first time. ‘Our Legion was built on a foundation of treachery. We were very good at it. At twisting our oaths to fit our wants. At seeing our desires in the words of the gods.’ He lowered his talons. ‘Maybe that is why they are coming. Maybe… maybe the gods have decided to kill the last bit of truth left to the Legion. To prevent any hope of them seeing what I saw. One final treachery as the galaxy unravels.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Eamon said, shaking his head. ‘Would they care?’ It seemed inconceivable to him that such damned souls would do so. Once you were far enough down a false trail, it ceased being false.

The Anchorite turned back to the wall. ‘Some would. To know that we were regarded as chattel by our lords, and spent like bullets for their glory, rather than our own? We mocked other Legions for such – to know that we too were but bodies for the altar, that would be too much for some, I think.’ He paused, tapping the wall.

‘It is a funny thing. A devout man understands the possibility of damnation, but does not think that he himself will be damned. In those days, I heard my brothers boast of altars and knives, and even then, I knew that not a one of them would go willingly to the stone. For such men, there is always another sacrifice, always someone weaker…’ He trailed off. ‘But these are the words of one who has grown used to solitude. I cannot say with any clarity why they come, or what their aims are. I doubt they themselves know.’

They were silent, for a time. Then, the Anchorite said, ‘What will you do, if they breach the walls of this place, boy?’

Eamon cleared his throat. ‘What would you have me do?’

The Anchorite turned. ‘Kill me. They are here for me. If I am dead, they may leave.’ The words sent a chill through Eamon. He’d heard them before – too often.

‘You know that they won’t.’

The Anchorite gave a rattling, artificial sigh. ‘Yes.’

Eamon was silent for a moment. ‘Do you truly wish to die?’

The Anchorite spread his arms. ‘Would I be imprisoned in this sarcophagus if I did not wish it? I deserve death. I am owed death.’ He turned back to the wall. ‘But we so rarely get what we are owed, in this life.’

Eamon shook his head. ‘What will you do, when they come for you?’ He paused. ‘If they come,’ he amended, hastily.

‘You mean will I go willingly?’

Eamon didn’t reply. The Anchorite laughed. ‘No, boy. I will not go. Nor will I fight them. Whatever they have become, they were once my brothers. I will not raise my hand against them.’

‘Then they will chain you and drag you back to whatever hell-world they call home.’ Eamon’s voice rose. Anger flooded him. The thought of such abominations bestriding the holy soil of Almace, of taking away a relic of the Ecclesiarchy, was enough to burn away his fears and anxieties.

‘First, they must break the walls erected by the sons of Dorn. I have faith that that will not happen. It did not happen then, it will not happen now.’

‘And if it does?’

The Anchorite paused. He began to write once more.

‘Then the God-Emperor will provide.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

85:40:00

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Apis entered the ship's meditation chamber with some hesitation. All Word Bearers vessels of appropriate size possessed such a chamber, though they often took different forms. Some resembled temples, while others were open to the void. This one was more sedate than some, fitting with its master's personality. A place of quiet contemplation and reflection.

The chamber was a large, tentlike space, occupied by a mandala of semicircular benches, all centred around a single, immense censer. The censer was suspended between the floor and ceiling by taut lengths of now rusty chain, and was tended by a quartet of blind slaves, their mouths stitched shut and smaller censers grafted to their chests and backs. Fumes of steaming incense rose from it, filling the chamber. Prayer scrolls decorated the walls, displaying the inked leers of daemons and dark saints. The statues of fallen heroes of the Legion stood sentinel at the eight cardinal points.

Apis knew some of them. Zardu Layak. Argel Tal. Xaphen. One or two others. He ignored the weight of their stony gazes as he threaded through the benches. A few of his brothers were here, stripped to their armour interface ports. As they sat in quiet contemplation, mutant slaves doused them in blessed oils or tattooed their flesh with catechisms. Some turned to watch him as he strode towards the back of the chamber, but most knew better than to display any interest.

Amatnim sat on the outermost benches, eyes closed. Mutants kneaded his muscles, and cleaned his interface ports, hissing and murmuring to each other in their own debased tongue. They paused as Apis drew near. Amatnim opened his eyes.

'Well?'

'We've almost entered the asteroid belt.'

Amatnim sighed. 'I know. The gods whisper as much to me.' He smiled.

‘Can you hear them, brother?’

‘No.’ Apis glanced around. There was the vaguest impression of shapes, moving in the fumes of the censer. Neverborn, perhaps. Unaligned entities, seeking a suitable husk to inhabit. That was why the mutants who were assigned to the chamber first had ritual bindings carved into their flesh. No sense letting a feral daemon loose on board, if possible.

Amatnim nodded. ‘No. I suppose not. Did Lakmhu go, in the end? Or is he slinking about, waiting for his chance to plant a blade in my back?’

‘He went. I made certain of it.’

Amatnim nodded. ‘You are of great comfort to me, Apis. A true brother, in a Legion where precious few of those remain.’ He sounded almost melancholy, and Apis sighed inwardly. It was always the way. Amatnim was a soul of great merriment and great sadness in equal measure. It was no wonder that the gods loved him as they did.

As if reading his mind, Amatnim said, ‘If the gods abandoned me, brother – what would you do?’

Apis paused, seeking a trap in the words. Seeing none, he answered honestly. ‘I would abandon you as well. Where the gods go, a man must follow.’

Amatnim nodded again. ‘A good answer. An honest answer.’

‘I have no cause to lie.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘Some among us don’t need cause, brother.’ He waved aside his slaves and indicated the bench. ‘Sit. Something is on your mind. I can tell.’

Apis hesitated. He wanted to leave. He didn’t care for the meditation chamber or the things he glimpsed in the fug of the censer. But he sat. ‘Are the gods truly with us?’

‘Do you doubt them?’

Apis shook his head. ‘I merely wish to know the nature of our quest – is it merely another campaign, or is it a crusade? Do we march in holy purpose, or merely to fulfil some objective of the Dark Council?’

Amatnim was silent for a time. When he answered, he did so slowly. ‘The gods are manifold. They, like us, are legion. Each god has many hands, put to many wheels. That some of those hands are upon our shoulders is obvious. For Khorne, well… we drown a system in war and slaughter. His hounds flock to us, eager to shed blood. For Nurgle, there is the despair our presence

brings. The plagues that rise in the wake of any war. For Tzeentch – look around. We stew in our own ambitions. A hundred petty schemes and hopes surround us, and more are conceived or dashed asunder by our actions. And Slaanesh… well. The Dark Prince seems to favour Ganor, whatever else.'

'But there's another reason,' Apis pressed. 'The way you speak – it is as if the gods have joined together in this matter.'

Amatnim smiled and leaned forward, wafting the incense about himself with a loose gesture. 'They have. Or so Lorgar claimed.'

'Lorgar?' Apis said. 'But no one has seen him in centuries.'

'That is true. And yet, I did.' Amatnim's gaze became unfocused. 'I went into the desert of bones and meditated for forty days and nights before the black gates of the Templum Inficio. No sustenance, only unceasing prayer. And on the eve of the forty-first day, I heard a child's voice, and it bade me find our lost brother. And so I did, and my quest began.' He shook his head. 'I cannot say what awaits us at the end of our quest. Only that it is of import to the gods. The universe drowns in a new and blessed madness. But the Risen Son would build dams and dykes to hold back the seas of truth.'

'Why does Lorgar not sally forth to meet him?' Apis asked, without thinking.

'I think he will, brother. But not yet. The ground must be made ready for him.' He frowned. 'Places like Almace – or Pergo – are cancerous nodes of deceit in the body of ultimate truth. Anathema worlds, where all but the strongest Neverborn are rendered ineffectual upon their surface, and the words of the gods sound hollow. If they are allowed to flourish unchecked, all that has been done, might yet be undone. What we do, here, now, might well cease their spread.'

'Or it might encourage it,' Apis said. The thought came unbidden, and he did not know why he spoke. Was something smiling at him from the depths of the censer steam? He felt the pressure of the Neverborn gathering close. Attentive. Anticipatory.

Amatnim smiled. 'Yes. Either way, the gods will be pleased.'

'But…?' Apis pressed.

Amatnim laughed. A loud rumble, as of a contented predator. A soldier's laugh. Not that of a priest. Apis relaxed. 'But I have no doubt in my destiny, or in the gods' plans for us, brother. They have guided me and guarded me across black seas of infinity. Why then would they abandon me on such a

hostile shore?’ He clasped the back of Apis’ head. ‘Fear not, brother. They are with us, and we will know victory. Now come. I would be on the bridge, when we reach our goal.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

‘Leave nothing alive,’ Lakmhu snarled, as cultists flooded past him into the mining facility. Booby traps at the main entrances had cut their numbers, but their courage was undimmed, thanks to the Word Bearers who stalked in their wake. He stepped past the entry bulkhead and into the hall, following his servants.

The entry hall to the facility was larger than he’d imagined. Gantries stretched into the dark like rusty highways, grav-shunts parked along their lengths. And beneath the gantries – a deeper darkness. There were lights there, far past the limits of human vision, but not that of a Space Marine. The lower levels, the ore processors, the thermal forges – a kingdom of industry, ripe for the taking. It was almost a shame to destroy it. But when the gods commanded, their servants could but obey.

‘Bring me skulls and flensed meat,’ Lakmhu continued, exhorting the pathetic creatures that swarmed about him, spilling across the unguarded gantries. ‘Bring me blood and souls. Or offer up yours in recompense. The gods demand it!’

A ragged cheer went up, and some among the cultists began to sing. Lakmhu tuned them out as he turned to Yatl. ‘Report.’

‘We’ve secured three other entrances. Losses at thirty-two per cent.’

Lakmhu grunted. ‘More traps?’

‘The meat is cunning.’

‘Too cunning. What about the launch bays?’ He’d sent hand-picked warriors to secure the identified bays before more ore-cutters were launched. He’d seen the first wave of small vessels arrow towards the fleet, even as his gunship had touched down. He didn’t know what they hoped to achieve, but he had no doubt it would serve to infuriate Amatnim. The thought pleased him immensely.

‘They haven’t checked in.’ Yatl paused. He pointed. ‘Did someone warn them about not taking the shunts?’

Lakmhu turned, even as the first grav-shunt exploded, consuming a dozen men and wounding twice that many who had been standing nearby. As if that

had been a signal, the other shunts blew up as well, one after the next. The darkness was as bright as day for several moments. Lakmhu watched in silence as almost a third of the chattels he'd brought in died without firing a shot.

Yatl laughed. 'Well. That was amusing, if somewhat unfortunate.'

Lakmhu turned to look at him, and Yatl choked on his laughter. 'Contact the fleet. We need more chaff to herd into this warren. I am not risking Legion lives in this place.'

Yatl nodded – and then made a quiet sound. Almost an exhalation. Slowly, he toppled backwards, a stream of blood spurting from his ruined visor. Lakmhu whirled as he heard the shot that had killed his aide. Another shot took him high in the chest, and he stumbled back into the looming shape of his remaining blade slave. The brute caught Lakmhu and spun, putting itself between him and the unseen sniper. A second crack then a third followed. Another Word Bearer fell from a gantry, as the survivors opened up with their boltguns, firing in all directions. The red-armoured warriors fell back towards the entry point, abandoning the surviving mortals. An old tactic, honed in a thousand wars. Ingrained and instinctive. To press forward in unfavourable circumstances was to invite defeat.

Lakmhu heard the chatter of autoguns and the distinctive hiss of lasrifles. 'Ambush,' he muttered. Of course. He'd expected that. He hadn't expected them to have weapons that could pierce power armour, however. He pushed away from his bodyguard and lurched towards Yatl. Despite the bullet in his brain, Yatl was still alive. The meat was strong, even if the mind was in ruins. That was good.

He drew his knife and winced. He glanced down at his own wound. It had sealed, trapping the bullet inside him. He'd have to dig it out later. He slammed the knife down, puncturing the seals on Yatl's armour. Swiftly, he pried away the chest-plate, revealing the black carapace beneath – or what had been the carapace, several thousand years ago. Centuries in the warp had given it the consistency of muscle tissue, and it pulsed with grey veins that spurted ichor as he sliced through them. Yatl made a sound like a groan.

More shots rang out, and screams from the mortals as they realised their benefactors were abandoning them. The others were almost at him. Bullets hissed from the dark around them, forcing them to bunch up as they withdrew. Lakmhu paid the incoming fire little heed, concentrating on the task before him. They needed reinforcements. All it would take was a little sacrifice.

With a grunt, he tore one of Yatl's hearts out and spoke the six sacred words taught to him by Erebus himself. Yatl had been riven with ambition. Desire. Need. His soul-stuff would taste sweetest to the court of the Dark Prince, and Lakmhu called out to them. He squeezed the heart, and for every drop of blood the whispers in the back of his mind grew stronger. Smoke rose from the droplets. It smelled like incense and rotten sugar.

He whispered a prayer for Yatl's soul as he consigned it to the hungry maws of the Neverborn that crouched beyond the veil. The smoke swirled about him and he felt questing tendrils brush tenderly across his armour.

'Come,' he said. 'Hunt them. Take what you wish, with my blessing.' Laughter greeted these words, and he heard the scrape of claws on metal. And then, something else – a low pulse. Hidden, before now, beneath the noise of the ambush. He heaved Yatl aside and saw something through the slats of the gantry. A sensor-plate, attached to a remote detonator. Yatl's heart slipped from his hand, and the Neverborn wailed in frustration as his concentration slipped. He rose to his feet – but slowly, too slowly.

He saw the others drawing towards him. Bunched together in close formation, so that they could more effectively direct covering fire. A Legion tactic. The sort of tactic their foe would predict – not the foe he'd expected, but the real one. 'Back,' he roared. 'Get back – scatter–'

Too late. A ripple of explosions tore through the nearest gantries, filling the air with shrapnel and bodies. The explosions swamped the retreating Word Bearers, obscuring them from Lakmhu's sight. He was thrown backwards by the force of the blast. His blade slave caught him and sent him hurtling back through the entrance as the last of the explosions went off. Lakmhu lay still for long moments, trying to reorient himself.

As he picked himself up, his blade slave stepped through the smoke, its flesh and armour charred and torn. It was otherwise unharmed and it still held its weapon. Behind it came half a dozen Word Bearers, some supporting others. He looked down at his hand, stained with Yatl's blood, and heard the murmuring of the Neverborn. Having had their appetites aroused, they were not eager to subside.

He bared his teeth in a mirthless grin.

'Fall back to the entry points,' he said. 'We need reinforcements.'

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

'Incoming.'

Amatnim looked up from his tactical projections. ‘What?’ His skin was still damp from the mediation chamber, and it chafed against his battleplate at the sudden motion.

A flare of light filled the command deck as a ship exploded. He dismissed the projections. ‘Which vessel was that?’ he demanded.

Another flare of light. And another and another. The viewscreen seemed to ripple with them, and he could hear the *Glory Eternal*’s subsonic snarl of consternation. ‘Someone report – now!’ Amatnim bellowed, as he rose to his feet.

‘We’re under attack,’ a Word Bearer said, from the primus strategium, just behind the command throne. The raised plinth was all but hidden by a constant swarm of tactical data and telemetry feeds. Amatnim turned.

‘So I gathered. By whom? And from where?’

‘The asteroid belt. It started as soon as we entered.’

Amatnim turned back to the viewscreen. The fleet had entered the asteroid belt, trusting the smaller vessels of the pirates to find relatively safe paths to the planet beyond. Where that wasn’t possible, frigates employed their weapons batteries to break up the chunks of debris and open larger pathways for the *Glory Eternal* and the remaining cruisers. He saw a flash, and pointed. ‘There – grid point zeta twenty-six. Magnify.’

The image on the viewscreen shimmered and expanded. A squat shape spurted from the greater tumbling mass of stellar debris. Amatnim recognised it as a type of mining vessel. It closed quickly with an assault-cutter. There was a staccato flash as an improvised plasma lance scythed out, cutting into the assault craft’s hull. The lance flickered again and again, too rapidly for the cutter’s crew to react. The larger vessel succumbed, its death throes consuming the smaller.

More small vessels slashed into view, their thrusters hurling them forward in fits and starts – a clear sign that they were being pushed past tolerance levels. Some exploded before they reached their targets. Others only managed a single shot, before they were ripped apart by the strain of the attempt.

‘Fireships,’ Amatnim said, not without admiration. ‘They’ve converted ore-cutters into fireships.’ He turned. ‘Contact all ships – I want them to target those vessels. Now.’

More explosions lit up the viewscreen. Damage estimates rolled across the data-feed. Escorts and attack craft burned in the void. The ore-cutters were

little more than armoured torpedoes, built to withstand damage that would crumple any other vessel of comparable size. Worse, they were armed. The lances they wielded were small pinpricks of light, but they stung nonetheless.

Amatnim sank back down in his throne. The ore-cutters were no threat to the larger vessels in his fleet, but they were a definite hindrance. They impacted against the fleet's screeners, scattering them or forcing them to tighten their formations.

'Contact the Dark Apostle,' he said to the Word Bearer at the vox-station. 'He should have landed by now. When you've established a link, patch it through to my personal frequency.' He turned back to the viewscreen.

He watched the pirate vessels, led by Prince Ganor's frigate, spread out ahead of the *Glory Eternal* and the rest of the fleet. They were eager – impatient. He'd learned much about them since Ganor had joined him. Most of the pirates were just that, criminals and outlaws. But some, like Ganor, were victims of circumstance. The worshippers of the Corpse-God were harsh with those who proved themselves unwilling to serve their morbid creed. They alienated those who might otherwise have been their staunchest servants.

He smiled. 'So has it ever been,' he murmured. Ganor served a new master now, though he knew it not. The princeling had a daemon in his belly no less savage than that which inhabited Lakmhu's slave. In time, with the proper attention, it might even grow into something great and terrible.

He wondered what would become of Almace, under Ganor. And what would become of Ganor, if he was made ruler of Almace. Together, they might become something truly pleasing to the gods. But first, the world had to be wrested from its current rulers.

His vox chimed, interrupting his train of thought.

'What do you want?' Lakmhu snarled, his voice distorted by static.

Amatnim grinned. Lakmhu sounded stressed. 'We are under attack. Ships launched from the mining facilities. Would you mind seeing to it, brother?'

'Humour, Amatnim?'

'No. Simply a request, from one legionary to another.'

Silence, broken only by the crackle of static. Soon, they would be out of vox range, unless Lakmhu managed to take the facility. Then, *'I will make the attempt.'*

‘That is all I ask, brother.’

Lakmhu cut the connection. Amatnim sat back, smiling. ‘All ahead full,’ he called out. ‘Almace awaits.’

Prince Ganor cursed as the command deck of *Kabalevsky’s Wrath* shivered. The frigate shuddered again, as its forward batteries unleashed a salvo against another wave of ore-cutters. The tiny vessels ceased to exist. But there were more coming. Dozens of them, hiding in the asteroid belt. The damned miners had seemingly weaponised every scow at their disposal. He ground his teeth in frustration. He could only imagine what the Word Bearers were thinking.

Conflicting shouts from his crew warred for his attentions. Ganor turned as Loomis, his first officer, called out to him from the primus strategium. ‘My lord, three more on the starboard side.’ Loomis was a spare, hollow-cheeked man, his bald head studded with feed-cables that connected him directly to the frigate’s systems. Loomis had been a devotee of the Machine-God, once. Now he served Ganor.

‘Can we avoid them?’

‘No, my lord. They’re too close. No time to alter course.’

‘Then keep firing,’ he snarled. ‘Take as many of them out as possible.’

Thankfully, there weren’t that many ore-cutters. He knew enough about the mining facilities to know that there were maybe a few hundred – three, at the most. Their plasma lances were little more than pinpricks to the larger vessels of the fleet. But for anything smaller than a frigate, they might spell disaster.

‘Incoming vox, my lord,’ a crewman called out.

‘Patch it through,’ Ganor said.

‘If I survive this, I’m taking your head, Ganor,’ Amina Dheel snarled. *‘You never said anything about dogfighting miners.’*

Ganor winced and modulated the frequency volume. ‘Dheel – how nice that you’re still alive. We’re almost through the asteroid belt. If you’d like to meet on neutral ground…’

Dheel’s response was inarticulate cursing. Ganor swiped two fingers across his throat, and the vox-operator cut the frequency. He sat back. He knew the other captains would be sending him similar messages, blaming him for things entirely outside his control. But they’d see things differently once they reached Almace.

His hands curled into fists as he stared at the viewscreen, watching broken

asteroids spin past the prow of his ship. Little dots of light marked the presence of outposts and augur-stations. Almace knew they were coming by now, whether the cardinal-governor had admitted it or not. He slumped back in his seat, imagining the homecoming that awaited him. Imagining what he would do with a world – a system – of his own.

It will be as it was before.

He nodded. It would be like it had been before. That perfect kingdom of childhood memory, when the Kabalevsky name was feared and respected.

All will love you and bow before you.

He smiled slightly, and felt something in him purr in satisfaction. Ever since he'd met Amatnim, he'd felt as if he possessed a greater clarity than ever before. As if his desires were within reach. As if all the galaxy were there for the taking.

It is yours. All you have to do is listen… listen…

He sat back, feeling the reverberations of the guns echoing through the deck-plates. Every thud felt like a heartbeat. Every pulse brought him a step closer to his goal. Asteroids cracked and shattered, spinning from the frigate's path. Other vessels closed in and ranged ahead and a brief, mad urge to fire on them – to claim the vanguard for himself – filled him. Instead, he signalled Loomis. 'All ahead full. We're close enough to the edge of the belt to burst through.'

'Is that wise, my lord?'

Ganor laughed. 'Probably not!' He rose. 'But do it anyway. I've waited too long – endured too much – to let someone else have first sight of what is mine by right. Now – all ahead full.'

Loomis obeyed. The command flew from one station to the next, and the thrusters fired. The frigate surged ahead, weapons batteries hammering at the debris around it. Ganor stumbled slightly, and braced himself on the side of his command throne. More vox messages came in but he ignored them all. If they couldn't understand, he didn't have the patience to explain it to them.

'I'm coming home,' he growled, his hand falling to the shuriken pistol on his hip. No one was going to stop him. Not this time. Not like all the other times he'd led raids, or tried to slip the sensor nets. This time, he had an army at his back – a real army. Not just whatever ships he could scrape together.

Welcome home, Ganor.

And then the last of the asteroids tumbled past, breaking up, leaving the way ahead clear. *Kabalevsky's Wrath* sailed into the open. 'Cease fire,' Ganor said. Loomis relayed the order, and the command deck fell silent.

On screen, their destination swelled. 'Magnify,' Ganor said. Then, more loudly, 'Magnify, damn you! Let me see it!' His crew hastened to obey. The image expanded.

'Almace,' Ganor breathed. It was even as he remembered. A blue jewel, hanging in the firmament. He had been little more than a child when they'd been forced to leave, but it hadn't changed in all that time.

'Augurs to full,' he said. 'I want to know what's waiting for us.'

On his tactical display, runes denoting orbital defences flickered into view. Pergo had only had a few dozen, mostly automated torpedo launchers. But Almace was a different beast entirely. Hundreds of defence-stations ringed the world, extending from the immense wreath of orbital dockyards. Others drifted independently, their autonomous systems activated by proximity. He heard the blurt of binaric, and knew these vanguard posts were asking for identification codes.

He turned. 'Loomis – introduce us to the bastards, eh?'

'Aye, captain,' Loomis growled. Klaxons howled as Loomis barked orders into the vox. The forward batteries of *Kabalevsky's Wrath* spat fire, and a defence platform was reduced to spinning wreckage.

'Torpedoes – wide sweep, target the closest platforms. Let's clear the decks for our allies.' Ganor raised two fingers. 'On my mark – *fire*.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

87:32:02

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

When the first enemy vessel emerged from the asteroid belt, Almace's orbital defences were waiting. Lance platforms and macro-cannon batteries opened fire, splitting the black with streamers of hot light. A frigate died in that opening volley, its hull pierced from a dozen angles. Attack craft burned, reduced to drifting motes. But as more vessels emerged, the orbital defences were less able to concentrate fire.

Calder watched it all from the strategium, noting the position of the largest vessels and estimating their targets. It would have been impossible for a human to keep up with the rapid flow of data, but Calder consumed it greedily. Every pict-capture, every scan, all of it helped him build a map to victory.

Many of the smaller enemy vessels were heading for the slowly trundling refugee vessels. Easy pickings. Calder felt a flicker of sympathy, but quashed it. Their deaths would preoccupy the foe, allowing for the closest defence platforms to properly triangulate their firing patterns. Every man and woman must do their duty for the Emperor, even if that duty was only to die at the appointed time.

The strategium chamber was strangely silent, despite the crowd of officers, scribes and Ecclesiarchial representatives that occupied it. A squad of Intercessors stood arrayed about the foot of the observation dais, bolt rifles held at the ready. Dozens of cyber-cherubs flitted this way and that, recording everything, or filling the air with incense.

'They're concentrating on the western hemisphere,' Calder said out loud.

'On us, you mean.' Eamon stood beside him on the observation dais, watching as his world's defences fell one by one. 'He was right – they have no interest in the rest of the planet. Just us.' He sounded exhausted. Calder wondered when he'd last slept.

‘That is to our advantage.’

Eamon looked at him. ‘I don’t see how.’

