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40,000

AVENGING SON

A DAWN OF FIRE NOVEL

GUY HALEY



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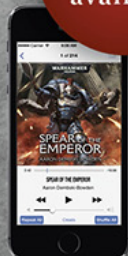
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AVENGING SON

A DAWN OF FIRE NOVEL

GUY HALEY



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It is the 41st millennium.

Ten thousand years have passed since the Primarch Horus turned to Chaos and betrayed his father, the Emperor of Mankind, plunging the galaxy into ruinous civil war.

For one hundred centuries the Imperium has endured xenos invasion, internal dissent, and the perfidious attentions of the dark gods of the warp. The Emperor sits immobile upon the Golden Throne of Terra, a psychic bastion against infernal powers. It is His will alone that lights the Astronomican, binding together the Imperium, yet not one word has He uttered in all that time. Without His guidance, mankind has strayed far from the path of enlightenment.

The bright ideals of the Age of Wonder have withered and died. To be alive in this time is a terrible fate, where an existence of grinding servitude is the best that can be hoped for, and a quick death is seen as the kindest mercy.

As the Imperium continues its inevitable decline, Abaddon, last true son of the Primarch Horus, and now Warmaster in his stead, has reached the climax of a plan millennia in the making, tearing reality open across the width of the galaxy and unleashing forces unheard of. At last it seems, after centuries of valiant struggle, mankind's doom is at hand.

Into this darkness a pale shaft of light penetrates. The Primarch Roboute Guilliman has been wakened from deathly slumber by alien sorcery and arcane science. Returning to Terra, he has

resolved to set right this dire imbalance, to defeat Chaos once and for all, and to restart the Emperor's grand plan for humanity.

But first, the Imperium must be saved. The galaxy is split in twain. On one side, Imperium Sanctus, beleaguered but defiant. On the other, Imperium Nihilus, thought lost to the night. A mighty crusade has been called to take back the Imperium and restore its glory. All mankind stands ready for the greatest conflict of the age. Failure means extinction, and the path to victory leads only to war.

This is the era Indomitus.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

FLEET PRIMUS

Roboute Guilliman, The Imperial Regent, the Avenging Son, the Last Loyal Son, the Returned and Sainted Primarch

Belisarius Cawl, Archmagos Dominus, Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah

Jermaine Gunthe, Senior logister

Servants of Cawl

Qvo-87, Reconstituted ally

Alpha Primus, Unsanctioned creation

Logos Historica Verita, 'The Founding Four'

Fabian Guelphrain, Historitor

Solana of Mars, Historitor

Deven Mudire, Historitor

Viablo, Historitor

FLEET TERTIUS

Cassandra VanLeskus, Vodine Sergastae hereditary general, fleetmistress

Vitrian Messinius, Captain, 10th Company, White Consuls/lord lieutenant Fleet Tertius, Sons of Guilliman

Fleet Tertius, Sons of Guilliman

Areios, Lieutenant, First Company, First Division

Thothven, Sergeant, First Company, First Division

Iqwa, Sergeant, First Company, First Division
Dessnius, Techmarine, First Company, First Division
Ganniv, Chaplain, First Company, First Division
Khesvinall, Apothecary, First Company, First Division

Strike Group/Battle Group Saint Aster

Eloise Athagey, Commodore and groupmaster
Finnula Diomed, First lieutenant and shipmistress
Semain, Second lieutenant
Basu, Third lieutenant
Gonan, Seventh lieutenant
Hainkin, Seventh lieutenant, third watch
Sorenkus, Commissar-Navis
Szezolas, Lord Navigator
Barandus, Episcopus
Scolos EvHaverad, Navigator

FLEET QUINTUS

Tronion Prasorius, Lord fleet commander, Fleet Quintus
Xergigis, Archmagos Prota Astranavato
Sara Tephise, Procurator Morbus, logister, Battle Groups Cerastus,
Quintus and Sextus
Savay, Midshipman
Versht, Shipmaster of the Praesidium
Adoli-4963, Transmechanic

THE ADEPTUS ADMINISTRATUM, ULTIMA MISSIVE PROCESSING

Nawra Nison, Scribum processus
Hamran Nison, Post-classificator
Jedmund, Overwatcher

Resilisu, Servant

Teasel, Data miner

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS EXPLORATOR TEAM

Camalin Hiax

43-Tau-Omicron, Magos Perscrutor

Chul-phi, Myrmidon-penitent

Osel-den, Sub-magos

89-7, Datasmith

ESTEEMED FLEETMASTERS AND FLEETMISTRESSES

Trincus Abconcis, Fleetmaster, Fleet Quartus

Lady Kaosholay, Navis Imperialis hereditary admiral, fleetmistress,
Fleet Sextus

Lord Aswan Relmay, Rogue trader patriarch, fleetmaster, Fleet
Octus

AGENTS OF HIS MOST HOLY INQUISITION

Rostov, Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos

PROMINENT VESSELS OF THE INDOMITUS CRUSADE

FLEET PRIMUS

Battle Group Alphas

Command ship *Dawn of Fire*, Retribution-class battleship (note: sister ship to *Embrace of Fire*)

Zar Quaesitor, Ark Mechanicus

FLEET TERTIUS

Battle Group Alphas

Command ship *Precept Magnificat*, Oberon-class battleship

Strike Group Saint Aster

Strike Group Saint Aster was originally a component of the Machorta Sector Battlefleet, itself a division of Battlefleet Pacificus, operating out of Hydraphur. Upon Fleet Tertius' arrival at the bastion world, it was absorbed into VanLeskus' command as an independent battle group. Below are the constituent vessels at the midpoint of the Machorta Campaign.

Command ship *Saint Aster*, Overlord-class battle cruiser

Vox Lexica, Dictator-class cruiser, battle group strike-craft carrier

Coming Light, Lunar-class cruiser

Unmerciful, Gothic-class cruiser

Ars Bellus, Styges-class light cruiser

Faith's Promise, Styges-class light cruiser

Squadron Pursuivant

5 x Sword-class frigates

Squadron Fulminant

7 x Cobra-class destroyers

Squadron Excoriant

4 x Invictor heavy frigates

Squadron Exultant

4 x Firestorm-class frigates

FLEET QUINTUS

Battle Group Betaris

Embrace of Fire, Retribution-class battleship

Golden Spear, light cruiser

Thought's Arrow, light cruiser

Pride of Macharia, Mars-class battle cruiser

Battle Group Cerastus

Command ship Praesidium, Adjudicator-class battleship

Ideos, Dominator-class cruiser

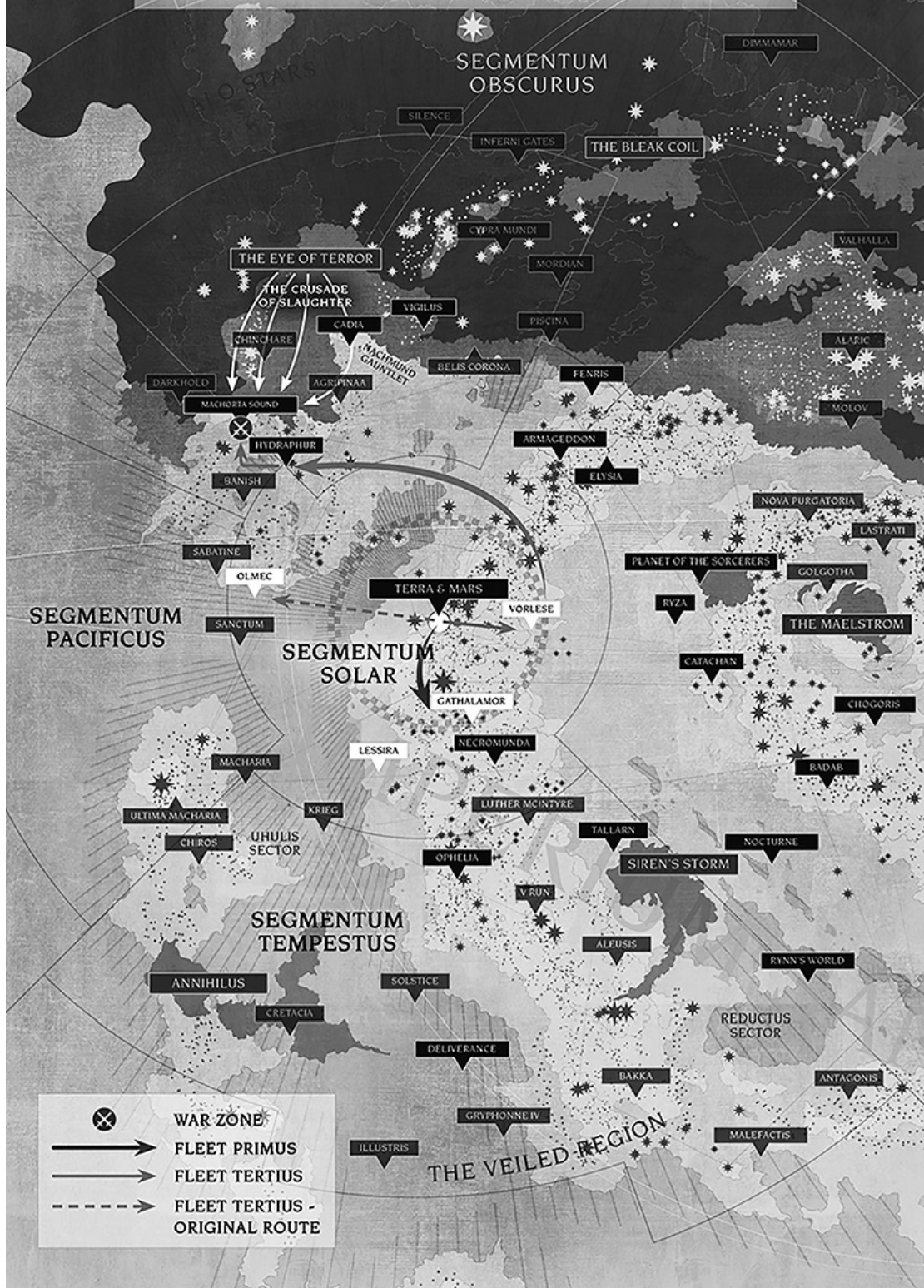
THE CRUSADE OF SLAUGHTER

Blood King, grand cruiser, unknown class

Sword of Brass, Hades-class cruiser

Hellship, daemonship, true name unknown, class unknown, once of Battlefleet Iago

The initial routes of Fleet Primus and Fleet Tertius at the outset of the crusade. As the primarch's great endeavour progressed, the trajectories of the major fleets would alter as they fragmented into smaller battle groups.



Chapter One

THE SIEGE OF TERRA

MESSINIUS

KHORNE'S LEGIONS

'I was there at the Siege of Terra,' Vitrian Messinius would say in his later years.

'I was there...' he would add to himself, his words never meant for ears but his own. 'I was there the day the Imperium died.'

But that was yet to come.

'To the walls! To the walls! The enemy is coming!' Captain Messinius, as he was then, led his Space Marines across the Penitent's Square high up on the Lion's Gate. 'Another attack! Repel them! Send them back to the warp!'

Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear, and the Angels of Death were in short supply.

'Another attack, move, move! To the walls!'

They came in the days after the Avenging Son returned, emerging from nothing, eight legions strong, bringing the bulk of their numbers to bear against the chief entrance to the Imperial Palace. A decapitation strike like no other, and it came perilously close to success.

Messinius' Space Marines ran to the parapet edging the Penitent's Square. On many worlds, the square would have been a plaza fit to adorn the centre

of any great city. Not on Terra. On the immensity of the Lion's Gate, it was nothing, one of hundreds of similarly huge spaces. The word 'gate' did not suit the scale of the cityscape. The Lion's Gate's bulk marched up into the sky, step by titanic step, until it rose far higher than the mountains it had supplanted. The gate had been built by the Emperor Himself, they said. Myths detailed the improbable supernatural feats required to raise it. They were lies, all of them, and belittled the true effort needed to build such an edifice. Though the Lion's Gate was made to His design and by His command, the soaring monument had been constructed by mortals, with mortal hands and mortal tools. Messinius wished that had been remembered. For men to build this was far more impressive than any godly act of creation. If men could remember that, he believed, then perhaps they would remember their own strength.

The uncanny may not have built the gate, but it threatened to bring it down. Messinius looked over the rampart lip, down to the lower levels thousands of feet below and the spread of the Anterior Barbican.

Upon the stepped fortifications of the Lion's Gate was armour of every colour and the blood of every loyal primarch. Dozens of regiments stood alongside them. Aircraft filled the sky. Guns boomed from every quarter. In the churning redness on the great roads, processional ways so huge they were akin to prairies cast in rockcrete, were flashes of gold where the Emperor's Custodian Guard battled. The might of the Imperium was gathered there, in the palace where He dwelt.

There seemed moments on that day when it might not be enough.

The outer ramparts were carpeted in red bodies that writhed and heaved, obscuring the great statues adorning the defences and covering over the guns, an invasive cancer consuming reality. The enemy were legion. There were too many foes to defeat by plan and ruse. Only guns, and will, would see the day won, but the defenders were so pitifully few.

Messinius called a wordless halt, clenched fist raised, seeking the best place to deploy his mixed company, veterans all of the Terran Crusade. Gunships and fighters sped overhead, unleashing deadly light and streams of bombs into the packed daemonic masses. There were innumerable cannons crammed onto the gate, and they all fired, rippling the structure with false earthquakes. Soon the many ships and orbital defences of Terra would add their guns, targeting the very world they were meant to guard,

but the attack had come so suddenly; as yet they had had no time to react.

The noise was horrendous. Messinius' audio dampers were at maximum and still the roar of ordnance stung his ears. Those humans that survived today would be rendered deaf. But he would have welcomed more guns, and louder still, for all the defensive fury of the assailed palace could not drown out the hideous noise of the daemons – their sighing hisses, a billion serpents strong, and chittering, screaming wails. It was not only heard but sensed within the soul, the realms of spirit and of matter were so intertwined. Messinius' being would be forever stained by it.

Tactical information scrolled down his helmpate, near environs only. He had little strategic overview of the situation. The vox-channels were choked with a hellish screaming that made communication impossible. The noosphere was disrupted by etheric backwash spilling from the immaterial rifts the daemons poured through. Messinius was used to operating on his own. Small-scale, surgical actions were the way of the Adeptus Astartes, but in a battle of this scale, a lack of central coordination would lead inevitably to defeat. This was not like the first Siege, where his kind had fought in Legions.

He called up a company-wide vox-cast and spoke to his warriors. They were not his Chapter-kin, but they would listen. The primarch himself had commanded that they do so.

'Reinforce the mortals,' he said. 'Their morale is wavering. Position yourselves every fifty yards. Cover the whole of the south-facing front. Let them see you.' He directed his warriors by chopping at the air with his left hand. His right, bearing an inactive power fist, hung heavily at his side. 'Assault Squad Antiocles, back forty yards, single firing line. Prepare to engage enemy breakthroughs only on my mark. Devastators, split to demi-squads and take up high ground, sergeant and sub-squad prime's discretion as to positioning and target. Remember our objective, heavy infliction of casualties. We kill as many as we can, we retreat, then hold at the Penitent's Arch until further notice. Command squad, with me.'

Command squad was too grand a title for the mismatched crew Messinius had gathered around himself. His own officers were light years away, if they still lived.

'Doveskamor, Tidominus,' he said to the two Aurora Marines with him. 'Take the left.'

‘Yes, captain,’ they voxed, and jogged away, their green armour glinting orange in the hell-light of the invasion.

The rest of his scratch squad was comprised of a communications specialist from the Death Spectres, an Omega Marine with a penchant for plasma weaponry, and a Raptor holding an ancient standard he’d taken from a dusty display.

‘Why did you take that, Brother Kryvesh?’ Messinius asked, as they moved forward.

‘The palace is full of such relics,’ said the Raptor. ‘It seems only right to put them to use. No one else wanted it.’

Messinius stared at him.

‘What? If the gate falls, we’ll have more to worry about than my minor indiscretion. It’ll be good for morale.’

The squads were splitting to join the standard humans. Such was the noise many of the men on the wall had not noticed their arrival, and a ripple of surprise went along the line as they appeared at their sides. Messinius was glad to see they seemed more firm when they turned their eyes back outwards.

‘Anzigus,’ he said to the Death Spectre. ‘Hold back, facilitate communication within the company. Maximum signal gain. This interference will only get worse. See if you can get us patched in to wider theatre command. I’ll take a hardline if you can find one.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said Anzigus. He bowed a helm that was bulbous with additional equipment. He already had the access flap of the bulky vox-unit on his arm open. He withdrew, the aerials on his power plant extending. He headed towards a systems nexus on the far wall of the plaza, where soaring buttresses pushed back against the immense weight bearing down upon them.

Messinius watched him go. He knew next to nothing about Anzigus. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was funereal. His Chapter was mysterious, but the same lack of familiarity held true for many of these warriors, thrown together by miraculous events. Over their years lost wandering in the warp, Messinius had come to see some as friends as well as comrades, others he hardly knew, and none he knew so well as his own Chapter brothers. But they would stand together. They were Space Marines. They had fought by the returned primarch’s side, and in that they shared a

bond. They would not stint in their duty now.

Messinius chose a spot on the wall, directing his other veterans to left and right. Kryvesh he sent to the mortal officer's side. He looked down again, out past the enemy and over the outer palace. Spires stretched away in every direction. Smoke rose from all over the landscape. Some of it was new, the work of the daemon horde, but Terra had been burning for weeks. The Astronomican had failed. The galaxy was split in two. Behind them in the sky turned the great palace gyre, its deep eye marking out the throne room of the Emperor Himself.

'Sir!' A member of the Palatine Guard shouted over the din. He pointed downwards, to the left. Messinius followed his wavering finger. Three hundred feet below, daemons were climbing. They came upwards in a triangle tipped by a brute with a double rack of horns. It clambered hand over hand, far faster than should be possible, flying upwards, as if it touched the side of the towering gate only as a concession to reality. A Space Marine with claw locks could not have climbed that fast.

'Soldiers of the Imperium! The enemy is upon us!'

He looked to the mortals. Their faces were blanched with fear. Their weapons shook. Their bravery was commendable nonetheless. Not one of them attempted to run, though a wave of terror preceded the unnatural things clambering up towards them.

'We shall not turn away from our duty, no matter how fearful the foe, or how dire our fates may be,' he said. 'Behind us is the Sanctum of the Emperor Himself. As He has watched over you, now it is your turn to stand in guardianship over Him.'

The creatures were drawing closer. Through a sliding, magnified window on his display, Messinius looked into the yellow and cunning eyes of their leader. A long tongue lolled permanently from the thing's mouth, licking at the wall, tasting the terror of the beings it protected.

Boltgun actions clicked. His men leaned over the parapet, towering over the mortals as the Lion's Gate towered over the Ultimate Wall. A wealth of targeting data was exchanged, warrior to warrior, as each chose a unique mark. No bolt would be wasted in the opening fusillade. They could hear the creatures' individual shrieks and growls, all wordless, but their meaning was clear: blood, blood, blood. Blood and skulls.

Messinius sneered at them. He ignited his power fist with a swift jerk. He

always preferred the visceral thrill of manual activation. Motors came to full life. Lightning crackled around it. He aimed downwards with his bolt pistol. A reticule danced over diabolical faces, each a copy of all the others. These things were not real. They were not alive. They were projections of a false god. The Librarian Atramo had named them maladies. A spiritual sickness wearing ersatz flesh.

He reminded himself to be wary. Contempt was as thick as any armour, but these things were deadly, for all their unreality.

He knew. He had fought the Neverborn many times before.

‘While He lives,’ Messinius shouted, boosting his voxmitter gain to maximal, ‘we stand!’

‘For He of Terra!’ the humans shouted, their battle cry loud enough to be heard over the booming of guns.

‘For He of Terra,’ said Messinius. ‘Fire!’ he shouted.

The Space Marines fired first. Boltguns spoke, spitting spikes of rocket flare into the foe. Bolts slammed into daemon bodies, bursting them apart. Black viscera exploded away. Black ichor showered those coming after. The daemons’ false souls screamed back whence they came, though their bones and offal tumbled down like those of any truly living foe.

Las-beams speared next, and the space between the wall top and the scaling party filled with violence. The daemons were unnaturally resilient, protected from death by the energies of the warp, and though many were felled, others weathered the fire, and clambered up still, unharmed and uncaring of their dead. Messinius no longer needed his helm’s magnification to see into the daemon champion’s eyes. It stared at him, its smile a promise of death. The terror that preceded them was replaced by the urge to violence, and that gripped them all, foe and friend. The baseline humans began to lose their discipline. A man turned and shot his comrade, and was shot down in turn. Kryvesh banged the foot of his borrowed banner and called them back into line. Elsewhere, his warriors sang; not their Chapter warsongs, but battle hymns known to all. Wavering human voices joined them. The feelings of violence abated, just enough.

Then the things were over the parapet and on them. Messinius saw Tidominus carried down by a group of daemons, his unit signum replaced by a mortis rune in his helm. The enemy champion was racing at him. Messinius emptied his bolt pistol into its face, blowing half of it away into a

fine mist of daemonic ichor. Still it leapt, hurling itself twenty feet over the parapet. Messinius fell back, keeping the creature in sight, targeting skating over his helmlate as the machine-spirit tried to maintain a target lock. Threat indicators trilled, shifting up their priority spectrum.

The daemon held up its enormous gnarled hands. Smoke whirled in the space between, coalescing into a two-handed sword almost as tall as Messinius. By the time its hoofed feet cracked the paving slabs of the square, the creature's weapon was solid. Vapour streaming from its ruined face, it pointed the broadsword at Messinius and hissed a wordless challenge.

'Accepted,' said Messinius, and moved in to attack.

The creature was fast, and punishingly strong. Messinius parried its first strike with an outward push of his palm, fingers spread. Energy crackled. The boom generated by the meeting of human technology and the sorceries of the warp was loud enough to out-compete the guns, but though the impact sent pain lancing up Messinius' arm, the daemon was not staggered, and pressed in a follow-up attack, swinging the massive sword around its head as if it weighed nothing.

Messinius countered more aggressively this time, punching in to the strike. Another thunderous detonation. Disruption fields shattered matter, but the daemon was not wholly real, and the effect upon it was lesser than it would be upon a natural foe. Nevertheless, this time it was thrown backwards by the blow. Smoke poured from the edge of its blade. It licked black blood from its arm and snarled. Messinius was ready when it leapt: opening his fist, ignoring the sword as it clashed against his pauldron and sheared off a peeling of ceramite, he grabbed the beast about its middle.

The Bloodletters of Khorne were rangy things, all bone and ropey muscle, no space within them for organs. The false god of war had no need for them to eat or breathe, or to give the semblance of being able to do so. They were made only to kill, and to strike fear in the hearts of those they faced. Their waists were solid, and slender, and easily encompassed by Messinius' power fist. It squirmed in his grip, throwing Messinius' arm about. Servo motors in his joints locked, supplementary muscle fibres strained, but the White Consul stood firm.

'Tell your master he is not welcome on Terra,' he said. His words were calm, a deliberate defiance of the waves of rage pulsing off the daemon.

He closed his hand.

The daemon's midriff exploded. The top half fell down, still hissing and thrashing. Its sword clanged off the paving and broke into shards, brittle now it was separated from its wielder. They were pieces of the same thing, sword and beast. Apart, the weapon could not survive long.

Messinius cast down the lower portion of the daemon. There were dozens of the things atop the wall, battling with his warriors and the human soldiery. In the second he paused he saw Doveskamor hacked down as he stood over the body of his brother, pieces of armour bouncing across the ground. He saw a group of Palatine Sentinels corner a daemon with their bayonets. He saw a dozen humans cut down by eldritch swords.

Where the humans kept their distance, their ranged weapons took a toll upon the Neverborn. Where the daemons got among them, they triumphed more often than not, even against his Space Marines. Support fire rained down sporadically from above, its usefulness restricted by the difficulty of picking targets from the swirling melee. At the western edge of the line, the heavy weapons were more telling, knocking daemons off the wall before they crested the parapet and preventing them from circling around the back of the Imperial forces. Only his equipment allowed Messinius to see this. Without the helm feeds of his warriors and the limited access he had to the Lion Gate's auspectoria, he would have been blind, lost in the immediate clash of arms and sprays of blood. He would have remained where he was, fighting. He would not have seen that there were more groups of daemons pouring upwards. He would not have given his order, and then he would have died.

'Squad Antiocles, engage,' he said. He smashed a charging daemon into fragments, yanked another back the instant before it gutted a mortal soldier, and stamped its skull flat, while switching again to his company vox-net. 'All units, fall back to the Penitent's Arch. Take the mortals with you.'

His assault squad fell from the sky on burning jets, kicking daemons down and shooting them with their plasma and bolt pistols. A roar of promethium from a flamer blasted three bloodletters to ash.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius commanded, his words beating time with his blows. 'Assault Squad Antiocles to cover. Devastators maintain overhead fire.'

Squad Antiocles drove the enemy back. Tactical Space Marines were

retreating from the parapet, dragging human soldiers with them. An Ultramarine walked backwards past him, firing his bolter one-handed, a wounded member of the Palatine Guard draped over his right shoulder.

‘Fall back! Fall back!’ Messinius roared. He grabbed a human by the arm and yanked him hard away from the monster trying to slay him, almost throwing him across the square. He pivoted and punched, slamming the man’s opponent in the face with a crackling bang that catapulted its broken corpse over the wall edge. ‘Fall back!’

Mortal soldiers broke and ran while Squad Antiocles held off the foe. Telling to begin with, in moments the assault squad’s momentum was broken, and again more bloodletters were leaping over the edge of the rampart. The Space Marines fired in retreat, covering each other in pairs as they crossed the square diagonally to the Penitent’s Arch. The mortals were getting the idea, running between the Adeptus Astartes and mostly staying out of their fire corridor. With the fight now concentrated around Squad Antiocles, the Devastators were more effective, blasting down the daemons before they could bring their weight of numbers to bear upon Antiocles. Sporadic bursts of fire from the retreating Tactical Marines added to the effect, and for a short period the number of daemons entering the square did not increase.

Messinius tarried a moment, rounding up more of the humans who were either too embattled or deaf to his orders to get out. He reached three still firing over the parapet’s edge and pulled them away. A daemon reared over the parapet and he crushed its skull, but a second leapt up and cleaved hard into his fist, and power fled the weapon. Messinius pumped three bolts into its neck, decapitating it. He moved back.

His power fist was ruined. The daemon’s cut had sliced right through the ceramite, breaking the power field generator and most of the weapon’s strength-boosting apparatus, making it a dead weight. He said a quick thanks to the machine’s departed spirit and smashed the top of his bolt pistol against the quick seal release, at the same time disengaging the power feeds by way of neural link. The clamps holding the power fist to his upper arm came loose and it slid to the floor with a clang, leaving his right arm clad in his standard ceramite gauntlet. A century together. A fine weapon. He had no time to mourn it.

‘Fall back!’ he shouted. ‘Fall back to the Penitent’s Arch!’

He slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Squad Antiocles were being pushed back. The Devastators walked their fire closer in to the combat. A heavy bolter blasted half a dozen daemons into stinking meat. A missile blew, lifting more into the air. Messinius fell back himself now, leaving it to the last moment before ordering the Assault Marines to leap from the fray. Their jets ignited, driving back the daemons with washes of flame, and they lifted up over his head, leaving four of their brothers dead on the ground. Devastator fire hammered down from above. Anti-personnel weapons set into casemates and swivel turrets on the walls joined in, but the daemons mounted higher and higher in a wave of red that flooded over the parapet.

‘Run!’ he shouted at the straggling human soldiery. ‘Run and survive! Your service is not yet done!’

The Penitent’s Arch led from the square onto a wall walk that curved around to another layer of defences. His Space Marines were already making a firing line across the entrance. A gate could be extended across the arch, sealing the walk from the square, but Messinius refrained from requesting it be closed, as the humans were still streaming past the Adeptus Astartes. Kryvesh waved the banner, whirling it through the air to attract the terrified mortals. The Space Marines fired constantly into the mass of daemons sprinting after them, exhausting their ammunition supplies. Shattered false bodies tumbled down, shot from the front and above, yet still they came, overtaking and dismembering the last warriors fleeing away from the parapet.

Squad Antiocles roared through the arch, landing behind their brethren. Messinius passed between them. For a moment he surveyed the tide of coming fury. Endless red-skinned monsters filling the square like a lake of spilled blood, washing over a score of brightly armoured Space Marine corpses left behind in the retreat. Several hundred humans lay alongside them.

He opened a vox-channel to Gate Command.

‘Wall batteries three-seven-three through three-seven-six, target sector nine five eighty-three, Penitent’s Square, western edge. Five-minute bombardment.’

‘On whose order?’

‘Captain Vitrian Messinius, White Consuls Chapter, Tenth Company. I have the primarch’s authority.’ As he dealt with gunnery control, he was

also datapulsing a request for resupply, and checking through layered data screeds.

'Voice print and signum ident match. Transponder codes valid. We obey.'

The far side of the square erupted in a wall of flame. Heavy cannon shells detonated in a string along the rampart. High-energy beams sliced into the square, turning stone and metal instantly to superheated gas. The approaching daemons were annihilated. A few bolt-rounds cracked off as the last daemons nearing the Space Marine line were put down.

'Company, cease fire. Conserve ammunition.' Nobody heard him. Nobody could. He re-sent the order via vox-script. The boltguns cut out.

Penitent's Square was a cauldron of fire so intense he could feel the heat through his battleplate's ceramite. The ground shook under his feet and he considered the possibility that the wall would give way. The noise was so all-consuming the idea of speech lost relevance. For five minutes the Lion's Gate tore madly at its own hide, ripping out chunks of itself in a bid to scrape free the parasites infesting its fabric, then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bombardment ceased.

Where the Penitent's Square had been, a twisted mass of black metal and shattered stone remained. So formidable were the defences of the Lion's Gate that the structure beneath had not been penetrated, but it was like this, in small bursts of destruction, that they could lose this war.

Messinius accessed the gate's noosphere. No daemons had as yet rounded the projecting Penitent's Spur to come up against their new position. When the attack came again, which it would, it would come from the front.

An ammunition train raced down the walkway from the fortress interior and came to a squealing stop fifty yards away. Medicae personnel jumped down. A Space Marine Apothecary came with them. Human peons rushed about with heavy sack bags full of bolter magazines, passing them out to the transhumans. Spent magazines clattered to the floor. New ones were slammed home. Messinius contacted his squad leaders, taking a quick census of his surviving men, not trusting the digits that read 'Company Casualties 23%' blinking in the upper right of his visual field.

Through the smoke given off by burning metal on the far side of the ruined square, he saw movement. Auspex returns tripped his armour's machine-spirit, and it blinked warnings in his helm.

<THREAT DETECTED.>

‘They’re coming again,’ he said.

‘*My lord?*’ A soft voice, one that did not belong in that moment. He ignored it.

‘Engage at fifty-yard range. Make every shot count.’

The ammunition train was hurriedly relieved of their allotted supplies, and sped off, bearing the worst-wounded, to aid whichever beleaguered unit needed it next.

‘Stand ready.’

‘*My lord?*’ The voice became more insistent.

The voidships in orbit were beginning to fire. Their targeting systems were perturbed by the boiling warp energy and the vortex in constant motion over the Imperial Palace, and many shots went wide, crashing down into the Anterior Barbican, a few falling as far out as Magnifican.

Red monsters bounded towards them, as numerous as before, as if their efforts to thin them had been for naught.

‘Fire,’ he said coldly.

‘*My lord, your duty rotation begins in half an hour. You told me to wake you.*’

This time he heard. Bolters boomed. Messinius froze them with a thought, and with another he shut down the hypnomat entirely.

Vitrian Messinius awoke groggily.

‘My lord,’ his servant said. Selwin, he was called. ‘You are returned from your recollections?’

‘I am awake, Selwin, yes,’ Messinius said irritably. His mouth was dry. He wanted to be left alone.

‘Shall I?’ Selwin gestured to the hypnomat.

Messinius nodded and rubbed his face. It felt numb. Selwin flicked a number of toggles on the hypnomat and it powered down, the steady glow of its innards fading to nothing and winking out, taking the immediacy of Messinius’ memories with it.

‘The wall again?’ Selwin asked.

The hypnomat’s primary use was to instil knowledge without active learning on the subject’s part, but it could reawaken memories to be lived again. Full immersion in the hypnomat required cooperation from

Messinius' cataleptan node, and coming out of the half-sleep was never as easy as true waking. Reliving past events dulled his wits. Messinius reminded himself to be guarded. He forgot sometimes that he was not on Sabatine any more. The local saying 'This is Terra' encompassed a multitude of sins. Spying was among them.

'Yes,' he said. 'Personal debriefing.' He shook his head and unplugged the hypnomat's input cables from the neural ports set into his arms and neck. 'Nothing new learned.'

Selwin nodded, then hesitantly said, 'If I may be so bold as to ask, why do it, my lord, if you expect to learn nothing?'

'Because I can always be wrong,' Messinius said. He pointed at the hypnomat. It was a bulky machine set on a trolley, but not too big for an unaltered man to move. 'Take that away. Inform my armourer I will be with him in a few minutes.'

Selwin bowed. 'Already done, my lord.'

Chapter Two

SHIP OF THE DAMNED

NEPHILIM ANOMALY

GLIMPSES OF BEYOND

<Hard return. Solid object detected. Artefact logged. Thirty degrees positive elevation left side. Distance 300,911 miles and closing.>

Datastreams braided themselves into the throughput of human consciousness, bringing revelation to Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron. The magos let his mind blend with the harmonies of data, transmitting his consciousness to a higher level of enlightenment.

<Solid object detected. Commencing wave parse. Identification in process. Maintain attention focus. Recommendation – do not downgrade this dataflood in action hierarchy. Cogitative subroutines engaged. Diverting sum three point two per cent machine-spirit consciousness to reinforce process execution.>

'Magos.'

A human voice intruded into the sacred datastreams. The magos felt a spike of unwelcome human emotion: irritation.

'Magos Perscrutor. Awaken, please. Holiness, we have a...'

<Solid object identification resolved. Object is an Imperial—>

'Ship,' said Hiax. He opened his sensors to the mundane world. He left behind the higher plane of the noosphere, reducing himself to a lone consciousness. The cradle room was small, being nestled deep in the

workings of the *Purity of Steel*. The speaker filled what little space there was. Hiax turned his attention fully on the intruder, and the worried expression of Sub-Magos Classifier Osel-den came into uncertain focus. Green lines marched across Osel-den's face as Hiax's ocular senses recalibrated. Outlines flashed around portions of the input field, resetting contrast levels and self-seeking the best wavelengths for data collection.

'There is a ship on an approach vector,' said Hiax. 'I know this already.'

Hiax grasped the edges of his interface cradle. Dataspikes unplugged from sockets all across his body and slithered back into their housings. He balanced the weight of his torso on his hands and his numerous mechadendrites to raise himself up out of the cradle. The socket stump of his metal spine disconnected and twitched under him, arching its plugs towards Hiax's motivator carriage.

'Yes, a ship, most wise one,' said Osel-den. 'We have no signal returns from our augurs, and all data-hails to its machine-spirits go unanswered. It is most odd. It will—'

'Cut across our course in little under three hours. Refrain from stating the obvious to me, it is a poor modus of informational exchange,' Hiax said, accompanying his words with a short agony burst to Osel-den's core augments. The lesser priest let out a beep of pain. 'Recall that I am closer to the Machine-God's perfection than you. These tidings are known.'

'My apologies, magos. I thought you might not know, the interference generated by the Gorgon's Eye and the anomaly being strong here.'

'The ship's systems are down. I intuit that it is flying blind. Its ident beacon is scrambled.' Hiax's spine connected with a solid clack. The four legs of the motivator carriage awoke, pistons extending, lifting his machine-made pelvis up so that the final matings of socket and plug could be made. Clamps snapped shut, locking Hiax's upper and lower halves together firmly. He rose then, his components of polished plasteel, brass and adamantium gleaming in the cockpit idle lights.

'You have scried the vessel,' said Osel-den. He bowed, and stepped back, allowing Hiax to rotate his bulky carriage. Clawed feet clanked on the deck.

'In this most sacred tabernacle, I am at one with the *Purity of Steel*, Osel-den,' said Hiax. 'Of course I have scried it.'

'I meant no offence, I only desired that you were properly apprised of what is occurring. We are still near to the Gorgon's Eye warp formation, and it is

spreading, your holiness. It appears... agitated. We are closing on the Nephilim Anomaly, but as we grow further away from the Gorgon's Eye it seems to be growing larger, against physical law. I am of course in no position to correct you, but—'

Hiax cut the sub-magos off. He was close to interrupting his synaptic processes for a further lesson, but refrained.

'You are babbling, Osel-den,' Hiax said. 'I respect your attention to informational protocol, will that be adequate to calm you? Now be silent, and hand me my robe.'

Osel-den fetched Hiax's robe from a peg. He kept his eyes averted, not to preserve Hiax's modesty, but in order not to betray his envy, or so Hiax assumed.

Hiax pulled the robe on. Although his torso preserved the basic outline of a human body, it was entirely mechanical. The feeble biological components he was born with had been replaced. After centuries of upgrades, he was so very close to blessed purity. Osel-den did envy him. Hiax factored this in to his dealings with the man.

Only Hiax's brain, and the much larger, supplemental vat-grown organ that enhanced it, were of flesh, both contained in armourglass support tubes inside his plasteel ribcage. Even his head was pure artifice, amply furnished with superior machine senses and a logic engine housed in the exposed, adamantium skull that further enhanced his cognitive functions.

He adjusted his clothes. The servo-claws on his back unfolded and pushed their way out of embroidered sleeves. His mechadendrites tugged their own apertures into place, seating the mag-seals around their housings. Hiax pulled his hood over his face. Multiple-lensed eyes shone beneath the cowl, like a fearsome glass-eyed arachnid, but he looked more human covered; at least a little.

'I have already prepared and inloaded an intercept course to the Imperial vessel,' said Hiax. 'Return to the conclave and select an optimally balanced team which I shall lead in the investigation.'

'You intend to board it?' said Osel-den, his inferior, organic eyes goggling wetly. 'Magos, we will be entering the vessel with minimal information. The ship's course suggests it has come straight out of the Nephilim Anomaly. I suggest we not approach any vessel emerging from that area before we have a deeper understanding of what we are facing there.'

Anything could be aboard the vessel. The Great Work is overrun with spirit-forms anathema to good physical function. Our primary goals—

‘Are very closely defined, sub-magos. Magos Tessiricon made sure of that,’ Hiax interrupted again. ‘But secondary objectives are decided at my discretion. The vessel is coy in revealing its precise identity, but any fool can see it is a chartist warp-carrier of the Golthma-Ryzan template. This pattern has a minimal crew. If the material extrusions of the great warp entities are present, they will be few.’

‘My lord magos, please! I make a plea for circumspection. There are other dark fates that could have befallen the ship.’

‘Which we should ascertain,’ Hiax insisted. ‘Insight into the anomaly could be within our reach, but you disregard it. Understanding is the true path to comprehension, or are you too much of a coward to accept the basic tenets of our faith? What if the stories are true? This could be our proof. We will board it.’

Hiax’s attempt to silence Osel-den failed. The lesser magos was being particularly persistent that day. ‘Misdirected curiosity is a sin,’ muttered Osel-den, downcast. ‘That is why Magos Tessiricon sent you here.’

‘So is insubordination, and that is why he sent you with me,’ said Hiax haughtily. ‘Now assemble my team.’

Hiax needed no void suit to pass between the *Purity of Steel* and the captured vessel. He could have jetted across and had his feet clamped tightly to the other hull while his followers were still extending the docking umbilicus. But caution vied with his impatience. Osel-den did have something of a point; there were lots of ways to die in the void.

He played a mem-fragment of Tessiricon’s rebuke to him. The crux of it, however, was cruelly concise.

‘Your swashbuckling days are over, Magos Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron.’

The old swine had said it with such a grin of satisfaction.

Of all the long lecture Tessiricon had given, that statement rankled the most. Hiax had done his best to eradicate the troublesome burden of human emotion from his mind, but the hatred he felt for Tessiricon was proof of how far he had to go. Lords of Mars, how he longed to purge the last of his troublesome humanity, to be like the great Belisarius Cawl himself, the

Prime Conduit of pure logic!

The umbilicus concluded its unfolding with the soft knock of metal on metal, interrupting his maudlin data cascades. The semi-translucent plastek of the boarding tube walls screened out the worst of the light from the Gorgon's Eye. Grav-active deckplate fans raspingly unfolded and activated, providing a floor.

'The umbilicus is ready, your holiness,' said Osel-den unnecessarily.

'That I can see with my own eyes, sub-magos.' By the Machine-God, Hiax thought, I am not going to let this mission break me.

Osel-den bobbed his head. Tessiricon had given him a ship of fools, but Hiax had to admit Osel-den had chosen the investigatory team well. The exiled myrmidon Chul-Phi provided much-needed muscle, both in the mundane world of physical destruction and in the more rarefied realms of electronic warfare. There was a certain single-minded need for violence prevalent in Chul-Phi's multiple sub-minds that made him irksome to be around and difficult to control, but Hiax was grateful to have his immense frame behind him. Chul-Phi's body was a masterwork engine of destruction, and he too was a victim of politics. There was kinship there.

Chul-Phi's augmentations were so extensive he needed no void suit either. The ship's only datasmith, 89-7, the fourth and final team member, did require protection, but unlike Osel-den, Hiax could forgive her sentimental attachment to flesh, for she was at least passably adept with her devices: three small, multi-legged datahounds that coiled around and around her feet in ceaseless activity.

These were the best he had. There were adepts more skilled virtually everywhere in the Martian Empire's domains, but 89-7, Chul-Phi and even Osel-den were good enough that he could feel almost proud.

'Proceed,' he said.

89-7 sent one of her charges racing towards the ship, where it unscrewed the airlock's exterior panel, held it aside in a clutch of metal tentacles and plugged itself into a dataport. 89-7 went motionless, her helm-slit flickering with data transfer taking place far from the crude realm of flesh.

The doors separated, popped outwards with a brief hiss of stale air, and pushed themselves across the hull. 89-7's datahound whipped back its interface probe, skittered within and set to work on the inner doors. Hiax zoomed in on the airlock vestibule. It was lit by a dull orange emergency

lumen. More of the same light shone through the single observation pane.

‘Emergency lumens are active,’ said Hiax. ‘Datasmith, scry for active emissions from the main grid.’

<There is power,> 89-7 datasent. <The ship reactor is in a state of dormancy, but not extinguished. We should be able to revive it.>

‘Then we board,’ said Hiax.

He took the lead, employing his omni-ax as a walking staff. In his other humanoid hand, he carried a primed phosphor serpent. His upper servo-arms each bore eradication beamers. How fine it felt to be so heavily armed.

‘For the Machine-God, follow me.’

A creeping horror set itself to work as soon as Hiax crossed the threshold. The ship was dark and emanated a cold that chilled even his metallic bones. Emotions he thought long purged resurfaced. There was a moment when he thought Osel-den might have been right, and that they had no business being there. That made him snappy. Osel-den was rarely right about anything.

‘Report!’ Hiax demanded. His voice shocked the silence of the ship. The darkness gathered between the wall buttressing seemed to thicken.

89-7 sent one of her hounds to suckle information from a major data junction.

‘I have an identity.’ 89-7’s flesh-voice was weak and flat, characteristics exacerbated by the voxmitter set into her void mask. ‘This is the chartist vessel *Evangeline* registered to void clan Collopsis, operating from Bakka. Cargo-manifest, thirty-nine million tons of unprocessed grains, collected at Sohelia, bound for the Tallarn System.’

‘They are far off course,’ said Osel-den. Vox-modulated, he sounded weaker than ever. Hiax despised him.

‘The Noctis Aeterna tossed ships halfway across the galaxy,’ said Hiax. ‘It is fortunate that it emerged from the warp anywhere.’

‘Were the crew so fortunate as the vessel?’ said Osel-den.

‘Ship log is fragmentary, but suggests unscheduled translation near or within the Nephilim Anomaly.’ 89-7 pressed a button at her neck. The segments of her bronze helm folded into each other and retracted into the wide collar of her void suit. Her augmetic eyes flashed in her pale face. In

the dark, her flesh looked blue and sickly. ‘Atmospheric circulation down. General life support down.’ She pulsed detailed measurements to the others. ‘Air breathable. No contaminants detected. Machine systems read clean, all praise the Ommissiah.’

‘Life signs?’ asked Hiax.

‘Living bioscans negative.’ She beeped. ‘I have little range. Interference between warp rift Gorgon’s Eye and the anomaly.’

The hound pulled its transfer lines out of the junction. All three of them leapt into life and raced off into the ship.

‘I shall position hound units to facilitate deep soak readings in conjunction with the *Purity of Steel*’s augurs. Get loc-readings. If anyone is alive on this vessel, we shall find them.’

Hiax extruded a sampler funnel from his shoulder. It coughed as it sucked in air. ‘Widespread trace of airborne human genetic material, though that is to be expected.’ He paused while he ran a deeper reading. ‘Curious. Little sign of decay.’

‘Maybe the crew were taken?’ said Osel-den. ‘Slavers? Xenos, maybe. The bringers of pain?’

‘Drukhari?’ scoffed Hiax. ‘Do you see any sign of weapons damage to this craft, for I do not. We proceed.’

Hiax looked to Chul-Phi. Lights simmered deep in the myrmidon’s metal skull. Generators engaged, charging his impressive weapons arrays. When they sang the whining songs of readiness, the party moved deeper in.

The ship’s design was cramped, most of its mass being taken up by enormous carrier silos. The crewed part of the ship comprised two distinct segments: an enginarium far to the aft, where the reactor, warp drives and realspace engine stacks were all concentrated; and a much smaller section to the front that housed the command deck, Navigator’s blister and living quarters. Being much simpler than the vast ships of war employed by the Imperium, *Evangeline*’s crew was small. Hiax accessed the ship’s primitive infosphere and ran through the crew’s files. Three hundred and forty-six chartist voidsmen, one low-status Navigator, fifty-two servitors, one transmechanic-caste engineer of the humblest sort, no more. It was barely enough to ensure the ship arrived at its destination intact, thought Hiax, but the chartists were concerned with profit above all things, and although crew

stipends were ungenerous, multiplied a million times across the vast merchant fleets, a single voidsman's wage became a considerable sum.

The ship creaked and moaned, its fabric stressed by temperature differentials and failing integrity fields. Emergency lighting cast feeble pools of light. The electrophagic microbes inside the bioluminescences were dying off for want of energy. Hiax pitied the vessel. He considered what to do with it. In normal times, he would order its progress arrested, and send the location to the nearest chartist representatives in return for reward. These, however, were not normal times. Most likely Hiax would leave it to join the flotillas of ghost ships plying the void. Given the constraints on their mission, it was not worth the expenditure of time to stop it.

<I have biosign!> 89-7 excitedly sent. She stopped dead to process the incoming data, then pulsed it out to the others. Osel-den made worried noises. Chul-Phi's primary armaments swivelled in their oiled sockets.

'They are together,' said Osel-den. 'Their refectory? Why?'

There was no sign of movement, no noise of life, but at least some of the crew were alive, their faint heartbeats and body heat registered by 89-7's sensitive auspectoria.

'Let us go and ask them,' said Hiax.

As soon as the refectory slide doors yielded to Hiax's command and opened, they saw something was terribly wrong. The thick stench of human waste rolled out in a near physical wave so solid 89-7 gagged. Hiax stood in the face of it imperiously, his superior enhancements splitting the stench and cataloguing the constituent elements: hydrogen sulphide, ammonia, acids, bacterial effusion.

'Biology,' he growled, and strode within.

The emergency bioluminescences within had mostly expired, giving only the most grudging wash of light. As elsewhere, the main lumens were out, so Hiax saw the remaining crew as heat ghosts lying about the room.

Chul-Phi clumped up to Hiax's shoulder and ignited his search beam. Brilliant phosphor light played over slumped bodies. Only a few returned active vital signs.

'What happened here?' Osel-den hung timidly back.

Hiax walked further inside, Chul-Phi his violent shadow. The search beam shone right into living faces. Eyes stared back full into a light that should

have caused immediate pain.

‘Intriguing,’ said Hiax. He holstered his pistol and lifted up the arm of one of the crew. Her uniform was filthy with urine and faeces, her hair caked in drool. He let the arm drop. It flopped down nervelessly. Her chest rose and fell with steady breathing, but she showed no other signs of life.

‘I have no sign of higher brain activity,’ said 89-7. She had taken out a more sensitive, closer-ranged bio-auspex and was playing it over the crew. They all appeared lifeless, whether living or dead. ‘They breathe, their hearts beat, but they are in a vegetative state.’

‘Brain parasites? Mind-wipe?’ said Osel-den nervously from the door.

‘There is no evidence of either,’ said 89-7. She moved around the room. Where she kicked or moved the occupants, they made no complaint, and nor did their steady breathing change. ‘Standard humans cannot survive longer than a few days without water, a week in optimal circumstances, two in certain sub-strains, but these people are in no way remarkable. Total baseline normal. Whatever happened to them did not happen long ago.’

‘How close are we to the anomaly’s edge?’ asked Osel-den. ‘Assuming they came from there.’

‘Two weeks,’ said Hiax. ‘Travelling at their speed of eighty per cent lux velocity.’

‘The Gorgon’s Eye warp storm is close to our destination – if interaction between it and the Nephilim Anomaly affected our auguries, then could it have affected organic systems also?’

‘Possible, but not plausible,’ said Hiax. ‘There is nothing here to enlighten us. Not all of the crew are present. We shall find the rest. 89-7, remain. Gather all data. Prepare the least damaged of these people for transfer to the *Purity of Steel* for examination. The rest of us will proceed to the command deck.’

The small command deck was empty of life. The oculus was a dark slit, the far left burning purple with the roil of the Gorgon’s Eye, but the forward view was quiet, a peaceful starscape unmarked by the warp interfaces that had ripped reality to shreds. It was a rare image of calm in a troubled galaxy, the edge of the Nephilim Anomaly.

The captain sat still in his worn throne, a beggar king of the void ways. He lolled in his restraints, his stubble caked in his own dribble. Hiax pushed

him out of the way to get to the instruments around the throne. These were modest in number and primitive of type. A light blinked on a vox-thief. Hiax replayed the final entry. The machine clicked and hissed with the noise of poor quality recording. There was no vid; audex only.

'Private log, Captain Hirako. Checksum... Checksum... I-I have no idea of the date. This is likely to be my last entry.' The man's voice was halting, dry, faint, though not from any fault of the machine. Speaking seemed a great effort to him, as if he drew on failing reserves of strength. *'We have been unable to re-enter the warp. Our warp drive will not engage. The Geller field will not initiate. Enginseer Gunfri says all will be well, but I don't believe him. He doesn't lie well.'*

The man swallowed hard. Hiax distinctly heard his voice click.

'The malaise has spread throughout the crew. Most of us are down with it. Nobody's died yet, praise be to He on Terra, but I fear it's only a matter of time. Where it's come from I have no idea. I've never seen anything like it. Bio-scans show nothing. There is no contamination, nothing viral, microbial or parasitical. Nobody's ill, except everybody is.' He laughed quietly. It was the tiredest sound Hiax had ever heard. *'Everything is fading out, like the colour's gone from the world. I can't think. I can't sleep. Soon I'm going to be like Venpha and the others. There's a report here, in the datalooms, if anyone ever gets to hear this. Our only hope is to get free of this dead space, see if we can re-enter the warp and make port. Any port will do, damn the fines. I'd pay any money, all the money, if I get to live.'*

Although the recording had a minute left to run, a soft hiss replaced the voice for a long time.

'I ask the Emperor,' he said eventually. *'Let someone find this, so I can give one last act of service that I can be proud of, when I go to be by His side. Last log of Captain Hirako concludes.'*

There was the sound of an uncooperative finger scraping over the activation rune three times, and the recording cut out.

'The stories are true then,' said Osel-den. *'There is sickness in the anomaly. I humbly ask your forgiveness for questioning your judgement, my lord magos. Boarding this ship was the right course of action.'*

Hiax ignored him. *'Strip the datalooms for information. Log the location of the ship. Attempt to bring the reactor back on line to bring it to a stop. This vessel is important evidence. Set a beacon to proclaim our salvage'*

rights. Prepare Astropath Philovus to send a message back to Graia. Make sure he is ready to process a majoris-level dataload encoding, priority Ultima.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ Osel-den looked around the bridge. ‘What about the crew?’

‘Take the captain to the others in the refectory. See if any can be revived.’

‘Yes, magos.’ Osel-den began to bustle around the command deck, no doubt to give the impression of industry. He spun around a chair by the vox-arrays. ‘My lord! There is another here,’ said Osel-den.

As the sub-magos turned from the man, he came alive. His hand shot out and gripped Osel-den’s wrist.

‘Get off me! Get off me!’ Osel-den squealed. His arm was steel and the man’s was only flesh, but there was madness in the crewman’s face, and its strength was in his limbs.

‘I know, I know! I know what waits for us!’ the crewman raved. ‘I have seen them. The watchers beyond the veil!’

He dragged hard on Osel-den’s arm, pulling him close, until he was hissing in the adept’s face.

‘It’s a lie. The Emperor’s light. It’s not there. He’s not waiting for us. Only teeth, and pain.’ He began to weep. ‘I don’t want to see it. I can’t see it. Not any more.’

He threw Osel-den back. Hiax raised his serpenta, but the man had no desire to harm them. Instead he reached up, and plunged hooked fingers into his own eye sockets, ripping the orbs free. He screamed with pain, but would not stop scrabbling, tearing at his own flesh, until his front was soaked with blood and his eyeballs rested upon his cheeks.

Screaming shrilly, he held up his hands. ‘Emperor preserve me! I can still see it! I can still see it! I can still—’

Hiax’s gun gave out its metallic bark. A round smacked into the man’s chest, burning with brilliant white light in the wound. Still the man did not die, but thrashed and moaned against his seat restraints, until finally the bullet’s fires cooked out his heart, and his struggles ceased.

Osel-den staggered up from the console he had been thrown against. The dead man’s burning body filled the deck with thick, greasy smoke.

‘An act of mercy,’ he said.

Hiax holstered his gun. ‘I am not so sure.’

Chapter Three

NOCTIS AETERNA

THE PRIMARCH SLEEPS

MESSAGE FROM MARS

Three months had passed since the return to Terra, and finally Roboute Guilliman took rest.

The night seemed to last forever when the primarch slept; a light brought back briefly into the universe was snuffed out, and there were more than a few who worried it might never be reignited. Roboute Guilliman did not need to rest often, but when he did, a terrible silence fell at the heart of Imperial government. Messinius could not help himself but check throughout the night that his gene-father still breathed.

The primarch slept in a circular chamber. Its decor was in cream and gold, but the room was not overly ostentatious. Roboute Guilliman had far more comfortable quarters he could use. After all, his palace covered an area of the Terran surface equal to a small state, and within it every conceivable form of room was found, but he had little taste for luxury, and was unmoved by the trappings of wealth. On the other hand, expectations had to be met. Guilliman had to show that he was a man of power, and to many that meant wealth. He could not alienate the powerful by a display of pious austerity.

By choosing that particular room, he was showing the subtler members of the Terran hegemony that he understood what motivated others, that he

respected it, but that the desire for gain was beneath him. His room was certainly far less impressive than the quarters of most ranking lords in the Adeptus Terra. Servants foisted on the primarch by the Adeptus Administratum tried their best to make it more regal, but Guilliman's indulgence of majesty only went so far.

The palace encompassed command centres, libraries, enormous gardens alive with self-contained ecosystems, pleasure domes, grand halls of ancient vintage, laboratories of obscure purpose, and new spires that crushed the past beneath thick foundations in their push to touch the hidden stars. No man could hope to visit every room in a single mortal lifetime, and besides, there were no complete plans. Doors locked for millennia might hide whole sectors left closed since the dawn of the Imperium, or open onto districts flattened to rubble by the weight of the buildings above. From the luxurious to the wretched, Guilliman's palace held it all, and it was but one such place among many hundreds embraced by the walls of the Imperial Palace. Guilliman could have the pick of any, for he was the son of the God-Emperor Himself, and who would deny him?

It was close to the Throneroom of the Emperor, wellspring of human authority, yet not so close that it appeared he wished to usurp his father. Similarly, although the palace was well equipped for the making of war, including at its heart the Praefectura Astra Superba, one of the finest strategiums on the planet, it was close enough to the great buildings of state to show he was not blinded to the needs of civilian rule.

Captain Messinius understood the primarch's reasoning, and was awed by it. His Chapter were scions of Guilliman's line and regarded the duty of governance as equal to their life as warriors. They had presided over a small realm around Sabatine, a miniature of the primarch's own sub-empire of Ultramar. Battle-brothers had acted as rulers of the unenhanced populace, attempting to emulate their father, and had succeeded admirably.

But they had also fought. All Space Marines must. They were made for war, no matter how much the White Consuls had wished to be statesmen. That had not gone so well for them, and Sabatine had fallen.

Messinius wondered what the people of Terra would make of Guilliman if they could see him at rest, for in those moments the appearances he so carefully cultivated were set aside, and uncomfortable truths emerged. Even now, after so long at his side, it was hard for Messinius to accept that the

primarch had returned from death to aid the Imperium at its greatest hour of need. To untold billions the primarch was a god reborn, and a god he was in many respects, but he was vulnerable.

At the primarch's order twenty Space Marine captains of twenty different Chapters stood guard around him, ten facing outwards, ten facing inwards, giving Messinius the feeling Guilliman could not quite trust himself, and required that the world be guarded from him as much as he from it. He occupied no bed, but stood rigidly, sleeping in armour he could not remove. An oversized frame held him upright, the sort sometimes used to assist with the arming rituals, only twice the size of a standard unit to suit a primarch's immense stature. Mechanical claws held his ribs, waist, legs and ankles, locking him in place, yet he gripped the hand rests hard, as if the support the machine gave was insufficient, and if he let go he would fall again into darkness.

Messinius realised he was being unworthy. Guilliman had no fear. He tried his best to quell his thoughts, but the idea persisted. Guilliman was not what the outside world assumed. He was no saint. Messinius saw the fragility behind the godhead. Machines were plugged into the Armour of Fate's large backpack. Though the workings of the mechanisms were mysterious their purpose was not: they were keeping the primarch alive.

He continued to stare at the man upon whom so much rested. Messinius adored his gene-father for what he represented. The White Consuls were unusually scrupulous in their veneration of the Emperor, so much that some outsiders believed they worshipped Him as a god. That was an error. The White Consuls were not the Black Templars, but they knew what they owed. Such sacrifices as the Emperor had made demanded more in return than any single warrior could give.

Guilliman had given everything. Asleep, he looked weary. The force that filled him when he was active was a blaze sunk to embers. When awake, he appeared radiant, powerful, a being greater than a man, but now he looked lesser, his humanity burned up by the fires of his soul. Messinius had seen the same shadow of death on the faces of aged standard humans. Advanced age had always fascinated him, because he never saw it on the faces of his brothers, no matter how old they were. Ancient Space Marines became gnarled rather than withered, and if they got a little slower, they became more belligerent in compensation. Guilliman was a primarch, as far

above Space Marines as Space Marines were above the common man. He should have shown no touch of mortality, but he did.

Many centuries ago, Messinius had made the pilgrimage to see the primarch's body. He remembered so clearly the first time he had seen Guilliman in the Temple of Correction. Guilliman was enthroned within a glimmering stasis field, the Emperor's sword across his knees, and though the cut that killed him was red and savage across his neck, his expression was as commanding as that on his statues that stood in every place of worship across the Imperium.

The returned Guilliman was troubled. He frowned in his sleep. The imagists and sculptors of the Imperium had preserved a good likeness of him down ten millennia, but their efforts showed only the god, not the man. By day he was the Avenging Son. When he slept, he was a man, Messinius had come to see, with a man's imperfections and faults.

A fierce desire swelled in Messinius' breast. His twin hearts thumped. He would let no one, not man nor xenos nor god nor daemon, exploit that. Weakness humanised the primarch. It was an essential part of what he was. The Imperium rejoiced at the primarch's return, but they wanted a god. Messinius feared if they realised how human their newfound saviour was, they would turn on him.

So much of what the primarch did was for the sake of appearances. Sometimes, Guilliman contrived to appear unarmoured, utilising hidden tri-d projectors to cloak him in the appearance of robes. The grand announcement of the crusade with its echoes of past martial glories, the scouring of the high table of the senatorum, the bloody business of the Primarch's Scourge, the procession down from the Eternity Gate the day he re-emerged from his consultation with his father – all playing, to some extent, on what people needed to see rather than what was true.

If it was subterfuge, it was necessary, and Messinius and the others went along with it willingly, but he feared the day the tricks were revealed. He wondered what the untamed beast in mankind's soul would do.

He thought he knew, and he stood ready. He was the head of Guilliman's security, and intended to uphold every one of his oaths.

During the Terran Crusade Messinius had built his opinions of Guilliman as a building is made. The return to Terra was the key that opened the door.

Terra was gripped by violent insurrection when they arrived. The Throneworld had been thrown into disorder by the breaking of the Astronomican. The returning primarch flew over burning towers and running battles. Whole districts of the world-smothering city were dark for want of power. Then they had passed over the walls into the Imperial Palace proper and everything had changed. The transitways between the filthy hives were crammed with people. A sea of faces turned up towards their gunship, radiating hope. Messinius held himself to be as psychic as a bolter round, but he could feel the adulation coming off the crowds and the bittersweet sharpness of hope.

How the people had known Guilliman was coming he could not tell, but they had known. Terra's people had turned from their many woes and looked skywards as the guardians of the Emperor bore down His last loyal son from Luna.

When they landed noise louder than the greatest battle hammered at them. The Adeptus Custodes and the Inner Palace regiments attempted to form a parade, and no doubt the event would be recorded as one of great solemnity in the Imperium's annals, but it had been anything but calm or ordered. The crowds pressed in from all sides. Had the Custodians and the Space Marines of Guilliman's Terran Crusade not been there to wall him in with armour, the great returning hope of mankind would have been lost under a surging tide of bodies, all of them baying out for his blessing, weeping, crying, shouting their hosannas to the sky. Only when the primarch's party went inside, and the minor gate Trajann Valoris had chosen boomed shut behind them, did some sense of sanity return, but they could hear the people still through yards-thick walls, and feel the fevered heat of their devotion.

They had expected this, of course. Next to the Emperor Himself stepping down from His Golden Throne, the return of a primarch was the single most miraculous event anyone on Terra could possibly imagine.

What Vitrian Messinius had not expected was how Guilliman reacted to the sight of Terra. Once they passed through the planet's choking smog they had a clear view. Guilliman stared at it impassively through the viewports, but Vitrian saw the slight knitting of brows. Whilst in the crowd, he had maintained perfect composure, but there was a look in his eyes when his gaze passed over symbols of devotion everywhere to the Emperor and His sons. Messinius did not feel emotion the same way a normal human

would – he had not for a very long time – but he recalled enough to recognise Guilliman’s expression as dismay.

During the long years lost to the warp on the way to Terra, Messinius had seen Guilliman fight, he had seen Guilliman plan, he had watched him rule and realised the legends about him barely touched upon his ability. He had seen Guilliman rally broken men with a few chosen words. He had seen him swallow the bitter draught of pragmatism, and allowed himself to be worshipped, though he never took part in the ceremonies. But Terra had done something profound to him. Maybe he had felt despair all along. Perhaps he had been hiding it since he was dragged back to life in the middle of a battle over his corpse. On Terra he could not hide it, not completely, and Messinius had seen.

The strength of Messinius’ feelings troubled him. He reminded himself that he was no scholar. After some difficulty he turned his thoughts away from the past and questions he was not equipped to answer, looking instead to his helm display, and carefully running through the multiple levels of security surrounding this most important of places.

Threats could come from anywhere. Many stemmed from within the Imperium itself. Simply by drawing breath again, Guilliman had made enemies. In the complex government of the Imperium, the followers of the so-called Static Tendency vied with those of a reformist bent. There were enough powerful people terrified by the return of a primarch that assassination was a real risk. This in mind, Messinius ran evaluation protocols on his fellow captains for the hundredth time. Nobody was above suspicion.

A chime sounded in his vox-bead and the outside world intruded on his thoughts.

‘Yes?’ said Messinius. He kept his external voxmitter offline. His helm caught his voice and kept it secret.

A mortal voice answered him, thin where his was deep and strong. His heart went out to the man. They were so weak, yet they did their duty as well as they could. Humans were the real heroes of the Imperium, thought Messinius. It was easy to achieve heroic acts when one had great power, but far more impressive to do so without it.

‘Forgive me, my lord captain of the watch,’ the man said. *‘I have a priority message for the primarch, highest code clearance.’*

Messinius looked at Guilliman. He was so pale, so drawn.

‘The primarch is studying, and does not wish to be disturbed. Give me the message.’

‘I cannot,’ said the man. *‘It is encrypted and will not be read by our machines. It is from Mars. The primarch’s eyes only.’*

It could be a threat, thought Messinius. Attacks need not be with bolt and blade. A cogitator phage introduced to the primarch’s armour systems could do as much damage as a bullet.

‘Show me the seal.’

A blurt of data arrived noisily in his helmet. A pict-illusion manifested on the helmpate, using ocular tricks to show an emblem floating some feet in front of him. Messinius pulled a face. Martian theatre. The emblem was a modified version of the Mechanicus skull-and-cog.

‘Belisarius Cawl,’ said Messinius.

‘It is his personal seal, my lord.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I have notification from the Adeptus Custodes of an embassy en route to the primarch’s palace now.’

‘Where are they?’

‘They were granted access to the lower Terran orbits by the Skhallax enclave yesterday and put down there, then travelled overland. They are currently being held at the bounds of the Eternity Loop, near the Lion’s Gate. The guardians await the primarch’s order.’

‘Admit them,’ Messinius said. ‘I act on his authority. The Lord Guilliman has been waiting for news. I shall meet with them within the hour. Prepare to hold them in the outer districts to await the primarch’s pleasure. Contain the message. I will let the Lord Commander decide what to do with it.’

‘There is no need, my son.’ Guilliman’s beautiful, perfect voice ended the silence of the night. He had heard the conversation. Of course he had.

‘Yes, my lord, I—’ the mortal vigilator began.

‘A moment, the primarch awakens.’

Messinius turned to face his lord. He felt a thrill of pride every time Guilliman referred to him as ‘my son’. Thousands of years of devotion, of myth, made real and worthwhile.

The captains all turned to face the primarch and got down on one knee. The claws of the arming stand hissed open and retracted. A tech-priest and

his servant mechanisms came forward to disconnect the tubes and gurgling vials from ports in the armour. Guilliman waited patiently until they were finished. His colour and vigour returned so quickly that Messinius could hardly believe what he had seen before, and regarded his thoughts on the primarch's frailty suspiciously.

When the last tube was unplugged, Guilliman stepped down from the frame. The massive boots of the Armour of Fate clicked faintly on the marble floor. Guilliman walked with the surety of a man who knows every step carries him closer to destiny's purpose.

'I will meet with the archmagos' emissaries myself,' he said. 'I have waited weeks for this news, and will not tarry nor wait upon convention for it. We will be leaving Terra immediately after I have met him, I predict. Prepare the Victrix Guard for the meeting. Choose five to come with us afterwards, and five of you captains. You, Messinius, and Taoshin – the rest you may select from among yourselves. Summon my court. Notify the offices of the High Twelve and tell them to send representatives if they cannot be present themselves. Contact Trajann, it is necessary that a delegation from the Custodians accompany us.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Messinius. 'Where are we going?'

'Mars, maybe one of his ships,' said Guilliman. 'Cawl is fond of dramaturgy. He will wish to reveal his works in as flamboyant a manner as he thinks I can stomach. The message and this envoy are the opening scene in his little play. There is nothing to be gained in waiting, or in pretending he might do otherwise, although that is possible, because Cawl enjoys misdirection also. However, in this case, I doubt there will be any of that. He and I have business to conclude.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Messinius.

'Vitrian,' said Guilliman, 'you are distracted.' He did not ask, but stated. To Messinius it felt like Guilliman could look deep inside his soul.

'It is nothing,' said Messinius. He centred himself, not wishing to display any form of weakness. 'I will fulfil my orders.'

'Then arise, my sons,' said Guilliman, lifting his arms. 'We shall all go to see Cawl's envoy together.'

Chapter Four

A HISTORIAN

VIEW FROM THE PALACE

ACTIO NULLA

His name was Fabian Guelphrain, Septicentio-level adept of the Adeptus Administratum, Priority Ultima Missives Evaluation, Departamento of Final Consideration. He was twenty-nine years old by the Terran measure, although like most people on the Throneworld he looked a lot older than his age. He was unremarkable in almost every way, except in one important fact, which was that Fabian Guelphrain was a heretic.

Nothing serious, not as he justified it to himself. He was no cultist, following proscribed gods or peculiar offshoots of the Imperial Faith. His crime was to be interested in the truth, and in a very small way at that. The worst he did was neglect his devotions, for Fabian used the pre-shift sanctification prayer period to write.

The auto-catechiser mumbled its way through tell and response rites while he scribbled away. Its voice was soothing, and easily ignored. To its droning, in snatched twenty-minute chunks, Fabian wrote his private journals. Though these books were simply diaries at first, they developed into something else that could bring him a great amount of trouble indeed.

He wrote history.

So there were two heresies there, both bearing corporal punishments, with a chance at a capital sentence for the latter. The possibility of a painful

death only made his transgression more thrilling.

A few years ago, he would never have dared write actual history. But, thrilled by his act of disobedience, his furtive diarising took on a different shape, moving from domestic rambling to detailed records of the missives that crossed his desk. Later, he started delving deeply into the sector library for enlightenment as to the cause and the possible effects of the awful things he read, and not long after that he began to add observations gleaned from ancient tomes to his texts.

He was meticulous in his notations. He remembered well the first day he dared offer his own interpretation of events. Such free thinking was a heresy *medianis*, and he must have trembled as he penned his small essay, written in tiny, crabbed script in his shabby codices, but the writing had since become commonplace. Past fear is like past pain. It is hard to hold the intensity of it. It sneaks away through the drains of memory.

He found an obsolete term in an ancient book: *historian*. That seemed to fit what he did, so he adopted it for himself. Self-named, he felt powerful. Then he became complacent, and that was his last mistake.

On that particular day, he struggled to write. Normally, his pen leapt into action as soon as his door closed for his private devotions. There was never any silence in the upper Missive Hive, but with the door to his domiciliary-tabularum shut, the collected sounds of a city of scribes praying were reduced to a soft buzz that blended comfortingly with the auto-catechiser.

He stared at the creamy vellum, perplexed, fully intending to write but not being able to. His quill hovered, motionless in his hand. Perhaps what he intended to write was too personal. This was no story he'd pieced together from incomplete sources. He had seen this war with his own eyes.

He'd been in the upper palace when the axes of the enemy fell on Holy Terra, that night when the shadows came alive and spewed nightmares into the waking world. The official reports named them *xenos*, but he was sure they were not. *Xenos* did not walk through walls. *Xenos* did not leave flaming hoofprints burned into the stone. He only saw them from a distance, but it was enough to know that these beings were not of mortal origin. His role in the great machine of Imperial governance gave him access to just enough information to know the name was false. An intelligent man would ignore what was staring him in the face. It was safer to accept the truth presented by the state, but Guelphrain was also curious,

and that was a further factor in his damnation.

His presence in the exalted levels of the Inner Palace had been purely happenstance, his errand little more than a job of fetching and carrying that any menial could accomplish, but only one with his rank was deemed suitable for.

He looked at his pen. A droplet of ink was forming on the nib. The second hand of the chronometer pinned to his chest sped towards shift start, every second banging loudly like a nail in his coffin lid.

Dare he write what he had seen?

He was wasting time. He frowned, closed his eyes, trying to fashion his recollections into words. The upper levels were among the holiest places in all the galaxy, and it was his occasional privilege to walk them, but it wasn't the grand halls that arrested his attention, or his proximity to the Sanctum Imperialis a few hundred miles away. It was outside that held his gaze, the humid, cloying, pollution-thick air of Terra, and the sky that it gathered together to make. Outside was a world without walls, a place one could move in and, if the right direction was taken, never stop. Those who dwelled in the upper levels paid the windows no attention, strolling past views that would reduce Guelphrain's comrades to tears. Many of the Missive Hive's teeming scribes had not seen the sky. Fabian never forgot that. He tried to pretend that he didn't care. He tried to walk past the view in the same insouciant way the grander adepts did, but always he was peering from the corner of his eyes at the majesty of outside.

The night of the battle was different. They were all at the windows then, crowding them, high lords and ladies pressed up against long-scorned glass, heedless of the ancient busts and artworks they threatened to topple, jostling one another in unseemly crowds, their jewelled clothes rasping on each other like the scales of netted fish.

Guelphrain had seen the fire in the sky first. Because he looked, he was one of those who got to the glass before the rest, and so had a clear view down the grand avenue to the Lion's Gate. Shock overrode a lifetime of deference and he shouted a warning. He hollered at people he would not ordinarily dare look at. He remembered the fire, the screeching monsters flying through storms of laser beams, the buildings of the inner wards shaking with the discharge of guns, and the deeper tremors as the sacred ground of Terra suffered the touch of evil things.

The alarms sounded, and the shutters closed over the vulnerable windows. He stayed pressed up against the glass as the view narrowed, watching attack craft streak the sky. The great vortex that turned over the Sanctum raged. Fire and lightning clashed. Low skies glowed crimson to the south. When the Palatine Sentinels came to drag at him, demanding he move away, he stubbornly clung to his spot. Only when the shutters finished closing did he let them drag him back.

On a different day that would have seen him locked in some oubliette, but not then.

There was screaming. People ran. Alarm clarions voiced their shrill fanfares. The view was shut off, but the noise was not. The end of days banged upon the gates. Yet the Palatine Sentinels had their duty and they were about to take him away when the gates flew open at the far end of the walk.

He could say Roboute Guilliman had saved him. He often used that, in later life, as an ice breaker or a brag, in the days before the name of the primarch turned ashen in his mouth. Guilliman was striding towards him, flanked by heroes in auramite and ceramite, beings who in any other-circumstance would have stood as gods themselves in Fabian's eyes, but in *his* presence they were lesser, insignificant. He had heard the news of Guilliman's return. All of Terra was rife with it. He had rejoiced with his fellows, while secretly doubting it was true. It could not be true, he thought. Yet there he was: the Avenging Son himself.

The Palatine Sentinels withdrew hastily, abandoning Fabian on the carpet, where he remained, struck dumb.

Fabian had been raised upon the stories of the nine primarchs. They were the greatest saints of the Imperial Faith, the Emperor's sons, made by His hand and given to mankind as saviours. Now here was one, terrible in every aspect. Guilliman was revered as the great statesman, the Emperor's administrator, whose skill in government had been matched by no man before and by no man since. The lessons they told Fabian at the scholam were of Guilliman's wisdom and his unswerving devotion to justice. A demigod who wielded a pen in one hand and a sword in the other. Fabian had long felt affinity for him. But though this being looked like the statues and devotional images, though he had the patrician's face and the noble features of a great ruler, he evidenced none of his supposed wisdom; instead

Fabian saw only aggression.

He stood in the path of a god of war.

The Space Marines and Custodians would have trodden him down had one of the higher adepts not grabbed him and pulled him aside.

‘Get out of the way!’ the man hissed. Everyone present fell to their knees as the primarch marched by, his armour growling, except Fabian. He remained standing while everyone else in the corridor prostrated themselves. The primarch noticed him, he actually noticed him, stood there like a fool, staring at the lord of humanity as if he were a papier mâché carnival figure borne down the streets on the last day of Sanguinala.

Guilliman’s head turned as he passed, and he frowned. Fabian was sure of it. He could never, ever forget that moment of eye contact. It was only a moment, and yet it held eternities.

Their gazes parted. The moment was over. The primarch was gone, marching to a war that never ended. Fabian recovered his wits and made use of the confusion to slip away back down to the Missive Hive, his original task in the high palace forgotten.

The memory was burned into him forever, but it would not come out and allow itself to be caged by the strokes of his pen. The page of his precious, forbidden journal remained blank, his pseudo-quill still poised, the ink hanging on its nib.

The sanctification bell tolled. His time was up. For the full twenty minutes he had sat in inactivity. He could not express what he had seen, and he feared that he would never be able to.

The shift clarion startled him out of paralysis. The drop of ink splatted onto the virgin page. Four trumpet notes blared from crackling voxmitters across the Missive Hive. His auto-catechiser heard, and it ceased its recitation of the Book of Boquell mid-sentence. A different synthetic voice gave a leaden blessing selected at random from its hard-state memories, and cut out.

Fabian scrubbed at the ink with blotting paper. He concealed the sheet. Wasting ink was unforgivable. He had no desire to fill out the penance form next requisition time.

Once more, the shift clarion sang its brief tune. Fabian sighed, and put his pen back into the pot. His unformed thoughts mingled with the rest of the ink, lost in blackness. He picked up his book, went to the back of the room

and the loose panel there, and hid it with the rest in the wall. Once, the shift song had him racing for concealment, but now he was a practised hand. He had the book stashed and was back at his desk before the cogs above the door to his domiciliary-tabularum engaged with the toothed lintel track.

Fabian's factotum, Resilisu, was in the antechamber frozen in an elaborate bow, head low and front leg stuck out, left arm held high and right across his chest as the traditions of their clan dictated. Fabian winced. Resilisu was an old man.

'Thank you, thank you, Resilisu, please get out of that posture before you do yourself an injury.'

'Master is most kind.' Resilisu's knees gave sharp cracks as he unfolded himself. He hobbled into the main room of Fabian's quarters and began tidying things away, which generally meant he dumped everything on Fabian's unmade, threadbare cot before folding it into the office's wainscotting. He then half-heartedly restacked some of Fabian's tottering piles of paper.

The antechamber was already neat. Resilisu's sleeping pad was tidied away, and last night's meal cleared up. The neatness was deceptive. Beneath the trim surface, chaos lurked. Old plates in filing cabinets. Dirty clothes on the bed hidden in the wall. It was an apt metaphor for the state of the Imperium, Fabian thought.

Resilisu gave up his perfunctory housework and left the room, returning with a chipped glass bottle containing half a quart of liquid.

'Today's water ration, master,' he said.

Fabian looked from it then to Resilisu's lined face. The man was ancient, nearly fifty. He looked a hundred years old. 'Is that it?'