‘We know what they want. They can’t simply obliterate us from orbit. They must come and take it.’ Calder brought up a holo-schematic. ‘I have identified eighteen potential landing points within easy distance of an entrance to the cathedral-palace. Of those eighteen, ten have been rendered unsuitable by controlled demolition…’

‘Those parts of the city are still on fire, by the way,’ Eamon said.

‘And they will remain so until the battle is done.’ Calder indicated another grouping of highlighted areas. ‘Of the eight remaining areas, five have been prepared by Solaro and Rukn – concealed weapons emplacements, pressure mines and plasma charges.’

‘They might detect them.’

‘I am counting on it. That leaves three potential landing zones.’ Calder traced a finger along the schematic, illuminating areas as he spoke. ‘All three provide direct access to the Processional Way. From there they will make for the Cardinal’s Gate, via the reliquary boulevards.’

‘How can you be sure?’

Calder looked down at him. ‘It is what I would do.’ He turned back to the schematic. ‘The quickest way for them to reinforce any assault on the Cardinal’s Gate will be to break the Pilgrim’s Gate, along the northern processional. That’s the closest major vehicle transit path and that’s where they’ll bring up their siege equipment.’

‘What about gunships?’ Tyre asked. He looked up from his data-slates. ‘If they’re coming in like they did at Pergamon…’

‘The White Scars will handle those. Any gunships that make it down in one piece won’t be in any hurry to take off again. To have any hope of delivering an intact force to the cathedral-palace, they’ll have to come by foot.’

‘If there are enough of them, they’ll be able to force their way past any cordon we erect,’ Eamon said. Calder nodded.

‘Thankfully, most of their forces will be occupied in Low Town.’

Eamon grimaced. He knew what that meant. ‘For how long?’

Calder turned away. ‘Long enough.’ He paused. ‘Siege-craft is about limiting an enemy’s options. You force them to choose the least worst option, and then

exploit that choice mercilessly. Their resources are limited. They cannot maintain a siege for long. We will force them into a stalemate.’

A klaxon sounded. Startled, Eamon turned. ‘What does that mean?’

‘They’ve reached the tropopause,’ Calder said. On the projection, a ship the colour of a torn scab pierced the upper atmosphere. It was a frigate – or had been. Its prow was surmounted by a massive leering face, and its flanks consisted of corkscrew towers and barnacle-like weapons batteries. The great face seemed to grimace as the atmospheric sensors struggled to capture its enormity. Ground-to-air flak greeted its arrival, and the grimace became a snarl of fury.

More vessels joined the first – long streaks of red, marring the horizon. The first strike, when it came, was so sudden that even Calder flinched. Lances of light fell like rain. The atmosphere screamed as cloud cover tore and split. Mountaintops soon followed. Bulwarks of metal and stone that held anti-air batteries vanished into blackened craters, leaving nothing behind but fused glass and burning forests. Sensor-feeds went black one by one. Soon they would be isolated from the rest of the world.

If there was a pattern to the strikes, Calder could not see it. Some of them were clearly positioned to eliminate flak batteries, but others seemed to be simply for destruction’s sake. A map of Almace spun slowly, red dots marking impact points. The number doubled. Tripled. The first shock wave reached the city a moment later. The stained-glass windows flexed in their reinforced frames. With the second shock wave, they shattered. Multicoloured shards scattered across the chamber, and he heard shouts of pain. He turned, sheltering Eamon as more rained down. The cardinal-governor was praying, his eyes closed.

Sirens echoed up from the city, the sound scrabbling through the windows. Pict-feeds displayed emergency crews and enforcers moving to cordon off areas where the shock waves had done more than break windows. Calder checked the positions of his warriors as he swept glass from his armour, making sure that all of them were where they should be.

Another blast shook the cathedral-palace to its core and cracks formed in the walls. ‘They’ll be finished soon,’ Tyre said as he climbed the dais. He plucked a shard of glass from his cheek. ‘They’re just softening us up so they can land troops.’

‘Yes.’ Calder activated his vox. ‘Torag?’

‘*It is time,’* the White Scar growled, immediately.

‘Yes. Good hunting, brother.’

A moment’s pause. Then, *‘And to you, son of Dorn.’*

Calder cut the link and looked at Eamon. ‘You should get to the command bunker. Tyre will oversee transfer of the primary strategium functions.’ He looked around. ‘This chamber is no longer defensible.’

‘What about you?’ Eamon asked.

‘I will be overseeing the defence of the Cardinal’s Gate personally.’ He descended the dais and accepted his bolt rifle from one of the Intercessors waiting there. ‘I will remain in contact with Tyre and the planet’s command structure for as long as possible. In the event that I am no longer able to oversee the defence, the swordmaster will be in overall command.’ He looked back at Tyre, who nodded. Ordinarily, Calder would have left one of his own subordinates in charge, but efficiency was not the only consideration in this matter. Politics, as ever, played their part. In any case, Tyre’s knowledge of the planetary defences were second only to his own, and he was confident the swordmaster could handle the responsibility.

‘May the God-Emperor be with you, lieutenant,’ Eamon said.

Calder paused. Then, he nodded.

‘May He be with us all, cardinal-governor.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Spiros moved quickly along the plasma conduits. Quietly, the way he’d been trained to do, almost two centuries ago. It was no easy thing to move silently in power armour, even with noise bafflers activated. It required a different way of thinking – an attention to one’s surroundings that most Space Marines weren’t interested in. The warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were terror weapons first and foremost. Sound and fury manifest. But there were different types of terror.

Below the Raven Guard, the transit corridor was full of bodies. Cultists, renegades, mortals. Easy meat. Thirty of them. They moved slowly, looking every way but up. They paused at an intersection, murmuring. The leaders were obvious – they were the ones that looked like they knew what they were doing. Former soldiers, these, at least going by their uniforms. He knew the regiment, though they’d defaced their equipment. He wondered if they’d been taken captive, given the choice between servitude or death.

It didn’t matter. The reasons for the treachery were irrelevant. All that

mattered was the treachery itself.

‘My lord?’

‘What is it, human?’ Spiros asked, not without some annoyance. He recognised the voice, but couldn’t immediately recall the speaker’s name. Giving the miners access to their encrypted vox-frequency had been a mistake. He’d told Karros so at the time, but the lieutenant rarely listened to him.

‘We are in position, as you requested.’ Culch. That was it. A blunt-faced ore-dredger that Reyes claimed was her second-in-command. He was unimaginative but dogged in following orders. Tolerable, for a mortal.

‘As I ordered, yes. Meet me at the next access corridor. We need to hold them here.’ He cut the frequency before Culch could reply.

He studied the mortals below, considering. Then, he drew his knife and quickly punctured the conduit in three places. His battleplate issued an internal warning chime as the temperature increased. He was already moving as the air of the corridor began to ripple from the plasma leak. The men below wouldn’t notice. Not in time.

Every few hundred yards, he stopped to repeat the action. Three blows, no more, no less. Just enough to rupture the conduit, but not enough to cause it to explode. Not right away, at any rate. Eventually. But not yet.

When he reached the end of the corridor, he slid quickly to the floor. The cultists were behind him, around the bend in the intersection. The transit corridor was wide and full of machinery. Plenty of cover. They were in no hurry to advance. He moved to the bulkhead leading to the access corridor. His auto-senses detected warm bodies, and he knew Culch and the others were waiting. Autoguns rose as he stepped into view. ‘Lower your weapons, fools,’ he said. ‘It is just me.’

Culch stepped forward, mopping at his sweaty features. ‘We’re here, lord.’

‘I have eyes, Culch.’ Spiros made a quick headcount. ‘I only see ten of you. Where are the others?’

‘I – ah – I thought it best to leave them at the last bulkhead. They can cover us, just in case we have to retreat. Which we won’t, of course, my lord.’ Culch sketched an overenthusiastic bow. ‘Unless you want us to?’

Spiros shook his head. ‘Stop talking. It irks me.’ He tapped a control rune on his vambrace, activating a holo-schematic of this part of the facility. ‘Here.

There are four access hatches along this corridor…’

‘We know them,’ Culch said. Spiros grunted.

‘Then you know that they will give you an unrestricted field of fire into the corridor itself. Split up into fire-teams – you know this term?’ He paused, until several of the miners nodded. ‘Split up and take the hatches. Keep them pinned, but do not let them rush the hatches. We want them to call for reinforcements. You understand?’

Culch nodded, and then shook his head. ‘No. But we’ll trust in your wisdom, my lord.’ The other miners murmured agreement. Spiros sighed.

‘When I give the word, seal the hatches and retreat to the rendezvous point.’ He paused. Then, because they were who they were, he added, ‘Do not tarry.’

‘Why?’ Culch asked.

Spiros looked at him. ‘Because the plasma conduit is going to overload and you will perish. And because I have given you an order.’

Culch didn’t ask any more questions. Nor did any of the others. They spread out as Spiros had ordered. He tracked them on his armour’s auspex, watching as they flanked the enemy. The Word Bearers’ slaves lacked knowledge of the facility. And if their masters had any, they weren’t sharing it. The traitors’ strategy was simple – flood the facility with bodies. But they would run out soon enough.

When he was satisfied that Culch and the others were in position, he extracted a picter-bead from his combat belt. The bead would feed images directly to his helmet display. With a twitch of his wrist, he sent it rolling around the corner, towards the gathered cultists. As it rolled, it scanned its surroundings and fed him data. He took in their positions as he released the mag-clamp on his boltgun and lifted it from where it hung on his thigh.

Quickly, he stepped around the corridor and paused long enough for them to see him. His first shot punctured a pressure valve, filling the corridor with obscuring steam. His second and third shot killed the leaders he’d identified earlier. That left the others in a state of panic. They wouldn’t retreat. If they fled, their masters would kill them. That meant they had to call for help. Reinforcements.

Spiros settled in to wait. Every few moments, he would fire off another shot, to keep them interested. In between, Culch and the other miners did the same. And the plasma continued to leak, filling the air. Warping the breached conduit out of shape. When it finally exploded, it would fill the corridor,

vaporising everything not wearing power armour.

Deron and the others would be preparing similar ambushes throughout the main facility, or helping the miners to do so. The farther and deeper they drew the enemy from their entry points, the easier it would be to isolate them and cut them off.

'Spiros, status.'

Karros. Spiros lowered his weapon. 'Transit corridor delta-epsilon-six. Third level. Initiating plasma purge.'

'Acknowledged. Be advised, reinforcements are on the way.'

'Good. More of them to kill.'

'Fall back to designated rendezvous point Acrius-Oslo once you're done.'

Spiros frowned. That wasn't the plan. 'Are we pulling back?'

'For the moment.'

'Acknowledged.' Spiros blink-activated the picter-bead. From its position, he could see that the cultists were firing into the spreading steam, attempting to prevent an assault that wasn't coming. He heard the thump of heavy boots, and realised that the reinforcements weren't mortal. He grinned fiercely, pleased. 'Culch – fall back.'

No reply. He heard the roar of autoguns. Screams. The feed from the picter-bead went dark as something heavy trod on it. The vox crackled with a babble of voices. He stepped into the open, boltgun at the ready. Targets sprang towards him and he fired, putting them down. Culch was screaming in his ear.

The ambushers had been ambushed.

Something thudded out of the steam. Massive and twisted. It bellowed savagely, the blade it clutched in its talons gleaming with an ugly radiance. Spiros threw himself to the side as the blade tore a chunk from the wall. He rolled to his feet, boltgun roaring. The blade came down again, quicker than thought, and his weapon was torn from his grip along with several of his fingers. Spiros cursed and clawed for his combat blade. A claw caught him by the throat and drove him back against the wall. A beatific mask leered out of the steam. He thrust his blade up awkwardly, and felt it bite into something that might once have been flesh. Boiling ichor spurted, burning through the seals of his gauntlet. A gurgle of bestial laughter was the creature's only reaction.

It dragged him forward, and slammed him back, hard enough to daze him.

His half-melted blade slipped from his grasp as the thing tightened its grip on his throat. His armour cracked, and he felt his bones do the same.

‘Be gentle with him.’ The voice was harsh. Inhuman. A bulky shape stepped into view. Spiros recognised the enemy commander. The traitor’s tattooed features split in a ghastly smile.

‘I need him in one piece.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

The hunt was all.

Torag sang softly to himself as his Stormtalon banked, assault cannons painting the sky in the colours of death. He hunted the enemy through fields of fire, stalking them with a persistence that he’d been told reminded his brothers of the *berkut* – the hunting eagle. Torag found the comparison flattering, if a bit obvious. He flew, so he was an eagle.

The gunship was not an eagle, but a hare. It was called *Red Hare*, after the beast of legend. Its machine-spirit murmured softly, pleased to be stretching its engines. It enjoyed the hunt as much as he. More, perhaps.

Together, they had hunted on many worlds, through many skies. Skies thick with toxic clouds and through floating forests of airborne algae. Skies full of hungry predators. And always he had been successful. Always, he had proven the superior hunter to his foes. This time would be no different.

With the orbital strikes concluded, the enemy had begun to land troops on the surface. Drop-ships and troop carriers of all patterns and sizes fell slowly through the burning atmosphere, making for the few landing zones left to them. Torag and his hunters had been tasked with clipping the wings of as many of them as possible.

Below him, the city cried out in anger. It lashed out at the invaders, tearing at the sky. Streamers of anti-aircraft fire followed him upwards, punching targets from the air. He stroked the controls and the Stormtalon rolled gently aside as a broken hulk plummeted groundwards, its ruptured hull venting smoke. He caught the thermals of its passing and rode them upwards, letting his assault cannons herald his coming.

‘Easy meat,’ he muttered. Drop-ships fired at him, but their guns were bulky and slow, meant for clearing landing zones rather than trading fire with aerial opponents. *Red Hare* rolled, thrusters burning. He tapped the trigger-rune.

His display showed his fellow hunters, above and below him, spreading out

around him like the wings of an eagle. A traditional formation, once used by the nomadic horsemen of Chogoris, now employed by their descendants. Sometimes he wondered what they would think of their sons now, those wild riders. Would their hearts swell with pride, as they saw what the Khan-of-Khans had made of them? Or would they shake their heads in dismay at all the traditions left trampled in the dust? Maybe both.

He took the Stormtalon up, angling the thrusters to carry him high. Hull-mounted missile launchers twitched, unleashing a salvo. The missiles streaked through the air, impacting multiple targets. He didn't have to destroy them; wounding them was enough. Slowing their descent so that the flak-towers could catch them or causing them to lose control was almost as clean a kill as eliminating them himself. The kill-counter on his display ticked over regardless.

'Eight so far,' he said out loud. His vox crackled with the voices of his fellow hunters as they replied with their own counts.

'Three.'

'Six – no – seven.'

'Four.'

'Two, Golchin. Two of those you claim were mine.'

'The skies are full of prey, Yakut – why seek to claim mine?'

'Fair is fair, brother. With the two, I have eight.'

Torag grinned. 'Trying to best me, Yakut?'

'I but strive to follow your example, Uquillian.'

'Strive harder,' Torag said with a laugh. 'I just caught my ninth, while you were talking.' He leaned back in his control-cradle as *Red Hare*'s engines hummed, carrying him farther and faster. The stars were almost close enough to touch. Or so it seemed.

'Still too many,' Yakut replied. *'And us too few to get them all.'*

'You are right, Yakut. Let us return to base. Leave them to it.'

'I was merely pointing out–'

'I do not care. You are a hunter. So hunt.' Torag thumbed an activation rune and stitched the hull of a drop-craft with an autocannon burst. The flimsy vessel caught fire, and its descent became uncoordinated. As it broke apart, tiny figures slipped from it, spinning upwards as gravity played its cruel

games. He grinned in pleasure at the sight, imagining their screams. It was more than they deserved.

But Yakut was right. More drop-ships pierced the tattered atmosphere. Almost too many to count. And not just drop-ships, but gunships as well.

‘Forget the drop-ships,’ he said, alerting the others to the new arrivals. ‘I have sighted worthier prey. Yakut, Golchin – on me. Good hunting, brothers.’

The gunships were of an unfamiliar pattern – old things, sleek and alien-looking. In comparison, *Red Hare* was a box. But boxes were sturdy things, often containing surprises. Torag’s smile widened.

Rukn had been right. Why prowl the stars when the enemy would come to them?

If they survived, he might even consider apologising to the old wolf.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

90:00:24

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Amatnim stood amid the hololithic displays, watching as runes representing the troop landers flickered and blinked out. ‘How many?’ Apis asked, from the other side of the primus strategium plinth.

‘Just over half,’ Amatnim said as he rotated one of the cartographic images. ‘Well within the parameters for expected casualties.’ Two-thirds of the host’s troop landers had converged on Almacia, with the remaining third spreading out to handle the other cities. The surviving pirate vessels were launching their own raids against the latter with a variety of atmospheric attack craft.

Pict-feeds from the surface showed hundreds of repurposed infantry assault vehicles, some dating from before the Heresy, rumbling across the rocky ground away from the surviving landers. The vehicles were daubed crimson and marked with ruinous sigils and totems. Vox-casters mounted on the hulls blared atonal hymns. Inside, the mortal followers of the Primordial Truth bowed their heads in prayer or checked their weapons.

Their orders were to silence the anti-aircraft batteries located in the hills and crags before descending on Almacia. A simple enough task, given that most of the batteries were automated. The enemy would not waste resources defending them.

Another stream of images showed the landing bays of the *Glory Eternal*, and the remaining gunships being readied for launch. When the battle-barge had reached optimal orbit and enough of the anti-aircraft batteries had been silenced, the gunships would pierce the atmosphere and head for Almacia. Over half of the Word Bearers under his command would be making the launch. And they would not be alone.

Apis studied the projections, his brow furrowed. ‘Something disturbs you, brother?’ Amatnim said.

‘Why bother landing troops at all, my lord?’ Apis asked. ‘We have attack

craft – why not simply strike the enemy's heart?'

'We will, but only when we are certain of the blow. First, we must soften the city's defences. That is where the pirates come in. Their holds are packed with the faithful, and they ferry them to their just reward. They will serve to ease our path in their own unique fashion.' The cultists and diabolists would open the way for the Neverborn, spilling blood and reciting the appropriate chants. By the time Amatnim and his brothers arrived, daemons would haunt the streets of Almacia, making it a more conducive sort of battlefield.

'I dislike leaving so much to lesser warriors.' Apis looked up as the lumens of the chamber flickered. Distant klaxons whined as the *Glory Eternal* met the enemy in the void above Almace. Assault craft from the dockyards swarmed the battle-barge like flies, and were swatted aside as easily. Amatnim paid the fluctuations no mind.

'Better to risk their lives than ours.'

'True, my lord.' Apis joined him in studying the data. 'Even so, many of us will meet the gods face to face in the coming hours.'

'And so? What more could we desire than that moment of perfect clarity? We were bred to die in service to a holy cause, brother. The cause may have changed, but our ultimate purpose has not.' Amatnim looked at the other Word Bearer. 'Now go. Get your war-dogs ready. I would launch within the hour.'

Apis crossed his fists over his chest and bowed his head. '*Gloria Aeterna*, my lord.'

'*Gloria Aeterna*, brother.'

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Lakmhu reached into the dying man's chest and removed his heart as easily as he might have plucked apart a piece of fruit. He held the red mass aloft, letting the blood stain his forearm and face before tossing it into the brazier with the rest. 'The hearts of a hundred brave men,' he murmured.

Symbolically, at least. There was no way to tell if they had been truly brave or not. It was hard to judge with mortals. He watched as a pair of slaves dragged the body off the makeshift altar, adding it to the pile of dead flesh nearby. 'What is courage, and what is merely chemicals?' he said out loud. His voice echoed through the chamber.

It was – or had been – an ore-processing centre. Great conveyor belts ran

along reinforced plinths, leading to heavy sorting equipment and other, less familiar machinery. Servitors continued to work in the background, despite the presence of Lakmhu and his warriors. The automata had little concern for anything outside of their labours. Mist issued from the plasma vents in the walls, making the air reek of burnt rubber. Lumens flashed silent warnings about flow-leakage, or jams in the conveyor system.

Lakmhu had disabled the klaxons in the chamber, irritated by their wailing. Keeping the facility in one piece wasn't his concern. Taking it from the enemy was.

He turned to his prisoner. The Raven Guard hung from the ceiling in a web of chains, his broken limbs splayed and his blood pooling into the wide, sacrificial bowl set below him on the gantry. Lakmhu's blade slave crouched nearby, leaning against its sword. The Space Marine glared down at him through a mask of blood and bruises.

Lakmhu gestured with his bloody hand. 'That is one of the eternal questions, of course. Such enigmas are the rocks of our faith. Is it courage or cowardice to serve the gods? Do we have a choice or are we merely walking well-trodden paths? Opinions?'

The Raven Guard spat. Lakmhu smiled. 'As expected. Your kind have never been ones to ask the great questions. Or any questions, really. You know neither doubt nor fear. You lack the capacity for philosophical debate. I am sure your masters consider it a fair trade-off, but it is a shame.' He turned. 'Bring the others forward.'

Word Bearers shoved a coterie of mortals towards the Dark Apostle. The miners were bloody and beaten. They cowered like whipped curs and Lakmhu's smile widened as he took in the scent of their fear. After a moment's indulgence, he gestured. One by one, their throats were slit and their blood emptied into a waiting trough.

More troughs – once intended as ore-sluices – had been dragged forward to create a makeshift circle of significant proportions. At each, a handful of captives waited. Men and women, old and young alike. The miners were a fecund lot, and they bred like vermin.

Despite the defenders' best efforts, Lakmhu's warriors had taken dozens of prisoners. After the shock of the initial ambush, the Word Bearers had grown more careful. Old strategies had been recalled, old tactics employed. Lakmhu had been but an aspirant the day Lorgar had sealed himself away. The Heresy was not even a memory to him. But to some of the others, it was still a fresh

pain. They remembered the Five Hundred Worlds, and the campaigns in the dark. And they knew the enemy.

‘They say your gene-sire still hunts, somewhere in the Eye,’ Lakmhu said, looking up at his captive. ‘The Eternal Shadow, cast by the light of the Astronomican. The wages of our glorious sins. I myself do not believe it. But that is what they say.’

The Raven Guard didn’t answer. Didn’t even react. They were depressingly stoic, these milk-bloods. Lakmhu sighed and turned to watch as more prisoners were slaughtered and their blood added to the trough. It wasn’t enough yet. But soon.

He needed reinforcements, but not mortal ones. He also needed them to last longer than it took for blood to dry – long enough to enforce his claim on the object of this crusade. That required a bit more effort than the usual bit of spilled blood and chanting. Most diabolists were content to call up the Neverborn only for the time it took to win a battle, but Lakmhu knew ways to chain them to existence for longer than that. Erebus himself had shown Lakmhu the art of opening an unhealing wound in the skin of reality.

It required several days of blood and meat. And something more. A sacrifice, not just of a life, but of lives not yet lived. Of potential.

He looked at the blood congealing on his gauntlet and then up at the Raven Guard. ‘My brother sent me here to die, you know. He must have known you would be here, so he dispatched me, hoping I would be too preoccupied to prevent him from accomplishing his own task. But instead, I will turn his cunning against him.’

He laughed.

‘And you will help me do it.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

For what felt like the first time in a lifetime, Prince Ganor Kabalevsky set foot on the soil of Almace. What should have been a great moment – a moment of celebration, the streets filled with thronging masses of jubilant citizens – was tainted by clouds of smoke, and burning vehicles. The assault-cutter rested on its landing gear, autocannons swivelling to cover the immediate area.

They’d landed in what had once been an ornamental garden. The burning skeletons of fruit trees crackled softly in the wind. The blackened grasses were littered with dead birds. The air had been drawn from their tiny lungs in the vortex of the cutter’s landing.

Ganor stooped and picked one up. ‘This isn’t how I imagined it,’ he murmured. He let the bird fall and turned back to the cutter. The hull was pitted from anti-aircraft fire, and he could smell oil leaking into the soil of the ravaged garden. It wasn’t likely she’d make it back into the air in one piece, but that was a problem for later. And for someone else.

He was here now, and didn’t intend to leave.

It had taken every trick his pilots knew to get them down in one piece. Others hadn’t been so lucky. From her last vox barrage, Dheel’s cutters had gone down somewhere in Low Town, well off target. Which was a blessing in disguise, really. Otherwise he’d have had to kill her, and that might have tarnished his triumph.

Not that it was much of a triumph at the moment.

He went to the edge of the garden, where some few trees still flowered against a wall of imported marble, and looked out over the city falling away below. A grey spiral of structures, stretching to a horizon now choked with smoke. The city was larger than he remembered. Maybe it had grown in his time away.

It would grow larger still, once he’d assumed his rightful place. Though the Kabalevsky clan had never been in the line of succession, he suspected such things no longer mattered. This was the beginning of a new era – or the end of an old one.

The Imperium was coming apart at the seams. A blind man could see it. Amatnim had only confirmed it. The old ways were dying, one by one. New ways – new kings – were needed. He winced and rubbed his stomach. Nausea from the rapid descent. Maybe nerves.

Or maybe something else.

The thought frightened him. He’d seen things in his exile that scared him. Men and women warped by Gellerpox. Diseases that seeped from the walls of salvaged ships. Great shapes sliding between the distant stars. But what he’d seen aboard Amatnim’s flagship… And yet, somehow, maybe it had not seemed so awful as all that.

Maybe his ambition had overridden his fear. Maybe it had poisoned his brain, as Dheel claimed. He shook his head. It didn’t matter. He was here now. The city – the world – would be his soon enough. He wasn’t so foolish as to think he could trust Amatnim, but something told him he was meant to be in this place, at this moment.

He remembered something his mother had often said, in her rare moments of lucidity. Every man was a story, but not every story was the same. He'd never really understood what she'd meant by that, until now. Amatnim's story was coming to an end. But the story of Prince Ganor was just beginning.

It will be a grand story indeed, Prince Ganor.

He turned to watch as the slaves of the Word Bearers spilled down the boarding ramps, chanting hymns and ringing great tocsins. He stepped back as they spilled through the garden in their hundreds. Some wore filthy robes, others gemstone-studded armour. There were women as well as men. All were armed, though some carried only the most primitive of weapons.

'Cultists,' a voice rumbled. Ganor turned. A man stood nearby, watching from the shade of one of the few unburnt trees. He was a soldier – or he had been, at some point, before he'd thrown in his lot with new masters. His uniform had been dyed crimson, and his carapace armour was stained with ash and char. Sigils and runes had been carved into the flat panes with an inexpert hand. Looking at them, Ganor felt a twinge of pain at the base of his skull. His eyes slid away. 'Just cultists,' the soldier said. 'Don't pay them any mind.'

He hefted his lasrifle, and joined Ganor unbidden. He had a bit of fruit, plucked from the tree, in hand. He proffered a piece and Ganor took it. It wasn't as succulent as he remembered. Nor as sweet. He chewed without joy.

'It's always the way,' the soldier went on, fruit juices staining his mouth and unshaven chin. 'They send in the sacrificial meat first. And a few of us to give them spine.' He slapped the length of his lasrifle. 'But always the meat first.' He chewed noisily. 'Say it sanctifies the ground. Makes it so they can walk on it without offending the gods.'

'You worship their gods?' It was a stupid question, given the man's uniform.

The soldier shrugged. 'Got to worship something.' His flat gaze took in the cultists as they forced the wrought-iron gates of the garden, using the broken remnants of a marble bench as a battering ram. Ganor saw other soldiers, clad similarly to his companion, marching down the boarding ramps, dragging heavy equipment behind them.

'It's like a fire,' the soldier said. 'That's what I've decided.'

'What?'

'This. All of it. It's a fire.' He ate another piece of fruit, chewing wetly. 'It's going to burn the galaxy clean, so that we can start over.'

Ganor stared at him. The soldier grinned, and Ganor thought something was moving behind the man's eyes. He looked away quickly. He felt sick.

'If we all burn, who's left to start over.'

The soldier chuckled and shrugged. 'That's for the gods to say.' He dropped what was left of the fruit to the grass and wiped his mouth. 'I'm just a spark in the fire.' He looked at Ganor and winked. 'And now, so are you.'

Ganor considered shooting him as he strode towards the other soldiers, assembling before the cutter, but he resisted the impulse. He turned back to the tree, suddenly hungry for another taste of fruit. But at some point, the fire had spread.

So instead, he watched the garden burn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

93:30:30

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Low Town had been hammered flat.

Fire had fallen from the sky as troop barges and gunships cleared landing zones. Pirate skiffs had joined the fun, less for strategic reasons than the pleasure of simple destruction. Now, the occupants of those vessels hunted the ruins they'd made, rounding up survivors and plundering at will.

And they, in their turn, were hunted.

Rukn moved silently through the industrial jungle, his Scouts padding in his wake. And spread out around them, the dregs of Low Town scuttled through the forest of girders and conduits. The mortals moved with commendable silence for their sort, though to Rukn's discerning ears they were too loud. They were criminals, mostly, clad in bartered or stolen combat rigs and flak armour, carrying a variety of weapons. Autoguns, slug-throwers, lascarbines and a few things that even Rukn didn't recognise.

Like the White Scars, they showed their affiliations openly – tattoos and gang-brands on their flesh, clan colours and sigils on their clothing. They stank of industrial grime, of processed ore and sour water. Their pores sweated narcotics. But they were hunters born, and had proved it more than once since the enemy had flooded the cramped streets of Low Town. Knives in the dark, garrottes, muffled stub pistol shots and monofilament nooses – all had been put to good use. The mortal slaves of the foe died in droves, barely aware of what had killed them.

Rukn had led his motley huntsmen through the slums and drainage tunnels. They had set traps and cut fuel lines. They had even poisoned a water filtration cistern, killing almost a hundred cultists.

It was satisfying work, this. The enemy were preoccupied with reaching the cathedral-palace, and paid little attention to the shadow war being waged around them. Then, that was often the way. Though he would never voice

such thoughts openly, Rukn saw many similarities between the traitors and their loyalist opposites. Both were often blind to anything not related to the battle at hand. For them, there was only war. An incessant drumbeat, guiding them and lulling them. A sad thing, when there was so much else to see.

Rukn stopped as the wind turned, bringing with it the smell of unguents and incense. He gestured, and his Scouts dropped prone, slithering into whatever cover was available. The gangers did the same, save for the one named Belloq, who crawled forward to join Rukn. The man was bald and his eyes were hidden behind welder's lenses. He wore battered fatigues beneath a threadbare silk jacket studded with good-luck charms, and held a heavily modified combat shotgun close to his barrel chest. 'What is it?' he grunted.

Rukn tapped his nose. 'Smell that?'

Belloq sniffed and spat. 'Close then. Quiet or loud?'

'Depends. Come.' Rukn began to creep forward. Belloq slung his shotgun across his back and followed, though more slowly. They moved past the walls of ruptured hab-units and through curtains of torn wiring and moisture netting, following the scent. The trail led them to what had once been a market square.

Rubble had been cleared away by labour gangs, and something that might have been an altar erected at the centre of the square. A crowd occupied the space, many of them clad in tattered robes and battered flak armour. Others were naked, save for the filth that smeared their forms. Men and women were dragged screaming through the crowd, their hands bound, their faces bloody and bruised. The crowd bayed and struck at them as they passed on their way to the makeshift altar, where a tall figure in the filthy remnants of once-rich robes and a moon-shaped, grinning mask stood waiting. Moon-face raised a sickle-shaped blade and beckoned the prisoners on. Their captors hauled them forwards.

Belloq fired.

Moon-face – the high priest – toppled back across the makeshift altar.

Rukn looked at the ganger. 'Probably not wise,' he said. Belloq replied with an obscenity and rose to his feet. As he did so, Rukn heard a hum, as of many tiny wings. Flies boiled up out of the crowd as they turned towards Rukn and Belloq.

The flies surged and swarmed about them, biting and stinging. Rukn bellowed in fury and slashed out with his tulwar, trying to break up the

swarm. He saw Belloq fire again and again, pumping shots into the clamouring ranks of cultists. Despite the buzzing in his ears he heard the thump of bolt pistols and autoguns as his Scouts and the gangers opened up from their positions of concealment.

The square was soon awash in blood, as cultists fell twitching. But the rest continued to chant and clang their tocsins, even as they fired back at the surrounding buildings. Belloq advanced into their ranks, his men following him. On the lumpen altar, the high priest's body had begun to twitch and jerk, as if he might rise up despite his lack of head. The droning chant reached a febrile pitch, and the air felt greasy and foul. Rukn tasted something bitter on his tongue and turned towards the altar, a warning on his lips. But too late.

The high priest's body burst open, and a long, gangling arm covered in mottled flesh reached up from within. The arm fell with a splat, and a horned head appeared, forcing its way up through the dead man's belly. A face like a squeezed pustule, with one urine-coloured eye, gazed about as the daemon forced its narrow shoulders through the dead man's ribcage. When it braced a knobbly foot on the altar, it dragged a rust-eaten blade from the body with a lingering hiss.

Time seemed to slow, as the daemon surveyed the realm it had been birthed into. Its mouth worked soundlessly, chewing the air. Then, half-formed and losing cohesion with every passing moment, it lunged, faster and farther than it should have been able to. Its wormy blade made an awful keening sound as it passed through Belloq's shoulder and chest. As the daemon ripped its weapon free, the ganger collapsed. Pale maggots sprouted from the blackening wound, gnawing at his rapidly liquefying flesh. Belloq's body twitched and jumped as the maggots devoured him and grew fat.

Belloq's men scattered, some fleeing, others shooting at the creature. But to no avail. As the creature closed in on those too stubborn to retreat, Rukn bellowed wordlessly, trying to catch its attention. He ducked aside as the daemon whirled towards him. It chortled something in glottal tones, but he ignored it. His tulwar danced across its tattered hide, rending it like soggy paper. Steaming ichor splattered his white armour and stung his bare arms. He backed away, pulling his bolt pistol. The daemon lurched after him, losing pieces of itself with every step.

'*The worm crawls in, the worm crawls out, the worm squirms all about,*' it grunted in a wet, ugly voice as it pursued him. '*The worm goes up, the worm goes down, the worm–*'

‘Quiet,’ Rukn snarled, and shot it in the head. Its cyclopean eye burst like a boil, spattering the ground with pus. Its skull deflated with a feculent wheeze and the body unravelled, tumbling to the ground in bits and pieces.

The cloud of flies shuddered and dissipated, leaving Rukn’s head and vision clear. The plaza was full of bodies and the stink of death was strong in the air. He looked at one of the surviving gangers. ‘Promethium. Burn everything. Just like the last time.’

He looked up as a shadow flickered across the plaza. Gunships. No way to tell whose.

‘They’re ours.’

Rukn spun, tulwar extended. Solaro raised an eyebrow as the blade came to rest against the edge of his neck. The Reiver stepped back respectfully. He looked past Rukn. ‘Trouble?’

‘No. You?’

The Reiver laughed. Rukn smiled thinly. He liked the Raven Guard, despite his abnormal height. They’d worked well together since the siege had begun. Solaro had his own contingent of mortals to shepherd, and Rukn saw them picking their way through the carnage. ‘We heard the shooting.’

‘Cultists,’ Rukn said, and spat. ‘More of them since yesterday, though.’ He sheathed his blade. Every day brought more of them, in landing craft, or crawling over the mountains. And that was just Low Town.

‘Yes.’ Solaro indicated the upper reaches of the city. ‘All heading that way. Siege weapons too. Tanks and artillery.’

Rukn turned. ‘Best to contact the lieutenant, then.’

‘Think he’ll want us to go?’

Rukn spat again.

‘Doesn’t matter. That’s where I’m going.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Karros leaned over the flickering schematic, frowning. ‘They’re pulling back to the ore-processors.’ He traced the image with a finger, causing it to hum softly. As it flickered, it cast sharp shadows on the dingy walls of the chamber. Originally, it had been an ore-vein, but as the shaft had been stripped bare, the miners had reinforced it and made it an extension of the facility, turning it into a catch-all chamber – a storage area, or a place for the

swing-shift to sleep. Thousands of similar sites dotted the asteroid's insides.

At the moment, it was Karros' headquarters. Enforcers and miners moved about, stacking supplies or studying maps, planning future operations. Women and children huddled in the corners, cooking or loading weapons. An elderly missionary – Zebus, that was his name – read haltingly from the *Lectitio Divinitatus* to an attentive crowd. Raven Guard moved about the chamber, overseeing the preparations. Sometimes they stopped to advise or comment, but mostly they watched. That was as it should be, Karros thought.

Space Marines were powerful, worth a hundred lesser souls, but they were finite. With the proper training, the miners could continue to resist the enemy after the last Raven Guard had perished. That they would all perish was an unspoken certainty among them. The enemy outnumbered them, despite the heavy losses the traitors had taken in the initial ambush. There would be no reinforcements from Almace. The Raven Guard would fight and die, one by one. But the miners might live. Might survive. That was enough.

Karros glanced at Deron. 'Any word from Spiros?'

The other Raven Guard shook his head. 'Can't even patch into his picter-feed. His armour's offline.' Karros' frown deepened. There was only one conclusion to draw from that. 'He's lost to us,' Deron said. It wasn't a question.

Karros shook his head. Spiros wasn't the first of their number to fall, but something felt off about it. 'Maybe not. They're planning something. The assaults here and here – they were more like raids, wouldn't you say?' He looked over at Reyes and Desh. The enforcer had his helmet off as well, and his features were haggard and bloody. Reyes handed him a cup of steaming recaff, and he thanked her with a brusque nod.

Desh nodded as he sipped his drink. 'I don't have much experience with it, but yes. Smash-and-grab, rather than trying to take ground.' He looked at Reyes. 'How many did they take?'

She looked away. 'We don't know. They hit one of the secure hab-areas. At least, we thought it was secure.' She concentrated on her recaff. Desh hesitated, and then reached out, as if to comfort her. She twitched away from him, and he let his hand fall.

Karros watched this interplay with mild interest before turning his attention back to the problem at hand. 'Why take prisoners?' he said out loud. He looked at Deron. 'If you were one of them, why burden yourself with captives?'

‘Hostages.’

‘No. They know we will not bargain.’ Reyes stiffened at that, but said nothing. Karros met her gaze and she looked away. ‘A ritual,’ he said.

Deron grunted. Like Karros, he knew how the Word Bearers fought. ‘Makes sense. They’re running short of chaff. And the traitors probably aren’t eager to waste their own lives. Not when they can…’ He trailed off. Something that might have been a shudder ran through him.

Space Marines knew no fear. That was the assumed wisdom, at any rate. But they could be unsettled – made uneasy by things outside of their comprehension. Daemons were such a thing. They were elements of wrongness imposed on reality.

Karros had fought them more than once, even before the Indomitus Crusade. Some Chapters mind-wiped those battle-brothers unfortunate enough to encounter such creatures, but the Raven Guard were wiser than most. Experience with such opponents was worth more than any potential harm such knowledge brought. Too, with the opening of the Great Rift, such knowledge had become sadly undeniable. The damned had set foot on Holy Terra, and nothing would ever be the same.

‘If they are preparing for such a thing, we must stop it. Like as not, we are already out of time. But even so, we must try.’ He expanded the schematic. ‘There are four main routes to the ore-processors.’

‘Six,’ Reyes corrected. Karros looked at her and she pointed to the schematic. ‘Processing chutes. Ore goes in, gets melted down and fed into the refineries on the next level. It’s a clear climb, if you’ve got the strength for it. They’re still firing, though. No way to get through them without cutting the power.’

‘Unless you’re wearing power armour,’ Deron murmured. Karros nodded, after a quick calculation.

‘We’d have to be quick. Even our battleplate isn’t going to withstand those temperatures for long.’

‘Doable, though. With luck.’

‘I didn’t realise Space Marines believed in luck,’ Desh said. His eyes widened, as he realised that he’d spoken out loud. Hastily, he looked down at his cup.

Karros smiled. ‘Luck is as keen a blade as this one on my hip.’ He indicated

his combat knife for emphasis. ‘But you must be careful, lest it turns in your hand.’ He looked at Deron. ‘Coming up through those chutes, we’ll be right in the middle of them. And with no time to analyse the situation beforehand.’

‘Bad for an assault,’ Deron said.

‘Good for a distraction, though.’ Karros looked at Reyes and Desh. The humans glanced at one another, and then at him.

Karros smiled. ‘Don’t worry. I have a plan.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Explosions rocked the reliquary boulevard. A building groaned and slumped on its foundations, as its broken walls spilled across the side street, erasing it from sight. ‘That’s the last of them,’ Canoness Lorr said. ‘The fire-corridor is finished.’

‘Good,’ Calder replied. They stood upon the steps leading up to the distant shape of the Cardinal’s Gate, overseeing the final defensive preparations. The steps were wide, slabbed things that rose steeply upwards for several leagues. Landings jutted from them at points, connected to causeways that led elsewhere in the city. At the very top of the steps was the gate itself, a towering edifice of bronze and iron, hung with bells and censers. Bulwarks had been erected on the landing before it, providing a final redoubt.

Despite the best efforts of Torag and the city’s defences, the enemy had managed to land assault-cutters and drop-ships throughout Almacia. Thousands of troops had spilled into the streets. Mostly in Low Town, but there were determined pockets elsewhere, and more arriving with every hour. The ships in orbit were emptying their guts over the planet. He knew the scene would be the same in the other cities, though most of the enemy’s efforts were concentrated here.

That was fine by Calder. Below him, Battle Sisters and Imperial Fists alike made ready for the arrival of the enemy. More squads of both were scattered throughout the upper reaches of the city, concentrated around the Processional Way.

That thoroughfare was the main artery of the city, connecting the depths of Low Town to the spires of High, and the most likely route of the enemy advance. It had seen the passage of millions of pilgrims over the centuries since Almacia’s founding. Great statues of saints and ecumenical personages overlooked the wide boulevard from columned plinths strung with great webs of electrical lighting and a canopy of hanging censers that filled the air with

the sweet stink of incense.

The censers swayed in the breeze, and ribbons of smoke drifted down from above, briefly interfering with Calder's auto-senses before they automatically compensated. Statues had been toppled at designated locations, creating a makeshift choke point. The relic-keeper responsible for taking care of them had gone into frenzied convulsions even as the first had been forced from its plinth, wailing imprecations upon the heads of the desecrators. Luckily, Canoness Lorr had been on hand to see to the matter.

Calder glanced up. The body of the relic-keeper hung from the canopy, among the censers, twisting gently in the breeze. As he watched, one of the dead man's sandals slipped from a limp foot and fell to the street. Calder followed its trajectory idly. He felt only the dullest glimmer of pity for the man, but even so, he wondered if there had not been a better way. Something of that must have showed in his body language, for Lorr cleared her throat.

'You seem displeased,' she said.

Calder looked down at her, somewhat startled by her perceptiveness. 'The most efficient solution is not always the most optimal,' he said after a moment.

Lorr smiled, her scarred features making the expression almost a grimace. 'He was given a command by the cardinal-governor. He failed to obey. The punishment for such heresy is death.'

'You sound almost gleeful, canoness.'

Her smile widened, becoming almost grotesque. 'I am ecstatic, lieutenant. At last, my faith is rewarded. Eamon has been kind – too kind – to those who defy him. Now, the time for kindness is done. The weak and sinful will be purged by this tribulation. This is a baptism of fire, from which a new Almace will rise – stronger, and blessed in the eyes of Him who guides us.' She made a fist. 'Our faith will light the dark, and we shall cast our defiance into the teeth of the God-Emperor's foes.'

Calder said nothing. He wondered what she would make of all that he had seen and heard in those ancient days, before he had been consigned to the vaults to await Guilliman's summons. Too, what would be her reaction to Eamon's prisoner? Would her faith shatter at the sight of the Anchorite, or would it only redouble itself? Then, part of him suspected that she already knew. He could not say which thought unsettled him more.

A vox-operator signalled them. 'It's Swordmaster Tyre, my lord,' the man

said nervously. He was a member of one of several squads assigned to the Cardinal's Gate in support of Lorr's Battle Sisters and Calder's Intercessors. 'Channel two-six-alpha.'

Calder cycled through the vox signals until he found the correct frequency. 'Tyre, this is Calder. Status?'

'It's as you predicted, lieutenant – Low Town is indefensible. I'm ordering a general withdrawal. You might want to let the White Scars know.'

'No need. Rukn has his orders. He'll bleed them from below as we hammer them here. Pull back to the Cardinal's Gate and disperse your formations across High Town. We'll join you in… five standard hours.'

'You sound confident.'

'No confidence. Experience. They'll lose most of their momentum in Low Town. Discipline will begin to break down. They'll be looking to enjoy themselves – or for reinforcements.' He paused, wondering how best to explain. But Tyre saved him the trouble.

'Reinforcements,' Tyre said, and laughed harshly. *'That's one word for it. Speak plain, lieutenant. They'll be looking to unleash the legions of hell on us.'*

'Yes. But Rukn will do what he can to prevent that. As will we.' He paused again. 'If we can't, we will need to alter our strategy.'

'I will make the cardinal-governor aware of the situation.'

Calder cut the link and looked at Lorr. 'You heard?'

She grinned. 'Oh yes. I'm looking forward to it.' She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, as if scenting the air. 'The chance to fight the Archenemy again is truly a gift from the God-Emperor.'

Calder's vox clicked. 'Solaro,' he said. 'Status?'

'Busy,' came the reply.

'So I assumed. Report.'

'Siege weapons moving along the northern causeway, towards the Pilgrim's Gate.'

Calder frowned. As he'd predicted. The enemy would seek to breach the gate and bring the weapons through High Town in order to train them on the cathedral-palace. 'Focus your efforts on disabling those weapons. I don't want them getting in range of the palace.'

‘Might be too late already.’

‘Then do what you can.’

‘Trouble?’ Lorr asked. Calder looked down at her.

‘Only the expected variety.’

Lorr smiled. ‘They are predictable, in my experience. Puppets to fell powers, unable to–’ She was interrupted by a shout, from the end of the street. A Battle Sister hurried towards the steps. ‘Aysha,’ Lorr said, descending to meet the other woman. ‘Something to report, Sister?’

‘The enemy, canoness! They come.’

Lorr laughed, low and savage. She looked at Calder, her gaze wild, and he nodded. She laughed again and quickly descended the rest of the way to the street. Calder followed more slowly. With the fire-corridor in place, the street was a killing field. The enemy would charge and die. He’d made sure to leave them no other choice.

He could hear them now, even without his auto-senses. The clanging of great bells and the piping of flutes. Shouts and hymns and the rattle of undisciplined gunfire. Kenric, one of his Intercessors, was waiting for him at the bottom of the steps.

‘Estimates put enemy numbers at several hundred,’ Kenric said, as he fell into step with Calder. ‘Maybe three. No organisation to speak of.’

‘Just humans?’

‘So far.’

Calder nodded. ‘The traitors won’t show themselves until they’re sure of support. This is just a distraction.’ Shouts now from the other end of the street. Soldiers fell back, taking up position behind the outermost bulwarks. Lorr was already there, exhorting her followers in ringing tones. Calder signalled his Intercessors with a single vox-click.

They would hold the centre. It was imperative that the defenders see them doing so. Morale was as much a weapon as a bolt rifle.

His display flickered and magnified the opposite end of the street. He could see them coming – thin, feral faces, some masked, others bare, twisted bodies wrapped in rags or plundered armour, carrying weapons as poorly treated as their wielders. They carried standards made from scrap metal and rotting body parts, or great bells that clanged hollowly.

Calder had made a study of the battlefield markings of the enemy – at least those it was safe to look at. He recognised the primitive heraldry of at least three distinct groups, all of them far from home. Some of them he'd fought before, as the Indomitus Crusade stretched across the stars.

'Place your shots – standards and leaders first,' he said. 'Kill anyone shouting orders. Leave the slaughter to Lorr and the others.'

He did not bother to check that they had heard him. They would follow orders. The bulwark was tall enough to shelter the Primaris Marines, but just barely. Calder set his shoulder against the ferrocrete and peered over the top. The enemy were flooding into the street, howling and chanting.

'Animals,' Kenric said softly.

Calder glanced at him. 'No. That is what makes this all the worse.' He turned, checking the rest of the line. Men and women in Ecclesiarchy red clutched their weapons with nervous intensity. Some were afraid, others eager. But he was satisfied that they would hold. Lorr prowled behind them, her voice raised in exultation.

'Raise your voices to the heavens, so that the God-Emperor might hear you,' she cried, lifting her crackling power maul. 'Sing, Sisters! Sing, penitents – *sing!*' She wheeled, her flat gaze sweeping across the ranks of soldiers and Sororitas. 'Sing the song of our last days, sing so that we are not forgotten. Meet their daemon-hymns with our own holy song! *Sing!*'

And they sang. Calder watched in silence as the troopers first raised their voices in song, and then their lasguns, setting them across the barricades. The Sororitas followed suit, their voices more practised. Battle-hymns were as much a part of their arsenal as the bolter. He raised his own weapon. 'On my mark,' he said through the vox.

'Shall we sing as well, lieutenant?' Kenric asked.

Calder glanced at him. 'Sing if you wish, Kenric. So long as you can shoot at the same time.' Targeting runes flickered to life as the first of the foe reached maximum optimal range. Calder felt a flicker of pity for the debased figures racing towards him through the dust. Misplaced faith had led them to their deaths as surely as if they'd put guns to their own heads. But they'd made their choice and now would suffer the consequences.

The voices of the faithful met in the dusty air, and for a moment, Calder imagined the songs twisting in battle above his head. Then, the first las-bolts erupted from the bulwarks and several cultists fell, their howls cut short. But

more pressed forward, trampling the bodies of the fallen in their eagerness to reach their foes.

Behind him, Kenric began to sing. One by one, the other Intercessors joined him, and the deep, basso rumbling of their voices stretched out. Troopers shot nervous glances their way, and their singing faltered, but Lorr nodded in evident pleasure. ‘See,’ she shouted. ‘See – the angels of the Emperor add their voices to yours! You are blessed, you sons and daughters of Almace. Show them your thanks – sing!’

Once more, the song rose, bolstered by the throbbing pulse of Primaris voices. The enemy raced towards the barricades, and Calder’s targeting runes flashed green.

‘Fire,’ he said.

Bolt rifles thundered, and the foe died.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

95:10:20

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Dusep watched in satisfaction as the trio of heavily armoured Deimos-pattern Vindicators rumbled up the throughway. Their Demolisher cannons thundered one after the other, shattering the foundations of the causeways and clearing the streets of rubble.