Resilisu shrugged, and set out a dirty glass. 'Problems everywhere. Word is breakdowns in the service levels again. Troubles outside the walls, so I've heard.' He put the flask down on the edge of Fabian's desk, next to the glass. 'I suggest you do not drink it all at once.'

Fabian picked up the bottle and peered into it. It had a yellowish cast and smelled strongly of chemicals.

'All will be well, now the primarch is here.'

'If you say so, master,' Resilisu called from the antechamber. A different man would have had Resilisu removed for his insolence, but a man who dared to dismiss his servant was one with nothing to hide. 'There's no

breakfast either, by the way,' he added. 'But as you say, all will be well.'

Fabian sighed.

Resilisu squinted at the small screen mounted into the top of the cogitator by the outer door. The thing was immense, a mechanical thought engine. Cogs and gears turned slowly inside, fluff stuck to ancient grease throughout.

'Three hundred and twelve waiting to see you,' said Resilisu.

'Already?' said Fabian.

'Problems,' said Resilisu again. 'Here, outside the palace, outside Terra, everywhere. You know how it is. How it's been, since the Blindness.'

In Fabian's father's time, the tally of supplicants bearing unclassifiable Ultima Threat Level missives rarely exceeded one hundred in any one day. Three hundred first thing in the morning would have been unthinkable.

Resilisu faced the door. 'Are you ready, master?'

Fabian stared out through his office. It was all old, and dirty. Many of the fittings were broken; those that performed their function did so poorly. Everything, from the holed carpet to the cracked plaster cherubs on the ceiling, hoarsely proclaimed the regrets of faded glory. He supposed his must have been an important job, once upon a time.

He attempted a short focusing prayer, to guide him back into a state of mind fitting to service. He was allotted twenty minutes for that kind of thing, he thought guiltily, and he had wasted them all. Predictably, it didn't work.

It all seemed rather hollow, seeing what he had seen.

'Master? Time is moving on. The affairs of state do not wait!' Resilisu chided.

Fabian gritted his teeth. The saying was his father's.

'Let them in,' he said.

Resilisu opened the door. The full din of the Missive Hive poured in, the scratching quills and clattering digi-claviers, the whispered chants of the scriptorians, the slow, squeaking wheels of the handcarts wheeled by bent-backed men and women making their rounds from tabularum, to tabularum, to tabularum. The hum of failing cogitators, the whirr of the ventilation ducts, growing from distant susurrus to intrusive racket. The smell of old vellum, dust and unwashed bodies came with it. It was warm and soporific. Fabian wanted to go back to sleep.

The first scribum-errant waited, missive in one hand, a fat sheaf of processing forms in the other. He remained outside as Resilisu came back into the main tabularum, set up a small folding desk at right angles to Fabian's, put out a heat stamp, three trays and his own writing implements. He was slow and his hands shook, and it seemed like an age before he sat down.

'Ready, master,' he said, folding his hands in his lap.

'Come in!' Fabian called as officiously as he could.

The supplicant shuffled forward. He was small and prematurely aged. His robes had never been washed. The air in the tabularum became a little thicker. Fabian got a glimpse of the vast galleries of tabularia outside, and the huge atrium that divided one side from the other. The offices on the far side made neat rows of little lights. Green for ready. The Imperium is open for business, he thought. Little lights dangled over little doors, each one leading into a suite of two rooms just like his. He felt a pang of defiance, a need for freedom, a sudden urge to rush out of the room screaming.

Instead he fixed the supplicant with a grave eye, his expression presenting the stern face expected of a septicentio-grade adept.

'Present the missive,' Fabian said.

The man bobbed his head and handed the vellum over. The sheaf of clearance papers went to Resilisu.

Fabian read the missive. It was heavy with seals. Ultima level, like all the missives that crossed his desk, each one presenting a threat to an entire world. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions or even billions of lives hung on his decision, but he had to be quick. There were so many, and no time to waste.

As he read he wondered how many men and women had died to make sure this message got to Terra. He wondered how many souls waited for aid, what ordeals the scribum stood in front of him must have gone through to get it this far through the bureaucracy of the Administratum. Uncertain missives were not treated lightly, but nor were they welcomed. The scribum-errants performed their own assessment, then had to speak with their superiors. They only took those messages they deemed worthy, for their quests to reach this level in the machinery of government were invariably arduous.

He reread the message, so desperately sent, so laboriously decoded by the

dream scryers of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

‘Xenos pirate activity round Calphrane in the Diomedes Sector, multiple alien fleets building to potential system-wide threat,’ said the scribum. ‘A dangerous affair.’ He affected a wisdom that he did not have. His understanding of the world was limited, a snatched peek through a crack in the wall was all it amounted to. Against that burden of ignorance, they were expected to weigh the needs of civilisations.

Resilisu noted down the scribum’s summary upon a scrip of parchment.

Fabian tutted. ‘This is fifty years old. We’re too late. No further action,’ he said, handing it over to Resilisu.

Resilisu attached the scrip to the missive with Fabian’s seal, then marked the vellum with a large stamp. The missive went into the rejected tray on Resilisu’s desk.

Sticky red ink proclaimed, *Actio Nulla*.

Fabian waved the scribum away, and cleared his throat. ‘Next!’ he shouted.

Chapter Five

GUILLIMAN'S COURT

SERVANTS OF THE MACHINE

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

Guilliman awaited Cawl's emissary in one of the palace's larger throne halls. His entire Victrix Guard flanked him. On the wings stood his nightwatch captains, ten on either side. Outside of that were the lords and officers of yet more Space Marine Chapters, then beside them officers from other branches of the Imperial armed forces, some of whom had accompanied the Terran Crusade. Navy, the many martial orders of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the Astra Militarum and other, more obscure organisations stood shoulder to shoulder. With them were officials from all the many Adepta who supported Guilliman's efforts civil and military, and delegations from the High Lords, including three of them who attended personally, and many other of Terra's great dignitaries.

The result was a riot of uniforms, arranged as neatly as an army ready for battle. None of them attracted the eye as much as the single figure in auramite who stood to Guilliman's left. He wore his tall, conical helm, hiding his face, but if the unique decoration of his wargear had not been enough to identify him, then the air of intense aggression he radiated would. Stratarchis Tribune Actuarius Maldovar Colquan was not like other Custodians Messinius had met. They were calm, thoughtful, projecting the souls of scholars as much as they did champions at arms. Not Colquan. He

was the essence of rage in a golden bottle. Messinius had expected to see Valerian, the Custodian honoured by Guilliman after the battle for the Lion's Gate. Captain-General Trajann Valoris had sent Colquan instead. There was some power play going on there Messinius could not grasp, but the Adeptus Custodes followed their own byzantine path. Colquan was not the diplomatic sort. To Messinius' mind, that Colquan had been elevated to the level of tribune was indicative of the dire straits the Imperium found itself in, and of the Custodians' newly avowed desire to take war to the stars.

All the warriors bore weapons. Everyone was in uniform, whether that be military or the formal robes of the Adepta. They were Guilliman's court, a collection of individuals assembled by the primarch himself. The organisations they represented were to be expected, but these particular people were not. They were nearly all radicals by the standards of the day. Guilliman's court was the blade of reform, and he was showing no compunction in thrusting it deep into the body politic.

Armour and weaponry gleamed. Banners rippled in the draughts of air-processing units. Lumens blazed. The floor was a lake of polished stone, reflecting the throng so clearly the image appeared solid.

Cawl liked theatre, so Guilliman was giving it to him.

Belisarius Cawl's entourage was hardly less impressive. When the great black iron doors to the throne hall yawned soundlessly wide, silver trumpets announced the delegation, and the priests of Mars came forward in a long procession, dozens of adepts to the fore bearing banners, magi of every specialisation behind them. Their servitors emitted banks of fragrant oil-smoke and discordant, sawing melodies of datablurt. Darting vat-angels chattered binharic blessings, while deacons of technology flicked sacred lubricants upon the spotless floor to bless the giant machine heart of Terra itself.

Messinius dearly wanted to see the primarch's expression at the approach of this clanking, braying parade of cyborgs, but from where he stood he could not. He allowed his battleplate's cogitator to run threat analyses over the Martians. Several of the priests were highlighted in bright crimson outlines denoting extreme danger. Datatags flashed up morsels of information about them all; Cawl's cavalcade contained priests from many major orders of the Mechanicus cult, representing over a dozen forge

worlds. The sheer number of cybernetic constructs buzzing over the procession concerned Messinius. He patched into the throne hall's internal security systems, and found he was not alone. A hundred pairs of transhuman eyes watched the priests carefully.

The distance between door and throne was exactly three miles. There was a plain of black and white checked paving between Guilliman and the door, space for a sizeable army to stand to attention, but Guilliman kept only his court. The tech-priests crossed the empty ground down a dead-straight road made from one artfully grown slab of pseudoquartz. Under the priests' tread it flashed and pulsed with colourful displays of piezoelectric discharge. They marched in swaying synchronicity, and their footsteps shocked the floor in time, sending buzzes of interference into the air as more and more of them marched from beyond the doors and filled the road. There were none of the forge worlds' warrior castes present, but there were representatives of the more warlike cults, and they and others openly carried weapons. This perturbed the Space Marines especially, who were conditioned to violence, and fingers tightened upon triggers. Guilliman, however, remained calm. Messinius had witnessed him angry. Guilliman's rage could be felt as a physical weight, a sensation that, for the time being, remained absent.

The clamorous parade of priests drew closer to the throne. Robes of red, black, white, orange, grey and silver wafted the scents of preserved flesh, metal and hot electronics out to mingle with the incense of burning scented oils. A hundred yards from the throne, the banner bearers at the front parted and a single figure walked out ahead of his many attendants. This was the emissary the parade conveyed to the primarch, and it was not Belisarius Cawl.

The priest was slight and a little tall by Terran standards. He looked to be mainly human, with an unaugmented human face atop a long neck. However, Martian appearances could be deceptive. Their long robes often hid extensive modifications.

As the individual approached, it became apparent that this was the case. Once he had outpaced his cohorts, and was free of the electromagnetic interference their augmetics generated, Messinius' sensorium overlaid a semi-transparency view of the priest, showing that all of him except his head was mechanical. The body was a sleek automotive shell possessing

several pairs of subsidiary arms. His neck was overly long, made of bands of articulated plasteel, making the priest's warm, open human smile somehow hideous.

When the emissary stopped the entire parade halted at once, all the way to the backmost servitor. The grinding datamusic and twittering of binharic announcements ceased. The cyber constructs went into holding patterns over their masters. Silence rolled in.

'Greetings, oh last loyal son of the Omnissiah,' said the priest, once a suitably dramatic pause had passed. He gave a deep bow. He spread his arms, all of them, opening his robes down the front and revealing the extent of his alterations to the naked eye. 'The Lord Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah, sends his most heartfelt and sincere amities to you, his lord and friend.' The priest said all this bent almost double, his knees bent, nose almost brushing the floor. He stood with a flourish that closed his robes, and thrust his primary pair of hands deep into his sleeves.

'The archmagos' greetings are gratefully received,' said the primarch. 'Though it is customary for the ambassador to announce himself. Who are you, magos? Tell me with whom I speak so we may conduct our dealings with due cordiality.'

The ambassador gave an apologetic smile. Incredible, thought Messinius, that he showed no discomfort at all talking to the primarch. There was a man who had left his humanity far behind.

'My apologies, great one. I did not give my name for several reasons. I am no magos. I am but a messenger. I am so below a masterful creation like my lord, made by the very hands of the Omnissiah Himself, that my name seems meaningless. You are an exquisite and important component of the Machine-God's great work, a mechanism divine. I am nothing. But you asked my name, and in good faith I shall provide it. I am Qvo-87, assistant, companion and servant to his most glorious Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah, the Archmagos Belisarius Cawl.' He bowed again.

Messinius could not resist a glance at the primarch then. Guilliman's expression had not changed, but he wondered how the lord of Ultramar felt at being addressed as a particularly holy artefact.

'Then you are welcome, Qvo-87,' said Roboute Guilliman. 'Now, if it pleases you, deliver your message.'

Qvo-87 stood. Like a man announcing drinks were available in the drawing room, he gave a cheerful smile and clapped his primary hands together. They rang silverly.

‘I am honoured that you receive me, my lord, nothing would give me greater pleasure. The message follows. The archmagos announces that his great labour of ten thousand years is done. The mission you tasked him with was arduous and complex, but he rose to the challenge and, employing all the arts the Machine-God saw fit to bestow upon him, he has exceeded your requirements in every way. He invites you to view the fruits of his labours in three days upon the Ark Mechanicus *Zar Quaesitor*.’

Qvo-87 turned slowly, addressing all the assembled dignitaries. Messinius realised that Guilliman had assembled the court not only because he wished to give a show of force to Cawl’s faction, but because he was revealing something to his own people. The primarch already knew what was happening. This wasn’t a message for Guilliman, but for Terra.

‘Rejoice, my lords and ladies!’ said Qvo-87. ‘The salvation of the Imperium of Man is at hand!’

Chapter Six

THE SAINT ASTER

REAVER FLEET

UNCOMMON MANOEUVRES

The command deck of the *Saint Aster* shook with a dozen closely spaced impacts. Alarms wailed from every control station. Incendum suppression teams raced across the polished floor to tame a blaze threatening to roast a servitor clade in its sockets.

Commodore Eloise Athagey turned around sharply in her throne to shout down at void shield command, bypassing the lieutenant responsible for conveying her orders to the Master Scutum.

‘For the last time, scutum control, get me my void shields stabilised!’

‘That was a big hit, madame shipmaster,’ said her first lieutenant. ‘We should abort the attack run. This is an unwise course of action.’

‘Enough, Finnula!’ Athagey growled.

‘It is my duty to question you, my lady,’ First Lieutenant Finnula Diomed replied. She released her grip on the railing of the command dais and looked up to the podium summit where Athagey was enthroned. The commodore’s seat was perched atop six steep steps. Around the periphery of the dais were nine stations, each manned by her chief lieutenants. Athagey favoured an unusual command configuration.

‘Void shield reignition achieved, my lady,’ reported her Master Scutum.

‘*Red Gift* continues pursuit,’ said Finnula.

‘Ignore it,’ said Athagey. ‘*Ars Bellus* and the *Faith’s Promise* can deal with it. Maintain course. Give me the range to principal target.’

‘Seventeen hundred miles and closing,’ Finnula responded.

The cathedral space of the command deck was a racket of noise generated by five hundred people, machines, servitors, the bombardment the *Saint Aster* was receiving, and the return fire of her guns. Athagey kept her eyes fixed on the main hololith, whose tri-d display of the battlesphere showed what transpired on the other side of the fortress walls of the grand cruiser.

‘Good.’

‘That’s too close,’ said Finnula. ‘Recommend course adjustment to parallel line and immediate retaliation with port batteries. Keep them at arm’s length. Stop them boarding us. If they’ve Heretic Astartes aboard we’ll not weather the fight.’

Athagey glanced down. Finnula thought her commander a fierce-looking woman, with a prominent, sharp chin and a high, thin forehead. She habitually striped her long black hair with brilliant magenta. If this was meant to soften her it did not work, being a single jarring flamboyance in her otherwise severe dress and manner. She wore her monocular data feed so much most people took it for an augmetic, and a haptic glove with input wands attached to the fingers of her right hand, which made it look like a claw.

‘Finnula, I truly believe the spirit of caution crawled in your ear and took up residence. You are too timid. Advice heard and disregarded. These Blood God-worshipping bastards like it close, so let’s give it to them. We’re going to drive at them and shove the Emperor’s judgement down their throats before they can get their twisted backsides into their boarding craft.’

On the hololith, the main enemy vessel was displayed as a large true-pict. Its designation was *Sword of Brass*, and it was bearing down aggressively on the image of their own ship. Though a crowd of floating data-tags crowded the hull, showing the damage the *Sword of Brass* had already taken in the battle, it had yet to have its teeth pulled. The ship was of comparable size and power to the *Saint Aster*, and capable of taking much more of a beating than it had already sustained.

Athagey refused to close the oculus shutters, and so they could also see the *Sword of Brass* with their own eyes, separated from them by a vanishingly short stretch of void. Whichever forge world had built the *Sword of Brass*

would no longer recognise it. The full front fifth was dominated by a gargantuan white skull so realistically contrived Finnula half-believed it to be the massive braincase of a defeated god. Three enormous cannons protruded from its eye sockets and open-hinged jaw. Behind the skull a collection of crenellations and flying buttresses hinted at its Imperial origins, though all were crusted in baroque skulls and twisted brass sculptures stained black by exposure to the void, while the metal between was the colour of dried blood. The *Sword of Brass* was accelerating. The death's grin of its hideous prow gaped wide enough to swallow the *Saint Aster* whole.

The battle was nearly over, but far from decided. There were six vessels of consequence in Strike Group Saint Aster. The *Vox Lexica* floated with its engine stacks out, a dozen decks ablaze but void shields relit. The fleet carrier had been targeted early, but thanks to Athagey's foresight, most of its attack craft had been launched, and they played havoc with the enemy's lighter vessels even while their carrier wallowed helplessly. The *Coming Light* and *Unmerciful* had been pulled out of the fight, beating a Slaughter-class cruiser down in a struggle of their own that had taken them tens of thousands of miles away from the *Saint Aster*. *Ars Bellus* and *Faith's Promise* ran behind the flagship. They were light cruisers, the *Saint Aster's* hunting dogs, and they chased their prey down, firing on the *Red Gift* as it closed on the *Saint Aster*. Besides the capital vessels there was the usual collection of fast escort vessels, destroyers and the like, but by that point in the battle the squadrons had played their roles, and the outcome would be decided by the larger craft.

The *Sword of Brass's* force had been smaller. One of its three supporting cruisers was already a cloud of atoms and spinning wreckage several thousand miles behind the *Saint Aster*. Finnula hoped the *Red Gift* would soon join its brother.

Another round of hits from the *Red Gift* slammed into the *Saint Aster's* flank. This time, the voids were properly configured, took the violence and shunted it off into the warp. Purple lightning raced away from the site of the impact, momentarily obscuring the view forward. The hololith crackled as the augurs feeding it were disrupted.

'Where are our light cruisers?' Finnula demanded of Lieutenant Basu, who oversaw the Master Augurum and his many control pits.

‘Coming in behind the *Red Gift*,’ said Basu. ‘They are gaining. Optimal close broadside range in thirteen seconds.’

‘Order them to draw level, take it apart,’ Finnula said. ‘Now.’

A few seconds later, the void flashed with the sheet lightning of unseen explosions.

‘*Ars Bellus* reports *Red Gift* shields are out,’ said Lieutenant Gonan, the vox-liaison. ‘*Faith’s Promise* is drawing in to fire. It is breaking from pursuit.’

‘Have the light cruisers turn aside and finish it. Let the commodore concentrate on *Sword of Brass*.’ Finnula looked up at her mistress, who was fiercely concentrating. ‘A couple of prayers to the Emperor wouldn’t go amiss either,’ she muttered. *Saint Aster* and *Sword of Brass* were now racing at each other.

The *Sword of Brass* opened fire as it closed, its skull guns blasting away at what was, in void terms, point-blank range. It was difficult not to flinch as shells big as buildings rushed at them, clearly visible to the naked eye. They detonated against the void shields, and embraced the ship in flame. The explosion was sufficiently violent that the shields could not displace it all, and tank-sized chunks of shrapnel rattled from the armoured prow.

‘Excellent,’ Athagey shouted excitedly. ‘As I expected. Their bloodlust betrays them. They’ve wasted their best chance at a killshot.’ Her pale face was flushed and her visible eye dilated with the stimms she snorted so much of. ‘Engines all ahead full, direct course for the *Sword of Brass*, provoke those blood-worshipping heretics into doing something stupid.’

The *Saint Aster* pushed through the short-lived cloud of flames, hurtling at its target with suicidal abandon. Goaded, the enemy ship responded in kind, and its rear flared with increased engine burn.

Athagey spoke quickly, rattling off a series of orders to various sub-commanders. ‘Ready torpedoes, tight spread, directly fore. Enginarium, prepare for full reverse. Directional thrusters prep for engagement. Run out cannons, both batteries. Gunnery crews to stand ready to fire on my order alone.’ Finnula recognised the expression. The commodore could smell victory.

Finnula unconsciously reached for the railing around the command dais. Athagey had pulled her intended manoeuvre before, and as effective as it was, the results for the crew were unpleasant.

‘Torpedoes ready!’ one of the lieutenants shouted.

‘Wait for their next volley, then fire,’ Athagey commanded. ‘Prime lances to fire. Batteries hold.’ Klaxons honked and acceptance chimes rang.

Once more, the skull prow flashed.

‘Emperor strike us down!’ Finnula swore. ‘They reloaded! Second volley inbound. The shields won’t take that – brace for impact!’ Finnula shouted. A press of a vox-button sent her order across the ship.

Alarm tocsins blared, joining the cacophony of weapons-ready alerts. Blast doors slammed closed all around the command bridge.

The vessels were so close now that the shells crossed the space between them in a couple of seconds. Two detonated harmlessly on the shields. The third burst through the *Saint Aster*’s void envelope, dragging a corona of fading lightning behind it. The shell crashed into the ship’s spine and exploded, tearing off one of the ship’s massive lance turrets. The *Saint Aster* shook hard, throwing Finnula about. The turret lifted on a trunk of fire, and spun off, narrowly missing the command deck.

The plough-blade prow of the *Saint Aster* flashed as a full spread of torpedoes hauled themselves free of their tubes and accelerated towards the *Sword of Brass*.

Debris from the lance turret crashed into the armourglass oculus. A crack ran across one of the panes.

‘Close shutters!’ Finnula shouted.

‘Belay that!’ commanded Athagey. ‘Let’s watch them burn. Lances, fire now.’

Columns of light burst from the ship’s ventral turrets. There had been six, two mounted atop each of the blocky gunnery decks on either side of the *Saint Aster*’s hull, and two more on the spine. Five remained, angled so they would not hit those in front of them. At distance, their situation restricted the guns to firing at targets either side of the vessel, but on a closing enemy more could be brought into arc, and three of the five energy beams slammed hard into the fore portions of the *Sword of Brass*.

Lances were among the most powerful weaponry available to humanity, with high-output, long-burn beams. The *Sword of Brass*’ void shields boiled with empyric energies as they took the hits, casting the lances’ fury into the parallel dimension of the warp, but the lances continued to fire, stripping back the shields and overwhelming their generators, until the violent purple

discharges bled away, became blue and feeble, and the shields faltered. Before the lances were forced to snap off, one punched through the failing voids and cut a new, molten smile across the face of the skull.

In the cavernous halls providing power to the lances, frantic crews would be ejecting spent powercells, swapping out line feeds and recharging the coolant reservoirs. The lance turrets were hellish places; the gases the cannons vented to stop them overheating made the air unbreathable, and the crews were forced to work in heavy environment suits in temperatures close to the maximum the human body could endure.

None of this was important on the command deck. The individual labours of thousands of human beings were insignificant; only the collective result mattered.

A cry went up. ‘Direct hit!’

The crew cheered.

The hit, though, was not Athagey’s goal.

‘Torpedo contact imminent! Shield eyes!’ Finnula commanded, and flipped down the photo-reactive visor of her cap. The rest of the crew covered their faces with their hands, and looked away from the oculus.

The torpedoes shone brightly as reverse thrusters slowed them enough to pass through the enemy voids without tripping them. A moment later they hit the *Sword of Brass*. Plasmic and thermonuclear warheads detonated on the hull, whitening out the forward view with painful light.

‘Now now now!’ screamed Athagey. ‘While they’re blind! Fire reverse thrusters. Fire manoeuvring jets. Dive! Dive!’

This was the part Finnula had been dreading. Nothing as big as the *Saint Aster* could be brought to a dead stop quickly. They couldn’t hope to slow it appreciably in such a short space to avoid impact if their course was wrong. She hoped Athagey had judged the distance well, and today was not the day she made her last mistake.

Finnula felt the thrusters as a punch in her guts. The ship howled in protest. Integrity field projectors all over the vessel burst with strain trying to hold it together. Metal screamed. On every deck, loose objects crashed forward, and men and women were flung about. The deceleration was only the beginning. The ship simultaneously dipped, and went into a corkscrew. The *Sword of Brass* skimmed past within a few thousand yards, its blood-red hull filling the oculus from side to side. Proximity alarms shrieked with

machine terror. They were close enough that the void shields of the *Saint Aster* reacted with the residual energies shrouding the *Sword of Brass* in eerie phantasmic display, with eddies that looked uncomfortably like screaming faces.

Athagey laughed.

‘Gut these motherless dogs!’ she shouted. ‘Show them the Emperor still rules this galaxy! Open fire!’

As the *Saint Aster* rolled, it opened fire with its port cannons. The shells punched into the belly of the *Sword of Brass*, tearing through pitted armour and into its interior spaces. There they detonated, ripping the underside of the vessel open. The *Saint Aster* continued to spin as it dived, but it passed before the starboard batteries had rotated into position, much to Athagey’s annoyance.

‘Too damn slow, laggards!’ she shouted. ‘When I command a double broadside, that is what I require!’

‘It’s dying, madame commodore, we need to get clear,’ Finnula said. She was sweating, her stomach doing somersaults. ‘Reactor is going into overload. Energy spikes across all augur frequencies. Shut the oculus, and brace for debris impact,’ she said grimly. It was a phrase she had been forced to employ a great many times under Athagey’s command.

The *Sword of Brass* exploded as the great shutters were sliding closed. The reactor failed, and an orb of white fire as hot as a sun burst into life, sending searing slices of light across the command deck. Enough energetic discharge smashed into the rear of the *Saint Aster* to tip it up, collapse the void shields, and make its thousand voices wail all over again. The ship shook violently before the explosion was off past them, gases and debris disappearing into the void, a last violent exhalation of a monster that had plagued the Imperium for millennia.

Alarms were shut down one by one. Teams from the medicae decks went to crew members. Fires were put out. Transmechanics raised electronic voices in prayer to placate the *Saint Aster*’s abused machine-spirits while their wrenches and arc torches tended to her physical hurts. Finnula ran a practised eye over the multiple screens mounted on the railings. Data from every part of the ship scrolled past.

‘We were lucky. Again,’ she said.

Commodore Athagey wasn’t paying much attention to what was

happening on the deck. With her fixed grin and flushed face, she seemed lost in post-combat ecstasy, but Finnula knew that wasn't all of it. Athagey would be in close contact with the rest of the strike group captains, sub-vocalising her conversations through the vox-beads embedded in her throat. Finnula watched her a moment. Her eyes were darting about. She had a retinal projector in her eyepiece that she habitually routed the hololith feeds through. Athagey had a tendency to paranoia, and did what she could to keep her consultations private. The stimms she took made it worse, but it hadn't become a problem. Yet.

Finnula had her own work, and was attending to it when Athagey suddenly stood up. In a rare, unguarded moment she let concern show on her face.

'Second Lieutenant Semain, you have command. The enemy is done. I am sure I can trust you with mopping-up work. Lieutenant Diomed, come with me, into the dead end.' She tugged off her taloned haptic glove and dropped it carelessly onto her throne, but left her eyepiece in place.

Finnula shot her a questioning look. Athagey shook her head almost imperceptibly. Later, then.

Together they left the command dais. A pair of naval armsmen fell in behind them, and they made their way out of an armoured portal towards the command deck stateroom.

On the bridge, the business of finishing off the heretic fleet continued smoothly without the commodore's input.

They called the stateroom the dead end, because there was only one way in. Even so, a pair of skulls tracked the two women with red-lensed eyes as they walked the short tunnel, rapid-fire laser carbines mounted over the door following them. Every one of the entrances to the command deck was covered by spirit-motivated weaponry. The dead end stateroom was no exception.

'Commodore Eloise Athagey,' Athagey stated loudly at the circular door. Machine-guardians heard and read her voice print. The door rolled aside, showing its thickness and the cog teeth that locked it in place. A scry-skull floated down from its roost when they stepped through, and wordlessly swept them with its sensors. Only when that was done did the lumens activate. A fountain set into the back wall gurgled into action; a woman with an urn poured water into a bowl. She represented Saint Aster herself,

and a similar statue, many hundred times larger, adorned the figure-plinth at the front of the superstructure. Finnula avoided looking at her. She found the statue's face bland, and its blank eyes always seemed to be judging her.

'Shutters open,' Athagey said. There was a tall window running the full length of the stateroom. External plasteel plates slid upwards at her voice command. High-grade machine-spirits lurked in the workings of the rooms Athagey spent her time in, a favour called in from a grateful archmagos, Finnula had heard, but the commodore refused to comment on it. To an observer from a more civilised age, the contrast in technological levels on the *Saint Aster* would have been confounding. To the two women, it was perfectly normal to have semi-intelligent devices performing menial tasks on one deck, while only a few hundred feet beneath them, work gangs hundreds strong laboured to turn the starter wheels of world-killing weaponry by hand.

'And you can be at ease now, Lieutenant Diomed,' Athagey added.

Finnula's manner suddenly changed. She dropped into a chair, tossed her hat onto the polished surface of the conference table, tugged her gloves off with her teeth and leaned back, rubbing at her eyes with the heels of her hands.

She sighed, and let her hands drop into her lap. 'What's happening, Eloise? It's not like you to miss the chance of hunting down a broken enemy personally.'

Athagey ignored her question. 'Drink, Finnula?' said the commodore. She went to a cabinet built into the wall by the statue.

'Now?' said Finnula. She blinked blearily. 'It's a bit early, isn't it?'

'We've won the battle. We deserve to celebrate,' Athagey said, looking up at the face of the water carrier. Its secretive, fixed smile suggested she agreed. 'Saint Aster brought life by giving water to the thirsty, but I can do you better than water.'

Without waiting for a response from her second, Athagey pushed on the door. It was of real wood, and opened without a sound. More lights inside illuminated the contents. Everything in the room was expertly made, spotlessly clean, an island of luxury in the oily body of the ship. Athagey took out two glasses and a decanter, and set them down in front of Finnula. She sat next to her instead of taking the captain's chair at the head of the table, and poured.

‘To victory,’ said the commodore, raising her glass.

Finnula lifted her glass and tapped it against Athagey’s. The aroma of Neoscotia’s Distillarius Superior rose as her hand heated the drink. She hesitated before sipping. Every mouthful was worth more than she was.

‘I swear every time you pull that trick, Eloise, the spine of this vessel gets twenty feet shorter. So does mine.’

‘We won. I always do, and you’re too tall anyway.’

Finnula looked out of the window at the void. Intermittent flashes showed continuing weapons fire, but the battle was dying down. Strike fighters and bombers were returning to the ships. Debris flashed as it caught the steady starlight of the deep void, while far away, the dusty wheel of the Corrayvreden Nebula, the principal feature of the Machorta Sound, turned slowly on a background of uttermost black. The combined glow of young stars, gas and the sixty established suns of the Sound around the Corrayvreden outcompeted the starscape beyond, so the darker heart of the nebula seemed like a gate or a tunnel, ringed with beacon lights.

‘We did win, and with your habitual verve, but every time I think it’s the last, Emperor help me,’ said Finnula.

Athagey made a dismissive noise. ‘The Emperor’s too busy to be paying any attention to us, my dear, and don’t you go citing luck either. It was the right tactics for the right enemy. When one faces as belligerent a foe as blood worshippers, you have to use their aggression against them. Provoke them, and they make mistakes. They always do.’

‘I’d prefer a bombardment, stood-off. If there had been Heretic Astartes on those ships...’

‘Bombardment at distance!’ said Athagey. ‘That’s your answer to everything, Finnula. Sometimes it will be the correct choice. Sometimes it won’t.’ She stuck out her bottom lip, and spun her glass around on the polished table, leaving little rings of condensation. ‘You are right, to a degree. Our guns are better than theirs, their warriors are more dangerous than ours, but one has to factor in the circumstances. We do not have time to play the distance game. These slaughter groups need putting down as soon as they are detected. If we are cautious, their ships will die, but then so will worlds as their comrades run amok unchallenged. We have to be quick. Right tactics, right enemy, right situation. One has to take risks in order to achieve the most favourable outcome.’ She downed her drink and slid the

glass carelessly across the table. A minor adept's yearly stipend skidded dangerously close to destruction. Finnula couldn't help follow it with her eyes. She was relieved when it came to a spinning stop.

'What's going on?' she said. 'You didn't bring me in here for a celebration, did you? There's something else.'

Eloise looked out of the window, and frowned thoughtfully. 'It is a little premature. I had a message, just now, delivered at priority from the Astro-telepathicum. Communications are still bad, and they haven't finished the translation yet, but the gist is here.'

'It must have been important to bring it up before it was finished. What did it say?' said Finnula. She put her own drink down, barely touched.

'Well,' Eloise said, nodding her head. 'That's the matter at hand, isn't it? We are to withdraw.' Athagey took out a silver snuff tin, flipped it open, and pinched up a generous measure. She snorted it into both nostrils, then put it away. The habit was accomplished dextrously, with a minimum of movement, mostly single-handed. A hypnotic series of movements: draw, flip, pinch, snort, click, away. So businesslike it seemed harmless, but after she'd partaken, her eyes shone a little too brightly, and their rims turned red. Finnula made a mental note. She had taken to recording how often Athagey took the stimms. Confronting her about it without hard evidence was disastrous. She knew; she'd tried. The time was approaching for one of their difficult conversations.

Athagey picked up Finnula's drink. 'Orders from Terra, via fleet command at Tasmarr in the Sound.'

'At least messages are getting through again,' said Finnula. 'Maybe things are calming down after the Blindness.'

'I doubt that,' said Athagey. 'Now listen to me, that's not all of it, there have been... developments.'

Now Finnula was intrigued. Athagey was deliberately holding out on her, enjoying knowing something her lieutenant did not. 'Come on, Eloise!' she said. 'Don't spin it out.'

Athagey sipped at Finnula's drink and gave her a mischievous smile.

'Get ready for this. There's quite a lot to take in.' She paused dramatically. 'The primarch, Roboute Guilliman, has miraculously returned to life and come to Terra.'

'What?' said Finnula. She went rigid with surprise.

‘Hang on, there’s more,’ Athagey said, enjoying Finnula’s reaction. ‘He’s been appointed Lord Commander. They’re calling him the Regent of the Imperium. There’s been a purge of the High Lords. We’re to rejoin the body of our fleet, aid in evacuating all military assets from this war zone. We’re abandoning everything on the far side of the Corrayvreden, regrouping on this side of the Sound, then falling back to the fortress world of Hydraphur.’

‘Then what?’

‘We’re to await further orders. The admiral might know a bit more.’

‘A primarch.’ Finnula shook her head. ‘How can this possibly be true? Is it true?’ she said. It was hard to falsify astropathic messages, as the sender’s intent was often clearer than the message itself, but it wasn’t impossible.

‘The message is triple-aquila secure, sent by the purest, most powerful astropaths in the fleet. It is genuine.’

‘But why? We’re going to lose everything we’ve fought for since the Rift opened! The Crusade of Slaughter is attacking every world around the Sound. We can’t just abandon them,’ said Finnula.

‘We’re doing it because we’ve been told to, and...’ She smiled. ‘He’s called a new crusade in the Emperor’s name. He’s been on Terra several months already, apparently. There was an attack on the Throneworld which he drove off, then he announced this Indomitus Crusade. Preparations are well under way. A lot has happened.’ She tipped her glass at Finnula. ‘So communications aren’t that good after all, are they?’

‘A crusade. Now? We’ve not enough warriors and ships to hold what we have. After an attack on Terra itself? That’s insanity.’

‘Is that true?’ said Athagey. Finnula hated it when she asked rhetorical questions. ‘Think about it, my dear Finnula. What is the point of frittering away the Imperium’s strength on worlds we’ve already lost, when those forces could be better used combined? Spread thin, our armies are next to useless. Combined, they will be unstoppable. It doesn’t take a primarch to see that, though it does take one to order it. We’ll lose a bit of ground, then we’ll take it all back, then more besides. These are great days.’ Athagey stood, and downed the rest of Finnula’s drink. ‘The small problem of the evacuation remains, of course. Where, I wonder?’

She looked out of the window at the dust cloud, the suns, and the darkness at the cloud’s heart that promised the birth of more.

‘I’ll wager my rank that we’ll be sent to Fomor III once Treheskon gets in

touch. Fomor seems like the best place to gather everything together.’ She shrugged. ‘We’ll see. Wherever we’re ordered, we’ve avoided the central Machorta conflict zone for a while, hunting down these reaving parties. Now we’re to sail right into the mouth of hell. So be it. We’ll do our part, and be away. Not even Horus nor any of his devils could stop us.’

Athagey smiled. Finnula frowned. The difference in their expressions summed up the divergence in their characters perfectly. For Athagey, it was about the glory. Finnula approached their missions with both eyes fixed on survival. That’s why they were a good match.

‘We need to get ready,’ the commodore said. ‘This has to be done properly. Hat on, gloves on, back straight! No more Eloise for a little while. I’m going to call the rest of the watch command in here, tell them. I expect you to look suitably serious. Then we’ll wait for all of the teleprayer to be decoded in full before announcing it to the strike group. That should provide a nice little morale boost. We’ve got to get the *Vox Lexica* sailing again, and regroup our flotilla...’

Her speech raced to keep up with her mind, both fuelled by the stimms.

‘Better get the bloody priests up here, too. We’re going to have to do the whole damn show.’

Chapter Seven

PRIORITY ULTIMA

SCRIBUM PROCESSUS

OVERWATCHER JEDMUND

Nawra Nison's workspace was confined in a cubicle exactly sixteen feet square. The walls extended up further than she could reach, high enough to screen her from her thousands of fellows and most of the soft, whispery noises their turning of pages created, but open at the top, exposing her to the scrutiny of the supervisor servo-skulls that swept by periodically.

Despite that, she could not see the ceiling. She never had. It was lost in the blackness. Her cubicle and all the others were each provided with a single lumen lamp on a flexible arm, and their light was barely adequate to illuminate the small desks. The remaining furnishings and fixtures of the cubicle comprised a small voxmitter built into the wall covered with a heavy bronze grille, a broad slot in the outer cubicle wall to accept incoming missives for appraisal, a number of deep shelves mounted close together, and a chair so ancient its uncomfortable metal seat had been worn wafer-thin by generations of worthy fundamentals.

Nawra spent her days in the cubicle and her nights in the dormitory. There were rigorously timetabled visits to the ablutorials and refectory, once-monthly visits to the facility chapel, twice-yearly trips to the bathhouse, and occasional, much feared moments in the overwatcher's office, but the dormitory and the cubicle were where the majority of her time was spent,

and the cubicle took the greater share.

Her only personal possession was the worn Emperor's Tarot deck neatly stacked at the left of her desk, close enough for her to brush with her fingers for comfort, but out of the way of her work.

Her shifts were eleven hours long. She was four and a half hours into the current one.

Every ninety minutes new documents were delivered for her to process. Right on time, the squeaking wheels of a cart approached down the corridor. Sometimes she could hear the adept moving around on the other side of the cubicle wall, and the rustle of papers as her next workload was portioned out. This time she heard nothing. A thick stack of papers burst through the delivery slot, making her jump, though she expected it. She grasped the stack. Through the soft vellum, she felt the presence of another human being. Her heart quickened. Her mind raced with thoughts of who they might be, what they might look like, and how many times they had shared these fleeting moments, the only instances of human contact she had throughout the day.

The adept let go of the papers suddenly. In her excitement, Nawra had been gripping them hard, and she lurched a little with their release. As a result, the vellum came out of the slot too quickly. Although only a dozen sheets thick, vellum was heavy, and the end fell onto her desk with a thump. It hit her tarot deck, knocking it onto the floor. As they fell, several of the cards fluttered loose, the rest exploding in all directions when they hit the tiles, whispering on cushions of air to each corner of her cubicle. She reached down, praying softly under her breath as she gathered them up. Every second wasted would be punished, if she were seen. She finished the task quickly, piling the cards as she gathered them, then sat up.

The pages had spread themselves in a fan on the desk, close to slipping onto the floor after the cards. The onion-skin papers that protected each and concealed the contents were in disarray. These minor disasters upset her, and she prayed faster as she rearranged them. She tried to preserve the stack, fearful of upsetting its Emperor-ordained order. While doing so, she lifted half the pile to pat it into shape.

What she saw beneath had her stop in disbelief.

Somehow, five of her cards had worked their way into the pile and now sat on top of one of the missives in a perfect aquilan reading. Three cards

upright, close together, made the body of the Imperial eagle. Two further, horizontal cards made its wings. She gaped. She couldn't have laid the cards out more neatly herself. What was more, the onion-skin cover on the missive was rumped up into nothing. The cards covered the body of the message, except for a few words visible between the gaps.

One sentence fragment leapt out at her.

'...tion of the Lord Commander himse...'

She looked at the cards for the first time. Two were major arcana, two more from the discordia suite. Only one was a minor suite. The big four were cards that rarely came up in the readings she did for her own guidance. She had drawn them, singly, very occasionally, but never so many important cards in one spread.

The Emperor's Throne sat in the middle, the Engines of War reversed was to its left, the Shattered World, also reversed, was to the right. The right wing of the aquila was Guilliman's Wrath, with the top of the card facing away from the centre. The Galaxy made the other wing, and the upper portion of this card pointed towards the middle three. Her eyes ran over the spread, trying to decide what it meant.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had pressed the single red button beneath the voxmitter. A light inside flickered at her balefully. The vox-unit connected to the archives department, who provided research so the missives could be properly classified. But it did have other uses.

'Auditorium requiratur,' she said clearly. The voxmitter buzzed, and the light clicked off.

Seconds later, a servo-skull swooped down over her cubicle, dazzling her with brilliant white light from a side-mounted search lumen.

'Scribum Processus Nison, state problem.' A machine snarl served the skull as a voice. Its eyes flashed in time with its words.

'I need to see Overwatcher Jedmund,' she said. She pointed to the tarot spread atop the missive. The skull angled downwards, turned on its axis as it examined the cards.

The voxmitter bolted into the wall coughed. '*What is it this time, Nison?*' Jedmund's irritation hissed out on a tide of static.

'I need to see you, adept,' she said humbly, bowing so the skull could see, and pointed once more to the spread.

Jedmund said nothing for a few seconds. The voxmitter hissed.

'To me, scribum,' he said wearily. *'Now.'*

The locks of her door clunked. The nerve-shredding sound of metal squealing on metal reverberated across the cubicularium as it swung open. All at once, the soft sounds of quills, turning pages, and collective, barely heard breathing stopped as everyone within earshot strained to listen.

She stepped out. The door closed behind her, just as noisily. The soft sounds of scribes at work returned, perhaps a little more hurried. Every second lost added to their weight of sin.

'Follow,' the skull said. It bobbed down in front of her, lighting the dark corridor with its search beam. The cubicles were arranged in rectangular blocks of sixteen, two deep and eight long. The corridors between them formed a grid pattern of maddening, soulless precision that stretched away into the darkness. Hundreds of doors lined the ways.

Nawra's slippered feet padded silently on the tile floor, but the skull's grav-impeller warbled loudly, making her self-conscious. In every one of the small cubicles would be a man or a woman wondering what was going on. She could almost feel their thoughts; so many thinking the same thing was oppressive, although she knew it was only her imagination. She muttered prayers of apology under her breath, and made sure to genuflect at every shrine they passed on the way.

There were mounting brackets for lumen panels on the walls, and candelabra depended from the distant ceiling on long chains, but nearly all were either empty, or the fittings they had were dead. When she did pass a working panel, or see a lumen tree with a single, working bulb, she felt exposed to view. Although she was aware enough of the way the world worked to know she was always being watched, the patches of light made it all the worse, and she scooted past them quickly. When she did, the skull bobbed around and flew backwards and watched her with a quizzical air. She averted her eyes from the glaring lenses buried in its eye sockets.

Fifteen minutes of walking brought the hall wall into view. Ten more had her climbing a mountain of steps. After three turns she was struggling; she was in poor physical health, and she stopped to catch her breath on a landing. The rail she leaned against wobbled. Moisture ran mouldy streaks down the wall behind her.

The cubicularium stretched out forever beneath her. The soft glow of the

scribes' lamps shone upwards in faint shafts of light that the dark rapidly swallowed. In places, whole sections were dark, but most contained workers locked in their cells, just like her. People she had worked alongside all her life, but of whose names she knew only a handful. She was high enough up to see into those beneath the stairs, and she found herself staring at the tops of heads bent over piles of missive vellum, evaluating cries for help from every corner of mankind's interstellar realm.

She had seen nothing of the stars. Only the missives. As far as she was concerned, the Imperium was an empire of words alone. It might not exist at all.

The skull floated back down the stairs and hovered in front of her face.

'Do not dally. Follow.'

She drew in a painful breath, and recommenced her climb.

Overwatcher Jedmund was a short, balding man with bad skin and black teeth. He gave the impression of corpulence without actually being fat. Nobody in the missive hall was fat, not even those in charge. To Nawra, his small office was a land of unimaginable luxury. He had at least three servants, who bustled about pulling scrolls from the pigeonholes that lined the walls and stacking dataslates in special wheeled racks. There was a window looking down over the cubicle field. A door she had never seen open led out from the back. What was through there? She imagined an ablutorial, so close to hand he could use it whenever he wanted, or his own personal hab-dorm where he slept in splendid solitude upon a soft bed. The idea that there could be several private rooms and access to corridors that led out of the Missive Hive had not crossed her mind. Such things were beyond her frame of reference.

Jedmund huffed and sniffed as he read and reread the missive.

'It is a simple Ultima request like the hundreds of others we receive every day. Process it. Submit archive searches for terms you do not comprehend. Stamp it. Put it in the right tray.'

'But the cards...' she said. She felt stupid now she was in front of Jedmund.

'Hundreds,' he said, eyes narrowed. 'Every day.' He put the missive down on his oversized desk. It was almost as big as her cubicle, so huge a piece of furniture it made him look bizarre, like a little decorative cherub that had

come to life and crept off its plinth to take up work in the world of men.

‘Do you actually know what these words mean?’ he said, waving his hand over it. ‘Of course you don’t. You have your checklist. Your role, scribum, is to evaluate these threat missives according to the departamento criteria. There are the seals, the cogitatorial marks, the adept pass signs, the significant term cullers.’ He gestured at all these things in turn. ‘Others have done their work, yours is to look at that, and to rank it accordingly and pass it on. You are supposed to read them only in exceptional circumstances, because you don’t understand what they say. That is all right, because you are not supposed to understand.’ He gave her a cruel smile. ‘You are supposed to process.’

He was right, she didn’t understand.

‘But the cards,’ she said. ‘It was a perfect spread. I could have laid it out myself.’

‘You dropped them. You said so. Imagination is the assassin of good sense. Do not think, it is bad for you.’

‘The spread was all of portentous cards. What happens if... what happens if...’ she swallowed, and dropped her voice. ‘What happens if He is trying to guide us? The cards are the Emperor’s way of speaking with us, everyone knows that. The priests say—’

‘Please,’ he interrupted, with an admonishing look. ‘Why would He be putting thoughts into a head like yours? You’re nobody. That’s not how the tarot works.’

‘Do you know how it works?’

‘I have my own,’ he said, patting a box made of actual wood. He flipped the lid. A set of twelve crystalflex cards were held inside in velvet-lined slots, so much grander than her worn set of peeling cardboard. Seeing something so wildly expensive made her feel worthless.

‘You must be devout to possess such a thing,’ she said, ashamed. She dropped her eyes. Her fingers were wrestling with themselves at the front of her dirty robes. She didn’t want her fingers to do that, but getting them to stop was an effort.

‘I consult it every day,’ he said proudly. ‘Today, they didn’t tell me anything special was going to happen.’ He sighed, and thought, and looked at the missive again. ‘Did you pray before making the spread?’

‘No. I didn’t make the spread. It made itself.’

‘You formed no question in your mind?’

‘No, they fell without preparation.’

‘So you do not know what it means.’ His fingers rested on the vellum. The fate of worlds under an insignificant hand.

‘No, I do not.’

‘Then why would the God-Emperor do that? He does not set out to confuse us. I have a mind to report you to Shriver Leonard for this heresy.’

She looked up sharply. ‘No! Please!’ A visit to Shriver Leonard was the worst thing in her tiny world.

He held up his hand.

‘I’m not going to. It’s a happenstance, Nison, you dropped your cards. I admire your honesty about your clumsiness. You will be docked half an hour of sleep rotation for the next five circulations. More work will help you focus your mind. Pray to the Emperor and thank Him for guiding me towards forgiveness. In His light, I am merciful.’

She should have been thankful, but her eyes strayed back to the missive. Her foreboding grew every time she looked at it. ‘Overwatcher...’

‘Be pleased I do not add more,’ said Jedmund curtly. ‘By the time you are back at your desk, you will be a full thousandth behind your work. You have wasted a great deal of time. Now, be back about your business.’

He held out the missive to her with a sympathetic expression.

‘Process it with the others. I know it looks bad, but since the Blindness passed more and more missives like this have arrived. I see many far worse than this every week, Emperor preserve us all. The numbers are unprecedented. The Imperium is on fire. A lot of those are addressed to the Sainted Primarch. How do you think he would react if every scribum and petty person bothered him with their woes? He is concerned with the fates of sectors. We cannot trouble him with the tears of single worlds. But I read them. I read them all, and I understand them, Scribum Nison. How do you think that makes me feel?’

‘Very bad?’

‘Worse than that,’ he said gravely, and it wasn’t all for show.

‘Yes, overwatcher. I am sorry.’

‘If this really is as important as you fear, then the Emperor will make sure it gets to the right place. That is our purpose. It is not through individuals that the God-Emperor exerts His will, but through the bureaucracy of the

Adeptus Administratum, his most Holy Machine, of which you and I are only a tiny part. One human effort is nothing, but together, we are the greatest empire there has ever been. Be reassured, that your insignificant toil here aggregates with that of billions of others into something fine and mighty. In that way we serve, though we are but humble.'

'Yes, overwatcher.'

'Have faith, Scribum Processus Nison. While the Emperor watches over us from His Golden Throne, nothing can go amiss.'

Nawra took the missive back. Overwatcher Jedmund took up a large quill and returned to his own work, perusing a long, tabulated list, and ticking boxes down its left margin seemingly at random.

She didn't move.

'That will be all,' he said, without looking up. He gestured with his free hand to one of his servants, who took Nawra by the elbow, and steered her out. His touch was soft, but his scowl was hard.

Outside, the skull was waiting to lead her back down the stairs to her cell.

Chapter Eight

SIXTY SUNS

WARP RIFT

HOUNDS OF KHORNE

The *Saint Aster* lurched through the storms ripping through the warp. No voyage had been smooth since the Rift had torn the galaxy asunder. Three ships from Athagey's flotilla had foundered in the last few months, but it did not appear to daunt the commodore, rather she exulted in the power of the storm. She had a light in her eyes that both inspired and worried Finnula.

Klaxons blared all around the command deck. The great bell of the watch hanging from the apex of the deck's dome was released to begin its sombre ringing.

The first toll rolled out a forbidding peal that shook the bones of the crew.

'All hands prepare for realspace translation!' the Master of the Empyrean intoned from his pulpit. He wore a ritual blindfold as part of his robes of office, and shouted through a voxmitter sutured to his lips. A choir fifty strong repeated his words. Vox-thieves carried by servo-skulls relayed the song to the entire ship. A contingent of the ship's priests added their voices, swelling the announcement with plainsong. Incense hung over everything.

The bell reached the apogee of its ponderous swing, hung a moment, then returned. The clapper met the metal and the bell tolled again.

'Vox Lexica, Coming Light, Unmerciful, Ars Bellus and Faith's Promise all

report readiness for simultaneous warp breach, commodore,' a fleet liaison officer reported. 'Squadrons *Pursuivant*, *Exultant*, *Fulminant* and *Excoriant* likewise report readiness.'

Athagey stared at the armoured shutters covering the oculus as if she could see through them into the tides of the empyrean.

'Shipwide vox!' Athagey commanded.

A device fashioned as a pair of angels fluttered down on noisy wings. The grav-impeller that kept them aloft buzzed. A mechanical arm unfolded, and held out a vox-horn to the commodore's lips. She paused a moment to formulate her words, then spoke firmly.

'Heed me now, brave voidsmen and women of the Imperium,' she said. 'We sail directly into the mouth of hell itself. On the other side of the veil a horde of heretics and traitors wait to bar our way to Fomor III, where thousands of the Emperor's loyal servants await rescue. There are warriors a thought's breadth from us who fought with the arch-traitor Horus at the time of the Imperium's triumph. They do not know they lost their war. We are going to educate them.'

She stood from her throne. The angels beat their decorative wings. The grav-impeller hummed loudly, and the device floated up to follow her.

'On Terra, at this moment, a wonder has occurred. The primarch Roboute Guilliman has returned to us. The Emperor has shown us that He will not submit to His ancient foes. The future is being remade as we speak. The Imperium will endure. It is our great glory to serve the Emperor and His last surviving son, to begin this era that will see the greatness of our species restored. Many of us will die. Fear not! The Emperor awaits all who serve Him faithfully, and who give all of themselves unto Him. Monsters wait for us, but not a single one of them cannot be vanquished by the sword of faith! To arms! To arms!'

She nodded to her chief warbringers, the masters of ordnance, torpedoes, lance, attack craft and plasma.

'Run out the guns! Increase reactor output to maximum. Begin realspace engine initiation. We enter the materium fighting ready, and we will not cease the spilling of blood until our mission is accomplished, and the brave soldiers of the Emperor are retrieved so that they too might better serve our beloved God-Emperor!'

She sat down to resounding cheers.

Finnula looked up to her mistress, taking her eyes only briefly from the myriad tasks she must oversee. ‘That was a good speech.’

‘Aren’t they all?’ said Athagey.

‘To the matter of battle. If Admiral Treheskon’s reports are still accurate, the enemy will be waiting for us at the Mandeville point. There are few safe egresses in the Sound, and only one in the Fomor System.’

‘We are ready for them. Bold heart, Finnula. Bold heart.’

A violet light blinked on Athagey’s armrest.

‘All hands!’ she shouted. ‘We begin translation now! Transmit orders to the flotilla. Exit is five, four, three...’

The bell clanged. The ship groaned. The whole deck shook. Cold foxfires gathered around the sharp edges of command stations and in the eyes of the skulls staring out from the capitals of columns. The command deck crew strapped themselves in. Those with the facility to do so maglocked themselves to the deck. Armsmen returned to their shock cradles. The priests sang their hymns louder, competing with the howling squeal of the warp engines now reverberating down the length of the *Saint Aster*.

‘Two, one! Translate now, engage realspace engines. All hands prepare for battle!’

The ship shuddered. Finnula held on tight. Her vision blurred. The outlines of her fellow officers broke into overlapping images of different colours, smearing themselves out on the membrane dividing reality from unreality.

With a rising wail, the *Saint Aster* broke warp and powered into the materium. Only the Navigators could look out into the empyrean safely; the rest felt their arrival through the vessel’s violent shaking.

‘Translation successful,’ the Master of Displacements said. ‘All ships reporting in. Full flotilla emergence, praise be to the Golden Throne.’

‘Open the oculus,’ commanded Athagey. ‘Raise shields!’

Plasteel slabs drew back from the armourglass, uncovering a breathtaking vista.

Colours of rare beauty saturated the void of the Machorta Sound. The Corrayvreden pulsed hungrily at the centre. Plasmic discharges flashed through the dense cloud banks where the seeds of stars were sown. Around the periphery burned young suns that made up the shores of the Sound, wreathed by the trailing discs of planetary formation.

Claws of dust and glowing gas extended in all directions from the-

Corrayvrecken cloud, their tips adorned by stellar ignition. Though all the worlds about the stars of the Sound were young, they were rich with elements forged in the pulsing heart of the nebula, and many already bore life. All these had been eagerly claimed by the Imperium. For six thousand years they had formed a prosperous group of mutually dependent states. Now, there was not a single one untouched by war.

Fomor was Strike Group Saint Aster's destination, a large main sequence star of gentle yellow hue, the kind most suited to life-bearing worlds. Fomor had three around its ample waist. All were to be abandoned to the Crusade of Slaughter.

Streamers of corposant and ghost lights washed off the *Saint Aster's* prow, obscuring some details of the view. These dissipated rapidly, and Finnula caught sight of the *Ars Bellus* and the *Unmerciful* riding a little ahead. Finding themselves behind, their escorts pushed forward to take up lead positions, their wakes marked by the annihilation sparkle of cosmic debris caught on void shields. It was virtually impossible to bring a fleet out of the warp in battle formation, especially in an environment as gravitationally dense as the Sound, but Athagey nodded in satisfaction at what she saw.

Finnula raced through a dozen screens of information. The fleet was in good order, and would quickly be in a workable fighting stance. The *Saint Aster's* shields ignited a moment later, flexing the view of the stars and nebula with temporary distortion. A passable response time, though not fast enough for Athagey. She would have to address that.

'Put fleet disposition on the main hololith,' Finnula ordered her subordinates. 'Begin broad augur sweep. Full spherical soak, ten-thousand-mile radius, then in further increments of ten thousand out to one hundred thousand miles.'

Already, information from the ship's sensoria was pouring in. Weapons discharge, recent warp exits and plasma trail returns brought evidence of high activity in the system. Guided by the sensor returns, the naked eye could pick out the signs of the war. Fomor's void space flashed with the light of battles fought hours before. The intensity of them and their persistence suggested Fomor's worlds were hotly contested.

They picked up thousands of vox-messages. None were meant for the *Saint Aster*. It would be hours before they were noticed, then hours more before the first messages intended for the commodore reached the system's

edge, but they gave the vessel's strategos more information with which to build a tactical picture.

'All ships into formation. Match *Vox Lexica*'s speed. We make for Fomor III,' said Athagey.

'Ware!' the Master of the Seers called. 'The psy-augury brings unusual readings from a source near our destination.'

It always amazed Finnula how Athagey could seize upon the most pertinent piece of information among the torrents coming at her, but she heard and responded.

'Show me.'

At the Master of Seers' command, a section of the oculus was reproduced on one of the major tri-d projectors. The yellow arc of Fomor was amplified. Fomor III was on the far side, but there was a plume of some energy that protruded over the rim of the sun.

'What is that?' asked Athagey.

'According to my readings, my lady, it is a warp rift. And it is growing, spreading out from Fomor II in the direction of Fomor III.'

'Hmmm,' Athagey said. She rose from her seat, and walked down to stand by Finnula. She was jittery. She had that sharp smell that came from stimm withdrawal, a desperate reek. She fumbled for her tin.

An alarm rang from another quarter of the deck, followed by several more.

'My lady, Squadron *Pursuivant* reports inbound flight of enemy destroyers, five Dragon-class,' another officer informed her. 'Unresolved energy signatures following behind. Cogitators suggest three cruisers of mid-gravitic displacement.'

'The hounds of Khorne have our scent!' Athagey said.

The information was pushed onto another screen. By then, the bridge's apse was filled with glowing hololiths and flat projections, as layered and complex as the dust clouds of the nebula.

Athagey examined the predicted trajectory of their interceptors. 'Then our mystery phenomenon will have to wait,' she said. 'We need to take care of this. I'll not run before an enemy only to have them close aft when we slow to join the battle at Fomor III. Bring us down in speed. Begin manoeuvres to form gunline and begin perpendicular traversal to line of enemy approach. *Vox Lexica*, prepare bomber assault. Tell Captain Ladinmoq to hang back, his ship's still hurting. We'll stop this before it begins, but we

need the bombers in the void now.'

Alarms howled. The ship moaned as engines fought inertia to push it around.

'This is only the first skirmish,' Athagey said quietly to Finnula. 'Fomor is going to be a hard fight.'

Finnula was only half listening. Her eyes were on the painful smear of the warp rift coming around the sun.

Chapter Nine

A CHANGE IN CAREER

LOGISTER GUNTHER

AVENGING SON

Dinner in the Grand Cenatio was a formal affair. It was not accounted for in the adepts' thin allotment of free time, but regarded as part of their work. Dinner was an hour and a half long, twice monthly, and a privilege every one of them regarded as theirs by right.

Fabian enjoyed it grudgingly. He had once suggested to the others that they should be more grateful. They had the privilege by an accident of history. There was nothing tangible that separated him and his fellows from everyone else.

He had pointed out the drudges that waited their tables.

'We could have been one of them,' he had said, 'if but one thing in our ancestors' lives had been different.'

His colleagues had been outraged, some of them delightfully outraged, because they enjoyed to shout and flutter, but outraged nonetheless. 'Things are the way they are according to the will of the Emperor!' they'd said, or variations on that theme.

Fabian had said it for devilment at the time, but he wasn't so sure now. Too much reading, he rebuked himself. There was a worm eating at him, like the parchment weevils chewing their way through the wisdom of ages in the Archivist's Tower. He couldn't stop thinking about the primarch. His

food tasted worse than it usually did. Indigestion burned at his gullet, making him surly.

‘To another fine week of evaluations, gentle sers!’ Dimmius Weent declaimed. He was acting toastmaster of their table. He was a creature of great self-regard, his robes embroidered at his own expense with patterns that pushed at the edges of the rules regarding such things. His neck was swaddled in a grubby, three-tiered ruff. He acted as if they dined at the Emperor’s own table, though theirs was only one of many, there being several hundred in the Grand Cenatio.

‘To the glory of the Emperor, and His eternal Imperium! We who rule the stars by right salute our lord, and give thanks for our service,’ Weent bellowed. The Cenatio rang with competing protestations of devotion. The noise reached unbearable levels as the toastmasters toasted and the diners responded.

‘The Emperor Protects!’ Bo Fossden said.

‘Imperium Eternal!’ Jal Hisopar proclaimed.

Glasses of harsh spirit were lifted and drained as the acclamations were given and the men sought to outdo each other in their piety. Fabian’s head throbbed.

‘You make no acclamation, Ser Guelphrain?’ said Weent.

‘For the Emperor,’ he said quietly, raising his glass.

Some of the others tutted.

‘You do not stand! You do not shout! That is a lack of enthusiasm!’ Weent scolded.

‘Forgive me,’ said Fabian. His temper had been poor all day, and finally broke. He threw his threadbare napkin down onto his plate. ‘I find my enthusiasm waning of late. Terra is in strife, and war besets the Imperium on every front, and yet we sit and we eat as if nothing has happened.’

‘Everyone must sit and eat sometime, Guelphrain,’ Bo Fossden said. Fossden’s neighbour, a man Guelphrain only knew by sight, nodded in exaggerated agreement.

‘They must, but they need not do it marinated in the juices of self-satisfaction.’

‘Careful there, Guelphrain,’ said Weent. He sat heavily and helped himself to more food. ‘You speak as if the Imperium is in difficulty.’

‘Whereas you, Weent, speak as if it is enjoying the heights of triumph!’

Fabian responded. 'I have heard that much of Terra is in open revolt. The effects of the Days of Blindness will last for generations. We were in no good state before. Look at us!' He flapped his hand at their accoutrements. 'Our settings are fine, but the food is the same nutrient cubes we are served every day, and which all other inhabitants of this sector eat. All these items are old, most are damaged or ruined.' He tapped his chipped glass. 'Is this the sign of an empire in rude health, or one in deep decline? You sit here and praise the past without understanding it, while the present burns beyond the palace walls.'

'Not this again!' Jal Hisopar complained amiably. 'You always ruin dinner, Guelphrain. Let's talk about something else.'

His attempt to change the subject failed.

'There have never been any empires like ours,' said Weent. 'It is eternal.'

'What about what came before, before the Emperor?' said Fabian. He charged headlong into dangerous territory. He should have stopped, but anger propelled him.

'The existence of other empires is hearsay and legends, spread by traitors,' a thin man named Bascus said. 'The Imperium always has been and always shall be.' Bascus raised his glass. 'Imperium Eternal!' he said.

'Imperium Eternal!' the others shouted.

'That's not true!' Fabian said. 'There have been others. Don't you think they all thought their rule would last forever? Do you think they had to face anything like we're facing now?'

'This is false talk!' said Weent.

'It is true!' said Fabian.

'Where do you read this, Fabian?' Gwilliam Draan said this, an adept Fabian deeply disliked.

'We have the materials, if you choose to look at them, Gwilliam. It is all there in our libraries! We have become blind, and indolent.'

'You are becoming a heretic. There is no place in the Great Machine for broken components.'

'Fine,' said Fabian. He stood up suddenly, making his chair rock. He was giddy with anger. 'This broken component is leaving.' He struggled to maintain his dignity but couldn't, and whirled about and stabbed his finger. 'I have few pleasures in life. I look forward to saying I told you so.'

'Did he just wish the end of the Imperium?' Bascus said in shock.

It could be looked at that way, thought Fabian, which means it probably will be.

‘Morons,’ he said. ‘Buffoons. Pinheads!’ he pronounced very loudly and very clearly as he stormed out.

‘I will report you!’ shouted Weent after him. ‘The priests will hear of this, and the departmental scrutineers!’

Fabian forced his way past the chairs of his fellow adepts. A sudden and uncontrollable loathing came over him, the way they gawped, the way they thought, the way they smelled, but already fear was worming itself into his mind, and he was formulating what he would say to dig himself out of the mess he’d made by the time he made it to the ornate, flaking doors of the dining hall. The menials bowed and opened them, but they’d heard too, and were horrified.

He was such a fool.

The enormity of what he had done hit him as he made his way back to his domiciliary-tabularum. All his colleagues from his gallery were in the Cenatio, so his own level was quiet on both sides of the open atrium.

His legs were shaking now the adrenaline was leaving him, and he stopped to gather his breath and his thoughts. He gripped the tarnished gallery rail. Eagles, Imperial I’s and the stylised quill of his departamento decorated wrought-iron panels. They were spotted with rust. Verdigris and thick deposits of polish collected around the rivets of the railings. In places the hollow brass had been worn right the way through.

It was all so old. Movement in the hive had bent it out of true. There was a glass ceiling full of cracked panes, but it was opaque with accretions of dirt, and Fabian had no idea what was on the other side. It could be the sky, for all he knew; more likely it was the underside of another miserable departamento.

That struck him as depressingly funny, and he snorted. He rang his ring of office on the brass rail.

‘All will be fine,’ he reassured himself. He pushed himself away, and headed back down to his quarters. ‘All will be fine.’

He was sure all would be fine right until he pushed open the door.

There, things were far from fine.

There were papers all over the floor of the anteroom. Resilisu’s bedding

had been pulled out of its hiding place and shredded. His eyes followed the trail of destruction through the open inner door into his office, finding a booted foot there, and following it up a leg, to the man who owned it.

The man was sitting on his desk, braced on the ground by one foot, the ankle of his other leg crossed to rest on the thigh. Fabian tensed. This was it then, they had come for him, but that didn't seem to matter. What infuriated him was that his papers were in disarray, scattered all over the carpet, his bookshelves ransacked. He was so incensed, he only saw what the man was reading a moment later. When he did his bowels turned to water.

The man wore a uniform he didn't recognise. It was military in cut, with simple trousers and a well-fitted tunic, but his insignia said he was part of the Adeptus Administratum, though his departmento badges were obscure. In general, the man had a military air. His hair was well cut, his face shaved smooth. He was young too, Fabian thought. The man smiled at him, and snapped the book shut with a dull thump as damning and final as the slamming of a dungeon door.

'You could get into a great deal of trouble for writing this,' he said, holding out Fabian's personal journal.

'Who are you?' Fabian said.

The man shook his head. 'A bit of defiance isn't going to do you any good. Do you know what? I'm going to rephrase what I just said.'

He let his other boot thump onto the floor and stood up. He was well muscled under his uniform, and had a black laspistol holstered at his hip.

'You *are* in a great deal of trouble.'

After that, events proceeded in a blur. More men came, carrying guns and wearing armour. Fabian sat helplessly on his desk while they tore through his things.

'Who are you?' he asked as his office was thoroughly upended.

'Jermaine Gunthe,' said the young man, as he smashed in panelling and had his minions rip out the cabling and pipes behind.

'You won't find anything in there,' said Fabian. 'It was all in there. You've got everything.' He raised his hand to point at his secret compartment. A warrior took his hand and forced it down so he could cuff his wrists.

'You can't be too careful in these matters.' Jermaine looked up from the dark spaces. 'Or any matter.' He pushed his hair from his eyes, and directed

an armed goon to smash in another panel with his lasgun butt.

‘I confess!’

‘It won’t do you any good,’ Gunthe said cheerfully.

‘Then tell me what departmento you are with!’

‘I’m not, I’m a logister,’ Gunthe said, though in that exact moment he seemed to be nothing other than an enthusiastic thug. ‘Our departmento is a new one, formed by the primarch himself to oversee the formation and supply of his crusade fleets, the Officio Logisticarum.’ He gave a little bow.

‘But you look like military.’

‘You’re not a stupid man,’ said Gunthe. He tapped his collar pins. ‘We wouldn’t be here if you were stupid.’

‘You look like the Astra Militarum,’ said Fabian.

‘You’re still being stupid.’ Gunthe pointed away from the desk.

Fabian stood up. Gunthe waved him to the side.

‘Thanks,’ said Gunthe, then heaved Fabian’s desk over with a massive crash. ‘We have to be thorough here.’ Gunthe beckoned over a couple of men. ‘We’re leaving. Get some of the locals to come in here and clean up. Make sure they see the mess.’

Fabian looked down at his life’s work. ‘You’re not even going to search it?’

‘Not the point. You’re coming with me. Anything in here you want to keep? You’re not coming back.’

‘What?’

Gunthe rolled his eyes and sighed. ‘Right. I appreciate you are undergoing a profound amount of shock right now, but it wasn’t a difficult question. Is there anything you want to keep?’ he repeated slowly.

‘Aren’t I going to be punished?’

‘My friend, if you think what’s lined up for you isn’t punishment, then the file notes on your intelligence level are woefully in error.’ He grabbed Fabian under the arm. ‘Last chance. Anything?’

‘Where’s Resilisu? Bring him to me! I’ll take him.’

Gunthe frowned. ‘That old fossil of a servant?’

‘His family has been in my family for forty-six generations. What would he do without me?’

‘I don’t know, a little dance that he doesn’t have to put up with such asinine questions?’

‘Please.’

‘Fine, fine, we’ll find him. You can keep him. Men!’ he called. ‘We return to the upper palace.’ He said this with an ostentatious flourish of his free hand. ‘Bring the books.’

The crashing and breaking stopped. Gunthe’s squad lined up behind their leader.

‘Are you a man who enjoys his work?’ said Fabian acidly.

Gunthe shrugged. ‘Come on.’ He gripped Fabian’s arm more tightly and propelled him out of the door. ‘We’ve people to frighten with the parading of the wicked heretic. That’s you,’ he whispered. ‘My Emperor, you are in bother,’ he said.

Fabian was taken out through the main entrance to the gallery, which more officials of the Logisticarum barred to his clansmen. They clustered outside, their shrill gossiping coming to a sudden silence when Fabian appeared. The adepts were cowards to a man and drew back as swiftly when Gunthe pushed Fabian through them. Fearful whispers were exchanged behind raised hands.

‘They’re going to be very productive for the next few months,’ said Gunthe, as they pushed past and out into the Whispering Walk, the way that cut between Fabian’s atrium and another, identical facility half a mile away. ‘They don’t seem to like you. What did you do to them?’

‘I made a bit of a show of myself at dinner time,’ Fabian said.

‘Really?’ Gunthe’s eyes widened in a way that Fabian found hard to read. The logister was either genuinely surprised, or mocking him deeply. He thought he could guess which.

‘You’re mocking me.’

‘All hurt are we, heretic?’ said Gunthe.

They came out into a parking area for official grounders. The departmento had two dozen spaces, but only a single battered official vehicle to fill them. Next to the departmento’s last vehicle, as if there weren’t twenty-two other spaces it could have occupied, was a large, jet-black armoured personnel carrier. Fabian was bundled through the side doors into an interior drenched ruby-red by dim lumens.

‘Now,’ said Gunthe, sitting down next to Fabian. The troopers, or logisters, whatever they were, settled in around them on the benches running down either side of the compartment. ‘Have you never heard the

expression, scribe, that no matter who you are, you will not be missed? You are an intelligent enough man to see that statement has two meanings. You are about to discover the truth of them both. Goodnight!’

‘Goodnight?’ said Fabian.

Gunthe stuck a needle in his neck. ‘I’m sure that file of yours is way off,’ he said.

Fabian opened his mouth to protest, but only a soft moan escaped, and he fell deep into drugged sleep.

Fabian came awake with the last thing he had on his mind on the tip of his tongue, whence it leapt without prompting.

It was very rude and biological.

A man who was not Jermaine Gunthe responded. ‘You are awake, then.’

When Fabian saw who had spoken the strength fled his body. A squirming terror wrapped itself savagely about his bladder and bowels and squeezed.

‘Forgive me, my lord,’ he gasped.

Lord Roboute Guilliman, the Lord Commander of the Imperium of Man, the Imperial Regent, the returned primarch of the Ultramarines, the Patrician, the Avenging Son, the living breathing offspring of the God-Emperor Himself looked at Fabian with a neutral expression for an eternal second.

‘I’ve been called worse,’ he said. ‘Now, take a moment. Breathe. The drug Jermaine used on you is rapid acting, and will wear off quickly. Wait to speak until its influence is gone, then we may discourse as civilised men.’

‘Man’ was too small a word for the primarch. The galaxy was too small a place for him. Guilliman would have been big without his armour on. As he was, garbed for battle, he was the size of a tank. Various components of his war suit rested on a stand behind him. The huge gauntlet with its underslung weapons, the ammo hoppers and feeds, the outer plates of his pauldrons, and the great golden eagle with its halo that sat over his backpack had all been removed, but he retained the rest, though he stood at a gargantuan desk. Fabian imagined him part disarming, before remembering he had no time, and setting himself to work. His enormous sword – *the Emperor’s sword*, Fabian reminded himself with a fresh spurt of fear – hung sheathed from hooks on the wall. In its place, Guilliman had taken up a pen.

‘Take your time,’ Guilliman said, and returned to the pile of documents in front of him.

Fabian looked around dazedly. The room was enormous, everything in it except the chair Fabian sat in made for a giant’s stature. The ceilings were high and painted with battle scenes. The walls were black stone, decorated with flowing details, pilasters, garlands of leaves, angels and all manner of things picked out in gold, and polished to a high lustre.

It was also empty of anything but data. There was Fabian, and his chair, and Guilliman. Then the desk between them. If that had been the sum of it, the picture would have been one of high Imperial majesty.

Yet into this perfect place disarray had come. Shelves stood in ranks like soldiers at attention, dipping under the weight of their contents. Then there were the stacks of books and dataslates piled up on the desk, and more scattered across the floor. The primarch didn’t look like he belonged there. He looked like a mocking art installation, a model demigod placed amid heaps of trash.

It could not be real, thought Fabian. It was a drug-, machine- or witch-induced fantasy. Maybe he was being interrogated, or tested. He lifted his hands. They were unchained. They looked real enough. He poked himself. Guilliman continued to work, consulting multiple active slates and reading scrolls and books at the same time. Very occasionally, his pen moved, but it made no sound on the activeglass of his slate. Fabian felt pleased to notice that. He was so stupefied by what was happening, he was seeing the ordinary and thinking it remarkable.

He was in danger of losing his mind.

He half rose, then thought better of it.

He cleared his throat. ‘My lord?’ his voice was an embarrassing warble.

Guilliman looked at him. His death wound was visible, a rope-thick scar that protruded from beneath his neck seal.

‘You are ready?’

‘I think so,’ said Fabian.

‘Then listen,’ said Guilliman. He put down his pen. ‘When we are done, you will be taken from here and given refreshments. I apologise if you are hungry or thirsty now, but time is of the essence. I am sorry I do not have much time for you at this moment, the demands of the crusade are great, but please understand that everything I am going to say, and what I am going to

ask of you, is very important to me. Consider this fact above all others before giving me any sort of response. Do you understand?’

Fabian’s tongue refused to move, so he nodded.

Guilliman took in a deep breath. In the recesses of his armour were many small lights. Some of these burned more brightly when he breathed in. Others pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

‘I have been dead for over nine thousand years,’ said Roboute Guilliman. ‘The galaxy has changed, and I do not like what I see. The Emperor had a dream, Adept Guelphrain, and it died when I did.’

Fabian’s head was spinning. Guilliman was the son of god. Fabian was sitting in the same room as the son of god! The realisation pummelled him. The primarch’s presence was overwhelming. Guilliman looked like a man but he wasn’t a man. He could never be a man. He wore the shape of a man, but he was a sun, a tempest, the universe clad in flesh. Fabian made himself listen, to try to understand, when all he wanted to do was throw himself onto his knees and beg for mercy.

‘After Horus’ defeat, and the Emperor’s installation upon the Golden Throne,’ Guilliman continued, ‘I tried my best to enact measures to ensure the Imperium would not deteriorate further. Though I believed the Emperor’s ambitions could never be fully achieved, now He was no longer with us, I thought we could save what we had. It is difficult to follow a plan you only half know. He never told any of us the extent of it, anyway. From eighteen successful sons, He told not a single one all of it.’

Fabian could hold Guilliman’s gaze for about half a second, but he kept looking up, increasing the amount of time by tiny increments. He had the strange feeling the primarch was challenging him. Eighteen sons? There were nine holy primarchs, nine! He wanted to yell, then laugh. He held his teeth closed. His head spun.

‘I have much to do, but I will win this war, and when I have done so, things are going to change. We can no longer go on as we have. The past decays, no matter how hard you work to preserve it. It is time for the Imperium to look forward again.’ Guilliman paused. ‘I am going to ask you to help me. Much has been lost. Records are frustratingly incomplete. In many cases they are fabricated or deliberately suppressed. During the time the Emperor walked with us, most of human history was uncovered. This has been forgotten again, yet another lacuna in the sum of human

knowledge that I must refill. I am establishing a small cadre of individuals to do this, to document the coming crusade, and to piece together what happened, as truthfully as is humanly possible, while I sat powerless on Macragge.'

Guilliman's voice was strong and pure, though a slight catch suggested his wound had cut into his larynx. Far from ruining his voice, this imperfection only highlighted how perfect it was. It was deep, resonant, the kind of voice that made one listen. Neither strident nor loud, and carefully used. The primarch paused to make sure Fabian understood, though not so frequently as to make him feel patronised, and left openings so the adept might ask questions should he need to. Despite his gentle manners, listening to Guilliman was akin to Fabian sticking his head into a ringing bell. The words reverberated around his head, shook his guts. Guilliman might have spoken measuredly, his voice might have been perfect, but it was also pitiless, the march of a million soldiers into the undefended hinterlands of Fabian's mind.