In their wake, mortal chaff marched in rigid formation under the watchful eyes of Legion overseers. Dusep had always favoured martial rigour over theological. Off the battlefield, faith was between a man and his gods. On the battlefield, Dusep was the only deity his slaves needed to worry about.

The Word Bearer stood atop the observation cupola of a heavy Medusa field gun. Behind him, his slaves rang their tocsins, and called out the eightfold prayers of far-slaughter. The ancient weapon had seen him through a thousand sieges. Its red flanks were marked by kill-runes, and he'd trained its crew himself. The Medusa growled as its treads crunched over broken bulwarks, and he patted the top of its blast shield affectionately.

Red drifts of bodies were flattened beneath the Medusa's weight as the advance growled forward. There were larger corpses mixed in among the mortal meat – Imperial Fists. But only a few. A bare handful, and not enough to stop him. He studied the bodies as his brothers plundered them, taking sections of battleplate, or even gene-seed. The latter was worth a lord's ransom, in the Eye. It was also a delicacy, among certain fraternal lodges.

As he watched, two Word Bearers shucked their helms and shared a meal of raw gene-seed, gobbling it down with no thought to the mortals who might be observing them. Dusep sighed at their lack of civility and made note, intending to chastise them later. Discipline had to be maintained, especially in front of the slaves.

'My lord, the Pilgrim's Gate is just up ahead,' one of his assistants quavered. Dusep looked down at the mortal and cuffed him, knocking him sprawling.

‘I am aware. Do not speak again unless it is to tell me something I do not know.’ Dusep looked up as an assault-cutter – one of several – scythed overhead. The bulky vessels were archaic, even by his standards. Little more than aerodynamic drop pods, and armed to the teeth. They were hurtling towards the prearranged drop points, their bellies full of mortal meat. Slave-soldiers and cultists. Their blood would sanctify the battlefields above, calling the children of the gods to war. He frowned at the thought. Daemons always complicated what should be a relatively simple matter.

He heard shouts from behind the Medusa, and saw that the troops following in his wake had stopped. He could hear them arguing with each other from here. While the cults made for excellent battlefield chaff, they had exaggerated notions of their own importance. Get enough of them together in one place, and they started vying to be top of the midden heap. Even slaves had a hierarchy, however ridiculous the notion.

Dusep looked down at his cowering aide. ‘On your feet, maggot. We have a rendezvous to reach. Get them moving.’ He reached for the lash hanging from his belt as the mortal scrambled to his feet and leaped down from the Medusa.

‘You shouldn’t beat them, so,’ a nearby Word Bearer said. ‘They are fragile and there are better uses for their pain.’

‘Hello, Morkesh. Come to contribute to the war effort?’ Dusep looked down at the other Word Bearer. Morkesh was a diabolist by inclination. He wore a ritual harness, studded with spirit-bottles and prayer scrolls, and there were censers built into the cooling vents of his armour’s power pack. Sweet-smelling smoke cloaked him at all times, and it seemed to take the shape of leering faces whenever the wind blew just right. ‘Maybe conjure up some living siege weapons for us, eh?’

‘Mockery, brother?’

Dusep laughed. Morkesh sounded annoyed. That was good. Dusep wasn’t overly fond of Morkesh, or diabolists in general. Neverborn might be blessed of the gods, but they were a curse on the battlefield. You couldn’t give them orders, no matter what fools like Morkesh claimed. They were like a natural disaster. You just had to hope that they went in the right direction. ‘No, no, of course not. I wouldn’t dare. Why are you here?’

‘I go where I am needed.’

‘I don’t recall asking for your help, brother.’

‘I don’t recall offering it, brother.’ Morkesh looked around. ‘The winds of

Chaos blow strong here. Daemons press close all about us, clawing at the barriers between worlds. They smell the blood of the fallen.’

‘Is that what that stink is?’ Dusep made a show of looking around. ‘Well, where are they, then? I can’t see them, and I have very keen eyes.’

Morkesh ignored him and crouched, tracing his fingers through the effluvia on the ground. Dusep shook his head and turned away, slightly repulsed. Despite his jibes, he could feel the Neverborn as easily as Morkesh, if not perceive them. The air felt oily when they were about. It felt wrong. As if the universe had grown ill.

Dusep did not consider himself especially devout. He knew the names of the gods, and made the ceremonial ablutions on the holy days. He painted his battleplate the correct shades, when necessary. But the gods were remote things. They prowled battlefields far beyond those ruled by Dusep and his brothers. Like many in the Legion, he did just enough to avoid drawing the ire of the gods or their representatives, but no more than that.

‘They’re coming,’ Morkesh said.

‘I thought they were already here.’

Morkesh looked at him. ‘They are both here, and not. The universe has been made permeable and things may be in two places at once.’

‘Yes. Things have changed, haven’t they?’ Dusep sighed. ‘Things were simpler, in the old days, before all this… confusion. Gods and daemons. When it was just a man and his faith and the desert.’ He turned, and studied the distant spires of the cathedral-palace. He began to calculate how best to crack it.

Morkesh laughed. ‘Yes. It is a grand time to be alive.’ There was a sound on the air, as of chains rattling. Or hooves stamping. The oily sensation had grown worse. The mortals had fallen silent, and even the other Word Bearers paused watchfully.

‘Gods grant that it stays that way,’ Dusep muttered.

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Hasht warmed his gloved hands over a plasma vent as the Blessed Ones went about their holy work. He kept his distance, as was only prudent. Too close, and the gods might decide to add his soul to their bounty.

It was cold in the chamber, despite the heat issuing from the vents. The miners had damaged the environmental controls on this level. The Blessed

Ones hadn’t noticed. Wouldn’t notice, until Hasht and the others started freezing to death. He pulled the collar of his uniform tight, trying to ward off the chill.

Around him, the remainder of his brotherhood stood watching the proceedings with the appropriate levels of awe and appreciation. He studied their faces, noting those who were missing. Their membership had never been as large as some and it had shrunk drastically in the past few days, from several hundred to barely sixty. Men and women he had sworn blood oaths with were gone, their bodies crushed and lost, or frozen stiff on the asteroid’s surface. Worse, most of them had died without seeing the faces of their enemy. Those who were left, he barely knew, or didn’t want to.

He raised his hands, flexing them. Feeling the ache of the cold. It wasn’t much different, this. Serving the Blessed Ones, or serving in an Astra Militarum regiment – you still wound up cold and far from home. You still wound up on a stone, with a knife at your heart. If the gods wanted you, they’d have you one way or another. Better to serve them willingly than be served up to them. That’s what the Blessed Ones said.

He watched them, careful not to look directly at them. They didn’t like that. Some of them would tolerate it, but most would kill a man the way Hasht would kill a fly. Then, the Emperor’s angels weren’t much different.

He looked away as they killed another group of miners and dumped their blood into the troughs. Bodies were stacked like ingots in the corner of the chamber. Some of those in his brotherhood were already eyeing them hungrily. Protein was protein, and it’d had been a day or two since any of them had eaten anything more than a ration bar.

Hasht wasn’t that hungry, quite yet. But he knew he soon would be. He wondered whether he’d be able to stomach it, this time. He reached for his canteen but found it empty. They hadn’t yet managed to get to the hydrogen cyclers for the facility. He turned to one of the others – a hard-faced woman named Skeda – and gestured. ‘Water,’ he said.

‘No water,’ she said, handing him a battered flask. He took a swig and nearly choked on it. Whatever it was burned like hot embers going down his throat. Gasping, he handed it back. She grinned. ‘Bartered it from the half-breeds on the gunnery decks. They brew it in the siphon tanks. Good, eh?’

‘No,’ he said, pawing at his mouth. It felt as if his lips were peeling.

‘Keeps you alert, though. And keeps you from getting hungry.’ She took a swallow and rolled it around in her mouth. He watched the crude ritual tattoos

on her face flex and squirm. Similar patterns adorned his own flesh. He tapped his cheek.

‘Akel do yours too?’ Akel had been their brotherhood’s rite-keeper. He was dead now. Something had twisted his head off in one of the southern junctions. Skeda nodded.

‘Just before we left Pergamon.’ She touched her cheek. ‘The Blessed Ones watched. Akel said it made the ink flow smooth.’

Hasht nodded. That sounded like Akel. ‘Never seen them this close,’ he said quietly. ‘Never realised…’

‘How big they are?’

‘How badly they smell,’ he said.

Skeda snorted and clapped a hand over her mouth. Hasht smiled. She shook her head. ‘They’d kill you, if they heard you.’

He shrugged. ‘They heard me. They don’t care. And they smell like rancid meat and spoiled blood. Like a battlefield.’

‘Or a charnel house,’ she said. ‘Akel used to say that some of them rub fat and incense on their armour, to keep it shiny.’ She took another swig. ‘Feel that – they’re calling up the hunters from deep places.’

Hasht shivered. The ritual had been going on for days, and would for several more, if the others were to be believed. ‘Never seen one up-close. You?’

She nodded, her face tight. ‘Once.’ She stuffed her flask back into her armour. ‘Didn’t like it. Don’t like it.’ She looked at him, and he saw fear in her eyes – and something else. ‘Come,’ she said softly. She held out her hand. After a moment’s hesitation, he took it.

She led him away from the others, back towards the processor chutes. The heavy, chimney-like structures bled a welcome heat, and the clangour of their function drowned out the sounds of the ritual. The servitors were still at their stations, hard at work. They didn’t stop, even when Skeda kissed him.

Her lips were rough against his, and he could taste the alcohol on her breath. There was fear there, and loneliness too. They were afraid all the time. Sometimes Hasht wondered if there’d ever been a time he hadn’t been afraid.

These little moments were all any of them had. A few minutes to forget the fear and the worry. To think about something other than attracting the ire of the Blessed Ones and the Dark Gods. Just a few precious moments of peace.

Skeda pushed back from him, panting slightly. He made to speak, but the words turned to dust on his lips as he saw it. Something black and terrible rising over the lip of the chute above, its form steaming, its eyes red as blood. Glaring down at him, glaring right through him, and he thought, just for a moment, of shouting. Of crying out a warning.

But the moment passed.

And then, it was too late to say anything at all.

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

The interior of the gunship shook as it dropped through the atmosphere. Warning lumens bathed everything in a warm, red light as pressure valves clicked rhythmically. Amatnim ducked through the bulkhead separating the pilot's compartment from the rest of the ship. 'You wanted to see me, brother?'

'Yes, my lord.' The pilot was hooked snugly into his control throne, conduits and cables connected to numerous feed ports on his armour. Over the centuries, those ports had begun to take on a disturbingly organic texture, and they seemed to pulse and twitch in time to the pilot's movements. The rest of the crew were servitors, or had been. Now they were part of the gunship – semi-sentient synaptic nodules, their restraint cradles grown into hard, scabby tumours that hid all but their slack features.

The pilot had no name, save that which he shared with his vessel – *Golan.* For all intents and purposes, man and machine were one and the same. When the pilot spoke, so too did the guiding machine-spirit of the gunship. Amatnim was sure only that both were loyal to the Legion – and to him, in particular. 'One moment please,' he said.

The reinforced viewscreen showed the upper atmosphere. Flickering ident-runes spun across the screen, marking the locations of the other gunships and troop landers dropping towards the city. Explosions tore at the already ravaged air. Ground flak, rising from the upper reaches of the city. Apis winced as the edges of an explosion washed across *Golan.* 'That was close.'

The pilot spoke up. 'No. It wasn't.'

Another explosion followed. The glare of it momentarily filled the viewscreen. The gunship shuddered and veered. Apis stumbled, and Amatnim steadied him. 'That one was,' the pilot added, with an unpleasant chuckle.

The city spun beneath them, spreading to fill the viewscreen. Slabs and stretches of white and grey spilled among the brown of the crater mountains.

The explosions came faster and larger the lower they went. Flak-towers hammered at the sky as tracer-fire spun and spiralled. A troop carrier was pierced clean through – a lucky shot. The great vessel listed, spewing smoke and gouts of flame. The pilot murmured a command, and the servitors replied in hissing, static-laced voices. The gunship banked away from the burning vessel.

Amatnim leaned forward, watching the troop carrier plummet towards the city like a newborn comet. ‘How many were aboard that one, do you think?’ he said.

‘A few hundred,’ Apis said. ‘Only mortals, though.’

‘No loss there, then.’ Amatnim turned. He recognised some of the ident-runes on the screen – the atmospheric cutters employed by the pirates in their raids. Ganor was making good on his part in the strategy. Some of the cutters disintegrated in mid-descent, cut to ribbons by the flak. But others streaked downwards, thrusters firing.

The pilot grunted a curse as tracers skidded past *Golan*’s prow. He thumbed an activation rune on his display and the gunship’s assault cannons roared. Targeting runes spun across the display as he returned fire, attempting to silence the closest flak-tower. A burst of flame and smoke from below spoke to his skill in such matters. ‘There. Ought to buy us a few moments.’ He glanced at Amatnim. ‘We will be entering the city’s airspace within the hour, my lord,’ he said. ‘Unfortunately, we are suffering a distinct lack of safe landing zones within reach of the designated target area.’

He gestured without turning from his viewscreen. A hololithic schematic flickered into view above his throne. For a moment, it resembled a nest of squirming snakes. Then, it resolved itself into a plan of the city.

Augur-sweeps and information provided by Ganor and the other pirates had given the Word Bearers a wealth of valuable information. Amatnim had identified at least half a dozen sites at which they might set down just from a cursory glance. These were all illuminated on the schematic. ‘There are three options,’ the pilot said. ‘None of them good.’

‘What about these?’ Amatnim gestured to several of the other illuminated areas on the schematic.

‘Long-range augurs detected concealed weapons points and thermal readings that can only be explosive charges. We land at any of those, we won’t be in one piece for long.’

Amatnim grunted. ‘Smart. Give us three doors that all lead to the same choke point. And all the while, they’ll be stalling Dusep.’ He shook his head. ‘Imperial Fists. Stubborn and infuriating to the last.’ He gestured, and the schematic rotated. ‘The key to any victory is to force your opponent to react to your choices, rather than the opposite. So let’s avoid those poisoned chalices they’ve so kindly left out, and choke them on their own hubris.’

‘Meaning?’ Apis asked.

‘We’re going to enact a rapid assault drop.’ He looked at the pilot. ‘You know how to make a controlled crash, I trust?’

The pilot looked up at him. He was silent for a moment before answering. ‘I know enough to know that I would rather not, my lord.’ The gunship seemed to shudder in agreement around them.

‘Sometimes the gods ask that we take the hard road, brother. Contact the other gunships. I want you to plough right through whatever defences they’ve erected – carry us right into the heart of them.’

‘Bold – especially since we might not survive,’ Apis said. ‘And we won’t be able to extract ourselves if we scrape these birds across the road.’

‘We have plenty of gunships. And as I’ve said before, brother… the gods love a gambler.’ Amatnim leaned over the pilot’s shoulder. ‘Take us in, brother. And sing them a hymn of fire as you do.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

95:15:40

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Ord stood at rest, his heavy bolter hanging loosely from his hands. The metal of its barrel pinged softly as it cooled. He and his brothers were spread out among the mortal soldiers. Geert stood to the rear of the bulwark, ready to lend support where needed, while Caln was crouched atop the gate itself, warding the fire-teams positioned there. Ord had the honour of the centre, where his arc of fire would not be too badly hampered.

Thus far, they had encountered little more than chaff. Chanting lunatics, clad in stolen fatigues, carrying weapons outdated even by the standards of a backwater world like this. They showed little discipline and little inclination to do anything more than rush to their deaths, singing foul hymns. Ord suspected that had he and his brothers not been there, it might have been enough. Numbers counted for more than most would admit.

Geert made a sound. Not quite a cough. Ord glanced at him but said nothing.

‘We have not heard from the lieutenant in several hours,’ Geert said after a moment. There was a brief hesitation before the word ‘lieutenant’. Only a Space Marine would have noticed. Only an Imperial Fist would have known what it meant.

‘So we hold,’ Ord said. ‘Those are our orders.’

‘Places us to the back,’ Caln murmured. ‘Takes his own kind forward.’

‘There are less than fifty of us to cover the gates to the upper city. He commands the defence of the main thoroughfare, as is his right as our commander.’ Ord turned slightly, looking up at Caln’s yellow form standing atop the gate. ‘Or do you question his strategy?’

‘Not his strategy,’ Geert said.

Ord snorted. ‘At least you have the sense to keep your murmurings to the vox.’ It would not do for the mortals to hear such things.

‘I am not a fool, brother.’

‘Only a fool claims not to be a fool,’ Ord said. ‘Save your muttering for afterwards, brother. It will make entertaining listening at the victory feast.’

‘You’re assuming we’ll survive.’

‘I always do.’

‘The odds are not in our favour.’

‘When are they ever?’ Ord glanced up at Geert. ‘I have no intention of dying, do you? If so, please let me know so that I might adjust our strategies accordingly.’

Geert’s reply was lost in a haze of static. Ord was about to ask him to repeat himself, when he heard something amidst the crackle.

‘–blasted atmospheric disturbance,’ Geert’s voice broke in, suddenly.

‘Quiet,’ Ord snarled. ‘Listen.’

He heard it again. Not across the vox, this time, but out in the open. On the wind. A sharp, slithery sound. And then the clop of hooves – many of them – racing through broken streets, faster and nearer with every moment. An unsettled murmur ran through the red-clad soldiers as the air took on a greasy tang.

Ord heard a hiss. He looked down. The blood that coated the street was bubbling. Fat orbs swelled and burst, releasing a fragrant stench. Things like plump, red maggots writhed within them, twisting and stretching. A sound like claws scratching at stone echoed across the street, as the clop of hooves grew louder and louder.

A nearby vox-caster gave a squeal, and laughter emerged from it. A guttural flood of brutal obscenities followed, until a panicked soldier switched it off. Ord grunted. ‘Something new.’

‘Daemons,’ Geert said. The word sent a chill through Ord. Not fear, not exactly, but uncertainty. As if he stood on a crumbling ledge, with no sign that it would take his weight. Daemons… Some of his brothers thought them mere psychic phenomena – murderous phantoms conjured by witches. Others thought them something else entirely. Regardless, they knew neither fear nor fatigue. Even orks would eventually flag and retreat, if you killed enough of them. But daemons didn’t. They just kept coming. There was only one way to effectively resist them, and that was to lay down enough fire to keep them at bay. His hands tightened on the grips of his heavy bolter.

‘Yes. Many of them.’

Caln grunted. ‘I can smell them from here. Like sour blood and verdigris.’ He paused. ‘Should we withdraw?’ He asked the question hesitantly.

Ord didn’t reply. His auto-senses fuzzed and wept, unable to acclimate as the air twisted and steamed. The blood on the street was climbing the walls somehow, painting an improbable crimson corridor up to the edge of the Pilgrim’s Gate. In the red steam of its boiling, he saw phantom shapes twist, as if in agony.

‘I hear something… like… like chains, or blades, or…’ Geert began.

‘Ignore it,’ Ord said flatly. ‘A witch’s tricks. Have faith, brother.’

‘Faith is the wall of the soul, and the gate of the mind,’ Caln recited.

‘Every shot a prayer, every blade a hymnal,’ Geert added.

‘We are his fists, clad in mail, and our blows are his,’ Ord said softly. ‘Ready yourselves, brothers. They want our gate. I do not think we will let them have it.’ He raised his heavy bolter.

‘Not easily, at any rate.’

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Reyes was frightened.

Not the familiar sort of fear, the kind you got when you were hanging over a shaft, your harness slipping and the lumens too dim to show you the bottom. This was more visceral. The air tasted wrong. Like poison.

She wasn’t the only one who was afraid. Desh was too. The enforcer had practically sweated through his uniform, but like her, he kept firing. She glanced at him, and he met her gaze. He wasn’t so bad, for an enforcer. Better than Galba. He gave her a smile – a quick, weak thing, but comforting nonetheless. She tried to muster her own, but it didn’t come.

The ore-processing chamber echoed with the sounds of battle. The sounds of dying. She heard a roar and saw a red-armoured warrior hurl one of her miners against an outcropping of machinery. The Traitor Space Marine turned as a fusillade of boltgun fire struck him, driving him back against the wall. He staggered forward a few, uncertain steps before slumping, and toppling over. The sight gave her some hope. If monsters like that could die then maybe they could win. Maybe.

‘Reloading,’ Desh said, dropping down behind the bank of industrial

cogitators they were using as cover. Reyes fired over the top of the bank, covering him as he reloaded his combat shotgun. Around her, miners and enforcers moved up through the chamber, but slowly. Hesitantly. They could all feel it.

Something was coming. She felt it on her skin, like the hint of rain. Her autogun clicked and she dropped to her haunches. ‘Reloading,’ she said, ejecting the ammunition drum. She reached for another as Desh took her place in the firing line. She fumbled at her gear-belt, her fingers tracing across her plasma-cutter before she found what she was looking for. The drum was covered in passages from the *Lectitio Divinitatus*.

It had seemed only fitting, given the enemy. Old Father Zebus had done it for all of them, every miner, even a few of the enforcers. The missionary was too old to fight – had been too old to fight for a decade or more – but he knew his scripture.

As she clicked the new drum in place, she peered around the cogitator bank. The chamber had been desecrated. That was the only word for it. Bodies were stacked in the corners, and blood slathered everything. The walls and floor stank like nothing she’d ever smelled before. And something else. There was a sound – faint, under the roar of gunfire and the screaming. But it was persistent.

Like metal, scraping on stone. Or laughter. It was getting louder, no matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise. Something was coming.

At the centre of the chamber, the air had taken on a watery tinge. One of the traitors stood there, his hands raised, his voice echoing hoarsely over the sounds of battle. Nearby, one of the Raven Guard hung from a web of chains. The Space Marine – Spiros – was dead. Reyes hoped he was, at least. His chest had been torn open, the black carapace hanging in bloody tatters and the thickened ribcage split.

The Traitor Space Marine had plucked something from his chest, and was holding it aloft. As if it were an offering. Beyond him, she could see Karros and several other Raven Guard fighting their way towards the centre of the chamber.

The air convulsed. She felt her stomach twist. Desh cursed. ‘Did you feel that?’

‘It’s happening,’ she said. She didn’t know what it was. She didn’t understand. But she knew it had to be stopped.

Before Desh could argue, she darted into the open, ducking past combatants. Las-rounds plucked at the floor around her feet. She could hear Desh cursing as he hurried after her. The air had turned thick. She could feel things moving through it, just out of sight. Something giggled in her ear.

One of the traitors lurched into view, roaring. She ducked past the giant, not stopping. She raised her autogun, taking aim at the chanting legionary. She knew her autogun wouldn't hurt him, but she had to try. Immaterial claws scratched at her, and the giggling became urgent whispers. She saw him lift something glistening and wet, and a light grew, shining, spiralling, an ugly light, too bright, and the whispering became a roar–

She fired. There was a sound like a bell, tolling in the deep. For a moment, the air turned to fire and she couldn't breathe. She heard screaming, not human but something else. She saw the traitor staggering, smoke rising from him, as if he'd clutched a grenade to himself and it had gone off. He turned and for an instant, their eyes met.

She froze. There was so much hatred there. Raw, animal hate – not just for her, but for who she was and all she represented. She raised her gun again. But before she could fire, she heard the wet scrape of meat on stone. The world stuttered to a halt. A stink like fresh-spilled offal washed over her. She turned. Slow, too slow.

A mountain of muscle and metal rose over her, its face impossibly beautiful. She saw a massive blade sweep back, and knew it would split her skull and there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing at all.

Karros shoved her aside, dislocating her shoulder with the force of his blow. She cried out as she hit the ground, and lost her grip on her weapon. She saw the monster's blade fall, and Karros' hand spun away in a spiral of red. The Raven Guard made no sound as he shoved his bolt pistol into the thing's chest and pulled the trigger until the weapon was dry.

The monster roared and smashed Karros to the ground. It whipped its blade up, ready to strike the prone Space Marine. But a combat shotgun roared, and the monster whirled with a shriek. She saw Desh stumble back. The enforcer fired again and again, pumping shot after shot into the advancing creature. It reached for him, and he flung himself back. As it made to lunge after him, Karros leapt onto its back, his wounded limb wrapped around its throat.

It dropped its blade and clawed at him, tearing great, sparking gouges in his armour. Reyes smelled the acrid stink of trans-human blood, and winced as Karros was slammed into the floor hard enough to split the ferrocrete. She

was on her feet by then, arm numb, but she had her plasma-cutter. The tool spat and flamed as she thumbed the activation rune.

The monster turned, and she saw that Karros had managed to ram his combat blade into its throat. It wheezed, ichor bubbling from the wound. It bent, reaching for its blade. ‘No,’ she said. The plasma-cutter hissed, and the monster screeched as the solid spike of heat burnt through its talon. It swept its good hand at her, and she lurched under the blow, stabbing at it with the cutter. She smelled something like burning oil, and the creature staggered, wailing. Off balance, she hit the ground, jarring her arm. Cursing, she lashed out wildly, scraping the cutter across the beast’s legs.

It howled and fell. She scrambled back as it flailed at her. It lunged again, and she thrust the plasma-cutter into its face. Its momentum carried it into her, and she screamed as it jostled her arm. It twitched. Gurgled. Lay still. The smell of its dying enveloped her, nearly causing her to pass out. She heard shouting, and then the weight was being levered off her. She saw one of the other Raven Guard – Deron, she thought – rolling the corpse away. ‘Do you live, Ore-loader Reyes?’

She coughed and nodded. Desh was there a moment later, helping her to sit up. ‘You killed it,’ he said. He didn’t sound shocked, so much as thankful.

‘Somebody had to.’ She clutched her arm and cried out, as Desh helped her to her feet. ‘Where’s Karros?’

Deron stepped aside, and she saw the leader of the Raven Guard laying in a heap. One of the other Space Marines – she thought his name was Chayn – was crouched beside him, speaking softly. Chayn looked at Deron and shook his head. Reyes fell to her knees beside Karros.

They had removed his helmet, exposing battered, swollen features. His chest-plate had become a concave mess, and she could hear the rasp of his lungs. Blood spilled from the cracks in his armour. One of his eyes had burst, and the remaining one fixed on her. His limbs jerked limply, and she realised that his spine had been broken. His lips twitched, as if he wanted to speak. But he said nothing. No final words. No goodbye. No explanation.

His eye dulled, and his breath rattled. A moment later, he was still.

Deron dropped to his haunches beside her. ‘His ribs shattered. Both hearts were pierced. His spine was broken, and there was swelling in his skull.’ He spoke calmly, as if Karros had been a stranger. Maybe that was just how they talked about each other.

‘He saved me.’

Deron nodded and rose. ‘Their leader fled. We will find him.’

Reyes struggled to her feet. ‘I’m coming with you.’ Desh was at her side a moment later, steadying her. She caught his hand, and squeezed it. Desh returned the gesture. He wasn’t so bad, for an enforcer.

Deron didn’t argue with her. ‘Gather your people. It is time we finished this hunt.’

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder had once heard Dorn describe a siege as a thousand moments of unseen heroism. Patched into the picter-feed that the Raven Guard had given him access to, he witnessed them all, if only out of the corner of his eye.

He saw the crime lord Stella Drumm balance a lascarbine atop a shattered window sill and fire at the daemon-worshippers howling in the streets below. She spat orders at her followers, and one of them hefted a missile launcher. There was a red flash and the street shook from the resulting explosion.

Elsewhere, he saw enforcer rumblers skidding through the shattered streets, sirens blaring. They took a sharp turn, swinging around a corner. The assault cannons mounted on their chassis stuttered and a mass of bodies was reduced to red ruin. The rumblers sped on, rolling easily over the broken corpses.

Somewhere to the east, in an alleyway, red-uniformed soldiers hurriedly hauled a lascannon into position as a tracked troop carrier rumbled past, unawares. He saw grey-armoured Battle Sisters hurry through the burning ruin of a Low Town shrine, the firelight reflected in the visors of their helms. He saw all of this and more. A thousand last stands. A thousand glorious charges. A thousand deaths.

Numbers clicked over as he altered strategies based on these deaths. He did so without setting aside his bolt rifle. Mechanically, he ejected an empty magazine and reached for a replacement, relaying orders across continuously cycling vox frequencies as he did so.

‘Lieutenant Gavriel to sector tertius, grid-marker omega-nine. Reinforce Sergeant Ablet. All available units in sector secundus to grid-marker zeta-one – hold the eastern reliquary boulevard. Tyre – do you copy?’

‘Copy, lieutenant.’ Tyre’s voice was distorted by static, but intelligible. Ricochets glanced from Calder’s battleplate and a targeting rune flashed. Without turning, he snatched his bolt pistol from its holster and fired. The

rune went dark. He holstered the pistol and lifted his bolt rifle.

‘Status of the Processional Way?’ From the command bunker, Tyre would have access to the full tacticum map of the city. He would be following the battle in real time.

‘Holding. It’s mostly chaff – the arch-heretics have not yet shown themselves in any great number. But there are reports of siege weapons advancing to the north.’

‘I’ve already ordered Rukn and Solaro to deal with them. What is the cardinal-governor’s status?’ Eamon was under guard in the command bunker. That was the safest place for him, theoretically.

‘Anxious. He wants to be out there with a gun himself. I know the feeling.’

‘You are both more valuable where you are.’ Calder switched over to another channel without waiting for Tyre’s reply. ‘Torag – ETA?’

‘Commencing attack in three… two… – I’d take cover – one… attack run commenced.’

The air cracked with a shrill shriek. The thunder of turbines shook the nearby buildings to their foundations. The wind lashed, and shadows sprang down the thoroughfare. A trio of Stormtalon gunships swept overhead, assault cannons roaring. Impact craters opened in the street and surrounding buildings as the gunships hurtled over the packed masses of the enemy. Splinters of stone struck Calder’s armour as he hunkered against the bulwark. The craft split up at the end of the thoroughfare, one continuing on, the others banking northwards and southwards, respectively.

Calder heard the rumble of missile impacts from nearby side streets as the Stormtalons continued to strafe the enemy positions. He caught the top of the bulwark and leapt over. ‘Come. While they’re preoccupied.’ Kenric and the rest of the Intercessors followed. Their heavy tread echoed in the silence of the gunships’ passing as they stalked towards the stunned survivors of the assault.

Smoke and dust hung thick on the air as Calder led his warriors along the savaged street, killing the wounded where they found them. Despite the wind and dust, his helm’s auto-senses pinpointed the survivors, limning them in blue.

‘They’re pulling back,’ Kenric said.

‘Then we press them,’ Calder said. ‘Keep moving.’ Vox-clicks of assent were

the only replies. He grunted in satisfaction. The Intercessors spread out in a battle-line. Groups of three leapfrogged one another, two Space Marines to the front, a third moving in support. Calder waved two groups off and they moved into support positions along the edges of the thoroughfare, among the fallen pillars and shattered shopfronts.

Behind him, he knew Canoness Lorr would be tightening the line, readying the defences for another assault. The Battle Sisters were still singing, their voices roughened by strain and dust. The defenders had survived mostly intact. A few casualties, but within optimum limits.

So long as they held the Processional Way, the enemy could be contained. If the enemy could be contained, they could be isolated and dealt with. His strategy was proving correct. But something felt wrong.

A wounded cultist lurched to his feet, blade in hand. He wept as he hacked at Calder. The Primaris caught the blow on his forearm and drove the stock of his bolt rifle into the mortal's bloody head. The man sank down, still weeping. Calder kicked him onto his back and stepped on his neck, silencing him.

He paused, looking out over the street. Something felt wrong. Was there were something he'd missed? Something he'd overlooked? He ran through his strategy, wondering if he'd somehow underestimated the enemy.

An explosion drew his eyes skyward. A second followed. Artillery. The spires of the cathedral-palace shook, and the street shuddered with them. 'Pilgrim's Gate – status?' he said. As he spoke, he knew there would be no answer. There was smoke to the north. The Pilgrim's Gate had fallen.

'Primaris… there are gunships inbound.'

Calder stiffened. 'Clarify.'

'Gunships,' Torag repeated. The White Scar sounded chagrined. *'They blew past us.'*

'Which landing zones?'

'Are you deaf? I said that they are inbound. They are not going to your landing zones, Imperial Fist… They are coming to you.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

95:50:00

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Klaxons filled the interior of the gunship. Amatnim grinned and looked at Apis, sitting across from him in his own restraint throne. ‘Remind you of anything, brother?’

Apis’ laugh was a harsh growl. ‘The drop on Vertis City. A good day.’

The gunship shook as it hurtled through the ferrocrete canyons of the upper city. A web of automated flak batteries filled the air with death and noise. Through his display, he could see gunships fall burning from the sky, ploughing into the streets below. Some exploded on impact; others made it down intact. The voices of the survivors filled Amatnim’s vox-link. He didn’t bother to make contact. They knew what to do.

‘Granted, we had air support at Vertis City,’ Apis said, as the gunship convulsed. Smoke filled the compartment.

‘And this time, we’re the air support,’ Amatnim said.

‘That’s what worries me.’

The tenor of the klaxons changed then, becoming shrill. The gunship shook, every plate and rivet clattering. Its engine snarled in protest, and Amatnim felt the reverberation of its assault cannons. He blink-clicked a rune on his helm display and opened a channel to the gunship’s pilot. ‘Status?’

‘It’s getting hot out here, my lord. They’ve got interceptors in the air. We outgun them, but they’re fast. I think they’ve realised what our intentions are.’

‘Are they fast enough to stop us?’

‘Only if the gods will it.’

‘Maintain course.’ Amatnim cut the link. He looked at Apis. ‘We’ll be there soon.’

‘And then, my lord?’

‘And then we end this.’ He looked at the others who occupied the hold. A full cohort – twenty brothers of the Legion. The other gunships held the same. Every brother not required elsewhere was here, at the spearpoint. How many of them would survive?

Amatnim found that he didn’t care, so long as the quest was successful. So long as he found what – and who – he’d come for. No sacrifice was too great. The gods were at his shoulder, and he tasted the honey-sweet tang of victory on his lips.

Apis laughed abruptly. Amatnim looked at him. ‘Something funny, brother?’

‘Lakmhu will be sorry he missed this.’

Amatnim frowned. ‘He will get over it.’

‘I doubt that.’ Apis leaned forward. ‘I spoke to the pilot of his gunship. The Dark Apostle will not leave the asteroid belt alive.’

Amatnim was silent for a moment. He had not given the order, but that mattered little, in the scheme of things. He nodded. ‘Then the gods have made their choice,’ he said slowly. He had not expected Apis to show such initiative, and it bothered him slightly. But there would be time to deal with such matters later.

‘Approaching target,’ came the pilot’s voice. *‘Taking heavy fire.’* Amatnim could hear it, rattling against the hull. Smoke billowed, filling the hold. He felt the gunship begin its descent at speed.

He smiled beneath his helm. ‘*Gloria Aeterna*, brothers.’

Then – impact.

Amatnim had been in crashes before. It had been distressingly common, in the latter days of the Great Crusade. Even so, one never got used to it. It was at once a sudden convulsion and cessation. Metal buckled and tore. Smoke rose in waves. Heat washed across his armour. He heard cries of pain and shock, and the tooth-rattling growl of a reinforced strut digging through ferrocrete. All of this, all at once. A single moment, stretched to a fine point.

A fire was raging through the downed gunship. He tore himself loose from his restraint throne, relying on his auto-senses to see him through the smoke and flames. There had been casualties, but less than he’d feared. He strode past them, leaving them to hang from their thrones, broken bodies lolling. Apis was already up, hammering a fist against the hull, trying to force the ramp to descend. ‘It’s wedged,’ he voxed.

‘Step aside,’ one of the others – Gernt, Amatnim realised – growled. Amatnim hauled Apis back as the other Word Bearer charged. Gernt hit the ramp with his full weight, and the bent pneumatics gave way with a shriek. The ramp fell to the broken street and Gernt rolled down. As he picked himself up, las-fire danced across his armour. He cursed and fired his boltgun one-handed.

Amatnim thundered down the ramp, already returning fire. The gunship had slammed into the bulwarks at the top of the street, crashing through them like a battering ram. Bodies lay in crumpled heaps, and flames danced along rivers of spilled fuel. The survivors were falling back in good order, and he felt a sort of grudging respect for them. He heard the roar of engines and turned. More gunships raced down, looking for safe landings on the street. All bore the signs of having raced through hell – hulls scorched and blackened, thrusters smoking. Barely a third of his force had reached the target, but it was more than enough.

‘They’re regrouping,’ Apis called out. He’d reached the intact bulwarks, and was putting them to use against their former owners. Amatnim hurried to join him. Targeting runes flashed everywhere he looked.

‘We have to push forward. Keep them under pressure. Grenades.’ Amatnim pulled a frag grenade from his belt and flicked the activator. As he hurled it towards the steps, Apis followed suit. Explosions rocked the street, followed by a deafening roar as the fires reached the gunship’s fuel reservoir. Thick, black smoke choked the air.

Amatnim stepped past the bulwarks, firing. His auto-senses pierced the smoke, showing him sketches of movement. He heard heartbeats and the hum of power packs. The whine of servos. Shouts. Prayers. He pivoted, boltgun roaring. Apis moved past him, firing. More explosions stirred the smoke.

Yellow forms loomed suddenly. Amatnim blinked. Larger than a legionary, but not unfamiliar. He’d seen them before, though only at a distance. A new weapon, for a new age. But old weapons were still just as deadly.

One of the newcomers fell immediately, head vaporised by a lucky meltagun blast. The remaining pair split up, using the bulwarks as cover. They moved smoothly into position to either side of the defensive line, and opened up on the advancing Word Bearers, catching them in a crossfire. The warrior carrying the meltagun was the first to fall. Gernt was next, his body jerking as shots hammered into him mercilessly and finally flung him to the ground. He twitched for some moments before finally going still. Apis cursed and sank

down behind a bulwark beside Amatnim.

‘No way to get around them,’ he growled.

‘They’re buying time for the others to regroup.’ Amatnim could see the mortal defenders retreating up the great stairs that led to the Cardinal’s Gate. There would be a secondary defensive position there, he knew. It was the way the Imperial Fists thought – there was always a fallback point. Always another wall. He ducked back as bolt-rounds chewed the top of the bulwark, spattering his helm with splinters of stone.

‘If they manage to dig in, it’ll be the gods’ own luck to drag them out.’ Apis signalled to a nearby warrior whose armour was festooned with sheathed blades. ‘Saper – see if you can flush those two yellow curs out of their kennel.’

Saper nodded and motioned to two other Word Bearers. They slithered forward, crawling low across the ground, and were soon lost in the smoke. Amatnim watched them go. ‘Dusep is still advancing to the north. He should be in position soon.’ He scanned the vox frequencies. Those who’d survived the assault drop were converging on his position. Soon, he would have the reinforcements he needed to breach any defences that the Imperial Fists had managed to erect.

‘Let’s hope that the Dark Gods watch over us until then.’ Apis peered around the side of a bulwark and fired. ‘We’ll need their blessings to get past those big bastards.’

Amatnim laughed. ‘They are quite large. What do you think they feed them?’

‘Knowing the Imperials – a tasteless nutrient paste.’

‘Sometimes it’s not about quality, but quantity.’

Amatnim heard a click on the vox. Apis tensed.

‘Saper is making his move.’

‘He’s a stealthy one.’

‘And vicious. That’s why I keep him around.’ An explosion sent chunks of stone hurtling through the air. Apis rose and Amatnim followed. One of the Imperial Fists was down, his armour smoking and ruptured. The other was turning, firing, stitching shots across the chest-plate of one of Saper’s companions. Another Word Bearer came out of the smoke, chainblade whirring. The Imperial Fist sidestepped the blow and crunched the stock of

his weapon into the Word Bearer's helm, knocking him flat. Before he could rise, the bolt rifle thundered, silencing his curses.

Apis cursed and lunged. The Imperial Fist spun, faster than Amatnim thought possible, and knocked Apis back against a bulwark. Before their opponent could capitalise, Amatnim drew his axe-rake and swung. The blade bit deep, nearly severing the giant's hands at the wrists, and sent the bolt rifle clattering away. The hulking warrior jerked around, nearly dragging the weapon from Amatnim's grip. He tore his axe-rake free and hacked at his opponent, finally knocking him to his knees with the flurry of blows.

Apis was there a moment later, to drive a combat knife into the back of the warrior's neck, in the gap between his helm and gorget. The Word Bearer twisted the blade, but the Imperial Fist tried to clamber to his feet regardless. 'He's not dying,' Apis snarled. 'Saper – make him die.'

Saper appeared, blade in hand. Not a combat knife, but something alien and lethal. It hummed nastily as he slammed it through a gap in the warrior's armour. The Imperial Fist stiffened and finally slumped. Saper stepped back, panting. 'That did it.'

Amatnim looked at the blood coating his axe-rake. It smelled different, somehow. Full of mysteries. He turned, looking up towards the Cardinal's Gate – he could see tiny figures moving. The Imperial Fists had succeeded. And there would be more of them up there. Not many, perhaps. He looked down at the body. 'Take his head. Just to be sure.'

He sheathed his blade. 'And then – we take the Cardinal's Gate.'

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Lakmhu staggered on through the dust of the asteroid's surface, through a forest of girders and machinery, forcing himself to stay upright. His remaining warriors moved in his wake. Only a handful now. He knew the names of some: Evek. Morn. Feyan. Half a dozen others. Loyal servants of Erebus, just like him. He hadn't realised it at the time. Amatnim had sent all of those openly loyal to Erebus with him. Perhaps hoping to cull them.

Some had died. But those who hadn't were determined to survive.

That was what the sons of Lorgar did best. They survived. Only those who survived tribulations were worthy to serve the gods. And Lakmhu was worthy. He had failed – but he would survive. He would survive to serve the gods again.

If they forgave him.

The ritual had been disrupted. Lakmhu could feel the pain of it inside him. He'd failed, and the gods had extracted a price for it. He felt smashed up inside, as if something had grabbed him by his hearts and lungs and *twisted*. It was a wonder that he wasn't dead already. Obviously, the gods had other plans for him. Why else would they have spared him?

The Raven Guard had come from an unexpected quarter – they and their slaves. He cursed himself for not realising – for not thinking that they might. Perhaps Amatnim was right. He was no line soldier, no strategist.

It had been the slaves that had surprised him. He'd thought them too cowardly to risk open battle. His hand ached from where the woman had shot the offering from his grip. He looked down at his hand, the blood on it turned to crimson crystals of frost.

Twice now, he'd failed to call up that which ought never to be put down. He could feel their anger beating at him. Pulsing in time to his own heartbeat. They were savage and hungry and driven to distraction by the sensation of their kin loosed upon the planet below. They wanted to be free. Demanded it.

He realised Evek was looking at him. They all were. 'I hear them as well,' Evek said. He was a bulky warrior, his armour crudely reinforced in order to contain an inhuman girth. Lakmhu fancied that soon he'd burst and something glorious would rise from the ruin of him. If he lived long enough. 'The gods demand blood to open the way.'

'The only blood we have left is ours,' Lakmhu said. 'And they'll have that soon enough. Contact Decimo. Get one of the gunships down here. We must retreat.'

The thought angered him and he coughed. Blood spattered the inside of his helm. Out of the corner of his eye, red markers flashed. The enemy were in pursuit. The image magnified, revealing a trio of ore-crawlers closing in. They had reinforced cabs set atop bulky, spider-like legs. Repurposed plasma cutting tools were mounted on the cabs.

'More to our left,' Evek said. 'They're closing in.'

'There – the pumping stations,' Lakmhu said, gesturing with his crozius. 'Easily defendable position. We'll call for extraction.' The pumping stations made for a makeshift palisade of pistons and slough-tanks, nestled among an interwoven thicket of support girders. The Word Bearers trudged into cover. The vox crackled and popped with the echoes of encrypted signals. Lakmhu suspected that meant that the Raven Guard were shadowing them as well. 'Feyan, Morn, the rest of you, keep watch.'

Evek moved to the edge of the stations, looking towards the landing platform where they'd left the gunships. Lakmhu joined him. There were flashes of light there. No sound, but Lakmhu knew the flash of weapons fire.

'The gunships aren't responding,' Evek said.

'Perhaps they are preoccupied.'

'Contact,' Feyan howled. A spurt of plasma struck one of the girders, nearly cutting through it. Morn and the others began to fire. Lakmhu drew his pistol and sought cover behind one of the girders as more lances of plasma struck the pumping stations and support beams. Evek joined him.

'The gunships,' he began.

'What about them?' Lakmhu demanded. A stream of plasma struck Morn, punching the Word Bearer from his feet. He convulsed on the ground, clawing uselessly at his melting armour. When he at last lay still, Lakmhu saw that the plasma had eaten its way right through the bone.

'They're taking off without us,' Evek said.

Lakmhu cursed and leaned around the girder, firing his bolt pistol at the approaching ore-crawlers. 'Patch me through to them – now!'

'They're refusing, my lord.'

Lakmhu snarled in frustration and turned, glaring at the distant shapes of the gunships as they rose into the black, pursued by flashes of light. 'Decimo,' he growled. 'I know you can hear me, Decimo – whatever Amatnim has promised you, I will double it. But only if you cease this foolishness…'

Static was his only reply.

'Dark Gods take them,' he roared, slamming his fist into the girder. 'I– what?' He looked up as a shadow passed across the asteroid.

Something white and vast moved slowly overhead. The murmur of the Neverborn quieted as the vessel slid across the horizon, filling it end to end. A gunship was caught by a strobe of fire and reduced to drifting motes. Another gunship followed, and another, until all of them were burning – a rain of steel comets.

Lakmhu began to laugh.

It seemed that the gods had preserved him again.

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Huldan Datch, commander of the Imperial Fists strike cruiser *Capulus*, watched as the enemy swarmed over Almace. His tactical feeds brought him information about the status of the closest vessels – most were damaged in some way. While the orbital defences had not proven equal to the task of keeping the foe at bay, they had bloodied the enemy fleet severely. The *Capulus* had capitalised on that, as much as it was able.

It was not enough. One ship, no matter its pedigree, was not enough. Datch had chosen his battles with care, but time was running out. Outnumbered and outgunned, his ship had sustained too much damage in too brief a time. He'd remained close to the dockyards, preventing their destruction – but only just. He made his ship a wall, and put it between Almace and the enemy. But every wall eventually fell.

The enemy vessels had begun to peel away from Almace, seeking new prey. The dockyards made a pretty target – every vessel that could mount a weapon had been impressed into service. Merchantmen and trade frigates spun in slow contests with pirate vessels in the upper reaches of the stratosphere.

The wreckage of the battle cluttered the upper orbits. Great currents of torn metal drifted sunwards, caught in the planet's gravity well. Fighter craft hunted one another through these reefs of shrapnel, duelling savagely in the shadows of the vessels they had launched from.

'Bring us about,' he growled. At their stations, the bridge-servitors bent to obey. Slowly, painfully, the battered cruiser began to turn. Klaxons whined throughout the ship. Smoke choked the corridors of the gunnery decks, and contact had been lost with the starboard launch bays. The command deck was full of heat and sound. He ignored it all. His armour was sealed against heat and the void. The surviving serfs had been evacuated, where possible. Only servitors and battle-brothers remained aboard, for the most part – those who could endure the slow dissolution of the *Capulus* and keep her in the fight.

Datch gave orders calmly, despite the flames licking across the deck, feasting greedily on the ancient battle standards and sacramental tapestries that rustled loosely in the heat. Soon, it would reach his throne. He estimated that he had another hour before it truly endangered his ability to effectively conduct operations. His tacticum display flickered weakly, but it was still readable. 'Jerik, concentrate starboard fire on those troop ships for as long as possible – I want them burning when they reach the troposphere.'

The crackle of static was his only reply. He ignored it. Either Jerik had heard him or not. There was little he could do about it either way. On the

viewscreen, the enemy flagship was visible – a vast, crimson nightmare, heaving to through seas of stellar debris. It cruised through the shattered wreckage of lesser ships, smashing them aside, sending the burning hulks spinning slowly away. Its guns spat fire, cutting attack craft from the air. Datch could hear the cries of the pilots as they died, and his hands curled into fists. He wanted to lash out, but the enemy was too far away. At least for the moment.

It had been a battle-barge once, he thought. Something beautiful. Now it was twisted and broken, made over into a thing of murder and ugliness. Clean lines broken by ramparts of filth, orderly decks become gaping maws – a loyal hound gone rabid.

Datch hated it, as he had never hated anything else. He wanted to kill it, more than he had ever wanted to kill anything else. But he knew that he could not. It was too strong, even wounded as it was. All he could do was bleed it more, sacrifice his ship so that the next ship – or the next one – might have a chance. A wall was not one stone, but many.

The battle-barge was approaching the dockyards, seemingly intent on dealing with them once and for all. Datch did not intend to let it do so unchallenged.

‘All power to forward batteries. As soon as it gets in range – fire.’

Servitors murmured their acquiescence. One squalled and slumped as flames crawled up its withered form. Its yellow tabard crackled as it twitched in its death throes. Datch paid it no heed. There were still an optimum number remaining. If necessary, he could run the bridge himself.

Augur-feeds showed the enemy vessel powering up its forward batteries. It was going to be a stand-down – a straight-ahead brawl, with the toughest ship emerging victorious. He smiled, despite the increased probability of his imminent demise. If the sons of Dorn were good at one thing above all others, it was taking whatever the enemy doled out, and paying them back twice over. ‘Come on then,’ he growled. ‘If it is to be done, let it be done well.’

The two vessels closed the distance, batteries hammering silently. The first shot smashed aside what was left of the *Capulus’* shields. The second tore a canyon in the strike cruiser’s hull. The strike cruiser returned fire, to less effect. Datch scanned the sensor-feeds, trying to find a weak point. But the battle-barge had held itself aloof from the worst of the orbital defences, allowing the rest of its fleet to take the punishment. The damage it had suffered was seemingly mostly cosmetic.

He growled in frustration as another hit knocked out the *Capulus'* long-range sensor array. The deck shuddered, and he fought to hold on to his seat. A servitor was knocked sprawling as its cogitator station exploded. Smoke was thick on the air, and the vox was buried beneath distortion. But the *Capulus* continued its approach, still firing.