Fabian had never truly thought about his soul before, but he could feel it now, shivering inside him. He blanched, fighting back nausea.

'I read these books from the past ten millennia,' the primarch said, waving his hand over the desk, 'and I cannot trust them. I must know what happened, why, and when, so that when I formulate a new system of government it will perform correctly.' He looked at Fabian seriously. Fabian's entire body shook with the effort of holding his gaze. 'I have failed in many of the tasks the Emperor set me. The state of the Imperial governance is the most egregious of those failures. We must put this right.'

Fabian goggled. 'Me?' he tried to say, but he couldn't. He could barely blink. He was as helpless as prey before a serpent. Guilliman's voice thundered in his mind louder than the drums of war, compelling him to agree, compelling him to obey.

This couldn't be real, his mind screamed.

Guilliman made a small gesture.

'There will be four of you, to begin with. When I have the time, I will confer with you. I will instruct you in the methods and techniques you are to use.' He rested his giant armoured hand on a thick book. 'After a period of three months acclimatisation, you will each be given others to train. This is only the beginning. Do not fail me.' He paused. 'Now, if you have any

questions, ask them.’

Fabian swallowed. The cessation of the primarch’s voice was a blessed relief. Guilliman waited.

‘Nothing?’ he said, in a way that suggested he knew Fabian wanted to speak, but couldn’t.

‘You’re not going to ask me if I want to do it?’ he panted.

Guilliman raised an eyebrow.

‘That is not the first question I would ask were I in your position,’ the primarch said. ‘Do you think you can refuse?’

‘What if I did?’ The thought of being in thrall to that voice was terrifying.

‘You would go back to where you came from. I believe you have been accused of a number of crimes according to the *lex minoris* statutes applicable to your office.’ He made a show of flipping over a plastek flimsy. ‘Seven, in fact. You were quite clever but careless, and you offended your colleagues.’ He let the flimsy drop. ‘This is why you were caught. You will be sent back to face justice if you refuse.’

‘Then I accept,’ Fabian said feebly.

‘Then is there anything else I can answer for you? Jermaine will give you details of your duties and show you to your new quarters.’

‘Why me?’

‘That is the question I expected you to ask,’ said Guilliman. ‘Your histories show talent for this kind of work. You have an enquiring mind. You are curious. These qualities are extremely rare.’

‘But there are trillions of people in the Imperium, maybe more,’ said Fabian. ‘I... I don’t know how many humans there are in the galaxy, but there are a lot,’ he said, cringing inwardly at how stupid he sounded. ‘You could have asked any of them.’

‘Call it providence. Call it the will of the Emperor, but I saw you, on the day of the Battle of the Lion’s Gate.’

‘You remember that?’

‘Among my many gifts is perfect recall,’ said Guilliman levelly. ‘I am a primarch. I remember everything.’

‘Ah,’ said Fabian. ‘Because you saw me? That’s why?’ He was surprised.

‘Not entirely. A few weeks later, your file was passed to me when I began my search for my first historitors. In your journals you called yourself a historian. You showed some raw talent. That you assembled what you did

from the sources you had impressed me. So many volumes produced in such little time to such a high standard. You show an ability for fast, competent work. A little over-adorned for my tastes, but well written.'

'You read my books?'

'Nothing goes unnoticed,' said the primarch. 'I am no believer in serendipity, Fabian, but sometimes it appears that fate emerges to make our lives a little easier. Yes, I could have chosen any one of billions. Even now, in this dark Imperium time has carved from the bones of the Emperor's ambitions, there are free thinkers and radicals who dare to question, and many of them have more talent than you. But you are here, and they are not. That is why.'

Fabian stood there with his mouth open. He had to gasp a couple of times before he could speak. His lungs felt too shallow to provide him with adequate air.

'"Because"? That's your answer?' said Fabian. Disbelief undermined his fear.

The primarch frowned. 'I see you are as unbound by convention as your files suggest. You address a primarch in a tone of incredulousness,' he said sternly. 'This trait is beneficial, some of the time, as I have little use for servile behaviour, and would prefer a certain directness from those who report to me. However, I suggest you learn quickly the occasions when it is not beneficial.' He gave a meaningful stare that nearly floored Fabian. 'That is all we have time for. I am, as you will understand, exceedingly occupied.'

The doors opened. Jermaine Gunthe waited in the opening. Two immense Space Marines in ornately decorated armour stood at attention either side.

'We will speak again,' said Guilliman.

Fabian gathered his wits.

'Thank you, lord,' he said, and bowed, and backed away.

'It seems you are a fast learner,' said Guilliman, already absorbed by his multiple information sources. 'That is also good.' He said no more.

Fabian staggered out.

Gunthe took his arm gently, and helped him walk. 'It does get easier,' he whispered, close to his ear.

Fabian could only nod.

Chapter Ten

IN THE EMPEROR'S SERVICE

RIGHTFUL REST

A SIGN FROM THE THRONE

The dormitory was hot and close, so many tired bodies lying in ranks of bunkbeds four high, their exhausted exhalations filling the enclosed space with levels of carbon dioxide the wheezing air purifiers struggled to deal with.

It was hard for Nawra Nison to stay awake while she waited for everyone else to slumber. They were exhausted after their work. Rest periods were short. None of them were ever completely fresh. Finally, when she thought she would pass out, the last of her dorm-mates fell asleep, their breath evening out from work time's anxious rasp to a gentler rhythm.

She waited a couple of moments to be sure, before reaching under her pillow for her idol. Her fingers closed around bone, and she pulled it out. She held it so close to her face that her breath warmed it. Looking at it before she began her prayers always helped, somehow. The note left with it on her chair that first day told her the bone had come from the leg of the first person to sit in her cubicle, but she didn't believe that. Regardless, it was very old; the carving of the small figure sitting on a blocky throne had been rubbed smooth by generations of owners. It wasn't well made. The arms of the throne were lopsided, and the head of the Emperor was too big, the lines of His halo crooked, but in its own way it was beautiful,

delightfully silky to the touch, the lines stained a warm brown that contrasted with yellow polished smooth by generations of hands.

She gripped it in both hands and pushed it hard against her forehead.

‘God-Emperor,’ she whispered. ‘You know all things, and you know what I wish to ask. Please guide me now in my moment of need. If only once in my life you can spare your attention for me, away from the suffering many who are unlucky not to live upon Holy Terra, away from the terrible wars your brave warriors fight, away from the scourging of the heretic, the mutant and the alien. I am nothing, I am beneath the notice of even my blockmates, but I have your sign, and I ask most fervently that you direct me now, so that I might better serve your holy Imperium.’

She feared she was being blasphemous, for she was asking permission to break the Emperor’s laws. Was that not an affront to the Emperor? Was that not the antithesis of service? But she’d been thinking about the missive for the last three days, and couldn’t get it out of her mind.

A displeased moan came from the bunk opposite hers. There was only a gap of a few feet between the bed stacks, hardly enough to walk down. A woman called Shaisha slept an arm’s reach from her.

‘Shut up, Nison!’ groaned Shaisha. ‘You’re keeping me awake.’

‘Your snoring keeps me awake every night!’ snapped Nawra, surprising herself. ‘I am praying.’

‘I’m praying for sleep – shut up!’ Shaisha said, and rolled over.

Nawra waited until Shaisha’s breathing slowed again before continuing, though now she whispered more quietly.

‘Do I act upon this or not? Do I try to get someone to listen?’ She took a deep breath. ‘I am sorry. I am not worthy. Guide me now, please. Tell me what you want me to do.’

Nawra screwed up her eyes, waiting for divine inspiration to strike her. She didn’t know what to expect. She felt ashamed to be asking the Emperor directly like this. The tarot had been good to her. Shriver Leonard told them that the Emperor was concerned with so many things, He could not watch everyone, though he assured them He loved them all, as He loved all pure, proper members of the human race.

She clutched the little effigy so tightly her fingers went numb, and screwed up her eyes until stars burst across her vision.

Nothing happened.

Abashed, she fell asleep.

She awoke a couple of hours later, according to the glowing segment clock on the wall. A centile division winked out as the end of the day's first millennial neared. She wiped drool from her mouth, and rolled over, but there was a brighter light in her eyes than the clock's, and she rubbed at them until she could see.

The dormitory was never dark – blue lumens cast a twilight gloom over the place, and there was the clock's eerie green face – but now a blade of hard light poked at her. She raised her hand against it, and saw that the door to the dormitory was ajar. That never happened. They were locked in at lights out, and only let out before workshift to break their fast and perform morning prayers, but the rooms were checked three times a night by the scribum-watchers. Perhaps one of them had left the door open?

Or maybe – her heart hammered in her chest, bringing her instantly awake – maybe it was a sign.

The missive was under her bedsheet. She hadn't a clue what she would do with it, or why she had brought it back. If she was caught with it outside her cubicle, she would suffer.

'The Emperor works through His people,' Shriver Leonard told her lovingly while he laid the stick across her back. 'He is the arbiter of all. I am His instrument. This gives me no pleasure.'

That was a vile lie. But now, but now...

If she went, she would never be able to return. They might kill her. Her only hope was to get the missive to a higher level, get far enough away to claim her rights as a scribum-errant guided by His divine will. They would try to stop her getting out, but success would be proof enough that her cause was true.

The light in the corridor beckoned, so bright, so enticing.

She grabbed the sheet and took her sack of clothes from its peg.

'For the Emperor,' she whispered to herself.

Her feet made no noise on the floor as she padded out, and nobody woke up to see her go.

Nawra left the dormitory and fled into little-used, unlit ways. Her free time was practically non-existent, but for a while, what little she had, she had spent wandering, sometimes into places she should not go. Too many of her expeditions had ended with the application of the shriver's stick, and she

had stopped months ago, but not before she had a good knowledge of the ways around the cubicularium. Her world was circumscribed, but she knew more of it than most, enough to head confidently away to the edge of her scribe-clan's territory.

There was only one person Nawra could think of that might be able to help her, and even he might turn her in. Anyone would turn her in. She had to get out of her section before she could claim a scribum-errant's rights. What she was doing was unthinkable for most of her peers. She had little idea why she was doing it herself. An urge rose up in her heart and pushed her on. She was following some other Nawra to her destruction, but she couldn't stop herself, and she didn't want to.

Away from the cubicularium, the scribe-clan's spire was empty. Dark doorways yawned, the halls behind abandoned. Draughts whistling over unseen obstructions suggested huge spaces, but no life was in them.- Everything was covered in a patina of grime. Fewer lumens were working than she remembered. It surprised her they had not been replaced. She supposed that the Imperium was an eternal thing, dirt and all, but the failure of the lights in her lifetime made her think. If something had changed for the worse recently, maybe it was part of a longer decline. Maybe this had all been clean once. Everything she owned had been someone else's. Everywhere she went had hosted hundreds of generations before her own. Newness was an alien concept, but her mind stirred. What if, she wondered, the halls of her clan had once been full of light, and all the machines had worked all of the time?

It was impossible to imagine. She walked corridors whose floors were thick with dust, and whose air was stale. Surely, they had always been that way, the way the Emperor had made them.

In no time at all she reached the limit of her earlier explorations. A corridor with an odd kink in it marked the furthest she had ever dared go from her workplace. The wall plating was buckled there, pushed in by machines shifted from their mountings by a hive quake. The edges of the tear, though ragged, were as dirty as the rest of the wall, black and sticky with thousands of years of accreted filth.

She'd never dared go past that rupture before. She halted in front of it, her small hands clenching and unclenching.

She touched the missive tucked into her belt.

Taking a deep breath, she left her life behind.

Nawra was forced to rejoin the main thoroughfare linking her people's territory to the next. She had followed this road only once before, going the other way, when she had been bartered from her parents' clan into the Departamento Processium Quinta. That day had been momentous and she had never forgotten it.

There was a bridge between the Processium Quinta Spire and the Tower of Archivists, carried on a high arch over a chasm hundreds of feet deep. There were crowds of people using the way, many of them low-cast scribums like herself, so she did not stand out. She kept her head down and walked as quickly as she dared without drawing attention to herself. A hot wind rose from beneath the bridge, making the robes of the travellers flap. Though the deeps were hidden to view, above her she could see a sky of metal plates and clusters of pipes. Dishevelled birds flew between high eyries. Both buildings looked the same. She did not know the difference between a tower and a spire. There didn't seem to be one. They were metal cliffs facing each other across a chasm.

Being in such an open space made her dizzy, and she was glad to cross. On the far side she joined crowds of people. They were noisy, chattering freely. The archivists of the tower were renowned for their ill tempers – she'd been on the receiving end of their invective often enough when making a request, and she was not surprised to find every conversation heated – but then the flow of people got slower, and the crowds thicker. Grumbling escalated to shouting, shouting into violence. She found herself shoved in every direction, crushed between jostling shoulders, until the crowd bounced her through itself, and she emerged at the front.

She collided with a man in such dazzling robes that she almost screamed. He was carrying something long in his hands, and it took her a moment to recognise it as a gun; another thing she had never seen, only read of in the endless missives she categorised. She was pushed back by an archivist wearing the black sash of the literati enforcers, and caught by the crowd's many arms.

The road was blocked by a barricade of linked rockcrete sections. There was a single gap in the middle through which people were passing one at a time. The man in the dazzling clothes was a soldier, she saw, one of two at

the barrier. One stood at the gap, his gun ready, guarding a mid-level acolyte as he checked documents. The second, the one she'd bounced off, was walking up and down, keeping a thin corridor of clear space between the literati enforcers and the crowd. There was a lot of shouting. The weight of people behind was shoving the crowd forward, fractions of an inch at a time. She could not go back, and without permit papers she could not go forward.

She turned round, her body rolling over the solid wall of people behind her, looking for another way. An archivist and an enforcer were having a lively row right by her ear, dazing her. There was a tall arch a few yards back, through which another stream of people passed. She turned sideways, her skinny body finally allowing her to slip back through the press to the passageway. She looked back, unsure whether to take this other route, and saw the soldier raise his gun and fire a flash of blue light which made a crack like a failing lumen bulb.

'Back! Back!' he shouted. The crowd heaved. The complaints increased. An ugly atmosphere took hold. Nawra pushed her way onto the narrower road.

She really had no idea where she was going.

Behind her there was more gunfire, and people screamed.

Chapter Eleven

A HOPELESS SITUATION CRUSADE OF SLAUGHTER INQUISITOR ROSTOV

The heavens of Fomor III burned with unnatural fire. A poisonous slash cut across sky and sun alike, weeping purples, blues, oranges, pinks and colours that had no human name. The wound defied reality, being dark at the height of day, and the filth it poured ran down the sky like paint dribbled on glass, robbing the heavens of their true dimensions and making them seem flat and unreal.

Against this tortured backdrop a mighty void battle raged. The Crusade of Slaughter had ravaged the entire Machorta Sector, pushing the Imperium back south of the Corrayvreden, and now the Emperor's armies were ceding ground. The broken remnants of Imperial forces were gathered at Fomor III for evacuation. Scenting victory, the lords of Chaos committed more troops from elsewhere in the conflict zone, and the loyalist fleets concentrated there were coming under heavy attack from a growing heretic presence. Capital ships manoeuvred in low orbit, raking each other with salvos of energy cannon. Failing void shields ripped at the upper atmosphere, adding uncanny booms to the tumult of weapons fire. The war carried on in layers up into the sky that seemed to pass into infinity, stack after stack of ships eviscerating each other above the world.

Shells and rockets fired by both sides from orbit powered down on the tips

of white contrails, bombarding positions on the ground. Chunks of debris were more indiscriminate in their destruction. Blasted from the flanks of warships, they fell in fiery rain all over the dying planet, devastating whatever they hit. Columns of laser light flicked up from the few remaining defence silos, bracketing the horizons in a brilliant cage. Attack craft screamed overhead, trying their best to keep the orbital extraction corridors free of the enemy. Explosions flashed around darting shapes as they duelled with enemy fighters and wailing, bestial engines.

Into the middle of this storm the evacuation craft flew. Ships of all kinds had been pressed into service to effect the getaway: fat landers, shuttlecraft, dedicated troop transports, gunships, minor lighters, diplomatic barques and supply conveyors lumbered up and down, carrying the Imperial forces away. Planetary to orbital flight was slow and laborious, and the ships passed from one maelstrom to another whichever way they were going, for the fight on the ground was as fierce as it was in the sky. The difficulties of scaling and descending the gravity well made each vessel vulnerable on approach and departure, and with every trip a handful were speared by laser beam or missile, and crashed down onto those they would save.

Time was running out for Lieutenant Lacrante and his men. Imperial rearguard actions held the enemy back from the evacuation site, desperate battles fought by doomed men, their lives callously spent so that others might get off-world to fight again. The full ground forces of the enemy were yet to commit themselves to attacking the extraction zone, too busy mopping up stragglers and annihilating isolated army groups. When they did, the evacuation would be over. The certainty of that hung like an anvil around Lacrante's neck. His platoon still had far to go.

They hugged the ridge of a long, low hill, hoping they would not be seen as they raced for salvation. The hillside had been churned into chaotic hillocks by persistent bombardment. A few days before, the landscape had been one of open fields sweeping down to the bottom of a shallow valley. Rolling plains whose gentle patterns repeated for hundreds of miles of well-ordered agricolae tended by servitor-machines. Of that, only a broken mudscape remained.

Their boots broke vitrified soil crust and splashed in mingled puddles of blood and water, as they skulked along a trough carved by a starship lance. At the bottom of the scar they were unseen and unnoticed, hidden in a crack

in the world.

Lacrante was beginning to think they might make it, at least as far as the zone. Getting onto a ship would be another matter. They were late. But one thing at a time, as his old pa used to say.

‘We’ve five more miles, that’s all,’ Lacrante said for his own benefit as much as his men’s. ‘Five more miles, and we live.’

He tried to ignore the storm of fire around the landers. Get to the zone, get on a ship, get up into the air. So many barriers to continued life. Once in the void, they would have to pray that their ship would not be destroyed, then that they would make it into the warp, and on and on. Death waited for them at every stage, however far they got. Lacrante focused on the next second. One foot in front of another, through the mud and noise. A man will endure all manner of pain and terror for a few more breaths. They kept low, cursing quietly when their boots slipped out from under them.

The period of grace did not last. They never did, not in war. There was never any more than a few seconds of peace. Lacrante heard the chanting before his men did, and held up a hand. The two dozen troopers left in his command came to a weary halt.

‘Listen!’ he hissed.

‘Khorne! Khorne! Khorne! Khorne!’ A chant so harsh it was almost mechanical, carried on the wind like distant waves.

‘Khorne! Khorne! Khorne!’

The snap-crackle of weapons fire followed, then the screams of the dying.

Lacrante looked back into eleven filthy faces. His men were drawn from half a dozen worlds, and were of all different kinds, but he could not tell who was who under the mud coating them. They had the same fear in their eyes, and the same trust that he would save them.

The screaming came from the south, just over the ridge. The evacuation zone was to the east. He could leave it.

He hesitated. Despite the guns and the maniacal chanting of the heretics, it seemed to have become very quiet.

He couldn’t leave it. He never could. He had to see. He might be able to help.

‘You, Pelson, with me,’ he said, picking a soldier who shared his sense of duty. ‘The rest of you wait here.’

Lacrante and Pelson clambered on their elbows and knees up the slope of

mud. Soft and blocky chunks alternately caught their limbs then disintegrated under their bellies, making them slip back. The stink of rotting meat rose from the ground. Most of the planet's people were dead. Being churned into the earth of their home was the best burial, and the cleanest death, any of them could hope for.

When they reached the top of the ridge, the chanting hit them with renewed volume.

'Khorne! Khorne! Khorne!'

Khorne was a name Lacrante had not heard six months ago. He had arrived at Fomor III ahead of the attack, when the world was pure and clean, and free of war. The things he'd seen since then...

Strength leaked out of him. His eyes unfocused. His mind drifted into relived atrocity.

He shook himself out of it. Now was not the time.

About half a mile away, at the bottom of the ruptured slope, a column of civilians were moving along the remains of the main Heath to Drenden highway, towns that were now heaps of smoking rubble. They must have heard about the military evacuation, and were making a last effort to stay alive, just like him.

The enemy had found the refugees. It didn't matter to the heretics who they killed. Soldier or civilian, all blood was the same to them.

'Khorne! Khorne! Khorne!' the slaughter cult chanted as they slew.

There was nothing Lacrante could do. Too many. Too far away. They'd be cut down in minutes.

'Emperor damn them all.' Lacrante turned onto his back and slid away from the top of the ridge. He couldn't see the horrible colours of the wounded sky from there, only blue. Contrails weaved smoky patterns. A pair of cruisers were exchanging fire above them, pale shapes in the day, far, far above. It looked almost peaceful, a war of clouds.

'Sir,' said Pelson. He had not stopped looking. Lacrante turned his head and patted the man's shoulder.

'We can't do anything. Six of those debased Space Marines are with the turncoats. They'll kill us all.'

Pelson shook his head. His eyes were hollow. 'I'm sick of this. I can't bear it. We have to help them.'

'We'll die,' said Lacrante. 'Even if we save them, they won't take them on

the ships. This is a military withdrawal, not a civilian evacuation. They'll be turned away. At least this way, they will die quickly.'

'Khorne! Khorne! Khorne! Khorne!'

The snap of lasguns was joined by the brutal, stomach-churning bark of boltguns and the snarl of chain weapons. The screaming was getting closer. The enemy were driving some of them up the slope towards Lacrante's position.

'Sir...'

'We can't,' said Lacrante.

He tried to be gentle with Pelson. The man didn't listen, but slowly got to his feet.

'I have had enough,' Pelson said through gritted teeth. 'They're being slaughtered. What good are we, the shield of the Imperium, if we hide on our bellies in the mud?'

'Throne's light! Get down. Pelson, they'll see you!' Lacrante rolled over onto his front, grabbed Pelson's ankle, and tugged. Pelson fell down.

Lacrante was too late. A group of civilians had got away from the main group and were pointing up at Lacrante's position. Sensing salvation, they broke into a desperate run over the churned earth. If only they had not seen, perhaps the platoon would have got away, but the refugees drew the attention of a massive figure in baroque brass armour caked in blood. His helm rose up in two broad, flat horns. Hair plumes swung under them as his head turned in Lacrante's direction. Lacrante pushed himself back down the slope, but the warrior looked right at him, and he knew he had been spotted.

'You've killed us all!' he spat at Pelson.

'We're dead already,' Pelson said, and slowly got back to his feet.

Lacrante slipped back down the earth bank.

'Run!' he shouted to his men. 'Run, all of you!'

They looked up in fright. Pelson was taking aim with his gun, but slowly, moving dreamily.

'Get out of here!' Lacrante shouted, slapping them into action.

They skidded about in the mud of the broken land as they fled. Pelson stood alone on the brink of the ridge, gun stock pressed into his shoulder. Lacrante was looking right at him when a mass reactive round took him in the stomach and blew him apart.

'Move! Move!' he screamed. A cold part of him calculated how near the

Heretic Astartes must be to have hit Pelson with a single pistol shot like that.

They weren't going to make it.

The lance track had been eroded by the violent storms that had been sweeping the planet since the war began, and a gulley opened up to their left, leading up to the top of the hill. Thin, slippery mud gathered there, and they struggled up the steepening slope. Against all reason, Lacrante hoped that if they made the top they could get away down the other face of the hill.

The growl of power armour approaching behind them suggested otherwise. Lacrante knew what was coming for them and did not look back. One of his men did, and screamed at what he saw.

A terrifying vox-amplified battle cry smote their ears.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

One of Lacrante's men exploded. Shrapnel from the bolt-round and fragments of bone stung Lacrante's cheek, spurring him on like a whip.

Servos growled. The Space Marine's reactor pack hummed with the demands of hard use. A gauntlet stained rusty red plucked one of the men at Lacrante's side screaming into the air. The others were shouting, jostling in the narrow space of the rising gulley. He stopped. There was no way he was going to get out.

'Pelson was right.'

A sudden rage roared through Lacrante's body. He drew his laspistol. He felt ashamed.

'Stand, men! Stand! Do you want to die like men, or like cowards?'

Slowly, deliberately, he turned to face his death.

The Space Marine was a monster, eight feet tall, clad in armour decorated with screaming faces. He held Lacrante's struggling man over his head in both hands. The Space Marine's weapons swung, ignored, from the chains binding them to his wrists. He was straining, pulling hard. The trooper shrieked in agony. There was a tearing noise, the cracking of bone, and in a sudden rush of gore he came in two, dousing the Space Marine in blood and entrails.

The Heretic Astartes roared and tossed aside the halves of his victim.

'Skulls for the Skull Throne!'

Lacrante took aim. His hands shook from adrenaline and terror, but he was

so close he could not miss, and the beams hit true, vaporising chunks of ceramite. They did not penetrate the armour – a Space Marine kill-shot with a laspistol was a hundred thousand to one chance – but he kept on firing. The warrior spread his arms, leaned into the blasts and roared.

‘Fight, men! Fight! For the Emperor! You are going to die, die well!’ Lacrante shouted.

Two las-beams snapped over his head in response, both connecting near the Space Marine’s neck. His men were aiming for the more vulnerable seal there, away from the layers of plasteel and ceramite that protected the damned warrior. It was the only chance they had to fell him.

One shot slagged part of the Space Marine’s vox-grille. Another scored a black mark across his pauldrons, and yet the warrior stood, head erect, fists clenched, basking in the bursts of concentrated light.

Lacrante and his two men walked backwards, still firing. The rest of the platoon had scabbled up out of the gulley and were fleeing down the other side of the hill.

Lacrante’s weapon clicked dry, followed quickly after by those of his men.

The warrior’s armour was covered in las-burn scoring. One of his hair plumes was smouldering. He let his arms drop.

‘For the glory of honour in combat, I have given you your chance to best me, for I recognise your inferiority.’ Though his voice was a thick growl, he spoke calmly, at odds with his berserk manner. ‘You failed. Now you will die, and your blood shall water the plains of skulls at Khorne’s feet. Rejoice, for you go to a better master than the Emperor ever was!’

They opened fire again. This time, the Space Marine responded, swinging the bolt pistol by its chain, using it as a flail and smashing the skull of one of the two soldiers to fragments. Another swing brought his chainaxe back into his grasp. The warrior squeezed its activation trigger, and the chain blade spun. The second soldier shouted an incoherent battle cry and lunged at the Space Marine with his bayonet extended. The warrior laughed. The blade skidded off the breastplate, and the Space Marine smashed down with the butt of his axe, caving in the back of the soldier’s ribcage and laying his spine bare.

The warrior pointed at Lacrante.

‘Your turn. Fight well. Khorne is watching.’

If Lacrante still had his power sword, there was the smallest chance he

might have prevailed, but even had he not lost it the Space Marine would probably have beaten him. He was being toyed with. There was no doubt he was going to die.

‘Fight me,’ said the warrior. ‘For the glory of Khorne.’

Lacrante’s hands shook so hard he could barely take another power pack from his belt. It took him three tries to eject the spent pack and slot the fresh home. The warrior laughed, low and hard, but joyfully. He raised his chainaxe in salute before his face.

Lacrante aimed.

The Space Marine moved so fast Lacrante didn’t have time to squeeze the trigger. The axe came screaming for his head, but never connected. A plasma stream roared over his shoulder, catching the Space Marine full in the chest. Superheated gas vaporised his breastplate, scalding Lacrante’s face. The resulting explosion threw the heretic sideways, where he lay stunned for half a second. He grunted, and rose from the dirt. The edges of his melted plate glowed red, and smoke rose from the cooked flesh beneath. He growled, and reached out.

Two shots rang out in quick order. Bright flashes of light punched holes directly over each of the Space Marine’s hearts. He looked down at the mess his torso had become, fell to his knees, and toppled sideways into the mud.

Lacrante turned round to his saviours, and was appalled to see a squat, barrel-shaped creature with a flat head. It had large, moist eyes widely set in a vaguely fishlike face, and wore a brown cloak over armour of scratched black metal. In its hands it carried a slender rifle with a square profile.

Lacrante immediately raised his gun and fired. The las-bolt struck the being in the shoulder, burning a hole in its cloak.

‘Son of a...’ the creature said with a voice like broken rocks. ‘I saved your life, you ingrate!’

From beneath its cloak a second pair of arms emerged, each holding a pistol of wildly different design.

A man Lacrante hadn’t noticed before stood from a kneeling position and put a restraining hand on the creature’s arm. ‘Leave him be,’ he said.

He wore a patched Astra Militarum uniform of a regiment Lacrante didn’t know, and carried a sun gun, a deadly plasma weapon usually issued to specialist squads. It was a heavy weapon for a mortal man, and dangerous

to its operators too, but he held it casually while it spewed white gas from its cooling vents.

‘Don’t shoot the one that saved you,’ he shouted down to Lacrante. ‘Don’t they teach you anything in the Guard these days?’ He came down the short slope, and roughly checked over Lacrante, grabbing at his labels, rank badges and equipment. ‘Lieutenant, eh? This is your lucky day. Better give me that,’ he said, pulling Lacrante’s laspistol from his hand. ‘My name’s Antoniato, by the way. Nice to meet you.’ He winked. ‘My lord!’ he said into a vox-pip in the collar of his dirty uniform. ‘I’ve got one alive here. Shall we take him with us?’

At first, Lacrante thought the man was addressing the creature. He stared at it in open puzzlement.

‘What are you looking at?’ The thing’s mottled brown face wrinkled in annoyance. ‘Damn Terran ape!’ it said.

‘You can put your guns away, Cheelche,’ said the soldier.

Cheelche spun its pistols around and stuffed them into holsters under its robe. ‘Idiot burned a hole in my cloak. This is my favourite cloak.’

‘It’s your only cloak,’ said Antoniato.

‘It almost hit the box!’ it said, jabbing a thumb at the blocky pack it carried.

‘Thing’s millions of years old and practically invulnerable. A las-bolt won’t do it any harm.’ A beep sounded from his earpiece. Antoniato nodded. ‘On our way.’

‘That... that is your lord?’ said Lacrante nodding at the creature.

‘No!’ said Antoniato. He took Lacrante’s arm and pulled him up the slope. The sun gun was still radiating heat, and drew sweat from Lacrante’s face. They came level with Cheelche, who scowled at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lacrante. ‘I didn’t mean to shoot your mutant.’

‘Gods of pity!’ Cheelche said, shaking its head. It stomped off.

‘Cheelche isn’t a mutant. Xenos,’ said Antoniato with a chuckle. ‘Chikanti.’

Lacrante stared.

‘Never seen one, eh?’ said Antoniato.

‘But they’re... evil,’ said Lacrante feebly.

‘Screw you! Evil yourself,’ said Cheelche over its shoulder.

‘The galaxy’s a lot more complicated than you think,’ said Antoniato.

‘Know that Cheelche is on our side. One of the best.’

‘I shot him.’

Cheelche threw up its hands and moaned.

Lacrante looked at Antoniato.

‘You’re doing very well at this,’ said Antoniato. ‘Cheelche is female. I wouldn’t say anything else about her until you’ve found your mind again, or she might shoot you.’ He squeezed Lacrante’s bicep. ‘It’s not your fault. You’ve faced a Heretic Space Marine. You’re lucky to be alive. It’s not good for the soul, fighting something like that.’ He looked back at the smoking corpse. ‘Gather your thoughts.’ He slapped Lacrante’s shoulder.

They crested the hill. The last few men of Lacrante’s platoon had scattered, and he could see only one of them staggering down the churned-up slope, too far to call to, and heading in the wrong direction.

‘This is our lord,’ said Antoniato.

There was a man of around thirty years of age waiting for them, clad in close-fitting carapace armour. It looked like it was ordinarily highly polished silver, but now it was covered in mud like everything else on the plain. He wore a large rosary around his neck, and the small figure at the centre of the wooden beads was bright gold, as if freshly polished. He was young for someone who exuded such authority. His skin had a faint reddish cast to it Lacrante would have found odd if he hadn’t just met Cheelche. His blond hair was shaved around the sides of his head, with a close-cropped thicket left atop. A couple of augmetic lines ran up from the back of his neck, entering the skull above his left ear through a silver plug. There was a large Imperial ‘I’ tattooed on the skin beneath them, on the shaved portion of his scalp.

‘Lord inquisitor,’ said Antoniato. ‘There’s an ambush ongoing down on the highway. There are more enemy troops coming in. We’re not going to be able to get out that way.’

‘You, lieutenant, have you fought here for long?’ the man asked.

‘You’re an inquisitor?’ said Lacrante.

‘I am Rostov,’ he said blandly, ‘of the Ordo Xenos.’

Lacrante stared dumbly.

‘Do you know what that is?’ said Rostov.

‘Everybody knows about the Inquisition,’ said Lacrante.

‘Everybody knows the stories about the Inquisition,’ corrected Antoniato,

‘which are mostly grox dung. Answer his question.’

‘I have been here since before the invasion,’ said Lacrante. ‘Six months. I was part of the garrison here. First in, last to leave.’

‘Our ship is hidden two miles east from this point,’ said the inquisitor. His eyes were penetrating. Lacrante recognised the look; the man was a witch. ‘Is there any way of getting there undetected?’ Rostov pressed buttons set in his gauntlet. A cartolith of the plain opened in the air over his wrist, and he held it out to Lacrante.

Lacrante approached, and studied the map. The troop displacements on the display were hours out of date. He shook his head.

‘The enemy are closing in from all sides. You’re too late. My regiment...’

‘Which regiment?’ Rostov asked.

‘The Forty-Seventh Illusiti Pioneers,’ said Lacrante.

‘Go on,’ said the inquisitor.

‘We were moving through that quadrant as we fell back to the evacuation zone this morning, when we were attacked and scattered. It’s been in enemy hands since then. Lot of armour moving through, and thousands of turncoats.’

‘The Valkyrie’s signum transponder is still emitting,’ said Antoniato.

‘They will have found it. That the machine-spirit still calls is a trap,’ said Rostov. He looked towards the chaos around the evacuation zone. ‘There is only one way off-world now. We must be quick. The Navy will not hold position for much longer. Their position is becoming untenable.’

‘My men...’ said Lacrante. He couldn’t believe they’d vanished, after all they had been through.

‘They’re gone,’ said Rostov, and started to walk. Cheelche fell in with him, not bothered by the pack she carried, though it seemed heavy.

Antoniato grasped Lacrante’s shoulder.

‘Looks like you’re out of friends. You best come with us,’ he said.

Chapter Twelve

UNBREAKABLE SEAL

BOUND BY WAR

NOBLE SACRIFICE

The enemy were closing in on the zone by the time Rostov's party reached the cordon. Artillery fire rumbled in the distance, not yet close enough to directly shell the zone, but methodically obliterating the last columns fighting their way there. The air war was raging intensely only a few hundred feet above the plain, where swift Lightning fighters duelled with shrieking machines. Only in the void did the battle seem to be going the Imperium's way. The enemy could not yet get good firing angles from orbit, and the ships seemed more occupied with the Imperial Navy than the ground, yet occasional super-atmospheric fire nibbled at the edges of the zone, and it was creeping closer.

There were thousands of men and women in uniform waiting to pass the checkpoint through the defence line. A few civilians were mixed in with the troops and in general there appeared to be a lack of organisation. The dun uniforms of Lacrante's regiment mixed randomly with the brighter jackets of the Plovian Bombardiers, and the green-piped greatcoats of the Light Adriatic Fifth. There were too many of them trying to get through the cordon, spilling off the road and onto the muddy ground either side. The troops manning the line watched them warily.

Through a hellish racket of bombs and flashing energy weapons, booming

reports and the crackle of tortured air, Rostov pushed grimly on, following a road buckled under the weight of armoured vehicles. Lacrante fully expected to be left behind, but Antoniato herded him forward. He was no milk-livered recruit; Lacrante had distinguished himself in combat several times, but there was only so much a man could take. Days without sleep, the looming promise of defeat, the strange turn of events that had swept him up took their toll, and he was reduced to a stumbling shadow of himself.

A stray fusion beam slammed into the earth not five hundred feet away, slaying fifty men and sending a scalding blast of vaporised flesh and soil that cooked a hundred more where they stood. A cacophony of screams overcame the roar of the battle, sending quivers of panic through the mass. Soldiers jammed shoulder to shoulder staggered as they were shoved. Lacrante succumbed to the herd's fear, stumbled off the raised embankment of road into the muddy field at the side. He lost sight of Rostov, until Antoniato pushed weary men aside with the bulk of his plasma gun, came down, grabbed Lacrante's bicep and hauled him back up onto the crumbling rockcrete.

'Keep going,' he said quietly. 'If the enemy come now, this is going to be a massacre. We need to get off this planet, fast, because the enemy are not stupid, they can see we're pushed into the duelling cage bars. They just need to finish us. It'll happen soon, and when it does, it will happen quickly.'

A flight of fighters screeched overhead. A combination of fire from the voidships and Aeronautica craft kept the perimeter whole, but it was shrinking inwards with every moment.

'When the ships get through, they'll murder everyone,' said Antoniato quietly. 'Ground troops won't be far behind.'

'You've seen an evacuation like this before?' said Lacrante.

Antoniato shrugged. His troubled face told Lacrante everything he needed to know.

Rostov said nothing as he pushed through the crowds waiting to be evacuated, Cheelche at his side. The alien drew hostile looks from every man and woman present there. People recoiled from her, and fingered their rifles nervously, but none of them moved against the small party, for Inquisitor Rostov's presence safeguarded them all.

The inquisitor wore his insignia openly. This dissuaded attack, yet

Lacrante thought his presence alone would have kept them safe. His bearing was different to every other human being on the field. He was surrounded by an aura of authority that no one would dare to challenge. It could have been psychic in nature, Lacrante thought; whatever it was, you could tell he was a man of great power. Men turned round with snarls on their faces when they felt his hand in the small of their backs. The threat of violence was thicker than the smoke billowing off the burning plains, but all impulse to action died when they saw who wanted them to make way. Desperate men became meek at the sign of the inquisitorial skull and 'I' embossed on Rostov's breastplate. None could meet his eye. Some bowed, some turned away pale-faced, nearly all made the aquila and mouthed a snatch of prayer. A few of the braver ones shouted out for blessing from this holy servant of the Emperor, only for the words to die on their lips when Rostov looked at them, and so the party went by unmolested, all the while the guns fired, the skies thundered, and the enemy came closer to victory.

A steel pole held at waist height on metal crosses blocked the road where it went through the perimeter. Two Astra Militarum peacekeepers guarded it, processing every person as they came forward, although the real disincentive to pushing through was the unit of Militarum Tempestus Scions stood a little way back in a double firing line.

Rostov walked straight to the barrier. He held up a small, ivory seal into which was carved the mark of his order. A ruby was set into the forehead of the skull, and this flashed, painting a light image of the seal a foot high in the air before him.

'You will let me through,' Rostov said, 'and convey me with all due haste to your commanding officer.'

The peacekeeper manning the barrier nodded dumbly. He lifted the pole, and stepped aside. His comrade watched, holding a soldier's papers forgotten in his hand.

'What are you looking at, you stupid bastards?' Cheelche said.

'Hush,' said Rostov.

The peacekeeper took them through the defence line and onto a path of wobbling duckboards sinking into the mire, which led to a tarpaulin raised over a battered table. A large, long-range vox-set sat in the centre. Maps spilled off around the edges. A hunched vox-operator occupied the only

chair, speaking rapidly into a covered vox-horn. Two captains stood at his shoulders, peering at the maps and giving words to be passed on, listening, then asking brief questions. One was a tall woman, the other a shorter man, both grey with fatigue and worry.

Rostov approached without comment, reached into his coat and pulled out a sealed message cylinder. The man looked up. His eyebrow rose a little, but he was either too surprised or too collected to say anything.

‘You will datacast these files on this cylinder to the three ships *Orledon*, *Duc Beauv*, and *Incandescence*,’ he said. ‘To them only. For their shipmasters. Give these signifiers.’ He passed a scrap of parchment over. ‘Destroy both when you are done. You will convey me and my men immediately to a place of extraction.’

The woman looked at the man. Obedience was bred into him. There was no way he was going to refuse to aid them, but he was curious.

‘Why are you here?’

Antoniato stood forward. ‘You know better than to ask—’ he began, but Rostov cut him off.

‘I have information of extreme importance to the success of the Emperor’s armies in this subsector. If you aid me in getting it off this world, you will earn His immortal gratitude.’

‘Of course.’

The vox crackled, incomprehensible messages delivered with urgency. The operator murmured into his vox-horn.

‘Turn that off. Switch to datacast,’ Rostov demanded.

The operator was so invested in his work he objected. ‘But sir, I have the general to...’

‘Now,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter what the general has to say. It’s over.’

The vox-operator took the cylinder, unscrewed the cap, pulled out a rubber plug and set the cylinder into the input jack it protected.

‘Priority message,’ he murmured into his vox-horn. ‘Prepare for data exload.’

The officer found a fresh resolve. He stood taller. He seemed almost heroic.

‘I will take you. Follow me. Adraana, it is time,’ he said to his comrade. ‘I will return soon.’

Adraana nodded. They clasped hands. Both were emotional. They were

close, Lacrante thought, too close for regulations probably, but there seemed also to be an air of relief to their interaction, a sense of an arduous duty nearly finished. Their lives would be over soon, and they were glad.

‘This way,’ said the male officer.

Adraana straightened her uniform, and the two officers led Rostov’s group out of the tent and round a stack of munitions crates. There was a Salamander command vehicle round the back of them. The officer got into the driver’s compartment. Rostov, Cheelche and Antoniato climbed into the open-topped crew deck at the back. Lacrante waited for Rostov’s order to get aboard, expecting that he would be left behind to fight with his countrymen. Rostov paid him no attention, but Antoniato gestured him forward and reached out his hand. Lacrante took it, and Antoniato pulled him aboard.

Adraana clambered with weary care up the pile of crates. Once atop it, she stood tall, framed by the burning death trails of downed aircraft and the violent interplay of warship combat.

‘Warriors of the Imperium!’ Adraana shouted. She had a clear, strong voice that cut through the rumble of the war. She must have been a good singer, thought Lacrante. He was already thinking of her in the past tense. ‘Warriors of the Imperium!’

At the second call, soldiers looked up to her. They stared from their posts on the defence line, from the doors of bunkers, from makeshift beds in the mud, from guttering campfires. They watched her over recaff mugs and lho-sticks, over steaming ration tins.

‘We have made our stand here on Fomor III so that others might carry on the great war for survival being waged in every part of the galaxy,’ she shouted. Her voice carried cleanly over the noise of battle. ‘We have fought for the Machorta Sound. We have fought for the Imperium. We have fought for our Emperor.’ She paused. ‘Our fight ends today.’

Only a few hours before, Lacrante had delivered a similar speech to his own men, albeit far less eloquently. He wanted to stand up and call to Adraana, to tell her that she might live, that the strangest things could happen. But he knew for her that was not true. For some reason, the Emperor had taken him this far, but He had not chosen her. She was already dead.

‘I have asked so much of you in these last months,’ Adraana said. ‘You

have given me everything. You have given Him everything. Now for the final time I ask only that you do your duty once more,' said Adraana, her voice rising with passion, 'that you—'

The male captain ignited the Salamander's engine, drowning out his comrade's words. The tracks spun in the mud, sending out wet plumes behind the vehicle. It slid from side to side, then the tracks bit, and it lurched forward, picking up speed, until it was racing towards the centre of the evacuation zone, and salvation.

The guns started hitting the zone before they were halfway to their destination. A high whistling preceded each falling shell. They shrieked like they were laughing, their detonations punchlines to cruel jokes.

Sirens wailed all over the evacuation zone. The Salamander raced past groups of exhausted men waiting to be taken to safety. They were stirring, standing up slowly as the first explosions boomed over the camp. Then they were running. Whistles blew, men shouted. Lacrante looked skywards. The tempo of the void battle had changed. The Imperial ships were breaking off, so slowly he was not sure at first, but their engine stacks glowed with plasma burn; they turned, and moved faster, their washed-out daytime shapes lifting higher into the void.

The captain drove well; men scattered before him but he hit none. A dragon-headed attack craft swooped down from the sky, vomiting fire from its mechanical maw like the beast of legend. It wrote a long signature of destruction across the zone in flame, catching a store of promethium barrels that blew like pyrotechnic novelties on Sanguinala, lifting high on short-lived rocket trails of fuel. Soldiers screamed as they were immolated. The roaring dragon thing turned, opened up its mouth again, but before it could fire it was chased away by a pair of interdiction fighters, and all three raced off out of view.

The captain sped through the burning and the screaming. Lacrante watched horrified, holding on for dear life. None of his companions seemed concerned. Rostov watched the sky, reading the battle with an expertise Lacrante could not match. Antoniato stood at the front, holding on hard, but staring ahead as if he were driving the vehicle himself. Cheelche crouched at the bottom of the open crew compartment and muttered to herself, her arms wrapped about her blocky pack.

They entered the landing areas. They raced past a chugging flak gun whose conversation with the sky made Lacrante's ears ring. Large ships were lifting off, buffeting the ground with volcano winds. Another ship lit its engines. Lines of soldiers waiting to embark disintegrated into mobs, shouting for rescue. Fences collapsed under the weight of those left behind. They pushed them over, trampling comrades caught in the razor wire, spilling onto the landing aprons. A crowd was incinerated by igniting engines. Lacrante saw men gunned down by the turrets of a smaller ship as it reeled into the sky, the weight of the soldiers holding onto its landing claws upsetting its ascent.

On the Salamander went, the passing landscape presenting little vignettes of despair before hurrying Lacrante on to the next, as if it were a guide in some grand guignol presentation, eager to shock, and increasing the horror with each new sight. A commissar dropped a man into the mud with a single lasgun shot to the head, before he was rushed, and disarmed, and killed. Men turned on each other. Soldiers wept and prayed on their knees in the mud. A hundred-yard-long supply craft was hit by a macro particle beam, and became a crematorium for those it carried, falling from the sky like a burning lantern and crushing thousands who, moments before, had clamoured to get aboard. All the while the sirens wailed and the shells rained down, murdering with impunity.

The officer drove faster.

A series of prefabricated landing pads were clustered at the centre of the evacuation zone. Smaller ships were taking off all the time from outside this area, where they had parked directly in the sea of mud. The largest, purpose-built troop craft had put down even further out, and the very last two of these were already flying, leaving a single, broken-backed example burning on the field behind them. The prefab pads took ships of medium size, cargo lighters and personnel carriers. Several of them were wrecks. One looked to have been brought down on top of two others, and now all three were heaped together like smashed toys, putting out boiling clouds of black smoke that choked Lacrante. They passed through it, and it parted like a curtain and they saw their last hope, a small Arvus lighter, unarmed, boxy, already overfull.

The captain drove straight over the low rockcrete barrier hemming in the landing zone, bouncing his passengers hard. The ship's engines were

already at full cycle but had not ignited. Lacrante thought the officer must have voxed ahead. It was waiting for them.

The captain locked the tracks and brought the Salamander to a slewing halt. 'You were almost too late,' he shouted over his shoulder.

'My thanks to you,' said Rostov.

'Remember me, inquisitor, in your prayers,' said the captain. 'I am going to die here. It would soothe my heart and ease the passing of my soul into His light if I knew someone remembered that I did my duty, and said the words aloud for me.'

'What is your name?' asked Rostov.

'Hejult Colliman,' said the captain.

'It will be done, I swear it, by the Emperor Himself.'

Colliman closed his eyes in thanks, and waited until they were all off, then turned around and drove away. Lacrante looked back the way they had come and saw only fire and the flash of weapons.

A commissar came down the rear ramp out of the Arvus' passenger compartment. A group of storm troopers looked out.

'You are Inquisitor Rostov of the Ordo Xenos?' the commissar shouted over the rising engines. A triple burst of shells made the ground tremble. Rostov waited for the noise to die before he answered.

'I am.'

'We have held this ship for you. We are full, but I will remain behind so you may depart. It is my duty.' He was proud, this one, back as stiff as a flagpole. Old too, his face lined with years of service.

'The Emperor commends your sacrifice,' said Rostov.

The commissar nodded curtly and stood aside.

'But my men must come with me too,' Rostov added.

The commissar's expression was the same hard, stony mien Lacrante had seen on the face of every commissar he had ever met. They made them that way in plaster moulds, he was certain. The commissar's eyes flicked to one side. A spear of plasma impacted the ground a few hundred yards away, evaporating earth, men and equipment with an explosive roar. Nobody flinched.

'My lord,' said the commissar. 'I am willing to give up my life for the Emperor's glory by allowing you to continue your work, but these men here, they are loyal. I have commanded that many disobedient men should

die, but these are among the best.’

‘Nevertheless, I must take my servants with me,’ said Rostov calmly. His pure blue eyes shone with uncanny power.

The commissar looked at Lacrante and Antoniato. Antoniato raised his eyebrows at him as if to say ‘hard luck’. The commissar’s gaze rested on Cheelche, and his face hardened.

‘You ask one of the Emperor’s soldiers to give up his place for *that*.’ He pointed.

‘She’s done more for the Emperor than any one of these men,’ said Rostov evenly. ‘I know. I speak with His authority alone.’ Throughout, his voice remained level and his expression firm, but the sense of threat he gave off increased. ‘Now make room and die serving the Emperor, or deny me and die opposing Him.’

Aircraft screamed. The sirens wailed. Shell-bursts and energy strikes thrummed the ground like a drum. The commissar’s coat stirred in the hot wind of war. Two Imperial servants locked eyes, neither used to backing down. A commissar was the scourge of many arms of the Imperial forces, but inquisitors were the instruments of the Emperor Himself. There could only be one outcome.

‘Very well,’ said the commissar. ‘But the xenos must give up its weapons.’

‘She will be keeping her guns,’ said Rostov, ‘so she may use them in His service.’

The commissar hesitated, then nodded again. He turned about smartly and marched the short distance to the Arvus like he was on parade. At its rear he stopped by the open ramp, and indicated three men inside.

‘You, you, you. Out. Make way for the lord inquisitor’s men.’

The three men looked at one another. One pointed at himself.

‘Rejoice, for the Emperor has chosen you to do His bloody work,’ said the commissar. ‘We fight, in His name, and for His glory, on the fields of Fomor III.’

An explosion punctuated the end of his speech. The commissar had chosen the men well, for they did not complain but gathered up their gear, and left their seats. They marched down the ramp to the landing pad, their faces grim.

Rostov marched to the shuttle craft. He waited with surprising respectfulness while Cheelche waddled on board. She struggled to get up

into her seat. A couple of hesitant men came forward and helped her in. Rostov followed, agile despite his heavy carapace plate.

‘Come on,’ said Antoniato. He grabbed Lacrante and pushed him at the door.

‘But why me?’ Lacrante said. ‘I should stay here. These Scions are worth four of me.’

‘How many Astra Militarum officers do you think we see, who are running from a Heretic Space Marine, but turn back to face it, so his men can escape?’ Antoniato invited an answer with an open expression.

Lacrante didn’t say anything.

‘I’ll tell you, then,’ said Antoniato, ‘not very many. That makes you unusual. Get on board. Rostov has noticed you. If there’s one thing that intrigues him, it’s unusual men.’

Antoniato boarded first, Lacrante followed. As he strapped himself in, he looked out at one of the men whose places they had taken.

I’m sorry, he mouthed. The man stared back. He cradled his hellgun in one arm and activated it with a flick of his thumb. Their eyes remained locked as the Arvus’ engines ignited. The shuttle rose up on blades of screaming plasma. The landing zone dropped away, taking the commissar and the three doomed men off into insignificance, until they were the size of insects, then not even that.

‘We’re not out of the underhive yet,’ said Antoniato. He pointed across the camp, laid out like a model below them. Crowds rolled in tides around the last few ships taking off. At the edges of the evacuation zone they were turning outwards.

The enemy was coming from the north, preceded by a howling tempest. The sky was red in that direction, the hue mingling with the wound in the void, becoming one unholy storm front. Crimson lightning danced across the ground, as if the world itself were in pain, and the wind that blew smelled of blood.

A horizontal cascade of las-beams flashed out from the defence line. The shuttle was banking around, bouncing through air agitated by the worsening bombardment. Shells crashed down, interspersed with violent energy beams of garish colours, each surrounded by nimbuses of excited particles. Only the Emperor’s providence ensured that they were not hit and obliterated. Trapped in the circuit of the evacuation zone, unable to fly directly upwards

for fear of becoming an easy target, the pilot corkscrewed up, and in doing so brought them closer to the attack on the defence line.

Lacrante looked down upon a scene of terrible slaughter. Outside the walls, twisted mutants ran amok, ripping men apart with glistening claws and biting them in two. They disrupted the Astra Militarum firing lines before the traitor soldiery came forth with their guns blazing at erstwhile brothers in arms. This betrayal was terrible to behold, and held Lacrante's horrified attention until his eyes found the Heretic Astartes, where he witnessed worse.

No more than a dozen in number, the fallen Space Marines tore through the Emperor's soldiers like a knife ripping through paper. They were giants in brass and blood, their armour bedecked with skulls. Though rendered tiny by distance, they were obvious among the mortal men and women below, and wherever they went they carved bloody lanes of death through the crowds. Faced with such violence, many soldiers fled in panic, only to be cut down by whirling blades as they turned their backs.

The Heretic Astartes reached the wall in short order, bounding up the near vertical ramparts in two or three strides. Once upon it, they slaughtered with renewed ferocity, clearing the firing steps of men. Las-beams of blue and red stabbed at them, but none could bring them down.

The shuttle turned another loop, changing the view. Lacrante saw a Sentinel pilot drive his machine towards one of the Space Marines, its multilaser burning the air and hitting the monster straight in his breastplate. The fallen Angel of Death took a wound, it seemed, but then he leapt, axe out, slamming into the walker's cockpit and bearing the light machine to the ground under his weight.

The view shifted again. Lacrante caught sight of some immense centauroid machine. The upper part was a terrifying giant in brazen armour, who leaned low from a gargantuan tracked unit to cut down men a dozen times smaller than he, reaping them like a harvester and spouting bloody spray from the exhausts upon its back. Then the ship turned away from the battlefield completely, and tilted, showing him only the sky and the nearing void war. The rear ramp closed and the cabin pressurised with a hiss, shutting away the sights and sounds of violence.

'Check your fastenings!' shouted Antoniato over the roar of the engines.

Lacrante didn't really hear him. Rostov had got up, and was making his

way out of the cramped passenger cabin to the cockpit. Lacrante unclipped his harness and followed him, hypnotised by the violence in the sky. He had to see, and ignored Antoniato's shouts, grasping straps when the Arvus bucked or swerved around enemy attacks.

Rostov opened the single door into the cockpit. The lone pilot glanced back.

'Get us up,' commanded Rostov.

'The ships are all leaving, my lord. I'm not going to be able to catch them. We'll be brought down. We were too late.'

Rostov's eyes raced over the cockpit instruments. 'That one,' he said, pointing to a symbol on a screen. 'Make for the *Saint Aster*.'

'We'll never reach it!' the pilot shouted. 'They're all moving off.'

'By the Emperor's grace, we will,' said Rostov. 'Give me your vox.'

The pilot gave him a questioning look, but pulled off her headset and passed it back.

Lacrante eavesdropped on all this unnoticed. Then he saw a vast dagger shape plummeting down at the surface of the planet, a torpedo as large as a hive spire that punched into the ground. Its explosion turned everything white, and the shockwave lifted up the Arvus and dropped it hard. He fell sprawling into some of the seated men, smashed his head on the bar of a restraint cradle, and was knocked unconscious.

Chapter Thirteen

ESCAPE FROM FOMOR III

WORLD DEATH

CANALUS OBLIGATIO

The void was bleeding. What was visible from the ground as a lurid band of colour appeared in space as a giant, bloody wound. Reality had been ripped open and the meat of creation was visible beneath. At least, that's how it appeared some of the time. If Finnula looked at it askance, she saw a cataract of blood falling into eternity; other times it appeared like any warp-realspace interface: a mess of twisted gas and energy, bright against the dark, hardly distinguishable from the nebula. When seen like this, the vessel that led its forward edge, the knife, Finnula thought, was plainly detectable by the *Saint Aster's* sensors and by the human eye. But that happened rarely.

Most of the time the crew saw blood, and pain, and impossible sights, and the enemy ship was the tip of a jagged sword. Machines were no better than human senses at getting a firm impression and the *Saint Aster's* auspexes and sensoria struggled to interpret what they saw, the displays haunted by sensor ghosts. All any of them could be certain of was that the rift was heading for Fomor III's star.

Finnula could spare no more thought for it than that. The crew had more pressing matters at hand.

The battle zone around Fomor III was crowded with Imperial ships. Giant

troop haulers drew in hundreds of smaller craft fleeing the war on the surface. A cordon of warships protected the evacuation. Poorly armed conveyors huddled the centre. Groups of cruisers broke from formation to defend the transports as they fired their engines and fled, and the sphere of ships shrank, and so running battles were strung out to the system edge. Space all the way to the Mandeville point flashed with furious exchanges of fire, each skirmish separated from the next by hundreds of thousands of miles but together added up to a display that made the void sparkle.

By the time the *Saint Aster* had fought her way in to the orbit of Fomor III, the evacuation was in full swing, and was now coming to an end. The surviving troop transports were full. The shrinking Imperial fleet was coming under increased pressure as more enemy capital ships sailed in from the dark to engage them. Two hulking Cetacea-class transit ships remained, their gaping holds scooping up small craft.

The *Saint Aster*'s strike group guarded the sunward approach.

The command deck was a babble of orders and tense voices. Vox-messages from all over the *Saint Aster*, its strike group and the wider fleet chattered over one another from the mouths of mechanical figures and wire-meshed grilles. The ship shook under enemy hits, the violent flexing of its void shields passing on kinetic overspill to the structure.

'Fresh contacts emerging over Fomor III horizon,' a junior officer shouted over the clamour. 'Four new targets of threat level majoris. Eight of minoris classification.'

'The *Domitian* requests immediate strike craft support!' another relayed.

'Denied,' Finnula said. 'Enemy bomber flight inbound on intercept course with *Saint Aster* and *Coming Light*, all escort fighters hold to defend.'

Icons blinked on and disappeared from the hololiths. Tactical displays shone with an incomprehensible amount of data. Servitors mumbled flat reports detailing thousands of deaths.

Finnula tried to concentrate, but the red slash through the sky drew her eyes back towards it. A headache pushed against her skull, and every word she read she had to read again, then again, before she understood it. An alarm wailed behind her, and she turned angrily towards the source.

'Repair crews, lock that malfunction down! I can't hear myself think up here!'

The noise ceased, and she returned to her displays. The Imperial line held

against the enemy, who were attacking without much in the way of discipline. They came in small groups, daring the gauntlet of fire the Imperial fleet put out. A determined spear thrust could break a protective sphere, but the enemy ships came at them in dribs, frenzied as the warriors they carried, and threw themselves heedlessly at the Imperial guns.

The first of the transports closed up its docking slots, and began to make hard burn away from the planet. A portion of the fleet detached and formed up around it, all painfully slowly as huge engines pushed the ships' enormous masses into action. Then the second fired up its main engine stacks, its hangar gates still open, the last of the evacuation craft chasing after it. They were successful at first, darting into the still gaping decks, but as the Cetecea accelerated, the small craft fell behind, and an extra layer of desperate vox-messages was added to the hubbub of communication.

Finnula reread the specifics of the new enemy group. The announcement had been one of hundreds, and the group's arrival was but one piece of data pulled into the general cascade of information. But it was significant, and she saw it as a potential turning point of the battle; not necessarily in their favour.

She brought up closer views and more data. The ships were hanging back around their chief vessel, a grand cruiser of an ancient sort rarely seen in Imperial navies those days. It was huge, and baroquely decorated, and radiated a malice that intensified her headache while she read the augur reports.

'They're going to make a push for it soon,' she said. 'Someone's exerting control out there. As soon as they get themselves organised, we'll be in danger.'

'Seen and noted, first officer,' Athagey said. Her voice was strained. Every person on the ship suffered the psychic pressure emanating from the rip in the sky. 'Vox annunciato, pass on notification of incoming threat made by First Lieutenant Diomed to fleet command.'

'We're closest,' said Finnula. 'They'll make their run right by our noses. They'll wait until the fleet breaks up to withdraw with the last transports, and come at us then.'

'They will.' Athagey's eyes narrowed. 'Do we have enough fight in us to take on a grand cruiser and its escorts, that is the question.'

'You'll get your answer soon, commodore,' said Finnula. 'Admiral

Treheskon is ordering a general withdrawal.’ She depressed a key rune and the admiral’s face came into being in the air in front of the command dais. He was young for an admiral, younger than Athagey, not much older than Finnula. He always looked immaculate. There was not a hair out of place in his beard.

‘*All ships are to withdraw according to plan,*’ he said. That was it. He disappeared. The fleet had coded orders as to their withdrawal points, sub-fleet organisation, emergency rendezvous and dispersal patterns. They knew what to do.

‘Now is the time,’ said Athagey. She called down her vox-cherub and spoke into the horn it proffered. ‘Strike Group Saint Aster, return to tight formation, staggered line, ascending ecliptic echelon. Enact now.’

‘Those are not the admiral’s original orders,’ Finnula said.

‘The enemy will attack within minutes. Our prescribed formation will see us all dead,’ she responded.

‘Aye, commodore,’ said Finnula, who agreed with Athagey’s command, but was duty-bound to point out the discrepancy. She caught the eye of the *Saint Aster*’s Commissar-Navis Sorenkus, prowling the gangways between the command pits. The old man blinked like a lizard and looked away. No challenge there, then.

Already, the sphere surrounding the ascension corridor leading up out of Fomor III’s gravity well was breaking apart. In most cases the ships behaved with admirable precision, and the sphere hinged outwards like an opening flower, keeping up well-coordinated volumes of fire as they repositioned. There were over a hundred vessels involved, and their discipline was perfect. They split into smaller groups, moving off to several headings to confuse the foe, the grouping of ships rearranging themselves into more flexible formations as they sailed. The enemy, already disorganised, broke apart to chase down the escaping Imperial ships. Only those around the grand cruiser held their position.

‘My Lady Commodore Athagey,’ said Lieutenant Hainkin. He was of the third watch, one of the dais officers, but rarely up on the platform. He had too big a heart, thought Finnula. He was choking on it now, his skin flushing and throat working uncomfortably. ‘If I may?’

Don’t, thought Finnula, but Athagey nodded her consent.

‘There are thousands of soldiers still on the surface,’ Hainkin said. ‘I have

multiple requests for assistance from smaller craft who are out of range of the last transports, and more from the evacuation zone. We could take some on board.'

All eyes went to the commodore.

'Ignore them,' said Athagey. 'We condemn thousands to death, but such is war. Thousands die so millions might live.'

It was the burden people like Athagey bore. Hainkin would never understand that.

The *Saint Aster* rumbled as her engines pushed her about, swinging her stern away from the planet.

A klaxon blared.

'Enemy grand cruiser beginning attack run, all ships in attendance, spear formation,' Finnula ordered.

'Increase port manoeuvring thruster output,' said Athagey. 'I want us over the planet's terminator and away before we're in range of their main batteries.'

'They'll cut right through us if they catch us,' said Finnula.

'Then they won't catch us,' said Athagey.

'The enemy has launched torpedoes, full spread. Contact in five minutes.'

'They're getting damnably close,' said Finnula.

'And I say they will get no closer!' said Athagey.

'I have an identity,' an officer reported. '*Blood King*.'

'I've heard of that,' said Athagey quietly.

In the oculus, the bruised surface of Fomor III passed by. Finnula watched it. Scores of lights flashed in the debris between the ship and the surface as the enemy loosed his first lance shots. Their batteries of plasma casters, fusion beams and laser cannon were out of arc, but the grand laseweapons on their spines fired steadily. Thankfully, the debris field around the planet made targeting difficult.

Fires burned all over Fomor III's surface. A few months before it was blue and green, a civilised world dominated by agriculture and small seas. It had been far from a paradise planet, but further from the overcrowded hells of many other Imperial worlds. Now it was a necrotic brown, choking on its own blackened breath. Finnula had seen a planet die twice before. Each time, her feelings became more wretched at the sight. There were trillions of worlds in the galaxy, perhaps billions of them were suitable for human

habitation. The Imperium consisted of a million worlds, they said, but she had realised a long time ago that was a figurative number. It had no basis in reality. How could it, when so many planets burned every month.

‘World death,’ she whispered.

A flashing light on her command boards attracted her attention. She frowned in disbelief, never having seen that particular indicator illuminated. She pressed a button beneath it. A screen came on, displaying an Imperial badge that surprised her.

She turned to the commodore.

‘Madame commodore, I have a priority message on the canalus obligatio.’

Athagey looked at her sharply. ‘The Inquisition?’ she said.

Finnula nodded.

‘Play it!’ snapped Athagey.

The appropriate code sequence to activate the message cypher was so obscure that Finnula had to send for a specialist from the vox-pits. He was old, needed to retrieve a mono-task servitor from its case, which he did very slowly, then orderlies had to be summoned to convey the servitor upon a grav-sled, for it had been reduced to a head in an armoured box with a cogitator attached. The process was painfully sedate, and accompanied with many solemn utterances that irritated Athagey visibly.

‘Can you not,’ she said, ‘get a bloody move on? We are under fire!’

‘Madame commodore, *Unmerciful* requests adjusted course heading. We’re not moving as they expect,’ the Master of Manoeuvres called.

‘Of course we’re not moving as they expect. Tell them to come about! Get the whole flotilla to come about! Helm, full starboard thrust. Leave us pointing at Fomor III. Broadships prepare to fire,’ she commanded. ‘We can’t go anywhere until we have this message decoded. Prepare to engage enemy spearhead.’

‘We could leave, madame,’ said Finnula.

‘We might escape with our lives, only to lose them later. The Inquisition are the agents of the Emperor,’ said Athagey. ‘They will not be denied.’

Klaxons wailed. The ship shuddered as its own lance turrets opened up, hurling the contents of gargantuan capacitors at the approaching enemy in beams of destructive light. The enemy had recharged theirs, and fired almost simultaneously.

The vox-specialist arrived at the dais. The box was opened, releasing a

pungent waft of decay. A copper wire was unspooled from a reel and plugged into Finnula's console.

'Now, first officer?'

Finnula nodded.

'Don't you understand "hurry up"?' shouted Athagey from the top of her dais. She had not taken any stimms for an hour, and was becoming irritable.

The vox-specialist turned a crank on the outside of the box. The head came to sudden, jerky life, eyelids fluttering and jaws clacking. A series of red lumen beads lit up on the box exterior, until they made a flickering line. They turned green.

'Code conveyed and accepted,' the old man said, then bowed, and began the slow process of returning the head to its locker.

Finnula watched the cypher on her screen interact with the message code locks. Blurred lines of text ran down the glass, then a hololith projector came on, and a phantom face appeared off to her left. He was a young man, of so serious a demeanour it looked like he had never smiled in his life.

'Captain of the Saint Aster, I am Inquisitor Rostov of the Ordo Xenos. By the authority of the Emperor Himself, I demand immediate retrieval from the atmosphere of Fomor III. Coordinates for intercept are included. Transponder code for my vessel included. I am en route now. For the Emperor,' the inquisitor intoned. The message snapped off.

'The arrogance of it,' said Athagey. 'No doubt whatsoever we would respond.'

'Are we going to respond?' said Finnula.

The commodore sighed. Her long haptic nails drummed on the arm of her throne. 'Of course. Send Rostov a message, same channel, tell him we are on our way.'

Finnula looked at the coordinates, then out at the world, and the closing enemy battlefleet.

'Summon all my captains to hololith conference. Message Commodore Shaloong, see if Strike Group Justicarius will cover our backs. He owes me from the Dandra debacle,' Athagey said. As soon as she gave this order, small projections of her fleet masters began to appear around her. 'And put out a general call to those fleeing Fomor III. We shall heed Lieutenant Hainkin's craving for mercy this once. Any craft that can reach us, we will take in, but they must reach us, we cannot turn back or deviate from our

course to save them. Helm,' she said. 'New heading.' Her talon wands twitched as she datacast the coordinates to the fan-shaped helm section of the deck, where it was fed via ocular implant and direct cranial feed to the helmsmen. 'All hands stand ready, this is going to be rough.'

The battlesphere over Fomor III was awash with fire and deadly light. Strike Group Saint Aster formed up with the ships of Strike Group Justicarius, presenting a block to the approaching *Blood King* and its escorts. Gunfire flew between the two forces with building fury. Void-shield flare flashed across the fronts of both fleets. Concentrated lance fire from Shaloong's ships cut apart a squadron of enemy destroyers as they neared. The *Ars Bellus* of *Saint Aster*'s group took a mauling in return from torpedoes and solid rounds cast ahead of the Chaos advance.

The *Saint Aster* took no part in the worsening battle, but drove hard down the planet's gravity well, her dorsal thrusters burning hot and main stack pushing at seventy per cent. Her prow hit the atmosphere at close to terminal speed, striking fire from the world's gas envelope immediately. Stripes of flame trailed after her as she plunged down, her void shields reacting violently to the insult of atmospheric flight.

Behind her, the *Ars Bellus* succumbed to lance fire, breaking into glittering pieces and falling after the *Saint Aster*. Two Chaos ships left formation to chase the diving battle cruiser. The blocking Imperial force zeroed in on one and sliced it apart, its wreckage mingling with that of the *Ars Bellus* and tumbling into the atmosphere together. The other ship shrugged off the attack and plunged after the *Saint Aster*. Bigger, heavier and better armed, it chased the lighter ship with predatory determination.

Above the glow of the void-atmospheric line, the ships turned their guns away, for the Khornate force was ploughing through the joined battle groups, and the *Blood King* was among them, all weapons firing.

Lacrante came around in confusion. For a moment he had no idea where he was. Only when the deck bounced and then pitched forward hard did he remember all that had befallen him in the last day. His head was wet with blood running from his scalp.

'Get up,' said one of the Scions strapped into the passenger seats. 'Another fall like that and you're going to break bones. Yours I don't care about, but

you could break mine, and I do care about that.'

He pointed to the empty chair next to Rostov's little xenos companion. Lacrante thought of the warrior left behind so that she could come aboard. He stared distastefully at her. She had big, flat feet, with an ugly fringe of toes running most of the way around the outside. Cheelche wore footwear, but it was so form-fitting it displayed the creature's revolting physiology.

'Get into the seat now,' said another of the Scions. He nudged him with a filthy boot, showing no respect for Lacrante's higher rank. Lacrante grabbed the restraints and used them to haul himself up into the seat. When he had buckled himself in, the constant bouncing of the ship was easier to bear. Blood continued to run down his face, soaking into his collar and pooling in the hollow of his collarbones. His mouth was dry, and his head swam, but he ignored it, for from his position he could see past Rostov into the cramped cockpit, and from there out of the frontal canopy. The sky was a terrifying mess of explosions and destructive energies, laced by the trails of duelling attack craft. The pilot shouted something at Rostov that Lacrante didn't catch, then the little lighter yawed to the right, and brought into view an astounding sight.

A warship was flying down into the atmosphere. At first he thought it was out of control and on a crash course, for it drew a long, fiery line down through the sky. Black smoke flooded the atmosphere behind it. A teardrop of flickering energy trailed around it, the shields distorted and revealed by the pressure of the air. Fire wreathed it on all sides. A hundred enemy craft swarmed it like the mythical hornet of ancient Terra, their stings of laser fire and missile strike speckling its throbbing voids with patterns of lightning. Thick columns of lance fire flicked past it from behind, and when the Arvus moved a little more, he saw a second warship cutting another trail through Fomor III's tortured air, and it was firing on the first. He blinked blood from his eyes. The Arvus was making its way directly to the foremost ship.

'There's our ticket away from this place, the *Saint Aster*,' shouted Cheelche with wicked glee, following his gaze. 'Do they gamble on your world?' said the little alien. 'Because I'd rate our odds as pretty low.'

Antoniato was staring at the ceiling, mouthing prayers to the Emperor. 'Don't listen to her,' he said, in between pleas for salvation. 'She's a pessimist.'

'Gah! Not even this will keep his mouth closed. He doesn't like flying,

you know,' said Cheelche. Her piscean face was wrinkled as tree bark, and her mouth lipless, but she was obviously smiling. 'He's going to start crying, that's something I'd wager my money on.'

Lacrante's head was swimming. The *Saint Aster* wasn't crashing. It had deliberately entered the atmosphere of Fomor III.

'They're coming to rescue us,' he realised.

The Arvus bounced hard, falling a hundred feet, then rocketing back up again. Antoniato groaned.

'That's the plan,' said Cheelche. 'It's a stupid plan,' she added. 'Rostov's luck's run out at last. It's been a good run though, eh, Toni?'

'Keep your filthy xenos quiet,' said one of the Scions.

'Don't...' said Antoniato. He gulped down a deep breath. 'Don't piss her off. I've seen her go through better than you in seconds.'

Cheelche stuck out one of her lower arms and waved at the Scion. He was about to reply when the Arvus shook with the impact of rapid cannon fire. The pilot reacted to the attack by yanking sideways on the flight sticks, sending the ship into an ungainly barrel roll. Lacrante grabbed at the straps. The blood rushed to his head, making the throb of his cut worse. One of the enemy's dragon craft streaked past the pilot's canopy, its scream of rage defying physics and penetrating the minds of the men aboard.

'Get us aboard the ship,' Rostov shouted. 'Or the opportunity for salvation will evade our grasp.' His boots must have had magnetic locks, for he stayed attached to the deck when the craft rolled. He was commanding, focused, but his knuckles were white where they gripped the doorway, and his previously inscrutable face was wrinkled with concentration. 'Go faster!'

The pilot depressed her pedal, the Arvus' engines howled louder. The boxy craft was as aerodynamic as a ferrocrete block, and it struggled to increase speed, but slowly they gained on the falling ship. Another daemonic screech punished the men's minds. The draco-craft dived suddenly into sight, wings folded, then spreading to slow and come right at them. Though it appeared mechanical, close to it seemed to move more like a creature of flesh and blood than a machine, giving it a sense of wrongness Lacrante could taste.

The ship-beast screamed again. The Arvus pulled hard to the right to avoid it, but its wings twitched and it matched the movement easily. In place of a tongue a cannon was set, and it opened fire, spraying the craft with red-hot

bullets. All this happened in a fraction of a second, then it was away over them, carried off by its own speed, and the Arvus was falling.

Wind blasted through a single bullet hole in the canopy. The pilot hung dead in her restraints. The shuttle veered off course, throwing them all about in their harnesses. The draco returned to spray the lighter with more rounds. Several plunked musically through the side, killing two of the Scions in their seats.

‘Cheelche!’ Rostov shouted. He leaned into the cockpit and grabbed the sticks, but could do little other than level out the flight from his position.

‘On it,’ Cheelche said. ‘Hold this,’ she said to Lacrante, shoving her heavy pack onto his lap. It was warm, and he had the perverse idea it was somehow alive. She smacked the restraint release with the flat of her hand and leapt onto the floor, sure-footedly scampering into the cockpit. She hauled the pilot’s corpse out, dragged it into the passenger compartment and hopped into the seat, all without losing her balance once.

‘Hand it over,’ she said.

Rostov relinquished the controls.

‘Should have let me fly in the first place,’ she shouted over the wind whistling through the cockpit hole.

The Arvus pulled up again, accelerating now as Cheelche’s secondary arms raced over the switches.

‘Godsdamned human technology,’ she said loudly. ‘So unresponsive!’

The *Saint Aster*’s burning hull was close ahead. The draco-craft sped past again. This time it reached out with metallic claws to snatch the shuttle from the sky, but Cheelche jinked at the last moment, and the creature hurtled past with an outraged scream.

‘Call the ship, Leonid, tell them we’re on a fast approach,’ she said. ‘We need some covering fire or we’ll not make it. This ship you found us is a lump of crap. It’ll never outrun a Heldrake. They have to get it off our back.’

Rostov took the xenos’ insolence without comment, and spoke into his vox. The words were lost in the violence of the battle, but they were heard, for a few seconds later the Arvus was speeding through a storm of lascannon beams as thick as horizontal rain. Despite the danger the Heldrake kept up its pursuit.

‘Damn thing’s still on my tail,’ said Cheelche. With the las-beams coming

at them, Cheelche had to keep the Arvus on a more or less straight course to avoid being hit, making it easier for the Heldrake to target them. ‘And I’m going to have to close the blast screen,’ she said.

The wreath of fire around the ship filled the sky in front of the Arvus. Cheelche keyed the shutters closed as they approached, and they flew blind into it. There was a roar as they passed through the fires, then a bone-deep ache as they flew on through the void shields. Cheelche had her eyes firmly on a small nav screen in the Arvus’ dashboard. The Arvus dropped to the sound of a loud bang. Molten metal dripped from a hole in the upper hull, and wind roared in.

A terrifying rush of sensations followed. Nothing could be heard over the blast of the wind through the hole in the ceiling. Another impact smashed the craft down. The Arvus heeled to one side. A steel talon pushed through the hull, followed by a second as the Heldrake tightened its hold on the shuttle. Cheelche was shouting. The Scions began firing. The compartment filled with the smell of las-burned air and hot metal. The engines howled with the effort of keeping the craft aloft while the Heldrake attempted to force it down to the ground.

The Heldrake screamed again, and this time the pressure within Lacrante’s mind was so great he screamed back. Images of parched landscapes cut by rivers of gore, where vast armies warred eternally over prizes of bone forced themselves into his mind, and the stink of spilled guts and fresh blood filled his nose.

The ship lurched. Then there was a bone-cracking impact. Part of the Arvus’ wall punched in, and its belly caught on something. They were sliding on a solid surface. Tortured metal screeches joined with the Heldrake’s cries. Abruptly, all stopped in a tremendous crash. Lacrante might have passed out again. When he came to, the lighter was tilted at forty-five degrees. The ramp wrenched open, its damaged pistons spraying hydraulic fluid everywhere. The smell of spilt promethium choked him, and dangerous vapours gathered in shifting clouds. The Scions were running out, charging their hellguns. Antoniato was with them, his plasma gun cycling up to fire. Rostov and Cheelche went after.

‘Move!’ the inquisitor shouted. Groggily, Lacrante obeyed, slapping open his restraints and lugging Cheelche’s pack out. The Arvus shuddered and lifted as he ran down the ramp.