Proximity klaxons sounded, and a new tacticum display shimmered to life, alerting him to the approach of a second vessel – as large as the first. Datch cursed. 'All hands to evacuation stations.' There was no sense in condemning his brothers to death. If they could make it to the planet below, they'd stand a better chance of survival. 'All hands to…'

He trailed off, as explosions lit up the viewscreen. The battle-barge shuddered beneath the impacts and began to come about. The vox hissed and spat, and then a voice – '*Pull back,* Capulus. *You have done your part. Now let us finish it.'*

'Who is this? Identify yourself,' Datch demanded. As he spoke, he caught sight of the newcomer at last. A second battle-barge, but this one was a familiar white. His hearts leapt with a sudden hope.

Laughter filled the vox. Wild and savage. *'The White Scars have returned, sons of Dorn. And Almace will not fall while we live.'*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

97:00:00

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Torag came to slowly, his gaze full of red. He blinked, trying to clear the blood from his vision. He felt no pain, but knew something was wrong. Fire licked at him. He turned in his control-cradle, and saw nothing save flames and smoke. He closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear it.

The last thing he recalled was swooping to attack the Word Bearers as they climbed the steps to the Cardinal's Gate. But they had been prepared. Brief flashes of that last moment clung to him – of red-skinned abominations, falling through the air like rain. Of a streak of light, and the sudden cessation of movement.

Metal popped, in the heat. His armour's systems were redlining. *Red Hare* was dying. He felt the Stormtalon's brave spirit slipping away even as he fumbled at the seals of his cradle. If he did not get out in time, its death would claim him as well. He drew his knife and hacked at the hoses and cables that tangled him. Sparks and lubricant spilled across his armour as he wrenched himself loose. He slammed his shoulder into the cracked canopy, trying to smash it from its frame.

Eventually, it gave way, parting with a scream. He hauled himself from the wreckage. One of his legs wasn't working, but he forced himself erect. His augmetic hands twitched spasmodically, and the world swayed about him. He turned, seeking his brothers. Another Stormtalon lay some distance away, scattered in burning chunks along the upper steps. But of the rest, he saw no sign. Perhaps they had retreated. Or perhaps they had not made it to the steps. He staggered away from the wreckage.

His visor was cracked, and he could feel his battleplate's servos acting sluggishly. There was blood in his mouth. In his armour. He looked down. A chunk of shrapnel jutted from his torso. The wound had sealed around it, but every movement he made caused it to tear open anew. He reached for it.

‘I wouldn’t.’

The voice was evil, a purr, like that of some great hunting cat. Torag looked up and saw a towering figure in red armour stalking up the steps towards him through the smoke. ‘I am impressed that you survived, brother. A wreck like that would have killed a lesser warrior.’

Torag said nothing. He knew instinctively that this was the cause of it all, before him. The arch-abomination. The warrior drew closer, and Torag saw other red forms rising up through the smoke, their baroque battleplate adorned with filthy sigils and strange runes. He did not retreat – could not. Would not. He was the hunter, and they the prey. That had not changed. He wished he had a weapon – even just a knife.

‘I saw you above, I think. Hunting my troops through the sky. Beautiful – if unfortunate.’ The Traitor legionary sighed. ‘You will die soon, I think.’

‘Better men than you have said the same. I am still here.’ Torag forced his hands to cease their twitching. ‘I have been burned and beaten. Drowned and hanged.’

The abomination studied him for a moment. ‘Have you ever had your soul flayed from your bones?’ he asked. Torag could hear the smile in his words and yearned to lunge at him. But even as he contemplated it, lanky shapes emerged from the smoke, prowling among the Word Bearers like wolves. Daemons.

The traitor extended his hand. ‘You do not have to die, you know. What purpose would it serve? Warriors of your calibre are not meant for lonely graves – but for glories eternal. I can give you that, brother.’

‘We are not brothers,’ Torag said.

The traitor lowered his hand. ‘No. Perhaps not.’ His hand fell to the blade at his side. ‘Then perhaps I can give you a worthy death, at least. Kneel.’

Torag laughed, though it pained him. The Word Bearer sighed, as if he’d expected it. ‘Very well,’ he said softly. Daemons paced forward, their steaming blades raised.

Torag nodded. ‘I dreamt that an eagle circled a mountain peak and fell from the sky.’ He peered up at the spires, rising far above. ‘That’s sort of a mountain, I suppose.’ He looked at the Word Bearers and their inhuman allies and deliberately tore the shrapnel from his midsection. He brandished it like a knife. ‘Well, come on then. I don’t have all day.’

He laughed as they came for him.

And then the eagle fell and knew no more.

The Pilgrim’s Gate had fallen, and the enemy had begun to shell the cathedral-palace. Ord watched it begin from where he crouched behind a half-shattered pillar. Blood stained his face and arm, and one of his hearts had ceased its beating, but he felt no pain. Only anger.

The siege tanks had blown open the gate and mounted the steps. Thus elevated, they had begun to bombard the distant spires of the cathedral-palace. Word Bearers and mortal slaves moved among the tanks, dragging rubble into makeshift defensive positions that offended Ord with their sloppiness. They were digging in. Preparing for an attack.

He looked around. The shrine the surviving defenders had taken shelter in lay just south of the gate. It had been struck by debris, and its roof had collapsed. The tall, stained-glass windows, once depicting the triumphs of the Kabalevsky clan, had shattered, and multicoloured fragments littered the cracked floor. Pillars slumped at odd angles, and statues had toppled from their plinths, providing improvised defence-works.

The daemons were mostly gone. After breaching the defences, the great mass of them had flooded upwards, into High Town, leaving the Pilgrim’s Gate to the forces following behind. Some had remained, though, eager to claim the skulls of the survivors. These capered and shrieked out in the street, as human slaves celebrated with them.

Great bells clanged atop crude standards, and mutants with faces like squirming masses of worms, or wolfish jaws, howled in joy. They beat drums made from newly flayed flesh and cast the skulls of the dead into tottering pyramids. Some few fired at Ord’s position, doing just enough to keep the survivors pinned in their shelter.

The daemons dancing among them twitched and flickered, like hololithic images suffering interference. As the mortal celebrants spilled blood from their own gouged flesh, the daemons solidified, lapping at the offerings with greedy need – as if they were starving. Sometimes, the creatures were too greedy, and bore down an unlucky mortal, devouring them even as they shrieked in ecstatic agony.

‘What… what are they doing?’

Ord looked down. Regulator Fein crouched nearby, her helm missing, her face bruised and bloody. The enforcer’s armour was battered and stained, and

she clutched her shotgun as if it were a holy relic. She stared at the daemons, her eyes wide. She was on the verge of panic, her breath coming in sharp, gasping bursts. He could smell the fear seeping from her pores. ‘I never… I never believed in them. Not really.’ She spoke in a hushed monotone.

‘Nor should you have,’ Ord said simply. In days gone by, such knowledge would have earned her death – or worse. But times had changed. The galaxy had split like an infected wound, and all manner of foulness had spilled out. Now, daemons had raged through the streets of Terra itself, and all the old certainties had been upended. He could not say whether that was a good thing or not. ‘Belief makes some evils stronger. We are lucky, in a way, that we fight them here, rather than elsewhere.’

‘What do you mean?’

He looked down at her. ‘This world was built on faith. I think maybe they are not so strong here as they might be elsewhere.’

‘They seem strong enough to me,’ she said, and he could see the fear on her face. In her eyes. But she was here. They were here. Enforcers and soldiers manned the rubble as if it were a palisade. Most of them were wounded. They had stood, and a part of him was proud of them. Proud to die with them.

‘They’re going to kill us, aren’t they?’

‘Yes,’ Ord said.

She closed her eyes, and he realised she was praying. Ord looked away, giving her as much privacy as he was able. He watched the seething riot of daemons and mortals, picking out the leaders among the latter. The ones exhorting their followers, gesticulating towards the battered defenders. Some were even singing.

Past this lunatic cacophony, Ord could see crimson siege vehicles grinding across the transitway. The Word Bearers seemed content to leave the slaughter to their slaves, both human and otherwise. And why shouldn’t they, Ord thought. There was no threat here.

His brothers were dead, save for Caln, who lay nearby, missing a leg and most of an arm. The survivors had erected makeshift defences from the rubble, but it was a poor substitute for a bulwark. Ord could smell their fear. Their shame. They’d failed, and that failure bit deep. Ord knew, because he felt it as well.

All their preparations, all their work – for nothing. The bulwarks had fallen in mere hours. The daemons had not ceased, or retreated. They had come on

and on, in an untiring wave of unnatural bodies, screaming in hate. What could a warrior do against such as that? Even a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes?

‘They’re coming again, brother,’ Caln wheezed, from behind him. He lay flat, his good hand holding a boltgun steady atop a fallen statue.

Ord peered around the pillar, and saw a handful of leathery, red shapes loping through the clouds of dust that now choked the air. Celebrations finished, they had decided to make the kill. Mortals ran with them, howling frenziedly. The daemons seemed encouraged by, and encouraging of, these efforts. As if they somehow fed off the madness of the humans and mutants mingled among them.

Ord checked the ammunition counter on his helmet’s display. A few thousand rounds left for his heavy bolter, plus what he’d been able to salvage before the defences had collapsed. ‘Fein, I require assistance,’ he said.

‘You seem to be doing fine,’ she said.

‘If my rate of fire dips, we risk them overwhelming us. Bring those ammunition cases and help me hook the feeds together.’ She didn’t argue further. Instead, she slid back and called out for two others to help her open the crates and drag the heavy ammunition feeds to Ord. Swiftly, he hooked them together, looping the excess over his shoulders where it wouldn’t become tangled or jam the weapon.

After a final check to ensure that the feeds would be unimpeded, he jerked his head, indicating for Fein and the others to withdraw into the shrine. ‘Fall back. They will be at the steps in moments.’

‘And what about you?’ she demanded.

‘I have work to do.’ Ord braced his foot against the rubble and raised his heavy bolter. As soon as the targeting runes on his display flashed green, he opened fire. The roar of the weapon was loud in the shrine, and fragments of stained glass rattled across the stones at his feet. The ammunition feeds rattled against his armour as he let the barrel drift from left to right, playing across the approaching daemonic ranks.

Whatever their nature, few things could endure such a withering storm. Daemons erupted in gouts of ichor and came apart like bad dreams. Mortals fell, their bodies ripped asunder. And yet still, they came.

The ammunition counter on his helm display shrank steadily as he swept the weapon back and forth, like a reaper’s scythe. A daemon, its lanky frame

covered in a score of wounds, sprang up the steps of the shrine, jaws wide, blade gleaming. He rammed the barrel of the heavy bolter into its chest and let rip, reducing it to tatters of stinking excresence.

But more of them pressed close, and mortals as well. Most were armed only with the crudest of hand weapons, but some had scavenged firearms. Las-rounds sang off the curved panes of his battleplate as he fired. The steps ran red, a waterfall of carnage. Bodies fell, piling in the broken walls. And still they came, driven to frenzied heights by the daemons that still danced on the broken street or lapped at the blood of the fallen. Only a few of the creatures were even attempting to enter the shrine. As if they were content to allow the mortals to die in their place.

Ord was pressed back by weight of numbers. Cultists squeezed past him and ran howling into the shrine. He heard Caln's bolter roar, and the sound of the mortal defenders following suit. A screaming man, his face stained with a cross of blood, spat obscenities as he hacked at the seals of Ord's leg-armour with a knife. Ord swept him off and kept firing. Two hundred rounds. One hundred fifty. One hundred. Fifty. Twenty-five.

When the heavy bolter ran dry, he swung it like a club. It was awkward, but satisfyingly heavy. Bodies pressed against him, climbing him, hacking and stabbing. Blades broke on his armour, but others pierced his seals, drawing blood. He could see nothing but hands and teeth, smell nothing but blood and–

Bolt pistols. He heard them. Recognised the sound instantly. Bodies fell away from him. He saw daemons clinging to the pillars like lizards, their skull-like faces turned towards the western end of the shrine, where white and black shapes moved. Space Marines. Scouts and Reivers, loping through the shrine.

A daemon lunged for him, blade raised. A shot felled it. Two warriors – one in white, one in black, moved to finish it as it screeched and rose. He recognised the former – the White Scars Scout, known as Rukn. The other was a Raven Guard – a Primaris Reiver. They shot it again and again, until it faltered at last, seeming to deflate.

Back to back, they fired into the crowd of cultists that swirled around them. Ord disentangled himself from his heavy bolter, and drew his sidearm. The bolt pistol kicked in his grip as he fought his way towards them.

Behind him, he could see that Fein and the others had been joined by other mortals – not soldiers, but gangers and civilians. All armed. All fighting. With

some relief, he saw that Caln was still alive as well, though even more bloody than before. He'd rolled into a sitting position, and was reloading his boltgun with one hand.

'My thanks,' Ord rumbled as he joined Rukn. 'Your assistance was well timed.'

'Don't thank me,' Rukn growled. He indicated the Reiver. 'It was Solaro's idea.'

'Conservation of resources,' Solaro said. 'They're retreating.'

The cultists were falling back. Their frenzy had seemingly evaporated as quickly as it had risen. 'Not retreating, regrouping,' Rukn corrected. 'Listen…'

Ord heard it – a shrill whine, growing louder with every passing moment. He looked at Rukn. 'Is that–?'

Rukn hurried towards the front of the shrine, his Scouts following him. They spread out along the wall. Ord glanced around, and saw Regulator Fein crouched next to Caln. She met his gaze and nodded. He hesitated and then turned back.

'Drop pods,' Solaro said.

Ord saw them. Slow streaks, piercing the sky. The whistle of their descent was impossible to ignore. The question was, who did they belong to? He turned his attention to the enemy. They had seen the drop pods as well.

Rukn muttered something in Khorchin, but before Ord could ask him what it meant, the first drop pod slammed down, raising clouds of dust from the already broken streets. A Lucius-pattern, Ord realised. Larger and heavier than the normal sort, lacking internal systems and armament. Pneumatic seals hissed in release, as the pod blossomed. Something massive stomped down the gangplank, concealed by a cloud of smoke and dust.

Ord heard the telltale whirr of an assault cannon warming up. A slow smile spread across Rukn's face. 'At last,' the White Scar murmured.

'What vermin is this I see before me?' a vox-amplified voice bellowed. 'What rough beast dares face a hero of Chogoris?'

A daemon roared in reply, claws flexing. It reeled as the newcomer's assault cannon thundered. The shots punched into its scaly hide, drawing out spurts of smoke and ichor. The newcomer descended to the street, firing as it came. Daemons staggered under the constant stream of shots, turning this way and

that as if seeking escape. Mortals died in droves, cut to ribbons by the withering volley.

The familiar white shape of a Dreadnought lumbered into view through the smoke, totems rattling against its sarcophagus. Rukn pounded a fist against Ord's shoulder-plate. 'Ha! I knew I recognised that howl. Malamir is here. Now we will see some death.'

'Excellent,' Solaro said. 'I was getting bored.' The air shuddered as more drop pods slammed down along the street. Mortal cultists scattered, falling back towards the line of siege tanks. Ord could see red-armoured forms hefting weapons. Heavy bolters roared at the newly arrived drop pods, even as the latter unleashed their own armament, clearing space for their passengers to disembark. He lost sight of them as the Dreadnought – Malamir – rampaged through his field of vision.

'Stop gibbering,' Malamir bellowed, as he slammed into a daemon. 'Accept death with courage. If your kind even understands such a thing.' His talon crackled with lethal energies as he drove his opponent back against a pillar and pried the creature's body apart. More of them leapt onto his hull, hacking at him with brass blades. Malamir swung his assault cannon around and fired, blowing another off its feet. His talon plucked a struggling creature from his hull and slammed it into the ground, reducing the lanky form to a mess of pulp and alien meat.

White Scars advanced through the smoke, clearing the street with brutal swiftness as they moved towards the dug-in siege tanks. Malamir turned to follow them, roaring imprecations as he went. Rukn laughed and clapped Ord on the shoulder. 'Come then, son of Dorn, we have reinforcements. Time to finish what you started.'

'Drop pods,' Lorr said, her voice harsh.

Calder didn't look up. 'Ours or theirs?' He dragged the top half of a statue across the edge of the landing, adding to the defences being erected there. His remaining Intercessors worked alongside him as the surviving human defenders rested.

The landing was a flat, wide platform, ringed by tall statues on plinths. Saints and martyrs looked down at the preparations being made in their shadows. Temporary bulwarks had been erected in staggered rows, each line anchored by a heavy weapon emplacement. At the rear of the defences, before the gate itself, a pair of Immolators waited, engines idling, their twin-linked heavy flamers at the ready. Cohorts of Sororitas moved along the bulwarks,

acting as fire support for the governor's soldiers.

Lorr stood atop an empty plinth, her eyes to the heavens. Her crimson cloak had been reduced to blackened tatters and her grey armour was scorched, but she was otherwise unharmed. He had come to the conclusion that it would take more than a rain of gunships to damage her. 'Ours,' she said.

Calder stopped and looked at her. 'How do you know?' Before she could reply, a burst of Khorchin echoed across the vox. Calder picked up one word in three, but understood the import. 'The khan…' he murmured. Suboden had returned.

'Yes,' Lorr said, dropping to her haunches, so that she was eye level with him. 'Surely, the God-Emperor is with us. He has sent His angels to us, in our moment of need. Perhaps we should take advantage of this blessing and mount a counter-offensive.' She smiled and Calder turned away. It had taken some effort to drag Lorr away from the enemy the first time.

'No. We hold the Cardinal's Gate. If they get into the cathedral-palace…' As he spoke, the cathedral-palace shook to its foundations again.

Lorr frowned. 'You do not have to tell me what the consequences would be, lieutenant. They shall not break our lines. Not here. Not now.' She sniffed and looked out over the steps that stretched down to the smoky streets below. The fires from the crashed gunships had been trapped in the narrow streets. The smoke was rising slowly, as if through a chimney flue, hiding everything below it. 'Your strategy was flawed.'

Calder stopped working and turned. 'Yes. I did not expect that they would crash their own gunships in an effort to reach us.'

'Why not? I would have done the same.'

'You are…' He hesitated. She stared at him, her gaze unblinking. He turned away. 'Yes,' he said again. 'You would have. I misjudged them. I will not make that mistake again.'

He knew that he spoke the truth, as surely as he knew that he would not have time to worry about it. Somewhere below, the Word Bearers were advancing up the steps, hidden by the smoke. Their assault had been so sudden – so savage – that he'd had little time to do anything but withdraw, and order the survivors to the secondary positions.

Kenric and two others had stayed behind to hold the way. They were dead now. He'd heard them die. Seen it, as he climbed the steps. They had deserved better deaths. Then, the same could be said for all those who'd

perished in this conflict.

He'd expected the enemy to come as soldiers. To advance slowly, to buy distance with blood. Instead, they'd all but decapitated his strategy. The moment the gunship had burst from between buildings, its shape shrouded in fire, he'd known that he'd made a mistake. He had never considered that this enemy would do something so reckless. Karros had been right. He had thought of them as he would his own kind.

But they weren't. They were mad. Fanatical.

On his tacticum display, he could see the battle for the city continuing to play out. A rumbling Taurox Prime rolled to a halt, its twin-linked gatling cannon whirring. Soldiers in red hurried down the embarkation ramp, lasrifles at the ready. Another Taurox burned nearby – Calder watched as the fire reached its fuel line, and the vehicle exploded. The planetary defence forces had little in the way of heavy armour, but they were making do with ore-haulers and transport vehicles where necessary.

He heard something explode far below, and thought for a moment that it was an echo of the Taurox. Orange flame-glow flared briefly beneath the shroud of smoke. He'd seen the Stormtalons swooping into the smoke, hunting the foe, holding them back. But no sign of them since. He activated his vox. 'Torag – status?'

Static.

He switched frequencies. 'Tyre.' More static, but the ghost of a voice was there, beneath it. He amplified the frequency, fishing for clarity.

'–ilgrim's Gate has fallen. Repeat – Pilgrim's Gate has fallen. Canoness' Retreat, on the southern causeway, has been overrun. Sororitas detachment pulling back to the Idolaters' Walk.' Tyre's voice came in hard gasps.

'Tyre – this is Calder. Status of the cathedral-palace?'

'Calder? You still live, then. Good. I was getting worried.' Tyre's voice was momentarily lost in a rush of static. Calder heard a crash of artillery and shouts. Soldiers scattered as debris fell from on high to slam down on the landing. *'We're in one piece – barely. The command bunker is solid, but Eamon's ancestors are rolling in their crypts. They're smashing us apart, piece by piece. Is the Cardinal's Gate…?'*

'We hold it still. We may need to fall back to the antechamber, however. The enemy have reinforcements.'

‘So do we, if the reports are to be believed.’

‘Perhaps. The question is – who gets here first?’

Tyre’s reply was lost in a wash of static. Calder strained, trying to hear the swordmaster’s voice but instead heard only laughter. Not human laughter. It echoed from every vox. Men and women stopped working to listen. Lorr smashed their remaining vox-caster, silencing the laughter.

‘Witchery,’ she said flatly.

Calder nodded, cutting his own vox-link. There were things moving through the smoke below. Not Word Bearers. Lorr sniffed the air and smiled widely. ‘They come – the hounds of unbelief.’ She lifted her maul and it crackled as she activated it. At that moment, the first of the daemons erupted from the smoke. It paused for an instant, bestial head cocked – a red-skinned nightmare, with horns of brass and hooves of iron. Then, with a great cry it bounded towards the Cardinal’s Gate.

A few seconds later, a hundred more burst from the smoke and rushed in its wake.

Eamon stumbled as the cathedral-palace shuddered to its foundations. One of his bodyguards steadied him. The walls of the corridor groaned. Conduits popped loose, spilling fluid across the floor. He could hear the dull boom of the enemy guns. They were close enough now to target the palace. That implied that the lieutenant’s strategy was coming unravelled – or that he’d underestimated the enemy. Or maybe it was simply the God-Emperor’s will.

Maybe it was time for an ending. An apocalypse in form, as well as function. But if so, he would meet it with as much courage as he could muster. That much, and one other thing besides, he could do.

One of his Crusaders suddenly flung up his shield as part of the ceiling cracked and gave way. Chunks of stone and metal slammed down against the face of suppression shield and cascaded off, narrowly missing Eamon’s skull. The Crusader staggered from the impact and shoved Eamon forward. Sparks spilled down as power cables tore away from the wall. The other Crusader dragged him on, towards the end of the corridor and the Anchorite’s cell. He’d insisted on coming, over Tyre’s objections. He’d prayed on it – asked for guidance. And knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was the right thing to do.

He had *faith*.

The guardian servitors lurched from their alcoves, squalling in protest. They

were damaged – maddened by the reverberations echoing through the palace. Or perhaps simply acting on some command he wasn't aware of. They had been designed centuries ago, and there were layers to their programming that defied even his authority as cardinal-governor.

They did not bother to demand his identity. They simply attacked. The Crusader forced him back and lunged, utterly silent. She parried the first attack with her shield, but found herself driven back by the first of the servitors. The second lunged for Eamon, claws extended. Eamon fell back, hands thrown up.

There was a crunch, and the servitor jerked to a halt. A grey talon gripped it by the back of the skull. Beyond the writhing automaton, Eamon could see that the entrance to the Anchorite's cell had been forced open. The Dreadnought had thrust one of his arms out to snag the servitor. As Eamon watched, the Dreadnought slowly crushed the servitor's head. Its bladed limbs thrashed wildly for a moment.

The remaining servitor whirled, screeching. The Dreadnought forced his way into the corridor, even as the automaton sprang for him. A single blow was enough to hurl the servitor to the floor in a broken heap. The Anchorite looked down at it for a moment, and then turned his red gaze on Eamon.

'You shouldn't be here, boy.'

'Neither should you.'

The Anchorite laughed. The lumens flickered as the corridor shook. 'Why are you here, Eamon? Why disturb my solitude, when you should be safe in your command bunker?'

'Necessity,' Eamon said. 'Your brothers – former brothers – are coming. The lieutenant cannot stop them. They march on the Cardinal's Gate and shell the palace from afar. We are out of time.'

'Then let them come. I am ready.'

'You know that I cannot let that happen,' Eamon said.

'Then you have come to kill me.' There was a terrible relief in his voice, apparent even through the distortion of the sarcophagus' vox-casters.

'No. But I will die here. Standing between you and the fate you welcome.' Eamon shook his head. 'As the lieutenant will die. How many others? And for what? For you. We have given you sanctuary for centuries. And now the debt has come due.' The words were like poison in his mouth. Words he had sworn

never to say. The secret of the Anchorite had been held in trust for generations, as Almace had, and now it was all undone. By his weakness. Tears sprang to his eyes, but he did not look away.

The Anchorite was silent.

Eamon stared at him, trying to find the words that would convince him. He had always been good with words, good at convincing – a born priest, as his father had often said. But here, now, his words failed him. He could think of only one thing to say. Only one word. ‘Please,’ he said softly.

The Anchorite stepped forward, looming over him, red gaze burning. ‘You will not kill me. You will not step aside. You force me to take matters into my own hands.’ The Crusaders tensed. Eamon waved them back, as the Anchorite set gentle claws upon his shoulders. He felt their terrible weight, and knew that the Dreadnought could rip him asunder with but a flick of those talons.

‘You think that I can stop them, where others cannot?’

‘I do not know,’ Eamon answered, honestly.

‘Then why ask?’

Eamon bowed his head. ‘I have faith.’

The Anchorite made a sound that might have been a sigh.

‘Very well. Then the last son of Colchis shall go to war one final time.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

97:50:30

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Amatnim climbed the steps, his hearts thundering loudly in his chest. He was close. He could taste the nectar of victory – of glory – on his tongue. He could hear the roar of guns, the screams of the dying. The daemons had reached the enemy first.

‘We should wait,’ Apis said, from beside him, his form indistinct in the thick pall of smoke and dust. ‘Let them slaughter where they will. Let them have their fill of blood before the sanctity of this place drives them back into the outer darkness.’

‘No. I would be there when the gates open. I must be there.’ Amatnim climbed more quickly as long shadows twitched and writhed over him. The spires of the cathedral-palace trembled as Dusep’s guns continued to strike. The palace was not undefended. Weapons emplacements built into the outer shell vomited fire and streams of plasma onto the streets below. The uppermost spires spat flak at circling attack craft and the frigates in low orbit. But it was all in vain. It was like a dying beast, lashing out in its final moments.

The steps trembled as he climbed higher and higher. The city spun away from him in semicircles of smoke-obscured grey. He could see the lower reaches burning. Hear the clamour of battle. A miniscule tacticum display showed him casualty readouts and data streams from his subordinates, but he ignored them all. It no longer mattered. Nothing mattered now, save that he was here in this place, and the object of his quest was at hand.

It had taken centuries to reach this point. A quest begun on a squalid shrine world, entirely by chance. A moment’s curiosity had led him here. He laughed suddenly, overcome by it all. He wondered what Kor Phaeron would say. What would Erebus do, when he learned of it? The future of the Legion rested on his actions here, and a part of him wondered if perhaps the gods meant for him to be something more than just a knight on a quest.

He stopped, struck by the thought. Apis stopped as well. ‘What is it?’

Amatnim looked at him, and through him, the Legion itself. How many were like Apis – devoted but not fanatical? How many would prefer to shed the mutterings of Dark Apostles, and return control of the Legion to the true defenders of the faith? How many might follow him, if the revelations to come truly broke the Legion?

He felt something at his back, like a wash of heat. He heard the distant murmur of inhuman voices, and knew the gods were speaking to him. Had they not guided him all this time? Had they not preserved him – protected him? Even from their own worshippers and servants. And suddenly, he knew why. Not just to find the truth. But to make use of it.

He saw a vision of himself, breaking the solitude of the Urizen and drawing him forth. Of Kor Phaeron and Erebus and Marduk and all the rest, lying broken in the dust. The Dark Council shattered and forgotten, as the Legion shed all weakness and pettiness, as they at last learned the lesson Lorgar had sought to teach them.

The Urizen would return, and Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash would be at his right hand.

‘A day of reckoning is upon us, brother,’ Amatnim said to Apis. He turned, looking down at the Word Bearers following in their wake. The mortals had been left behind and the daemons had surged ahead, leaving him and his brothers caught in the middle, as always. ‘A day when all lies are stripped away and all truths are revealed. When the old gives way to the new, and a better world rises from the ashes of the past.’ He gestured to the gates above. ‘We are on the cusp of that new day, brothers. Will you help me see it through?’

‘*Gloria Aeterna,*’ Apis said. One by one, the others picked it up, until they were all chanting the phrase. Amatnim looked at them and for a fleeting instant was reminded of simpler days and better ones, when the words had meant something different.

Maybe those days could come again, if he were strong enough.

He nodded and turned, and without pause broke into a sprint, climbing the remaining steps at speed. He drew his bolt pistol and his axe-rake as he moved. Ichor stained the uppermost steps, and chunks of broken statues and fallen rubble forced him to break his stride. He could smell the stink of daemons and the sour acridity of human blood.

The space at the top of the steps was larger than any landing platform. It was akin to a central plaza, ringed by statues and overshot by a canopy of fluttering parchment, banners and silk devices, all whipping about in the fiery winds.

The landing was full of death and smoke. The Neverborn made for perfect shock troops. They did not know the meaning of fear, and so hurled themselves forward ceaselessly. A never-ending wave of murder. They glutted themselves on it, on the blood and the pain. Every fallen enemy made them stronger, gave them a few more moments of solidity.

Something hissed. Amatnim turned and saw a bloodletter crouched on a shattered plinth, its sword balanced across its bony shoulders. It stared at him with eyes like simmering embers and spoke. The words jolted the air and made the smoke dance.

Amatnim nodded. ‘I understand.’

The bloodletter laughed gutturally and leapt down. In moments it was gone, returned to the fray. ‘What did it say?’ Apis asked.

‘That this world drains their strength – it is steeped in the stuff of anathema. But once we have done as we have come to do, they will be free to shout and revel and kill as they like.’ He looked at Apis. ‘It was wishing us luck. Come, spread out. Dispersed formation. We have a battle to win.’

Staggered bulwarks loomed out of the smoke. Bodies lay torn and bloody – soldiers, Battle Sisters and even the occasional Imperial Fist. Defences, no matter how clever, meant little to the Neverborn, who were as smoke and fire. Their blades cleaved stone and armour alike, and shooting them often did little good.

It was a matter of faith – if you believed that they could die, you could kill them as easily as a man. It was why the Neverborn hated the Sororitas so much, Amatnim thought. The Battle Sisters *believed* and their belief made them a match for beings that were formed of raw faith and sacrifice. But belief or no, the Neverborn were still killers without peer. Even the most faithful soul could die.

Las-rounds peppered Amatnim’s armour, sliding off the grey surface like boiling water. He turned and fired as a targeting rune settled over a soldier’s head. A Battle Sister sang hosannas as she fired from behind a bulwark, and Apis grunted as the shots caught his battleplate. Word Bearers sought cover. Amatnim continued on, ignoring the shots that broke the stones at his feet. He could hear Apis calling out, but paid him no heed.

Enemies rose before him and died. But not so many as he'd expected. They were mostly falling back, or busy dealing with the Neverborn. His auto-senses pierced the smoke, and he sighted the gates at the far end of the landing. They rose up before him. Two Immolators were parked before them, one already a wreck, the other belching flames across a crowd of daemons clamouring at its grey hull.

A shot took him in the side of the head, spinning him around. His helmet held, if barely, and he fired blind in response. His attacker kept coming, firing steadily. He staggered back, cursing himself for outpacing Apis and the others. A yellow form loomed out of the smoke. Another giant.

He growled and slashed out, his axe-rake dancing across the warrior's torso. Power cables spat sparks as the weapon chewed the armour there. The warrior staggered and tried to bring his bolt rifle to bear. Amatnim spun, chopping through the barrel and knocking the gun from his opponent's hands. The giant reeled.

Amatnim turned as a wash of flame licked over the broken bulwarks. The Immolator was grinding forward, crushing daemons beneath its treads. Vox-casters mounted on its hull shrieked maddening hymns. A Battle Sister crouched atop the vehicle, swinging a power maul in crackling arcs to smash down the Neverborn as they scrambled towards her. She sang as she fought, and her frenzy was almost equal to that of the daemons.

He saw Apis and the others out of the corner of his eye, moving swiftly through the maze of bulwarks, fighting their way towards him. 'Someone kill that thing,' he spat, over the vox, and pointed towards the Immolator.

The giant came at him again. He'd drawn his sword, and an energy field flickered to life along its gleaming length. Their blades met with a snarl. Amatnim grinned. 'And you'd be the leader, then. I recognise those field markings on your battleplate, brother, though it has been an age since I last saw them this close… A lieutenant. Hello, lieutenant. I am Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash, knight-errant of Sicarius.'

The Imperial Fist didn't reply. Amatnim laughed. 'Stoic to the end. I see that some things never change.' He held his ground as they traded blows. He felt the whispers of the gods, telling him where to strike, and where not to be. The giant was strong and skilled, but Amatnim felt himself to be stronger, somehow. Faster and better.

Amatnim forced the warrior back against a plinth. His opponent ducked aside and Amatnim's next blow chopped through the marble. He felt the edge

of the power sword carve a chunk from his side, and he twisted about. He recognised the style – every Legion had developed its own schools of swordsmanship. In the same way every warrior of the Third sought to emulate Lucius, Imperial Fists all yearned in their hearts to be Sigismund. They fought like him, but without the sheer, terrifying skill of that long-dead champion.

He slammed the pommel of his weapon down, catching his opponent's blade and wrenching it from the warrior's grip. Before his foe could react, he swung the edge of the axe-rake into the giant's midsection. The grappling barb hooked the armour there, and the chain teeth sawed into the ceramite. Blood spurted, staining his gauntlet. He ripped the blade loose and stepped back as the giant sank down.

'Yes. Some things never change. Sigismund was overextending himself in the same fashion centuries ago. Only he knew enough to ward his guts from a sudden strike.' He raised his blade, ready to remove his opponent's head.

Then a voice like the crack of doom echoed through the air.

'Leave him, boy.'

Amatnim turned. The gates had been forced open, but from the inside. A towering grey shape stomped through the smoke, shoving aside the burning Immolator as it went. Fighting ceased as daemons and Word Bearers alike drew back before the newcomer. The Dreadnought stopped, red gaze fixed on Amatnim.

'You came here for me.'

Amatnim stared, unable to take his eyes from the ancient monster standing before him. The Dreadnought spread his arms. A gesture of invitation and challenge.

'Well, here I am.'

Almace, Primus asteroid facilities

Lakmhu stood in the shadows of the pumping station, watching as the *Glory Eternal* perished. Its dying was a thing of painful beauty. A flowering conflagration, petals of fire stretching as far as he could see. The battle-barge twisted in on itself and fell away into black seas of infinity, carving a fiery path through the darkness.

Two ships to one. The outcome had never been in doubt.

Lakmhu slumped. Not out of resignation or despair, but simply out of a sudden weariness. Failure had never occurred to him. That the assault would

not succeed had seemed a matter not worth worrying over. But now the moment of realisation was here and he felt tired. So tired. As if he had been straining at some great labour for an eternity, and was only now granted a moment's peace.

'Why aren't they attacking?' Evek murmured. He scratched at his plasma-scorched armour as if it were his own flesh.

Lakmhu sighed, and looked towards the distant ore-crawlers perched in the shadows, their plasma-cutters glowing red. 'They do not need to. Our numbers are reduced and we are isolated.' Figures in void-suits moved slowly among the crouching vehicles. The miners, come for their vengeance. And not just miners. Larger shapes, in black, prowled among the lesser orders. 'They can eliminate us at their leisure – though they will suffer great casualties in the attempt. So they will wait.'

'For what?'

'Reinforcements,' Lakmhu said. He turned away, listening to the whispers of the Neverborn. They were still close, unseen. They always would be. Daemons clung like barnacles to places where blood had been spilled in the name of the Dark Gods.

Perhaps that was why the gods had allowed them to get as far as they had. He smiled. 'Hubris,' he murmured.

Evek looked at him. 'What are your orders, Dark Apostle?'

Lakmhu waved the question aside. 'What does that matter now, eh? We have come to the end of it, whatever this was – quest or fool's errand, it is done.' He pushed himself erect. 'It is done, and I am done, and we are done. Even the king of fools himself.'

They looked at him in bewildered silence. Surrender was an alien thing to them. Incomprehensible. For a legionary, there was always another option. Always another choice. But the gods were the arbiters of choice. And they only ever gave you the one that suited their needs.

'You wish to… give up?' Evek murmured. 'Victory might still be within our grasp.' It was almost a growl. Lakmhu shook his head.

'We have already won. We won the moment we set foot on this arid rock. The moment our forces landed on Almace.' Lakmhu laughed softly. 'You see it, don't you, Evek? Plans within plans. The gods do not show us a hundred paths – but only one. That is what Amatnim does not see. That is what his sort never sees. They think of things in terms of victory – their victory, their

defeat. But our victories, our defeats, they only serve the gods.’

He looked at his bloody hand. The red crystals cracked and fell away. ‘This system will never recover from what we have done. We have set it alight, and whether it burns forever or for a day, the damage is done. That is our victory. That is what the Neverborn have been whispering. I was too preoccupied to see it at first, but now it is clear.’

The others were listening now. Not just Evek. Lakmhu heard the crackle of unfamiliar frequencies in his helm, but he ignored it. The enemy would soon be here, and they would play their part in the grand design the gods had laid out for them.

‘We are all of us seeds of a great tree. Glory nestles in our blood.’ He pointed at Evek. ‘You said it yourself – the gods want our blood. Not our triumph. Not our victory. Only our blood. Why?’ He flung out a hand, indicating Almace. ‘A bastion of corpse-worship. A cathedral world. And now, its sanctity is tainted – by us. By our sacrifice. We have come here and made an indelible mark upon this place.’

He turned, arms spread. ‘War, brothers. A war is not won by a single great victory, but by many small ones. That is what we always miss, in our rush to glory. Amatnim – and yes, I as well – thought this was to be a great victory. But instead, it is a small one. We have wounded the great, doddering beast that is our foe, and left something of ourselves in the wound, as we have left pieces of ourselves across the galaxy.’ He looked at them. ‘Small victories, brothers. And glory eternal.’

He looked up, past the girders and tanks, past the asteroid belt to the stars themselves. He thought, perhaps, that something looked down at them. He thought that he heard the laughter of thirsting gods. He knew, then, that they were pleased. And he knew that it was enough. He turned, as his display lit up with targeting runes.

Drop pods the colour of death slammed down to the asteroid’s surface. Five, at least. That, then, was what the Raven Guard had been waiting for. They were taking no chances. He felt their impact, saw the dust, but heard nothing. As the ramps descended, and white-clad forms streamed through the clouds of dust, a figure wreathed in elemental fury strode among them. They had brought a witch – an architect of falsehood. How fitting.

The dust parted before the witch, revealing blue-and-white armour, stained by blood and fire. A bearded face, as fierce as that of an eagle, with eyes that held storms. A staff, wrapped in psychic lightning. The Neverborn fell silent,

and Lakmhu realised that they could smell the death of some among their number. A mighty witch indeed.

‘The gods send us one last gift, brothers. We will not be gunned down by slaves. We will die like men, at the blades and bolters of kin. Rejoice, brothers. In death, we are vindicated.’ Lakmhu lifted his crozius and struck a girder, causing a noiseless reverberation like that of a great bell.

‘*Gloria Aeterna*, my brothers.’

And with those words on his lips, Lakmhu led the last of his brothers into glory.

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

‘Here I am,’ the Dreadnought said again. The voice, distorted as it was, seemed familiar to Amatnim, as if he had heard it before, on some far-flung battlefield. But he could not place it, could not attach a name to it.

‘Come out then, sons of Lorgar. Or has your courage deserted you in the centuries since I wore the colours of the Legion?’ The Dreadnought turned, studying the daemons that crept towards him. ‘Or perhaps you prefer to let these abominations wage war on your behalf? Is that what you have become in my absence?’

As he spoke, the Neverborn drew back, their black eyes fixed on him. Amatnim looked around, puzzled. Did the creatures recognise him? Did they know who was contained in that sarcophagus?

The Dreadnought turned, surveying the daemonic ranks arrayed before him. Then he swept a talon out, and spat a single, thunderous word. A word that Amatnim had not heard in centuries – a word from lost Colchis. A word he had forgotten the meaning of, but which sent a spike of pain through him. He staggered, shaking his head, even as the word slipped from his grasp. He wasn’t the only one it hurt.

The Neverborn screamed – as one, they screamed. The sound rose to such agonising heights that Amatnim was forced to cut his audio-sensors. But it did no good, for the sound was not simply noise, but something horribly spiritual. A scream of elemental fury and frustration – but also of resignation.

The daemons flickered like a distorted signal, their forms stretching and wavering before snapping back into focus. A strange light swelled, seeming to rise from the Dreadnought’s battered chassis, and Amatnim was forced to turn away. The light spread, and for a moment, Amatnim thought he glimpsed great wings – not two, not four, but six or a dozen or more – rising from the

Dreadnought's back, and a face – wise and pitiless in its wisdom – superimposed over the bare helm of the ancient war machine.

He knew, then, deep in himself, why he was here. And in his head, the whispers of the gods fell silent. Just for a moment. That inhuman gaze, like a solar flare narrowed to the width of a human eye, lashed across the invaders. As bright as the Astronomican itself.

'This place is not for you,' the Dreadnought said.

Around him, daemons came apart, scattering like ash on the breeze. The effect spread like a contagion through their ranks, claiming them even as they turned to run, to flee.

'What is happening?' Apis hissed, turning as the Neverborn crumbled away. 'What is this?' The light began to fade as quickly as it had come, but the damage was done.

'Anathema,' Amatnim said softly. He shook himself and stepped into the open. 'Who are you?' he called out. 'Identify yourself.'

The Dreadnought turned towards them. The light faded to a bare glimmer, leaving only an ancient warrior rather than the horror of moments before. 'I already told you, boy. I am him whom you seek. I am the Anchorite, by fate and by choice.'

Amatnim glanced at Apis, who gave a slight shrug. Amatnim turned back to the Dreadnought. 'That is not your name, I think.'

'I have no name. I entombed myself so that I might pass through narrow straits to sublimity,' the ancient Dreadnought rumbled. 'But it is ever out of grasp. Am I unworthy of such understanding? Or have I simply not proved my worth to the satisfaction of the universe?' The lumbering war machine shouldered aside a leaning statue. Broken marble spilled across the ground.

Amatnim felt the ground shake with the Anchorite's tread. 'Answer me that, brother,' the Dreadnought said. 'What is the nature of worth? How might the unworthy become worthy? Do you know? What wisdom did you find in the dark places?'

Amatnim waved Apis and the others back. There was a brittle edge to the Anchorite's words that he didn't like. Perhaps the ancient warrior was mad – who wouldn't be, imprisoned for millennia on a world such as this? 'I have more wisdom than you know, brother. Come – join us, rejoin your Legion, and you shall have it as well. The wisdom of clarity – of truth revealed.'

The Anchorite stopped. He stood between them and the last defenders, however unwittingly. Amatnim ground his teeth in frustration. ‘And is that why you came, boy? To dig me from my tomb and tell me fanciful stories?’

Amatnim stood and stepped into the open, after only a moment’s hesitation. The Dreadnought was a massive thing – archaic and monstrous. Not like a Helbrute, but unsettling all the same. His brutal shape was shorn clean of insignia or device. Bare metal bore the marks of claws and bolter-fire. Amatnim cleared his throat. ‘I came because the gods showed me your torment, and I knew that I could not leave you to rot in this place. Move aside, brother, and we will finish this last task and depart.’

‘Where will we go, then? Not Colchis, for it is gone. Not Terra. Where, then, boy?’

Annoyed, Amatnim looked directly into the Dreadnought’s optical sensors. ‘Sicarius, brother. Where the Dark Council waits to welcome you.’

There was a sharp, staccato sound. It echoed in the quiet. Amatnim realised that the Anchorite was laughing. ‘And who is on this council? That jackal Kor Phaeron? Or that adder Erebus? Who guided your steps, boy?’

‘Stop calling me boy, nameless one. I am Amatnim Ur-Nabas Lash, and I am a veteran of the Long War no less than yourself.’

‘Amatnim.’ The Dreadnought leaned forward. ‘I know you now. One of Kor Phaeron’s curs. You liked to burn books, I recall.’ Another staccato laugh. ‘Books aren’t known for fighting back, are they?’

Amatnim bared his teeth. Anger thrummed through him. He had imagined a broken hero, an ancient sage, chained and grateful for freedom. Instead, he had come to rescue an ungrateful monster. ‘I did not come here to be mocked, old one. But stand aside, and I will forgive you your loose tongue.’ He swept out his axe-rake for emphasis. ‘We shall slaughter your captors before we depart for happier fields than this.’

‘Stand aside? No, I’ve done that enough for one lifetime. I stood aside at Isstvan and Calth. But not here, boy. Not now.’

Amatnim hesitated. It almost cost him his life. The Anchorite moved so swiftly that only the grinding of servos alerted Amatnim to the blow. He threw himself aside as the claw swiped out. Missing its target, the blow ripped chunks from a nearby statue. Amatnim came to his feet swiftly.

He struck out instinctively, and his blade drew sparks from the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus. The great machine whirled, quicker than

Amatnim believed was possible. The blow caught him in the chest and he was hurled back against a broken plinth. As he sagged, his battleplate screaming damage warnings in his ear, he saw Apis and the others open up on the Dreadnought. Bolters roared, but the Anchorite ignored them. He reached out and caught Amatnim by the shoulder-plate.

‘What is a man to do when he has lost his faith? I felt as if I were in the desert, with no one to guide me out. The gods spat in my face, and whispered false promises. They showed me oases, but there was no water in them, only blood.’

The Anchorite lifted him, claws tightening. ‘And then, I saw the light. It stretched across the dark skies, and drew me on, and I followed. Through the sands I stumbled, until I beheld a city on the hill – a city of gold, as great as a mountain, and shining like a caged sun. And in that city, the truth. Not the falsehoods you peddle as such, but the real thing. The truth that we turned from, unable to bear its mighty light.’

‘There is… there is only one truth,’ Amatnim said, fumbling for one of the grenades on his battleplate. He had to break the Dreadnought’s grip before the maddened ancient crushed him. ‘It is older than any city – older than man himself.’

‘And that is the lie. The oldest lie.’ The Anchorite lifted him higher, dragging him up the pillar. Bits of broken stone pelted Amatnim. He snatched a grenade loose and primed it.

‘Blasphemy,’ Amatnim spat, as he thrust the grenade into the nest of exposed cabling and pneumatics that formed the Dreadnought’s shoulder. The explosion cracked the pillar, and he found himself tumbling backwards amid a deluge of broken stone. The Anchorite bellowed, his chassis wreathed in black, greasy smoke.

Amatnim hit the ground, and damage runes flashed across his helm display. His battleplate was compromised in multiple places, but he was free. He forced himself to his feet, trying to recall where he’d dropped his axe-rake.

There was a flare from somewhere far above. He looked up, and saw fire spreading across the sky. Something massive had perished in orbit. A sick feeling spread through him. He tried to contact the *Glory Eternal* but received only static.

He cycled through frequencies, trying to catch the voices of his subordinates. They were few and far between – and all of them reporting a new force. Drop pods were streaking down, disgorging reinforcements. The guns had stopped.

The constant roar of artillery was stilled. He heard boltguns bark, and saw Apis and the others converging on the Anchorite. ‘Do not kill him,’ he howled. ‘He must live – the gods have commanded it!’ They could still triumph. If they took him. If they could escape this world…

‘If I must die to spite them, then let me die,’ the Anchorite roared. The Dreadnought smashed a Word Bearer to the ground, crumpling the warrior’s chest-plate like foil. A second crimson form was sent tumbling away, missing a head.

Amatnim cursed. They were going to have to cripple the brute, and drag his sarcophagus back to the gunships. Only there were no gunships. No matter – a different plan. There would be other vessels. They would take one of those. He was too close to fail. The gods would not abandon him here, on the cusp of victory. Would they?

He spotted his axe-rake and moved to snatch it up. A hand caught his wrist. He turned, and a yellow fist slammed into his head, further damaging his helm. He stumbled and swung about, to see the towering Imperial Fist standing before him, one hand pressed to the wound in his gut.

‘Almace stands,’ the Space Marine said simply.

Amatnim made to retort, but stopped. He shook his head. ‘I do not care about this world or you, or any of this. I came for him.’ He pointed in the direction of the Anchorite. ‘Let me take him, and I will leave this place. It will stand and you will live.’

The Imperial Fist’s only reply was a wordless growl. He lunged, moving faster than one so wounded had any right to. The warrior crashed into him, and he staggered back. He went for his knife, but his opponent caught his hand, and drove an elbow into his throat. The Imperial Fist had height and reach and strength. His knee slammed into Amatnim’s solar plexus, and the Word Bearer bent instinctively, though his armour had absorbed most of the impact. He stumbled, and the Imperial Fist drew his own knife. They came together, and Amatnim caught his forearm, holding the blade at bay.

In the back of his head, something had begun to laugh.

‘No,’ he hissed. ‘No!’ He snatched at his blade, and thrust it towards his opponent’s visor. The Space Marine blocked the blow with his forearm. They broke apart, and began to circle one another. As they did so, Amatnim could see the remaining defenders rallying. The Anchorite lifted a Word Bearer and slammed him down across a bulwark, snapping the luckless warrior nearly in two. Apis and the others were falling back, shooting as they went. He saw

Saper gut a mortal with one of his knives.

He locked gazes with Apis. The other Word Bearer looked away. Amatnim laughed softly. And the gods laughed with him. With him and at him and through him. He glanced down, at the blood and ichor staining the stones. At the Anchorite, bellowing catechisms as he murdered his brothers. It had all been for this, from the beginning.

He looked at his opponent. ‘It’s too late now,’ he said. ‘He’s out. The truth is revealed. Centuries of dogma, based on the words of the Urizen. We have all been on the same path from the beginning – some of us are simply farther along than others.’ He stepped back, and lowered his knife. ‘As a wise man once said, death is nothing, next to vindication.’

The Imperial Fist lunged. Amatnim made no attempt to block the blow.

The gods had never meant him to succeed. At least not in the way he’d imagined.

But it was a victory nonetheless.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

100:00:00

Almace, Primaris-grade cardinal world

Calder sat on the steps, the wound in his midsection aching as it slowly repaired itself. He still held his combat blade, the Word Bearer's blood staining it. He could not understand what had happened – or why.