They were in a hangar. On the other side of the atmospheric field the fires and void-shield discharge continued, but the view was narrowing as heavy shutters ground closed over the aperture. The Arvus had ploughed a steel furrow into the deck, dotted with puddles of burning fuel, smashed through a supply tender, knocked another lighter aside, and come to rest against the hangar wall. Men were running all over the hangar, racing to put out the growing blaze, but fire was the least of their worries, for pinned beneath the squat body of the Arvus the Heldrake still lived, and it was alive not in the abstract way the tech-priests said, but shrieking, bleeding, thrashing life, straining against the weight pinning it down. Its claws scrabbled the plating beneath it to ribbons. One of its wings was smashed into scrap, and it leaked blood, not oil. It *lived*.

The Scions were firing. Overcharged las-bolts punched into its side, bringing forth more dark vitae. The Heldrake vomited searing bullets across the ceiling, unable to twist its neck around. Lacrante drew his own pistol, but against such a monster he had no idea if his modest weapon would do any good. Cheelche brought out her strange rifle, and put a glowing bullet into the thing's eye, but still it screamed, until Antoniato's gun whined loudly, and its machine-spirit chimed readiness to fire.

'Get out of my way!' he bellowed. He shoved a Scion aside, knelt down and took aim.

A roaring pillar of plasma spat from the weapon's blunt muzzle, ionising the air into a violent halo of blue. Antoniato hit the Heldrake square on the neck, and the superheated gas melted through its flesh-metal, filling the hangar with a revolting stench. The Heldrake's head fell to the floor with a clang. Its limbs thrashed once, and it lay still.

'Emper-' Lacrante began.

A shockwave of energy blasted from the downed machine. Wicked faces leered in curls of blue flame. When it passed through Lacrante he felt a part of his soul blacken. In the smoke of the downed Heldrake the outline of a raging figure appeared, mouth wide and screaming.

There was a flash of light, a force knocked Lacrante off his feet, and the figure vanished.

The wail of klaxons and shouts of the damage control teams seemed nothing compared to the screams of the beast machine. Lacrante lay stunned. It was Rostov himself who held out a hand to help him up.

Lacrante took it.

‘Thank you, my lord.’

‘Rostov will suffice,’ said the inquisitor.

‘What was that?’

Rostov looked at the dead craft. ‘A daemon engine. Technology married with sorcery, its machine-spirit replaced by the soul of a Neverborn,’ said Rostov. He looked at Lacrante with his cool, blue eyes. ‘Not so long ago, I would have had to kill you after telling you that. Be thankful you are in a new world now. Doors have opened to you that were closed before.’

Rostov left him with no further explanation, going to the Tempestus Scions and summoning their sergeant.

Lacrante looked around for Antoniato, and found him on his knees nearby, loudly thanking the Emperor, while Cheelche rubbed his back with three of her hands.

He scowled at Lacrante, daring him to comment. ‘I hate flying,’ he said.

‘You’re alive aren’t you?’ Cheelche said. ‘Stop whining.’

Lacrante took a breath and steeled himself to address the small xenos.

‘I... I must thank you.’

Cheelche wrinkled her flat nose and showed off a double row of wide teeth. ‘Never thought you’d be saying that to a xenos, did you?’

‘I’ve never met one,’ he admitted.

‘You wouldn’t have. Most of your kind would kill me on sight. You would have too, if it weren’t for Rostov. You’re not a nice species.’

‘I’m sor—’

‘Save it, human,’ she said. ‘We’re not out of danger yet.’

The *Saint Aster* shook under a heavy impact.

‘See?’ she said with a smile. ‘We’re probably all still going to die.’

‘Madame commodore, Inquisitor Rostov is aboard!’ Finnula shouted.

A cheer went up, but it was ragged, and lost to the roar of atmosphere dragging at the ship’s exterior.

The Chaos cruiser was hard on their stern, less than six miles behind, closer than point-blank range for ships of that size. It was firing on them, but the turbulent electromagnetic field wake generated by the *Saint Aster*’s engines deflected the worst of the lance fire, and the enemy could not bring its solid-shot broadsides to bear.

Finnula checked their status again. The other ship outgunned them. In the void, it would destroy them.

‘Shall I give the order to ascend?’ she shouted.

Athagey sat tensely, eyes narrowed, concentrating on every aspect of her ship’s operation. ‘No. Give me the time until we’re trapped in the gravity well,’ she demanded.

‘Six seconds,’ responded one of her lieutenants.

‘We should fire the ventral thrust now and get out of this dive,’ said Finnula.

‘Wait.’

Athagey’s fingers danced over the air. The haptic glove manipulated a display only she could see through her eyepiece. Her fingers stopped. She stared at something intently.

The *Saint Aster* screamed. Metal groaned from every quarter as the forces of air resistance and gravity fought her mass. Every tactical display was a mess of static and flickering ghost returns. The high peeping of alarms warning of failing integrity fields rang out from every quarter. The temperature inside the command deck was climbing fast. The ship shook, and Finnula had to stop herself from grabbing onto the dais rail in fear.

‘Madame commodore!’ she shouted.

Athagey held up a single finger. ‘Not yet,’ she said. She dropped her hand. ‘Now.’

Finnula stabbed a vox-button. ‘Helm, engage all ventral thrusters, full burn immediately, execute!’ she shouted. Her words were a panicked rush.

The helmsmen were ready for the order, and reacted instantly. The ship rumbled. More alarms rang, and there was a sudden upthrust that punched into the crew and made them stagger. Shuddering so hard it made Finnula’s vision blur, the *Saint Aster*’s prow pitched upwards.

‘Increase main engines to maximum output!’ Athagey demanded.

Again the crew reacted quickly, and another forceful blow hit them as the engines vented all the thrust they had. The stress on the vessel was immense. Its spine flexed. Decking rumbled not far from the command dais, and steam gushed from a broken pipe beneath the floor. Rivets popped out of the wall like bullets, injuring the crew. A bronze statue of the ship’s first captain fell from its perch high up in the vaulting and smashed itself flat upon a navigation desk, killing the three ensigns manning the machines

there. Fire roared from a pressure tube near the servitor choirs. But slowly, slowly, the *Saint Aster* rose.

Proximity alarms added themselves to the clamour of terrified machine-spirits. Finnula called up a true-vid aft view. Through the glare of superheated air, plasma exhaust and tortured void shielding, she saw the pursuing ship slip past their stern, barely half a mile away. The vile decorations encrusting its defiled hull were visible through the heat smear, and its spinal weapons blazed red at the *Saint Aster*. They were within each other's shielding, and the guns hit home. A single lance with sufficient elevation to track the Imperial ship punched through the *Saint Aster*'s armour. More alarms shrilled. The damaged section was flushed out by raging atmosphere. Finnula thought they would be torn to pieces. The *Saint Aster* bumped hard to one side, but the hull held, and her course stayed true.

The red of abused sky was replaced by the sparkle-flash of war-wracked space. The shaking subsided. The tactical displays filled once more with information on the wider battle as the ship's auguries regained their sight.

In the rear view she watched the enemy ship continue its dive, its greater mass dooming it to a fiery death. As she watched, its shields gave out, and a chunk of its superstructure was ripped free.

She keyed the view off.

The *Saint Aster* was racing over the planet. Her flotilla was splitting in loose formation, engines at full burn, fleeing the *Blood King*. Finnula began to collate their losses. Two ships floated crippled. The debris hinted at more destroyed. *Blood King* continued its rampage across the centre of the withdrawing Imperial ships. The Chaos fleet had suffered casualties as a result of its impetuosity, but the Imperial sphere formation had fragmented, and the Imperials could not bring their guns to bear on their enemy. On the hololith showing the battlesphere, ships blinked as boarding pods were launched. Finnula watched as stragglers were swarmed and overwhelmed while their sisters were kept from responding by punishing fusillades from the *Blood King*.

The ship continued to increase its speed. Inertial dampeners could only take so much of the pressure from the constant acceleration, and the weight of it pushed hard against them all.

The battlesphere receded behind them, the world shrinking with increasing rapidity, until it was a ball garlanded by blinks and stuttering lights. The

fleeing Imperial ships were a scattering of bright dots across the blackness. Only time would tell how many vessels and men had been saved.

A flash sheeted across the void as a ship's reactor went nova, then the battle was behind them, and the oculus showed only the wide open expanse of infinity ahead.

The *Saint Aster* headed out into the deep void, leaving Fomor III to the growing warp rift, and the bloody mercies of Chaos.

A vox-chime drew Finnula's attention from her screens.

'This is Inquisitor Rostov. Allow me to access your astropaths. I must commune with Terra immediately.'

Chapter Fourteen

INTO THE VOID

THE SCRUTINY OF SPACE MARINES

RIVALRIES KINDLED

Fabian was going into the void, and he wasn't sure he was happy about that. Two more of Guilliman's initial historitors had been recruited by then, and went with him. The others were an off-world aristocrat named Deven Mudire, and a Martian priestess by the name of Solana. All of them were to accompany Guilliman's party off Terra.

Mudire was of such a rarefied social class he could hardly speak to Fabian. Solana, on the other hand, was friendly.

'That is the sound of the primary engine pre-flight warm-up sequence engaging,' she explained, as Fabian's eyes darted around the hold of the transport. They were being conveyed in a large passenger shuttle holding three dozen other standard or nearly standard humans from various branches of the Imperial state. Fabian thought that he should have been more impressed by his inclusion; on board were some of the most influential people in the galaxy. Or rather, he corrected himself, the servants of the servants of some of the most influential people in the galaxy. The actual lords were flying in their own craft. However, his excitement and sense of history were both overshadowed by growing fear. At the last moment, his mind had decided it really didn't like the idea of leaving Terra and going into the naked void at all.

The Space Marine sent to keep an eye on the passengers didn't help. The seats were too small for him, so he stood, fully armoured, with his back to the three historitors in the centre of the ship. His armour was a brilliant yellow, gaudy even in the dim lighting of the transit cabin. He was enormous; not as big as the primarch, but there was a greater sense of threat from him, like he could go from total stillness to murderous violence at a moment's notice. He radiated danger as much as his reactor pack radiated heat.

Fabian tugged at the collar of his new uniform. It was too tight, and too itchy.

'Does he have to just stand there?' whispered Fabian to his new colleagues. 'It's so intimidating.'

'That's the whole point,' said Mudire airily. He watched his golden autoquill compile notes on his dataslate, and didn't look up. 'He's Adeptus Astartes. He's supposed to be intimidating.'

'But he's blocking the aisle. What if there were an accident?'

Mudire gave him a withering look.

'There will not be an accident,' said Solana cheerily. 'Not if the correct prayers have been undertaken.' She smiled. 'As well as regular maintenance of course. Ships of this type and age have a very good accident record, as long as there's regular maintenance.'

'And if there's not regular maintenance?' said Fabian.

'There will not be an accident,' said Solana again, in exactly the same bright tone she'd used before.

'Oh, Throne,' said Fabian. He gripped the armrests and pushed himself back into the padding of the seat.

'Anyone would think you had never been on a post-orbital flight,' said Mudire.

'I haven't been on any kind of flight!' he snapped.

The last few weeks had been full of firsts. In most ways his life had taken a turn for the better. The food he was given was unlike anything he'd eaten before: real fruit, real vegetables, generous portions of synth-meat. He had been given a full medical appraisal, which culminated in a lot of red ink on his medicae chart, a stringent programme of exercise he was not enjoying and enough medicaments to floor an ambull. The first time he took a pulse shower was like dying and ascending to some pagan paradise. Gunthe had

insisted he use it, having made unkind comments about his odour. Reluctant at first, for it seemed so wasteful of water, he couldn't stay out of it now. Then there was the library. He'd had time to visit precisely once, but the books there had amazed him. He had access to the historians' small staff, of whom Resilisu was bizarrely jealous.

So he didn't like having to wear trousers instead of his comfortable robes, and the threat of imminent death hanging over him took the shine off the opulence that surrounded him, but he would be a fool not to be grateful. He'd been taken from obscurity and elevated to the heights of power. Culture shock was inevitable.

'What do we expect of this demonstration?' said Fabian, to take his mind off the impending flight.

'Nobody knows,' said Solana. 'It will be impressive, though, if Cawl's prior achievements are indicative.'

She was not what Fabian expected from a tech-priest, though she wasn't a priest, as she'd gently pointed out several times. She was very thin, her skull was sharp beneath her skin, and that made her eyes appear very large. They were silvered with internal augmentations, making them even more prominent. In the left of her skull was a large chrome assembly with a neat little port. Her memcore, she'd explained. A tattoo of the cog and skull of the Machina Opus occupied the spot on the opposite side of her head. But she didn't spout on about her shocking god, or make small talk with the hardware, like he'd assumed Mechanicus personnel would.

'And Cawl, what's he like? Who is he?'

Solana's eyes lit up. 'Who is he?' she said, and laughed. 'He is the great Cawl! The finest archmagos alive. They call him the Prime Conduit of the Ommissiah. His achievements are legendary. It is rumoured he has lived for ten thousand years, and that he has been responsible for some of our greatest triumphs. He worked on the Space Marine programme with the Emperor Himself. He fought during the great Heresy war. He unlocked the tech vaults of the Kuvatna, and reactivated the Death Moon of Resus. They say he located the *Spirit of Eternity* and bested its silica animus in a game of wits.'

'Then why have I never heard of him?' said Fabian, who had never heard of any of the other things either.

She shrugged. 'His works are of interest to my people, I don't see how

they would come to the attention of yours. But he is marvellous. I do hope we can meet him. I have so many questions.'

'There is the alternative point of view that he is a dangerous, maladjusted, power hungry heretek,' said Mudire carefully. 'Only some call him the Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah. He has a lot of less flattering names as well. It all depends on who you ask.' He gave them a thin smile. 'You really should have done the reading before we left, Ser Guelphrain.'

Mudire managed to make the honorific sound like an insult.

'Seeing as I've been run from pillar to post by our new masters,' Fabian said, 'I couldn't really find the time. Forgive me.'

'I'd learn to find it.' Mudire made a brightly glowing mark with his quill on the screen of his slate. 'You don't want to end up like Thiennes.'

'Who's Thiennes?'

Solana looked away.

'He's nobody now, which is rather my point,' said Mudire.

'You are overly fond of the word "point",' said Fabian. 'If we're to be writing histories, I'd suggest you develop a broader vocabula— Oh, Throne!'

The engines burst into full-throated life. No amount of kinetic dampening and solid cushions could cut out all the vibrations. The shuttle trembled as it lifted up slowly, like it too were frightened of venturing into the void.

'Oh Throne, oh Throne, oh Throne, oh Throne,' said Fabian.

The engines roared. A great weight pressed onto Fabian's chest, so that he thought he might pass out. Solana gripped his hand in hers and smiled. Mudire shook his head and settled back.

'Emperor! Oh my Emperor, I don't want to die!' Fabian shouted.

The Space Marine turned to look at him. Fabian regretted speaking.

The weight lasted a few minutes. The engine roar cut out, and the weight left him.

'We have stopped accelerating,' said Solana. 'We are now in the void. See, that wasn't so bad, was it?' She squeezed his hand and let it go.

Mudire went back to his work.

Fabian lifted his hand. It was strangely weightless, and stayed where it was.

'No grav tech,' Solana said, half to herself. 'They must be rationing energy, saving fuel. The crusade is taking everything.' She looked towards the blank walls of the shuttle. 'Imagine what is going on out there. The

might of dozens of star systems all gathered together in one place. Mankind's greatest army in millennia. There must be thousands of ships out there, and we're among them, the combined might of Terra and Mars.'

Mudire tilted his head. 'A pity they didn't send us up in a ship with windows to see out of then. A bit of an oversight, considering our role.'

'I don't feel very... ' Fabian hiccuped. His hand shot up to his mouth.

'You're not going to *vomit* are you?' said Mudire.

Fabian nodded, distraught. His cheeks bulged. Solana retrieved a pouch from under the seating and passed it to him. Fabian took it gratefully and was noisily sick.

'Oh, it appears you are,' said Mudire.

He pulled the bag away from his mouth. A bead of vomit floated past his face. He tried to catch it, swatting it with his hand into a dozen tiny bubbles. The Space Marine turned round further to look at him, exposing his name plate. Fabian felt worse knowing the Astartes' name. It brought home the fact that there was a man in there, judging him, and he lowered his gaze back to the pouch. Even it was richly made. He had come from one world and gone into another without moving more than a hundred miles from where he was born. He wretchedly wondered how many Imperiums there were, nestling blindly against each other. He wondered if any of them were remotely fair.

He was loudly sick again.

'My my, Fabian,' said Mudire, eyes still on his slate. 'You really are covering yourself in glory.'

Chapter Fifteen

ZAR QUAESITOR

AQUILA RESPLENDUM

A PRIMARCH'S PROJECT

Messinius stood watch upon the secondary command deck of Guilliman's lander, the *Aquila Resplendum*. Gifted to the primarch by the Adeptus Custodes, the ship was fashioned in the shape of a great, double-headed eagle, and had a command deck in each of the heads jutting from the tall body. Spread wings incorporated engine units. Its landing claws, currently retracted against the gold-feathered belly, were made to look like broad talons. Messinius found it gaudy, but beneath the layers of decoration was a strong ship, powerfully fast, with an impressive armament. It was fit for the primarch, he thought, for all those traits were necessary. The heavens between Luna and Terra were full of ships, and threats could come from anywhere.

The deck oculus was a four-foot-high slit wrapped around the eagle's face, narrowing a little to the front where the face's brows drew in judgementally over its hooked beak. From outside, the windows made eyes, but the view was less restrictive than the exterior suggested, providing Messinius with a clear view of the mustering fleets of Primus and Quartus. Buoys lined clear paths through the mass of ships, directing traffic through the throng. He had never seen so many vessels in one place at one time, though he had lived for centuries.

Primus was the biggest of the fleets currently gathering in the Sol System, with nearly two hundred ships-of-war of all sizes. Quartus was smaller, and only a portion of it gathered directly at Terra, but even that part was larger than most sector battlefleets. The warships were attended by hundreds of tenders, salvage vessels, scout craft and rogue trader ships, and there were thousands of transporters for the armies they would take to liberate Imperium Sanctus. This was only the beginning, since the fleets would get bigger as they sailed, gathering to themselves part of the Martian Basilikon Astra before they left Sol, and vessels to take Mechanicus ground forces, from skitarii clade ships up to Titan conveyors. There would be chartist ships following in the warfleet's wake to re-establish Imperium Sanctus' broken trade networks, and the Black Ships of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, whose recommencing of the psyker tithe grew more urgent with every passing day.

What was happening throughout the Sol System was the greatest military muster since the Great Crusade, but it was only a part of the greater whole, for Guilliman's plan was audacious. All across the Imperium similar gatherings were under way, vast movements of troops and assets undertaken despite war and compromised communications. Messinius was witnessing part of the Emperor's plan reborn. This was the work of one primarch. What would eighteen have done?

The Indomitus Crusade was too big to comprehend. The forces on display at Terra were too much to take in. There were ships in every direction, the great battleships and heavy cruisers like queens in social insect hives, served by endless lines of lesser craft moving to and from Luna and the Throneworld. He saw the *Excelsior Cruor*, command craft of the Lord High Admiral of the Navy, Lady Meralda Pereth, surrounded by its own escorts, a fleet in its own right standing sentinel over Terra's northern polar orbits. Not far from it was the *Dawn of Fire*, which would serve as the primarch's flagship. Both were immense, miles long, but in this city made of ships, tiny districts only.

Terra heaved with insurrection. Still the primarch managed to command this emptying of worlds. Guilliman's success was Messinius' problem. Ships were arriving from the system's edge all the time. The largest had crews tens of thousands strong. The smallest were insignificant enough to evade detection. Any one of them could contain a threat to his lord. It only

took one man on one ship in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the Indomitus Crusade would be strangled at birth.

Messinius' mind operated at capacity, occupied by dozens of streams of information. Men and women handed him dataslates to check. Audex and vid-feeds piped directly into his sensorium. Data screeds scrolled endlessly down his helmlate. The secondary flight deck was occupied by men and women of the Officio Logisticarum under his command, and there were several Space Marines. Everyone on that deck was concerned solely with the primarch's security. All of them needed to speak to him.

Security was tight. Between the *Aquila Resplendum* and the barques of lordly Terrans flew four more transports, each one full of human storm troopers and more Adeptus Astartes. Unwavering flights of Space Marine attack craft flew in escort around it. Adeptus Custodes accompanied Guilliman wherever he went.

As preparations for the fleets' departure increased in tempo, security arrangements for the primarch were becoming more difficult. According to agents from various Imperial Adepta, the deposed High Lords could not be trusted, and Messinius had his doubts about some of those currently in office, with worrying reports particularly coming from Cancellarius Anna-Murza Jek's office. There were parties across the Imperium who offered danger to the returned primarch. That left out xenos agents, and those working for the Great Enemy, whether willingly or not, for there were a hundred ways a man's will might be subverted. Although few beings in all the galaxy could stand against Roboute Guilliman in combat, he was not immortal.

Today was a big risk. The *Aquila Resplendum* led a convoy of transports of even more jewelled ostentation than itself. Upon them were the great and good of Terra, including eight of the twelve High Lords, and those who could not attend personally had sent their most trusted representatives. Here they all were, flying to visit one of the most dangerous men in the Imperium, the entire top echelon of the Imperial Government. Absolute folly, thought Messinius, but Roboute Guilliman would not be dissuaded. He would have Cawl's demonstration of whatever technology he brought to Terra.

Battleships and cruisers fired low-power volleys from their energy weapons in salute. At that magnitude coloured lights only, but a single good

shot from a main armament, and the primarch would die. Messinius tracked the power signatures of a dozen vessels simultaneously, alert for readings that indicated full charge emissions.

Hundreds of fighter craft flew in display formations around and before the convoy. If one of those pilots decided to turn, the primarch would die.

They passed by the flanks of gargantuan bulk carriers, following void-roads laid out by blinking beacons. If one of them was sabotaged, then the primarch would die.

None of these things happened. Beneath Messinius, stretching out in near infinite webs, were operatives of every kind from each of the Adeptus Terra. But he could not account for everything. He felt an unaccustomed tension that only grew as they passed through the endless ranks of void craft gathering for war.

‘My lord.’ The low voice of one of his crew interrupted his thoughts. He turned off his dataflows so he could see her clearly.

‘Logister Wreen,’ he said.

‘We are approaching our destination,’ she reported.

‘Thank you.’

She bowed and Messinius took a few steps towards the oculus. They were passing out of the shadow of a scarred battle cruiser undergoing a hurried refit. The light of Sol was rarely visible on Terra, but it shone pure in the void as it had for time untold, and yellow light streamed through the windows. Ahead, in a clear area of space, was the largest ship of all, roughly ovoid in shape, covered all over with hangar slots, projecting instrument clusters and weapons blisters. Behind it, in perfect formation, were a dozen transports shaped like ingots of metal.

Messinius watched it grow larger. That ship could kill them all, if it wished. It could do it while they were in space. It could be done while they were inside. Roboute Guilliman put an awful lot of trust in Belisarius Cawl.

‘Inform the *Zar Quaesitor* that we are on approach vector,’ he said. ‘Have them allocate a landing space. The primarch comes.’

The *Zar Quaesitor* swelled until it was bigger even than the dirty orb of Terra and the sorrowful white round of Luna. Ark Mechanicus ships like this were rare, great relics from better times. Messinius had never seen one before. He had fought alongside Cawl during the Terran Crusade. The

magos had proved his worth time and again, but there was a tension between him and the primarch. Cawl's Armour of Fate had saved Guilliman, bringing him back to life, and sustained him still, while Guilliman could command any man in the Imperium, and so both had holds over the other when neither liked to be restrained. Dissent was growing in the Adeptus Mechanicus at Cawl's influence. His methods were questionable. There would come a time when he and the primarch did not see eye to eye, and what would he do then?

They were directed towards a tall hangar gate low down on the *Zar Quaesitor's* belly. The Space Marine escort craft peeled away in perfect formation to await the primarch's command. The *Aquila Resplendum* proceeded, until the blue shimmer of the atmospheric field filled the forward view, the giant hangar it protected hazy beyond.

A pale blue line electrons-thick passed over the eagle ship. Wings folded inwards. The landing gear swung down from the body, huge, taloned feet opening, ready to brace the craft as it touched down. A violent outrushing of propellant gases burst from the landing jets, swallowing a wide expanse of the deck. Feet connected with the metal, shaking the hangar. The eagle sank into itself, and before it had come to a full rest the high chest opened. Burnished feathers parted in a razored fan, unlocking a gangway that folded down.

Roboute Guilliman strode out as a delegation of Mechanicus priests assembled to meet him, the false magos Qvo-87 at their head. Maldovar Colquan went at the primarch's shoulder, his oath brothers with him. Nine Space Marines followed them. Messinius watched them advance into the hangar, where they were greeted by a coterie of magi. He half listened to their blandishments through shared helm feeds, more interested in the military hardware ranged about and the multiple threats it presented.

The hangar ceiling was a forest of cranes, walkways and pipes, every shadow a hide for an assassin. The back wall was so far away the figures moving around in the bright slit windows of the command stations there were grains of sand, their numbers and intent impossible to judge. Hundreds of vessels of all sizes stood in ranks on the plating. Thousands of servitors tended to them, the greatest concentrations around the incoming ships of the visitors, which were putting down in the centre of the metal plain. Flocks of servo-skulls buzzed overhead, vying for space with larger cyber-constructs

and autonomous drones. Many served a religious purpose, emitting soaring hymns from arrays of vox equipment, or dropping plumes of incense in brightly coloured smokes.

A road led away from the landing field towards a set of armoured gates big enough to accommodate Battle Titans. Thousands of cybernetically enhanced troops in the colours of Mars lined the way, increasing in size and power from man-sized hunters fidgeting on clicking metal legs to behemoths carrying arcane weaponry.

The other ships continued to land, each taking to their own pads. Entourages marched out to each, carrying banners and accompanied by floating devices. Ramps opened. The most powerful people on Terra stepped out. The Grand Provost Marshall Aveliza Drachmar was escorted by a hundred Adeptus Arbites judges dressed in gleaming black. Lucius Throde, the Master of the Astronomican, had a party only slightly smaller: fewer armed men, more advisors and adjutants, many potent psykers. Violeta Roskavler emerged from another ship, leading dozens of high-ranking adepts of the Adeptus Administratum. On it went, each High Lord competing with the others through the size and splendour of their group.

The dignitaries were directed away under the supervision of sophisticated servitor units in a pattern designed to acknowledge seniority and minimise offence. The escorts might have been tech-magi, on second inspection, but every being in Martian red was so heavily augmented it was hard to tell them apart from their mind-wiped slaves.

Messinius watched until all the lords of the Imperium were aboard, knowing that there would be dozens of men like him watching at high alert, all thinking how insanely vulnerable this gathering of might was. Every one of the High Twelve, present or not, Trajann Valoris included, had sent a grand party – except one, and he worried Messinius most of all. Grand Master Fadix of the Officio Assassinorum was already aboard, all alone. Messinius zoomed in with his auto-senses, and saw that Fadix was just there, watching everything carefully.

The delegates gathered into a long procession. There was a place for Messinius by the primarch's side.

'I am leaving,' he informed his aides. 'Continue scanning. Inform me of anything unusual, any anomaly, no matter how small. If Cawl's minions show any sign of blocking our augur soaks, I wish to know. If he has

nothing to hide, then he has no business stopping us seeing what he has in this miniature forge world of his.'

'Yes, my lord,' his human followers said.

'Adeptus Astartes, make a perimeter around the ship. Be prepared to respond should we need to fight our way out of here. Be on your guard.'

The Space Marines followed him down the ramp and fanned out. Messinius waited for the telltale chimes warning him of target locks, but the multiple weapons adorning the hangar hung inert in their mounts, and he felt a little easier.

He was heading to his allotted place when he saw Guilliman's infant corps of historitors at the edge of the hangar, observing the view of the crusade at anchor, near the place bright light shone from the containment field projectors to keep the air in. Nobody seemed to be taking them in hand, and with a growl he altered his course. They saw him coming, and moved back from the edge.

There was so much machinery at work. Metal surfaces responded to touch with an electric crackle. Sparks crawled over his boots when he stopped.

'Wait,' he told them as they went to hurry by. He blocked their path, and they stopped. There were three: a rich-looking man, a young female Martian and another male who had the pasty, ill look of a Terran native. 'Where are you going?'

'To join the parade,' said the rich man.

'At the back,' said the other man nervously.

'You are not to follow the others in the servants' train,' said Messinius. 'You are of special status, beholden to the primarch alone. You three are to follow the primarch's party at a respectful distance, not close enough to be a nuisance to the regent, near enough to hear what is said and to make records. What do you think you are doing?'

Messinius turned down his voxmitter, but the static burr it produced robbed his voice of human softness. He was frightening them. He could not believe they were so timid. This pet project of the primarch's was ridiculous.

'If you see anything worth investigating, then investigate it. That is a priority order.'

'A priority order?' the Terran said.

The captain's helm swivelled to look at him. The man cringed.

‘Of course, my lord,’ said the richer man, with a perfect courtly bow.

‘Hang on,’ said the Terran, finding some backbone. ‘You mean we are to *snoop*? That is not our role.’

Messinius stared at him some more. ‘You are Fabian Guelphrain?’ he said.

The man nodded. He did not cower this time.

‘Your role is to do whatever the primarch requires. If the Lord Guilliman thinks you should snoop, then you should snoop,’ said Messinius. ‘However, it is for neither you nor I to guess what is the lord primarch’s mind. You are to make your own judgements. You have been given a great responsibility. Rise to it.’

‘Captain... Messinius?’ Fabian said, reading off the golden name scroll on his pauldron.

‘That is my name and my rank.’ Messinius stared down at the man. His red lenses glowed with the workings of his helm devices, but Fabian was looking through that, into his eyes.

‘We’re chroniclers, we’re not spies,’ said Fabian.

‘Be quiet, Fabian,’ said the rich man. He must be Mudire, thought Messinius; he was as arrogant as his files suggested. He had files on them all, but had paid them only cursory attention. The historitor project was far from his highest priority.

‘You are to do what you are commanded to do,’ said Messinius.

‘Then what are you commanding us to do, exactly?’ said Fabian.

Messinius gave him another long stare.

‘You were recruited in part because of your imaginations. Use them,’ said Messinius eventually. ‘I recommend you move now, or you will be left behind. Do not disappoint the primarch.’ He stalked away, his armoured mass shaking the deck.

‘We won’t,’ said Mudire to himself. ‘We remember Thiennes.’

Messinius heard him mutter, and they started to bicker. He paid no more attention to them after that.

The visiting Imperial party formed up into a long procession with the primarch near its head. The line was over a mile long when assembled, and never narrower than four people abreast. Messinius had his Terran Crusade veterans stationed at regular intervals down the entire length of the group, ostensibly as an honour guard, but they had orders to be alert for suspicious

activity. Guilliman was behind a block of Adeptus Mechanicus priests bearing banners covered in esoteric marks. Colquan was at his left, Qvo-87 at his right.

Messinius took position in the file of Space Marine captains behind Guilliman. The few members of the Victrix Guard Guilliman had brought stood alongside in a file of their own. Two groups of five to cover the primarch's back. He stamped on his annoyance. He was glad that Guilliman had allowed him to bring the line troopers, at least. As he waited for the rest of the groups to assemble, he ran tactical simulations in his helm, plotting possible routes of escape. Always escape, he thought, never forward, never into battle. He yearned for the day they would depart on crusade and leave all the politicking behind.

The lowing of a Knight's war-horn announced the beginning of Cawl's revelation. Others joined it, one at a time, until a dozen blared a mournful fanfare. The tech-priests at the front of the procession began to sing an interweaving harmony of grating datasongs. The larger war constructs stepped forward, causing Messinius' hand to clench, but they only lifted their weapons into an arch.

The war-horns cut out, and the giant gates leading into the *Zar Quaesitor* swung inwards. The *Aquila Resplendum* responded by augur-scrying the revealed interior, and set up a stream of scanning data directly to his sensorium. His armour's machine-spirits sketched out a cartograph with a potential route. It was a long way. Massive energy signatures came from ahead. Heat blazed through the opening gates, and the ringing peals of machinery hard at work competed with the tech-priests' songs.

The servants of Cawl set out from the hangar, leading them into a gargantuan smeltery. Temperature indicators within Messinius' sensorium rose, and the noise of creation came from every quarter; a cacophony of roars, whooshing hot metal, clangs and banging that made any conversation impossible.

If Guilliman said anything to either Qvo-87 or to Colquan, it was inaudible. The smelter's noise would have overcome a conversation shouted directly into Messinius' ears, and the next chamber was no better. There a mass of fully automated devices assembled parts of machines in looped production lines. Many different processes seemed to be under way in there, with multiple tracks running in, over and through each other to maximise

space. They crawled up the walls, over the ceiling, exiting and re-emerging through tight apertures set into the fabricatory's walls. He tried to calculate how many worlds must have been bled dry to make the *Zar Quaesitor*. Dozens, he decided.

A succession of factory spaces came and went. The party headed downwards the entire time. Eventually, the last fabricatory was behind them, and they passed into the first of a series of immense storage holds. The temperature dropped rapidly. Most of the cargo was concealed in plain transit containers. Augur readings became more uncertain the further Messinius went from his ship, and he got no definitive information on what was in the containers, but equally he got no impression Cawl was trying to prevent datascrying. Then they came to areas where the contents were on open display, and Messinius found himself amazed.

There was hold after hold of tanks, battle walkers, aircraft and void fighters, all of unfamiliar, new designs. His battleplate rapidly scanned them for combat capabilities, flashing hints of unknown technologies across his helmplate. All were obviously intended for the Adeptus Astartes. He was still trying to evaluate the equipment when they went into another hold and further wonders were revealed: thousands of suits of power armour waited for wearers in silent ranks, their plates part-wrapped in protective films, hanging from padded armatures in racks dozens of layers high.

He looked on astounded. This too was brand new, innovative technology. Power armour was precious, hard to fabricate, the pieces often passed down from bearer to bearer and embellished by each man to wear it. This was all pristine, entirely uniform, and heavier than the wargear Messinius was used to. The other Space Marines were similarly affected, though they held vox silence as the primarch had bidden. The silence in the holds was complete, and though their ears still rang from the noise in the fabricatories, the humans lowered their voices instinctively, as if they were in a temple, but they murmured and spoke rapidly with one another at each new revelation. 'This is Adeptus Astartes power armour,' they were saying. 'But who will wear it?'

Messinius thought the same. There were not enough Space Marines in the whole galaxy to fill all this armour, not any more. What was the point of it?

It was then Guilliman spoke. His face remained stern, and lips unmoving, but he subvocalised a message to them.

'My sons, my brothers,' he voxed them. 'There is something I have been keeping from you. Do not judge me harshly for it. The time of revelation is at hand.'

The final door opened, and Messinius understood.

Chapter Sixteen

THE PRIMARIS REVELATION

ALPHA PRIMUS

A NEW AGE DAWNS

The procession came to a massive, lenticular space deep in the ship, the largest hold of all, emerging through a triple set of armoured gates onto a viewing gallery. Guilliman and his transhumans were taken to the railings at the front. The rest of the groups were ushered onto raised platforms placed so that all might see down onto the hold's floor.

Messinius went to the front with the primarch. A hundred feet below, a clear square near the gallery was illuminated by bright light, its source unseen to the observers, and within it stood one hundred Space Marines clad in unmarked, grey armour. The rest of the location was black as Old Night, but the size of it could be sensed. Messinius' systems estimated it to be miles across. As well as being the largest chamber they'd seen in the *Zar Quaesitor*, it was the coldest, and the humans' breath rose in clouds around them.

He looked down at Cawl's creations. They were bigger than him. A new kind of Space Marine. As inconceivable as that was, they were there, in front of him. He began running threat assessments.

A lone, blaring horn wailed across the space, and a single grav-platform descended from overhead. From the delegates' perspective, it came top down, rotating at the mid-point before continuing until it was level with the

primarch at the front of the viewing gallery. A pair of giant vid-screens floated up to hover beside it. These activated to show the occupant of the platform, greatly magnified.

A massively augmented tech-magos stood before them. His upper torso supported a number of additional limbs, but he was otherwise recognisably humanoid, with a human head beneath a high hood where patches of age-blue skin were visible between his augmetics. Though hidden by a large, augmetic mandible, his face seemed to be of flesh, and a cunning human eye shone deep in his hood next to a bulky augmetic.

These scraps of flesh aside, he was mostly machine. His belly and back were bulked out by massive plates covered in empty input sockets. A high crest was locked over his bent spine, with much machinery beneath the rear, and the whole studded with large sockets to take additional limbs. His lower portions bore no resemblance to a normal man whatsoever. Multiple legs bore him on a long carriage that was sufficiently large to allow him to look Roboute Guilliman dead in the eye.

Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, self-proclaimed greatest mind of the age, and Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah.

He carried no weapons, and his form was slenderer than the last time Messinius had seen him, lacking the armour plates and other artefacts of war he had carried on the Terran Crusade. Cawl was in every way a Martian grotesque, yet when he spoke, he had a cheerful, warm manner.

‘Greetings, dignitaries of the Imperium,’ he proclaimed. His voice was amplified, and boomed at godlike volume through the chamber. He spread his arms and bowed, the various mechadendrites and other tentacular appendages he wore rising over him in a fan. ‘And greetings to you, Lord Roboute Guilliman, creation of the Omnissiah, most holy representative of Him, and my friend.’ He pointed meaningfully at the primarch.

He bowed again at Guilliman alone, then rose, and extended an arm behind him to indicate the square of silent Space Marines. Under the brilliant light, the metal of the magos’ hand shone like quicksilver.

‘For those of you who do not know me, I am the Archmagos Belisarius Cawl. Ten thousand years ago, the very same primarch who stands with you today entrusted me with a great and difficult task, the improvement of the work of the Omnissiah Himself.’

A murmur passed around the crowd, loudest among those knots of people

with technical knowledge or an understanding of the Martian Cult.

‘You have passed through this ship of mine and seen some of my work. Improvements to weaponry, armour and attack vehicles. Salvaged ancient knowledge, and entirely new designs. The scale of what I have achieved in armaments and wargear exceeds the wildest dreams of my colleagues, but it is the lesser part of the work. These warriors you see here before you are the crowning achievement of my project. You bear witness to a new founding!’ he said joyfully. ‘A new kind of warrior, the Primaris Space Marine.’

He chuckled, a most incongruous sound. ‘Do not think me a heretek for my presumption, for the Lord Guilliman commissioned me to undertake this task. Even I do not have the temerity to tinker with the Omnissiah’s work without permission. It was Lord Guilliman that gave me access to what few records and materials appertaining to the Space Marines’ creation survived the Great Heresy War, including the remnants left from His original primarch project, may the Machine-God ever guide and watch over His incarnate component. In a few moments, you will see that although my labours were millennia long, understanding even the work of the Emperor Himself was not beyond my genius, and I have exceeded the primarch’s demands in every way.’

He clicked metallic fingers. The warriors in the square divided immediately into squads and began marching around.

‘Stronger, more durable, more intelligent, more loyal. In the Primaris Space Marines, I have perfected that which many already thought perfect, correcting flaws, and introducing new enhancements to further improve combat effectiveness.’ Cawl gave another chuckle and bowed modestly. ‘There are those in the priesthood that would burn me for my claims, but I speak only the truth. I do not mean to call my work better than that of the Emperor, or to suggest my own substantial skills exceed His. These things I have done are rooted firmly in all the Omnissiah did before me. For is that not the driving force of our creed of Mars, to look back to greatness, and through diligent study recreate it? I stand upon titanic shoulders in order to touch the stars.’

He snapped his fingers again. Holes opened in the floor. From them issued dozens of heavy-combat servitors. The Space Marines stopped marching, set down their guns, and drew their combat knives.

‘This demonstration you are about to see is at full lethality,’ he said. ‘These servitors are among the very best combat models available, I know for I made them myself, and they have been programmed to kill. I shall transmit their combat programmes to you all for full disclosure. You may deconstruct them at your leisure. There will be no falsehood. I come to purvey hope. I am no bringer of lies.’ His mouth was invisible behind his mandibular augmetic, but they could all hear the smile in his voice. ‘There is no point selling you the excellence of my wares, if you do not get to see them fight. Here is a little demonstration!’ He clapped his hands.

The light snapped off the magos, shifting the focus of the group onto the Space Marines in the square. They readied themselves as the servitors fanned out into attack formation. Unlike the Space Marines, the servitors sported a full array of ranged and close-melee weapons, which they levelled at their foes. Grey faces mounted with advanced targeting augmetics stared across at warriors encased in power armour. Both sides were as inhuman as each other in their own way.

For a moment, the opposing forces faced one another.

‘For the Emperor!’ the Space Marines shouted, their battle cry amplified by their helmet augmitters into a roaring shockwave of sound. Even in the expansive hold, it was startling, and many of the full humans flinched.

The square erupted into violence. The Space Marines charged. The servitors opened fire with high-energy weaponry. An energy field contained the battleground, and it sparked with stray hits as plasma streams connected with it. Messinius watched as one of the Space Marines was felled mid-run, a coruscating beam of particles melting through his chestplate and burning out the flesh inside with a shocking intensity. Cawl was killing them to make a point, and he could not agree with that. He glanced at Guilliman, but the primarch remained impassive as ever.

Another was hit, and although his armour was breached he kept his feet, and charged forward again.

The servitors managed only a couple of volleys before the Space Marines were among them. The crash of ceramite on plasteel echoed up from the illuminated square. The aggression they displayed was terrifying, all the more so for being completely controlled. They targeted the ranged servitors first, wrenching their guns off their mounts before murdering their organic components with chilling efficiency. Aside from that opening cry, the Space

Marines made no noise as they fought. Metal crashed. Oil mingled with blood in broad slicks. Machines and men died.

Messinius watched three Space Marines take on a six-limbed monstrosity whose arms were tipped with crackling power blades. The Primaris warriors were fast, stronger than Space Marines of his type, and taller. His sensorium passed as much information about their wargear to him as it could gather. The reactors were more powerful. Their guns bigger and better. Without a full auspex reading he could tell little more, but he could see.

These were not Space Marines. They were something else.

They were his replacements. He realised, as he watched, that he was witness to the dawning of a new breed, and by extension, the end of his own.

One of the Primaris Marines was cleaved down, his armour split in a flash and bang of disruptor discharge. The others moved around the whirling blades. They were ungraceful, and to Messinius' practised eye they appeared stiff, almost a little mechanical, but the economy of their movements was astounding. Within two heartbeats they were within the reach of the combat servitor, and set about the joints of its limbs, slashing pipes and power feeds with their knives. Hydraulic fluids sprayed out and its arms went limp. In the space of only a few seconds, they had brought low a mechanical horror.

As Messinius watched the melee progress, he felt a tingle in the back of his neck. He turned around, expecting to find someone staring at him from the windows in the wall behind. He saw nothing, but his suspicions were raised. Messinius was far too experienced to ignore instinct.

He voxed Tierinus, the senior Victrix Guard present.

'Watch the primarch,' he said. 'There is somebody here that shouldn't be.'

Messinius left the clamour of combat behind, passing the enraptured delegations of Terran power to an open doorway, where he entered a plain corridor lit by dim blue lumens. He looked one way, but his attention was dragged to the other, and he felt himself drawn away to the right. The corridor opened up onto a set of stairs in a square well set in the wall of the hold. He allowed his feet to carry him up three floors. Again he turned right, allowing intuition to guide him. He had the sense of a presence awaiting him. A psyker, perhaps. He loosened his bolt pistol in its holster,

but did not draw it.

He came to a room with a round-cornered window looking out over the display ground. There were pallets ranged about the room, their loads covered over by heavy plastek tarpaulins heat-sealed to the bottoms. Dockets written in the indecipherable script of the *Lingua Technis* occupied clear wallets on the outside of each.

In that lonely place, a giant stood. There was no light in the room but that shining in from the hold and its display ground, only enough to highlight the many scars covering his face. He was *Adeptus Astartes*, *Messinius* was sure, but big, bigger even than the other *Primaris Space Marines* fighting for their lives in the square. He could be nothing else. Enormous muscles bulged under his robes, his milky skin was darkened in patches by the black carapace, and armour interface ports were visible in the back of his neck and wrists.

‘Good day,’ the figure said. He kept his eyes on the melee. His face was half turned into the room, allowing *Messinius* to see his expression. It was indescribably miserable. *Messinius* felt enormous pity for him, without knowing why.

‘Who are you?’ *Messinius* said. He put his hand on his pistol. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I live here,’ said the man.

‘Then why did you call me here? You are a psyker, yes?’

The *Space Marine* turned fully to face him. He had full, downturned lips, and sorrowful eyes.

‘You felt the manipulation? That is interesting. You must have some sensitivity to the warp.’

‘I’m no witch,’ said *Messinius*.

The *Space Marine* stared at him. ‘If you say so.’ His doleful gaze flicked down to *Messinius*’ sidearm. ‘You won’t need that. I am loyal to the Throne. I am no threat to the primarch. I called to you to warn you, in fact.’

‘You are a psyker,’ said *Messinius*. ‘One I did not expect to find and one I was not informed of. You are a threat.’ He held his ground by the door. This was a powerful warrior. He primed an emergency message pulse.

‘Yes, I am a psyker, among other things,’ said the warrior. ‘But I assure you I am not a threat.’

‘Who are you?’ *Messinius* asked again.

‘I do not have a name as such, but my master calls me Alpha Primus.’ He looked down at Cawl, half hidden in the darkness. ‘His little joke,’ he said bitterly. ‘The archmagos likes to joke.’

Messinius remained wary of this Primus, but he did not feel threatened, and went to stand beside him to look into the square. The fight was nearly done. Most of the combat units were down, scattered about in a mess of shattered machine parts and rent flesh. Half a dozen of the Space Marines were dead, another several injured.

‘That is a waste. A needless cruelty,’ he said, hoping to draw a reaction from the strange Space Marine. He got a question back in return.

‘Is it either of those things?’ said Primus. ‘A few lives to show the primarch’s newfound power. A little display to inform those who might oppose him of the violence he could unleash. That is worth a little blood, do you not think?’

‘The primarch would not stand for such wanton murder.’

‘Not if he had to do it himself, but he can see the utility of this display,’ said Primus. ‘My master likes his shows, he likes surprise. Guilliman has not been aboard this ship before.’ He looked at Messinius. ‘You know him. I sense it. Do you think your precious primarch will not have anticipated this display? He let it happen, because it is expedient. He is using it, just as he is using his surprise at the scale of Cawl’s achievements to distance himself from the Primaris’ creation, thus blunting suspicion that he intends to usurp his father. There is never an opportunity missed with Roboute Guilliman. He is a masterwork,’ said Primus, with a mixture of envy and appreciation. He looked down on the primarch. He placed his hand flat on the glass. ‘Such majesty the Emperor engineered into the primarchs, whereas I am an abomination, made by a second-rate tinkerer.’ His hand fell from the window. ‘What do you think of your replacements?’

Messinius said nothing.

‘You will not speak? Fine. I sense your surprise, though. Guilliman did not tell you of the Primaris project?’

‘No,’ admitted Messinius.

‘He probably told no one at all,’ said Primus. ‘How does that make you feel?’

Messinius questioned the wisdom of answering honestly, but did so anyway. ‘It offends me that I was not trusted. But I see why he told no one.’

A primarch with a new breed of Space Marines available soon after he awakens. Many great men of Terra remember the Heresy. To a suspicious mind, it might look like he planned this.'

'It does, does it not?' Primus nodded. 'Nobody is ever truly open, not even your gene-father. If I may offer you some advice, do not believe everything Cawl tells you when you speak with him either. He overplays his genius. He walks a crooked path.'

'This is your warning?' Messinius looked into Primus' scarred face.

'It is.'

'You do not need to warn me of that. He made you?'

Primus nodded. Palpable misery wept off him.

'What are you? Are you one of these... Primaris Space Marines?'

Primus returned his sad gaze to the battle floor. He moved slowly, as if every motion cost him an enormous effort. 'I am different to them. I am different to everyone. The archmagos says I was the first of the Primaris brotherhood, but I do not think this is true. I can do things none of them can. I was there before they were made. I have watched them grow in number. I have guarded them down the millennia. I was here long before the first of them was awoken to be tested.'

'Why did you really call me?'

'To warn you. And...'

The giant shrugged. 'Boredom. Loneliness. But mostly to warn you.' He took a weary breath. 'To each of His sons the Emperor gave some of His gifts. I doubt any one being other than He could contain such power in its entirety. To each of the sons of those sons, a portion of those gifts were passed on in turn. I have several of these gifts. As many as Cawl dared give me. I have called to you, Captain Messinius, to show you myself. I am living proof that Cawl cannot be trusted.'

He turned his ponderous head back to the demonstration below. The Space Marines were lined up for inspection while the dead combat units were cleared away. They were powerful. A decisive force for the man that controlled them.

'Do not fear,' said Primus, giving Messinius the certainty he had read his mind. 'Cawl has no desire to rule. He wants what we all want.'

'What is that?'

'The salvation of mankind.' Primus took a slow breath. 'But Cawl is not infallible. He believes he is, but he is not. He sees himself as the instrument

of his god, the Ommissiah, your Emperor. You know, I see so much. When I look beyond this crude reality, I see Him burning in the fire of His beacon, eternally writhing in pain. Gods do not suffer, so he cannot be a god. That is my understanding of it. Ergo, Cawl's basic understanding of the universe is flawed, and that means he is wrong.' He was quiet a moment. 'Or maybe it is I who am wrong. Perhaps He could not see the truth and remain unchanged either. Perhaps He is divine.' He shrugged. 'What does it matter?'

Beneath them, Cawl was gesticulating with all the fluid enthusiasm of a huckster. His presentation was becoming more energetic. Without the accompanying speech, it looked almost comical. It made him appear even more dangerous somehow.

'Great forces gather,' said Primus. 'For millennia, the Imperium has had no one to lead it. At last mankind has someone to believe in, and they do believe, they believe so much it moves the warp. This is a source of alarm to many, many beings, from politicians to gods. Be careful, Vitrian Messinius. The primarch has legions of enemies, and they are yours now too.'

'I have faith in my primarch,' said Messinius firmly. 'I have no fear.'

Primus smiled sorrowfully. 'Be wary of faith also, captain. It will destroy us all, one day. Faith,' he said, pointing to Guilliman, 'and hubris,' he continued, pointing to Cawl. He curled his finger back in. 'I have said what I needed to say. I would return now, if I were you. Cawl is reaching his grand finale. I do not think you want to miss it.'

Messinius glanced back at the illuminated square. Blackness stretched away in all directions around it.

What did it hide?

'Finale?'

When he looked up, he was alone. Primus was gone.

Unnerved, he took himself back down to the display hall, voxing his troopers and ordering them to perform a sweep, knowing already they would find nothing.

Messinius hurried back to the display stand. Space Marines were moving out of the back of the hall into the galleries. The Victrix Guard had taken up combat stance. Guilliman seemed to pay no attention, but Messinius could

see he was ready to fight, if he had to.

As he passed through the stands of dignitaries he noted well their reactions. In some, he saw hope of a new weapon that might deliver humanity from its imminent doom. In others he saw consternation. He shared it. New warriors, ready to fight from cold caskets. They must have been hypno-indoctrinated to make them so effective; if so, what else might have been put into their heads? Tainted Chapter culture was readily passed on in this manner, and Messinius was fully aware of what thoughts an ambitious man might programme into new warriors.

He returned to his place as Cawl was finishing a lengthy description of the Primaris Space Marines' capabilities, and gave details of the weapons and armour they had, making sure to impress upon the delegation that this was only the tip of the sword he had forged, and making equally sure to state his loyalty to the Imperium. He was garrulous, an unusual trait in the Martian of his exalted rank; more unusually he seemed eager to please. These characteristics more than surprised Messinius – he found them disappointing. Cawl was contemptible, but did that make him more or less trustworthy? Given Primus' existence, he thought the latter.

Finally, Cawl stopped prattling and bowed, retreating a little upon his grav-platform. A silent Roboute Guilliman looked over the company of identical warriors standing to attention. Cawl had not revealed which primarch was their father, another troubling note.

'You have excelled yourself,' said Guilliman. 'I am at a loss for words.'

'I had ten thousand years, my Lord Roboute,' Cawl said. 'Maybe I got a little carried away.'

'I expected a better breed of warrior, better weapons. Everything I have seen since I awoke has shown me nothing but decline. This is...' Guilliman paused.

'Something new?' said Cawl, nodding his head in satisfaction. 'I am an innovator. Many of the others call me heretic for this, but I am what none of them are. I am a *scientist*,' he said, using a word of ancient origin rarely spoken in those times. 'They use that as a slur, but I am a true servant of the Machine-God. I studied the work of the Emperor closely. I used the ancient arts of deductive reasoning. This is no heresy, indeed I say more honour is given the Machine-God by using His tools properly, and not falling prey to the dogma of rapturous unenlightenment.'

‘You have given me an army,’ said Guilliman.

Cawl turned suddenly, rising up on his mechapedal carriage and spreading all his limbs wide. ‘Army?’ he said, cranking up the amplification of his voice so that it rolled around the hold like thunder. He laughed. ‘An army? My lord, I have given you legions!’

He gestured. The dark parts of the hold suddenly filled with paired points of light. Thousands upon thousands of active eye lenses.

‘Behold,’ Cawl cried. ‘The true extent of my genius!’

Squares of light came on, each accompanied by a resounding boom. They started slowly, emanating from the display ground, illuminating the entire grid of the hold, both floor and ceiling. The lights came on with greater speed, until the whole space, more than three miles across, was brightly lit.

Under glaring phosphor glow stood thousands of Primaris Space Marines. The gravity plating above the delegation was inverted, and as many warriors were arrayed on the ceiling as they were on the nominal floor. They were divided by gene-line. Unlike the unliveried initial hundred, these were dressed in the yellow of the Imperial Fists, the blue of the Ultramarines, the grey of the Space Wolves, the red of the Blood Angels, the black of the Raven Guard and the Iron Hands, the vibrant green of the Salamanders, the darker green of the Dark Angels and the storm-white of the White Scars.

Within each block were multiple armour variants, infiltrators, terror troops, reconnaissance specialists, heavy shock troopers and others. New patterns of Dreadnought and piloted walkers stood behind them, and when Cawl clashed his metal hands together again, lines of grav-tanks fired their engines and rose from the deck in humming formations. The Space Marines brought their weapons across their chests – new patterns of bolt, plasma and every other kind of gun besides – and stamped their feet twice, shaking the ship.

‘For the Emperor! For Terra! For Unity! For Guilliman!’ they roared as one.

Cawl’s voice rose triumphantly, and his legs pushed him higher. ‘Not since the time your father walked among us have so many Space Marines drawn breath. They say I blaspheme. They say that I tinker with the work of the Ominissiah in ignorance. It is they who are ignorant! I, Belisarius Cawl, am the only one with the wit to follow the Emperor’s original vision.’ He sank

down again, and lowered his voice, clasping his hands in front of himself humbly. ‘But I can only accomplish part of it. I am not the Emperor, and nor are you, my lord. He made His armies and He conquered with them, but to do what He did requires both of us, so in honest humility I relinquish these warriors – all these warriors, every one, every gun, every tank, every voidship, every suit of armour and every bolt – to your command.’

Guilliman looked down again at the host, multiplying the contingent by the *Zar Quaesitor*’s numerous holds. Cawl watched him, a sly look on his aged face.

‘I calculate there to be twenty-four thousand Space Marines here. Are there more?’ said Guilliman eventually. ‘These are not all?’

‘All? All!’ Cawl laughed uproariously, three voices emerging from his voxmitter, layered over one another. ‘This is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, my dear Roboute.’

Cawl was habitually overly familiar with the primarch. His lack of respect annoyed Messinius, and strengthened his doubts.

‘The ships I brought with me contain five thousand warriors each, all currently asleep,’ Cawl went on. ‘Upon Mars many times these numbers still slumber, and in other places. I was careful to cache them away, you see. Some envy me so much they want me dead, and all my works burned! Can you believe that?’ He affected a wounded air. ‘These here are merely my demonstration models, enough to make a sufficient impact, I hope, on you, and my esteemed Lords of Terra. Enough to begin your war, but I assure you I also have enough that you might finish it.’

Guilliman looked upon the archmagos again.

‘How many are there?’ he asked.

With great relish, Belisarius Cawl told him.

In that moment, the history of the galaxy changed forever.

Guilliman looked around the hold. For the first time, Messinius saw him surprised, genuinely so, and yet he knew Primus was right. Guilliman had expected this and had factored it into his calculations. He was using his own emotions for political gain.

‘You have served the Emperor like few ever have, Belisarius Cawl.’ Guilliman turned to face the delegation. ‘This is what I brought you to see, my lords, this culmination of orders given ten millennia ago and exceeded in every way. Not since the Great Crusade has such a force been available

to us.

‘The Emperor had a dream,’ he said. ‘To unite all mankind in peace and prosperity. To ensure every human being could live a life unspoiled by the fear of xenos oppression or the thirsts of Dark Gods.’ He glanced down. ‘I have lived twice. In my first life, I was naive. I did not see what the universe truly was, that this realm of matter we inhabit is but a part of things, not everything. That the wars of the spirit are as important as the wars of flesh and blood. I have paid for that ignorance many times over. It was a residue of that ignorance that led me to preserve what little we could salvage from the wreck of the Horus Heresy rather than tasking my brothers with making something new.

‘I return to find my efforts were insufficient, and that humanity suffers because of my lack. For that I beg your humble forgiveness. I swear to you all, here and now, that I shall atone for those errors. That I shall put right my mistakes. Now is not the time to dwell on what has been lost, or what might have been, or yearn for what we briefly touched in those times you call the Days of Wonder. The time has come not for preservation, but for advancement of the human cause. No longer shall we live like frightened rats in a crumbling museum. An age of terror has descended, a night to rival the terrors of the Age of Strife. But there is light in the darkness. We shall prevail. We shall push back the dark and retake from it what is rightfully ours, not from yesterday, or ten years ago, or a thousand, or even from the time your Emperor walked among you, but before, when humanity ruled the galaxy, in the High Ages of Technology, and all feared us. When there was peace, and prosperity. It is this I shall restore. As the Emperor almost succeeded in doing, we, together, you and I, shall once again try, and we shall succeed!’ He flung out his arm towards Cawl’s Primaris warriors. ‘Terra has its armies. Our fleets gather. Let the enemies of the Imperium quail. The days of darkness are over.

‘The reconquest of the galaxy can begin.’

Chapter Seventeen

DATA MINE

THREE ERRORS RECTIFIED

A WAY OUT REVEALED

Nawra was hungry.

Taking the side route had been a mistake. It split and split and became so tangled that she was rapidly lost. What looked to take her up led her down, what should have led her forward led her back. She spent a night hiding in an abandoned room, and in the morning had stolen food and water from a small refectory between shift sittings, but that had been hours ago. Her mouth was parched. Her stomach ached. She was clueless as to where she was, finding herself moving further and further away from populated zones, until she was wandering silent corridors made narrow by tall shelves.

An uncountable number of vellum and paper scrolls stretched away until they vanished into the distance, all grey with age. The corridor was unusually well lit, with functioning lumens hanging from the apex of the ribbed roof, but there was no one about. She had been hoping this corridor would lead her back to the main route, but the longer she stayed on it, the less sure she became, until she was certain she was going the wrong way altogether. She stopped and looked back the way she had come. It seemed as long as the way ahead.

She made a determined noise, clutched the Emperor's idol in her hand, and continued the way she was going.

A couple of hours later, the corridor vanished into an immense hall that stretched on out of sight. Towering piles of papers heaped up seemingly without care took the place of the shelving. Her footsteps slowed as she came into this landscape of waste, and she faltered.

It was cold there. Despair stole up on her, accompanied by exhaustion. She hunted about for somewhere to rest.

‘I’ll go back,’ she said. ‘I’ll just retrace my steps until I find someone to show me the way. Perhaps the blockade will be gone by now.’

She was fooling herself. In any case, she hadn’t got far enough to claim the rights of a scribum-errant. She’d be caught and just be sent back. There didn’t seem to be anywhere safe in the hall either. She could hear things scratching about, and there were chewed scraps of vellum everywhere. Rats, she was sure. Her father used to say they got as long as your arm, down in the deeper places. She didn’t like her father, and had barely known him before she was sent away, but she remembered that, it had scared her so much.

As sleep was about to claim her, she found a tunnel burrowed into one of the giant piles. It was made by people, not rodents, because it was big enough to stand in, albeit stooped. She went in a short way and saw she was right, for the tunnel was held up with props made from broken-up scroll shelves, and rats didn’t do that. There was a neat pile of more stacked by the door, making her think someone might come back. Would they help her, she wondered. They might at least have some food.

‘Hello?’ she called into the tunnel. The compressed vellum made a solid material, but soft enough to swallow her voice whole. She went further in and found a bowl candlestick with the stub of a candle still in it. It was covered in dust. Her spirits sank. It didn’t look like anyone had been in there for a long time, after all.

The tunnel sloped up into the dark. There was no sign of any rats so far as she could tell. She was past caring anyway she was so tired, so she lay down on the compacted scrolls. It was warm, and surprisingly comfortable. Within seconds she was fast asleep.

‘Hey, hey you! Wake up! Hey!’ A bony hand grabbed at Nawra’s shoulder, scratching her skin through her shift. She woke to a head-mounted stablight full in her face, unable to see who the hand belonged to.

‘This is my claim!’ the man said. He held a short-hafted pitchfork threateningly in one hand, ready to stab down at her. ‘What are you doing here? This is mine!’

She pushed herself back up the tunnel on her elbows.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she said. ‘I was only looking for somewhere to sleep. I’m lost. I’m lost, please.’

The light bent towards her, and she held up her hand against it. The man who wore it sniffed at her.

‘Hmmm,’ he said suspiciously. ‘You don’t smell like an excavator.’ The pitchfork wavered a little.

‘I’m not, I’m not even an archivist. I’m from the spire, Departmento Processium Quinta.’

‘The spire? You’re in the tower.’

‘I know,’ she said.

The stablight withdrew. The man pulled it from his head and set it down. She blinked afterimages away, until she could see him clearly.

He was old, and ill-kempt, with black teeth in a hole of a mouth thatched with a straggly beard. The skin around his eyes was wrinkled from squinting, and his expression hovered over the uncertain ground somewhere between kindness and madness.

‘You’re a long way from home,’ he said. ‘A very long way from home.’

‘I’m trying to get uphive. I got lost. There was a roadblock.’

‘Yes, everywhere. Big things happening outside the plea district. War is on Terra. Other things happening too, so the whispers say.’

‘War?’ she said.

‘Yes. War. Fighting. Bad things.’ His eyes darted over her appraisingly. He reached out a hand to touch her. She slapped it without thinking, and he drew it away sharply.

‘Ow!’ he said. ‘Why did you do that? Only seeing if you was real,’ he moaned, and flapped his stinging fingers about. ‘See ghosts down here. All sorts.’

‘I don’t like being pawed at,’ she said. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I’m an excavator! A data miner. All these scrolls, millions of them, some thousands of years old. They keep it cool so they don’t rot. Important part of the process, my job.’

‘Why?’ she said.

‘Don’t you know?’ he said. He blinked, and sat back on his heels. ‘This is the plea processing district. The Missive Hive, the Archivists’ Tower, the processing halls – all of it. Thousands of messages every day come in here. The receivers read them. The rankers rank them. The higher-ups action them, or not,’ he said, pointing upwards and behind him. ‘The records end up down here, for a while, but...’ he leaned closer suddenly, his dirt-seamed face eager, ‘but they don’t always get it right! Sometimes they make mistakes. If I find an error, I get rewarded! That’s why I’m mining this heap. Most of these are only a few hundred years old.’ He slapped the wall of compressed messages. ‘Still current. If I find a misfiled text, I can take it to the administrator and get a bounty. Double, if it leads to a prosecution according to the lex minoris. I’ve had three,’ he said proudly. ‘Three silly scribes gone to the pyres for making a mistake, and so they should go! What would the Emperor think?’ He tutted. ‘Very bad business.’

‘Three? In your entire life?’

‘Not in any one else’s lifetime, is it?’ he snapped. ‘Three in thirty-two years is good going, I tell you, and if you leave off the five years of my childhood before I started work, it’s even more impressive. I’m a real finder, me, and now I’ve found you.’

He licked his lips and looked at her in a way that made her uncomfortable.

‘I can earn you some money,’ she said, heading off any other ideas he might have.

His eyes refocused, and he looked up sharply. ‘Money?’

‘I’ve come here to see my father,’ she said. ‘I was bartered from the Departamento Gradio to the Departamento Processium. He’s still here, I hope,’ she added quietly.

‘Why do you want to see him?’

‘He’s my father!’ she said.

‘Most irregular,’ said the man, unconvinced.

‘He’ll pay you. He has a good ancestral office.’

‘Then why are you a processor and not a ranker?’

She looked down, her eyes went moist and she blinked back tears. ‘I was his seventh child. There was nothing for me back home. All our hereditary offices were filled.’

‘Ha!’ said the man. ‘Then why will he pay me?’

‘Because he will!’ said Nawra. The man flinched. ‘Look, you know your

way around the tower?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, yes. I do!’

‘Then what will it cost you? A day grubbing through this?’ She patted the compacted vellum. ‘Surely an uncertain reward for something you already have is better than a certain reward for something you probably won’t find.’

He looked thoughtful. ‘Maybe, maybe.’ His eyes were sharp. ‘What if it takes longer than a day?’

‘It won’t. It took less than that for me to be taken to the spire, and we went on foot. I’ll bet you know a much quicker way too.’

‘I do! I do!’ he said. ‘Where are we going?’

‘My father’s name is Hamran Nison. He dwells within the halls of post-classification, the pre-ranking division.’

‘Aha!’ said the man, and capered about. ‘Not far. Not far at all. Let’s go.’

‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘Do you have anything to eat and drink?’

The man scowled. ‘You want feeding too?’

‘You won’t get anything if I starve,’ she said.

He saw the logic in that, and scuttled crabwise from the tunnel, returning a moment later with small pieces of dried meat that could only have come from rats and a bottle of blessedly pure water. She took both and gulped them down.

‘Now I’m ready,’ she said.

The data miner’s name was Teasel, and he led her out of the hall through a door she would never have found. She shuddered as she considered what would have happened to her if they’d not met. She’d either have been lost down there forever, or gone back and got swept up by the literati.

The door took them to a stair that climbed for many levels before they even saw another door. Teasel ignored this and continued on for what seemed like hours. They took the next, and went through work galleries that reminded her of the cubicularium in the numbers of people employed there, but were otherwise completely different. Miles and miles of cabinets, acres of shelves. Fields of data-input terminals manned by file-serfs sporting bulky augmetics. Nobody stopped her or asked her what she was doing, they were all far too busy, and the worst she suffered were sharp looks and shouted rebukes when she got in their way.

Where the cubicularium was silent, these places echoed with counter-

check songs and requests. Trolleys piloted by servitor torsos rumbled past piled high with scrolls, and towing trains of carts sided with wire grilles carrying more. The higher they went, the better the air became. The people looked a little healthier, and their robes cleaner. Eventually, they came to the level of the middling adepts, the domain of her father.

Threadbare carpets covered over the plascrete floor there, and more than half the lumens worked. The adepts she saw were well fed, some even looked well rested, and none of them had the haunted look of dehydration that plagued the lower workers.

Gallery after gallery of office doors, all numbered and named with stencilled characters rolled by. Peons rushed about self-importantly. The ceiling was a tangle of pneumatic tubes where document cases sped in rattling trains.

Nawra squinted at the doors, until they reached one bearing her father's name and number.

'Hamran Nison!' she said, grabbing Teasel, who showed no sign of stopping. He looked back, and peered at the door. He smiled his black-toothed smile.

'This it?'

'Yes!' she said.

'I'll be right out,' he said, walking in without knocking, leaving Nawra in the corridor on her own.

An adept in training hurried by. The tubes continued to clatter. A few minutes later, Teasel came out. He looked happy.

'You can go in now,' he said, and held the door open for her.

Nawra had been six years old when she'd been traded off to the Processium clan, the standard age to commence work in the hive. She had never visited her father's office. She barely remembered him, but as soon as she saw him she recognised him. He was older, and had become a little fat, though the Emperor alone knew how. His workplace was a surprise to her, being more luxurious than Overwatcher Jedmund's lair, and oppressively bright. Circumstances conspired to discomfort her, and matters got worse from there.

'Ah, Nawra, so it is you,' he said. 'I'd recognise that miserable face anywhere, fourteen years gone by or not.' He laced his hands together. He

did not look pleased. ‘What by the nine devils of Horus are you doing here?’

Nawra’s newfound sense of adventure evaporated, and she became timid.

‘No answer? I had to pay that wretch too. Do you realise how difficult it is for a man of my position to get hold of money? I can’t just throw it around, you know.’

She did not think it could be that difficult. Her father’s office was finely appointed.

‘You were sent to the missive processors, you were supposed to stay there. What will your work master say? What will your husband say?’

She shuffled her feet. ‘I don’t have a husband,’ she said.

Hamran groaned loudly and rubbed his hands over his face.

‘That’s the whole bloody point, sending you to another clan, so you can get a good position and a suitable mate! You’ll be telling me you’re stuck in a cubicle still.’

Her throat was closing up with the shame of it, so she simply nodded.

‘Emperor’s teeth, girl, you always were useless. Do you think they’ll trade any more ink and power for wives if none of them will take you? What are you now, nineteen?’ He swore colourfully. ‘Practically too old. Bastard missive shufflers,’ he shook his head. ‘You can’t trust them. This isn’t the first time I’ve heard of something like this, but my daughter, unmarried? Do they know who they are dealing with?’

His outrage was purely for himself; her feelings didn’t come into the equation.

Hamran pushed himself away from his desk and went to a sideboard, where a bottle of downhive spirit stood. He poured himself a generous measure into a cracked glass and slurped it down. He did not offer her any.

‘You can’t just run away when things aren’t going well,’ he said. ‘The Emperor has His plan for all of us. By denying it, you are at the risk of heresy, and we’ll all be held accountable.’

‘But that’s it!’ she said. ‘You always told me that we are all soldiers in the Emperor’s wars.’

‘We are.’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ she said. With shaking hands, she took out the folded missive from her robes and handed it to him. ‘Because of this.’

His eyes widened. ‘What are you doing with that?’ he said. ‘You can’t

have this, not here! It's in completely the wrong place. I can only see this if it has passed through the correct channels.'

He took it anyway, and read it, and frowned.

'Why this missive? No, this won't do,' he said. 'It won't do at all.'

'Father, father please, listen to me. The Emperor sees us all, and we do His holy work. That's what I am doing now.'

Something in her tone made him look at her properly. She was always a resource to him. He had never looked at her like she was a person, not until then. Into that tiny moment she leapt, breathlessly telling him of the tarot spread and how it came to be laid, and why she feared it to be important. Luckily, her father was a devout man, even if he had many failings, and he listened.

'I need a shortcut,' she said. 'I think someone needs to see this. It's important. I just have to get far enough that I can claim scribum-errant status, that's all.'

He tapped the vellum with his fingernails.

'Maybe. Maybe.' He breathed in sharply through his teeth. 'Those bastards in the Departamento Processium tolerate us because we are necessary, an earlier link in the chain, as it were. I'm tired of them looking down on us all the bloody time.' He went back to his desk, turned round, and ran his finger down a rack of small, neatly labelled boxes behind. He opened one, pulled out a form, and scratched a message and his signature on it.

'We'll say it's a misfiling,' he said, appending the slip to the message with his seal. 'If you are challenged, say that you came to me because you had no choice. If there are any repercussions it'll serve those tedious pedants on the other side of the chasm right for reneging on our marriage arrangement. You're going to have to go beyond this spire cluster, get to the final appraisal department. There are adepts there high enough up to make a proper decision on this. There's one I hear who is particularly lenient when it comes to irregularities, makes sure he does his job right rather than letting the job do him, more fool he, I say, but this is his officio designation.' He scrawled it down onto another piece of paper.

Nawra read her father's writing. The ink ran down the paper, but remained legible.

1/8923-FG-4, it read.

‘Make sure you tell him everything you told me.’

‘Spire cluster?’ she said. ‘What do you mean?’

He looked up sharply. ‘No education either?’

She shook her head.

That particularly outraged him. ‘Those swine! Heads will roll for this, I will see to it personally!’ He went so far as to wag his finger. Then he opened another drawer. ‘Get that scroll-grubber to take you, I’ll bet he knows the way. Scum like that always know things they shouldn’t.’

He fished out a small bag of coins, and handed it over with the document.

‘Emperor go with you, child. With a bit of luck, and His guidance, we can make those short-sighted ink sniffers suffer a bit.’ The idea jollied him.

‘Ha!’ he pronounced.

‘Thank you, father,’ she said.

‘Yes, yes, now go away,’ he said, dismissing her as he would any one of his minions.

‘Nawra?’ said her father.

‘Yes, father?’ She turned back, hopeful of a morsel of approval.

‘I never want to see you again,’ he said. ‘Don’t come back here.’

Chapter Eighteen

ADOLI-4963

A YOUNG SHIP

DISASTER FOR FLEET QUINTUS

‘All praise the Ommissiah. All praise the Machine-God. All praise the motive force.’

Transmechanic Adoli-4963 sang the blessings without thinking. He was tuneful enough, but his mind was not completely on the words. Half his field of vision had been given over to inner sight-screens, and these were stacked up twelve deep by the time he had got into the quaternary plasma overflow tube of the *Embrace of Fire*’s thirteenth reactor conduit.

He made his lonely way down a tunnel that was filled with boiling gases when the ship was under power, his omnimule plodding behind him. Nobody got to go into places like that, not even the transmechanics. Only when the engines were completely powered down was it possible. It was his duty and his pleasure to walk that secret space, and perform the checks that must be made before Fleet Quintus set sail.

His mechadendrites bobbed over his head, the mechanical jaws on the auspex bearing limbs snapping open and shut to feed his mind a delightful breakdown of the corridor’s smell. The byproducts of repeatedly heated magnetic induction coils left a pleasingly metallic tang hanging in the tunnel, along with a cocktail of intriguing free radicals. Naturally, his inbuilt equipment was capable of analysing the composition of the odour to

the atomic level, and it did so constantly. That was part of his purpose, and the glorious will of the Ommissiah had decreed he be made fit for it.

Adoli-4963 loved his job.

In one of his three hands he held a bulky meta-analyser whose delicate antennae broadcast a constant stream of code interlocks to the machines in the corridor. It was a pleasure to watch them come to life, their indicator lights blinking excitedly at their visitor, before they exloaded their function logs and became quiescent again. As Adoli passed down the tube, a ring of activity accompanied him, and data briefly filled the silent spaces of the noosphere. Magnetic toruses powered up and down. Machines rotated quickly and stopped. Channelling spikes extended themselves, displaying funnelling petals like opening metal buds, then retracted with metallic hisses.

Occasionally, Adoli-4963 stopped to commune more deeply with a machine whose data patterns were out of synchronisation, or to fix a minor mechanical defect. Mostly it was a case of replacing a broken filament, or ministering to a chafed piston with a dab of sacred unguent. *Embrace of Fire* was a relatively young ship, barely into its second millennium. Its systems were therefore hale, while its machine-spirits exhibited very little of the senescence he had encountered on older void craft.

Small servitor constructs scampered about his feet on clattering legs. A trio of servo-skulls buzzed around him, the prime connected to Adoli's spine by direct hardlink, the subsidiary pair free roaming. All were as careful in their examinations as Adoli was, canting possible malfunctions and signs of wear to his cranial receivers, so that he could view their sites of concern internally. He and his constructs made their own little network, a perfect symphony of data exchange that mirrored, if only crudely, the greater complexities of the Machine-God's universal Great Work.

The conduit was several hundred yards long, stretching from the enginarium to collection chambers where input from several pipes was collected, before being funnelled aft towards the engine stacks to be vented into space.

'By the application of force, another force is invoked,' hummed Adoli-4963 to himself. 'By rearward thrust is forward motion applied.' It was little better than a nursery rhyme, but he had a soft spot for the simple cants, reminding him as they did of his six-month childhood. 'Days of happiness,'

he said to his beta-2 skull. ‘Never since has so much knowledge been assimilated so quickly. If only I could learn so much in so short a span again!’

The skull swivelled on its contra-grav field and gave him a wordless stare. Its mandible augury flashed over him in a brief scan. Adoli took that for agreement.

The collection chamber was ahead. Adoli continued his way aft. The conduit retained its five-yard diameter until a few feet before the chamber, where it flared out, spreading to join others at such an angle that a set of four steps was required to reach down to the chamber floor. Adoli passed down these, and stopped a moment to take in the view.

Five conduits joined into one. Magnetic assemblies that rotated at high speed around the chamber to hold live plasma in place were visible through the mesh walls. The magnets moved so quickly when active that they would have been a single, indistinct blur, so to see them clearly under his stablights, their perfectly machined silver surfaces covered in beautiful, rainbow-hued heat bloom was something of a thrill.

He looked around the chamber, imagining the titanic energies channelled there. It was in spaces like this that he felt closest to the Machine-God, even more so than when connected to the holy worlds of manifold and noosphere. So far from the main networks there was the deep quiet of machines waiting to be called into action. In those silences the breath of god could be heard, if one listened carefully enough.

His constructs spread out and began the collection of data. Plasteel, adamantium and ferrites were probed for fatigue. Components of more exotic nature were remotely weighed. Machine-spirits were interrogated. All was as it should be. The magnets had lost no appreciable mass. The conduits were in fine fettle. He nodded, pleased at what he saw.

‘Onw—’ he began.

The sharp trill of an alarm interrupted him.

One of his scuttlers was dancing agitatedly around an access panel, its metal feet rattling off the deck plates and simple voxmitter bleating shrilly. The brain hemisphere that drove it swished about in its containment jar. Adoli was so concerned it would detach some of its wiring in its panic that he hurried over and performed the rite of deactivation.

‘What have you found here, little one?’ he said. His skulls hovered down

and took up station over his shoulders, lighting the panel. He saw then that one corner was heavily eroded, it seemed to be by a plasma flare, which could only have happened if the magnetic containment field was off, but there was no sign of that on any of the other access panels. He looked up at the nearest magnet, a huge, ton-weight slab of engineered metal. It could say nothing. He shrugged.

‘Curious,’ he muttered, extending a power driver from his enlarged right hand, ‘but as we all know, curiosity is anathema to the will of the Machine-God. It is what it is, by His decree.’

He caught the bolts magnetically with one of his mechadendrites as they came free from their holes. When he took the panel out, the corner crumbled further in his hands. He turned it side on, and peered at it. Throughout, the metal had worn away, being little thicker than a sheet of paper across much of its area.

‘Worrying,’ he said. He poked a bright lumen into the compartment, the mechadendrite it capped wriggling its way into the deepest parts without touching any of the complex wiring. A small logic engine nested at the heart of the tangle of wires, the casing cast in the shape of the Opus Machina. He peered at this.

‘No exterior sign of damage. That means nothing though, eh beta-1? Nothing at all. This doesn’t look right to me.’

He switched his attention to his inner displays and opened a data channel to the logic engine. What he found saddened him. The device’s machine-spirit was irredeemably corrupted. Whether the corruption had caused the flare that damaged the panel, or the flare had mag-pulsed the machine and upset its spirit he would determine later.

‘Well, my little friend, you will have to be replaced!’ He reached in and began gently disconnecting wires. ‘I will make sure your components are rendered into useful parts.’ Removing the unit deactivated the containment field machinery, so for the last stage of the procedure, he was obliged to shut down the chamber’s failsafe systems. ‘Not a problem, little one. No plasma today!’

He went to his omnimule and searched through the packs until he had a replacement unit. He carefully marked the broken component, and stowed it, then performed a short ritual to ensure the replacement’s good function. He sang hymns known for their efficacy at smoothing installation and set to

work.

He was halfway done when a wailing siren had him spin round in alarm.

‘No!’ he said. He stood up. ‘There’s no reactor test this cycle. There is no test!’

He raced through his communications facilities, trying the higher forms of communion. He was too deep into the ship. There was so much armour and so much machinery around him that his emanations were totally blocked. In desperation, he resorted to crude vox. Nothing got through the shielding.

He stood a moment in indecision.

He was going to die. He could not get out of the conduit before the engine test began. He would be boiled away into nothing by the power of the Machine-God Himself. A thrill of fear surprised him, issuing from a part of his limbic system long ignored.

‘If I am to die, I will do so in service to you, oh Ommissiah,’ he said, and heard the tremble in his voxmitter. ‘They will go just fine,’ he said. ‘Thanks to the three in one.’ Quickly, he pushed the new cogitator unit into place. He began the tricky process of reattaching the output cabling first. There were hundreds of hair-thick wires, and each needed to be inserted into its proper place. His voxmitter stumbled over his prayers as he rushed the job, annoyed even through his terror that he could not do the machine full honour.

His mehadendrites darted in and out. The klaxons finished the wailing, and he felt the metal beneath his feet throb. The ship’s reactor was being brought up to operational power for a test firing. A small, false sun was being roused by bellows of pure energy, energy that would soon reduce him to his component atoms.

His fear rose. He was not, it seemed, ready to meet the architect of the Great Work just yet.

‘Focus, focus,’ he thought.

Under his nimble appendages, wires slid into micron-sized sockets. He wielded pliers invisible to the naked eye to crimp them in place. Half the sacred wiring was done.

The throbbing of the deck turned into a steady vibration. His servo-constructs skittered about nervously. The tools he had scattered over the floor in his haste began to jump across the decking.

More wires went into more holes, all according to the schematics projected

onto his mind's eye by his cranial augmetics. Rarely had he worked so rapidly or so well.

A musical hooting sound moaned up the conduit. Wind blew down the passage, cool at first, then hot. Adoli-4963 was running out of time.

He still had seven wires left from sixty-three to insert when the howl built up to a scream, and coruscating light raced up the conduit.

'Twenty-two seconds for fifty-six good connections. A new personal best,' he said, as a wave of plasma hotter than the heart of a star consumed him.

The bulk of Fleet Quintus was gathering at the marshalling yards of Uranus. Hundreds of ships were docked in the orbital yards over the northern planetary pole. Hundreds more floated, powered down in neat formations.

It was a race against time to supply the ships. The Sol System was blessed by Mars' presence. Production of armaments and new vessels was proceeding at a breakneck pace. Raw ores, gases and water were brought in from the asteroid belts, the gas giants and the Oort Cloud, for even after nearly forty thousand years as a space-faring species, mankind had barely scratched the immense resources contained by Sol. But food, and exotic materials, finished components of rare sort, and most of all trained men, were in shorter supply. That all had to come from outside the system, and that meant via the warp. Turmoil gripped the empyrean. Ships came in no predictable order, if they arrived at their destination at all. Quintus, marked for first departure, was moored at the Elysian warp gate over Uranus to speed the process.

The proximity of the vessels helped loading efficiencies. It was to prove disastrous in every other way.

Seven point three seconds after its main drive test was initiated, a spear of plasma burst from the side of the battleship *Embrace of Fire*, cutting through decks thirty to ninety-six in a matter of moments, and venting their contents into the void upon a geyser of ignited atmosphere. Two point two seconds after that, the reactor went critical, the fusion reaction spiralling out of control in a rapid but mathematically inevitable escalation. The warp engine burst, the resulting detonation encompassing an area of space nine hundred miles across. Under normal void operations, this distance would have been inconsequential, but in the packed high anchorage of Uranus, it was devastating. Four vessels were sucked directly into the warp through

the temporary rift the *Embrace of Fire's* engines opened. Dozens more were so badly damaged they would not sail for years. At the edge of the rift zone, the light cruisers *Golden Spear* and *Thought's Arrow* were only lightly hit, but a chance impact caused *Golden Spear's* fusion reactor to also go critical, launching its prow like a missile straight into the amidships of the battle cruiser *Pride of Macharia*, punching right through its port flight deck and out of the far side, breaking the ship in two.

Hundreds of thousands died. Debris cascaded from the chained explosions peppered a dozen more ships, wrecked tenders, transports and orbital facilities far beyond the initial disaster site, and caused catastrophic damage to one of the Uranian star castella guarding the equatorial approach. For half a day afterwards the thick atmosphere of Uranus sparkled with impacts, and the defences of the planet were occupied with annihilating stray chunks of metal spread through every anchorage layer from near to far orbit.

This was not the first disaster Quintus had endured, and nor would it be the last.

Chapter Nineteen

THE READING OF FLEET TERTIUS FLEETMASTER PRASORIUS' EXCUSE FLEETMISTRESS VANLESKUS' PETITION

Green fluorite covered every surface of the circular hololithic arena. The curved benches stepping down to the audience pit at the centre were of green, as were the stairs, the ceiling, the plainly decorated wall panels and the pilasters between those. The lumen chandeliers were of chemically grown emeralds. The machinery that made the whole place work was hidden beneath green jasper slabs, its projection lenses chased in gold. Whichever ancient lord had commissioned the hololithic arena had really liked green.

Messinius looked over it all with a sense of deep apprehension. At his insistence, all crusade conferences were now to take place remotely. Guilliman had announced the Indomitus Crusade in public, in front of an audience of millions. He'd put himself at risk dozens of times meeting lords in all manner of hard-to-secure places. Messinius could not allow him to do that again, not with saboteurs active in the fleets. There was still so much that could go wrong.

If the primarch had been at Uranus, perhaps even on the *Embrace of Fire* itself...

It had taken Messinius a great number of messages to convince Guilliman to agree to a remote conference. Frustratingly, they had not had the

opportunity to speak face to face since Cawl's revelation. Citing the sabotage of Fleet Quintus and the ongoing uprisings on Terra, Messinius had at last prevailed. It was a mark of pride that the regent so valued his opinion. It was all the more poignant, as Messinius was sure this would be among his last attendances at Guilliman's court. His time by his grandfather's side was coming to an end.

He posted his warriors around the hall, most taking up station in the cloisters around the arena, where they retreated into the shadows, their helm lenses shining in the dark like the eyes of predatory jungle cats. Every single one of them had been hand picked by Messinius from the veterans of the Terran Crusade, and rigorously mentally screened. He sent men back to their units for the slightest reason. Some might call him paranoid, but doubt was the enemy of diligence.

He only wished he could have vetted the six Adeptus Custodes that accompanied Guilliman. He was suspicious of Colquan, the Stratarchis Tribune Actuarius. Colquan was one of the Custodians' highest-ranking officers, and one of the greatest servants of the Emperor in all the galaxy, but the tribune openly questioned Guilliman's motives, and so it concerned Messinius that Colquan would also be accompanying Fleet Primus.

Colquan's unit were guarding the door, two inside, two outside, the fifth patrolling the hall, duplicating Messinius' work. He would have preferred warriors from another unit, at least, as these were all Colquan's oath brothers.

He forced himself to stop his fretting. Guilliman assuredly knew what he was doing. Having Colquan by his side both neutralised his influence and carried the possibility of turning him towards the primarch's party. It worried Messinius that a Custodian was one of the few warriors in the Imperium who might possibly match a primarch, but it couldn't be helped. There were some politics even he could not interfere with. He reassured himself that everything else he could influence, he had.

Servo-skulls swept the arena one final time. Other constructs scanned the conduits of the loop projectors and ribbon modifiers hidden beneath the polished green stone. These too had all been checked and rechecked. Librarians of the Adeptus Astartes and sanctioned psykers of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica scried the room. Operatives of various assassin temples prowled the outer precincts, although not too close, for Messinius didn't

trust the Grand Master much either.

A lesser man would have been satisfied with these efforts, had he undertaken them, but Messinius never thought his work complete. Complacency led to defeat, as his own Chapter had so disastrously discovered.

'The inner and further wards have been swept, my lord captain,' voxed one of the Space Marines. *'All personnel accounted for and removed.'*

'Sweep them again,' said Messinius. 'All sectors. Keep patrols active throughout the conference. Vox-check in every five minutes, rotating squad pattern.'

There were potential saboteurs everywhere. What was happening in Fleet Quintus was ample proof of that. He went over the arrangements for the primarch's security, making himself concentrate on one data screed at a time, rereading the guard rosters and duty changeovers rather than absorbing a dozen at once. He was jittery, he realised, a sensation he had not experienced since he was truly human. He smiled ruefully to himself. He could face the worst enemies of mankind without a flicker of fear, but the thought of failing in his duty terrified him. It seemed even he had limits.

'Captain.' One of the Custodians approached him. His cloak was a deep red, rimmed with silver and bronze leaves entwined. Like all of them, his armour was lavishly decorated with embossed figures and esoteric symbols. A line of names filled a scroll that curled around his chest several times. There would be more names on the inside of his armour plates. His helm was chased with purple gems, the symbol of the Tribunate Pentekontarchoi, marking him out further, but though they were all different, they all looked the same to Messinius, like fanciful statues of forgotten heroes. Relics, he thought, standing tall and proud as if nothing had changed, while even on Terra the Imperium burned.

This one was Iustices. He made little attempt to hide his haughtiness when he spoke.

'Our preparations are complete. The chamber is ready. The primarch will soon be here.'

It rankled Messinius to share his responsibilities, and therefore his honour, with the Custodian Guard. It was his decision to declare the chamber ready, not the Custodian's. He did not voice his opinion.

'My thanks, Custodian,' he said, diplomacy foremost in his mind.

The Custodian stood taller and broader than him, his greater physical size exaggerated by his shining gold and silver battleplate. The conical helm added an extra foot to his height. Messinius wondered what it would be like to fight him. It was normal for a Space Marine to assess every individual as a threat; Space Marines were made for war, but he was genuinely curious as to whether he could beat this man in combat. He doubted it.

‘To our stations. This is an important day.’ Messinius was about to go, but Iustices stopped him.

‘I know what you think of us,’ said Iustices.

‘And what is that, my lord Custodian?’ asked Messinius.

‘For ten thousand years, you believe, we have hidden behind the palace walls, while the Space Marines died to protect the Imperium. How many lives and worlds could have been saved, had they left their fine palaces behind? How many worlds would be sweeter, if they had taken up the burden of rule? That is what crosses the mind of every Adeptus Astartes I meet.’

‘You are a psyker then, my lord?’

Iustices stiffened. It was a tiny change in posture, but one that brought him a scintilla of time closer towards striking. Evidently he did not like to be spoken back to.

‘I know also what you think of we Space Marines,’ said Messinius. ‘That we are unsophisticated brutes, made only to kill, while your kind are of a more refined sort, closer to the Emperor in intellect and temperament.’

Iustices did not contradict him.

‘I doubt either opinion is accurate,’ Messinius said.

‘I concur,’ said the adept.

‘I am glad to have you with us,’ said Messinius, which was true to an extent, for the Custodes were warriors without peer.

‘I will remind my brothers that there are more Astartes like you than they may think,’ said Iustices.

A vox-chime demanded Messinius’ attention, and the two parted ways on better terms.

‘Tautolochus, report,’ Messinius said, reading the warrior’s identity signum.

‘The primarch has passed the outer precincts, brother-captain.’

‘My thanks.’ He switched frequencies. ‘Lexicologis Hirimor, you may

begin the activation of the equipment.'

He received a brief runic acknowledgement. The floor vibrated as generators were coaxed to high activity and cogitator arrays prepared. Projecting so many hololithic ghosts at once consumed immense amounts of power, and required halls full of processing equipment to handle the data, so Hirimor said. Messinius found the tech-priest tetchy and often ill-tempered. Another servant of the Emperor struggling to serve the Avenging Son. None of them were getting enough rest.

The first of the attendees flickered into being. Some coalesced as the equipment brought them into focus, others popped into life fully formed. For the sake of order, they were seated, and projected to appear as if they occupied the curved benches. These were the generals, lord commissars, sector admirals, magi domini, and the high officials of all the Adepta that served the Indomitus Crusade. Every one of them was an important lord in their own right, and ordinarily would command audiences of their own, but in this instance they were but part of a throng. Slowly, they filled the benches, until a phantom army occupied the hall.

The quality of the technology broadcasting the presentees varied. Some appeared solid as if they were actually there, only the faint glow of intersecting ribbon beams giving away the fact that they were light ghosts. Others were flat-looking outlines, striped with interference patterns. Some were grainy to the point of anonymity. Messinius initiated protocols to have all the data beams tracked and verified. Spies were as problematic as assassins. He could not rely on the veracity of the images, and the grainiest could as easily be decoys to throw him off the scent of real interlopers as they could be actual spies.

Despite his burdens and the dangers inherent to any kind of interaction between the primarch and his subjects, it heartened Messinius to see the gathering. Such a convocation would have been unthinkable before the primarch returned. Humanity had a chance to survive, for in the blackest of days hope had come. Only in the unity this conference represented could the children of Terra endure.

The last few members of the audience were phasing into being, and the hall was full and uplit by their projection light. As the final spaces in the auditorium were occupied, the masters of the crusade manifested, projected into the air at twice life-size to underline their importance: the

fleet masters and mistresses of the great armadas that would soon sail against the new night. Guilliman's Logister Maxima was among their number. Also present were officials of similar importance to the muster. The Master of the Departamento Munitorum and the Imperial Cancellarius joined the Lord High Admiral and the Lord Commander Militant; the rest of the High Lords were notable by their absence, and their representatives were confined to the general throng.

Politics was to blame. Guilliman had already conducted separate meetings with the High Twelve in person. These meetings had presented more problems for Messinius to deal with.

Guilliman arrived last. He came in person, walking into the hall unannounced and alone but for the cage of servo-skulls floating around him and capturing his image. The Adeptus Ministorum would have swarmed him with priests given half a chance, but Guilliman had his fill of them quickly, and they were disallowed from attending him most of the time. Messinius enjoyed those occasions when they were told to leave.

Little audex input was conveyed by the projectors, so the light ghosts were eerily quiet, and Guilliman's footsteps thumped loudly as he descended the main stairway to the stage in the centre. The audience's points of view were fixed by their own reception equipment, and they stared ahead intently for the most part, which imparted even greater strangeness to the gathering.

Guilliman reached the podium at the centre of the hall, mounted the steps and took his place upon a lectern that rose from the ground as he approached. An aquila of verdigrised bronze adorned the front. He gripped the wrists of its wings, and began to speak.

'My lords and ladies,' he said. That was the full extent of his preamble. There was no flattery, no stroking of ego in that hall. All the people attending had been chosen by the primarch himself for their practicality and drive.

'Our first business of the day is to address the current problems being experienced by Fleet Quintus.'

At that, all attention turned towards Lord Fleet Commander Tronion Prasorius. When performing at their best, hololithic projections gave the total illusion of presence, allowing simulated eye contact. Large-scale hololithic edifications such as the fleet gathering, however, were nearly impossible to coordinate to a fine degree. Creating the seeming of an

audience was relatively easy. It was also easy to give the appearance that the fleet masters of the Indomitus Crusade were all looking at and interacting with the primarch. It was when ghosts interacted with each other, especially more than one other at once, that problems manifested. To have a hololithic phantom address a point over one's shoulder was not uncommon. But in this instance, technology functioned perfectly to allow all present to look directly at Prasorius.

Prasorius was a fat man with a generously pouched neck and poor hair regen work. Flat triangles of painstakingly cultivated strands were plastered to his scalp with coiffuring gels. Messinius understood vanity. Space Marines were not immune to it, they took pride in their wargear, but that had a practical purpose. Prasorius' attempt to hide his baldness was as baffling as it was hopeless. Such men as he, in command of millions, were immune to nervousness, but the shine of the gels on his head gave the appearance of sweat and therefore fear. Messinius could not comprehend why any man would wish to make himself appear weak for the sake of a few locks. An unintended consequence, perhaps, but the primarch's teachings said that lords should be aware of the problems their actions could cause, small or large.

Prasorius cleared his throat and put on a grave face.

'It pains me beyond mortal comprehension to bring news of yet another mishap to befall my fleet, but circumstances conspire against me, and I must,' said Prasorius. 'We were sabotaged.'

'As I am sure most of you are now aware, at the fiftieth hundredth of the third thousandth of yesterday,' said Guilliman, 'by the standard Terran reckoning, the battleship *Embrace of Fire* detonated in high orbit around Uranus, destroying six other ships and causing grave levels of damage to seventeen more, in addition to damaging several orbital facilities and requiring the activation of the planetary defence grid to eliminate the threat caused by debris ejected from the explosions. Half a company of White Consul Primaris Marines were lost, five regiments of Thessian Voltigeurs were destroyed with their transports, and a lance of House Taranis Knights were also killed, and their war machines destroyed with them. These are only the most notable losses.'

'That is correct,' said Prasorius, trying his best to maintain his composure.

'Tell us how it occurred, fleet master.'

‘The saboteurs covered their tracks well. We can only theorise that a small cell of malcontents managed to engineer a miscommunication between the lexmechanic hierarchs running the maintenance schedules aboard the *Embrace of Fire*, which led to confusion between two of the transmechanic subclades preparing my fleet for action. One of their number was performing an inspection deep within the plasma drives when a reactor test was wrongfully scheduled. I believe we were supposed to believe that this was the cause of this disaster. However, Inquisitor Galen has gathered too much evidence that suggests otherwise.’

‘Are you sure it was sabotage?’ said Guilliman.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Prasorius tiredly. ‘We have a surviving witness, an officer who was off the *Embrace of Fire* at the time of the explosion, attest to an unknown subaltern ordering minor changes to shift patterns. He had the right codes, and it was nothing suspicious at first glance, but the officer who supposedly ordered the change has not been seen again. We can only assume other, small alterations were made to ensure this disaster occurred.’

‘How did it occur?’ said Guilliman.

‘During the engine test, plasma was injected into a space where there was no magnetic field to contain it. As a result, it cut through the ship.’

‘That should not have led to its destruction,’ said Guilliman levelly. Messinius could see his patience straining. ‘The ship should have been damaged, yet you lost more than a dozen ships.’

‘No,’ said Prasorius wearily. All the fleet masters were tired from their efforts, but he was particularly haggard. ‘The plasma spike cut through into a reactor feedstock store that was being refilled in preparation for our departure. If it had been full or empty, there would have been no danger, but Quintus’ Archmagos Prota Astranavato Xergigis informs me that at half capacity, there was enough atmospheric mix within the chamber to initiate a wild reaction when the store was hit by the plasma stream. The resulting explosion destroyed three decks.’ Prasorius hurried on. ‘Which in turn damaged the plasma regulation system within the main reactor, leading to a runaway fusion reaction there, then its failure and explosion. This detonated the warp drives, which were also undergoing cycle testing, again owing to changed orders. Xergigis assures me this was a billion to one chance – practically impossible, unless it was planned, but I scarcely believe anyone could be responsible for creating such a precise series of events. It would

need rogue elements from the Adeptus Mechanicus at the least.’

‘Is it not more likely that you were lax?’ said Guilliman.

Prasorius stiffened a little, and stretched his neck. ‘I do not make apologies or seek to furnish you with excuses, lord regent. I would say you were right. Mustering this number of men and ships is stretching our organisational capabilities to their limits. But Inquisitor Galen believes otherwise. His evidence is persuasive.’

‘It is good for you that Galen knows his work well.’ Guilliman looked down at the active glass screen embedded in the back of the lectern. Rarely was the primarch away from sources of information. He needed no reference materials. His memory was perfect, but he had a thirst for new data that could not be sated. ‘Have you caught the saboteurs?’

‘I have reason to believe they died on the *Embrace of Fire*,’ said Prasorius, ‘but again, this belief may be because of sophisticated manipulation.’

‘Then they could still be at large,’ said Guilliman.

‘They could. Inquisitorial kill teams are at work throughout Fleet Quintus as we speak.’

Guilliman read silently for a moment, then addressed the rest of the gathering. ‘Lord Prasorius is correct. The provisioning and preparation of these fleets is of the utmost difficulty, my lords and ladies. Supply lines across the galaxy remain disrupted. Ships are going missing at an unprecedented rate, and yet we must prevail. We cannot stop. Disasters such as this cannot be allowed to continue. Alone, this occurrence would be notable and those overseeing the mustering liable for sanction. What is troubling, my Lord Prasorius, is that this accident happened only a week after the near catastrophic reactor failure of *Voidsworn*, and I remind you that the Magoria Sextus contagion still rages throughout Fleet Quintus’ vessels mustering at Jupiter.’

‘Of course, my lord regent,’ said Prasorius. ‘I have redoubled my own efforts to ensure that nothing like this reoccurs. Galen is on the trail of those responsible for the loss of the *Embrace of Fire*. We will be ready.’

A new voice interrupted. ‘You cannot say so with any confidence, my lord.’

It was Cassandra VanLeskus who spoke the words, and they were put with the force of a stellar collision. Her personality was so overbearing some said that it could not be blunted even by hololithic communication.

‘Lady Cassandra,’ Guilliman said. ‘You wish to speak?’

‘When do I not wish to speak?’ she said, to a ripple of laughter.

‘Then speak,’ said the primarch. As usual, his face gave nothing away. An invitation like that could lead to disaster for an overconfident speaker. VanLeskus had an abundance of confidence, but she also possessed enough talent that it stayed the right side of arrogance.

‘The uncomfortable truth is, owing to the many misfortunes to beset its preparations, Quintus will not be ready to leave on schedule,’ she said.

Prasorius shook his head. ‘The delays are regrettable, but we have pushed ourselves hard to be ready for our departure date. Harder than most. We will be ready.’

‘If your logisters were to liaise with mine, they would be forced to admit that Fleet Tertius’ efforts exceed even your commendable attempts at preparation,’ she said proudly. ‘And we have suffered none of your mishaps. The fact remains that you are not ready. Fleet Quintus has been beset by every manner of setback. Every aspect of its preparation is behind schedule. Supply, mustering, fuelling, crewing...’ she smiled. ‘You see the problem.’

‘Most of these things are beyond my control.’

‘And yet they are happening,’ VanLeskus said. Her augmetic left eye, though a sophisticated facsimile of the lost organ, gave her an inhuman look. ‘I will not point the finger of accusation at you, my lord. Your excellent record is well known. You are doing all you can to counter the undeserving reputation your fleet is gathering.’

‘They say Fleet Quintus is cursed,’ said Lady Kaosholay, mistress of Fleet Sextus. She was a scarred woman, dark-skinned, a scion of the Segmentum Tempestus naval dynasts.

‘Of course it is not cursed,’ said VanLeskus. ‘Lord Prasorius has only been unfortunate, as any one of us could have been. None of us have been free of accidents, though none of Quintus’ gravity, and all of us here suffer immense pressures organising our forces, so should we be surprised? This venture is the greatest military undertaking since the Emperor’s own Great Crusade in the Age of Wonder. The responsibility is crushing, the honour exults us all, not least you, my Lord Prasorius, but although your efforts match those of the great admirals of history, Fleet Quintus will not be able to depart first as was the lord regent’s plan. It is a simple fact. Attempting to

force the matter will only exacerbate your problems, putting greater strain upon your men, which will inevitably,' she said, stressing her point when it seemed Lord Prasorius would object, 'lead to more mistakes. Whereas Fleet Tertius is ready.' She smiled. 'Now.'

'You are suggesting you should take Lord Prasorius' honour, and leave first?' said Aswan Relmay, master of Octus. Another lord steeped in ancient privilege, he was the patriarch of one of the Imperium's most powerful rogue trader clans.

'I am.'

'Why not one of we others?' asked Trincus Abconcis, master of Quartus. 'Why not I?'

'Or I?' asked Lady Kaosholay. She did not mean she should go first. The Sixth Fleet had started to gather itself together last in the first wave, but the question needed posing. For all that Guilliman valued VanLeskus, her presumptive manner irritated some of the other masters.

'Because my fleet is the only one that is already prepared,' said VanLeskus. 'My crews stand idle. My ships are loaded. My troops are gathered. Let me depart first, my Lord Guilliman. Allow me to shoulder this most onerous of responsibilities.'

Guilliman pulled an expression that conveyed a modicum of displeasure.

'Do not dissemble, Lady VanLeskus. You do not address a chartist merchant, or an official of the Departamento Munitorum. I am a primarch.'

'I do not mean to deceive you. Fleet Quintus is delayed again. I am ready to leave now.'

Guilliman stared at her hololithic projection.

'I suggest you wish to do so for personal matters,' Guilliman said.

'I would be lying if I said there was no honour to be had in departing first,' she said. 'But the more pertinent reasons are strategic. I am ready.'

She paused. Messinius saw it for the rhetorical trick it was.

'I have also received reports from the Machorta Sector of Segmentum Pacificus of a major enemy advance. Followers of the so-called Blood God are cutting through the nebula there, many Imperial worlds have fallen, and furthermore, their vanguard is followed by warp wake that will connect with the Great Rift within three months, cutting off a large part of the segmentum, endangering the bastion world of Hydraphur, which will further destabilise the northern reaches of the Pacificus.'

A ripple of conversation passed through the crowd. This was news to many.

‘Hydraphur is the key to our operations in the north of the Segmentum Pacificus, and the main fortress against enemy attacks south from the Eye of Terror,’ said VanLeskus. ‘It is not sentiment, my lord, that urges me to action, but simple logic. My course was to take me to Hydraphur anyway. It is in danger, ergo I should leave. Let me go now, and strike our first blow.’

‘I was aware of these developments,’ said Guilliman. ‘Do not presume that your intelligence is greater than mine, fleetmistress.’

‘Never,’ said VanLeskus proudly. ‘I desire only to edify my colleagues. Your wisdom is beyond compare, my lord. You knew, but I don’t think they did.’ She looked aside, encompassing the other attendees.

Guilliman’s lips quirked upwards a little.

‘This is not the place to decide these matters,’ said Guilliman. Messinius thought he did not wish to undermine his own authority by acceding to VanLeskus’ demand, or offend the other fleetmasters and mistresses by showing her undue favour.

‘Naturally,’ said VanLeskus. ‘That is why I came here to ask for a personal audience so I might better present my case, not to force any decision upon you.’

‘Granted,’ said Roboute Guilliman. Messinius was already formulating a security plan. ‘Now speak no more,’ he said.

VanLeskus bowed.

‘Cancellarius Anna-Murza Jek has agreed to lend more of her office’s efforts at helping us prevent further sabotage among the fleet elements gathering at Terra,’ said Guilliman. ‘Similar requests will be made of the planetary authorities of all Solar worlds. Every Imperial Adepta is to increase preventative measures. I will not have our endeavour over before it is begun,’ he said. ‘Now. The next matter.’

He deliberately keyed the lectern’s cogitator to a new datastream, drawing a line under the previous conversation. He pretended to read the item from the screen, though Messinius knew Guilliman would have memorised whatever it said. This was among Guilliman’s curses, being forced to downplay his own abilities lest all others abdicate their responsibilities and look to him to fulfil them.

‘Crusade goals in reinstatement of tithe and trade networks across the near

space of Imperium Sanctus prior to campaign start. Lady Kaosholay, I believe you have constructed a workable plan?’

The Avenging Son could make his own plan. It would be superior to anything Kaosholay or anyone else could conceive. The primarch would have planned the crusade down to the distribution of the very last replacement rivet if he could. But he couldn't. He had to let go and trust to the inferior abilities of lesser beings to do what he did not have time to, and before he could do that, they had to feel comfortable he trusted them.

As Messinius watched the last hope of mankind masterfully lead his officers, he was reminded that very soon, he too would have to let go.

Chapter Twenty

RED AND WHITE

THE PRIMARCH'S FAVOUR

WEAPONS OLD AND WEAPONS NEW

Keetan Ashtar of the Red Consuls was coming out of Guilliman's private offices when Messinius was going in. Ashtar had been a close comrade on the Terran Crusade, with a wry sense of humour rare in any Space Marine, let alone the grim, uniform members of the Red Consuls, and he had joked often with Messinius about his Chapter's intolerance of individuality. In more sober moments, particularly after hard engagements, he and Messinius had discussed their orders' shared origins, now lost to history, searching for commonality and brotherhood while their Chapters were far away.

They stopped by one another, almost mirror images, one in white robes, one in red. Their gene-seed came from the primarch, and they had his stamp on their features. Though Ashtar's skin was a darker hue, and he was taller, they could have been distant relatives. It felt as if they were cousins, Messinius thought. He experienced a sudden pang of loss. There would be many more partings to be endured.

'He is seeing us all individually, then,' said Messinius.

'Indeed, brother,' said Ashtar. 'A joint edification would have sufficed, but the old man is in a sentimental mood today.'

They called him old man, even when, in absolute terms of years spent animate, both Ashtar and Messinius were older than the primarch.

‘He has his depths,’ said Messinius.

‘Deeper than most.’ Ashtar paused. He was thoughtful, evincing for once the cold manner the Red Consuls were famed for. ‘I am to depart immediately to my crusade fleet. He is splitting us up, I warn you in advance.’

Messinius nodded sharply. ‘I anticipated as much. I do not think many of us will stay with him. He needs our experience to guide these new Space Marines.’

Ashtar nodded. ‘Exactly so.’ He reached out his arm. ‘It has been an honour and a pleasure to fight with you, brother in white.’

‘I am forced to say the same, brother in red, though I still hold my Chapter to have the edge,’ said Messinius with a sad grin.

A little of Ashtar’s usual manner showed itself. ‘Ah, now there’s a debate we could have for all time and never settle.’

Messinius gripped Ashtar’s forearm. ‘Maybe one day we shall argue it anew,’ he said, knowing in all likelihood they would never see each other again.

‘Maybe,’ said Ashtar. He gripped Messinius’ arm harder. ‘Try not to get yourself killed. There are too few warriors of your integrity in these dark times.’

‘There’s always you,’ said Messinius. ‘Rarely have I fought alongside one so honourable or skilled.’ They released each other.

‘I suppose there is me, at that,’ said Ashtar with a grin. ‘Brother-Captain Messinius.’ He gave the salute of the aquila; arms crossed over his chest.

‘Brother-Captain Ashtar,’ said Messinius, and returned the salute.

Ashtar strode away to his destiny. Messinius faced the tall, decorated doors of Roboute Guilliman’s scriptorium, and prepared to discover his own.

The primarch received Messinius in an antechamber to his main scriptorium. When he knocked on the portal, Guilliman bade him enter. Messinius swung both doors wide, and was immediately forced to step aside as a pair of sweating scribes came out, pushing a trolley heavily laden with bound-up reports and dataslates whose memcores blinked the red lumens of full capacity. They were not afraid of him, and grumbled as they hurried past, the wheels on the trolley squeaking loudly.

The antechamber was in disarray. Papers, scrolls, books, data devices of all

kinds, hololiths and more filled the space wall to wall with information. Guilliman was immersed in his work. This was the primarch's natural habitat, not the battlefield. Messinius was still slightly surprised by this; he had imagined the primarchs to be warriors first and foremost. Guilliman's facility for administration was widely stated in the White Consuls' Chapter legends, but it played second string to stories of his martial prowess. Messinius had come to see the balance was off in their mythology. That was not to say Roboute Guilliman was not the consummate warrior the stories suggested; indeed he was greater – Messinius had witnessed him prevail over enemies of the most terrible sort – but this landscape of ledgers and codices were Guilliman's true battleground. It was in the conflicts of numbers and words that he truly excelled, and it was on those terms that the war would be won. Messinius' Chapter had tried to emulate their progenitor's statesmanship, but he saw now, in comparison to Guilliman's ability to assimilate information and turn it into policy, that they had been children playing at kings.

The primarch had limits. This mess was not Guilliman's preference. When he had time, he ordered everything perfectly, but there was no time left in the Imperium for anything other than war.

'Captain Messinius.' Guilliman lifted an arm in greeting, and pointed to a chair, although he worked standing up. 'Please, sit.'

Guilliman wore his armour, as he always must. Messinius was garbed in simple clothes: loose trousers, boots and a tunic that left his massive arms bare. He enjoyed the freedom of movement they gave him. So much of his life was spent enclosed in ceramite, he enjoyed being free of it. Being trapped in the Armour of Fate must have been trying for the primarch. Although some of the huge outer casing had been removed, the armour still added to the primarch's bulk considerably. He held a book in one gauntleted hand that seemed precariously delicate. His artificers had applied pads of adhesive plasteks to his fingertips to enable him to handle everyday objects, for power armour was intended as protection, not as a second skin. Without these adjustments, he would not have been able to turn a single page in one of his books.

'I am speaking to all of you captains who served me on the Terran Crusade,' said Guilliman, his softly accented voice matter-of-fact. 'I am taking the time to do this because of the service you have given me, both in

the field and as head of my security here on Terra.’ He spoke Gothic as it was used in the 41st millennium stiffly, as if it troubled him to do so.

Messinius sat. The chair was overstuffed, far too soft for him to feel comfortable in. Anyone who knew the mentality of Space Marines would not have made a chair like that. Baseline humans, in misguided worshipfulness, had crafted the chair according to their own paradigm of comfort. The same rule held throughout Guilliman’s palace; it was full of rooms sized for the Adeptus Astartes, yet overly decorated and equipped with similarly inappropriate furniture, crammed with fripperies, unnecessary decorations and supposed luxuries that the Space Marines had no need of.

‘It is a great honour, my lord,’ said Messinius.

‘Nonsense.’ The Armour of Fate purred as Guilliman dismissed Messinius’ words with a wave. He closed his book with a thump, and put it down with exaggerated care. ‘The honour is mine. From the likes of you, Messinius, I have drawn a little hope that the hearts of the Adeptus Astartes still beat true after so long.’

He gave a smile that felt a little calculated. As a leader, Guilliman was inspiring. In more intimate circumstances he seemed to struggle.

‘I must also, regretfully, bid you farewell.’

‘I assumed that was why you wished to see we captains on our own.’

‘That is part of it,’ said Guilliman. ‘I owe it to you all, to thank you personally for your service, and explain individually to you what our next steps must be.’

His face was like a statue’s, a breathing example of perfection, barring the ugly weal poking over the top of his neck seal. There was a faraway look in his eyes while he spoke, a sign his engineered brain was working on multiple problems simultaneously. Messinius was grateful he did not have the primarch’s full attention. It would have been almost too much to bear.

‘As I am sure you have guessed, most of you who survived the Terran Crusade with me are to be reassigned to other crusade fleets. This undertaking is the largest military operation for a hundred centuries. I need warriors I can rely on spread throughout it. There are very few men I trust so implicitly, so I will be explicit regarding what I require of you. Firstly, allow me to fulfil a promise to you. I know that you came to Ultramar in search of reinforcements for your Chapter, and you shall have them.

However, I must ask that you are patient for a little while longer, because I still need you.'

'My lord, you need only command me.'

Guilliman frowned thoughtfully. 'You, Vitrian, I will not command. You are free to refuse what I am about to say, and return with new Adeptus Astartes to aid your brothers, if you wish. The reinforcing of the White Consuls is of great importance. A torchbearer fleet is due to depart to find your brothers within the week. If you prefer, you may go with them. I will not stop you.'

'I will do so only when the primarch deems the time right.'

'There are no right times now, Vitrian, only a limitless parade of ill-omened theoreticals, with a limited pool of practicals to answer them with. Either option would be useful to the Imperium, the choice is yours.'

'Then I will do what you think best, my lord.'

'Very well,' said Guilliman, and he seemed grateful. 'Then my preferred orders for you are thus. You are to be given the temporary rank of lord lieutenant, and placed in command of a formation of Primaris Space Marines attached to Crusade Fleet Tertius, under Cassandra VanLeskus. You will serve as one of her chief advisors.'

'As you wish,' said Messinius. He paused. 'Did you grant her request?'

'I have not yet decided, but we will come to that. Her reasoning is sound. The way she presents it to others leaves me with sore egos to soothe and hurt pride to balm if I choose to let her go, but that cannot be helped. Nobody is a master at all things. I trust you to keep an eye on her for me.'

'I shall, my lord.'

'You understand why I wish warriors like you to undertake such roles for me?'

'VanLeskus is not your primary concern. You are more occupied by the question of Cawl's new Space Marines.'

Guilliman nodded. 'Why? Give me the rest of your theoretical.'

'The Primaris warriors are new. They were made at your order, but by a man who is a maverick at best. We cannot be sure of their loyalty. They have no combat experience, from what I could tell. In the demonstration, they fought with great skill, but without wisdom.'

'That is the crux of it,' said Guilliman. 'As to the first point, Cawl may appear to be a monomaniac, and when his attention is on one matter he

objectively is, but it is never the case for long. The Primaris initiative is only one of his projects, some others of which are of similar scale. But although I have little reason to doubt his sincere desire to follow my plans, he has designs of his own. How the Primaris Space Marines factor into his plans rather than mine, or indeed if they even do, is currently unknown.'

'You must have trusted him when you gave him the resources to make what he has made.'

'I did. I do trust him, as much as I trust anyone, and I owe him a great deal,' said Guilliman. 'His descriptions of himself are immodest but accurate. He is a genius, and a true follower of the Emperor. I do not believe Belisarius Cawl is a Martian Horus in the making. But one cannot be sure of any man's true intentions.' Guilliman looked at Messinius. 'This is not cynicism, but bitter experience,' he said. 'At all times, all theoreticals must be considered, and practicals formulated to deal with emergent threats, no matter how far-fetched they may seem on initial hypothesisation. A man called Aeonid Thiel taught me that, a long time ago.'

'Cawl has a servant, my lord, a Primaris Marine of unusual ability.'

'Alpha Primus? I read your report,' Guilliman said. 'What did you think?'

Messinius laced his fingers together and thought. 'He was not on show during the demonstration, and referred to himself as imperfect. Yet he was a potent psyker. He was...' He struggled to come up with the right words. 'He was something else. Mighty. I think Cawl was trying to keep him hidden.'

Guilliman's lips thinned. 'I am not surprised. Cawl always exceeds his remit. I do not wish to know what monsters he has locked up in that ship of his. Did this warrior give you cause for concern?'

'Beyond his creation, no,' said Messinius. 'Primus protested loyalty, and seemed to want to warn me about Cawl more than anything else.'

'What did he say?'

'That the archmagos cannot be trusted.'

Guilliman paused. He made a note. 'I will look into it. Cawl is as Cawl does, his supporters say.' He tapped his finger on the table. 'That is something for another occasion. The second of your original points has the greater weight here, that these new Space Marines lack experience. The best training in the universe cannot make up for that. They must have experienced leaders. Brotherhoods must be forged, bonds made between

them, and flexibility introduced into their thinking. Though they are strong, without the ties of brotherhood they will be outwitted by a more agile foe.

‘It goes further than being unblooded, in truth they lack direct experience of anything,’ Guilliman went on. ‘Most of them, Cawl says, have been in suspended animation for millennia, with only a few days truly awake. They were boys when they were taken. The Imperium they were born into is gone. Everything they know was inculcated into them by hypnomat. They have no actual training, in the main. The usual problems recruits face post-apotheosis are exaggerated by their sense of displacement in time. They will compound each other. It is vital that we, as posthuman creations, hold tight onto our humanity, or we shall forget who we were made to serve. Who knows how much of their essential humanity the Primaris retain? You were your Chapter’s master of recruits. I cannot think of a more qualified man to undertake this task.’

Guilliman gestured awkwardly. It was difficult to talk naturally in power armour. It hampered non-verbal communication. It added unintended aggression to every movement.

‘There is a third problem, which you are too loyal to suggest,’ said Guilliman, ‘which concerns many of the High Lords. The last time there were Space Marines in these numbers, under one unified command, they turned upon each other, and the human race was nearly destroyed. It is forgotten in this era that the Horus Heresy was a war of Legions. The legends of the primarchs are simplistic. They were like me, with similar flaws and similar gifts. They were more human than you think. They did not have the power alone to cause the destruction the Imperium suffered, though that is what the Ministorum’s stories say. My brothers were commanders and champions, and their rivalries spurred the betrayal, but the war was fought by Space Marines, and the embers of hatred were in them before Horus stoked them into a blaze.’

Guilliman looked like he wished to clasp his hands behind his back, but the armour prevented him, and he let his arms fall to his side.

‘So, three theoretical dangers we must overcome,’ Guilliman said. ‘One, misplaced loyalties. Two, inexperience. Three, the potential for internal strife. I have therefore decided on several courses of action to reduce the risk of influence from Cawl’s party over the Primaris Space Marines, whether intentional or inadvertent, to bring them combat experience, and to

neutralise any antagonism between the various gene-seed lines.’

‘Are our differences really that innate, my lord?’ Messinius asked. ‘Is it not more a matter of culture?’

‘No,’ said Guilliman firmly. ‘More than seventy per cent of the current strength of the Adeptus Astartes present in the galaxy are descended from gene-seed derived from myself, though it is hard to reach an exact figure,’ said Guilliman. ‘The Space Marines of my brothers’ genetic heritage are fundamentally different. As Cawl has it, a great deal of the character of the original Legions was mixed in to the ingredients at the outset.’

‘Mixed in?’ said Messinius.

‘Cawl is insolent, and fond of ludicrous archaisms. He refers to the creation of confectionery when discussing the Emperor’s greatest achievement.’ Guilliman appeared disapproving, but at the same time he smiled slightly. ‘He insists we are the way we are purposefully. The savagery of the Space Wolves, the rage of the Blood Angels. The fortitude and technical aptitude of the Salamanders. All of it was intentional, and set into the genocode at the outset by the Emperor. Variations and intensifications of these tendencies are the result of other phenomena, most frequently deterioration of gene stock, and as you say, cultural preference. Cawl returned to the original source, and recreated the gene-seed from there. In many ways, the new Primaris Marines are purer versions than the Space Marines alive today, closer to the Emperor’s vision. Cawl insists these differences were designed to create interlocking abilities, resulting in forces intended for varying theatres of war, or to be combined into mixed groups of warriors with mutually supportive abilities. It may have been the Space Marines were never intended to form Legions exclusively comprised of the same bloodline, but exigency and delay, primarily the scattering of we primarchs, forced the Emperor to follow that path.’

‘Do you believe so?’ asked Messinius. He had rarely had a personal audience with the primarch of such length. To hear him speak of these mythological events in such a factual manner, as if they were recent history, awed him.

‘Theoretical only,’ said Guilliman. ‘For whatever reason they are present, these differences do exist, and they lead to misunderstanding between the sons of my brothers. I have seen this misunderstanding turn into suspicion, then suspicion turn to outright hatred. I will not allow this to happen again.’

It is especially important as Cawl has produced equal numbers of Primaris warriors from each strain of gene-seed. The time of the Ultramarines' dominance is over.

'So,' he continued. 'Here are my orders, which are being put into effect as we speak. Cawl has many thousands of Primaris Space Marines. He has been increasing production in recent years, guided, he says, by visions from the Machine-God. A large portion of these latter-day recruits are not yet ready, but will be brought on campaign and activated when their apotheoses are complete. His vaults on Mars are full of warriors who await awakening. These are all being activated for immediate deployment. Around a quarter of these will be formed into new Chapters of Space Marines – the Ultima Founding, we will call it. Some new Chapters will be despatched ahead of the crusade, others will accompany it, to be assigned new Chapter holdings as we progress towards our objectives. Our goal of securing Imperial worlds this side of the Great Rift will be speeded immeasurably by these creations of Cawl's.

'The rest of the awakened Primaris Space Marines will be assigned to temporary formations which I shall designate the Unnumbered Sons.' He spread his fingers and placed them upon an illustrated document on his desk. 'Each will wear the heraldry of their gene-father. We require concentrations of force to break our way out of the cordon containing our armies in the Segmentum Solar. The major warp nexuses are heavily defended by the enemy, excepting Vorlese. We are practically hemmed in to Sol. We require a hammer to break the cage. The Unnumbered Sons will provide it. As we progress, these formations will be broken up to provide reinforcements to existing Chapters of the same genetic heritage, or to found new, discretionary Chapters where need demands.'

'You will not mix the gene lines?'

'I intend to revise the Codex Astartes,' said Guilliman, 'but a change of that magnitude would be too great, undermining thousands of years of tradition, and posing problems regarding recruitment, specifically the maintenance of multiple gene-seed stocks within each Chapter. Although the Unnumbered Sons will primarily fight with others of their genetic lineage, all of them will spend rotations in mixed groups, where they will learn the strengths and proclivities of the other primarchs' sons. Through shared battle, they will learn respect, and brotherhood with those different

to them. They will take these lessons with them when they are eventually assigned to their parent Chapters.

‘I hope that this measure will also deflect accusations that I seek to reinstate the Legions. Believe me, that is not my intention, but I will be accused of attempting to do so. Too many politicians here believe my motives to be suspect. I must balance the military necessity of these larger Space Marine formations against the political cost, and the longer they are active, the higher the cost will be.’

‘There is always a cost,’ said Messinius.

‘There is,’ said Guilliman. ‘You will be given direct command of one of these units, at Chapter strength, within a larger cohort of five thousand, further organised into a batallia of two cohorts, four of which batallia shall make a Brotherhood. Initially you are to provide advisory command over all Primaris forces within Fleet Tertius, but you are to cede control as quickly as possible – though, I stress, on a timescale according to your own judgement – to Primaris commanders. It is your role to bring them the experience they lack, to instil in them the urgency of our mission, to teach them to tolerate and value each other, and to breed loyalty into their hearts.’

‘It is a great honour you do me.’

‘It is not a small task,’ said Guilliman, ‘and this command will be only the first. Once you deem your initial group to be at full operational ability according to these criteria, you will be assigned to another brotherhood, and repeat the process. I calculate that within twelve years, if the numbers Cawl provided me are correct, then all the first contingent of Primaris Space Marines will be capable of autonomous action, and the technology to create more will be spread across Imperium Sanctus, at least. Then, I shall give you leave to return to your Chapter with my blessing.’

‘My lord, I mean no disrespect to your commands, but the White Consuls are not alone in their need for urgent reinforcement. War rages across the galaxy, many Chapters have not been heard from, others are hard pressed.’

‘I am sorry for the losses incurred when the *Embrace of Fire* was sabotaged.’

‘My thanks, my lord, but I was not thinking of those brothers lost. I am more concerned for your safety. The *Embrace of Fire* was the sister ship to your flagship, they could have been trying to target you directly.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Guilliman. ‘Though anyone skilled enough to manipulate

our own organisation in that manner is more likely to be making a point. They could not hit the *Dawn of Fire*, therefore they attacked the *Embrace of Fire*. They seek to show their strength, but instead reveal their weakness. They cannot get to me. You are responsible in part for my safety. There was a time when I was attacked in a room very much like this by infiltrators of the Alpha Legion. I learned that lesson well. I choose my officers carefully,' said Guilliman. 'As for your brothers, reinforcements will be despatched to those in greatest need, including your Chapter. The torchbearer fleets will deliver the message of our coming to all parts of the Imperium, and prepare redoubt worlds for our supply chain, but most crucially, they will carry materials and data caches that will enable all Chapters to independently begin the creation of Primaris Space Marines and their associated equipment. At first, this will be by necessity limited in scope, but full libraries of information will be apportioned to all in due course. The first torchbearer fleets will leave within the month. The one going to the White Consuls is among the first.

'And there we have it,' Guilliman said, 'in the broadest outline. You are to be assigned a Primaris adjutant, who will in the beginning bear the rank of lieutenant, a rank which, incidentally, I am introducing into all Chapters to increase flexibility of company deployments. This warrior has been selected for you according to his psyche profile and simulation evaluations. Treat him well. Teach him.'

Guilliman retrieved a slim dataslate. He picked it up gingerly and passed it to Messinius. Every movement he made in that crowded environment he did so with great care, lest his armour destroy his ordered chaos of facts.

'His name is Ferren,' said Guilliman. 'That slate contains all data Cawl has upon him. I think you will find it sufficient. Cawl is thorough. The requisite pass codes and authorisation seals are included. All you must do is go to the *Zar Quaesitor* and retrieve him. Your first units are currently being activated and will be ready for you within the next forty-eight hours. Cawl will see to the rest.'

'I will do so immediately,' said Messinius.

There was much unsaid in what Guilliman had presented. By spreading his advisors among the fleets, and by mixing the Primaris intake, putting them under the command of Space Marines he trusted, he was ensuring compliance, and extending a web of influence right through his war effort

and beyond to the independent Space Marine Chapters. Doubtless there were other layers to the primarch's plans, and other factors he had taken into consideration. These remained opaque to Messinius, but he believed in what Guilliman did completely.

'My lord, I have taken enough of your time. I am deeply honoured by your personal attention, but you must permit me to go, so that you might continue your work.' Saying these words stabbed at Messinius' hearts. Standing before the primarch was like basking in warm sunlight.

'You are correct. Much is to be done,' said Guilliman. 'But you and I have other matters to deal with.' He spoke into his vox pick-up. 'Bring in Captain Messinius' weaponry,' he said.

One of the doors leading off the antechamber opened, and a uniformed servant pushed in a case held off the ground on a suspensor field. Guilliman directed the man to leave the case in front of the captain. The servant withdrew to the door and stood at silent attention.

'Vitrian Messinius, you have served me faithfully and well. It is time that service is rewarded. Open the case.'

Messinius looked at Guilliman.

'Do not hesitate when your primarch commands you,' said Guilliman warmly, a faint smile playing about his god's features.

A Space Marine's nervous system is hardened against all forms of trauma, internal and external, and yet such was the honour Messinius felt his thumb shake as he extended it to the lock reader plate.

The lock chimed and the lid opened with a hiss. Inside, held by perfectly cut gel foams, was a beautiful power fist. The upper assembly and fingers were painted in White Consuls livery, and trimmed to match Messinius' personal heraldry. The hand was clad in rich, lustrous golden metal, intricately carved with a battle scene of ancient warriors on horseback fighting a horde of spear-armed infantry.

'There are many treasures on Terra,' said Guilliman. 'Too many have been hoarded and forgotten. It is time they were brought out again. Some of them a Space Marine could find a use for. To that end, I present this to you.'

'It is... beautiful,' said Messinius, his throat catching. His hands hovered over the fist.

'You may touch it. Soon it will be your right hand in war, it is best you become acquainted with it.'

Messinius placed his fingers on the reliefs of the fist. The metal was warm and smooth like gold, but hard as ceramite.

He glanced up. 'Is this auramite?' he asked.

Guilliman nodded. 'A rare honour. None but the Emperor's own guardians bear armour made from that metal.'

Messinius let his fingers explore the killing machine. Touching it made his soul sing.

'You lost your favoured weapon serving me, so it is my pleasure to replace it. This mark of power fist was last in mass production millennia ago,' Guilliman went on. 'It is superior in several ways to the current models. I have had Cawl himself refurbish it. It will not fail you. Now, look beneath to the lower layer of the case.'

Hesitantly, awed by the artefact given him, Messinius put his thumb to a second ident-lock within the case. The compartment holding the power fist rose silently on a contra-grav field. To see such powerful technologies used for such a mundane purpose surprised him. It was a harbinger of the coming golden age. Truly, Guilliman could restore mankind's greatness.

In a thinner layer of foam beneath was a long plasma pistol. Its casing had been decorated to match the power fist, with a scene carved in the same style, showing one of the horsemen now dismounted, brandishing his sword on a pile of vanquished foes, while miniature Space Marines marched around the edging of the gun's charging coils in files given depth by cunning art.

'This weapon is new,' Guilliman said. 'Most of the wargear Belisarius Cawl has created cannot, alas, be easily matched with existing Space Marine equipment, for he was determined in his enthusiasm to start from a fresh slate, but as his new models are also superior to what has been in common usage, I had him adapt some for the warriors I respect the most. This is one for you. It will fire for you alone, and will never scald you. Together, the fist and pistol represent the best of mankind's knowledge, old and new.'

This weapon Messinius picked up and hefted. It was lighter and sleeker than plasma pistols he had used before, but the number of coils and the range of its settings dial suggested a greater potency.

'Now replace the pistol, and close the lid. You will have many years to become used to one another. They will be sent to your quarters.'

‘I do not know what to say, my lord.’ He shut the case.

‘Let the weapons speak for you. I will always have need of you, Vitrian, but the Imperium needs you more. However,’ he said, ‘before I send you from my side in all honour and with expectation of your future heroism, I have one final favour to ask of you, in your capacity as my dux praestes.’

‘Anything, my lord,’ said Messinius.

‘You will go to Fleet Quintus at Uranus and Jupiter. Take your new warriors. I want you to discover if Prasorius can make his departure date, then report to me, and we shall see if I will grant Lady VanLeskus’ request.’

Chapter Twenty-One

REBIRTH

METHALON FOG

AREIOS AWAKES

Space around the *Zar Quaesitor* was alive with ships. As Vitrian Messinius' transport approached, shuttlecraft were exiting the Ark Mechanicus in long streams, bearing away Cawl's new-made technological wonders to destinations all over the gathering fleets. He was accepted without delay, though not welcomed. Once aboard he inloaded the contents of the dataslate Guilliman had given him to his battleplate, and let it guide him through the ship.

The *Zar Quaesitor* was so huge, and so crammed full of unexpected passages and spaces that it would have been easy to lose his way to his destination. He took a grav-train deep into the immense ship, passing columns of armoured containers heading out on the opposite track, with long runs of flatbed trucks carrying tanks, attack craft, and open racks bearing weapons and armour. Frames with a hundred Primaris suspension pods apiece raced by in a blur.

When he alighted, he saw awoken units trooping by. All these were of the bloodline of Dorn, and wore the Imperial Fists livery and heraldry, albeit with novel unit markings, and over the clenched fist of the ancient Legion was painted a pale grey chevron. Each group was at company strength, fully armed and armoured, led by servo-skulls, and followed by servitor-piloted

supply trains. The sons of Dorn were passing through gates guarded by a Knight of House Taranis, but no matter how many marched under its skull-faced vigil, there seemed to be more to come. Klaxons rang every other second, while booming vox-announcements echoed down enormous transitways.

He left the train at a major nexus. Winding his way through the crowds, Messinius followed the cartolith away from the main arteries of the vessel, and into its cargo holds, where giant haulers were being loaded by lifter trucks, and personnel of the *Departmento Munitorum*, Guilliman's new *Logisticarum* and the *Adeptus Mechanicus* shouted, swore and hurried to get their precious cargo off to war. As he went deeper, he passed into the deserted stretches, where immense holds were voided of everything. His map sent him through one of the great stasis chambers. Cargo lifters sat idle. Loading bay doors were closed. Only plugs in the floor and ceiling, and loops of cabling neatly tied marked where thousands of suspension pods had stood. Methalon fog from emptied caskets drifted over the decking, rising as high as Messinius' breastplate. He pushed through it, forcing the vapours into curling waves.

At the centre of the hold, the action of the *Zar Quaesitor's* atmospheric circulation systems gathered the fog into huge banks. Messinius' armour warned him of dangerous dips in temperature. A mortal human would have succumbed to hypothermia in minutes there. Cold gripped his ceramite, seeping inwards to chill his flesh. Frost, first of water vapour, then of gas frozen out of the ship's air mix, gathered on his battleplate, and his reactor rumbled into a higher output mode. The fog rose high over his head, forcing him to rely solely on his auto-senses. His heart rates rose. Against his will, his heightened senses strained, anticipating attack at any moment. The fog banks would have been a good place to ambush him.

All the various filters his helm possessed provided him with no way to see through. Heat phantoms rendered his thermal overlay useless, and the fog seemed to bounce his echolocator emissions as effectively as a baffle field. He was forced to stop and recalibrate his cartolith, relying on invisible auspex pulses, until it aligned him with a door out. Through it he entered a lesser corridor along with a spill of super-chilled vapour.

Once again he saw adepts at work, red-robed *Mechanicus* priests and *Munitorum* numerators in the main. The corridor was freezing, and they all

wore their clothes done up high against it. No one paid him a second glance as he marched past them.

There were doors at regular intervals along the wall opposite the hold side, most closed, but he passed one open, and saw a new Space Marine sat upon an examination table, his skin ghostly white from long hibernation. He stared at Messinius while Mechanicus adepts fussed around him. There was something lacking in his gaze that disturbed Messinius, and suddenly he appreciated more what Guilliman was asking of him.

The door slid shut, breaking the brief contact. He passed several more of the Primaris Marines being led from the rooms in medicae gowns, some as dazed as the first, others alert. Newly awoken they did not live up to the promise of Cawl's display, but seemed childlike.

After several minutes of fast walking he reached his destination, a door the same as all the rest. It opened for him unprompted, and he went in.

He had expected to find a ready warrior waiting. Instead were two adepts, and they ushered him past the room's examination table, into a second room dominated by a stasis tank in which only an indistinct shape could be discerned.

'This is Ferren?' Messinius asked one of the adepts; both were mostly human in appearance, hardly augmented at all. One was nominally male, the other nominally female. It was often hard to tell with the tech-priests.

'This is he, captain,' said the first adept, who did not offer her name.

'Why is he not awoken?'

'It is beneficial for one who is to assume command to be introduced to his commanding officer immediately. He will imprint upon you.'

Messinius took off his helm and frowned at the woman. 'What do you mean "imprint"? You speak as if he is a canid.'

'It is nothing to be alarmed about, noble Space Marine.' The man raised up his hands and bowed.

So they were of that sort, thought Messinius. Certain of the biologically specialised Adeptus Mechanicus could be annoyingly worshipful of the Adeptus Astartes, seeing them as the work of their god.

'He has been asleep for thousands of years. Yours will be the first-transhuman face he will have seen, ever, in the flesh. This is not something the Prime Conduit has placed into their psyche, it is simply a normal human reaction. Think of a newly born child, not an animal.'

‘The lord primarch warned me about this,’ said Messinius, though he did not completely trust the adept’s explanation. ‘He told me these warriors would experience a greater than usual sense of dislocation.’

‘Yes, yes! Exactly so, my lord,’ said the adept, performing an unnecessary and complex bow. ‘It is nothing sinister, all we desire is that the intentions of Belisarius Cawl be correctly executed right up until the end of the process, and his genius released to its proper purpose within the scope of the Machine-God’s Great Work. After that, he is yours.’

‘Right,’ said Messinius. ‘Then let’s get on with it.’

‘Of course,’ said the female. ‘The process of rebirth is complex.’ She looked expectantly at him. Standard human expressions were sometimes lost on Space Marines, but Messinius recognised the look from his endless, tedious dealings with the burghers of Norsee.

‘You wish for me to remove myself.’

‘Not entirely, lord captain,’ she said, with evident relief. ‘If you would stand back a little, give us room to work, then it would help us greatly.’

Messinius turned around so he could look behind him. Despite the room’s purpose as a revivification point for Space Marines, it was not built to easily accommodate them. The female adept smiled and gestured to the point furthest from the suspension pod. ‘There should suffice. Please remain clear of us while we work.’

Messinius clamped his helm under his arm and went to stand where indicated. He felt entirely ancillary to purposes and wanted the awakening done with as quickly as possible.

The priests fussed over their machines, and from that point paid him no attention. They whispered prayers and minutely adjusted dials upon a large board. The equipment had cleaner lines and was smaller than a lot of Mechanicus technology, sharing many similarities in form with the technology of the Adeptus Astartes. There were a number of touch-activated gel screens and displays of active glass that responded without visible prompting from the priests. Messinius judged that they must have a deep level of connection with their devices, but in contrast to the large, oily, often cumbersome augmetics worn by the adepts of Mars, their personal enhancements were hidden.

A bright light came on in the tube, illuminating the fluid. It was so thick, the warrior showed only as a silhouette, but that at least made him seem

real, moving him from rough outline to solid shape. He was the future, casting his shadow back into the present. Messinius' world was about to change. Yet for the moment Ferren was motionless. The suspension casket still radiated a deep chill despite having been disconnected from its methalon unit, and trickles ran down the outside from melting frost.

Gradually, the two adepts brought the temperature of the casket up. The cold in the room lessened. The last of the frost melted and the moisture covering the glass shrank to beads, then dried. Still Messinius could see little, and he understood less. It soon became apparent that the operation would not be a short one. Messinius' anticipation gave way to stolid patience, though this had to be manufactured. Watching the priests minister to their machines with such concentration he felt unaccountably on edge, like he should be doing something useful, but he could do nothing. He forced himself to remain utterly still, and watched the favour of the Machine-God being called for, and the adjustments made to the equipment as the two adepts brought the process towards its conclusion.

'Temperature is at thirty-seven grades, human normal,' said the female.

'Praise be to the Ommissiah and all the hosts of digital saints. Prepare for revivification.'

The female moved quickly. She and her colleague exchanged cross-check cant as they worked their way through a long series of activation protocols. Pumps whirred into life, sucking out preservative fluid and introducing blood into Ferren's body. Various chemical compounds were eased into the circulatory system along with preheated vitae, and forced throughout the warrior's system by electrostimulus of the man's hearts that made his fingers twitch in the medium.

'All prepared, by the will of the Ommissiah,' the female finally said.

'Stand back,' said the male. 'Engage power generation.'

With three fingers, the female pushed up power sliders on an active glass panel. Engines hummed in the walls.

'Motive force ready for release,' she said.

'Executing,' said the male. He pressed a square, green button.

Power cracked audibly through the liquid. The silhouette spasmed violently. The female swiftly checked a number of displays. The male stood in rapture, communing directly with the machines.

'Again,' the male said, returning to the world of matter.

Once more, the female slid her fingers up the glass.

‘Motive force ready for release,’ she said again.

The male’s finger hovered over the button, then he closed his eyes.

‘In the name of the Ommissiah, let there be life.’

He stabbed down.

Ferren was freezing cold. He ran through puddles that numbed his feet. He breathed air that raked his lungs with icy claws.

He had never been cold before. The underhive was a place of heat and humidity. Cold was unknown, consequently he found it hard to understand what he felt; it was so extreme it should have been terrifying. Only, he was not scared.

He wasn’t scared of anything any more.

Things were chasing him through the tangled ruinscape of an abandoned manufactorum. They were fast, hard to see, moving with deadly, silent grace through knots of steel scrap and rotted cables.

Ferren was noisy by contrast, his feet knocking aside piles of junk and splashing loudly through puddles of uphive effluent. His panting echoed off dead machines. Rust pattered from metal. He could see an escape route ahead. They might be faster than him, but he knew the hive better. A door opened onto a half-crushed passageway that led to an abandoned hive dome. They’d never catch him if he got into there.

A figure in red with a mirrored face stepped in front of him and grabbed him with metal hands. It stopped him with such finality his skin tore, and yet it did not move at all, but stood as solid as the hive itself.

‘Subject apprehended,’ it stated emotionlessly.

The ground opened beneath him, and he fell.

He was in a chair, tightly restrained. Bright lights shone in his eyes, but not so bright he could not see the inhuman figures moving behind them. They were dark shapes of waving tentacles and menacing pincers. Soft pads were attached to his head.

‘What is the thirty-first precept of engagement?’ an impersonal voice grated.

‘Application of overwhelming force to be considered within the light of non-belligerent objectives.’

‘Expand,’ said the voice.

He did not know the answer, but he heard himself say, ‘Terror is a weapon,’ the words springing into his mind. He was freezing cold. He did not know where he was. His body was swollen, and did not feel like his own. But he was not afraid.

‘Name six methods of exfiltration in a high-population-density oceanic environment,’ it grated. ‘Assuming optimum results in retrieval of wargear, gene-seed and personnel are required.’

‘Teleportation, aerial evacuation, submersible retrieval, seabed traversal on foot,’ he said, the words pouring out of him.

‘There are more,’ said the voice. ‘Again.’

A sharp shock of pain made him scream.

There were thousands of green monsters running at him, roaring unclean alien words and brandishing crude weaponry. He was on his own, isolated, clad in armour as thick as an armoured vehicle’s and armed with a gun that fired miniaturised, self-propelled missiles that would obliterate a man with one shot. Technology like that would have made him a king in his own lands.

It would not be enough against the horde. He was going to die.

Methodically, he emptied his gun into the onrushing xenos.

Orks, his mind supplied, his subconscious edifying his conscious self as he picked out the strongest-looking specimens among the enemy, and sent them swift death. The xenos were huge...

Unclean. Hate them, his subconscious offered.

...but the bolts from his gun penetrated their thick skulls and blew apart their heads anyway. Twenty bolts, twenty dead, each shot a kill, no time to reload. He threw aside his bolt rifle and drew his pistol and knife as the horde closed in on him. His sense of proportion was skewed. His armour displays told him the height and mass of the orks, and the smallest was bigger and heavier than a grown man, yet he overtopped all but the largest. His knife was the length of a sword, but seemed only a dagger in his fist. The pistol seemed small, but was larger than the rifle he had owned at home. Despite the knife’s seeming inconsequentiality, he punched it through the armour and the chest of the first ork with little effort, shattering its sternum and skewering its heart. He lifted its considerable weight from

the ground. It raged at him, raking his armour with dirty nails, so he kicked it hard, at the same moment wrenching the knife free, ripping viscera out on the tooth of the knife's serrated back edge. Orks were unnaturally tough...

Warrior race. Possible bio-engineered origin.

...and this one would not die, but it fell down, and lay at Ferren's feet cradling its exposed innards. Ferren had already moved on to his next target, loosing a shot into the screaming maw of a second ork, driving the knife up through the ear and into the brain of a third. He dropped to a crouch, tripping the fourth into those behind, and sending them all sprawling. Ferren moved smoothly, each action calculated to end another xenos life. Within moments, his cobalt-blue armour was bright red with spilled blood, and the ground was slippery with organs. Half-dead orks moved at his feet. The jarring blows of axes rang from his armour. Heavy-calibre bullets crashed into him. His wargear remained inviolate, yet it was beginning to take damage, failing by small degrees, until the warning amber runes in his helm flickered to an angry red, and he suffered his first breach.

A knife found its way between the plates on his stomach and through his armoured undersuit. He slew his attacker.

An axe wreathed in a stuttering power field shattered his vambrace, the kinetic spillover numbing his arm. He wrenched the weapon from the ork and fed it to him.

A hand grabbed his backpack and pulled back. Ferren pivoted with the move, ducked, and eviscerated the ork's chest cavity with a single shot from his bolt pistol.

So it went on. His pistol emptied, and was cast away. His knife blunted, then broke. He fought with fists and feet, shattering ivory fangs with violent headbutts. Still they came on, pulling at him, dragging him down, until he was buried beneath a pile of them, his hands locked about the throat of his last victim, throttling the life from it.

A dozen dirty green hands clawed at him, wrenching at his pauldrons, his helm and his backpack.

A knife found the neck seal, and pushed in with agonising slowness. He ignored the pain, determined to strangle the last ork before he died.

His veins and arteries were ripped asunder. His spine broke. He went limp, and was still alive when the orks tore him to pieces and began to feast upon him.

He died.

<AGAIN,> an electronic voice blurted. <RESET SCENARIO. INCREASE XENOS FEROCITY. PROVOKE HIGHER AGGRESSIONAL RESPONSE IN SUBJECT. PRIMARY AIM – IMPROVE KILL COUNT BEFORE DEATH.>

Ferren jolted.

There were thousands of green monsters running at him, roaring unclear alien words and brandishing crude weaponry. He was on his own, isolated, clad in armour as thick as an armoured vehicle's and armed with a gun that fired miniaturised, self-propelled missiles that would obliterate a man with one shot. Technology like that would have made him a king in his own lands.

It would not be enough against the horde.

He was going to die, and he was so very, very cold.

Electric pain burned through him.

Soft music played, so beautiful that it entranced him. Ferren had no idea such divine melodies existed. He thought it the Emperor's music. Hearing its perfection was almost painful, and that was almost enough to take his mind off the agony bedevilling his flesh.

He was floating within a machine, held in place by crushing gravity fields. Arms bearing tools darted around him, cutting and sampling, jabbing at him with sharp knives and twisting needles. Some introduced fluids into his system, others took them away.

There was someone nearby, humming to itself, a large mechanical presence, yet the upper parts of it were oddly human seeming.

'You are doing very well, 306-621-051,' the figure said. 'I know it hurts, but I promise one day this will be done and you will be free to serve your purpose.'

Ferren wanted to shout at him, to ask why, to plead with him to make it stop, but he could not speak, and the creature was distracted in any case. It wandered off humming along with the tune, past rows of other machines like the one that trapped Ferren, each holding another body.

More electrical agony speared him.

His lungs were full of liquid, yet he was not drowning. An unfamiliar pressure in his chest pushed at his lungs, and through this he breathed. The

liquid was thick, making it hard to see, but he gathered that he was in a tube, and beyond the tube was a room. He saw the smeared outlines of two people working around him, and a third, much larger figure as a dim shape behind them. They were speaking, their words muffled by glass and liquid; he caught only a little of what they said, and paid no attention to it.

Out, he thought. *I must get out!*

Another electric spear raced through his body, briefly outlining the network of his nerves for his conscious mind to measure.

Out! he screamed. The word emerged as turbulence in the liquid. He drew his fist back and drove it forward into the tube's side. The liquid dragged at his hand, slowing it, and yet his strength was so great it hit with a loud thump. His actions provoked greater activity from the two smaller figures. The larger stepped forward.

Out! he shouted again, and this time when his fist connected with the glass a network of cracks spidered out from the impact, the sounds of the fissuring of the glass a series of sharp, clear snaps.

A light flashed outside, red and urgent.

His third blow punched through the glass. The liquid suddenly gurgled from the base, and he thumped down onto the open louvres of a drain. The tube opened, and half swung outwards. The two figures stepped back, and he threw himself onto the ground, his legs tangling with each other, tripping him and bringing him down. He attempted to rise, but he was slick with the residue of the liquid, tangled in cables plugged into metal embedded in his bones, and the strength that had powered his fist through the glass had deserted him.

'Be at ease, lord Space Marine,' said one of the figures. Ferren blinked liquid from his eyes so he could see, taking in every detail of the man's appearance. Information he did not know he knew poured into him.

Male. Adeptus Mechanicus minor adept, biologan specialisation.

He turned to the second figure. She was the same in dress, manner and levels of augmentation, but female.

'You have awoken from a long sleep,' she said. 'Your trials are over now. You are born anew.'

'Can you stand?' said the third figure. He had a much deeper voice. Insignia displayed on his armour made Ferren want to obey him. The other two made way for him and he came forward, his hand outstretched.

Ferren looked at the armour-clad fingers. They were clumsy looking, and brutal.

Ceramite. The voice in his head was fading into his own now, so he could not tell it apart from his own thoughts. *High thermal tolerance ceramometallic hyper-alloy. Undersuit plastek/plasteel weave.*

Power armour, he thought. Space Marine. White Consuls, he thought, ancient primogenitor Chapter of the Ultramarines. Captain.

The captain was stern looking, with what might have been handsome features made broad and somewhat ugly by his transhumanism.

Ferren took his hand. For the first time since he could remember, he was not cold.

‘I can stand,’ he said, and his voice was alien to his ears.

Even through Messinius’ armour, the grip of Ferren felt strong. Messinius pulled him up to his feet. It was the first time he had been so close to one of Cawl’s creations, and only then he realised just how much taller they were.

Ferren’s skin was bleached and puffy with the fluids he had slept in, but it looked like it would be a rich brown when his circulation returned to normal. Cawl had chosen only the finest specimens of humanity, and had therefore taken his subjects from across the Imperium. Messinius wondered at the efforts undertaken to assemble this host of prodigies, the organisation, the secrecy, the lies.

‘Welcome, my brother,’ he said.

‘Brother,’ said Ferren, as if the word was new to him.

Only superficial differences existed between them. Within the population deemed human basic by the Adeptus Terra, morphology varied widely, but gene-seed assimilation erased all that, remaking a man from the core until only little of what they had been remained. Scattered memories, the cast of their skin, minor differences in height and build – these were an artisan’s chasing on the hilts of weapons made in the same manufactorum, nothing more than that. Space Marines looked human, but they no longer truly were. Their character owed much to their gene-seed and the Chapter cult, and little to the environments that shaped their birth bodies, or the cultures that formed their youthful minds, and the bonds of affection that elevated people above the beasts.

The Emperor made the Space Marines. They were His. In them was a little

of His reflected glory. How much of the Primaris Marines came from Cawl? thought Messinius.

Ferren stared at his hands. 'Where am I?' An inhuman placidity had come over him. A normal man would have been screaming in fear, or at least demanding answers. A normal neophyte would not exhibit such calm. The cold of suspended animation had been driven from his body, but not from his soul.

'I am Captain Messinius of the White Consuls.'

'You are a Space Marine,' Ferren stated. 'An Angel of Death.'

'I am. As are you.'

'They are myths,' said Ferren. His fingers probed slabs of hard muscle slippery with the fluid. He prodded experimentally at the input ports set into his skin. The female adept gently moved his hand so she could unplug the leads. She and her companion worked around him while Messinius spoke.

'We are not,' said Messinius. 'You live. I live. We are real, and we are the soldiers of He of Terra.'

'The Emperor?' asked Ferren.

'Yes, the Emperor. Do you know who you are?'

Ferren's eyes seemed unfocused, like he wasn't fully conscious.

'I was Ferren,' he said softly, 'from Hive Daner Fifty, which I thought was the whole world, but was not. I was a boy who dreamed he was taken from a place of steel, up through a sky I thought was a story for children. There I was made into a breed of warrior I thought was a myth. I have been dreaming ever since.' He held his hands up again in wonderment. 'Now I wake, and see I am again beneath a roof of metal, but it is not the Daner Fifty, and I find that it was the boy who was the dream, and that all the nightmares were true.' He frowned slightly. His puffy skin made the expression seem rubbery, a facsimile of emotion. 'I do not know who I am any more.'

'Who do you wish to be?'

Ferren looked down at himself again.

'My mind is full of war. Its waging, and its winning. I wish to be what I have been made to be. I wish to serve the Emperor of Mankind.'

'Loyally and truthfully?'

Ferren looked at him as if the question was incomprehensible.

'What shall I call you? You were Ferren. Do you wish to be known by that

name still?’

‘I... I do not know. You will command me?’

‘For a time.’

‘Then name me anew. What I was is gone. What I am is ready to fight. It needs a name.’

A myth so old few now knew of it came unbidden to Messinius. Messinius himself was ignorant of the culture and era it originated from, but fragments of it were preserved in his Chapter’s librarius, and from it he took a name once synonymous with Mars.

It seemed fitting, somehow.

‘Then I name you Ferren Areios, your old name for where you came from, and the new for the world that changed you.’

‘Areios,’ said the warrior.

He knelt. Like all his movements, it was awkward.

‘Command me, my captain. I am yours.’ He looked up, and Messinius saw a hint of pain in his eyes. ‘For I do not know what else to do.’

‘Come with me, then. I have for you a rebirth of fire.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

QUINTUS INFECTED

THE PROCURATOR MORBUS

AN UNEARTHLY CONTAGION

Messinius gave Areios a day to acclimatise, no more. Then he had him armoured, collected the first batch of Primaris troopers assigned to him from elsewhere in the *Zar Quaesitor*, and requisitioned an in-system ship to take them to Jupiter. He travelled with his new men in the ship's small hold, all of them sat on hard benches along the sides of a space where empty cargo webbing lay in untidy tangles. He had two demi-squads, configured as Hellblaster plasma gunners and Intercessors. Their leaders were Thothven and Iqwa, men from planets at opposite ends of the segmentum. Messinius had already got the impression they were united only by gene recoding and Ultramarine blue battleplate, and already he saw his task would be hard.

'We will be taking part in this crusade?' Areios asked. His voice was distracted. All of them were distant, Areios especially, like he found it hard to focus on what was happening. Messinius remembered his own ascension to the Space Marines, how much that had changed him, and how difficult his adjustment had been. As Master of Recruits he had seen it in the Scouts new to the Chapter, before they were assigned combat duties. Without guidance, the Space Marines were lost, open to the temptations their raw power gave them. Distance was normal in young Space Marines. But what

he saw in Areios was something else.

‘We will. We will be departing with Fleet Tertius,’ said Messinius.

‘How many of these fleets are there?’ Thothven said. ‘We know nothing, captain. You must educate us.’ A couple of the others murmured assent. In Thothven, Messinius glimpsed a questioning soul. He had been awake the longest of the group, and was the sharpest of thought. Messinius saw hope there, that the emotional coldness was only a temporary phase, and would pass.

‘Ten fleets gather,’ said Messinius. ‘Not all at Sol. Six are nearly ready.’

‘What is our objective?’ Areios asked.

Messinius leaned back on the bench. The ship was small, built to cover the distance between Luna and Terra in a couple of hours. It was a five-day journey to Jupiter under maximum power, and the ship’s engines complained at the efforts demanded of them.

They knew nothing of the crusade, and little about the current state of the Imperium. He shifted his new power fist across his knees. It was good to be wearing one again, even if he had yet to get the feel of it.

‘You know the great traitor Horus?’ he asked.

They knew this. ‘The grand devil,’ said a Hellblaster named Giitri.

‘Not a devil, a primarch, like Lord Guilliman. The Emperor created eighteen of them, each the master of a Legion of Space Marines. They were made to conquer the galaxy after a time called Old Night, when humanity’s first great empire was lost and our species nearly went extinct. But Horus turned upon the Emperor at the height of His triumph, and the Imperium was nearly destroyed. Nine of his brothers fell with him. Nine remained loyal. Our gene-father is one of them.’

‘We know this history. Cawl put it in us when he remade us,’ said Iqwa. He retained a trace of his harsh birth accent. Like his fellows he seemed a little dazed, but Messinius suspected a belligerent man would emerge in the days to come.