Had it been suicide, or something else? A sacrifice. He pushed the thought aside, as it made him uneasy. What was it Karros had told him? *They are not us. They do not measure victory as we do. They do not recognise defeat.*

He looked up as a pair of Stormtalons arced across the sky, trailing dark smoke from straining thrusters. Troop vessels and assault-cutters rose unsteadily across the city, seeking the dubious safety of the stars. Most would be shot down before they reached orbit. The enemy had come to Almace, but they would not leave it.

Atop the landing, Canoness Lorr oversaw the remaining defenders as they doused fires and recovered the dead. He could hear her singing from where he sat, and wondered why the sound of it bothered him so. He lifted the knife and carefully wiped it on his gauntlet, before sheathing it.

'The truth is revealed,' he murmured. What truth? Whose truth? What had the Word Bearer meant? The thought gnawed at him, despite his best efforts to dismiss it. Calder wondered if he were fit for this new age, when men waged wars not for strategic objectives but for more esoteric purposes. He felt tired – more tired than he had ever been.

They do not recognise defeat.

He shook his head. If the enemy did not recognise defeat, could he truly claim victory? Or was a stalemate the best that could be hoped for?

He looked down as he heard a familiar voice call out. Suboden Khan, white armour stained grey with ash, climbed towards him through the thinning smoke. He was followed by several White Scars, all of them looking as if

they'd waded through blood and fire. Suboden studied Calder. 'Not often I get to look down on one of you.' He turned. 'Was that the Uquillian's Stormtalon down there?'

Calder shook his head. 'I do not know. I am sorry.'

Suboden nodded, as if he had expected as much. 'I told you I would return,' he said after a moment. 'Though it seems you do not require my assistance.'

'Not at this particular moment, no.'

The White Scars raised their weapons. Suboden looked up. Calder turned, and saw the Anchorite at the top of the steps. He tossed a crumpled helm down and it clattered past Calder, to roll to a stop at Suboden's feet.

Suboden looked down at the helm, and then back at the Anchorite. 'One of yours?'

'No.'

'I belong to no one,' the Anchorite rumbled. 'And I can speak for myself.' He looked up. 'They will retreat, with Amatnim dead. Not all at once. And not all of them. Some will seek to dredge glory from this moment. Others will seek to hide themselves away, like ticks in the flesh of a beast.'

'Then we will hunt them down,' Calder said. 'But not today.'

'No.' The Anchorite was silent for a moment. 'I wish to return to my cell.'

Calder looked at him. 'I cannot stop you.'

The Anchorite laughed. 'No.'

Calder hesitated. 'Thank you.'

'Thank Eamon. It was he who convinced me.' The Anchorite didn't move. His red gaze scanned the horizon, and Calder wondered what he was looking for. 'It is beautiful, isn't it?' the Dreadnought said. 'I forgot what it was like, I think.' His talons twitched, and Calder saw that they were stained crimson. 'I forgot what it was like to be… to be who I was.' He turned away. 'I will return to my cell. But maybe my time of contemplation is at an end. I must pray for guidance.' He stopped and looked at Calder. 'You will tell the primarch that I held to my oath. Tell him that I continue my penance. That I will continue it.'

Calder nodded, and the Anchorite strode away, each step like a boom of thunder. Suboden was silent for a moment. Then he sat down beside Calder. 'Is he–?'

‘He is what they came here for.’

‘Why?’

Calder shook his head. ‘I do not know. I find I know less now than when I arrived.’ He looked up, watching distant fires streak the skies. The battle was still raging above Almace. What was left of the Word Bearers fleet was attempting to fight its way free of the planet’s gravity well. He looked at Suboden. ‘I think the Lord Commander sent us here to find him. Or maybe to kill him.’

‘Which is it?’

‘I have not decided yet.’

Suboden nodded. Then, ‘You will let me know.’

Calder thought about it. ‘Yes.’

Suboden laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Good enough.’ His smile faded. ‘Kanim has reported that the mining facilities are under our control, as well.’ He paused. ‘Though not without cost.’

Calder said nothing. Suboden looked out over the city. ‘Victory does not come without a price,’ the khan continued, after a moment. ‘Ours was not so heavy as it might have been.’

‘For which we give thanks to the God-Emperor.’

Calder turned. Eamon stood above them, flanked by his ever-present bodyguards. ‘Cardinal-governor,’ he said.

Eamon nodded in greeting. ‘Lieutenant. Khan. You have the thanks of the Ecclesiarchy. And, perhaps less impressively, myself.’

Suboden chuckled and rose. ‘There are things I must see to. Find me when you have a moment, brother. We will raise a cup of rice wine to Karros’ memory.’ He and his warriors filed past. Eamon joined Calder on the step. His bodyguards remained where they were.

‘Do you think it was wise – rousing him?’ Calder asked, after a moment.

Eamon shook his head. ‘No. I will likely be sanctioned for it. A vow is no less broken for it having been done in good cause.’ He looked down at his hands. ‘It worked, though. For which I am grateful.’

‘It was a sound stratagem. One I would not have conceived of.’ Calder looked at the cardinal-governor. ‘I am sure the Lord Commander will speak on your behalf, should it become necessary.’

Eamon smiled. ‘Perhaps.’ He looked up, back towards the gate. ‘He is out now. He is awake in a way I have not seen before. As if new life fills him. There is a light to him. I cannot describe it.’ He bowed his head, hands clasped. ‘I have faith that I have done the right thing. But I cannot help fearing that I have loosed something that cannot be chained again.’

Calder thought of the way the daemons had given way before the Anchorite, of the light that had swelled from the Dreadnought. As if it were not a fallen warrior in that sarcophagus at all, but something else. He thought of Guilliman, and what the Word Bearer had said as he’d died.

The truth is revealed.

He looked at Eamon, trying to find words of comfort. Of surety. But only one thing came to mind. The unspoken mantra of his Chapter. ‘We do as we must,’ he said. ‘That is all any of us can do.’

It would have to be enough.

Prince Ganor Kabalevsky slunk hurriedly through the shattered streets, one hand on his shuriken pistol. He had discarded his coat and armour, instead wrapping himself in a hooded robe. His cutter was gone, blown out of the sky. *Kabalevsky’s Wrath* wasn’t responding to his hails. It too was probably gone – either fled, or floating shattered in Almace’s orbit. Either way, it was of little use to him.

He had not understood what was happening, at first. He had never experienced a drop pod assault. When he saw the first one open, disgorging a squad of towering, white-armoured killers, he had ordered his men to fall back, to abandon their plunder, to retreat. But too late.

And now, he was alone.

No, not alone. Never that, Prince Ganor.

He stopped, senses straining. Something was following him. Someone. He could hear their steps. Had heard them since he’d fled the White Scars. They were walking on his shadow, hunting him through the ruins of Low Town.

Or maybe it was in his head. He wasn’t sure any more. His stomach ached, and his skull felt full. The voice no longer brought comfort – if it ever had.

He stumbled and leaned against the wall of an alleyway, wanting to vomit, but lacking the strength. Something was wrong. It felt as if he were being eaten from the inside out. As if something were growing in him.

He couldn’t think straight. He needed to escape the planet. If they caught

him, he was dead for sure. And that would be the story of the Kabalevsky clan. And wouldn't the cardinal-governor laugh to hear of it? A spurt of anger filled him, and he thought he heard a voice, murmuring supportively.

You are meant for great things, Prince Ganor. Great things indeed.

He looked around, certain now that someone was stalking him. The world spun. He slid down the wall. There was no one in sight, save the dead. All around him, the dead and fire and broken things. He cradled his face in his hands, trying to breathe, trying to find his courage. He'd wanted this, hadn't he? He'd dreamed of it for so long.

I'm just a spark in the fire. And now so are you.

He shook his head. There were places he could go. Safe places. The Kabalevsky name still carried weight in some quarters. He could hide here, build a new crew – no, a revolution. The thought warmed him.

There would be other survivors. Dheel, maybe. And whatever was left of the Word Bearer's chattel – fanatics, but a smart man could make use of such materials.

Yessss. They'll be looking for someone to lead them. To tell them what to do. Why not you? Are you not a prince of Almace? Who better?

He nodded, no longer wondering where the voice was coming from. Why bother, when it made so much sense?

He stiffened.

A shadow detached itself from the deeper black of the alleyway. His hand fell to his shuriken pistol as the Raven Guard stepped into the firelight. He was taller than Ganor had expected, and clad in form-fitting armour. A helmet shaped like a skull obscured his features.

The Space Marine did not speak. He lifted his bolt pistol, and Ganor wanted to close his eyes, but something wouldn't let him. Something in him thrashed and screamed and demanded that he stand, that he draw his pistol.

Fight, fool! Fight for your throne. Fight for what is yours!

Ganor cried out and snatched his weapon free. The shuriken pistol spat and the Raven Guard darted to the side, faster than Ganor could follow. A blow caught him in the sternum, and he fell back, unable to breathe. He fired again and again, trying to keep his attacker at bay. How long had this killer stalked him? Since he'd fled the upper reaches of the city? Longer?

The cardinal-governor sent him, Ganor. He wants you dead. *You must*

fight.

‘Can’t,’ he wheezed. He tried to get to his feet, but another blow dropped him back to his knees. He turned, and saw the Raven Guard watching him. Ganor fell onto his back. ‘Do it,’ he spat. ‘Finish it and be damned!’

The Raven Guard levelled his weapon. Then, abruptly, he stiffened. There was a sound Ganor had heard before – a wet crunch. The Space Marine turned, and Ganor saw a knife jutting from a gap in his armour. A bulky form, hidden beneath a heavy cloak, lunged. Ganor caught the gleam of steel, and heard another crunch.

The Raven Guard staggered and fell against the wall. His attacker threw back his hood, revealing tattooed features. The Word Bearer grinned and drove the knife he held into the Space Marine’s chest, hard enough to crack his armour. The warrior convulsed as his killer twisted the blade with both hands. When the Word Bearer jerked the knife free, the Raven Guard collapsed to the ground. The Word Bearer bent and retrieved the dead man’s weapon. He peered at Ganor and grinned, almost mischievously.

Ganor scrambled backwards, heart thudding. The Word Bearer padded towards him, cloak rustling. Ganor retreated until he struck something unyielding. He looked up into the hard, flat gaze of a second Word Bearer. The newcomer gestured.

‘No, Saper. This one might be useful.’

Ganor stared up at the Word Bearer. ‘I-I know you. Your name is Apis.’

Apis nodded. ‘You remembered. Good.’ The Word Bearer hauled him to his feet. He caught Ganor by the chin with a painful grip, and peered into his eyes. ‘Yes. As I thought.’ He released Ganor and smiled thinly. ‘Where are you going, little prince? Haven’t you laid claim to this world?’

‘I…’ Ganor trailed off. ‘I have to get out of here.’ Something in him hissed, but he ignored it. His hands shook as he looked back and forth between them. ‘Somewhere safe.’

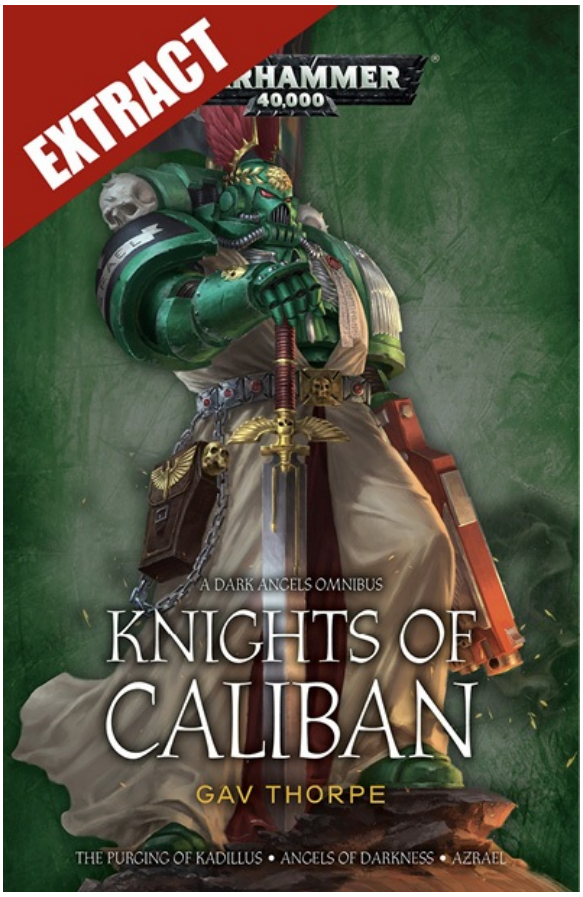
‘No,’ Apis said, laying an almost companionable arm across Ganor’s shoulders. ‘No.’ And he laughed softly.

‘I think you are right where you are supposed to be.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Warhammer Horror novella *The Beast in the Trenches*, featured in the portmanteau novel *The Wicked and the Damned*. He has also written the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, and two audio dramas featuring the Blackshields: *The False War* and *The Red Fief*. His Warhammer 40,000 work includes *Lukas the Trickster* and the Fabius Bile novels *Primogenitor* and *Clonelord*. He has written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Shadespire: The Mirrored City*, *Soul Wars*, *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, the Hallowed Knights novels *Plague Garden* and *Black Pyramid*, and *Nagash: The Undying King*. His tales of the Warhammer Old World include *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, and two Gotrek & Felix novels. He lives and works in Sheffield.

An extract from *Knights of Caliban*.



A fuel tank exploded, showering squat bodies and shards of metal across the refinery. Guttural laughter rang around the bare rock walls of the asteroid-ship, against a backdrop of chattering guns and flames. A handful of stocky figures stumbled from the fire, airsuits tattered, thick beards and bushy sideburns smoking. They carried high-velocity riveters and fired them at the mob of green-skinned attackers thundering down the tunnel. A few orks fell to the fusillade; others returned fire with their crude weapons, filling the tunnel with muzzle flare and bullets.

‘Give ’em anuvver!’ Ghazghkull barked at an ork to his left.

The greenskin loaded another improbably sized rocket into its launcher and stood with legs splayed, aiming at the survivors through an array of cracked lenses. The rocket hissed wildly for a moment before the propellant erupted into flames, blowing apart the launcher, tearing off the ork’s arm. The ork’s pained cursing was drowned out by Ghazghkull’s deep laugh.

‘Wun fer da doks,’ said the warlord, waving roaring warriors forwards with a claw-sheathed hand. Ghazghkull’s laughter stopped as a slew of rivets pattered across the thick plates of armour protecting the warlord’s gut. The massive greenskin turned his red scowl upon the scattered demiurgs sheltering in the ruins of the refinery. ‘Time to finish ’em off. Get stuck in, boyz!’

Following their warlord, the orks charged into the burning debris, hacking and chopping with serrated cleavers and whirring-toothed blades. Ghazghkull levered aside a twisted sheet of metal to reveal a demiurg hiding behind it. The warlord roared along with his multi-barrelled gun as he blazed away, shredding the miner into bloody lumps.

‘Dakka dakka dakka! Dat’s ’ow ya do it!’

Ghazghkull’s gaze fell upon another victim scurrying into the collapsed doorway of an outbuilding. The massive ork shouldered his way through the wall after the fleeing miner, erupting amidst a cloud of tangled reinforcing rods and shattered stone. The demiurg swung a rock-drill at Ghazghkull, aiming for the chest. The diamond-edged bit skittered and shrieked across the warlord’s armour and bounced away, the impact almost wrenching the drill from the miner’s hands.

‘Nice try,’ growled Ghazghkull, looking at the scoring across his chestplate. The ork lifted up an armoured, energy-wreathed fist. ‘My turn, stunty!’

The claw crackled with arcs of power as Ghazghkull smashed in the

demiurg’s craggy face, the force of the blow thudding the miner’s head into the far wall. Smoke billowed from the exhausts of the warlord’s armour as Ghazghkull lifted up an armoured boot and crushed the headless body beneath its deep tread. It was always worth making sure.

Thundering out through another wall, Ghazghkull looked around. Scattered pockets of orks were running here and there looking for more targets, but it appeared the refinery was empty of enemies. The warlord spied a tiny figure scrambling through the rubble, dragging a huge pole and banner behind him.

‘Oi, Makari!’ Ghazghkull bellowed at his standard bearer. The gretchin flinched and turned wide eyes to his master.

‘Yes, boss?’ Makari squeaked. ‘What can I do fer ya?’

‘Where’s da meks? Dey needs to be gettin’ da ore and worky-bitz back to da ship.’

‘I’ll go find ’em, boss,’ said Makari. He planted the flag in a pile of debris before gratefully scurrying back down the tunnel.

Ghazghkull strode to the top of a slag heap and looked around. The stunties hadn’t provided much sport, but the warlord didn’t mind. The orks were here for loot and gubbinz. The meks could make some really good stuff with stunty gear.

Another explosion rocked the artificial cavern, a blossom of fire engulfing a mob of orks investigating one of the mine entrances. Ghazghkull thought it was a secondary explosion, but it was soon followed by three more, each heralded by the telltale smoke trails of rockets.

‘Dat’s odd.’

‘What’s dat, boss?’ asked Fangrutz, clanking up the slag heap, the joints of his armoured suit wheezing and whining.

‘Look at dat,’ said Ghazghkull, pointing a serrated claw towards the explosions. ‘Dose is rokkits. Oo’s firin’ rokkits at us?’

‘Da stunties?’ suggested Fangrutz.

‘Stunty rokkits don’t smoke and whirl about like dat.’ Ghazghkull smacked Fangrutz on the head again for making such a stupid suggestion. ‘Dey iz orky rokkits!’

In confirmation of Ghazghkull’s suspicion, a horde of green-skinned warriors poured out of the mine entrance, guns blazing in all directions. They wore yellow-and-black body armour and jackets, the back banners of their

nobz decorated with stylised grinning half-moons.

‘Dey ain’t our boyz!’ Fangrutz declared. Ghazghkull’s gun clanged loudly across the back of Fangrutz’s head again. The nob’s eyes crossed momentarily and he stumbled.

‘Course dey ain’t, ya zoggin’ squig-brain. Get down dere and give ’em some dakka. Dey’re after our loot!’

Ghazghkull set after the boys as they poured into the firefight, which in some places became a vicious scrum of blades and fangs. Smoke churning behind him, Ghazghkull lumbered into a run, bellowing orders.

‘Stop ’em gettin’ up on dat roof! More dakka dat way! Give ’em some boot levver!’

The warlord watched a blur of red and black come sailing out of the mine; it quickly resolved into one of his boyz, a ragged hole in the chest. The body splattered and bounced noisily across a rock just in front of Ghazghkull. The ork heard a rapid-fire din above the creaks and puttering of his armour’s engine, a drawn-out rattle accompanied by a flare of orange in the mouth of the mine entrance. A swathe of orks fell to the ground, bloodied holes punched across their bodies. Through the gap, Ghazghkull saw another huge ork advancing from the mine, chain gun hurling bullets in all directions.

The rival warlord was wearing mega-armour as well, painted a garish yellow and decorated with black flames. Compared to the rusty joints and oil-spattered pipes of Ghazghkull’s suit, the newcomer’s armour was spotless, haphazardly inlaid with chunks of gold and – Ghazghkull sneered at the ostentation – dozens of ork teeth.

‘Wot a show-off,’ the warlord muttered as he levelled his gun at the newcomer.

Ghazghkull opened fire, spraying the remaining contents of the magazine at the enemy warlord. Bullets skipped off the floor and walls of the mine tunnel, and a few found their mark, rattling over the plates of his foe’s mega-armour. The Bad Moon warlord – such gaudy displays of wealth were unmistakeable – turned his own weapon on Ghazghkull as a series of empty clicks from his gun echoed around the chamber.

‘Oh zog!’ grunted Ghazghkull.

He was engulfed in a firestorm of flashing projectiles. A particularly vicious burst caught him in the right shoulder, sending slivers of metal spinning in all directions. The armour’s engine gave an alarming cough but continued

working, although with a new rattle.

The two warlords closed in on each other, the boyz parting to allow their leaders to get to grips, the ground trembling under the combined thudding of metal-shod boots.

Ghazghkull struck first, swiping his power claw across his foe's chest, shredding metal. He winced as the Bad Moon smashed his own long claw onto the top of Ghazghkull's armoured head. A boot found Ghazghkull's knee plate, which clattered off to the right. Ghazghkull brought down an elbow spike onto his opponent's left shoulder, driving it hard between the armoured plates, but was thrown back a moment later by a knee-trembling blow to his gut.

Parted for a moment, the two warlords locked glares. Around them the fighting between the rest of the orks died away to some desultory shooting and the occasional punch or kick. Dozens of red eyes were turned towards the pair, expectantly awaiting the combat to recommence.

'Zog off!' roared Ghazghkull. 'Dis is my loot!'

'I woz 'ere furst!' the other warlord bellowed. 'You zog off!'

''Ow?' asked Ghazghkull. 'I ain't seen no uvver ship. 'Ow did yoose get 'ere?'

The Bad Moon rippled back his thick lips in a grin.

'Dat's fer me ta know, innit?'

'Don't you knows 'oo I am? I'm Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, da proffet of Gork an' Mork. I'm da biggest, baddest warlord dere is. Ya got ta tell me!'

'I 'eard of you,' said the other, stepping back another pace. 'You gave da humies a good kickin', I 'eard. You might be da proffet of Gork an' Mork, but nobody makes betta proffet dan me.'

Something in Ghazghkull's memory tinkled into place: Bad Moon warlord, stupidly rich, plenty of dakka.

'Nazdreg?' he snarled.

'Dat's da wun!' beamed his opponent. Nazdreg's eyes narrowed slyly. 'I 'eard yoose a bit special, bit of a finker.'

'Dat's right,' said Ghazghkull. 'I 'ear da wordz of Gork, or mebbe itz Mork, itz 'ard ta say. Dey tell me clever stuff, and dat's why I'm da baddest warlord dere is.'

‘I got an idea fer ya, Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka.’

‘Yeah?’

‘We can fight dis out until wun of us iz dead, in good orky fashion…’

‘Sounds good ta me!’

‘…or we can come ta some kind of deal.’

Ghazghkull looked hard at Nazdreg and his boyz. There were quite a lot of them. He was sure he could probably beat them, but… It’d taken him ages to get enough boyz together after being chased around by that Mork-cursed humie boss, Yarrick, and it did seem a bit of a waste to be killing other orks when he could be killing the hated humies.

‘What you offerin’?’ he asked cautiously.

‘I’ll tell ya ’ow I got on dis rock wivout a ship, if you and yer boyz come wiv me on a li’l job I got planned.’

Ghazghkull suddenly became aware that he was the centre of attention from both sides. He waited for a while to see if Gork or Mork had anything to say on the matter. There were no voices in his head, so he guessed that they didn’t care either way. He took a deep breath and lowered his power claw.

‘I’m lissenin’…’

Blue-feathered gulls circled screeching above the wall.

Tauno followed them against the dismal grey sky, humming quietly to himself. As one of the birds dipped past, Tauno looked back across Kadillus Harbour. Surrounded by the high curtain wall, the city squatted on the steep coast of the volcanic isle, a mess of grey and silver against the dark rock. The raised landing platforms of Northport jutted out from the wall a few kilometres away; an orbital craft the size of a city block rose from the starship dock, smoke and plasma wreathing protective blast ramps, while atmospheric craft buzzed and growled to and fro, borne aloft by jets and rotors.

From the gatehouses, highways of cracked ferrocrete cut through sprawling tenements and smoke-wreathed processing plants, converging at the central plaza. Next to the square loomed the spire of the Dark Angels basilica, a towering edifice of buttresses and gargoyles broken by stained-glass windows and ornate balconies. The buildings around the basilica seemed cowed by its presence, none reaching higher than three storeys, as if to be higher would be an affront to the spectacle of the Space Marines’ temple-keep.

Past the basilica, Kadillus dropped steeply towards the harbourside. The sea

was little more than a glinting blur on the horizon, obscured by a tangle of cranes and gantries that stooped over the high warehouses. A dozen wharfs stretched into the ocean, where supertrawlers three kilometres long unloaded their harvests.

Tauno heard a grunt of confusion from Meggal next to him in the watchpost.

‘Have a look at this,’ said the other sentry, handing Tauno the magnoculars. ‘Looks like a dust storm or something.’

Tauno looked through the magnoculars and could see a thick wall of dusty cloud coming towards Kadillus Harbour, still at least half a dozen kilometres away.

‘Anything from the comm?’ he asked, not looking away.

‘Nope,’ replied Meggal. ‘Come to think of it, aren’t Kendil and his lot meant to check in from Outpost Theta?’

Tauno flicked his blond hair from his face, increased the magnification and tried to hold the magnoculars as steady as he could, peering into the dust storm. He could see nothing save the cloud billowing up from beyond a rise in the ground. He caught movement, a darker shape within the dust. Resting his arms on the parapet he concentrated, trying to focus the magnoculars.

Suddenly in pin-sharp clarity he saw figures emerging from the dust. Steadying himself again, he gently thumbed the focus rune a little more. More and more shapes emerged from the haze, churning up the dirt in their wake, a great crowd of figures on foot: stooped, green-skinned, waving weapons in the air. As the seconds passed, Tauno could see the columns advancing steadily in a seemingly endless procession. There were thousands of them.

‘Emperor’s balls…’ gasped Tauno, the magnoculars dropping from his cold fingers.

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For Elodie.