‘You will listen anyway,’ said Messinius. ‘The war never ended. Abaddon, a warrior of Horus’ Legion, took up his mantle of Warmaster, and along with other fallen Legiones Astartes has waged war on the Imperium ever since. Recently, he returned on his Thirteenth Black Crusade, and somehow split the galaxy in two. They call it the Great Rift.’

He datapulsed a cartograph to their helms, showing the ragged line of warp

storms.

‘To the galactic south is Imperium Sanctus. This portion of the Imperium we have reestablished contact with. The crusade’s mission is to secure the southern half of the galaxy.’

‘And the north?’ asked an Intercessor.

‘We do not know if anything exists beyond the storms. They could extend all the way to the far north. There might be nothing on the other side. Lord Guilliman does not believe that is so, and that we will re-establish contact with the lost segmenta, but it remains to be proven. This part has been dubbed Imperium Nihilus.’

He looked at them all.

‘Warriors, you have been woken from long sleep. You have changed. You are confused. The galaxy has changed much since the youngest of you was born, but I must prevail upon you for the sake of our species. You must serve now, and save what we can. Thothven, Iqwa, the equipment built into your left vambraces, does it possess a projection facility?’

The Primaris Marines looked at one another.

‘Yes, captain.’

‘Call me brother-captain. You must learn to respect one another as if you were brothers. Comradeship is the true strength of a Space Marine Chapter, not armour, not bolters.’

‘Yes, brother-captain,’ said Thothven.

‘Then project the images I will send to you. We will speak of the greater crusade soon enough. We have a mission now, that we must focus upon. That is the way of the Adeptus Astartes, to complete the task allotted without distraction.’

Messinius set up a datacast with Thothven. The Primaris sergeant flipped open a flap on the top of his arm, revealing a compact cogitation unit beneath. A projection lens flickered. Thothven made some adjustments, and angled his arm so that an image of the Jovian planetary system floated in the middle of the empty hold.

‘This is Jupiter, home of the greatest shipyards in the Sol System,’ said Messinius. He pointed out the lattices of orbital yards around the equator and the planet’s larger moons. ‘A third of Fleet Quintus is assembling there. Currently two battle groups are suffering pestilence of unknown origin. We will visit the flagship of the fourth battle group, the battleship *Praesidium*.

My mission is to assess their preparations and judge whether they will be ready. You will observe and perform close guard duties.'

'You have a large responsibility,' said Areios.

'The Lord Guilliman will have others performing similar investigations. It will not be my say alone that releases or stops a fleet,' he said. 'But what we find will sway him, and unlike others we will be arriving unannounced. Our role is important, understand that.'

'What manner of pestilence is this?' asked Areios.

Messinius rested his head against the shaking ship hull. 'One that makes it unwise for me to go alone.'

The Jovian approach was as crowded as the skies around Terra, and took several hours to negotiate. Eventually, they approached the *Praesidium*. Messinius announced his arrival at the last possible moment, and was gratified to hear a hint of panic in the answering officer's voice. An attempt at delay was essayed, quickly swatted down by the presentation of the primarch's authority. After Messinius explained exactly who he was, their ship was cleared with all speed. Messinius ordered the pilot to dock quickly, just in case.

Dull clangs sounded through the hull as one of the *Praesidium*'s docking piers grasped their ship.

The vox clicked. Thothven spoke to him privately. 'They'll wake up soon, brother-captain,' he said. 'You do not know what it's like to sleep so long. I was the same when I was revived.'

'Maybe the primarch knows,' said Messinius.

'Maybe he does,' said Thothven.

The ship shook a little as the *Praesidium*'s docking pier finally caught a solid lock. Lumens spun around the airlock door.

'Open the way, shipmaster,' Messinius voxed.

A sharp blurt from a klaxon replied. The inner lock doors opened. They could have opened both sets, but Messinius wanted to keep the biological sanctity of the ship intact, so they went into the lock and waited for the inner doors to shut again before Messinius depressed the release for the outer gate.

It rolled back into the hull. On the other side a pier extended, roofed with nothing but atmospheric energy shielding emanating from the spreading

arms of caryatids. An official of the Logisticarum waited for them, flanked by two men carrying long-snouted bio-scanners. All of them wore heavy duty environmental gear. The small size of the welcoming party made Messinius suspicious.

‘Captain Messinius, we were not expecting your visit,’ the logister said. ‘I am a logister of the third standing, Procurator Morbus for Battle Group Cerastus, Sextus and Septimus of Fleet Quintus. I assume you have come to check on our progress in managing the contagion.’

‘You assume correctly. What is your name?’ Messinius asked.

‘My name is Sara Tephise, captain,’ she said. Her eyes shifted sideways to look past Messinius at the Primaris Marines. These were probably the first of the breed she had seen. Speculation about them was rife. Tephise was professional enough that this small eye movement was her only concession to curiosity.

The open nature of the pier allowed them to see the side of the *Praesidium* clearly. Statues plated with gleaming metal stood in artful groups between the closed hatches of macrocannon ports. The outer buttressing was finely proportioned. Imperial vessels were often indelicate, but not this one.

‘A beautiful ship, Procurator Morbus Tephise,’ said Messinius.

He moved to step forward on the pier. Tephise held up her hand and he halted at the edge of the airlock, towering over her. A young face looked out from the transparent, cylindrical helmet she wore that exhibited no sign of Astartes dread.

‘If I may beg your forgiveness, please do not step aboard the ship until we have had the chance to scan you for contaminants. We have had to become wary. I apologise if that makes us seem unwelcoming. May we?’

‘Proceed,’ said Messinius. ‘By all means.’

The two men moved forward, more nervously than the logister, the funnels of their scanners snuffling all over the Space Marines. For good measure, they then passed around the inner airlock. They consulted panels set into the top of the processing boxes, depressed buttons protected with coats of plastek, and waited for a verdict. Lumens shone green.

‘They are clean,’ one said.

The logister stood aside. ‘Then welcome to the *Praesidium*, Captain Messinius, command ship of Battle Group Cerastus, Indomitus Crusade Fleet Quintus.’

Messinius stepped onto the pier.

‘You must come this way,’ said the logister. ‘Please, it would be better if we were quick.’

As they approached the voidlock at the far end of the docking pier, it opened, and a second party came out. There were twenty armsmen in void-hardened armour led by a man wearing the bright bronze helm and wings of a sergeant-at-arms, and accompanied by a midshipman.

‘Procurator Morbus Tephise,’ the officer said. ‘You were quick here.’

‘It is necessary to preserve the biological purity of this vessel, Midshipman Savay.’

‘Even from them?’ he said. His soldiers lined up either side of the pier. Messinius idly calculated the threat. His sense that something was amiss here grew. Not so idly, he assigned targets to each of his own warriors.

Messinius stepped forward. ‘Especially from us,’ he said. ‘We should be treated no differently to others. This is humanity’s crusade. Exception breeds resentment and exposes us all to risk.’

‘I am sorry, my lord,’ said Savay. He clicked his heels together and bowed shallowly. ‘The bluntness of the Adeptus Astartes as always cuts through poorly formed opinion. I beg your forgiveness and ask that you come with us.’

Messinius looked down at Tephise. She stared straight ahead.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Procurator Morbus Tephise will be my point of contact. I believe she has the expertise to explain what is happening here in the clearest manner.’

‘I understand,’ said Savay, ‘but Shipmaster Versht was insistent that you come with me to the command deck where you might discuss these matters directly with the battle group commodore.’

‘I prefer to discuss this with her,’ said Messinius. He began to stride forward. His immense bulk intimidated the men, and they parted to let him through. ‘My brothers, escort Mistress Tephise and her men, with all due honour.’

Forming a mobile barrier between the logister and the armsmen, the Space Marines went to the airlock. It remained closed.

‘My lord captain...’

‘Open this door now,’ said Messinius. ‘If you have any problem with my remit or my actions, then I recommend you take it up with the Avenging

Son himself.’

The airlock opened.

‘Closed squad vox. Activate omicron level cypher,’ he said to his men. ‘I do not think we want these people listening to what we say.’

The ship was in the throes of preparation. Work of all kinds was being undertaken on every level of the interior. Scaffolding covered expanses of the walls, and the lesser transit conduits were full of supply carts travelling nose to tail. In the main spinal way, the crew train rushed back and forth past them three times as they headed from the docking spars up towards the lifter nexuses of the superstructure. The crew were all occupied. Shouts and the sounds of machine tools echoed down every corridor and in every hall. No one paid the Space Marines much attention, though when it was realised they were Primaris, they attracted a few curious glances, and everyone was quick to get out of their way.

Messinius said nothing while they followed the logister through the crowds, preferring to observe, and guarding his actions and gestures. The frenetic pace of the preparations did nothing to assure him Quintus was ready. There were officers in the crowds watching them, a few inexpertly tailing them.

They reached a restricted lifter keyed open by Tephise’s data wand. They entered, and the doors closed, cutting out the noise of the grand junction. The lifter sighed, and accelerated into the battleship’s towering spires.

‘The primarch is concerned that this issue is still unresolved,’ Messinius said.

‘We are devoting all our efforts to stamping out the contagion,’ said Tephise.

‘Yet it is still present.’

She nodded tightly. ‘We will discuss this in a moment, please. Here is too... indiscreet.’

She had removed her helmet, and Messinius could see how tired she was. Large black semicircles shadowed her eyes, and her skin was waxy. The rest of her voidsuit remained on, though it was bulky and awkward to move in under normal conditions.

The lifter decelerated crisply, delivering them to a suite of rooms halfway up the tertiary command spire. Men and women of the naval medicae corps

moved with exaggerated care between the various chambers, all of which were closed by airlocks with sanctity wards and machine-spirits that asked many clearance questions.

She led them towards a room. 'Wait here,' she told her two attendants. The outer lock door opened, and the Space Marines had to duck to pass through. The airlocks were new additions, and sized exclusively for baseline humans. Bioscanners hummed and clicked in the walls for a minute before they chimed the all clear, and the inner door opened to an empty laboratory.

'Provide lighting,' she said. Lumens blinked slowly on, as if sullen at being awakened. She went to a console that looked out of place, and depressed a button. Feedback in his helm and a blinking rune warned him a vox-bluff was active.

Plastek-shrouded equipment lay quiescent in the room. Tephise went to the centre of the laboratory and turned round to face the Space Marines. Messinius inwardly cursed. If this were a combat situation, he would have blithely walked into an ambush. He half suspected he had.

'I'll be brief, because I must,' said Tephise. 'I am glad you are here. We are making no headway in containing the disease. Battle groups Sextus and Septimus have been isolated for weeks, from us, from Jupiter, from each other, yet still it spreads between the ships in those groups.'

Messinius made a noise in his throat that came out of his voxmitter as a growl.

'Any infection so far of the shipyards?'

'As of the moment, it is only Fleet Quintus that is plagued,' she said. She rested against a workbench. A tired, involuntary sigh escaped her. 'I sometimes feel we are being specifically targeted. This disease is not natural,' she said.

'What makes you say so?'

'I was with the Chirurgeon-General of the Astra Militarum before I was recruited to the Officio Logisticarum,' she said. 'Departmento Contagio. I have seen diseases of all kinds. Sickness with a strong mutagenic effect like this is rare. It has a psychic element. It is touched by the warp.'

'Your relief at my arrival. This room. Your candour,' said Messinius. 'You wish me to report this back to the primarch. You are being prevented from doing so.'

‘As soon as I learned you were inbound, I made sure to be the one to meet you. We cannot control this outbreak, captain. It is beyond us. There is only one...’ she paused, and looked afraid. ‘There is only one organisation with the capability to deal with a contagion like this,’ she said as calmly as she could, but too quickly to appear entirely matter-of-fact. ‘It would be best if they were informed.’

The buzz of the bluff in his vox-bead annoyed him, so Messinius unlocked his helm and drew it off. The air in the laboratorium was dry, characteristic of having been filtered too many times.

‘You have tried to contact higher authorities?’

‘I have,’ Tephise said. ‘My recommendations have been ignored. My attempts to discuss my findings with my own superiors within the Logisticarum regarding this matter have been intercepted and suppressed. I have been isolated.’

‘Why?’

She shifted against the edge of the bench. ‘You saw the reception you were intended. I am sure you can guess.’ She looked at the ceiling, at the door locks, at the lumens. I am being watched, her eyes said. The bluff screen was evidently insufficient.

‘Humour me,’ said Messinius. ‘I will hear your hypothesis, and my brothers here will benefit from hearing your reasoning.’ He raised his voice a little, so any who were listening would hear. ‘You have nothing to fear. I will make sure of that.’

She thought a moment.

‘They do not want you to know. There is a great deal of reputation at stake on which fleet leaves Terra first,’ she said.

‘Is Lord Fleetmaster Prasorius aware of this?’ he asked carefully.

‘Aware? Yes. He knows full well how important this is to his subcommanders, as it is to him. If you are asking, is he involved in this instance, suppressing the nature of what we are facing here, I do not believe so,’ said Tephise. ‘Lord Prasorius is a diligent and honourable man. It is my belief that the severity of this outbreak is being kept from his knowledge.’

‘The Indomitus Crusade is the largest military undertaking since the Great Crusade, so they say. Even if that is not true, the size of Fleet Primus alone matches the grand army of Lord Solar Macharius, the largest venture launched by the Imperium for three millennia. Every family of any rank is

involved in this crusade. Every world of any note has a stake. Fortunes will be made. Reputations earned that will last for thousands of years. The future lords of the Imperium will be drawn from those organisations and worlds that win the most glory. Imagine the pride of being part of the first fleet to leave Terra.'

'Imagine the shame to have been part of a failure.' Messinius' choler stirred. The future of mankind was at risk by short-sightedness and an eye on personal gain. It ever was thus. There would be new trade routes, gifts of land, accolades, offices, all the things that men craved, all the things that blinded them to danger.

'What I imagine is this,' she said diplomatically. 'There are men and women responsible for Fleet Quintus who wish to serve the Emperor more than anything. They do not understand the danger this outbreak poses, otherwise they would have reported its severity to outside authorities, and would have requested that the departure date be amended. Instead, they believe they can get it under control. They are wrong.'

'I see,' said Messinius. 'Have you been threatened?'

'Not yet.'

'You will come with me,' said Messinius. 'We will deliver this message to the primarch together, personally. But I should get some first-hand experience of this disease. What little we know is confused. I heard intimations of violence.'

She nodded. 'That covers it, but barely.'

'I need to see for myself. No one will gainsay my word.'

'That would be for the best, I think.'

'I will speak with Shipmaster Versht,' he said. 'While we are on our way.'

'And I will prepare decontamination facilities for you,' she said. She unhooked her helmet from her belt. 'You will need them.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

DEATHPHAGE

THE IDEOS

COMBAT TRIALS

They left the *Praesidium* quickly, taking the most direct route for speed, knowing wherever they went they would be monitored. Messinius initiated conversation with Versht, and baldly stated what he intended to do. There was a small chance that an attempt would be made to silence Messinius, but he decided it was a low enough risk. He judged he would achieve results more quickly by brazenness, and he was proved right.

An hour later, they had crossed several thousand miles to the cruiser *Ideos*, and set down. The ship was running on low power, only its running lights and beacons on. The hangar bays were dark. Where they were open, the atmospheric fields were out. Shields were down, main motive off. Its sisters were the same, all dark and silent as tombs, only their lights and holding formation revealing that they were not ghost ships and that some order still ruled aboard.

They docked at a port right next to the main flight deck and proceeded directly in. Tephise came with them onto the landing deck. It was dark. Air frost gleamed on every surface. There were piles of supplies all around, but they, like the ship's complement of shuttle craft, had been covered over with tarpaulins, made secure, and left where they were.

Things could not have been more different to the scenes aboard the

Praesidium. There were few people about, and those that were went covered head to toe in either hostile environment suits or void gear. The welcome they received was also different. Three exhausted officers greeted them, a sub-lieutenant and two ensigns. All evinced the same relief Tephise had.

‘Relief is coming, then?’ one ensign asked. He spoke hopelessly, as if he had given up.

‘It will,’ said Messinius. ‘Where are your crew? Have so many died?’

‘All crew are confined to their quarters. We keep all non-vital sections free of atmosphere, depressurised. It slows the spread. At least in that respect, the sickness acts like a normal disease,’ Tephise said. ‘*Ideos* has not been too badly affected by it, but there have been...?’

‘Six instances, as of today,’ the lieutenant offered. ‘Nine hundred and thirteen fatalities in total. Eight per cent of our crew complement.’

‘That is unfortunate, but hardly disastrous for a vessel this size,’ said Messinius.

‘The sickness itself is not the main problem,’ said Tephise. ‘But what comes after, in a few rare cases is impossible to—’

A short alarm clarion interrupted. An announcement rang out over the ship’s voxmitter system.

‘All hands, minor manifestation on deck one hundred and six, area epsilon. Contagion contained. Minor presence expected. Armsmen have moved to engage. Remain clear of this section until advised otherwise.’

‘You wished to see the problem,’ said Tephise. ‘This is your chance.’

‘What kind of presence?’ Thothven asked.

‘The disease,’ said Tephise. ‘It leads to certain manifestations...’

‘There will be combat then,’ said Thothven.

The sub-lieutenant nodded. ‘It’ll be a stray. Sometimes the infected get away before we can treat them, and bed down in some out-of-the-way place, until they...’ He swallowed. ‘Until they ripen. Then we get a situation like this. Any assistance you can give us would be welcome.’

His statement was met by an orchestra of clicks and whines as the Space Marines activated their weaponry.

‘We are already on our way,’ Messinius said.

‘You have access to our internal auguries,’ the sub-lieutenant shouted after them.

Messinius and his men were already out of the door, heading into the pressurised areas of the ship.

Information from the *Ideos* appeared in his helmplate as he ran to kill whatever it was before it could do any real damage. A cartolith led them onward, a pulsing dot their target. Going into action raised his spirits. On Terra he'd spent long months fretting over details and watching for attacks that never came. Combat was where he belonged. His muscles moved smoothly. His armour systems purred; hours of maintenance and adjustment bringing them to a level of function they had not enjoyed for some years. His new plasma pistol was snug in its holster strapped to his thigh. His power fist encased his right arm. Its weight was counteracted by a pair of coin-sized suspensors screwed into the top and bottom, but contra-grav could do nothing about its bulk, and he had yet to adjust his running gait to accommodate it to his satisfaction.

It was a fault only he noticed. Those he passed would have seen nothing amiss in his running. Aided by his power armour's supplementary musculature, he ran as fast as an equine. Were he to enter combat at that speed, he would have had as much impact as a charging cavalryman. In case the noise of his warriors thundering along the deck were not enough to clear the way before him, he roared with his voxmitter set to maximum output.

'Ware! Ware! Make way for the Emperor's judgement!'

Areios ran at his side, their ten Primaris Space Marines behind them in double files. They loped where Messinius sprinted. He suspected they could outpace him. They were stronger, and their armour was more powerful. They were running at his pace out of respect. He wondered how they would fare in the coming fight.

Ratings and menials scattered from their path. They were all short, even by mortal standards. Life on board an Imperial warship was not easy. They had enough to eat in order to live, but not enough for their bodies to realise their full potential. Deep down in the lower decks, it was as cramped and dingy as any underhive. It was no wonder disease took hold in places like that. If the Space Marines ran one of the crew down, they would be smashed to a pulp, and the Space Marines would barely stumble. Messinius had no wish to harm them, and bellowed his warning over and over again. If any had got in his way, then he would not have stopped. His duty came first.

The ship's walls passed by in a blur. Dim lumens smeared into streaks of light. Pale faces watched them from the shelter between stanchions and recessed doorways. Every bulkhead door that opened saw the mortal crew scurry out of the way like rats disturbed in a larder, and on the Space Marines ran. These creatures were too lowly to be afforded full protection, and were equipped with respirators only.

A data inload from the ship's operations office pinged into his helm. He opened it, and found himself presented with a delicate light-weave cartograph of the area of the incursion. The area was a shaft of some kind. He brought up associated detail, and read that it was a ventilation exchange junction used to transfer fresh atmospheric mix to compartments after void venting, but the transfer gates were closed, and there were only four ways in and out. The size of the exchange and the companionways staged at three points up its height gave good lines of fire. Those were the factors in his group's favour.

Red dots swirled round, marking the enemy. Green pulses showed up the position of the fleet armsmen who had discovered the foe. A standard patrol of ten reduced now to six. As he watched, another green marker went out, swarmed by blinking red dots that broke over and through the armsmen and raced off down one of the corridors towards the midline of the ship. They were intercepted by a second patrol coming in from spinewards, but the men would not hold for long. That was the bad news. Messinius grumbled with displeasure. He pulsed the data out to his squads.

'Pick up the pace,' he said, pushing himself to run faster, knowing that the Primaris Marines could handle it with ease.

A few seconds later, they heard the metallic, brash noise of naval shotguns firing in an enclosed space, the shouts of men, and a horrendous, scratchy buzzing that made Messinius' teeth ache at the root.

'Spread and engage,' he said, marking destinations up for each squad on the cartograph. 'Hellblasters, watch for fire towards the outer wall. There are several yards of armour between us and the void, but take no chances. No accidental breaches.'

They sped down the approach corridor towards the shaft, where battle between man and monster raged as it had since the beginning of their species, when nightmares assailed shamans in the land of dreams, and contracts with otherworldly creatures led to earthly bloodshed. He knew

now what they were dealing with here.

Daemon plague.

Messinius entered the fray first. He clenched his fist within its oversized gauntlet and activated its power field. With his left hand, he shoved an armsman aside as gently as he could, vaulting over him as he fell sideways out of the way. Their arrival came as a shock to the man, and he scrambled backwards and pulled his knees to his chest with his hands, making himself as small as he could. Areios' foot stamped down on his shotgun, breaking it like a piece of kindling. By then, Messinius had already engaged, swinging the giant club of his power fist into the oozing mouth of a warp daemon, and obliterating it completely.

There was the shrivelled corpse of a man stuck to the wall, not quite hidden. The cocoon woven about him had burst open from the inside, letting out swarms of Neverborn. The enemy were everywhere, in far greater numbers than Messinius' equipment had suggested. They were lesser things, not the servants of the great daemon-kings who ruled the empyrean, but the corruption of some poor soul's flesh. They were small, roughly spherical, covered in tentacles of differing length that gave them an asymmetrical silhouette. Fully half of their form was occupied by a large, snapping maw whose only purpose was to kill. The teeth framed an enormous, single eye, seemingly bigger than the body, as if it peered into the human world from the warp. Two pairs of ragged wings blurred behind them.

Messinius and Areios smote them as they cleared the last few feet of the corridor. The creatures were quick, and several dodged the attention of Messinius' fist and Areios' sword, but these were trapped and bludgeoned by the warriors coming behind. As yet, not a bolt-round nor a plasma beam had been fired.

They arrived at the middle of the three companionways that circled the hollow space at the heart of the cylinder. They were wide, made of heavy-duty open grillework to facilitate the easy movement of air up and down the shaft. Messinius' warriors spread out, bolt rifles raised to their shoulders, firing as they ran. Messinius monitored them closely, this being the first time he had seen them in action, and found himself pleased by their efficiency. The overlapping fire they put out was perfectly executed. They were less stiff than he feared they might be in battle.

His Intercessors bunched closer together to allow Thothven's Hellblasters to open fire. The daemons flew around the walls at dizzying speed. Plasma streams lit up the enclosed space, chasing the things around the metal and leaving scores dripping with molten orange behind. Where the energies connected with their intended targets, the things exploded.

'They are mindless,' Messinius voxed. 'Corral and expunge them.' He checked the cartograph. The number of red dots in the shaft was dwindling, many banished, but a small swarm was fleeing down the corridor into the ship, where the second squad of armsmen was already hard pressed. He looked up to the top level where the corridor's mouth was situated, and saw the things flooding into the opening like sewage down a drain.

He estimated their numbers, and came to a decision.

'Areios, you have command,' said Messinius. 'Kill everything that should not be here.'

Before the lieutenant could question his orders, Messinius was on his way to the armsmen's aid. Tactical prudence would suggest he take a squad with him.

'Prudence be damned,' he said to himself. He needed to fight. As it was, these paltry foes would barely make him sweat.

He raced up stairs that joined the second floor to the third level. Bolt explosions and plasma beams flashed all around him. He left the beasts rushing into the opening to his men, diving into their swarm and setting about himself with his fist so he could push through to the armsmen's position. He drew his plasma pistol, and shot behind him, burning the jawed eyes out of existence.

The armsmen were ahead, behind a wall of the minor daemons. He was now in the thick of the beasts, and they tried to hurt him. Moist eyeballs rubbed against his plate as their teeth locked about his arms and legs. Wings fluttered against him. His armour detected corrosive substances in their excretions and sounded a warning note, but he ignored it, using himself as bait to draw the creatures away from the weaker mortals so he could stamp and bludgeon them to death.

He emerged from the creatures' press, streaked in gore and singing the battle song of the White Consuls. The armsmen on the other side recoiled at first upon seeing him, then cheered as he slaughtered their foe. Between their relentless fire and his rampage, the daemons were soon destroyed.

‘Areios?’ He was calmer. Some of his frustration had been spent in the fight.

‘All warp xenos are dead, brother-captain.’

Messinius checked his instruments. From every quarter, his helm reported threat levels of zero.

‘You,’ he said, pointing one enormous digit of his power fist at the armsmen. ‘Join your comrades in the shaft back there and await debriefing.’

The armsmen bowed and gave their thanks. They were jubilant now, having survived the attack. The ordeals of faith they must undergo after exposure to the daemons, though for no sins of their own, would dampen their mood, he thought.

They tramped away.

The last of the creatures were dissolving into puddles of black ooze. Messinius resisted the temptation to nudge the remains as they disincorporated. Daemon gore was bad enough, but the sludge they left as they melted to nothing was a devil to shift, sticking to ceramite so well he suspected it did so purposefully, as a last spiteful act on the daemons’ part. He watched as tentacles shrivelled up and sloughed off, exposing the bulbous mass of the single eye, which collapsed into itself like a sculpture pressed from wax melting on a stove. Noxious vapours streamed upwards, heating the air by some sorcerous interaction with mundane reality. The puddle shrank until it was a greenish smear of matter stuck to the deck, and set hard as plascrete. He wondered how many other people in the fleet had ended this way, their bodies usurped by Neverborn.

He scanned his immediate surroundings again, calling in data from the ship’s internal augurs to augment his battleplate’s limited sensory suite.

Messinius gave the corridor one last look over. The stink of corruption hung on the air. He overrode the ship’s machine-spirits and shut the nearest pressure door, marked the location of the battle and passed it on to the ship’s command structure. Let them decide what to do, whether they would send in ratings to clean up the mess and the priests to bless the sullied metal, seal the compartment permanently, or vent it to the void, in the hope the vastness of space would absorb the taint of this intrusion. All would be viable. That was not his concern.

He flexed his fist. Daemonic ichor slicked it an ugly green, where it had not been baked black by the power field. The decoration of his plasma gun

was smeared with it.

‘Squads, regroup,’ he voxed, ‘gather the armsmen and prevent their leaving. Do nothing to compromise the integrity of your armour. Helmets to remain on. Void sealing protocols stay in force.’

He returned to the shaft.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THEY FOUGHT WELL

DECONTAMINATION

THE ACTION OF WARRIORS

Areios and his warriors were standing to attention around the surviving armymen.

Messinius looked the mortals over. There were the usual signs of terror among their ranks. The daemons had been poor specimens, but they all struck an uncanny dread into mortal hearts, their weakness had no bearing on that. Others of them seemed to have an inkling of what was coming next, and sat quietly. One of them repeatedly called out fragments of scripture to the Space Marines, asking them to join him in prayer. They ignored him.

‘You fought well,’ Messinius said to Areios.

‘We are as yet still untested,’ said Areios. ‘This battle was not sufficiently challenging.’ His affect was still off. He was distant, as robotic in the way that he spoke and interacted as he was when he fought.

‘That is for me to judge, Brother Areios. I expect a full report on the capabilities of all the men present here today to help me do so.’

‘As you command, brother-captain.’

He voxed Tephise. ‘You were correct. Our equipment requires decontamination. These were unearthly foes. Their effects on wargear can be unpredictable, even after death. You have somewhere aboard?’

‘Yes. You will be taken there shortly. Do you have enough evidence?’

‘More than enough. Return to our ship and wait for me there. You are coming back to Terra with us. If anyone tries to detain you, threaten them with the primarch’s name.’

‘They are that dangerous, the creatures of the warp?’ said Areios. ‘These did not seem so deadly.’

‘They are more deadly than you can comprehend,’ said Messinius.

‘Is that why we watch these men here? They fought well. I feel...’ There was a click as Areios switched from open vocal communication to a private vox-channel. He was learning, then. ‘We are punishing them for doing their duty.’

Areios’ concern for the mortal humans reminded Messinius that he came from a very different age. Messinius, as a White Consul, held the lives of all humans to be valuable; they were nevertheless part of an equation and must be balanced against other concerns. There was no space for the luxury of kindness for kindness’ sake. That belonged to older eras.

‘The deaths of a few men are nothing in comparison to the potential loss of this ship. Manifest Neverborn are dangerous but ultimately simple to deal with. Though they are strong, skilled at arms and supernaturally fast, a bolt or a blade will kill them as easily as they will a mortal foe. It is those that hide that must be guarded against. They invade people’s souls, and turn them against their fellows.

‘The creatures of the warp delight in perverting the minds of living beings. It is sport to them. If they find an individual with the latent curse of psychic power, then they will use that person to rip open a hole in space and allow hordes of their brethren into the materium. I have seen this happen with my own eyes. These pathetic things that we fought today were nothing. Those that serve the so-called Dark Gods are deadly foes, one and all. The problem here is the contagion. It provides a vector for manifestation. That is disastrous. So close to Terra.’ He shook his head.

‘Will the mortals be killed?’ Areios asked. His normally emotionless voice lifted a little.

‘Probably not. They are voidsmen. Even if they have no true knowledge of what we faced, they will have heard rumours. Sometimes a little forewarning can help armour a soul. If they are deemed clean of disease, then I am sure they will be spared.’

Areios nodded. ‘Why is it that my hypnomatic inloads contained no data

on these things? They are a new foe to me in every way. Diseases that spawn monsters. Daemons. These were the stuff of folklore in my time.'

'For millennia the existence of daemonkind was suppressed,' said Messinius. 'Even we, the Angels of Death, were supposed to be ignorant of the beasts of the warp, though in practice I have never yet met a Space Marine of any real age who has not encountered them. But there were days when entire Chapters were mem-cleansed of their campaigns against the warp-spawn, or subjected to total mind-wipe. A wasteful way to suppress the information, and in these times pointless.'

'Who did these things?'

'The Inquisition,' said Messinius.

'The Emperor's own agents?'

'Yes.'

'They would act against loyal Space Marines, in the same way that we are complicit in the possible condemnation of these valiant men?'

'They would and they do,' said Messinius. 'There are things far more terrible in this era than injustice.'

'I was taught that the Emperor protects.'

'He is not a god,' said Messinius. 'Remember that. He cannot be everywhere.'

'I have so much to learn,' said Areios.

'I will teach you.' Messinius paused thoughtfully. 'It is interesting that Cawl adhered to the Inquisition's guidelines on the Great Ban. I believe it impossible that he does not know the truth of the warp himself, and he shows scant regard for other prohibitions.'

'It may be our age,' said Areios. 'He began his programme long ago. Perhaps it was safer for him, then.'

Messinius glanced at the younger Space Marine, who was, in many important ways, so much older than he. 'That is good thinking.'

'It is probably incorrect,' said Areios, though he did so from rational deduction rather than modesty, thought Messinius.

'Yes,' said Messinius. 'Be thankful you know so little. It is said that the knowledge of these things is corrupting on its own. Maybe Cawl did not wish to draw attention to your creation. You slept a long time. I have also heard it said that there are spies that lurk in dreams. If there are monsters hidden in bacteria, I can well believe that.'

There was more he could say, of the horrors he had faced and the secrets he had learned regarding the empyrean. He refrained. Even thinking about them felt wrong, as though it attracted unwanted attention from outside the ship.

‘Areios,’ said Messinius.

‘My captain.’

‘Next time you fight, allow yourself a little freedom. Your technique is perfect, but you must learn fluidity. Technique can be decoded. Passion cannot. Instinct will give you the edge.’

‘Yes, brother-captain.’

Messinius went to speak to the rest of his men. To each he imparted similar advice.

Their conversations were interrupted by the arrival of more armsmen and senior priests from the ship’s chaplaincy.

‘Company, move out,’ Messinius said. As his men filed through the door, he beckoned the party’s high priest to him. ‘Treat these men as well as you can,’ he said. ‘They fought well, and they did their duty without fear.’

In two groups, the Space Marines were directed by menials into a decontamination chamber where they were washed down with high-pressure hoses of sanctified water. Messinius waited until the first of his warriors were through, watching their reactions closely. The Primaris Marines did nothing unexpected, being impassive as always. He went in the second group, beckoning Areios to come with him. High-pressure water rinsed him, while a Ministorum priest chanted rites of exorcism, a religious nonsense Messinius tolerated only because it was effective. For a while he allowed himself to meditate as the water pounded rain-hard on his battleplate and the run-off gurgled black down the drains.

When this was done, he went through into a second room where the joints of the Space Marines’ armour were to be cleaned of residue by servants dressed in protective gear and watched over by yet more chanting priests. Their singing annoyed Messinius. He was a believer in the divinity of the Emperor as much as the primarch was, which was to say, not at all. But it appeared the Neverborn believed it as fervently as any priest, and were afraid.

Areios must have picked up on this, for he voxed Messinius privately.

‘You tell me that Space Marines do not worship the Emperor,’ Areios said.

‘We don’t. He is not a god. He told all who would listen that He was not a god when He walked among us. They didn’t listen. We did.’

The patient serfs worked little picks into their armour’s crevices. Messinius tolerated their presence as large predators tolerate the attentions of small animals cleaning them of parasites.

‘He was seen as a god by my people,’ said Areios.

‘Unlearn that. Your belief was in error.’

‘Then why do you listen to these priests? Why are they even here? Why do you speak of faith, and the power of prayer, and heed the battle liturgy of your Chaplains and your Chapter cult?’

Messinius paused. What Areios wanted to understand was difficult to explain. ‘There is a difference between faith and truth,’ he said. ‘This is my understanding of it. You will find those who say otherwise, but faith has its own power. These people believe in the Emperor as a god. It is that which protects them, not the Emperor Himself. As the creatures and sorceries of the warp are born in the mind, then so a strong mind protects against them, no matter what the source of that strength is. Imagine if a fortress is raised in the name of the Emperor, blessed and sanctified by His priests. Perhaps the Emperor does listen to them – He is no god, but He is powerful beyond the understanding of mortal men. Whether He does protect them or He does not, and the words of the holy men have no effect at all, the wall still stands. A good wall well defended is worth a thousand prayers.’

The tiny picks worked round the rims and in the runnels of his armour. Curls of dried black ichor were carefully deposited in jars waiting to be sealed with warding parchments.

‘I think faith is like that,’ Messinius said. ‘It is something to strengthen the mind, a brace for the walls of breaking sanity. That does not mean it is true. Your creator Cawl, for example, he has faith in his Machine-God. Does that protect him or any of his strange breed? I would hazard yes, or all the worlds of the Mechanicus would have fallen to Chaos. The Machine-God and the Emperor are not the same. Cawl is illustrative in another way, in that he has faith in himself. I therefore reason that faith of all kinds has an efficacy. We Adeptus Astartes have faith in our purpose, in our wargear and the gifts the Emperor gives us. That makes us strong.’

‘But that is religion,’ said Areios.

‘Of a sort, arguably it is, I suppose,’ conceded Messinius.

‘Then we are dealing in semantics,’ said Areios, as thoughtfully and softly as he said everything.

‘Be glad that we are made for war then, and have limited time for these discussions. Talk is not the action of warriors.’

‘We have time now.’

Messinius looked to the serfs, still carefully scraping out every last piece of warp-born matter. They were going to be there for some time.

‘That we do,’ Messinius admitted.

‘We could draw conclusions as to the nature of the Emperor by looking at His son,’ said Areios.

‘I doubt that would work,’ said Messinius. ‘Guilliman is not the Emperor.’

‘I have heard the priests say he is nearly a god in his own right. Higher than the saints, closer to the Emperor. A demigod. Humanity’s saviour.’

Not our saviour, humanity’s saviour. Areios already felt detached from the common man, then.

‘He’s not a god either,’ said Messinius, lifting his arms to allow the serfs to blast out crusted daemon matter from the ribbed joints in his armpits.

‘What is he then?’ said Areios. He had a mild tone, one of genuine curiosity. ‘Tell me about the primarch.’

‘What do you wish to know?’

‘Everything.’

‘He is not a man,’ said Messinius. ‘He’s not a Space Marine. He’s more than either,’ said Messinius. ‘He’s...’ He stopped. He was unwilling to make pronouncements on things he did not fully understand. ‘I do not know what he is. He is taller in person than he seems from a distance. He has a real presence, a great charisma. You want to obey him. Do you understand me?’

‘Like you,’ said Areios. ‘You have presence. We respect you.’

‘What Guilliman has is little to do with rank.’

‘I understood. What you have is not due to your rank either,’ said Areios.

The younger Space Marine’s praise embarrassed Messinius, and he became gruff.

‘Whatever you think I have, it is nothing compared to our gene-father. He is... He is...’ he struggled to find the words, he whose rhetoric was still quoted to the neophytes by the Chaplains.

Used to be quoted, he corrected himself. Sabatine was gone. Did Kronos still stand? Were there neophytes listening to the wisdom of Chaplain Kandred in the Halls of Learning there, or was all that so much interstellar dust now, and he one of the last?

‘Brother-captain?’ said Areios. He reached and touched Messinius’ pauldron.

‘He is transcendent,’ said Messinius tersely. ‘I do not know what he is in truth, whether he is a god like the priests say, the Emperor’s natural born son, as our tradition holds it, or a work of cunning technology, as the Martians believe. All I know is that I would follow him to the gates of death itself. I would do anything for him. Nothing he could ask of me would be too much.’

‘Including the tedious business of teaching the likes of me,’ said Areios.

‘Was that a joke, Areios?’

Areios was silent a moment.

‘I am not sure,’ said Areios.

‘Hnh,’ grunted Messinius.

He fell into a brooding quiet. The conversation stopped, and they stood silently until the menials had finally finished with their steam jets and scrapers, and rubbed their armour down. The last of the tainted water was gurgling away. It would be collected in sanctified silver tanks, then jettisoned into the void. Messinius was still thinking on Areios’ question.

The menials directed them from the decontamination room into a corridor where hot blasts of air dried them.

‘It is necessary that you are checked for signs of infection now, my lord,’ the mortal’s supervisor said.

Messinius thought hard. If the command structure of Fleet Quintus were desperate enough to hide what was going on here, and were stupid enough to move against the Adeptus Astartes, they would do it now. On the other hand, the risk of returning the plague to Fleet Primus was far greater, and he acquiesced.

They went to a makeshift armoury, where more serfs waited to remove their battleplate. The serfs took Messinius’ power fist first, twisting free its energy feeds and unbolting the housings that clamped the outer casing over his lower right arm. Three of them pulled it off with some difficulty, and deposited it with a clang on a stand. Their clumsiness provoked a hard

throat clearing from Messinius.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘That weapon was given to me by the Imperial Regent himself.’

That made them blanch. Messinius did not like to bait mortals, but these menials were poor, with no experience at serving transhumans.

With his standard right gauntlet now exposed, Messinius took off his helm himself, causing the armoury staff to rush about to fetch the stand for that too. He took in a deep breath of the metallic, sour air, welcoming the way it dried the battle sweat on his scalp. Areios deserved better than his temper, he decided, and he attempted to put his impression of the primarch into words.

‘I left Sabatine when my brothers took ship for Cadia,’ said Messinius, ‘and went to Ultramar to beg for reinforcement from the Ultramarines. I did not succeed in my mission, but was instead party to the rebirth of a legend. I arrived some weeks after the primarch had awoken. I shared in the jubilation of Ultramar, and took part in the war to save it. When Guilliman left, I accompanied him on his crusade to Terra. I was there when he went into the Throneroom. I stood vigil while he was within, and I was there when he emerged. I will never forget that day.’

Everyone in the armoury was listening to him now, the Primaris Space Marines openly, the menials surreptitiously, trying but failing to appear uninterested.

‘Roboute Guilliman went in through the Eternity Gate itself. You would not be able to imagine the pain I felt when that gate opened. Being near while it was closed was bad enough, a great pressure in the mind, the regard of something locked away behind yards of fortifications yet still aware of you and your every thought, your every failing, your every pathetic ambition, but when that door opened, it was blinding. I could not see inside. The priests who serve the mortals would love for me to say I saw the light, and beheld the holy body of the Emperor in majesty upon His Golden Throne, but I saw nothing. It was like the absence of sight, as if I never had that sense, and the very notion of vision was alien to me. It was not blank, or black, it was indescribable, and the pain.’

His expression was one of wonderment. ‘The great pain that came out through that crack in the gate as it swung open. They opened only a crack, big enough perhaps to admit a squad marching five abreast. The gates are

tall enough for Titans to pass through if fully open, yet I doubt they could let out all that agony. Many of us fell to our knees. Only the Adeptus Custodes stood firm, and even they lost some of that arrogant bearing they have. Such power, and such pain. And yet Guilliman had gone in there, into the Throneroom, and I did not see the weight of that power lie heavily upon him at all as he passed through the crack in the gates.

‘When the door shut, our unease remained. How could anyone endure such an experience? The Adeptus Custodes told us that they survived the light of the Emperor, and so would the primarch, though I insisted that I had seen no light.’

A tense calm fell on the room, and every man within it felt an echo of the power Messinius described, as if the Emperor’s omnipotence clung to him, and stirred as it was spoken of.

‘A day passed, then a second. We became afraid. Again, the Custodians assured us that all would be well, stepping between us and the gate when we moved towards it. We were to come that close to the Master of Mankind, and no closer.

‘Guilliman emerged days later. Do not ask me how many. I could not answer with any accuracy. Close to Him time moves differently, and our battleplate systems were as affected as our minds. Guilliman emerged grim-faced, his skin ashen. He gave orders that the lords and ladies of power be assembled, for he had news to give them, that he would assume the role of regent as his father commanded, and work towards the restoration of His Imperium. But he would not say what he had seen, nor what the Emperor had said. To those who dared asked him, he presented a stony silence.

‘To my knowledge, he has never told anyone, and I count myself among his confidants. I realised something that day, when he came out. I saw then that for all his power, all the gifts his father had put into him, and all the responsibility that He had thrust upon him, that although he is not a man, he is human, as we are human. We must never forget that. You Primaris brothers must learn it if you have forgotten, for we are humanity’s shield. We were born, and we shall die, we are changed, but our essence remains the same – and that essence, that soul, is a human soul. Guilliman is the same. He is the Avenging Son, but he can be hurt. He can grieve. He can make mistakes. He can die.’

The menials had abandoned their work, tools inactive in their hands. The

Space Marines stood in a circle around their captain. Messinius looked around at them all, human and transhuman.

‘Remember this, Areios, you others. Guilliman would be the first to say that he is not infallible, and I can find no more personal nor pertinent example than that of my own Chapter, the White Consuls. We followed his teachings to the letter. We took responsibilities on ourselves that went beyond our duty as warriors. In our confidence, we sought to emulate Macragge, and create a new Ultramar in the Segmentum Pacificus. Now our Chapter is broken, dependent on receiving reinforcements from this crusade to survive.

‘The primarch’s ways are not perfect, because he is human. He knows this, he says this. Many do not listen. They say he is a god. But you should heed him, not them. Follow him. Give him your hearts and your minds, but do not let his magnificence blind you, for he does not let it blind him. Willing blindness is a flaw. It led to my Chapter’s downfall. It led to his brothers’ treachery. You Primaris Marines are supposed to be better than us. Prove it by seeing the truth, and not what you wish to see.’

‘How did it happen?’ one of the Primaris warriors asked. ‘How did the White Consuls fail?’

Messinius stared at the younger Space Marine until he dropped his gaze. ‘A good question, Brother Lashan. In our need to prove ourselves statesmen, like our gene-father and his exemplar sons the Ultramarines, we forgot that the Emperor made us to be warriors first. We turned our talents to matters best left to mortal men.’

‘Guilliman’s Codex says that our gifts are many,’ said Areios. ‘We were not built only for war.’

‘If that is true, and I do not think it is, then now is not the time to employ our gifts for anything but war.’ He stared severely. ‘I have seen this. My brothers, by losing focus, the White Consuls won the peace, but we lost the war.’

He held out his armoured forearms to the serfs.

‘Now remove my armour. Run your tests. We must leave.’

The armoury filled up with the whine of power drivers unbolting armour plates. Nobody spoke again.

Chapter Twenty-Five

PAPER FALL

THE INCENDIARY CLAN

THE WAR OF PARCHMENT

Teasel pulled on the handle of a door that had not been opened for years. Rust clamped its hinges firmly, and he had to tug repeatedly before it gave with a sudden croak. Light flooded the derelict tunnel, very soft, but Nawra's eyes had become accustomed to the dark days ago, and she squinted against it. A soft rustling came from the other side. Teasel muttered to himself, and started poking about in the detritus on the floor, ignoring Nawra and cackling to himself over what he found. Hungry for light, and curious about the noise, she passed through the door, leaving him behind.

The doorway opened onto a round metal room. Rusty pipes poked out of the floor and the wall, but the machines that should have been mated to their ends had been removed a long time ago. Cables with age-brittle insulation hung stiffly from the ceiling. Water dripped from one of the pipes. The floor beneath it had corroded away, and the drops fell through into a deep hole.

The walls were scabbed all over with rust and black oxidisation. There was a long, rectangular window in the outer wall, but the glass had gone, leaving only a few shrivelled traces of rubber sealant clinging to the edge. It was an ugly room, thick with the sharp smells of mould and decay. The

floor creaked under her feet, the metal stained her shoes orange. She continued forward, entranced.

Through the window was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

Sheets of paper were falling past the aperture. Some fluttered, others swooped by or spun round and around in soft whispering flight. She went to the empty window and looked out into a wide shaft.

The soft light came from high above, but the shaft was so wide that the glow penetrated all the way down. Walls with other rooms, all seemingly abandoned, rose up for hundreds of feet. They were altogether dirty, but the light was pure and white, and in its illumination the falling papers seemed so too. They sifted down, spiralling about each other. The sight tugged at things hidden deep in her soul, psychic echoes of snow and gulls in flight that her ancestors had witnessed in epochs past. She had no conception or experience of these things, but part of her in some way remembered.

The papers made soft flutterings. She followed one sheet with her eyes, down to the floor far below. Collectively, they made a quiet, pleasing rasp as they hit the ground. Figures in respiratory gear and armed with rakes worked the floor, dragging up the papers and feeding them into a shuddering machine at the side of the shaft that pressed them into small bales. Dust hung in a haze around them.

The air smelled of parchment. She caught one of the papers. It was very thin vellum carrying an Ultima missive. A huge red stamp crossed the centre diagonally, corner to corner. 'Actio Nulla', it read. She caught another, this one on rough paper, and another on parchment, and read them, clutching them to her breast and catching another. All were Ultima priority plea missives, all of them stamped 'Actio Nulla'. The cries for help of countless worlds dismissed. A chute rattled in the curve around the wall, and a rush of papers flew out to burst into a cloud that joined the rest in floating serenely down.

The papers fell. The people at the bottom raked and carried, stuffed and bundled. The machine shook and spat out cubes of pressed documents that were taken away to a cart where a pair of masked children waited in harness.

Teasel gripped Nawra's shoulder softly, and pulled her back from the balcony edge.

'Dangerous here, don't linger. Don't want to be seen,' he hissed into her

ear. His breath stank.

‘What is this place?’ she asked.

‘Waste,’ Teasel said. He snatched the missives she held and threw them back into the shaft. ‘Documents processed, checked and disregarded. They throw the outdated ones down here. These don’t even make it to the stores. The Incendiary Clan bundle them up, burn them for fuel, drives the generators of the Missive Hive Cluster.’ He shook his head disapprovingly. ‘They burn them! Who knows how many mistakes get turned to ash? How many bad adepts go uncaught?’

‘How many bounties go uncollected?’ she said. Her tone was lost on him.

‘Yes! Exactly, it’s a bad business.’ He looked around himself nervously. ‘But shhh, be careful!’ he said, holding up his finger to his lips. ‘We go quiet. Don’t want to be heard.’

‘Why is it dangerous here?’ she asked.

‘Gets raided!’ he said incredulously, as if she should know all about it.

‘Why, by who?’

‘Paper! Paper!’ he said, gesturing at the falling documents, his irritation growing. ‘Why else? There is not enough parchment or vellum or paper in this hive. Some scribe clans get desperate, come down here to steal it, scrape it clean, reuse it. If they get enough, they do their sacred duty to the Emperor, but that stops those fellows,’ he said with exaggerated quiet, pointing down, ‘doing theirs. One lot must record, another must destroy, but there is not enough to go around for both! Irony!’ He giggled, and then scowled. ‘Now we go. Be quiet. We don’t want to get caught up in all that.’

Teasel became cautious after that, putting Nawra on edge. She feared to meet these paper thieves, and Teasel was graphic in his descriptions of what the Incendiary Clan did to those they caught in their territory. They crept down many levels, most deserted. The areas around the shaft appeared to have been abandoned centuries ago. Teasel said the burners lived near to the furnaces now, and that though they had to go that way, he knew a secret path. He led her through crooked corridors, whose floors were patterned with charred fragments of paper. Once a group of balers passed them by, all dressed the same in outsized respirators and black protective clothing. They argued with each other in that tense yet easy way of families, though their dialect was so thick Nawra couldn’t understand it.

She was staring at them, out in the open. If one turned to their left and looked down the side corridor she was in, they would have seen her. Teasel squawked and pulled her into a damp room, clamped his hand over her mouth and held her until they had gone by.

‘Stay in cover! They squash you flat and burn you too if you stay out to be seen!’ he said. ‘Do you want that?’

She shook her head.

‘Good.’ He released her. Then he found them somewhere to sleep, and gave her something to eat that she did not question the origins of. It was better that way.

The next day, Teasel made her walk quicker. He was getting nervous.

‘Too long here! Too long!’ he said. He paused periodically, and cocked his head, listening for something.

‘Where are we?’ she asked.

‘Nearly out,’ he said. ‘Get to grand road, over the furnace plain. Don’t worry! It is high up, they’ll not see. Then through the far door and over the stink river. There’s a bridge. Find that, go over, you’re in high adept territory, then it’s time to use that seal daddy gave you and claim scribum-errant privilege. You get over the river, then you’ve come so far the Emperor must have blessed you, see, and they’ll leave you alone. Help you!’ He pressed the side of his nose. ‘Only they don’t know about old Teasel!’ He tittered. ‘Anyway, they’ll hear you out.’

‘I could use the seal now,’ she said.

‘You could, and you’d be dead,’ he replied. ‘We must hurry! There are others in these tunnels with us, and they are not friendly.’

He pushed her along. Nawra’s hand brushed the missive again, finding comfort in the silky feel of the vellum.

Through ancient passages they went; ducts and ventilation conduits or dank places where sludgy filth ran in channels along the floor, always avoiding the crowded ways. The Incendiary Clan’s territory was in parlous state. Much of it was derelict. Even more than in her own section, the evidence of lost glory was apparent. Nawra had always taken dilapidation for granted, but presented with an example of deeper decay, she saw that it was not a constant state, and her conviction that there must have been a time when this was all new grew. She heard drums in the distance, and

once, loud and raucous singing. Often the smell of burning blew down the corridors on hot winds.

They came to a door like dozens of others she had passed through, so she was surprised when Teasel held up a finger to his lips, his eyes bright white and frightening in his dirty face, and said, ‘Shhh!’

He opened the door. It made a horrendous screech that was covered by the great racket of industry coming from the other side, along with a wash of unbearable heat. Teasel grasped Nawra’s hand, and dragged her through onto a catwalk high over a giant space stained orange by firelight. She steeled herself to glance over the edge. There were dozens of other ways criss-crossing the space, black lines on deep fires, whose fierce heat washed from open gates.

In the slices of light, tiny shadow figures laboured by the thousand. A carpet of spilled papers patterned the floor, hundreds of thousands of cries for help crushed underfoot by Terran serfs. People of every age and gender were at work. Menfolk used pitchforks to toss the bales into the flames. Women brought more bales in single-wheeled barrows, while children walked bent double, picking up spilled documents and stuffing them into baskets on their backs. The tasks were endless. There were always more bales coming on small trains pulled by smoke-belching engines. Hopes were consigned to the inferno, news of planets lost burned to nothing, without thought.

Nawra faltered. No doubt some of the missives she had passed higher up the chain had ended their journey here.

‘Come! Come!’ Teasel said nervously. He cringed and looked around and above, below and about, then tugged her and dragged her on.

A soft noise beneath had Teasel look down. He let out a curse and shoved Nawra into a crouch. Through the grille panels of the catwalk Nawra saw pale, skinny scribes sneaking over a lower crossing. Teasel repeatedly put his finger to his lips, pushing so hard they went white. Nawra ignored him, watching the newcomers. They wore steel plates on their fronts and back held together with rope. They were armed, most of them with knives, but they also had a few primitive-looking firearms scattered among them, little more than metal pipes tied to old chair legs. Nevertheless, they looked like they meant business. They wore masks of pulped paper moulded into exaggerated features that gave them a fearsome appearance. They moved

quietly, with the air of warriors experienced in this form of foray, despite their ramshackle equipment and obvious lack of physical prowess. Nawra guessed they had done this before.

‘Emperor, Emperor, they’re heading the way we are,’ Teasel said. He rolled onto his back and gulped at the air.

‘They’re on a different bridge.’

‘All end up at the same place!’ he said. ‘They’re going for the storehouses, to raid for fuel blocks and papers and parchments. We’ve got to go that way to get to the big stink river. They go the same way. Big fights there, often.’ He frowned and twitched anxiously. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Too dangerous. We’ll get killed. We have to go back. This is over. Home time now!’

‘But the missive!’

‘Fie! Emperor make waste on your missive! Teasel wants to live!’

‘It is my holy mission,’ she said quietly. She felt foolish saying it out loud, but she had come to believe it was true, and her hesitancy became insistence. Her voice rose. ‘He showed me the cards. He sent this parchment to me. It’s important, I know it is!’

‘No, no, we leave. Immediate and all.’ Teasel flipped himself onto all fours. Nawra caught his ankle and squeezed hard, so that he winced and tried to kick her, but she held him hard.

‘My father paid you to get me to the Departmento of Final Considerations. You will take me.’ She put all the authority she could muster into her voice. Her habitual timidity vanished like one of the missive bricks in the furnaces.

‘I won’t!’

‘You made a contract with him, yes, by agreeing?’

‘Yes!’ he spat.

‘Then if you don’t honour it, you’ll be just as bad as the bad scribes whose work you hunt out. I’ll tell. They’ll burn you,’ she said nastily.

Teasel’s fright grew.

‘Oh no.’ He went limp.

‘Then take me,’ she said.

Reluctantly, Teasel nodded.

‘This way,’ he said, and turned around, pointing to the distant side of the furnace hall. He frowned. ‘Yes.’

They crossed the furnace hall as fast as they could. The people below were

so engrossed in their labours they never looked up, and no servo-skulls or other forms of surveillance appeared to be active there, so they went by without notice, as ethereal as the heat shimmer spilling from the furnace mouths.

By the time they reached the far side and Teasel opened another door into yet another abandoned corridor, Nawra was drenched in sweat. The change in temperature was so great she felt suddenly freezing.

The parchment was slippery against her skin. Suddenly, she panicked, and pulled it out, afraid her sweat would have ruined it. But the ink had not run, and it remained legible.

She rolled it up with a sigh of relief, but kept it in her hand.

‘Now, quick!’ Teasel said.

He ran to a square aperture in a wall and beckoned, then vanished down it.

She jumped in after him, only to find herself speeding into the dark. The aperture had been some sort of conveyor belt once, but the belt had perished, the hard remnants of rubber ripping at her flesh as she sped down the squealing rollers that had supported it.

She could not help but scream.

The descent seemed to go on forever, but ended suddenly with an upturn on the roller track. She shot out into a lit space, and hit a pile of loose papers hard.

She rose spitting. Her clothes were torn, covered in rust and her own blood.

Teasel leapt out from behind a stack of mouldering bales and grabbed her.

‘Oh why did you scream? Why?’

He dragged her into a run. They were in an immense warehouse full of bale stacks. A number of tracks ran through them. One had a train upon it, the engine idling. A member of the Incendiary Clan hung from the window, his bloodied head emptied of brains, and she gasped loudly.

‘Shhh!’ Teasel said.

The bales muffled all sound, but presently she heard quiet voices. Teasel slowed, and went into a quick, crouching walk. She saw the man first.

One of the scribes was ripping apart a bale and plucking out the best pieces of vellum. An open satchel sat on the floor to one side of him, the body of an incendiary man to the other. He smoothed out a large piece of parchment and stared at it longingly.

Teasel came to a stop. Nawra banged into him. The man looked up. There was a moment of mutual surprise all round, then he let out a piercing shriek and scrambled to his feet.

‘Run,’ said Teasel, and sped off.

Nawra ran in the other direction. The man opted to follow her.

Somehow, she managed to keep ahead. Perhaps her forbidden nocturnal wanderings gave her an edge in fitness. Nobody was very healthy in those depths. She was soon out of breath, but when she looked behind her, she had outpaced the raider. There was shouting coming from far off now, and the pop of low-powered gunfire.

Her respite was short-lived. Another raider came running around a pile of papers boxed up in mouldering cardboard, his armour bouncing madly on his chest. His mask had half slipped, showing the Terran grey skin of his face and obscuring one of his wild eyes. His impaired vision didn’t prevent him from seeing Nawra, and he came directly towards her.

Nawra turned and ran. He discharged his firearm, but it was of such poor manufacture that it gave off nothing greater than a sustained flare around the hammer and a sulphurous stink from the muzzle, so he threw it at her.

She flinched as it bounced off a wall of compressed vellum, the stock came free from the muzzle and hit her back, making her stumble. It was a small advantage, but enough. He cannoned into her back, sending her flying. She bucked and writhed as he pinned her down, managing to get herself onto her back before he backhanded her across the face. She tasted blood.

‘Nice parchment,’ he said. ‘Mine.’ He gripped her throat and squeezed with one hand, reaching for the missive with the other.

She flailed at him, ripping at his face with her fingernails and knocking his mask off.

‘I’ll take it when you’re dead,’ he said, clamping his other hand about her throat and squeezing.

He took her blows, a maniacal grin on his face. Black spots crowded her vision. She couldn’t breathe. The world receded down a dark tunnel.

A shout came from what seemed far away. Something hit the man, and the weight came off her suddenly.

She rolled over, choking hard. Her throat wouldn’t open. She coughed and coughed, until the tainted air of the deep hive filled her lungs again.

Teasel was fighting the man. The pair of them were stunted examples of humanity, yet they rolled around and bludgeoned each other with shocking fierceness.

She got up, staggered about, looking for the detached wooden stock of the raider's makeshift gun. She found it, picked it up, and turned around in time to see the raider gain the upper hand. A shard of glass with its handle bound in torn cloth was in his hand, and he stabbed it hard and fast into Teasel's side several times.

'Get off!' she croaked, angrier than she had ever been, and smashed the chair leg across his head. He made a strange noise, and fell sideways, but she was not done, and she thumped and thumped until his head was a soggy mess, and his limbs twitched with fleeing life. Then she gave out a sob, and cast the stock aside, and hung her head, her hands pressed into her knees.

A gasp came from behind her.

'Teasel?' she said. She went to him, and knelt down by his side. 'I thought you were dead.'

He coughed feebly. Frothy pink blood gathered at the corner of his mouth. His breath came fast. 'I head that way.' He smiled. 'No bad scribum, me.'

'No. No, you did well.'

'You go now. Get out of this place. This hall is big rectangle. Head towards the far short end.' He gasped. His chest made a horrible gurgle. 'Go... up stairs. Third door left, first floor landing. Follow your nose. Big stink river... Cross!'

'Teasel!' she said. His eyes were fluttering.

'Hold breath. Air bad.'

'Teasel, don't die!' she said.

He grabbed a fistful of her dress in his bloody hand. 'The Emperor protects!' he hissed.

His eyes closed, and his head lolled.

The sounds of fighting were getting more intense. She could not tarry. On impulse, she kissed Teasel's filthy forehead.

She picked up the bloody stock before she left. She looked about for Teasel's satchel, which contained all of their supplies, but could not find it. Too afraid to search further, she ran.

Nawra went through the stacks of bales as fast as she could. She went too quickly at first, and was forced to stop and gasp for breath. After that, she

paced herself, and fell into a steady jog. The stacks of bales got higher, obscuring the ceiling and the far wall, so that she came upon the end of the warehouse quite unexpectedly.

Down that end, there was no one about, and she could no longer hear the fighting. A large number of the lumen fittings hung broken from chains that were covered in so much dust they appeared like long hairy ropes. It was dark, and she was forced to slow, the pale bale stacks smearing in her vision.

She found the stair and climbed until she was above the level of the bales, where she looked back over a blocky landscape like so many piles of protein cubes.

Teasel was back there somewhere. She could figure out where they had come in, but where they had fought and he had died she could not guess.

She found the door. Behind it was a long, cramped corridor that led off towards a single lit spot at least a mile away. For a moment, she dithered, wondering if she was in fact correct, but a cool wind blew, carrying with it a noisome stench so powerful she gagged, so she made her way up the corridor towards the light, and all the while the smell worsened.

She stumbled a few times, not because there were obstructions in the corridor, which proved to be remarkably clear, but because she feared that there might be, and her feet anticipated obstacles that never came. So convinced she became that either she would fall on some dangerous or revolting object in the dark, or that members of the parchment raiders would follow and kill her, that by the time she reached the lone lumen, her nerves were shreds. The sweat had dried from her skin some time ago, but her clothes were still damp, and the air there was colder yet, and she began to shiver. The wind was full of moans and other troublesome noises carried from places she could only guess at, and her fear grew.

The lumen was dull yellow, and buzzed mournfully. Who knew how long it had held its solitary vigil in the bowels of the palace. It was the last of its kind. All its fellows were dead. She stepped a little past it, and saw to her relief that there was a door not too distant, its lock wheel catching the last stray rays of light. She went to the wheel and spun it. It was well oiled, opening with a sigh of old air released.

The smell grew worse still.

There was a vestibule beyond. From it three corridors branched off. She

followed the one that smelled the worst.

She kept on going. She had no food and no water with her. Exhaustion dragged at her feet.

‘When I cross the river,’ she promised herself. ‘Then I shall sleep, but not until then.’

Several more choices of path had to be made. Every time, she followed her nose. The stink grew thicker, and heavier, until she was forced to breathe through her mouth. Even then she could smell it, and taste it, dirty and meaty against the back of her throat.

Her head began to swim. She knew she was getting close. A heavy wet slapping echoed towards her.

The corridor became a bridge across a tunnel. A river of sludge sped beneath her feet, full of all the foulness humanity excretes, yet even there life clung on, and a dull phosphorescent glow rose from the river’s edges. The far side was a hundred yards away.

She gulped down as much of the noxious air as she could, though it made her want to vomit, then ran. Her feet skidded on accumulations of filth on the bridge. There were no barriers, and she was forced to slow lest she fall into the mulch and be carried away with the rest of Terra’s effluvia. By the time she reached the other side, she was desperate to breathe, and only Teasel’s dying admonishment kept her mouth clamped shut.

There was a door there, and at first it would not give. For a few desperate moments she struggled with it, her lungs screaming, until she found a button release. She slapped it hard. It lit up orange, and the door’s handle abruptly pivoted. She yanked it open, and hurried through. As she did, her need to breathe overcame her, and she gulped in air. The atmosphere on the far side was purer, but the river’s miasma followed her, and she fell to her knees, her head spinning, and mouth running with bitter saliva.

Gagging, she shoved the door closed and waited for the air to clear. When she thought she could breathe without throwing up, she lay down. She intended only to rest a few minutes, but was soon fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DAWN OF FIRE

AN EMPIRE HALVED

AREIOS AND THE PRIMARCH

Roboute Guilliman's flagship was even busier than the vessels of Fleet Quintus. The *Dawn of Fire* thronged with personnel focused on their tasks as singlemindedly as servitors. There were people of all kinds and all organisations, of every rank from the lowest to the most exalted, all jostling for space upon the ship. Guilliman's departure date was only a few months away. Preparations were well under way, and as time ran out, activity increased. The void around the ship was as busy as its halls, with hundreds of craft passing to the flagship every day.

Areios passed through the crowds in wonderment. In the days before Cawl had taken him, he had never seen such a variety of people. The gangs in his hive distinguished themselves by mark and costume that, at the time, had seemed vibrant and diverse. He realised how limited their self-expression was, and how similar they had all looked. In the *Dawn of Fire* Areios was confronted by humanity in all its varied forms, and despite his psychological conditioning, it made his head ring. Battle programming vied with culture shock for his attention, alternately presenting him with a long list of threats and a sense of numb amazement. Messinius seemed immune to it all, and Areios struggled to keep up with his captain as he pushed through the crowds like a ship forcing passage through ice.

It all felt like a dream. He half believed he would wake in a warm, hidden corner of the Daner 50. He feared he would come round on Cawl's examination tables, and suffer the unshakeable cold of his millennial hibernation again. Only the endless training exercises run through his half-dormant brain seemed real. The xenos and fiends he had fought over and over again were vivid to him, but all that had happened since he had awoken was like a vid-feed, a perfect recording of something that had happened to someone else, distant and unreal.

He tried to shake it off. A little clarity was his reward every now and then, but true consciousness slipped from his fingers like smoke, refusing to be grasped. His training seemed to pilot him, with his consciousness a mere passenger in his new body. He was a ghost, trapped in his still living corpse, like the elders of the Daner 50 said happened to dishonoured fighters.

He could be one of them, the half-dead. He had thought it before and he thought it now. This was the hell of his people.

Thothven told him it would improve. He reassured Areios that he had felt that way himself.

'The way to live,' he said, 'is to live. It is simple. Take experience firmly, and wring every sensation from it. Trust me, the dislocation passes. You will feel part of the world again soon.'

He wished it would pass sooner. He and Messinius walked through the press of people, so tightly packed he had to be careful not to harm the mortals, for they brushed him always, and at the worst chokepoints pressed hard against his battleplate. He could have moved through them as easily as wading through water if he so chose, but at the cost of leaving a trail of broken limbs and mashed flesh. He lacked Messinius' skill at negotiating the crowds. He felt clumsy.

There were soldiers everywhere. Adeptus Astartes of old and new sorts, thousands of mortal troopers from the Navis Imperialis and the Astra Militarum, and agents from every warlike Adepta. At crucial junctures of the ship, the golden auramite of the Custodians flashed. Checkpoint after checkpoint had to be passed. There was no direct route to the primarch's command centre. Before proceeding from the landing bay they had been obliged to give up their weapons.

Although he had had the guiding hand in creating these precautions, Messinius was impatient. His rank and status granted them access through

every barrier and guarded door, but it was slow going. The ship trains were packed to capacity, and their transmotive engines hummed with the effort of pulling so many heavy cars. Cargo was everywhere, being delivered directly from the ship's loading hangars to its destinations, and conveyors jammed all the major thoroughfares.

After an hour, the Space Marines reached the command deck. There things were hardly less frantic. Tech-priests and Techmarines had taken apart large parts of the structure, upgrading equipment in so many places that the deck looked like it was under construction. Artisans on scaffolding added new decorations to the pillars and vaulting, while a small procession of Ministorum priests went about, loudly blessing everyone and everything.

They were met by Jermaine Gunthe, one of Guilliman's senior logisters, and taken through to the grand strategium situated aft of the main command deck. Several smaller rooms had been removed to accommodate this new facility; a large sphere, with hundreds of stations rising halfway up the lower portion, each equipped with cogitators and multiple displays. Banks of hololith projectors filled the upper half, their thousands of focusing lenses gleaming in the half light. Alone of all the places on the ship, the strategium was finished and quiet. It was also free from all ostentation and decorative flourish. By stepping into it, Areios felt he was going back into a cleaner, more effective age.

Roboute Guilliman was upon a grav-stage currently docked and inactive off to the side of the main imaging pit, where he consulted quietly with three men. Messinius and Areios stopped at a respectful distance until the primarch was finished, and waited to be called forward.

Even from a distance the primarch daunted Areios. He towered over his advisors, but his presence extended far beyond the physical, so that he seemed to fill the entire chamber. In Areios' mind he appeared to grow, to become a titan trapped by his consent alone, who could at any time break through the walls of the ship and stride the stars unfettered by technology.

The primarch turned to them, and the spell broke. The men left, hurried as everyone else aboard.

'Vitrian,' called the primarch, beckoning with genuine warmth. 'Come to me.'

The Space Marines crossed the strategium and joined Guilliman. Messinius gave a quick salute. Areios followed suit. The primarch seemed

to be a man now, one of uncommon charisma and size, but human nonetheless. Areios felt off balance.

‘My lord regent,’ said Messinius. He gestured to Areios. ‘My lieutenant, Ferren Areios.’

‘Ah, it is good to meet you in the flesh, Ferren.’ Guilliman extended his hand. A palm as big as a power fist’s opened. Areios hesitated, just a fraction of a second, but enough to be noticed before taking it. The primarch’s hand engulfed his totally, and Areios experienced a brief, startling recollection of his birth father.

‘Be at ease, Ferren,’ said Guilliman. ‘I do not judge that which I have already judged worthy. You are a suitable man to wear the blue of Ultramar.’

Areios gave him a questioning look.

‘Your test records impressed me. It is I who appointed you as Vitrian’s deputy.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Areios managed to say. The sense of unreality receded, and now he was presented with the opposite problem; Roboute Guilliman seemed too real, a being from a place of solidity and noble fires, who had stepped through the curtain to show life up for the shadowy dramaturge’s sham that it was.

‘Areios,’ he said. ‘You have taken a new name?’

‘Brother-Captain Messinius named me, at my request,’ said Areios. ‘My old life is gone, far into the past. It fades already. Ferren no longer seemed to fit.’

‘We forget who we were at our peril,’ said Guilliman.

‘Equally, we should not cling to what is no more,’ said Areios. ‘But I keep my first name as a reminder.’

Guilliman smiled. It burned like the sun. ‘A man with a philosophical bent. Good. A Space Marine should be a thinker as well as a warrior.’ Guilliman regarded him long enough to make him uncomfortable. ‘A good choice,’ he said, speaking of the man and not the name. He released Areios’ hand, and returned his attention to Messinius.

‘Fleet Quintus is not ready,’ he said.

‘No, my lord,’ said Messinius. ‘The contagion is warp-tainted, and in the most severe cases brings forth infestations of minor Neverborn. The true extent of the problem has probably been concealed from Fleetmaster

Prasorius, and the agency of the Officio Logisticarum curtailed. Without your order that I visit, the problem would have been hidden until it was too late. As it was, we visited one of the affected ships and there were forced to engage a manifestation. No casualties. Quintus will not be ready to depart according to your schedule, and should not attempt to.'

'Temptation comes in many forms, and not only from the so-called gods,' said Guilliman. 'Men's desire for honour and gain have led them astray. Procurator Morbus Tephise has provided a thorough report. Your testimony is the final piece. They will not leave until the issue is dealt with.'

'Tephise implied the Inquisition should be called in.'

'Yes. I have ordered them to take control,' said Guilliman. 'Inquisitor Sleevik of the Ordo Sepulcrum is confident the contagion will be eradicated within a week, though drastic action is required. The affected ships have been taken to interplanetary space to be cleansed.' He frowned a little, and sculpted wrinkles creased his statue's face. 'This will cost us in men and material. VanLeskus will be delighted, of course. Although it concerns me the same motivations that turned this issue into a crisis are strong in her, her strategic reasoning is sound.' Guilliman looked at Areios. 'You are to serve under VanLeskus. What do you know of her, Ferren?'

'Very little, my lord.'

'She is a remarkable woman,' Guilliman said. 'Ferocious in battle and in politics. Of uncommon height for a mortal. She was born into the Vodine Sergastae command cadre, but she has the void in her blood. Her family line boasts generals, admirals, sector commanders and links to two major rogue trader houses. By dint of centuries of careful marriage contracts, alliances and mutual assistance accords, she can call upon several naval and chartist dynasties. The name VanLeskus is already spoken with great respect across several sectors. Cassandra seems determined that it spread further.' Guilliman's accent was curious, unlike any he had yet heard. An accent of time, not of place.

'She is ambitious then?' said Areios.

'Anyone can be ambitious. You are ambitious. You were lowborn, yet you aspired to rule what you could. It is what you do with ambition that counts. Ambition is a wild horse,' said Guilliman, 'but harnessed properly it can pull a heavy load. VanLeskus is arrogant, overly confident, undiplomatic and occasionally rude. However, she is brilliant, and one of the finest

military minds currently alive. Her manner, while annoying to others, is effective. She gets things done, and we find ourselves at a time where many things need doing.'

Guilliman paused a moment.

'In fact, let me show you, Areios. One day quite soon, you will have responsibility for your own company of warriors, perhaps a Chapter. Messinius will be there to guide you only so long. An understanding of our initial strategies will benefit you. If you are interested?'

'I am, my lord,' Areios said. 'It would be an honour.'

'Then we begin,' said Guilliman. The grav-platform rose up on quiet engines, until it hovered fifty feet above the pit. It stilled, and the main hololith activated, projecting a light model of the galaxy a hundred feet from side to side, ten feet thick at the central bulge, only a foot deep through its spiral arms. The recreated light of two hundred billion stars bathed them in an ethereal glow. Serpentine arms turned slowly about the barred heart.

'This is our galaxy,' Roboute Guilliman said. 'Breathtaking, is it not? This is, alas, a reconstruction of how it should appear, were the warp to be absent.'

The image changed. Weeping sores of light appeared in several places, the largest above Terra's position, cutting the arm adjacent to Sol's own in half. A lesser spot manifested closer to the central mass. There were a few others, smaller, though no less sinister in aspect.

'The Eye of Terror, and the Maelstrom,' said Guilliman, pointing to the two in turn. 'The principal areas of materium-immaterium interface before the Cicatrix Maledictum opened. They are the relics of ancient disasters, tears in space that lead directly into the warp. They are ugly weals on the face of creation, but far worse has taken their place. This is the galaxy now.'

The light changed. A slow, purple stain spread across the image, extending outwards from pre-existing warp rifts at first, sending out creeping tendrils to each other, then more emerging from fresh wounds in the fabric of reality, all reaching for others, coming together until they formed a long, veinous cancer that cut reality in two. Bending southwards at the Eastern Fringe of the Ultima Segmentum, and curling back on itself where the stars thinned in the far galactic west, by far the broadest part of the Great Rift was around the galactic centre, where millions of stars had been engulfed

and terrible energies raged as reality and unreality tore at each other. The Eye of Terror to the north of Hydraphur was incorporated as a large knot, the Maelstrom a hideous swelling coming off the galactic core. The Rift was not a solid wall, but a gnarled thing with spurs that extended out in all directions, its surface undulating and uneven, cutting down through the galactic plane so that in some places it was taller than it was wide. Lesser wounds cut through space far from the main Rift, and although the largest centred on known warp-realspace interfaces, a number were entirely new.

It was the heart of evil. Even looking at the Rift as a light-spun projection made Areios uneasy.

The northern part of the galaxy faded out, the objects there appended with data tags suggesting alternative configurations.

‘And so, the culmination of Abaddon’s strategy of ten thousand years,’ said Guilliman. ‘The unpicking of the fabric of the tempus-materium, and the unfettered intrusion of the warp, dividing our realm in two. Imperium Sanctus,’ he said, pointing to the southern element of the image. ‘Here the situation is dangerous, but stable. The Days of Blindness have passed. We have regained contact with Imperial holdings. Astrotelepathic messages can be sent and received, and warp travel, though now more perilous than ever before, may be undertaken again. The light of the Astronomican shines here. Sanctus is in peril, but not lost. To the relative north of the galaxy,’ he said, and his hand moved to indicate the faded part, ‘is Imperium Nihilus, and about that we know nothing. I do not know for certain whether anything remains beyond the warp storms – whether they are not a rift, but a solid wall behind which the warp itself is manifest to the galaxy’s edge.’

‘Do you think everything there is lost? What is most likely?’ asked Areios. His home was behind that wall, and he felt a queasy tug in his guts at the thought.

‘I do not think so. I have consulted the most experienced seers, astrogators, magi astra and Navigators in Sol, and I believe that the Rift is a barrier, or perhaps more akin to a fissure. This cartolith represents that theoretical. It is speculative, but upon this speculation our strategy is based. We have to have a little hope. As we speak, torchbearer fleets head north to ascertain the truth of this supposition, and if proven, to find a way across.’ He passed his hand across the writhing energies. ‘It is my belief that Abaddon has been working towards opening the Rift since the fall of his gene-father,

Horus. His thirteen crusades appeared to be random. They were intended to bring about this cataclysm.'

A number of red dots spread across the galaxy, these purely representational graphics stark against the realistic star field and Rift.

'I have decided that the key to the enemy's success was blackstone,' said Guilliman. 'Otherwise known as noctolith, a substance that can be tuned to be in harmony with the warp, or inimical to it. It has been long overlooked by the Imperium, but it appears that Abaddon was quicker to grasp its significance. Archmagos Belisarius Cawl and others have devoted much time to understanding how it functions. Perhaps, had we been faster to understand, then this would never have happened.' He paused a moment. 'There were other species, though, who understood its power, and they exploited it. These red points are worlds where known concentrations of the substance is found. And these worlds are those with the xenos structures known as monoliths.'

The red-marked worlds blinked. Rings circled a number of them. Most were deep in the purple smear of the Rift. The red lights winked off. The majority of the circled systems turned green.

'These green marks indicate pylon worlds attacked and destroyed by the Warmaster over the last ten millennia. Note how they are concentrated in a line across the path of the Rift.'

'Then their destruction opened the Rift?' said Areios.

Guilliman nodded. 'It has become clear that the pylons were in some way holding the power of the warp in check, and that without them it was free to spill out into reality,' said Guilliman. 'Who would have known, in the days of the Great Crusade, how powerful and pervasive Chaos was? Fairytales and myths...'

His voice trailed off, then he started anew.

'I assume that Abaddon's strategy follows one of two theoreticals. The first is that he has opened the Rift in order to allow his patrons' Neverborn servants easier access to our reality, cut our communications, hinder our means of travel and isolate our worlds, as has indeed already happened. The warp is our lifeblood as well as our poison. This trick was attempted before, long ago, by Horus when he attacked Terra, first with his Ruinstorm to hamper us, then with the opening of a rift within the bounds of Sol to speed his daemonic allies into the fight. If that is the case, then we are fighting a

war with conventional aims – the gaining of territory, the usurpation of authority, and the subjugation of mankind to the will of the false warp-gods with Abaddon as their puppet emperor. These were Horus’ goals.’

‘What is the other possibility?’ asked Areios. Throughout Messinius kept quiet, being already party to this information.

‘The other is more troubling,’ said Guilliman.

‘He wishes to plunge all the galaxy into the warp,’ said Areios.

‘Very good, Ferren,’ said Guilliman. ‘I ask myself why. What would he gain from this? Reality in our galaxy would be destroyed, and perhaps it would be so weakened that it would spell the beginning of the end for the universe, not only our part of it. Could that truly be his aim? So I must question our theoretical – why would any man wish to plunge all of existence into the warp? I do not understand the lure of these so-called deities. The power they offer is fleeting and corrupting, and therefore I cannot understand an enemy who courts them. However, understanding is irrelevant. Because I do not understand it does not deny its existence. My theoretical stands as the worst case scenario. Therefore, my practical must be to prepare for it.’ He gestured again at the cartolith.

‘This projection begs a further question. Look at the line of the Rift. If either are the Warmaster’s objectives, then why open the Cicatrix along that line? Why not take the Rift right through Terra? Assuming the Emperor could not prevent that from happening. If we assume He could, then why not isolate the Throneworld in warp storms as it was during the Age of Strife, before the Emperor rose? Indeed, we must ask ourselves why the pylons were where they were in the first place.’ He paused. ‘Are either of you familiar with Archmagos Esotericus Sigulus Herstoffen of Stygies?’

‘No,’ said Areios. He looked at Messinius, who shook his head.

‘He is one of the foremost experts on the warp and blackstone in the Imperium,’ said Guilliman. ‘The tech-priests of Stygies are famed for their knowledge of alien technologies, and Herstoffen has dedicated several lifetimes to the study of blackstone alone. It was he who first suggested its resonance with the warp, and later that it may be polarised to either carry or repel the energies of the empyrean. Herstoffen knows much about the interaction of the materium and the immaterium, and theorised that warp rifts form more easily in areas of high mass,’ he continued. ‘In this case, I am not speaking of the dangers associated with in-system warp-translation,

where high mass concentrations create gravitic rip that endangers ships emerging from the empyrean.'

Guilliman pointed with his right hand into the cartolith. 'See here, the Eye of Terror, centred on the ancient aeldari home cluster.' This news he delivered as if it were a commonplace fact. Neither of the Space Marines were aware of it. 'An area of high mass, many stars, close together in a large globular group. Does that have bearing on that ancient race's fall?' His finger moved down. 'The Maelstrom, hard by the limits of the galactic core. Another area of high mass. Now see the galactic core, which was largely free of the influence of the empyrean before the Rift.'

'It is swamped,' said Areios.

'It is the area of the highest mass in the galaxy. Billions of stars, more closely packed than elsewhere, arranged in increasing tightness about the the vortex at the centre of the heavens, the galaxy's central black hole. It is there that the Rift is largest and most violent. It is largely uncharted space. Who knows how many pylon worlds were there, destroyed by Abaddon while the Imperium slid into decline?'

'So the pylons were placed where the veil between real and unreal might most easily be breached,' said Areios. 'Along a line that takes in the denser parts of our galaxy, this is what you are saying, my lord?'

'The breaking of the pylons opened up a fault line running from the Eye of Terror, and through the galactic heart, one aided only by the great density of matter there. See how it follows the bar of the galactic heart, and skirts the edges of the Perseus arm. Also note how many pylon worlds were sited along the same arm. The fabric of our reality, the tempus-materium, is not flat, but curved by matter. Where it curves deepest, it intrudes into the empyrean, like a body floating on water, or weights resting on cloth. These concentrations allow our Navigators to guide themselves out at the appropriate points of their journey. The Astronomican is a lighthouse, these mass concentrations are the islands in the sea, the shores of the benighted ocean, the cliffs, bluffs and distant mounts. But where the cloth bows, it is weaker.

'Now,' said Guilliman. He waved his hand, and the cartolith shifted, zooming in on a portion north-west of Terra. 'Here is the Machorta Sound, the centre of the Machorta Sector,' said Guilliman. 'It lies well south of the fault line that has become the Great Rift, but it too is an area of high mass.'

This nebula is a stellar phenomenon named the Corrayvreken, and it has an unusual density at its middle. The Crusade of Slaughter is making its way towards Hydraphur through the Sound, bypassing the more direct route going via Mordax.'

'The Mordax subsector is crawling with orks,' said Messinius. 'It has been ever since the forge world there fell. They could be avoiding it.'

'Orks are a minor inconvenience to the Great Enemy,' said Guilliman. 'I surmise the presence of the greenskins has nothing to do with the crusade's route. The mass present in the Machorta Sound twists space and time. Undermining the natural laws of our universe is easier here. By passing through the Sound, they will open reality to the warp more quickly. I will advance this projection. It is based on their current route, activity, and effect of whatever they have that is opening the materium to the warp. Watch what happens when the Slaughter Crusade hits the Corrayvreken.'

The cartolith zoomed further in to the Machorta Sound showing a dense nebula alive with birthing stars. Dozens of suns packed around the fringes, lighting up the cloud like a lantern. The centre turned slowly, trailing long flags of dust and gas, almost a miniature of the galaxy. Several of these tendrils were tipped with newly ignited suns. Further out, young stars shone dully through accretion discs, where infant planets formed.

A flicker passed across the nebula from top left to bottom right, spreading a smattering of green names across the simulated void: Syzaron, Fomor, Acheini, Humbolt's World, and several that suggested recent settlement: New Landing, Open Prospect, Far Landing, and more, until thirty of the suns were bracketed in circles that denoted Imperial ownership, and others bore lesser tags indicating Imperial presence.

A number of dark red arrows came in from the north, nosing down from the direction of the Eye of Terror. They spread out towards the northernmost worlds, and where they encountered Imperial worlds, the signifiers changed. Far Landing was the first to go, winking out like a snuffed candle, its name greyed out. Others lasted longer. The names of some of them remained lit in doleful reds.

As the red arrows spread, arrows in blue moved in from outside the sector, coming mostly from Hydraphur to engage the red and reinforce the worlds. A couple of the smaller red arrows were extinguished. Many more blues were destroyed, or were turned back, diminished in size. More of the worlds

were taken by the Crusade of Slaughter. The whole war was represented by symbols, but Areios could imagine the pain and suffering on each of the worlds that were overrun, and the terrible losses sustained.

Following the crusade came the purple smear of a warp rift. It was small at first, a sliver of unwelcome colour, but it widened as it headed towards the nebula. It followed the red arrows as a carrion bird follows an army, passing over each conquered system, spreading its purple pall over them like the shadow of great wings. More text greyed out as worlds were swallowed by the warp. A pattern emerged; the rift was moving in towards the nebula at the centre in a wide spiral, while red and blue arrows jabbed and split, encircled and retreated. Two small blue arrows headed towards the leading point of the rift, one turned back, another vanished.

There was a convergence on the Fomor System. A gathering of arrows from all sides, then a repulsion of the blue. The Imperial forces fell back to the galactic south-west, where Hydraphur offered safe harbour.

‘We have passed the current moment,’ said Guilliman. ‘What follows is deduction.’

In the simulated future, the last of the green worlds were attacked and taken. The rift moved in closer and closer to the nebula, before piercing it like an arrow taking an eye.

The nebula curdled. Purple light poured over the image, running out in all directions in a pattern like infected arteries carrying disease into a body, broadening towards the top where, off the map, the Great Rift lurked. A long, jagged root surged downwards towards Hydraphur. The map zoomed out again, showing the rift spreading, spearing Hydraphur, and curling in towards Terra. The rift in the Machorta Sector fully joined to the Cicatrix Maledictum. Energised by connection to the larger warp storm it raced ahead, coming within light years of the Throneworld, with hundreds of red arrows riding alongside.

‘Hold simulation,’ said Guilliman. The animation stopped. ‘The Crusade of Slaughter is a threat, but not to the whole Imperium. It is the nature of the Blood God’s wars to burn themselves out, but this growing of the Rift, that cannot be allowed to happen. It will grant Abaddon a road to the Sol System,’ he said. ‘We must assume this is among his primary strategic goals. Terra is at risk. Our initial strategy was to take the eight key warp nexuses at the edges of the Segmentum Solar. With only Vorlese currently

in our hands, our crusade is effectively trapped. Quintus was supposed to leave soon to take Lessira, which will open the south. Tertius was to follow and secure the dead world of Olmec, giving us the west. Then I was to depart. Holding the warp gates is crucial to our securing of Imperium Sanctus. Only when Sanctus is safe can we think of venturing over the Rift, if anything is still there. But the first phases of this strategy must be rethought.’ The cartolith vanished, plunging the strategium into gloom.

Faint fires seemed to burn in the shadows of Guilliman’s eye sockets. ‘The Crusade of Slaughter has to be stopped. Forces will move via the Vorlese Gate, and head from there to Hydraphur. The journey will be long, Tertius will have to rely on its own supplies until it reaches Hydraphur, and Olmec will have to wait, but I have decided.’ He looked at Areios and Messinius. ‘I am telling you this as it affects you directly. VanLeskus will have her wish.

‘Fleet Tertius departs first.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven

PRECEPT MAGNIFICAT

THE WARP GATE AT VORLESE

THE ROUTE OF FLEET TERTIUS

To immense fanfare, Fleet Tertius set sail from Terra's orbit. VanLeskus' flagship *Precept Magnificat* went first, breaking free of the orbital docks coddling it against the void's boundless dark, and pushing out as confident and impressive as its mistress. An Oberon-class battleship, and one-time command vessel of Battlefleet Centaurus, the *Precept Magnificat* was a gargantuan blade of a ship, the ploughshare prow massing as much as a light cruiser alone.

Although it was light on armament for its mass, most of its capacity was taken up by flight decks, and as a carrier the Oberon-class excelled. The *Precept Magnificat* had been modified extensively, fitting more hangars than usual for its type so that it carried an impressive ten squadrons of bombers, fighters and assault boats. As *Precept Magnificat* departed its dock, these flew alongside in tight formation, the difference in size between the small craft and their giant carrier accentuating the flagship's immensity.

For the Indomitus Crusade, the ship had been further modified. The superstructure was equipped with large amounts of strategic and communications equipment, much of it designed by Belisarius Cawl, while the prow bristled with augur arrays, enhancing its capabilities as a command vessel. The new equipment was either patterned after ancient,

newly unearthed designs, or on completely novel constructs pioneered by Cawl. The archmagos' opponents accused him of hoarding ancient knowledge in the first instance, of dangerous innovation in the second, and of being a heretek for both, but the users of his bounty did not care for the quibbles of the Cult Mechanicus. The new devices were smaller and better than those the ship had previously carried. Cawl had many enemies within his own faith, and there were increasingly violent calls by the more conservative congregations to condemn him as *Modus Intolerabilis*. The Imperial Navy, however, held him in high regard. For a voidsman a bigger gun and a better engine trumped most theological debate.

What Cawl thought of all this, he kept to himself.

Under displays of choreographed weapons fire and brilliant pyrotechnics the *Precept Magnificat* set out, the vessels of her command coming into formation behind her. On those parts of Terra where order held sway, the priests of the Adeptus Ministorum urged worshippers to offer up their prayers for the fleet's success. Lips cracked and were bloodied by days of repeated hosannas sung for the glory of their God-Emperor and His reborn son. Tech-priest conclaves staged rituals, calling upon the Machine-God to ensure good function for all devices technologia, a titanic act of worship unseen in recent millennia. As the fleet sailed towards Mars it absorbed a contingent of the Basilikon Astra, and at its passing the Red Planet went into a frenzy of ecstatic devotion that saw manufacturing output briefly rise by over three hundred per cent.

Out, out into the dark, past the asteroids of the belt, hollowed by man in his first centuries in the void, out past Saturn, Jupiter, Neptune and Uranus. As the armada crossed the orbit of each of the planets, more vessels joined, the Jovian shipyards alone emptying a full thirty-sixth part of the Galilean lunar docks to swell the forces at VanLeskus' command. To avoid disrupting the flow of vessels into the Sol System, the fleet swept past the Elysian and Khthonic in-system gates, heading to the Mandeville point majoris beyond the heliopause where the large, aggregated mass of Fleet Tertius could safely enter the warp together, some five days sailing from Terra at the full speed of the slowest vessels.

They made translation with little hardship. Null maidens gathered from across the Imperium shielded the Navigators of the largest ships in each battle group the fleet was subdivided into. Their presence pained the

psychic Navigators greatly, but reduced the risk to them from the warp, and, with a little practice, they were able to act as a screen to reduce the violence of the energies the Navigators were exposed to. With the larger ships acting as shepherds to the smaller, Fleet Tertius forged on through the immaterium towards the warp nexus at Vorlese, travelling a major conduit that saw the fleet attain speeds not seen since before the Rift had opened.

Nightmares assailed the crew. Minor psychic manifestations were reported on scores of craft, as well as the usual suicides, eruptions of insanity and other sorrowful happenings that accompanied warp travel, but there were no major breaches, and no losses of ships either to daemonic incursion or navigational error.

They made Vorlese in good time. The vagaries of warp travel had only become more unpredictable after the Rift, and time keeping was nigh on impossible, but the ships' chronologians, aided by the secretive pair of operatives of the Ordo Chronos accompanying the fleet, were able to gauge the duration of their voyage at around two and half months, according to Vorlese local time.

They paused at the system's edge to give thanks to the Emperor, and bells rang from every chapel on every ship.

The fleet rested at Vorlese for just under three days. Several ships had sustained damage in the warp, and were obliged to remain behind. More supplies were taken on board, though no further troops.

Vorlese had always been of strategic significance, but the upheavals of the Great Rift had shifted the major warp currents, and one nexus where many joined had come to rest under the skin of reality beneath the system, increasing its importance. Guilliman himself had prevented its destruction at the hand of the enemy, and Vorlese was now being transformed into a bastion world, a rare gateway from which the forces of the Imperium could sally out.

The changed courses of the stable currents that met at Vorlese were still being mapped by the Astra Cartographica and the more esoteric cartomancers of the Navigator Houses, but there was no indication that any would bear Tertius directly from Vorlese's position at the eastern edge of the Segmentum Solar to the north-west, as their course required that they double back on themselves past Terra to the edge of the Segmentum Pacificus and Hydraphur. VanLeskus spent all of their brief stay in closed

conference with her chief Navigators and the highest ranking Sisters of Silence. Hours passed in sometimes heated argument generating the optimum route, which by necessity involved many shorter warp jumps and all the perils that entailed.

Fleet Tertius departed as quickly as it had come, the ships of the armada blotting out the stars of Vorlese's night sky in their multitudes.

Once out from Vorlese, past the skeletal frames of the nascent star forts and the great fleet guarding the space lanes, Fleet Tertius made its way to the further Mandeville point and passed back again into the warp.

From there, the voyage became harder. Several more ships were lost. Incursions incurred on numerous vessels.

Weeks later, they arrived.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HYDRAPHUR

ASCENDANT MAN

THE LEGACY OF CARDINAL BUCCHARIS

Hydraphur turned, fat and dirty beneath the watchful gun arrays of the star fortress *Ascendant Man*. Around the long loop of the Gallery of Equilibrium, Inquisitor Rostov walked with Commodore Athagey, his small band of followers and her command cadre. The walk was long, and the gallery was lined with troops all the way, each from different orders, from Astra Militarum regiments, Space Marine Chapters, Battle Sister convents, Adeptus Mechanicus macroclades and all the other branches of humanity's war machine. They ranged in form and type from standard humans who would have fitted in to any era of mankind's history, to variants who skirted the heresy of mutation, grossly augmented cyborgs, and towering transhumans. But their purpose was the same, despite their differences in body form, armament and uniform, and they all bore the mark of Fleet Tertius proudly displayed.

Fleetmistress Cassandra VanLeskus was making a point, and Hydraphur was a world whose history was founded on making a point.

Curving around the ventral signals array that jabbed at the planet below like an accusing finger, the Gallery of Equilibrium was a weakness in the station's formidable armour. Although it could be shut off in the event of attack, it presented a possible ingress to the fortress for boarders, thought

Finnula. The political value of the gallery outweighed its vulnerability, however. Hydraphur had long been a place where tensions between Imperial factions were pressing. The elegant, bubble-shaped sections that made up the gallery's continuous viewing wall provided a necessary statement on the nature of Imperial power.

Hydraphur was a world divided. Above the final line of the atmosphere, the Navy held sway. Beneath it, the Adeptus Ministorum ruled the planet in uneasy conjunction with the Adeptus Mechanicus. Where the glowing gas attenuated to nothing, rows of orbital defences stared at each other, those in the rarefied air covered in statues of saints and reliefs of miracles cast in plasteel, those in the true void rather more sober, decorated with eagles, engraved star charts, and honour scrolls listing important victories. The might of the Battlefleet Pacificus was plain to see in the void, while the mega-cathedra and manufactoria covering Hydraphur's surface were clearly visible from orbit.

The reasons for the trinary division of power dated back to the Age of Apostasy four millennia ago, and the world's shameful surrender to the forces of Cardinal Bucharis, but there was strategic wisdom in allowing this fractious arrangement to persist, as it kept any one organisation from exerting control over the strategically vital system, and, in microcosm of the balance of power between the major Adepta throughout the Imperium, the three of them were stronger together than they would have been alone.

Hydraphur was one of the great bastion worlds of the Imperium of Man and hosted the chief naval base for all of Segmentum Pacificus. Its position close to the northern rim of the Segmentum Solar and the southern reaches of the Segmentum Obscurus meant its fleets were as often called to make war there as they were in their home segmentum, whose vast reaches extended far to the galactic south and west, where the Halo Stars made a thin border against the intergalactic void. Being close to the Eye of Terror, its ships had been at the forefront of the defence of Cadia for millennia, and its losses when the Cadian Gate had fallen had been severe.

Still Hydraphur stood. Assailed three times by Chaos in recent months, its guns had not failed, not when darkness was cast like a shroud over the Astronomican, nor when the Rift had split the sky. Its fortresses had not been taken. Its ships had not foundered.

If one world had to be chosen to exemplify the Imperium, with its strength

drawn from many parts, its indomitability, and its bloody-minded refusal to accept defeat in the face of overwhelming odds, Hydraphur was a good candidate.

Finnula walked behind Rostov and Athagey. They didn't speak. Athagey wore complex warpaint and a heavy costume whose train required four ratings to carry it. Rostov's armour was polished to a dazzling finish, his own red cape whispering over the shining floor next to Athagey's brocade. The commanders of Strike Group Saint Aster wore their dress uniforms, every chest glinting with medals. The occasion was formal enough that Rostov's scruffy band of vagabonds had smartened themselves up, except the xenos, who toddled along in its ragged cloak with an insolent look on its face, daring the assembled protectors of humanity to strike it down. Another point being made.

Finnula hated politics but she could not avoid them. They were an inevitable by-product of human endeavour. Whether one loathed or enjoyed them, only a fool disdained them.

Thousands of docking facilities radiated out from the planet in neat files, making long bands of metal stretching towards the stars. They were held in geosynchronous anchor on the same orbital plane as the equator, so that when viewed from above in full sunlight, Hydraphur resembled the jewelled orb of an alien king. Long runs of the facilities were physically joined together by power feeds and transit tubes, though not to the extent of the artificial rings around Luna or Mars. If they lacked the majesty of the Solar shipyards, Hydraphur's docks competed with them in productivity, the sheer manufacturing output of Hydraphur's facilities outmatching all but a forge world.

Hydraphur's near void was already full of ships when Strike Group Saint Aster had sailed in from the night, a welcome reminder of the Imperium's strength. At Guilliman's order, various sector fleets had made their way to the world from Segmentums Pacificus, Obscurus and Solar to rally there. Others had headed for Hydraphur during the cataclysmic days following the Rift when the Astronomican had failed, drawn in by the relay stations that ringed the third moon of the fourth planet, upon whose surface a great temple of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica was sited.

To the scores of ships already present, Tertius had added hundreds. Their lights outshone the stars and competed with the system's sun. There were

more battleships in one place than Finnula had seen in two decades of constant service combined, including marks of craft she had never seen before alongside ships whose silhouettes were instantly recognisable, for among Fleet Tertius were storied vessels. Seeing what she saw surrounding Hydraphur, Finnula found herself believing that the Imperium could prevail, and that the ancient traitors could be driven back into the warp.

The scale of Tertius was hard to take in, and the sight of it pushed the fearsome battle at Fomor III into the back of her mind. With the crusade fleet, the battle would have been over in hours, and the world saved. Emperor, she thought, with Fleet Tertius with them, they could take all of the Machorta Sector back in days.

The parade was beginning to grate by the time they completed the full circuit. Finnula was never one for ceremony. It annoyed her as much as politics; more so, in fact, for although politics were necessary, ceremony rarely was. She'd seen people die because they'd stopped to perform their rituals. The Gallery of Equilibrium was long. Her dress boots were tight, and her feet ached well before the journey was over. But she kept her face neutral as was expected, and walked with her back straight nevertheless.

Eventually, the long walk was done. A funereal song coming from ahead announced that they had completed the walk.

'Priests!' she heard the alien say. One of the men that accompanied Rostov, the smartly dressed one in the Astra Militarum lieutenant's uniform, not the slob in the crumpled fatigues, said something to the xenos. His words were muttered, and she only heard the alien's reply.

'What?' the repulsive thing said, then it laughed, as if it were in a heathen marketplace, and not surrounded by Imperial warriors and Imperial power. 'Yeah, I believe in gods, I just don't worship them. Gods are more trouble than they're worth.'

The gallery branched, probably only a few hundred yards from where they had set out, Finnula guessed, for she could see once again the *Saint Aster* and the rest of the fleet come from Fomor in the docks down towards the planet. Holy men stood in cowled throngs, thickening the atmospheric mix with incense. A fat bishop led their sermons from a legged motile pulpit, whose heavenly sculptures were interspersed with weapon muzzles and glimmered with the steady shine of targeter lenses.

A set of doors were opened, revealing another set behind, then a third as

the second set was opened, then more. There were no more than a dozen yards between each, dividing the corridor into a series of vestibules, and the booming of the doors as they were flung back made a heavy percussion to the priest's singing. The air vibrated to hosannas, and thanks to the Emperor and His holy son. They passed through several of these small spaces, variously dedicated to the Emperor, the saints of the Navy, the Machine-God, and lastly to the Avenging Son. The final door was gargantuan, forty feet high and nearly as broad. Twenty fraters in white robes pushed to open them, and they swung inwards ponderously. Chandelier light flashed from a heavy relief that told, panel by panel, of the planet's shame and the Emperor's judgement upon it, four thousand years in the past.

A huge hall awaited them. The emblems of dozens of Imperial organisations hung from chains between tall pillars of a blue-veined stone. The chamber was circular, hundreds of feet high, the ceiling a giant dome in black that displayed the seven key constellations of Pacificus as they were seen from Terra.

The entire half-arc of the hall facing the doors was full of people displaying a dazzling array of uniforms and costumes, skin hues and morphologies. In the centre of the crowd a floating platform carried the chiefs of this host: Space Marines, generals, admirals, and at their front, Fleetmistress Lady Cassandra VanLeskus.

Rostov and Athagey's small party came forward and halted in front of a line of richly garbed armsmen who were equipped more in the manner of Tempestus Scions than simple naval troops. Athagey stuck out her hand from the side of her preposterous costume and waved Finnula forward, so she hurried to her mistress' side. The grav-platform sank until it was a couple of feet off the ground. Steps at the front hinged down. VanLeskus walked briskly down them.

'Inquisitor Rostov,' said Lady VanLeskus. She turned to Athagey with a rustle of fantastically pleated lace and layered silks. Her bionic eye whirred as it focused on the commodore. Finnula had rarely seen one so fine. The false iris was as bright as sapphire, and the shining platinum that replaced VanLeskus' right brow and upper cheek was engraved at so fine a level it shimmered iridescently. It was jewellery when most other augmetics were ugly. She guessed that VanLeskus could have had a perfect biological mimic, but had chosen not to. She reeked of money and ancestral power.

‘You must be Commodore Athagey,’ VanLeskus said. She held out her hand, not for it to be shaken but to gesture at the commodore, as if she might have difficulty recognising that the fleetmistress referred to her.

By the Throne, VanLeskus was tall – almost freakishly so by baseline standards. She wasn’t slight either, but firmly built, with well-toned muscles, wide shoulders and little in the way of a waist. Her extravagant clothes made her appear even bigger, so that she filled all the space in one’s field of vision, and crowded out those who stood in such multitudes behind her. Literally larger than life, she seemed.

Her outfit was a jewelled one-piece bodysuit tightly fitting around her hips, ankles and wrists, flared and layered below the knee and at the shoulders. She wore a mass of delicate chains around her neck, and all her fingers bore fine rings engraved to match her augmetic plate’s oily sheen. She wore a cap with a sharp peak, like an avian bill, and long plumes either side of the head whose roots were black but progressed through all the colours of the rainbow until they were purest white at the tips. It was the kind of outfit that belonged to someone with an extensive wardrobe. Her face would have been ugly if seen in isolation, for it was heavysset and unfeminine, but in the context of VanLeskus, combined with her manner, height, attitude, but above all the overbearing confidence of the woman, it was fiercely beautiful.

Athagey saluted stiffly. She was evidently uncomfortable in her dress uniform. VanLeskus watched her with some amusement, and Finnula felt Athagey prickle. There was going to be trouble between these two, she was certain of it. They were too similar, she thought. Both formidable, both tall, both strong; women who would flatten anyone who came between them and their goal. But VanLeskus exceeded Athagey in all these categories; she was the commodore taken to another level. The pink streaks in Athagey’s hair seemed even more desperate compared to VanLeskus’ easy flamboyance, and the commodore’s ceremonial uniform only accentuated her lack of flair, like a glorious frame drawing attention to the ordinariness of the picture it housed. Athagey was dressed up because she had to be. Her discomfort made her look ridiculous. VanLeskus looked like she wore clothes that gaudy every day, and she shone like a star because of it.

Emperor help me, thought Finnula. They are going to detest each other. She could see it already in Eloise’s face, annoyance gathering itself beneath

her discomfort. VanLeskus was used to lording it over people, she had that air of nobility, of money and influence a hundred generations old that expected to get what it wanted. Athagey had come up from the schola progenium, naturally brilliant but of no great background. She reacted badly to those born to rule. Her one great weakness besides the stimms was envy of good blood.

Thankfully, she was keeping quiet. This was Rostov and VanLeskus' affair; they were called to the fleetmistress' presence only because they had conveyed him to Hydraphur. Meeting her like this, without Admiral Treheskon and the rest of Battlefleet Machorta, was a borrowed honour. Finnula and Athagey were spectators.

'You responded to my summons with admirable speed,' said Rostov. 'I thank you.' He dipped his head a fraction, the sole deference he offered to the fleetmistress.

VanLeskus laughed. Her teeth were like shaped pearls, very even and square.

'I got your message, if that's what you mean, inquisitor. Fleet Tertius was always intended to come here, although thanks to you, we bypassed our original objective and came early. Be in no doubt, lord inquisitor, nobody summons me, it was my decision. I am a fleetmistress of the Indomitus Crusade. I answer only to the Imperial Regent Roboute Guilliman.'

'Whereas I answer to the Emperor,' said Rostov. 'No one else.' He moved his coat aside to show his inquisitorial seal attached to a loop on his breastplate by a ribbon.

'I see,' said VanLeskus. She looked a little displeased. She was not used to being spoken to that way. 'Well then, this greeting here is probably a little lost on you, seeing as you answer to the highest power. I apologise if our attempts at appropriate levels of ceremony disappoint you.'

'I expected it,' Rostov said, his voice so flat that Finnula couldn't guess whether he was offended or not.

Rostov held up his hand and lifted his smallest finger. Upon it was a very fine ring.

'This ring holds an alpha-level privacy field. It will prevent anyone hearing what we are going to discuss.'

'Now?' said VanLeskus. 'I have a feast waiting, you know.' She raised her still human eyebrow. A line of gems were glued in place over it.

‘It can wait a quarter of an hour longer,’ he said. ‘In a moment, I will activate the field. I have news that I can give only to you, and it must be given immediately. I ask that you choose one witness to attend you while I speak, someone beyond reproach and entirely trustworthy, who will carry this information should you die.’

‘I’m not going to die!’ she said laughingly. ‘I’ve half a *segmentum majoris*’ military at my back!’

‘If the enemy learns what I know, they will expend all efforts to destroy you, and me. It will set back your efforts here. They will do what they can to thwart us, and they can do anything. All they have to do is find out. It is imperative this information is kept secret.’

‘Very well,’ said VanLeskus. She turned and addressed an armoured Space Marine in the livery of the White Consuls upon the dais.

‘Messinius, Guilliman trusts you. Come to my side.’ She crooked a finger at him.

The platform shook as he came down to the floor, armour purring as he took up position opposite Athagey.

‘I myself will take the commodore here,’ Rostov said. ‘Only we four will know all the truth. That may be enough to allow us to act.’

VanLeskus evidently had a head for what was important and what was not. She set aside her offence, her expression entirely serious, and nodded. ‘Agreed.’

‘First lieutenant, this is not for your ears,’ said Rostov to Finnula. Not hard, not soft, a statement of fact. She was not to be included.

Finnula withdrew to stand with the others in their small party. The Space Marine’s unreadable eye lenses followed her. A shiver ran up her spine. She didn’t like being that close to the *Adeptus Astartes*.

‘We will begin,’ said Rostov.

The inquisitor twisted his ring. The air around the quartet went fuzzy. They seemed to freeze, breaking up their outlines like those in a badly rasterised image. All sound ceased, replaced by a rushing noise hard as solar interference on a vox. Finnula’s vox-bead squealed loudly, and she winced and disconnected it. Everyone else within fifty feet shut off their communications as the privacy field brutalised the vox.

Finnula flexed her hands. Leather gloves creaked tightly around her knuckles, making her feel they would split, then her skin, exposing the

shine of bone beneath. Emperor, she was tense, helpless, excluded by those more powerful. It brought her a little comfort that many faces in VanLeskus' party mirrored her own. The little tableau of Messinius, VanLeskus, Athagey and Rostov shivered. She wondered what would happen if she walked across the privacy field; she'd never seen one like that before. Nothing good, she decided.

From behind her came a bored sigh and the sound of a heavy body settling onto the floor. Finnula turned around and saw the little xenos, Cheelche, arranging its robes around crossed legs and taking out a leather pouch.

'What are you looking at? Don't you people know it's rude to stare?' It brought out some sort of foul-smelling ration stick from its bag and began to chew on it. 'Stop gawping and make yourself comfortable,' it said through a full mouth. 'We're probably going to have a long wait.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

INQUISITOR ROSTOV'S ERRAND

THE WORK OF INQUISITOR DYRE

SOMEONE IN MIND

‘My ladies, captain,’ said Rostov, favouring each of them with a small bow of his head. He had a noble’s bearing, Messinius thought, the easy movement of a man used to being in control. He was like VanLeskus in that regard, and Messinius himself, whose own family had been of some consequence. Athagey was the odd one out. She had the stiff, hypervigilant bearing of a powerful person who was not of noble birth surrounded by those who were.

‘I thank you for joining me in this conference,’ said Rostov. He was calm to the point of coldness. He had very bright eyes. A psyker’s eyes, Messinius thought. He could feel the cold press of the man’s mind. There was something reptilian about him.

‘I will endeavour to be brief,’ the inquisitor went on, ‘for the less time we spend in talk and the quicker we move to oppose the enemy, the greater the chances of our success.’

As Messinius processed the small tensions within the group, he considered how long it would take the Primaris Marines to relearn human body language. Some existing Space Marines could not understand baseline humans at all. Though the White Consuls were closer to the populace than most, the process of apotheosis and the suppression of fear could strip a

man of his emotions entirely, and the Primaris warriors were especially awkward.

VanLeskus attempted to wrest control of the conversation the moment Rostov paused to draw breath. ‘You are here on a mission against the Crusade of Slaughter. Your seal is that of the Ordo Xenos,’ she said. ‘I understand that you are not completely restricted to one area of investigation, but it is unusual to find an alien hunter opposing the forces of Chaos.’

‘We all oppose Chaos, my lady,’ said Rostov. He was almost impossible to read.

Guilliman’s assessment of VanLeskus was accurate. She was opinionated, and unnecessarily pushy, almost aggressive. Messinius turned his helm fractionally towards the inquisitor to watch his reaction. He found these interactions between mortals fascinating.

‘I am of the Ordo Xenos, yes,’ said Rostov. He was reserved, considered in the way he spoke. This was a man, thought Messinius, who only spoke when he needed to. Messinius used his sensorium to get a reading on Rostov’s heart rate. Predictably, Rostov’s pulse thumped along at a stone-cold sixty beats a minute. VanLeskus did not faze him at all.

‘What started as a simple investigation into the theft of and illegal trade in the substance known as noctolith led me to the crusade sweeping through this sector.’ Rostov paused to allow further interruption from VanLeskus. It was challenge, not politeness. She raised her eyebrow, so he continued. ‘Your own agents will have informed you that the crusade heading towards Hydraphur is being trailed by a warp rift.’

‘Interestingly,’ said VanLeskus, with a touch of a smile, ‘the first news of that came from you, though I have of course confirmed it. It is the Lord Guilliman’s opinion that Warmaster Abaddon intends to spread the Rift further. I believe that the target is Hydraphur. This is not the isolated action of a Chaos warlord, but part of a greater strategy to overthrow order in the galaxy, specifically here an attempt to deprive us of this peerless bastion world. Should it fall, then the corners of three segmenta will be at risk, and a corridor open for an attack on Terra itself from the Eye of Terror. Simple enough, though their manner of accomplishing it is bizarre.’

‘Your reasoning is sound,’ said Rostov. ‘But your understanding incomplete. I suspect that the enemy’s efforts are more coordinated than we

think.’

‘This is the greatest assault on the Imperium since the days of the Horus Heresy,’ said VanLeskus. ‘Of course it is coordinated.’

‘You do not understand all of it,’ said Rostov. ‘My master was Inquisitor Dyre. He long had an interest in blackstone. It was through his own efforts to secure a supply of the material for study that we came across a network trading in finished artefacts of xenos derivation.’

‘The Mechanicus have been interested in this material of late,’ said VanLeskus. ‘They do not always respect the Lex. We understand study of this material has become most pressing to them since the fall of the Cadian pylons. What does it matter if the Martians engage in a little underhand exchange of xenos material if it eventually profits us all?’

‘Not a great deal,’ admitted Rostov, ‘and in many cases the trade was legal. The Adeptus Mechanicus have been actively mining raw blackstone throughout this segmentum for well over five centuries. But vigilance is always called for in case xenos artefacts fall into the wrong hands, and so Dyre took it upon himself to monitor the industry in the sectors that he regarded as his own. He struck bargains with most of the major providers to do so, legitimising their activities and allowing us to oversee it, intercepting examples of xenos technology when we saw fit. We kept a wary eye out for those who could not be trusted with the blackstone in any form, rogue magi in the main, several of whom we tracked down and executed, but there were others. Over time, we became aware of a pattern of trade that raised great concern. A portion of the finished material was vanishing. We traced this to a number of heretical cults, which we were successful in exterminating with aid from members of the Ordo Hereticus. However, even successful, we rarely recovered the material, and it became clear some organising influence was at work.’

‘But why? Why not just take it?’ said VanLeskus.

‘Because that would have revealed the scale of their plans. According to my contacts within the Adeptus Mechanicus, the gathering has gone on for some time, in secret. Whoever is assembling this blackstone is interested primarily in xenos tech, and they are gathering large amounts. I believe it has something to do with the means by which the Slaughter Crusade is creating this rift, more, I believe it goes further than that. This is the first instance we will see of this use of blackstone.’

‘Sorcery is their usual means,’ said Messinius.

‘These are followers of the Blood God,’ said Rostov. ‘They despise psykers and sorcerers. My intelligence suggested that there is something else, that some of the larger blackstone artefacts I and my master were tracking have been adapted into some sort of machine that can be used to open the veil between reality and the empyrean. I mean broken pylons and other similar pieces. Large pieces.’

‘Lord Guilliman told me something of this,’ said Messinius.

‘After a long investigation, we discovered it to be true. I excruciated many of the cult members myself,’ said Rostov, and for the first time he showed emotion, a certain haunted look that flashed behind his eyes. ‘One of them made mention of a being. The subject referred to this being as the “Hand”. In his ravings before the pain broke his mind, he revealed that it was to this being that the blackstone was being conveyed, all over the segmentum, and that gave me a hint of the scale of the Hand’s intentions. Observe.’

Rostov held up his ring again. A pencil-thin beam of light projected a tri-d of a man strapped into a chair. He was streaked with blood dribbling from several precise holes over major nerve clusters. Several of his teeth were broken. Messinius was taken aback by the primitive nature of the torture inflicted on him. From Rostov’s fastidious appearance he expected something cleaner, but this was the work of knives and hooked implements, of fists and gouging fingers, not pain engines or subtler devices.

‘You’ll see!’ the man was shrieking. ‘When the stars are drowned and the gods are in the ascendant, the Great Powers shall overthrow the False Emperor. He has what he needs, and he is going to use it. Then,’ the man panted, he was close to death, but a triumphant leer formed around his broken teeth, ‘then you will know what freedom is.’

The image went out.

‘This information was difficult to secure. However, Dyre did not doubt its accuracy, and nor do I.’

‘You learned nothing more?’ Messinius asked. He found torture distasteful, dishonourable, and rarely useful. A man would say anything to end his suffering.

‘He expired soon after,’ said Rostov. ‘I performed a thorough psychic rip. He knew little more.’

‘Then you are a psyker,’ said Messinius.

Rostov nodded.

‘Hand of whom, or of what?’ said VanLeskus.

‘That is the question I will have answered,’ said Rostov. ‘I must see this machine. If I can get close enough to it, perhaps I can divine something of its origins and ultimate purpose. Maybe we can return with captives who can be induced to tell us more.’

‘That is a dangerous course of action,’ said Messinius. ‘But Lord Guilliman believes that the enemy’s ultimate strategy is to spread the warp across the materium. Any intelligence regarding the truth or otherwise of this theory will be of great interest to him.’

‘Then we shall do what we can to help him, for Inquisitor Dyre feared the same. Blackstone is certainly involved. The trail leading to this machine was not the only one. There could be other devices out there, waiting to be used to saw open the materium,’ said Rostov. ‘After we have retaken Machorta, then I shall have my proof. Whether this is an isolated incident, or part of a greater strategy, it cannot be allowed to continue. We must stop this machine, and it must be examined.’

‘How should we proceed,’ said Messinius. ‘Can it be targeted physically? Will conventional weapons work against it?’

Rostov glanced between the three. ‘I have the means in my possession to stop it and to reverse some of the damage done.’

‘What means?’ asked VanLeskus.

‘Xenos tech. I will not tell you exactly what,’ Rostov said. ‘The fewer who know, the better.’ He returned to the cartolith. ‘This should be our highest priority in the campaign. I will send the primarch a message as soon as we are victorious, and pass on all I have learned.’

‘And if we all die?’ Messinius said.

‘I have a sealed message ready for him, in case of that,’ said Rostov.

‘I intend to take *all* Machorta Sound,’ said VanLeskus fiercely. ‘I shall unleash the entire might of Fleet Tertius against this incursion, and it will be burned from the stars. It is time the heretics were reminded of who is the true power in this universe, and I shall have the great honour of delivering the crusade’s first victory.’

‘You must do as you see fit,’ said Rostov, ‘but to be frank, I do not care if it is Machorta that burns instead of our enemy. All that matters is that device. It must be stopped, and if possible, studied.’

‘I have seen it,’ said Athagey, speaking up for the first time. ‘We all saw it, at Fomor. There is a ship, though it attempts to hide itself. I saw no device, but there was a ship towards the front of the rift. Two attempts from Battlefleet Machorta were made to destroy it. The first expedition got nowhere near it. No matter how fast they sailed, it was always the same distance away. The second task force vanished. This is no normal foe. It will be impossible to attack.’

‘I also know how to get to it,’ said Rostov. ‘Empyrically charged blackstone creates a resonance in the warp. There has to be a great deal of it to be traceable, it has to be active, and it can’t be done from more than a subjective light year away, but it is possible to lock onto it and follow it. We will track it, break warp on top of the machine, and take its guardians by surprise.’

‘Do you speak of sorcery?’ asked VanLeskus. ‘Some of the Inquisition’s methods are questionable. I know of radicals who will use any means. I will not tolerate the use of dark magics on my ships.’

‘Not sorcery, rare sciences,’ Rostov reassured her. ‘I have plans for a machine that will help. This must be fabricated, and I require a Navigator,’ said Rostov. ‘We shall need a volunteer. Following the machine’s spoor will most likely kill the one who tracks it.’

‘You will need ships as well. A task force at the least,’ said VanLeskus. ‘Possibly a battle group.’

‘I will,’ said Rostov. ‘I assume you intend a multi-pronged attack into the Machorta Sector.’

‘The enemy are widely spread, it is the only way,’ confirmed VanLeskus.

‘The main body runs ahead of the rift. If you can engage this with the larger portion of Fleet Tertius while we attack the device, then they will be drawn away and unable to defend it. I believe the enemy thinks this engine to be safe, and it is not in the character of the World Eaters Legion to spend their time on guard duty. This mission should fall within the wider strategy of the attack instead of being an isolated venture.’

‘Obviously,’ said VanLeskus haughtily. ‘So be it. We can come to an agreeable accommodation, I am sure. A few diversionary attacks sent ahead of our main assault will add spice to the pot.’ VanLeskus gave out a bark of laughter that made the long feathers in her hat jump. ‘But what, for argument’s sake, if I say no? Will you use your seal to requisition a fleet

from me?’

‘You would refuse? Then I will,’ said Rostov. His ringed hand went to the small bauble hanging from his chest, where resided the power of the Emperor Himself. ‘But you won’t.’

‘I cannot, can I?’ said VanLeskus. ‘Not in all good conscience, and not without incurring consequences. Whether now or in a decade’s time, the Inquisition will hold me to account if I turn you away.’

‘Yes,’ said Rostov simply. ‘You would be defying the Emperor. Death would be the only just reward.’

VanLeskus snorted. ‘Well I agree, anyway. Whether this grandiose theory is correct or not, the rift-ship must be stopped. If you are wrong and it is but a single wickedness that troubles the realms of mankind, it will have been removed. If you are right, then we shall have the upper hand against our foe, and will have prevented the extension of the Rift southwards.’

‘That is why this conference must remain secret,’ said Rostov. He looked at them all gravely. ‘We four are the only ones who know what I have discovered, that this ship is no random cruelty of the Great Enemy, but part of a structured plan. There will be agents of the enemy in Tertius, my lady fleetmistress. There are probably traitors among the men and women you brought here today, within striking distance of us right now. All that separates us from victory and failure is this privacy field. When the forces you second to me move out to strike down this evil, they must remain in ignorance of what they hunt until the last moment. As long as the enemy remain sure they are safe, they are vulnerable. If they come to learn that I have a means of tracking this ship, or that I possess a way to deactivate their machine, then it will disappear. Secrecy must be our watchword.’

‘Then you present me with a *fait accompli* as to who will perform this task,’ said VanLeskus. She looked at the commodore.

‘I did already have somebody in mind,’ said Rostov. He gave a wan smile.

Athagey stuck out her chin. Her head seemed small and frail trapped between her cap and tall collar, but she was proud.

‘Strike Group Saint Aster will do it,’ she said. ‘For the Emperor.’

‘Battle Group Saint Aster,’ corrected VanLeskus. ‘You belong to me now, commodore.’

Chapter Thirty

A NECESSARY SACRIFICE

SCOLOS ACCEPTS

A WAY THROUGH THE WARP

No one told Scolos EvHaverad and the others that the mission would be fatal, but he knew it from the moment he was summoned to the *Saint Aster*. He did not need to use his powers to read the disquiet around Commodore Athagey and her pair of aides as she gathered twenty of the strike group's Navigators in the stateroom of her command deck, and asked, stern-faced, for a volunteer.

Scolos watched his fellows. Seventeen of the Navigatorial Houses were represented, their origins clear from their morphology as much as from their distinctive modes of dress. They all looked at each other. None of them spoke. None of them wanted to be the first to say no.

Scolos took the lead. Someone had to say something.

'My lady commodore,' he said. His voice was high and raspy, the result of a mutation to his vocal cords. The deviation was so pronounced it was visible on his throat as a twisted knot which he habitually covered with colourful cravats. He had always hated his voice, it made him sound like he had fallen into a helium tank, but he tried to imbue it with as much dignity as he could, and hide his loathing of the way he sounded with good manners and good humour.

'I believe I must speak on behalf of all the Navigators here,' he said.

She looked at him, and he saw how tired she was, but her jaw was set with such determination.

‘We are not fools,’ he said pleasantly. ‘This task will kill whoever takes it upon themselves.’ He lifted his cane and flourished the top at his fellows. His hands too bore the stigma of change, each finger carrying an extra knuckle. Gloves hid this deformity from all but the most observant. ‘None of us here are of the highest grade,’ he said. ‘But none of us are of the lowest either. We are Navigators qualified to the upper middle degrees of competence. Therefore, I assume, the volunteer you require needs some skill, but not so much that they are indispensable to the fleet and to the crusade.’

Athagey said nothing.

‘The two officers with you look uncomfortable,’ said Scolos. ‘I suspect they appear that way because they have followed the same line of logic I have employed. They probably know little more of the nature of this mission than we do. That suggests to me that besides being dangerous, it is also very important. You have kept this secret to prevent the enemy learning of it, I believe, and if that is so, it must be vital.’

Being a mistress of ships, Athagey had plenty of experience dealing with Navigators. He could see that too. She didn’t like it, though. Some captains hated their Navigators, and they hated the fact they had to rely on them even more. Athagey was an alien-loathing mutant-hater. Her rectitude probably helped her forgive herself for her stumm habit, he thought, for that was obvious too in her red-veined eyes, clenched fists, and the glint in her pupils sharp enough to scratch steel.

‘What do you wish to gain from pronouncing all this, Navigator EvHaverad?’ she said coldly. ‘There is no gain to be made here. This is an act of service to the Emperor, not a contract negotiation.’

She did not refute what he had said. That was good enough for him.

‘I don’t want anything,’ he said. ‘I only wanted to be sure of the magnitude of what I was volunteering for.’ He tapped the ferrule of his cane upon the decking. ‘Will you accept my service, for the greater glory of the Imperium of Man, and for He of Terra?’

Her eyebrows rose. ‘You will do it?’ she said.

‘I assume you will tell me no more until we are alone, in this ship’s sanctum.’

‘Yes.’ The lines in her face softened. She had thought this was going to be harder.

‘It is my duty to do it.’ He let his glances at the other Navigators chastise them for their cowardice. ‘There is one advantage I seek from this,’ he said.

Athagey’s face tightened again.

‘I said...’

‘Not for my house, but for me.’ Scolos smiled his most charming smile. ‘I ask that you inform my house of the service I provided, and that I went to my death knowingly. I am not regarded as pure enough to father children,’ he explained. Although his mutations were minor, his house had been plagued with divergency of late, and their breeding codes had been tightened. He pulled off his glove with his teeth, and curled his fingers so Athagey could see their deviation from sacred human normality, then tugged down his cravat to expose the ugly tumour at his throat. ‘I wish my name to be remembered with honour, and that I, Scolos EvHaverad, was a useful scion of my house. Despite these marks upon my body, my soul is pure.’

She understood his motivation, and her sympathy for honour overcame her disgust at his mutations.

‘It shall be done,’ she said.

‘Then I gladly accept this mission, whatever it may be.’

Scolos’ desire to do the right thing seemed an error when screaming out his last in the lead Navigator’s chair.

The sanctum of the flagship was immense, the abode of a true lord, and the kind of domain Scolos had always coveted for himself; an immense, armoured orb five decks deep and crammed with the kind of luxury the average Imperial citizen could only dream of.

When he came in and was accepted by Lord Navigator Szezolas, he allowed himself a small fancy that the manse was his, and that he had finally achieved his rightful place in the hierarchies of mankind.

That moment of pleasure seemed very far away.

The *Saint Aster* plunged down a warp current that threatened to wreck the ship. An infinite vortex of red and gold that twisted and eddied, from a certain perspective it was beautiful. Any normal man who looked upon it would have been slain. There was a malice to the light that blackened the

spirit, but that was not why Scolos screamed and screamed, his hated, stridulating voice made hoarse by hours of pain. Veins stood out all over his body. Sweat poured off him. His warp eye bled from the corners, and still he screamed. A machine of black stone and bright steel was set before him, the emanations it gave off caustic to the soul. He forced himself to look into its strange displays, and follow the mote of agony that swung across them.

There were seats for six additional Navigators in the *Saint Aster's* navigatorium, a sign of the grim times they were in. He occupied the room's original, central seat. The outermost two on the wings were occupied by Navigators of menial rank. Their warp and human eyes were blindfolded against the sights Scolos must endure; they were there only to offer him a little strength, and even that minor effort might kill them.

As was practice in the Indomitus Crusade fleets, two null maidens stood at silent attention at the front of the navigatorium, blotting out the worst of the energies pouring through the oculus. Their presence hurt him too. To Scolos' warp sight, a searing light battled with depthless shadows, and both meant him harm.

The pain was overwhelming. Fever raced through him. His heart ached. His throat was raw, and yet through it all he kept true to his task.

'Look for a cyst in the warp,' the inquisitor Rostov had said, as he demonstrated the use of the device he had fabricated for the purpose of tracking the rift. 'It is a blending of empyrean and materium, but with something at the edge of it, something hard, something alien, of neither realm. It will appear like nothing you have seen before. The machine I have provided will guide you, but it will kill you.' He could give Scolos no more than that, because although he was a psyker himself, he was no Navigator.

Solos found the wake of the blackstone device sure enough, a slick like blood in the water where reality vomited its guts into the ever-hungry maw of the warp. Turbulence was intense, stirred up by the disintegration of gross matter and the formation of brief-lived actualities in the warp. The ship plunged and rolled dangerously. Through the warp oculus Scolos could see nothing other than the raging energies given off by material dissipation. The storm was getting worse, and so was the pain. This was the surest sign they were on the right course. A small hardening of space rolled around the device's display, and he chased it.

To him, the room was full of an awful roaring, but the adepts and other

Navigators working in the galleries behind psy-screens and opaque active glass heard only his screams.

It was not standard practice for others to be present while a Navigator flew, but without a full post-rift cabal in place, and with Scolos nigh incoherent, they were needed to pass on locations to the other ships, all of whom were blind-linked to the *Saint Aster*. On Scolos' head, the fate of the entire expedition depended. The burden gave him strength, even as his soul frittered away under the influence of the blackstone machine.

The *Saint Aster* hit a wave front of intermixed matter and energy. She reared up so fast the grav-plates could not hold her crew in place, and all over the vessel men and women were tossed about. The other ships followed, not all successfully. A firestorm frigate slewed around and broke amidships, flying into wreckage that spilled the screaming crew directly into the immaterium.

Klaxons rang as pockets of clotted matter impacted upon the *Saint Aster*. They exploded in displays of exotic energy, streaming distorted faces into the ship's wake. They were very close now. Scolos snapped his jaw shut so hard his teeth cracked. He held his screams in, though his chest convulsed as they attempted to get out. The machine was consuming him, body and soul. His skin was blackening.

A storm of warp-broken matter sped past. The energy thinned. Through shifting veils Scolos saw the blackness of truespace, and the stars that dwelled there. Ahead was a hellish glow, an aurora both crimson and angry, and at its heart was a thing, a ship, a god, a monster. It changed as he watched it. It was an eye, staring at him. It was a taloned hand, poised to snatch. It was an ancient vessel, towing behind it a great asteroid bearing an engine of stone.

This last wavered. Knots of serpents and torrents of blood attempted to replace it, but of all the guises the ship and the asteroid returned most frequently, and he focused on this, using the machine to force the true shape upon it, while his flesh burned under supernatural heat and flaked away from his bones in hard carbon showers.

The engine was a whirling contraption of bladed blackstone big as spires. There were eight, arranged around a central hub, the unholy octed of Chaos. Though many hundreds of thousands of miles away, looking upon the asteroid somehow compressed the distance, and he thought he saw low hills

raising up one end, machines, and tiny figures walking around. Flocks of daemonic creatures flew around it, soaring on thermals of energy, like scavenger birds following a corpse train.

The spear-tip blades of the device sliced and bit, macerating the skin of reality and allowing the warp to spill out. It was not a clean cut, but a ragged tear that bled upwards. The blackness of the void folded into the rift like loose skin over a wound, and where these flaps touched the boiling warp, they evaporated with violent flashes of sorcerous discharge. This machine was what he had been following, its presence in the warp was grit in his eye; it was the lump in the fabric of things that Rostov's device displayed.

The rift grew wider as the ship sailed forward, half in realspace, half in the warp, unzipping reality like a ration pack and scattering the contents carelessly. The vortex tugged at Scolos' soul, teasing it out of his body strand by strand and boiling it away, because he looked, because he saw. Something about it had hold of his immortal being, sucking it away.

'Trans... trans...' he breathed. His legs were collapsing into dust. His left arm came free of his chains as his hand shattered into a fall of black sand. He took one final deep breath, holding the screams in. His face flaked into ash, exposing his jawbone, creeping up towards his eyes.

'Translation!' he screamed. 'Translation!'

The warp bell tolled in the apex of the navigatorium, and was answered by its twin upon the bridge. The men and women in the galleries behind the Navigators' thrones sent out datapulses to every quarter, alerting machine-spirits and crew to their duties.

'Translation!' Scolos screamed. His disintegration spread up into his midriff, his clothes and muscles became friable dusts, showing guts that were only momentarily moist before they too became grainy sculptures of themselves and fell into nothing. His body caved into itself, and his head fell suddenly, leaving his gaping, skinless skull atop the heap of sand to jerk twice on the hinge of its jaw, then mercifully disintegrate into the pile.

The mortal remains of Scolos trickled onto the floor, while outside the Geller fields daemons screamed alarms.

Battle Group Saint Aster crashed back into the materium.

Lightning flashed in the depths of the void where no lightning should be. A

vivid red wound split the sky, narrow near the leading edge, millions of miles wide further back, then wider yet, so wide it engulfed the stars, and black and screaming madness usurped the natural order of the heavens. An uncertain shape dragged out this hurt upon reality, flickering and treacherous of form, deceiving the eyes and the soul, but whatever shape it chose it cut, and split, and chewed its way from one dimension to the next, letting out all the filthy hellscapes of the warp into the materium.

Near the edge of the rift a fresh breach opened, more controlled, short-lasting, a winking of purple and yellows, though just as corrupting to the rightful form of things. A bright patch flashed into being, spreading out tendrils of unlight, so that it resembled the radial muscles of a staring eye. From the hideous light a shape emerged, resolving from ragged edges to a silhouette against the storm, and became at last the *Saint Aster*, speeding from the warp in such undue haste she tipped over her own prow and threatened to fly out of control. She avoided her stumble, yet wallowed in the backwash from the opening rift as she righted herself.

Her sisters joined her in similar disarray, but as their numbers swelled, they brought themselves to order. Realspace engines fired, and bright blue points of plasma burn shifted them into a cruciform formation, their engines shining with the clean light of science against the raging unreality of the warp. *Coming Light*, *Vox Lexica*, *Unmerciful*, *Faith's Promise*, all the ships under Commodore Eloise Athagey's command. Together they sailed with all haste towards their sworn target, a spread of torpedoes racing before them, dense as spears cast by the armies of Old Earth's primitive ages.

But though they surprised their foe, they had been noticed.

Chapter Thirty-One

VANLESKUS LAYS HER PLAN

A POTENT VESSEL RETURNS

FIRE AT WILL

‘All hands, prepare for translation!’ The warning of the *Precept Magnificat*’s shipmaster sounded throughout the flagship.

Lady Cassandra VanLeskus leaned into her pulpit over the strategium.

‘This is it,’ she said, ‘prepare for battle. With the Emperor on our side, Battle Group Saint Aster should be in position and ready to launch its assault.’ She smiled hungrily. ‘Time to take the fight to the enemy. Stand ready to activate all displays!’

Her strategos and aides repeated her orders, preparing their underlings for the great task ahead. Alarms wailed all over the flagship. The soul-troubling sense of transition passed fleetingly. So many ships were gathered in VanLeskus’ attack group, the immaterium yielded them meekly back into the true void. The ship shuddered, and the oppressive sense of the warp left them. Another tremble, and a shout went up.

‘Transition accomplished, Geller fields down. Void shields activated.’

The ship rumbled as the realspace drives fired. Battle klaxons honked.

‘Enemy within sight.’

‘All ships to battle stations!’ VanLeskus ordered. ‘Activate inter-ship noosphere and tactical linkages. Bring all displays on line. Give me a true pict of the foe. Let’s have a look at them.’

Machines all over the deck whined as they spooled up for action. The smaller displays came on first, showing the disposition of the three battle groups in her main group, the whole of Alphas and Betaris nearby, with Delpharis yet to enter play. After an initial skirmish which VanLeskus commanded herself, Haephestus was sailing to Fomor. Lamdax forged on to the north, to the worlds of more recent settlement that were hit early in the campaign. Smaller task forces went to the aid of embattled forces holding out elsewhere. Everywhere, the Crusade of Slaughter found itself under attack, each assault painstakingly coordinated to take place at the same time, or at least as close to each other as the warp would permit.

Timing was everything in this fight.

Alphas and Betaris emerged together, a single spear-tip assault led by six Imperial battleships. VanLeskus' *Precept Magnificat* held back, making a shaft to the spear with its escorts. Flanking and pursuit squadrons spread out in thin lines either side. This was shown on the smaller displays.

The largest hololith came on last, spreading a colourful tri-d true vid of the enemy fleet. There were a similar number of ships to VanLeskus' own, heading with overwhelming force through the Yanssi System, and the six civilised worlds it contained.

VanLeskus examined the enemy's disposition. They were mainly strung out, not in good formation, each group keeping to itself in the manner of war bands rather than a unified force. Each would require dealing with separately; they would favour boarding actions over ranged fighting. Some had become monsters, warped by the powers they served into beast-machines. Others looked little different to similar ships in Imperial service. Only around a single grand cruiser was the fleet well organised, sailing in a large defensive formation that would prove tough to crack.

Tags flickered over the display as the ships were identified. The grand cruiser's image blinked. A green outline surrounded it.

Blood King.

Already the enemy fleet was reacting, slowing to come to attack heading. Sound void war doctrine would have seen some of them press on to their original target while the main body ran a holding action. But that supposed genuine strategic goals. These traitors desired only slaughter and war. The temptation of such a big battle was more than they could resist. All of them were coming about.

She grinned. That was what she wanted. She opened vox-channels to all the fleet.

‘There we are. Everyone ready! Remember our goal today, total annihilation. Let’s give them an opening salvo from the nova cannons, stir them up a bit. There are three dozen major warships in that fleet, ladies and gentlemen. I would be most grateful if you could destroy a few before they close. It makes my task all the easier.’

Soft laughter greeted her comment.

‘Now, now,’ she chided. ‘I am being entirely serious. If we are victorious here, you will all be remembered forever.’ She smiled again. ‘Well, I will. You’ll all get honourable mentions. But nobody will be getting anything if we fail except round cursing by the last few humans in existence, for our failure will leave Terra wide open to an attack directly from the Great Rift. I requested we leave first not because of my faith in my own, undeniable brilliance, but because I have unshakeable faith in your abilities to bring us victory. So don’t make me look bad. Let’s be about it. To war!’

‘All ships with nova cannon report full loads, fleetmistress,’ an aide informed her.

‘Then all captains may proceed with firing,’ she said.

As soon as VanLeskus gave the word, gargantuan railguns mounted on the prows of a dozen ships launched their payloads, accelerating volatile plasmic super-warheads down magnetic tracks to near the speed of light.

Even at such a vast range, the weapons hit almost instantaneously. Fuses timed to the millisecond burned out and detonated the bombs. Sun-bright orbs of energy appeared in two dozen places in the enemy fleet. Enemy vessels wallowed, systems overwhelmed by electromagnetic pulses. Void shields guttered out in washes of pseudo-starfire. Metal burned. Brief silhouettes of shattered debris were visible against the flames before they were engulfed and burned to atoms. Where the munitions scored direct hits, the effects were even more spectacular. There the velocity of the shot did more damage than the devices. Three cruisers vanished in blisters of light. The nova cannon shells blinked out, leaving afterimages on the eyes of all who watched the display.

‘All ships, reload, fire at will,’ VanLeskus said. The number of shots would be down to the speed of each crew. She calculated that they might get three or four more volleys off before the enemy were too close; the

sheer velocity of nova cannon munitions made them a long-range weapon only.

‘Enemy fleet accelerating to attack speed,’ one of her strategos reported.

‘Hold back, one quarter speed,’ VanLeskus said. Her hololithic image was displayed on the command deck of every vessel. ‘Prepare first torpedo volley when enemy reach two hundred thousand mile marker. Alphas task forces Principio, Thesian and Inccorrupt turn to broadside, form gun line thereafter. Task forces Bombast and Vengeful to begin envelopment. Cast out mass shot screen behind. Battle Group Betaris to prepare for mass attack run. Engage targets of discretion. You have your orders.’

She had her own goals.

Blood King raced at her, bringing with it the promise of glory.

Boarding klaxons summoned the Primaris Marines to their attack craft. Areios and his men were among them. Messinius had a small force of Space Marines for his mission, but VanLeskus had ordered all the rest into the body of Alphas and Betaris, all tasked with boarding and counter-boarding actions.

Areios’ group were to go on the attack, taking the fight to the enemy before they could launch their own boarding parties.

His units filed aboard an Overlord gunship, a large, new flying machine created by Cawl to carry his Primaris Space Marines into battle. It had two spacious transit holds, one in each section of its double fuselage. Swept-down wings and the hunched cockpit between the twin hulls gave it the look of a raptor crouching over its prey. Weapons bubbles carrying crewed heavy guns lined the outside of each hull, while the wings were tipped with gatling las, and their broad spread played host to a myriad missiles.

Areios directed his men aboard. There were forty to each bay. He and Lieutenant Colinius commanded a near complete demi-company each, two full squads apiece of Hellblasters and Intercessors, three units of five Aggressors, and a command unit of Chaplain, Apothecary, Techmarine and Epistolary. Colinius’ group included the company Ancient. The standard bearer’s title was in name only. They all regarded themselves as reborn, truly alive only for months.

Boots clattered on the boarding ramps. The noise of interdiction fighters firing up their engines for test cycles sounded from their launch tubes a few

hundred yards away. The hangar presented a wall of noise, and Areios was glad when the Aggressors had lumbered aboard and he could follow. The prow and aft landing ramps whined closed, cutting out most of the racket from outside. Sparse talk came from the men as they checked each other's wargear. The occasional order and notification filtered into Areios' helmet. Mostly, *'Hold, hold.'*

Eventually even this tailed off. The Space Marines locked their boots to the deck and secured their weapons to their chests with maglocks, then braced themselves against the man in front, left hand to left shoulder.

Areios reviewed his mission objectives. Take the fight to the enemy. Kill all he could. Sabotage, cripple and withdraw. Easy enough. He had never done it before, but had dreamed it a thousand times.

The Overlord rocked on its landing struts. Their cruiser had opened fire. It was an assault specialist, designed for planetary attack and boarding actions. Therefore, its solid-shot weapons had a shorter effective range than most, the guns were less powerful, imparting less speed to its munitions, making them easier to shoot down. If they were firing, they were closing.

'Be ready, brothers. We are going soon,' he voxed.

No one else spoke. They waited in the dim light of the combat lumens as the ship shook around them.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A HOST OF DAEMONS

THE NATURE OF THE FOE

THE EMPEROR WATCH OVER YOU

‘Open fire, all vessels!’ the commodore shouted. ‘Torpedoes simultaneous launch, five thousand miles spread, echelon left. Reload and prepare second volley.’

Rostov was right, the enemy rely too much on their warcraft, Athagey thought, now they are dead in the water. A single ship awaited them, towing behind it a large asteroid upon which was mounted the blackstone device. Scans revealed no other weapons.

Athagey exulted in their attack. The ambush was a complete success, the enemy were caught unprepared. Several million miles away, VanLeskus was attacking the principal fleet of the crusade force, preventing them from turning back. The first light of their combat had yet to reach Battle Group Saint Aster, but astropathic messages confirmed the Fleet Tertius main body had engaged.

The buzz of combat mingled with the stimm rush in her blood, making it fizz with excitement. The sense of inadequacy VanLeskus gave her burned away. This was her fight. She was in command.

The ships bumped unevenly through the wake of the enemy craft as they approached from the rear. Their target ploughed up reality, leaving the terrain of the tempus-materium deformed behind it, causing the engines of

the *Saint Aster* to howl and its frame to scream. The hellship that pulled the blackstone device had its stern to them, and could bring no guns to bear. Initial augur soundings seemed correct regarding the asteroid, for no weapons locks were detected.

They raced forward, guns charging, void shields on, engines at full motive. On a subchannel of the intraship vox she heard the masters of the Mechanicus exchanging hurried datablurts. They sent advisements for caution her way not to overstress the systems, but she ignored them. She ignored Rostov also, who stood at the front of her command dais in full battle dress, stroking his beard thoughtfully as if he owned the vessel. Lastly, she ignored the priests, who stood in a large congregation right in front of the oculus, moaning and wailing and getting on her nerves. Athagey did not like priests, but the *Saint Aster*'s Episcopus had insisted, and Rostov had indicated that divine help might not go amiss. As far as she was concerned, Episcopus Barandus could go hang, but one disregarded an inquisitor's hints at one's peril.

'*Vox Lexica* reports strike craft ready to launch,' reported her Fleet Master of Squadrons.

'Tell them to hold until we are close,' Finnula said.

'All ships report second salvo of torpedoes ready to launch,' said the Fleet Master of Ordnance.

'Hold fire,' Finnula said. 'Let's see what the first round does before we loose.'

'No, let them fly,' said Athagey. 'There's no point conserving our munitions. Fire them now.'

The *Saint Aster* shuddered as the second volley of torpedoes eased themselves free. Their faint lines appeared on the tactoliths, such subtle marks to denote building-sized missiles. They attained maximum velocity quickly, following the narrow spread of those that preceded them.

'The target is accelerating,' reported Lieutenant Donbass.

'Maintain intercept speed,' Athagey said. 'Augury control, any sign of warp engine engagement?'

'None, madame commodore. It does not appear to be about to flee.'

'Gunnery decks report readiness,' the *Saint Aster*'s Master of Ordnance shouted.

'Gunnery decks on *Coming Light* and *Unmerciful* are ready,' the Fleet

Master of Ordnance added.

‘Hold all fire, hold all launches. Maintain intercept speed,’ Athagey commanded.

‘The enemy is increasing reactor flow,’ the chief helmsman voxed from the nested stations near the front of the deck.

‘Then increase our reactor output, chase them down,’ Athagey ordered. ‘All ships to follow, maintain formation.’ Within milliseconds of her order being relayed to the engine room, a canted objection arrived in her eyepiece, the binharic automatically translated into Gothic vox-script. She blinked it away without reading it.

The *Saint Aster* shook. Its power systems whined as energy flooded them to near maximum capacity. Every ripple in space made the ship’s frame squeal, but Athagey had her prize in sight. A group of torpedoes blew, caught in the reality shear of the rift. The rest flew on.

Athagey listened to the interplay between her lieutenants on the command dais, how their orders radiated out to the subsidiary stations across the deck then on to the other ships in her flotilla, but her attention was mostly on the main hololiths. The oculus shutters remained closed, for the rift opened directly onto the warp, and though shrouded by veils of disintegrating matter, to look into it risked madness. She saw the rift as a river of red, a simple triangle cutting across space, but even represented by so innocuous a graphical form it projected supernatural menace that had the hair prickle at the nape of her neck.

For all the danger posed by the rift, only two enemy returns from the augur were displayed upon the tactical orb: the hellship and its asteroid. Five cruisers and their attendant escort ships were a considerable force, and in normal circumstances an enemy of such weakness would be overpowered, but Athagey had undergone a rapid re-education since the Days of Blindness. She had seen things in the many battles the *Saint Aster* had fought that should not be possible. This was going to be one of those occasions.

‘We are gaining again,’ the chief helmsman voxed her. ‘Eighty thousand miles and closing. Five-hundred-mile gain per second.’

‘Ready all weapons,’ Athagey said. ‘Prepare to launch fleet strike fighters. When we are within striking distance, bring the fleet to five thousand miles above the plane of the rift.’ She activated a counter that rapidly fell towards

zero as the ships approached their target. In the main tactical hololiths the pulsing dots marking the warp machine and its tow grew larger. The thin lines of the torpedoes arrowed towards them.

‘The enemy are slowing,’ Finnula said, looking back over her shoulder. ‘They’re not running! They mean to fight!’ She too had battle excitement in her eyes.

‘All hands prepare for immediate contact,’ Athagey said. ‘Helm, begin elevation of the fleet over the main target!’ She ground her teeth. Her muscles were cramping, time for another dose. Without thinking, she pulled her stim tin from her jacket, opened it, and pushed a pinch of the narcotic into the space between her lower lip and teeth, numbing the gum and sending a delightful thrill up her tongue. Finnula shot her a disapproving look. Athagey shook her head at her lieutenant to head off any rebuke, and the woman went back to her work.

Orders were passed out through the fleet. The *Saint Aster* rose rapidly over the plane of the hellship’s progress. Athagey watched her vessels lift over the red triangle until she judged they were sufficiently distant.

‘That should be safe enough,’ she said, standing from her seat. The input cables for the ship’s systems dragged at her eyepiece, but she adjusted her stance to accommodate it in order to present as determined a pose as she could. ‘Open the shutters.’

Red lumens pulsed as the shutters swivelled open and retracted into their housings. Work faltered on the deck as the crew looked out at what faced them.

The rift spread out beneath the *Saint Aster* from the hellship ahead. They had been calling it a wake, and it indeed looked like that of an ocean vessel sailing luminous seas. The vivid red and orange churn of energies fanned out from the asteroid as white water follows a ship. There the similarity ended, for the cut resembled a path of blood cut across the sky, and bathed the command deck in dismal, bloody tones. The ship itself was but a speck of dirt in a wound. They were close to it now, and it held its shape, ceasing its chameleonic shift from nightmare to nightmare. From their position, the ship seemed a metal sliver, the asteroid a wink of light at its tail, the sharp edge of the blade gutting reality.

‘Auguries, lock onto the targets, present magnified true pict view of primary target,’ Athagey ordered.

Two of the subsidiary tactoliths shifted perspective, projecting images of the ship and the asteroid separately. Though it possessed engines, and moved like a ship, the vessel did not appear like other craft. It was a long, scabbed lump, like the excrescences found crusting the hides of void whales. More organic in shape than mechanical, though here and there random-looking pieces of machinery protruded. It was ugly as its purpose, a deadly cancer on the fabric of the universe. Scans failed to penetrate its skin, the few readings returned were confused garbles of nonsense data, relayed by screaming machines whose operators moved quickly to shut them off. Preposterously, the ship drew the asteroid by means of gargantuan chains with links as big as strike craft. Augur returns told Athagey these were of brass, though they were blackened by contact with the void, and bled torrents of blood constantly from every link. The chains were attached by hooks sunk so deep into the flesh of the ship that only their tips were visible, protruding from torn skin-metal that wept pus.

The asteroid appeared almost normal by comparison, a dirty lump of rock and ice several miles across and almost as many high. Sun-worn spires of frozen water reflected the boiling energies of the warp spreading out behind it, giving them the appearance of flames caught in a single moment. Around it danced clouds of what looked like dust, but which Athagey suspected was anything but.

The central tactolith focused on their objective, an immense machine of shattered black obelisks arranged into the eight-pointed wheel of Chaos. Its operation made no sense to Athagey, like all the blasphemies of the heretics.

‘That’s it,’ Rostov said, resting his hands upon the railing at the front of the dais. ‘The blackstone device.’

The first spread of torpedoes were gaining on the asteroid, rushing at it like the wrath of the Emperor Himself. No defensive fire blasted out to meet them, and they approached without hindrance.

‘No defences, no void shielding,’ said Finnula.

The torpedoes tracked the asteroid on perfect courses.

‘This might be easier than we thought,’ said Athagey.

Rostov, his eyes fixed on the prize, shook his head gently, but did not speak.

The Master of Ordnance spoke up. ‘Torpedo impact in three, two...

Impact.’

The crew shielded their eyes as twenty-four Helios-class fusion torpedoes impacted with their target. Brilliant blue-white light cast everything on the command deck into flat monochrome as heavy atoms in the warheads were forced together, unleashing the power of suns.

Athagey blinked afterimages away from her human eye. The asteroid had taken very little damage. A plume of vapour trailed it, and a bite had been taken from the rearmost part, that was all.

‘We have some teeth, at least,’ said Athagey. ‘Why are we reading no void shields on the target?’

‘You won’t see any,’ said Rostov. ‘It is protected by the warp itself.’

‘Psy-oculus, I want readings on what happens when the second volley impacts,’ Athagey ordered. At an obscure station on the far side of the deck, several pale men rushed to oblige.

The second spread of torpedoes hit the asteroid and exploded to similar result.

‘The inquisitor is right, there is a warp field around the asteroid,’ the Master Seer of the psy-oculus reported.

‘Surely that should show up on our auguries – what is a warp field but a void shield produced by unclean means?’

‘Natural law has little sway here,’ said Rostov. ‘Our machines are next to useless. Only faith will prevail.’ He picked up a rosary hanging around his neck and kissed the central amulet.

‘Commodore, I am reading multiple targets being, well, moving away from the orbit of the asteroid... They’re... They’re...’

‘Clarify!’ demanded Athagey.

‘They’re not ships, I am struggling to get a clear return on them.’

‘Then give me a visual,’ she demanded, though she guessed what they were before she saw them.

A grainy image, magnified many times, was brought into being upon a large, ornately framed screen that floated down from the high ceiling.

The view was full of creatures. Where there was no air, they flew, wings beating against nothing, moving as if they were avians in any planet’s sky, and yet they moved with the speed of void fighters, coming directly at the ships so fast the targeting arrays struggled to maintain a lock. Some of them were in harness, galloping in space, dragging skull-shaped chariots behind

them ridden by leering, horned figures carrying black swords. Although Athagey was prepared for something like this, still the sight of the Neverborn made her head spin. On the bridge, several crew gave involuntary moans of terror.

‘Impossible,’ said Finnula. Her eyes strayed to the fifteen Space Marines waiting in silent ranks at the rear of the deck. Though she disliked being around them, she was evidently grateful they were there.

‘You know better than to say that, my dear, after all we’ve been through these last months,’ murmured Athagey. ‘Shut down that image. Put out a fleet-wide alert. All armsmen, billeted troops and Space Marines to prepare for boarders. Rostov,’ she said, ‘they may have no escort, but we’ll never bring all those things down before they are on us.’

‘We must be strong,’ he replied, seemingly more to himself than to her.

They were in lance range of the hellship, and her officers gave the order to fire. Laser beams flashed across the immensities of space. This time she saw it, the queasy shimmer of the warp around the ship and the asteroid. Her fleet had them boxed in, a perfect firing solution, but the great cannons had little impact on either asteroid-shrine or ship. Alarms bleeped, and reports came up of more daemons emerging from the rift to the rear.

‘This could be a trap,’ said Athagey.

‘If it is, I am going to spring it,’ said Rostov. ‘Messinius’ men are ready for a ground assault. It is time to see how effective these new Space Marines are in battle. I and my followers will join them.’ He bowed. ‘The enemy will not stop coming until the rift is closed. We will have limited time to achieve our objective before we are overwhelmed, so do what you can to keep them from us. Every second will count.’

‘As you require, inquisitor,’ she said.

‘Good luck, Commodore Athagey,’ Rostov said. ‘May the Emperor protect you.’

Chapter Thirty-Three

AN INVITATION TO BATTLE

NULL MAIDEN

HELLSHIP

They were making Lacrante go with them to the surface. It hadn't been framed in quite so bald a way, it had been more of an invitation than an order, but he had enough sense to see what was expected of him. Besides, he was a soldier, what else was he going to do but fight?

There were several inquisitors attached to VanLeskus' fleet. Rostov had spent the few days at Hydraphur in shadowy conclave with his fellows. New equipment had arrived soon after at the inquisitor's quarters. Some of it was for Lacrante, which surprised him.

'I'm not one of you,' he'd said, as he unpacked weaponry of a quality he'd never thought he'd touch.

'Don't you want to fight?' said Antoniato.

'Yes,' said Lacrante, and meant it. 'But I could return to my regiment to do that, what's left of it,' he said. 'They're joining Fleet Tertius.'

'Why do that?' said Antoniato. 'We suffered some, back on Fomor III and before. There were more of us. We need new blood.'

'Banacha, Fizerment, Pho-lu, all dead. Dyre too,' Cheelche said. She sat on the floor scrimshawing a finger bone with her knife. Lacrante had no idea if these were human or xenos names, or if it were a human or a xenos finger.

'We all have to die sometime,' said Antoniato.

‘And here I am, still stuck with you,’ said Cheelche.

Antoniato grinned at her. ‘Come on, it’s good to have some more back-up,’ he said. ‘We like you, Lacrante.’

‘Yeah!’ said Cheelche with deeply sarcastic good cheer. ‘Come along and die with us.’

‘Why let me? Rostov knows nothing about me,’ said Lacrante.

Cheelche clucked her tongue and shook her head.

‘He’s a psyker,’ said Antoniato.

He draped a comradely arm around Lacrante’s shoulders. It was an easy gesture for him, probably normal on his world. Displays of intimacy like that were certainly not common on Lacrante’s, and he tensed uncomfortably. Antoniato either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

‘He can tell if a man has a good heart the moment he meets him, he can move without being seen.’ He patted Lacrante’s left breast. ‘And—’

‘Some of his gifts we don’t talk about,’ said Cheelche warningly. Antoniato shrugged.

Lacrante wondered what Rostov’s other ability was, as he followed the inquisitor down a quiet access corridor to one of the *Saint Aster*’s flight decks. Cheelche wore a weird void suit that looked like it was made from stitched leather, with two inset glass lenses covering her eyes. She carried the backpack she had on Fomor III. He and Antoniato wore advanced carapace armour. It was environmentally sealed, the grey undersuit was made of tough carbon-weave fabric and the articulated plates, which covered more of the body than the wargear he was used to seeing, were painted matt black. There were no markings on it except for a tiny golden inquisitor’s ‘I’ on the left shoulder pad. He carried a hotshot lasgun, still getting used to the weight of the power pack slung beneath his armour’s systems unit on his back. Antoniato had his sun gun, Cheelche her alien firearms, while Rostov had added gauntlets and a helmet to his carapace armour.

Cheelche whistled a jarring tune. Otherwise, the corridor was totally silent. Rostov reached a door, and held out his ringed hand to it – the rings sat outside his gauntlet, seeming to have grown to accommodate the extra width. The door opened on the raging activity of a hangar deck. Rostov strode past the sentries guarding the door. Automated gun emplacements scanned him and let them pass. Several blocky Space Marine gunships were

ranged on turntables, facing directly away from the shimmering atmospheric field that screened off the hangar entrance. Rostov headed directly towards one, passing the Space Marine guards without comment, and boarded.

Lacrante paused. He had never been inside an Adeptus Astartes craft.

Antoniato nudged him hard in the back. 'Up you go!' he said cheerfully.

The ship was full of Space Marines standing in three ranks of ten, their boots magnetically locked to the floor, eye lenses glowing in the half light. Four acceleration seats had been prepared for the inquisitor and his retinue near the front ramp. They buckled themselves in. A klaxon sounded.

A slender woman in armour ran aboard, coming close to Lacrante as she did. He got an impression of a shaved head with a long topknot, a face blanked off by some kind of muzzle, a sword. But his view was fragmentary, like she was hard to see all of a piece, and he was permitted only to glimpse aspects of her, never the whole. She had an unpleasant aura, and he felt his stomach cramp as she brushed past his knee. The Space Marines opened up to let her through, and she hurried up the short rise to the flight deck. Boots clanked on the decking as the Adeptus Astartes took up their places again.

Antoniato rapped on the helmet of his carapace suit.

'Null maiden. She'll get us through the warp field,' he said.

Lacrante looked outside.

'Hey!' he shouted. They communicated using squad vox, but the rumble of idling engines and shouts of ground crew outside was deafening even through the armour. 'Isn't that Lord Lieutenant Messinius?'

'Yep,' said Antoniato.

'Didn't you tell me only he and the others in the privacy field know Rostov's big secret? What if we all die? There's two of them on this mission, three if you count the commodore.'

Antoniato shrugged. 'They've got their ways, these inquisitors. The story will get out somehow, if he needs it to.'

A klaxon began to honk, and machinery beneath them jerked to life with a short grinding. The Thunderhawk lurched into a slow turn. More klaxons started up as the other attack ships rotated on their turntables. The ship crawled around, the hangar entrance swinging into view. The ship stopped with a judder, and Lacrante looked out into space.

The rift had been awful enough from the distance of a planet's surface. Up close it was insane, a riot of horrible colours all vying for his attention. Lightning flashed in the clouds of glowing gas spilling around it, and there were other things he could see, glimpses of daemoniac faces as tall as moons, and showers of blood. He felt nauseous, and screwed up his eyes to shut out the images. It didn't work; somehow it made it worse – he could still see them, and now he felt they could see him. He quickly opened his eyes again. Clouds of dots were flying up from the asteroid towards the fleet.

'That's as close as you'll ever get to looking directly into the warp. It's probably not safe at this distance, even so shrouded like it is here,' shouted Antoniato. 'If you can, avoid looking back down the wake of the ship. Further back, the amount of real stuff diminishes, and the edges of the empyrean will be clearer. Don't look at it, whatever you do!'

The Thunderhawk shook. Machines inside it made loud protests as the engines roared up to flight speed. The ramp lifted.

'When we get down there, you're going to see some crazy shit,' said Antoniato. 'Daemons, Heretic Astartes, renegades. Whatever. Stay close to me.'

'I can look after myself,' said Lacrante.

'Hey! The Emperor protects, but it helps if you have one of these.' Antoniato patted the sun gun's stock and grinned. His face was lit up yellow by his helm's internal lights, and he looked ghoulish. He was sweating, and Lacrante remembered how much he hated flying.

Rostov's head was bowed in prayer, his hands clasped around his rosary. Cheelche was kicking her feet nonchalantly, pack gripped by all four arms. Lacrante could imagine her still whistling inside that hangman's hood she wore as a helmet.

The Thunderhawk's engines rose and rose until the noise filled Lacrante's skull from one ear to the other. One of the gunships lifted up, nose angled forward, claws retracting. It passed through the atmospheric field. Another followed, then another. Lacrante's last sight of the void before the ramp closed was a clearing barrage launched from the ships, and escort craft racing out of the launch tubes above and below the hangar, then the ramp clanged shut, the Thunderhawk leaned forward, and it accelerated with a force that punched the air clean out of Lacrante's lungs.

Antoniato moaned, and they raced towards the asteroid.

The Thunderhawks rattled like dice cups. Messinius' eyes blurred, and he was glad of the padding in his helm. Lacking the great mass and powerful engines of the warships, the Space Marines' attack craft tumbled through the wake of the hellship.

Through images relayed from the Thunderhawk's vid-feed and displayed on his helmplate, he saw the horde of daemons racing to meet the landing force. Athagey had brought the ships as close as she dared to the asteroid, but there remained thousands of miles to traverse, and even at the speed they were going, that was minutes of tremendous danger. Las-beams and fusion lances streaked past them from the fleet. Balls of fire erupted in the hordes from exploding shells, clearing their way. Ahead of the flight of seven Thunderhawks, two strike cruisers flew. They had an easier time negotiating the turbulent currents of disrupted reality, and they too began to fire on the clouds of daemons crowding the asteroid.

The images leapt around. The close confines of his helm and the manner in which the vid-feeds were generated ordinarily kept them floating in front of his eyes, but the violence of their flight was so pronounced he was reduced to short glimpses of the onrushing horrors.

The daemons came at them fast, and Messinius saw that most of them rode bizarre chariots pulled by surging beasts which seemed to flicker in and out of existence. The swords held in outstretched hands were real enough.

Shells preceding the landing force detonated in a solid wall of fire, consuming the first wave of the daemons. The strike cruisers were through first, their weapons firing madly into the endless horde. They could not possibly kill them all, the intent was only to clear a path through. The fire died fast in the vacuum, and the storm of las-fire from the ships cut through those coming after the first wave. There were greater beings among them, winged monsters bigger than Dreadnoughts, the lords of Khorne's armies. The Thunderhawk shook hard, whipping the Space Marines around and making them clash off each other as they evaded these larger fiends. Messinius lost sight of the battle for a moment. There were no seats or restraints in these vessels, the hold being empty to carry as many men as possible. Their boots were maglocked, but they were thrown about.

Next he saw, the enemy were closing in on the two strike cruisers. Guns of

all kinds blasted at their foes, disintegrating daemons before they got in close; those that did were ripped apart by the void shields.

Attack craft pulled ahead of the Thunderhawks, targeting the larger daemons, then the transport dived hard and vibrated so much that the images on Messinius' helmlates became unreadable smears of light, and he gritted his teeth in anticipation of landing.

'The assault force is through the first barriers of... the enemy.' Lieutenant Gonan was unsure what to call them. 'Estimated landing in two minutes.'

'Maintain speed, pace the enemy ship,' said Athagey. 'Stand ready to bombard as soon as the warp field is down.'

Daemons were coming at them over space at impossible speed. Their very existence was an affront to reality itself, and she fought off crippling levels of disgust. She passed a quiet order that all close-in pict and vid views of the creatures be minimised or shut down altogether. For now, as they came near to the ships, their headlong charge was brought to a crashing halt by the void shields. Athagey accessed a private view of the things squirming against the barrier, unable to get past the ancient warp technology holding them at bay. They were an endless collage of grotesques, every horrible thing she could imagine exemplified in vaguely human form. Expressions of murder and vice, alive and hungry for her soul.

Her left hand shook as she reached for her stim tin.

'Void shields holding,' one of her lieutenants reported.

'Madame commodore, augury reports massive energy build-up from the target!' The message was sufficiently important to side-step the usual chain of command, and was vox-cast directly to Athagey from the augury pits.

'Psy-oculus too,' another man reported. 'It's the noctolith construct upon the comet.'

Her crew knew better than to signal her unnecessarily, so she switched to the datastreams being pushed her way. Lines on graphics danced upwards in ever higher peaks. They were of an unfamiliar, exotic energy pattern, but she recognised the signs of a weapon about to discharge.

'Get me visual,' she commanded. 'Asteroid, front and centre, maximum magnification.'

The wheel was whirring about with increasing rapidity. A dark halo built around the obelisks making it up. It appeared that this adversely affected the

rift, as the sickening glow of warp intrusion faded a little.

‘That’s a damn warp weapon,’ Athagey said. ‘All ships brace!’

The obelisks stopped, hanging in space over the asteroid, then a massive pulse of energy burst from them, washing over the daemons and rolling out towards the ships. Where it touched the Neverborn, it invigorated them. Space wavered, short-lived warp breaches flashed into being. It slowed as it encountered resistance from the actuality of the material universe, but still it came, and when it touched the void shields around the lead ship, *Coming Light*, it provoked a violent reaction.

Light akin to the detonation of a fusion core flashed across the heavens. When it died, the void shields were down and the daemons were surging towards the *Coming Light*. Then it was the *Saint Aster*’s turn.

The energy wave was a rolling front of glass, distorting the battle behind it. It hit and the void shields winked out. In her eyepiece, Athagey saw the daemons screaming in anticipation as they crossed the last few thousand yards to the ship’s metal hull.

That would not stop them.

‘Get the voids back up, now,’ she commanded.

Machines howled as they were bullied into cooperation without the correct placatory incantations.

A cacophony of reports competed for attention.

‘The Neverborn, ma’am...’

‘...enemy closing, three thousand yards.’

‘...blackstone device is powering for another pulse...’

She heard only one voice properly, that of Lieutenant Diomed.

‘We’ve another problem,’ Finnula reported, and summoned a floating image of the enemy vessel towing the asteroid. ‘The hellship is breaking free.’

Millennia ago, the ship had been given the name *Duke Randal*. That no longer had any meaning. Neither of the materium or the immaterium, it was an abomination, a fusion of matter and extra-dimensional malice. A machine possessed by an evil spirit.

A daemon ship.

It slowed. The need to pull its burden through space was superseded by more immediate concerns. Firefly souls danced through the cold night of

the world of dust, baiting it, demanding they be devoured.

The daemon ship had no crew. Corridors and chambers where men and women had once spent their entire lives were full of rotten matter, analogues of arteries and lymphatic systems, a mocking pastiche of mortal anatomy. In its own way, the daemon ship was alive, its animus taken from the warp so long ago and bound within the steel halls of man's artifice that it no longer thought of itself as a thing of the warp.

Merged with its monstrous spirit were the caged spirits of the ship's complement, human and machine both, screaming constantly as their energies raced through corroded circuits.

It stopped. A quivering passed over its flanks. The chains attaching it to its burden shook. The hooks plunged into its body moved for the first time in aeons. It felt something akin to pain.

The ship convulsed like a sick dog, the chains shaking, the hooks working free from flesh-steel. Some of the firefly things spat at it, peppering its body with metal and hot light, but this only speeded the shedding of the chains. Strange structures within its flesh tugged out barbs and forced back the hooks, until with a slithering rush and a wash of daemonic fluids, the first came free.

Another hook followed, then another, until only one remained. Unable to wait any longer, the ship fired its engines at maximum, the sudden acceleration ripping out the last hook and tearing a bloody gash down its side.

The hellship flew free, its spine flexing like that of some giant pelagic animal, engines flaring a dirty red. It executed a manoeuvre that would have snapped a normal vessel in two, doubling back upon itself and coming to a new heading with a muscular twist at an acceleration unattainable for anything truly real.

The skin of the ship cracked, and sloughed off, revealing a vile thing of gaping, tusk-ringed orifices and flayed muscle nestled between pitted towers and ruined guns. Ancient statuary peered out from enfolding flesh, every face contorted into a horrified scream. The prow split, shattering what little resemblance the thing still had to a ship. The ram section exploded outwards in a shower of metal and blood. A long muzzle like that of a skinless canid was beneath. It opened, showing teeth and a tongue. The rest of the ship was a revolting assembly of rotting body parts and corroded

metal, but the tongue was incongruously healthy, slick and pink with unholy life. Slit-pupilled eyes blinked gummy fluids away. A look of cunning passed through them.

A sole imperative flashed through the corrupted circuits of its cogitator network, born in the viscid brain that occupied its command deck, gathering in the places where the holy work of Mars met warp-born meat, sorcery met technology, and the divine met the diabolical.

Hunt. It wanted to hunt.

Lacrante's head throbbed and images of doom plagued him when they passed the warp shields. He was still reeling when the Thunderhawk landed with bone-jarring force, and both fore and aft ramps slammed down. Antoniato gripped his arm, preventing Lacrante from rising and being crushed by the Space Marines. The Adeptus Astartes ran out with their guns held ready. The last were already firing before they hit the dirt of the asteroid.

The inquisitor's group was patched into the Space Marines' vox-network, and Lacrante listened to them as they dealt with the few enemy at their landing site. They spoke little, their reports to one another and commands to the point. The chugging boom of bolt-fire echoed up the ramp, lessening in volume slightly as the Space Marines pushed out to form a perimeter. There were other weapons firing, and the roar of void craft touching down.

Cheelche got out of her seat and put her pack on. 'Gravity normal, for humans, at least,' she said.

'There's an atmosphere too,' said Antoniato.

Cheelche huffed. 'So we'll just get shot rather than suffocate, and when we're dead, we'll fall down properly instead of just floating away. Marvellous.' Her short fingers moved over a series of studs on her rifle's side. A glass blister glowed blue.

'Move out,' said Rostov.

They marched down the ramp and out into the battle.

The asteroid's landscape wasn't what Lacrante had expected. Antoniato had told him the truth of the cultists who bedevilled the Imperium, and he expected to see all manner of barbarity. Instead, he saw a lot of machinery. It was strange looking, but there were no monsters or hideous mutants, the character of the place being technological rather than supernatural. The

daemons were absent from the surface – the few not engaged in the void battle wheeled beyond the warp shields, but did not pass through its faint curve of oily light.

‘Huh,’ said Cheelche, ‘it looks like they can’t get in.’

‘Those things out there are rage incarnate,’ said Antoniato. ‘It’s probably not a good idea to have them roaming about around your doomsday weapon, don’t you think?’

Cheelche’s chattering laugh blended with the sound of Space Marine guns.

The asteroid was a nothing place, a crumbling surface of compacted void dust around an iron core. Dirty pillars of ice thrust up from the ground. Between these, power conduits snaked to portable units. There were two machine groups visible from their position, possibly an atmosphere generator and a gravity stabiliser.

The Thunderhawks had landed in a crater scooped out of the asteroid’s side. It made a partial sphere, with steep walls that were ragged around the top. The Space Marine strike cruisers stood off, seemingly close enough to touch, embattled on all sides by the daemons in the void. The sickening glow of the rift shone over the foreshortened horizon, and the Thunderhawks lobbed shells in that direction from battle cannons elevated to clear the lip of the crater.

The Space Marines were pushing out. So far all Lacrante and the others could see of the enemy were red splashes where they had been dismembered by bolt weaponry. There were fragments of machinery mixed in with some of the mess that might have been augmetics, but the foe had been so comprehensively killed it was hard to tell if they had even been human.

Rostov led them at a fierce stride. All the Thunderhawks were down, and the last of the Space Marines were disembarking. There were a couple of hundred of them all told. One or two were intimidating, but so many together were frightening. They ran past, their armour growling, plates clashing, and Lacrante dodged aside in case they trampled him underfoot.

Rostov made for a group of officers gathered about Messinius. There were communications and medical specialists, a couple with the trappings of Space Marine warrior mystics, and a skull-faced Chaplain in black. Messinius turned from his warriors and began his report as soon as Rostov came close, shouting to be heard over the report of the Thunderhawk

cannons.

‘Inquisitor, we have secured a perimeter just past the ridge line.’ He pointed to the edge of the crater. ‘As yet, enemy resistance is minimal, mostly human dregs. That one was an acolyte of the Dark Mechanicum.’ He pointed at the splash of blood and flesh scraps around the broken augmetics.

‘What of the Heretic Astartes?’ Rostov asked.

Lacrante’s heart skipped a beat at the name. He had no desire to face them again.

‘Power emissions suggest they are dug in around the device. We are struggling to get clear readings on their numbers, even though we are within the warp shield.’ Messinius looked up. ‘We need to get the warp shield down, so the remainder of the strike force can make a landing. Without support and resupply, we will not hold long. We have a maximum of ten minutes’ ammunition supply at moderate fire rates.’

‘Your group is ready?’

‘Yes, inquisitor,’ said Messinius. Lacrante noticed he kept glancing at Cheelche, who stared steadfastly at him. ‘Sergeant Thothven here will lead the attack on the generator. We’ll act as a block until his objective is achieved.’

‘When the warp field comes down, we will be exposed to the Neverborn. We have to be in position to move on the device as soon as possible, and then we must be quick,’ Rostov said. ‘If Dyre’s theories are correct, we can undo a great deal of harm here.’

A group of Space Marines walked past, bearing heavy crates between them. Others were setting up mobile sentry guns to guard the approaches to the crater, and communications equipment at its centre, not far from the traitors’ environmental machines.

‘This will serve as our beachhead,’ said Messinius. ‘In case we find ourselves mired in heavy fighting, we can fall back here. It’s good ground to hold if we need to wait for reinforcement from the main fleet. They will not evict us from this asteroid. If your plan can be achieved, it will be. If not, the fleet will be free to bombard the blackstone device from existence. We will be victorious,’ said Messinius certainly. ‘All that matters is the degree of our success.’

Messinius saluted the inquisitor and bowed his helmet. It was a ridiculous

sight, so huge and heavily decorated a warrior paying respect to so comparatively small a figure. Messinius issued orders to his men and they dispersed.

‘We move now,’ said Rostov. Within his helm a respirator mask covered the lower part of his face, and the view of the rest was restricted by the narrowness of his visor. The determination in his eyes was clear nonetheless.

Messinius took the lead up a fan of loose material, heading to a notch in the crater wall. Powdered dusts slumped under the Space Marines’ weight, burying Lacrante up to his knees in regolith chilled by millions of years of exposure to the void. The Space Marines made it to the top quickly, aided by their armour’s supplementary muscle systems. Rostov moved so easily he must have had some sort of strength boost built into his own battle gear. Antoniato sidestepped every rush of pebbles and dust like he foresaw their coming. Only Lacrante and Cheelche struggled. She stumbled in front of Lacrante while he was tugging his boots out of the sand. He was out quick enough to help her up. He expected a sharp comment in return, but, gasping a little, she thanked him, and he helped her get to the top of the slope. Her bag was heavy, and he took half the burden by hauling on the strap at the top. They were both panting by the time Antoniato doubled back and helped them up the last few feet.

‘What’s in there?’ asked Lacrante.

‘You don’t want to know,’ said the little alien.

The ground levelled off. At first the view was obscured by the looming backs of the Space Marines, but they parted, splitting into different units. Rostov’s small crew could see to the heart of the asteroid where stood the blackstone device.

Eight shaped pieces of blackstone, like spear heads hundreds of yards long, rotated around a central hub carved with a giant eye, looking like a massive, arcane compass rose. They had no physical supports, but floated in the air on crackling arcs of energy. The hub and the spears bore the marks of different hands. The hub, being newer, was more roughly hewn.

The eight-pointed star spun around the axis of the hub, though it did so erratically in both speed and inclination, first tipping one way, now spinning flat, now nearly vertical. Long trails of green lightning danced around it, earthing from the spear tips into the ground. A vortex of what Lacrante

could only think of as black light twisted over it, pulling the warp field down towards the hub of the wheel. Thunder boomed erratically. It was of a scale that was difficult for the human mind to comprehend, and Lacrante wondered why they could not see it from the crater, when they should have been able to. It was all wrong, unreal. His head throbbed and he tasted a taint on the air, metallic and sour. He could smell something dusty, but no matter how many times he checked his environmental settings they assured him that his air supply was clean.

A squad of Space Marines joined Messinius. Forty more warriors ranged themselves over the slopes. Together they all descended the ice-strewn hillside to the centre of the asteroid. Between the ridge and the device there were thick vapours flowing over the ground, and in them there was movement. Their advance would be contested.

‘It is an abomination,’ said Rostov. ‘Xenos science put in service of mankind’s greatest foe. That is our primary target. We must undo what has been done.’

‘Thothven,’ Messinius voxed. ‘Begin your assault now.’

Chapter Thirty-Four

OVERLORD

THE POWER OF TERTIUS

THE CHILD INSIDE

War tore into the heavens.

Areios watched the battle through the Overlord's augury suites. Dozens of ships were already engaged at close range as the Chaos captains raced with one another to be the first into the fight. Explosions burst amid squadrons of heavy ships, rippling off void shields and crashing into brass-chased plasteel hulls. Energy weapons fire turned the spaces in between to dancing light shows. Brilliant luminescence of every colour flickered from the vessels' sides, from gunfire, explosions, engine blocks and void shields.

Three enemy cruisers ran ahead of the pack, their arrowhead prows blazing with gunfire. One took the full brunt of a macrocannon broadside. Its shields collapsed around it. Seven lance beams converged on it, coring it out. Gas plumes and explosions erupting along its spine pushed it down out of formation, forcing one of the others into an evasive roll.

The Overlord sped past, rising up high to ride over them. Bombers and fighters flew alongside the Space Marine formation, waiting for counterstrikes. These came soon enough, starburst patterns of anti-fighter flak shells bursting amid the formation. A couple were hit. Debris smashed into the void shielding of Areios' ship, whiting out his view. Overlords, Thunderhawks and other gunships scattered, splitting apart, taking fighter

squadrons with them. A flight of destroyers cut up through the battlescape towards them, only to be intercepted by three waves of bombers peeling off from the attack run, and smashed apart. Sword-class frigates pushed on parallel with the Overlord's flight path, their prow lances sniping at exposed superstructures and wounded enemy vessels.

They hit the enemy's own attack-craft screens, a combination of daemon engines and traitor-piloted star fighters in flocks, and the Imperial squadrons engaged. The boarding craft were targeted, but they were heavily armed themselves, cutting through the enemy with whirling spirals of gunfire, trapping them between their fighter escorts. The Overlord dived, tipping from side to side as it weaved its way between two cruisers trading punishing broadsides. Flame wreathed Areios' view, and they were through, the enemy ship above coming apart around them.

Their wing mate was hit by a lance beam. Armoured figures were flung into the void. Areios wished them luck, for Primaris Space Marines were so hardy, some had surely survived. Then they were past that, making a corkscrewing ascent as intersecting las-beams tried to pin the Overlord down. Again its void shields spilled dangerous energy into the warp, and all the while it accelerated, the superhuman reflexes of the Techmarine pilots driving through manoeuvres deadly to unenhanced humans.

They punched up through another formation of enemy cruisers. A nova cannon shell went off several hundred miles away, obliterating the tail section of a Carnage-class cruiser. Explosions chained along its surviving half, driving the point of its prow down towards other ships, passing through their voids and raking open a long gash on the flank of one.

Areios felt the stirrings of excitement in his blood, an honest feeling not born of his adapted metabolism nor the drugs his battleplate provided. The power of Fleet Tertius seemed overwhelming. Everywhere the Overlord turned on its flight he saw ship after ship pounded apart. But the enemy were firing back, and their own assault cruisers were launching Dreadclaw pods and Gehenna gunships. Wave after wave of torpedoes and attack craft streamed back the way they had come. The destruction inflicted on his own side would be no less dramatic.

Their target hove into view, and the Overlord levelled out. Its attendant craft moved back into screening formations.

'Lieutenants,' the Techmarine flight commander voxed. *'We are beginning*

our attack run. Prepare to board.'

Blood King grew ahead of them rapidly. The twenty ships around it were arranged in good order, and a storm of fire came from them, targeting the assault boats. The Overlords shrugged off most of it, but the Thunderhawks in their group were without void shields, relying on agility to survive. On that last dash they were vulnerable, and two exploded.

Covering fire from the Imperial fleet streaked over the assault group, flaring on void shields. They failed to bring them down, but the assault boats would be able to slow enough to pass through, and the discharge of the shields as they displaced incoming fire scrambled targeting systems. A heavy barrage was kept up, and the assault group sped onwards.

'Deceleration to penetrate shields commencing. Be ready.'

The ship fired its retro jets, dropping speed so violently black spots swam in Areios' vision, and he felt his internal organs shift. The void shields washed over them, and the Overlord accelerated again, once more with painful force. Fire intensified towards them, now from point defence guns and swift-moving turrets rather than the main arrays. These were more accurate against strike craft, but far less powerful, and although the Overlord's single void shield pulsed and sparked, it did not collapse, and they sped on.

The *Blood King* grew massive in his view, until its hull filled most of his external input and blurred by. The assault craft split, the surviving support ships streaking off to target weapons systems and comms arrays, the others conveying the Space Marines to their designated boarding points. There was a massive impact, and the Overlord's void shield exploded in a display of purple lightning. Another hit struck the far hull, and for a moment it rolled out of control before the pilots brought it to heel and raced on to their target.

It slowed, until it was stationary, facing large cargo-dock doors patterned with decay. The void shield sprang up again, absorbing the hail of lascannon blasts coming at the ship from all directions. The ship shivered. All its missiles detached, slamming into the cargo lock and blasting it in. Then they were tipping forward, pushing against the gale of venting atmosphere into the breach. The Overlord set down and all the hatches slammed open.

'Move! Move! Move!' Areios commanded.

The Aggressors went down the front ramp, wading into enemy small arms fire. Shotgun rounds smacked off their reinforced Gravis armour, rattling from them with as much effect as rain on metal roofs. Their boltstorm gauntlets replied, and they advanced forward.

The Intercessors went out of the back, using their longer-range bolt rifles to lay down suppressive fire. The Hellblasters took shelter behind the Aggressors, waiting for hardier troops to show themselves. Areios went down with his command group. Their foes were mortals in void gear, all dead now, their blood freezing on the cooling metal.

He pointed to the inner door. ‘Get the ingress open. Split, and head to your objectives.’

The interior of the airlock was grubby, poorly maintained, but seemingly free of the warp’s corruption, although blasphemous symbols were daubed on the walls in blood. He brought up a cartograph of the ship layout. It was a generic floorplan for the *Blood King*’s original class, and he tasked the Overlord crew with bringing it up to date with augur scans.

He looked to the other side of the ship. The front ramp and the first quarter of the hull had been torn off. The metal was blackened and torn. No life signs from inside.

‘Sergeant Iqwa!’ he commanded. ‘Check for survivors.’

Iqwa detached himself from his squad and looked into the ruined hull.

‘None, brother-lieutenant,’ he said.

‘Then we’re on our own. Form up. Expect heavy enemy resistance.’ He looked to their target.

A few hundred yards away, several decks up, the command deck waited.

War was what Areios had been made for. He advanced quickly up a wide corridor towards the command deck main ingress, dodging into cover every dozen yards and covering his men as they moved up behind him. His gun moved precisely to match the motion of his legs so that his aim was perfect. His armour systems helped him, highlighting the wretches who came at him in dull orange outlines, showing them to be little threat. Bright, info-rich pictograms hung around their heads, showing that most had been mind-slaved. Though they could not harm him, though they were not objectively guilty of treachery, they were the foe and they had to die. For each one he spared only a single bolt, switching with inhuman smoothness from target

to target. Bolt motors flashed brightly in his thermal imaging systems. The deaths of his foes were impressionistic splots of short-lived white on the deep blues and greens of the ship's deck.

He moved, he killed, but he did not think. Areios went into battle as a passenger in his own mind. For millennia, the hypnomats of Belisarius Cawl had reworked his being. Until that point Areios had thought of himself as an extension of the boy he had been. When he went into battle on the *Blood King* he saw that for a lie.

His body reacted without conscious input from his higher functions. When he came into the main spinal way, he decided to switch to his knife and pistol, only to find his hands had got there first, and were already performing deathblows to the slaves running screaming towards him. By the time he judged the thermal view too limiting for close melee, and the proliferation of informational runes too much, his helm had already switched to standard view, and he saw his foe as he would with his uncovered eyes, the scene colour-corrected by his battleplate cogitator to take out the red tint of the armourglass.

An alarm trilled, arrows sliding around the retinal display of his Intercessor armour, highlighting a threat coming in from the right. Already, he was turning, his bolt pistol raised, firing before he'd even had a chance to process what he saw; lumbering war-servitors equipped with crackling power claws coming to take his head. He had the briefest glimpse of their moronic faces before bolts he was not aware of firing had obliterated them, and he was on to the next target, consciously noting them only after he had killed them.

He moved so fast, his own limbs working without his input, and he killed without compunction or hesitation. He had undergone thousands of simulations. He had been sparring since he had woken on the *Zar Quaesitor*, and there had been the battle on the *Ideos*, but this was the first time he had killed something that was truly alive. Every one of his foes was a person, even the servitors had been, once. Each had their own thoughts, desires, dreams and fears. Many would be slaves taken from Imperial worlds. He killed them just the same. Any moral objection he might have had as a child was gone.

War was what he was. He was a living embodiment of mankind's destructive impulse.

Ferren was still there, but he was a vestige, clinging on to the shadowy parts of his mind like a ghost, wordlessly watching, and he thought again of the unliving, dishonoured dead of his home.

He caught a servitor in the throat with the blade of his left forearm, flipped it over his extended left leg, drew back his sword and decapitated it before it hit the ground. The neck glowed with the contact, and the skull exploded. There were dozens more, pouring out of side doors lit by hellish forge glows, like ants coming out of their nest. As he slew them, as his brothers slew them, he had the awful thought that he was not so different to them. He had not wanted to be taken. He had been snatched from his home and his people, and made into a tool for war. He had no control, it seemed then, over what he did. They were all human bullets for a war that would never end.

He filed the idea away for later consideration.

The last of the servitors fell crashing to the deck, blood, oil and strange milky fluids spilling from ruptured lines.

‘Lieutenant!’ One of the others was gesturing with a handheld auspex, pointing towards the command deck. In the chaos of the fight, he looked much like all the others, but the rune-tag in Areios’ retinal display showed him to be Brother Issus. ‘Strong energy readings that way. Heretic Astartes.’

‘Squads four and six, spread out, hold the rear against counter-attacks,’ Areios commanded. His bolt rifle barked four times, and a servitor fell back in pieces into one of the sally-holes. ‘Get those exits blocked up. Krak grenades in all of them. Squads two, three, five, follow me.’

He brought up a roster of the selected squads. All the outlines of the battle-brothers showed green, indicating no injuries and no armour damage, but ammunition counts glowed ominously towards the orange-red end of the spectrum. He checked his own counters. Five in the pistol, thirteen in the rifle, one additional magazine for each. They had to get the bridge under control. He patched into Issus’ auspex feed and counted upwards of thirty power armour readings, possibly more.

There was something else, something large that spooked the short-range sensors of his battleplate and had his threat indicators trill an uncertain warning. His mind seemed to shift in his skull, and he came more into himself. A decision had to be made, one that could not rely on reflex alone.

Their objective was ahead, but it was heavily defended. What should he do? Situations played a million times in his endless sleep pointed to one conclusion. Though he had to make the choice, there was no real decision involved. He had his orders.

‘Forward,’ he said. ‘Carefully.’

Chapter Thirty-Five

OCEAN PREDATOR

WARP FIELD

THOTHVEN'S MISSION

Daemons flew screaming at the *Saint Aster*. The space around the ship was a mad artist's sketch of searing lines. Point defence turrets put out a constant storm of fusion beams, plasma streams, las-blasts and solid shot. Daemons were atomised, their unnatural forms burned from the universe. Their twisted souls screamed back into the warp, further disturbing the fabric of space and time. Still they came on, an unending horde of red-skinned horrors, propelled into the teeth of the guns by their need for violence. Fighter craft speared through them, opening leads in the teeming mass. The guns of the macrocannon batteries boomed in series, time fuses detonating their shells in the middle of the daemonic swarms, but though tens of thousands were slaughtered, there were more coming, streaming from the depths of the rift in inexhaustible numbers.

The Space Marines had made their initial landing upon the asteroid, but their strike cruisers remained embattled in near orbit. Now deep into the daemon cloud and close by the asteroid, their communications with the fleet were disrupted. Messinius needed to get the warp field down quickly.

Athagey brought her attention back to her part of the battle. The daemons clogged the battlesphere around the fleet. There were too many to kill, and though the warp tech of the void shields seemed to be harmful to them,

already they had pushed through and begun to swarm the hulls of her warships. Exterior vid-feeds from various parts of the *Saint Aster* showed them tearing at the armour, and gathering around airlocks and hangar slots. Teams of Astra Militarum, Space Marines and her own armsmen waited for them at the most likely points of ingress. She regretted the necessity of sending the Sisters of Silence down with the Thunderhawks.

That was not the most pressing concern.

The hellship was coming for them. Daemons scattered before it as prey does before a leviathan. It fascinated her, for in many respects it still looked like a ship made by mortal hands, even though its ram had become a set of smiling, crocodilian jaws, and wet eyes rolled along its sides where gunnery decks should have been. She could see the command structures on its back, half buried by organic growths, but visible nonetheless. Its stubby main deck shield plates remained of metal, upright, fixed, the faded insignia of Battlefleet Iago still visible on them, but its movements were entirely organic. It flicked its stern from side to side like a tail, swimming through the void as easily as a fish might negotiate the water, and yet its engines still burned with a hideous red light. It was closing rapidly, its speed incredible, the sinuous curves it described impossible for a ship of metal to perform, making its already horrible appearance all the worse. Its rheumy eyes seemed to be staring directly at her and its smile took on a knowing aspect, as though it wished to share a private jest only with her.

Finding herself mesmerised, she snapped herself out of it before its gimlet stare bored its way too deep into her soul.

She opened a fleet-wide channel.

‘All captains, heed this order well. New firing priorities will be provided for long-range main armaments.’

Finnula began commanding the gunnery masters of the *Saint Aster*, the other ships providing firing solutions while the commodore was still talking.

‘Destroy the daemon ship,’ said Athagey.

A repellent evil afflicted Thothven as he and his men penetrated the warp field machine complex. Warp engines throbbed. The arcane power they projected affected reality, causing his battle-plate’s sensorium to spew junk data through his retinal feeds. They wouldn’t be able to get much closer to

the main generator than they were, he realised.

The warp field acted a little like a void shield, a little like a Geller field, but was more unstable and poisonous than both. He could taste the warp on the air as hot metal and rancid fat. A malfunction or misjudgement, and the field would implode, opening up a short-lived portal to the warp proper. The tech was proscribed in the Imperium, but the Dark Mechanicum had no such scruple against it. These facts appeared unbidden in his mind, yet another bit of knowledge forced into him by Cawl.

He felt light-headed. His vision blurred. He had his pharmacopeia compensate for the machines' psychic bleed and held up his fist. His squads stopped.

'Here,' he said. 'We cannot get any closer.'

He ordered his men to keep watch, while he tasked his targeting systems with finding the best places to plant melta bombs. Outlines blinked around various machines as he panned his vision slowly around the complex.

The overlay added symbols to a few components. These flickered red.

'Those three,' he commanded, flicking out battle sign with his fingers and datapulsing attachment points to his warriors. Three Space Marines came forward, unclamping heavy fusion flasks from their thighs. They twisted the handles on the top, and the arming lights went green, setting them for remote detonation.

The final was being placed when Thothven's threat indicators shrieked in sudden alarm. A huge shape charged out of a dark passage between two ranks of crackling engines, giving him precious little time to react. He threw himself into a roll to avoid a metal claw as big as his torso that buzzed through the air and buried itself in the asteroid's bedrock.

Thousands of hours of simulations had drilled the movement into him until it was a reflex as natural as breathing, but the consequences of getting stuck prone stayed with him still. His power plant was heavy, and the bulk of power armour made it hard to get up quickly from the ground, like the chelonians of ancient Earth. Falling on your back in a quarter ton of armour was a bad idea.

His pauldron collided with the ground, his legs tucked into his chest, he shifted his weight over and shoved with his gun against the ground, swinging the bulk of his power plant round before it grounded, and leaping back up as easily as an acrobat.

The thing that attacked him confronted him head on, a huge mechanoid unit as big as a Dreadnought chassis. Through a thick viewing slit set into the front he saw a human face contorted with pain and pierced by a hundred wires. Gristly muscle threaded through the workings of its limbs, and organs pulsed alongside exposed mechanisms. The left arm carried the claw. It snapped open. Spinning, toothed wheels set into the pincers showered sparks. The right arm carried a heavy flamer.

‘Target heavy-combat servitor, on my mark!’ Thothven had time to shout, summoning his squad to his position, before the flamer opened up, spewing a curl of promethium at him. He ran from the stream, and the servitor chased him with it, dousing the machines and the ground with burning liquid. The heat was intense, even through ceramite.

Bolt rifles banged behind the servitor, and it rocked from the impacts. Thothven’s squad attacked it from all sides. A second unit came through a kinked alleyway leading through the warp generators. Spall ricocheted around the open area. The machine screamed, a horrible voicing of pain, and it swung out its massive close-combat weapon, smashing one of the Space Marines in the chest and hurling him into one of the devices. The impact crumpled the outer shell, and shattered the innards. The warrior was engulfed in a blaze of lightning, and the biosigns projected into Thothven’s helm went flat.

Thothven fired, putting the entirety of his magazine into the thing’s faceplate. The vision slit starred and cracked, turning opaque. Another bolt found a softer part behind the armour, blasting out a spray of gore and fluids. The machine screamed again, its heavy flamer spraying fire all over everything. One of his warriors was engulfed as he advanced into the space. Another was caught by the swinging claw, gripped between its pincers and snipped neatly in two. Shards of ceramite pinged off Thothven’s battleplate.

He cast aside his empty bolt rifle and drew out his chainsword. The blade roared into life. The machine swung at him, freeing his men to riddle its back with explosive bolts. Thothven leaned back from the blow, spun around and brought his sword down hard on the machine’s wrist. Teeth shrieked, and a couple spat free. Chunks of chewed-up metal fell to the ground. The machine screamed again, somehow feeling the pain. It yanked its damaged arm back, and fired its heavy flamer.

A spread of liquid fire hit Thothven square in the chest, so heavily

pressurised he was sent sprawling into one of the machines. His sensorium beeped warnings as the heat in his armour climbed to scorching levels. Warning runes blinked around his softseals and joints on his retinal display. The ceramite plates were so hot his skin burned. His armour dispensed a rush of combat stimms into his system, blotting out the pain and sending his pulse racing. He heaved himself up, still on fire.

He barged into the machine with his pauldron, rocking it back, then brought up his sword in an upward cut, left to right. It caught, and ripped open its armour, breaking the seal on its amniotic tank and cutting deeply into its warp-formed flesh components. The machine roared, and punched down, but one of Thothven's men leapt for it, wrapping his arms around the elbow and hauling backwards. Another joined him, their armour ringing together as he grappled the arm, and the blow fell short. The machine turned, trying to throw them off, giving Thothven an opening.

The flames still guttering on his armour, Thothven charged at the machine again. Levelling his point at the knee, he punched the blade deep into the joint and wrenched it round, shattering mechanical components and severing strands of gristle. The servitor collapsed, pulled backwards by the Space Marines hauling at its arm. It staggered, spraying a plume of fire upwards over Thothven's head. He ducked the burning wash, and swung his sword around, hitting the left ankle hard.

He sawed his chainsword back and forth until the foot bent inwards. The man-machine toppled backwards and rolled about, trying to get back up on its ruined legs.

'Leave it!' Thothven shouted. 'Withdraw!'

His men ran from the field, abandoning the wargear and gene-seed of their fellows.

When they were at a safe distance, Thothven detonated the melta bombs with a mental command. Fusion fire erupted over the machines in a blinding dome. A large section of the machine complex collapsed. His armour's spirit had judged the demolition well, for the complex shook with secondary explosions, other machines following the first into death, but there were no more serious consequences, no howling maw to drag them into the warp. He looked upwards. The oily sheen of the warp field dissipated, shrivelling in on itself like plastek film on a fire. His sensorium feeds cleared, and the vox-channels sounded true.

‘Lord lieutenant,’ Thothven voxed. ‘Primary objective achieved. The warp field is down.’

They had been Adeptus Astartes once, though they were no longer fit to bear the name.

They were of the same savage tribe that had attacked Fomor III. Blood-red armour edged with brass, chain weapons, a few bolters, everything festooned with skulls – either real or in cast brass but hard to tell apart, for they were caked in age-brown gore. Plumes of grit erupted from the ground in precise patterns as the seven Thunderhawks bombarded the enemy position from the other side of the ridge. Why they hadn’t opted to strafe the positions from the air was abundantly clear now – the trenches had a wealth of gun turrets, many of which were anti-air emplacements. Deep trenches linked bunkers buried up to their firing slits in the ground. Everything was heaped with skulls and bloody bones, but they were sturdy despite their savage decorations.

Antoniato took the magnoculars back from Lacrante, and the ruddy figures sprang away into the distance, shrinking to mites occupying cracks in the ground.

‘Unusual for the followers of the Blood God to hold back,’ said Antoniato. He scanned around the blackstone machine. ‘They’re dug in really tight.’

‘Your dead Emperor made them well. They might be maniacs, but it looks like they can control themselves when they have to.’ Cheelche had an alien-looking scope held up to one eye.

‘Nah,’ said Antoniato, ‘they’re berserkers to a man. Someone else will have made those defences for them. They won’t be able to wait long. Good job too, it’ll be easier to cut them down when they charge out of the trenches.’

‘That’s not going to happen, they’ll wait, I tell you,’ Cheelche said. ‘This is going to be the death of us.’

Antoniato grunted in amusement.

Lacrante found them to be an odd pair. Unless he was flying, Antoniato was perpetually cheerful, Cheelche ragingly fatalistic. He felt like a spare part around them. He was entirely surplus to their requirements; even if both of them did try to make him feel welcome in Rostov’s party, he was intruding into their friendship, and he still was not comfortable in the

xenos' presence.

Lacrante looked behind him. He, Cheelche and Antoniato were sprawled on the sharp-edged regolith. Rostov was talking to Messinius a few yards away, surrounded by the Space Marine's command squad and the seven null maidens who had brought the gunships through the warp field. Space Marines were ranged in broken lines up and down the slopes. There were a lot of guns pointing back at them, but none of them were firing yet.

'What are they waiting for?' said Lacrante.

'For us to do something stupid, which we will,' said Cheelche.

'It's an honour thing,' said Antoniato. 'The followers of the Blood God admire martial prowess above everything. They'll want to prove themselves in combat against the new Space Marines.'

'So they're doing something stupid,' said Cheelche. 'I'm surrounded by idiots, because you're all human.'

A loud crack reverberated through the asteroid's limited skies. The warp field blinked, then failed.

'Speaking of stupidity,' said Cheelche, as she looked skywards. She and Antoniato got into a crouch, and started to prep their weapons. A ripple of activity spread down the line.

'Time to go, lieutenant,' said Antoniato. He slapped Lacrante on the shoulder and glanced meaningfully upwards.

The heaving of the daemon hordes around the strike cruisers changed as some turned back towards the asteroid. The ships altered their firing patterns, blasting out channels through the empyrean's armies. The rearrangement filled the skies with falling, burning bodies, and revealed the sides of the ships more clearly. The cruisers descended towards the surface, their huge hulls blotting out space. They entered the thin, false atmosphere of the asteroid, and their engines shook the world. As they came, their big guns opened fire, blasting at the Traitor Space Marine positions around the blackstone device. Huge holes were torn in the ground, but the greatest threat to the asteroid was yet to come.

Sparks of fire appeared all along the sides and keels of the strike cruisers, and the void filled with hurtling tear drops. The air was scant, but such was their speed through to the ground, fires flickered around them as the air was compressed into itself. Daemons dived after them, trying to catch them, but they rebounded from their sides and fell to the ground. Now the traitor guns

responded, stitching seams of fire across the air. Lascannons flickered. Shrapnel opened dull grey flowers around the pods, and sent down brief rains of metal. A few were hit, some careening out of control, some vanishing into space; a couple exploded, launching their contents in pieces across the battlefield. But there were too many, and they were coming in too fast. The enemy could stop only a few.

The noise was deafening. Lacrante had been spared the terror of a Space Marine drop assault until that point. The racket of it drove at him, making his heart quail and his courage fail. Were it not for Antoniato and Cheelche at his side, he would have broken and fled, though the warriors coming in to land were on his side.

The pods were fired like cannon shells. When they came within a hundred feet of the surface, thundering retrojets burst into life around their sides, righting and slowing them to less fatal velocities. Still they hit hard enough to kill mortal men, dislodging blasts of rock with their impacts. They landed close in to the enemy defence works. Their ramps blew open to cannonades of exploding bolts, and the gathering smog of war flashed with their discharge. Space Marines leapt from their restraint cradles, guns blazing, and the enemy's emplaced weapons responded. The depression holding the enemy position turned into a boiling cauldron full of fire, smoke and noise.

Lacrante followed the progress of one squad as they sprinted across the broken ground. He saw one warrior hit by an autocannon and spun around; he fell, and his friends vanished into the smoke. The violence seemed to excite the blackstone device, and it rotated faster, shooting out more of its branchings of green lightning, and these stirred the fog further.

Messinius got to his feet, the giant power fist he wore on his right held clenched over his head. It ignited with a booming crack that drew the attention of all those near him.

'Soldiers of the Emperor!' he roared through his voxmitter, his amplified voice godlike. 'Forward!'

With a shocking cry, the Space Marines on the hill raced down the slope towards the dropsite. Fear spurred Lacrante up before his companions, forcing Antoniato to sprint to catch him.

'Stay close, let them go first!' said Antoniato, grabbing this arm. He, Lacrante and Cheelche ran in the shelter of a squad assigned to protect them. Rostov remained with the lord lieutenant, but he was close. 'Those

heretics down there could kill us without a second thought,' Antoniato said. 'But if we stick together, we have a chance.'

'And watch out for them!' said Cheelche, who despite her shorter stature and heavy burden kept pace. She pointed up. The daemons were plummeting from the sky after the drop pods.

'There's too many of them. We don't have a chance,' said Lacrante.

'Yes we do,' said Antoniato. 'Cheelche and I have survived worse than this.'

'There's always a first time,' said Cheelche. 'With death, it's also the last.'

Chapter Thirty-Six

THE REDEMPTIONS OF WAR

A CHAPTER'S ERRORS

THE ENGINE FIRES

A berserker in twisted armour rushed at Messinius, chainsword held back to strike. Messinius only had a glimpse of him, but every detail was forever stamped into his perfect memory, from the flakes of dried blood caking the warrior's battleplate to the black iron chains binding his weapons to his wrists. His bolt pistol was so poorly maintained it didn't look like it would fire. His respirator grille was broken, as was the mask beneath, and Messinius could see the warrior's yellow snarl through the gap.

A second later he was no more, preserved only in Messinius' recollection. The berserker's first blow skidded off Messinius' left arm. He did not get a chance at a second. Messinius' golden fist punched the warrior in the chest, obliterating his armour, flesh and bone, leaving a smoking hole where his organs had been. Blood splattered all over Messinius' white armour.

'For Sabatine!' he roared, and cast the dead traitor aside.

It pleased Messinius that the traitors had erred as his own Chapter had. When the Thirteenth Black Crusade came forth from the Eye of Terror and Cadia called for aid, the majority of Messinius' brothers had responded, trusting their Chapter planet of Sabatine to a single company. In doing so, they left themselves open to an attack they were too arrogant to see coming, and the cursed sons of Mortarion had destroyed their world.

Now the scions of Khorne suffered the same consequences. The patronage of the Dark Powers was no protection against hubris.

Massed Hellblasters opened fire, taking apart another bunker. The enemy defences were disintegrating, but trenches and heavy guns mattered little in this war of immortals. Daemons were pouring from the sky. Those with wings flew down, but most fell, tumbling in red falls. The first of them splattered on the rock, dying on impact, their essences visible as they sped furiously back into the warp, but soon there was a pile of daemonic flesh high enough that the creatures landed without harm, and came rolling down the heaped bodies. At the bottom, they faced additional peril, for the ships of Battle Group Saint Aster were firing on the surface. The ground shook so hard Messinius thought the asteroid might soon break apart. Despite the fall and the bombardment, hundreds of warp creatures made it through the roiling impacts unharmed, and bounded on hooved feet towards the Space Marines.

Messinius ducked the swooping daemons. The null maidens drove them back by their presence, those coming too close fraying into black smoke from the pressure of the sisters' negative psychic auras. Rostov's band kept close to Messinius and his warriors, and made good account of themselves. That was for the best, as Messinius had little attention to spare for their safety, being occupied with Khornate Space Marines rising up from the trenches.

He sent forward a phalanx of Aggressors to clear out the trench lines. Rocket racks coughed, their small missiles punching clean through corrupted ceramite and blasting apart the enemy. They swept their underslung flamers back and forth, flushing out more berserkers, and immolating the mortal servants of Chaos. But the Imperial advance, rapid at first, was slowing as more of the enemy warriors committed themselves to the melee. The Primaris Space Marines under Messinius' command were stronger and better equipped than their foes, but the berserkers had millennia of experience, and the fury of a god to call upon. Ceramite crashed into ceramite as lines of blue-armoured Unnumbered Sons struggled with the blood-red and brass-clad followers of Khorne. Messinius battled at the forefront of his warriors, smiting down the hated traitors with fist and plasma. In the brief second between each encounter, he nominated targets for the cruisers above, and their lances gouged molten tracks across

the asteroid.

Creatures bearing swords forged of flickering black fire crashed into the back of the Unnumbered Sons' formation. Messinius had nearly a demi-Chapter strength on the ground, a mighty force, but the daemons were infinite.

He glanced upwards. The blackstone device howled around and around, spitting out green lightning. They were close to their goal, but obstacles remained.

He gave out orders to his men to hold the line then pushed on to the forefront of battle, singling out a warrior for death who grappled with an Intercessor upon the ground. His helm chimed to indicate a clear shot, and he put a plasma stream through the traitor's head.

'We have to get to the device soon,' said Rostov. He arrived at Messinius' side, his silver armour beaded in blood and power sword fizzling with evaporating gore. 'We will be overwhelmed.'

Messinius nodded. 'How much time do you need?'

'A few minutes,' the inquisitor said. 'That is all.'

'A tall order.'

'We must get through!'

Messinius searched the slope. Stairs led up to the plateau where the engine squatted, heavily defended. There was a way through, he thought, but first he needed to clear it. Only then could they recapture their lost impetus.

He voxed the cruisers, requesting support. Bright dots emerged from their hangars. Inceptors, low-orbit insertion specialists with heavy Gravis armour and powerful jump packs. They were slower than the drop pods, and many were attacked by the airborne daemons. Gunfire lashed into the hordes, holding the daemons back long enough for a score of the Inceptors to break through the flocks and rush on flaring rockets towards Messinius' position. They swept over the fight, towards the rear of the enemy line guarding the approach to the device, and though two of them were hit by ground fire and crashed down in flames, the others gunned down the Heretic Astartes pouring down the slope, slackening off the press of bodies, and allowing the Space Marines to push forward again.

'This opening will not last long,' said Messinius. 'Follow me.'

'Look!' One of Rostov's humans, Antoniato, was pointing at the blackstone device. Its orientation was changing; it was rising up onto one

point, and whirling around like a coin spinning on its edge.

Colour drained from the fight, sucked in towards the artefact. Sound became soft and distant. There was a crackle, and black lightning burst from the topmost spear tip towards the fleet in the void. They could not see from their position what became of it, for the blast was swallowed up by the daemons, but it betokened nothing good.

‘We have to go now,’ said Rostov.

‘Keep up the bombardment!’ Athagey commanded. ‘Keep their attention on us!’

Hurried communications passed across the void between the ships. There were millions of daemons around them. Point defence fire spat in all directions from the *Saint Aster*, raking across the choked void. They were half blind. Their weapons cleared paths through the swarms, giving them momentary glimpses of the asteroid that were snatched away as the swarms closed up. The surface sparkled with gunfire. Their auguries cast out their sounding beams but the information they gathered was constantly interrupted. Athagey could do little more than target her fleet’s weapons where she thought they might do some good. It would have to be enough; they had problems of their own.

Athagey watched as a Fury starfighter was ripped to pieces by winged monsters. One moment it was racing through the void, the next it was silvery flinders of metal. Displays detailing the disposition of the fleet’s attack craft flashed red as more of her fighters were torn apart by simple claws.

‘Any sign of the hellship?’ Athagey asked. She could not let herself become distracted. The hellship was a greater threat, but the daemons held her attention, fascinating her as much as they sickened her.

How many lies we were told, Athagey thought. All the time, these monsters had been waiting in the dark to devour them. She’d heard the stories. They were the Navy, after all, and they spent half their lives in the warp, but she had been wise enough to give them no credence, at least not in public, for those who spoke too loudly of strange phenomena tended to vanish without trace. Now she looked at vid-feeds of the daemons clambering over her hull, and wondered how they could have been so afraid to ignore what was in front of them. They couldn’t be wished away. Purging

those who saw them made no difference.

‘No sign of the hellship. Perhaps the initial bombardment drove it off,’ said Finnula.

‘No, it’s coming. Keep your eyes open for it! All sensorium stations. Priority optima.’

The daemons had all the appearance of living beings, but they needed no air for their lungs or their wings. They were wholly unnatural, and the very sight of them carried a repulsive stench that worked its way into her senses from outside. Watching them made her head spin, and for once, when she reached for her box of powdered stimm, her hand stopped, and withdrew without touching it.

‘Emperor save us if they ever get in,’ she muttered. ‘Keep up the bombardment. Kill as many of these things as you can. We have to buy Rostov more time.’

‘Eloise...’ Finnula was perturbed enough by something to forget they were on duty. ‘The engine on the surface is ready to fire again.’

‘Void control, stand ready,’ said Athagey, dread growing in the pit of her stomach.

‘It’s firing!’

Sensing what was to come, the daemon swarms parted. A jagged line of greenish black cut across the void from the asteroid and connected with the *Unmerciful*. The tip passed through the void shields as if they weren’t there and contacted the ship’s hull, where it ate furiously into the metal, bringing forth a great jetting of gas and fire that pushed the cruiser off course. Lights all over it flickered, and its engine stack went out. The beam flicked off, leaving little tears in reality that bled blue and silver energy, space wounded like skin over which a sharp sword has been carelessly drawn.

A moment later, the *Unmerciful*’s reactor core went critical. A ball of fire five hundred miles across swallowed its hull and annihilated hundreds of thousands of daemons.

‘Emperor preserve us,’ said Athagey. ‘It’s getting more powerful. Draw back, pass down beneath the asteroid. Take us out of the engine’s sightline. Have the fleet close in, concentrate fire on the swarms. Maybe we can take some of them with us.’

‘That will take us dangerously close to the rift.’

‘Then seal the shutters! We have to move. We don’t stand a chance against

that warp beam.'

'Inquisitor Rostov—'

'He's on his own,' said Athagey. 'We're no use to him dead. The fate of our victory rests in his hands, Emperor preserve him.'

The bombardment ceased. The fleet was pulling away, yet the ground still shook with the engine's tremors. It howled as it rotated, screaming a song that defied reality's right to exist. The sensation of it sickened Messinius to his bones, but he forced himself forward, up steps carved into the asteroid's stone, towards the low summit the engine occupied. His command squad fell back to hold the stair's base with the surviving null maidens, their number now reduced to four, for they drew the daemons' anger and were forever the first to be targeted.

Messinius climbed with Rostov and his small band, the Inceptors giving them aerial support where they could. The stair turned. A heretic came at him, chainaxe roaring. Messinius braced himself for impact, but a bright pulse round sped past him and took the warrior through the left eye-lens, and he crashed down, falling head over heel down the steps, and coming to rest at the feet of Rostov's small xenos. The White Consuls were not of the mono-dominant tendency, and did not view all aliens with automatic hatred, but he found her loathsome nonetheless.

'Don't look at me like that,' she said pointedly, patting her rifle. 'You owe me, Space Marine.'

She pushed past him, daring to touch his sacred wargear, and yet he did not move to kill her. She had her uses, the dead heretic was the proof.

The last turn of the stair brought them to a wide plateau with a large central well. It was over this that the lowermost point of the profane octed spun. It moved so quickly it seemed to be a solid sphere of grey and black, shot through with green lightning and flashes of red warp discharge. It made a deafening, burring roar. Machines were spaced regularly around it, in the manner of menhirs from an elder age. All of them bore the blasphemous marks of the Dark Mechanicum, and magi of that fallen creed attended them.

There was more and worse to see, a hundred brutalised bodies hung from crossed wrists nailed into spines of blackstone. Conduits rolling wetly with peristalsis sucked at them, conveying some essential part of what they were

to the machines.

At the centre of the circle, around an inner ring of machines, stood a number of transhuman figures. It was hard to see their colours against the light, but the manner of their armour gave them away. Dark Apostles of the powers in the warp. Word Bearers, maybe, or others, equally deluded and dangerous. They stood with their arms spread, their unholy totems held up towards the blackstone octed. Power arced between them, the machines, and the spinning device.

They did not see the party arrive immediately, not until the Inceptors rose on screaming jets and opened fire with their assault bolters, blasting machinery and their attendant magi into scrap.

‘We come at last to the end,’ Rostov said. ‘Cheelche, Lacrante, Antoniato, with me.’

‘What must we do?’ Messinius asked. The priests positioned around the engine were turning to the source of the disturbance. As their arms dropped, the engine slowed and began to wobble.

‘In this pack is a xenos device,’ said Rostov, touching Cheelche’s bag. More Inceptors were coming down onto the platform, raking the environs with their weapons, and he shouted to be heard over them. ‘We must attach it to the central machinery banks. It will do the rest. The mechanisms at the centre must be preserved in order for this to work. The rest can burn.’

‘Understood,’ said Messinius.

‘Lord lieutenant, if you can, take one of them alive,’ said Rostov, pointing at the priests.

‘They will not break,’ said Messinius. ‘Keeping them alive is dangerous. Better they are slain.’

‘They all break, in the end,’ said Rostov. ‘See it done. I will be the judge of their danger, and of their value.’

The power signatures on the auspex suddenly began to move together, and shortly afterwards incoherent howling echoed down the corridors. The enemy charged. They were near mindless with rage, sprinting down the corridor into the face of the Space Marines’ bolt and plasma fire. The first rank of them went down easily, flesh burned out by plasma strikes. But the others leapt over their fallen comrades, not caring that they died, bolt-rounds exploding off their ancient armour, and crashed into the line of

Primaris Marines.

The rear was also threatened. Hordes of mortals were pouring up from the deeps of the ship. They carried nothing but mauls and lengths of chain, weapons that barely scratched the Space Marines' Mark X armour. But they threw themselves to their deaths gladly, the name of their vile god on their lips as they performed one valuable role for the masters of the ship, consuming much of the boarding force's ammunition.

'Aggressors, fall back,' Areios voxed. 'Cover the back line.' They trudged off. Soon they were among the foe, and Areios heard the telltale false thunder of power fists hitting unprotected flesh.

While his rearguard fought, Chaos Space Marines were pushing his vanguard back. Areios' men responded by falling back. Warriors ran from cover to take up position further from the front, firing past their brothers when the opportunity arose.

Apothecary Khesvinall struggled with a Primaris brother suffering from a catastrophic stomach wound. Techmarine Dessnius fired multiple plasma shots from his servo-harness rig.

'We must push on,' said Areios. 'We cannot let ourselves be trapped down here. Brother-Chaplain Ganniv, with me.'

The warrior priest nodded, and ignited his crozius arcanum.

'Throw them back!' the Chaplain roared. 'Throw them back into the abyss!'

His Techmarine and half a squad of Intercessors offered covering fire as Ganniv and Areios raced into the press of bodies. The Intercessors stood in a line two deep, jostling with axe-wielding heretics. A couple of Areios' men went down, and heavy weapons opened up at the far end of the corridor, their rounds skating off Ganniv's power field.

Areios and Ganniv crashed into a warrior about to deliver the deathblow to a wounded Space Marine, their combined impact lifting him from his feet and knocking him back into the press of his fellows behind. Ganniv used the opening to swing his crozius into the breastplate of another warrior, breaking it into shards with a sharp, actinic flash. Areios spun his power sword around, reversed it, and rammed it through the belly of a third.

'The Emperor made us,' Ganniv shouted, 'and bade us be strong to rid the stars of wicked beings! Fight, my brothers, and know that He is watching, and that He judges every man by the merits of his valour!'

The Space Marines pushed forward. Clean, new pauldrons ground against armour grimed with centuries of innocent blood. The lines loosened a little, and what had been a scrum broke up into a series of individual duels. With more space between the combatants, opportunistic fire from both sides thickened the corridor with death.

Areios found himself fighting a berserk Space Marine wielding paired axes. They had no energy field, but were heavy weapons of a tarnished alloy of such density that when they crashed against Areios' power sword they held and did not break, forcing Areios to change tactics, employing his sword as he would a naked blade. The energy field banged and crackled with each strike from his foe, and these came in quick succession, delivered with a skill honed by millennia of war. Areios found himself pushed back, hemmed in by the press of his brothers behind.

The Chaplain's plasma pistol boiled the faceplate from a heretic, and he fell down, screaming from his fleshless skull. Two more came at Ganniv, one with a power axe, another whirling a flail weighted with brass daemon faces around his head. Ganniv slammed at the axeman with his crozius. One of the energised wings cracked the helm, burying itself in the traitor's head. In the moment it was caught, the flail wielder wrapped the chains around the weapon, and wrenched it from Ganniv's grasp.

The dead axeman fell down, opening space for another to step forward and slash down with a two-handed chainsword. Teeth flew from the track as the Chaplain's protective power field reacted, but it passed through, and with a screaming, sparking snarl sawed through Ganniv's armour between his left arm and his neck, down through his collarbone and ribs, where its teeth finally snagged and the weapon stuck.

'In the name of the Emperor I give you judgement!' Ganniv shouted. Blood poured from his vox-grille. His assailant made to yank out his weapon, but Ganniv caught it, pinning him in place, raised his plasma pistol and put a hole clean through his chest, back and power plant. The reactor blew out violently, scything down warriors pushing in from behind.

'Apothecary!' Areios shouted over the vox. 'Khesvinall!'

Areios sidestepped a blow from his own opponent, managing to hook the beard of the axe around his sword to trap it, at the same time raising his bolt pistol and emptying it into the chest of another traitor coming to take him from the side. For a moment he and his opponent were locked. He felt the

metal of his sword creak. His sinew coils tensed under his skin, pulling at his natural muscles, working with his armour against the god-granted strength of his foe. The traitor was a monster, his arms bare, too swollen to take battleplate, and he laughed as he pushed down with his axe and raised his other to take Areios' head.

The disruption field finally triumphed over the dense alloy of the axe. The energy of their combined efforts was suddenly released, the axe head flew away, and they crashed into each other. Areios caught the wrist of the hand still holding an axe. The traitor dropped the smoking haft of his ruined weapon and grabbed Areios by the throat.

'Emperor's dog!' the traitor snarled.

'You have never fought a dog like me,' said Areios. Almost too easily, his sword slid through the traitor's breastplate, destroying his primary heart. The traitor let out a grunt of pain, but held fast, squeezing tighter, and tighter, until darkness nibbled at the edge of Areios' vision. He dragged his sword across the traitor's chest. The smell of cooking blood boiled up from the rent in the ceramite. Armour banged and cracked as its atoms disintegrated. The traitor's grip fell limp when Areios' sword cut through his lungs and into his secondary heart.

Areios staggered back under the weight of his defeated foe, and barged him off the end of his sword.

No more enemy came. They had expended most of their strength, and the remaining few were being cut down by angled fire, though they fought insanely to the last.

The heavy weapons at the far end of the way fired at Areios' men, forcing them back from the corridor centre. He dived down behind a pair of corpses, one loyal, the other a traitor, locked together in death.

'Hellblasters! Clear the way forward,' he ordered. His throat hurt from the traitor's grip. The ship was shaking from the discharge of its guns, and a shift in the pit of his stomach told him it was coming around to a new heading. 'The *Blood King* has been engaged by the fleet. We must hurry.' He didn't need to add that if they were not successful in taking the ship, VanLeskus would have no compunction in blasting them from the void along with it.

He deactivated his helm overlays. It was then he realised the foggy feeling he had suffered since awakening was clearing. Looking around at his dead

and dying men, scattered among the corrupted corpses of once noble warriors, he wished it had not.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

THE WARP ASCENDANT

UNHOLY RAGE

PREDATOR AND PREY

Pursued by a host of daemons that grew more numerous with every passing moment, the *Saint Aster* had dropped under the asteroid and out of sight of the blackstone device when the hellship attacked. It came at them from the shadows, evading detection until it was too late.

Its mouth gaped wide, and it roared, the sound disobeying the laws of physics, passing through the airless void, through the shields and the hulls, and spiking into their brains. Athagey's mind flashed white with pain. A terrible rage gripped her, and she fell howling into her seat. A torrent of horrific images flooded her mind's eye, and with them the undeniable urge to kill. She resisted. Others were not so strong of will, and small arms fire echoed from the far corners of the deck. The madness lasted only moments, and the next she knew she was looking at true-vid feed of the thing's open jaws racing towards the ship.

'Brace for impact!'

The *Saint Aster*'s gunnery captains were well drilled, and got off a volley before the hellship hit. Explosions flashed deep in the gullet, illuminating bizarre amalgams of flesh and machinery deep inside. Their efforts did nothing to slow it down. The rushing maw filled the vid-screen, fell off its edges, and filled the view with black.

The impact threw Athagey from her throne. She toppled over the edge, bouncing down the steps, coming to rest against one of the railing uprights around the lower command dais.

Metal groaned as the *Saint Aster* was pushed aside by the hellship. Alarms blared from every quarter. Men and women were scattered across the deck. Athagey got to her feet, bruised but otherwise unhurt. She was luckier than some. A number of casualties had resulted from friendly fire and the impact. Armsmen's guns barked as the last men gripped by rage were put down.

'Get me damage reports!' she ordered. Several of her mid-ranking staff were dead or injured. Her coterie of lieutenants were still picking themselves up, and she was forced to communicate directly with the various sections of the deck, reducing efficiency of command. She snapped off orders as she went around the dais, assessing her officers' wounds and summoning them aid.

'There are major breaches on multiple decks,' reported one ensign.

'We have boarders, deck fourteen. Daemons,' said another.

'Send Captain Ulinius' company to deal with it,' Athagey commanded. 'We'll see how the Neverborn fare against the Emperor's Angels.' She reached Finnula, who was at her station, blood running from a cut to her cheek.

'Ulinius is locked down on deck sixteen,' Finnula said. 'We've an incursion there too. And in four other places. They can't be everywhere at once. I could redeploy Lieutenant Ivreson and his men,' she said, looking back at the Space Marines still maglocked to the floor at the back of the deck.

'Emperor's bones, no!' Athagey swore, wrestling with the residue of the hellship's rage still poisoning her mind. 'We'd leave ourselves defenceless. The enemy will be coming here soon. Just get someone on all incursions,' she said. 'Anyone. Sound the general retreat from the affected areas. Tell those who cannot get out to barricade themselves into the strongest compartments they can find. Seal off the decks, section by section. We can't vent the Neverborn into the void, but we can keep them contained for a while. What about the rest of the fleet?'

'I've got no contact,' Finnula said. 'We've lost our primary comms mast.'

'Where's the hellship?'

The howling screech of ripping metal answered her.

‘It’s got us, that’s where it is,’ said Finnula.

The *Saint Aster* shook.

‘How can it even have an Emperor damned *mouth*?’ Athagey said. She mounted the steps to her throne, climbed up, and sat down. ‘Well, it’s big enough. Get a fix on roughly where it is. Tell the gunnery captains to blast it back into the void.’

‘We’ll take damage. It’s point-blank range,’ said Finnula.

‘I don’t care. I want that damn thing off my ship.’

Orders were passed down. The *Saint Aster* was being pushed out of formation by the hellship, and she was flying practically blind. Her auguries were damaged or scrambled by proximity to the rift, and for the same reason they were forced to close the oculus shutters, as they were facing directly towards the deepest part of the tear in space. Looking into it would be as good as staring into the warp.

A tense few minutes followed, as the *Saint Aster*’s crew tried to restore function to the damaged systems and work out exactly where the hellship was.

‘Hold,’ she whispered to her ship. ‘Let the Throne-blessed armour hold!’

Shortly, reports came back from all over the *Saint Aster*, giving them a good enough idea of where the other vessel was. Firing solutions were formulated. More orders were passed down to the gun decks. A warrant officer approached with a piece of parchment.

‘All guns report ready,’ he said.

‘Then open fire,’ she said.

The *Saint Aster* convulsed from stem to stern as her main battery fired directly into the vessel gripping her. Alarms wailed as the hellship’s teeth shredded armour and ripped off weapons. Pressure warnings sang from a dozen decks. Another rage-inducing roar reverberated through the ship.

‘Throne save us all, it won’t let go!’ Finnula said.

Athagey stood to issue further orders – perhaps finding the thing’s head would help – when the sudden, triple bark of bolt weaponry boomed behind her. She was turning as the warning came from Lieutenant Ivreson.

‘Boarding party!’ he cried.

The air was shimmering, opening up on a hellscape that, though barely glimpsed, would haunt Athagey’s nightmares forever.

Through it stepped muscular, long-limbed fiends, black horns and black tongues complementing black swords. Big as Space Marines, they set to bloody work, attacking the Sons of Dorn guarding the deck. A Space Marine helmet flew in an arc of blood over the bridge and bounced across the floor.

‘We’re lost,’ she said. ‘Forget the ship. Draw your weapons.’

Melta bombs cored out the lock shafts on the bridge main door. Techmarine Dessnius worked at an open panel, loudly proclaiming wards against malicious scrapcode and fell machine-spirits. Internal weaponry hung smoking from its mounts.

‘Enemy groups coming from the rear,’ reported one of his men.

‘Dessnius!’ Areios called.

‘Almost there,’ the Techmarine said, the supplementary limbs of his amour darting in and out of the machine. ‘This ship is not so corrupted. Perhaps it can be saved and resanctified.’ He gave out a small noise of satisfaction. ‘There. The Ommissiah smiles on us. I am ready to open the door.’

Gunfire started up some distance away.

‘They’ve found our pickets. Mortals only. No Heretic Astartes,’ reported one of the sergeants.

‘Squads Icarin and Deimos to hold back,’ said Areios. ‘The rest of you form up,’ he commanded. ‘Firing lines against the door.’

His Aggressors and a supporting unit of Intercessors headed back towards the stern to support the pickets. The rest, some twenty now, faced the door, half kneeling, the rest presenting their arms over their heads.

‘Ready?’ asked Dessnius. His servo-arms raised up and swivelled towards the command deck gates too, though his human hands waited for Areios’ command in the guts of the door workings.

‘Ready. Open the doors.’

Dessnius twisted something inside the wall. Gears grumbled, and the doors shuddered apart. Brittle metal welded by the fusion boring broke with plangent tings. Where the melta flasks had taken out the locking pins, the metal still glowed cherry red with fading heat.

The doors shuddered back into the walls. Stale air moaned out through the gap, spicy with age and long-finished decay.

‘Seal your helms,’ Areios ordered. Grilles in the snouts of their masks

rasped closed.

Darkness waited on the other side. The sound of fighting was nearing from the rear.

‘Rearguard status?’ he enquired. He left the monitoring of the situation to one of his sergeants.

‘Heavy weight of mortals pressing forward. Our warriors are holding the line.’

‘Then we go forward,’ said Areios. There was no communication from the other strike teams, but if they took the command deck, then the fight for the *Blood King* was as good as done. With the lynchpin of the most organised battle group in the fleet dealt with, the rest could be divided up and destroyed.

Areios had them go in squad by squad. Stab and lens lights panned around the space beyond. It retained the general shape and look of a similar Imperial deck, but was empty of personnel. Dust lay heavy on every surface.

‘Where are they commanding it from?’ Areios asked Dessnius.

‘Here,’ said the Techmarine after a pause. ‘Where is the crew?’

‘They are at their stations,’ said one of the warriors, and lifted up an age-yellowed ribcage. ‘Dead.’

The men spread out. Everywhere was the same. Skeletal bodies in tattered uniforms were all over the deck. Many looked like they had died where they worked, though others lay face down on the floor, limbs flung out or covering their faces in protective poses. Many were missing the skulls.

‘These are all Imperial uniforms,’ Dessnius said. ‘What happened here?’

‘Check the command dais.’ Areios felt himself drawn towards the oculus. The shutters were open, looking out onto a crowded void. Battle Group Betaris had forced its way deep into the enemy fleet, and was engaged at all sides. Nova cannon shells cast from the guns of Alphas were still exploding, tearing enemy ships to pieces, but the Imperial fleet did not have it all its own way. Space flashed with bombardment as miles-long vessels exchanged broadsides at close range. So many void shields were active that the view shimmered and distorted. Torpedoes raced between the opposing sides. Though only part of Fleet Tertius was in play, the number of craft taking part in the fight numbered in the hundreds.

The view was swinging about as the *Blood King* continued to manoeuvre.

The entire scene tipped on its side and rolled over. The *Blood King* shuddered as it discharged another broadside. He saw the guns flash. Lance turrets mounted in front of the superstructure tracked targets and fired, all without the intervention of the command crew. The view shifted a little further, and Areios saw the unmistakable profile of the *Precept Magnificat* and its flotilla closing on the main body of the enemy.

‘VanLeskus will destroy this ship. Gyronus, get the vox operational. Brother-Techmarine Dessnius, are you sure the command impulses are coming from here?’

‘As sure as I can be,’ said Dessnius, consulting a handheld device plugged into a console. ‘There’s some dark science at work. Be wary.’

‘Rig the helm, weapons and void shield controls for destruction. If the orders are coming from here, we’ll stop them,’ Areios commanded. ‘Squad Ettien, fall back to the rear and reinforce the others. Dessnius, get a message to the *Precept Magnificat* and tell them we have the bridge.’

‘Lieutenant!’ Two of his men had ascended up to the shipmaster’s dais, on this vessel held far over the work pits and console banks of the command crew. ‘You need to see this.’

Areios passed warriors rigging the deck for destruction with every grenade they had. Others took the more direct route of tearing off machine casings and wrenching out huge handfuls of wiring. Smoke drifted from their work and the sepulchral silence was replaced by the sounds of tactical vandalism.

Areios mounted the stairs, and stopped as something brittle crunched underfoot. He lifted his boot from the powdered remains of a skull. Dozens more lined the steps all the way to the top. On the command dais there were hundreds of them piled in dusty heaps.

‘Here, brother-lieutenant.’ The Intercessor pointed to where the command throne should be.

In its place was a rippled mass of dull brass. At the base it appeared as metal curtains, as if poured over the throne and hardened quickly by some means. These took on more regular form as they went up. The hints of a great hand gripping the rest of a throne; a lump that could be the other. There was a chest perhaps, shoulders definitely, and clearest of all, a horned skull face with hollow eyes and a gaping, fang-toothed maw facing towards the oculus.

Areios looked at the captain. It was like nothing he had ever seen, either in his life before, or in his long sleep. The mass of metal looked like an abstract sculpture of a great daemon, twice his height and many times heavier, draped in cloth up to its neck. But it was not a sculpture. It radiated the same sense of wrongness that the eye-things on the Ideos had, only more potent.

‘Whatever this is, destroy it,’ he said.

The dais shook, loosening skulls that bounced down onto the main deck.

‘Brother-lieutenant, look!’ one of his men said.

A black crack ran up the brass skirt, joined by others, until they raced all over the folded metal, joining with each other and widening.

Molten light spilled from them, and the statue’s fingers moved.

Messinius could be rash. He had been told so since his earliest days as a Scout. It was a tendency he had always had. He should have waited for his men, but he could not. The priests were too much of a challenge to him. He might excuse himself by blaming the baleful influence of the Blood God’s rage, which throbbed palpably as his own pulse around the device and its governing machinery. But he knew it was his own pride that saw him break into a run past the inquisitor and pound across the polished blackstone floor.

‘For the Emperor! For the Avenging Son!’ he shouted.

He raised his plasma pistol, and fired.

The shot hit a priest in the stomach, but a flare of warp fire deflected most of its force, leaving his foe with a shallow burn across his battleplate. Messinius was quickly among them, trading blows with a traitor in a tall, horned helmet with no eye-lenses, only blank metal. It was clear now that all were Word Bearers. Their battleplate was highly individual, embellished with howling daemon mouths, but it was all the same colour, a deep red bordering on purple, and covered in tiny script that crawled when read. Flaps of parchment bore more of the same writing, some with flayed hands or faces still attached. They were infused with the tainted gifts of their patrons, exulting in their power while it consumed them. Messinius understood then why the daemons had been kept back from the rock. The creatures of Khorne had no love for sorcerers, and he wondered what hellish alliance brought the Word Bearers into the service of the Crusade of Slaughter. His musings were cut short by the haft of the priest’s staff

crashing against the muzzle of his helm, stunning him.

There were eight in total. His armour systems ranked them all as high threat. Half were preoccupied by the Space Marine Inceptors firing at them from the edge of the machine plaza, and were moving to counter them. That left four for him. They were advancing slowly on him, arcane power burning around their force weapons.

‘I have been rash,’ he said to them. ‘For that, I shall atone when I return to the ranks of my brothers.’ He sidestepped another blow from the priest. ‘Until then, accept this as my apology.’

He lunged suddenly, taking the priest unawares, punching him hard in the face. The explosion caused by his disruption field shattered the traitor’s helmet. The impetus of his fist took the head clean off, and half wrenched the power pack from the traitor’s armour. The priest fell down. The other three squared up to him. Without challenge or insult, they raised their arms, and screamed out for the aid of their gods.

Messinius charged towards them, but made it no further than a few feet. He was caught by black light pouring from the priests’ staffs, which wrapped itself about his neck, waist and left arm. It was solid enough when it had him, crushing him, but when he swiped at it with his power fist the weapon passed clean through. The middle priest stepped forward and yanked his staff backwards, lifting Messinius from the ground.

The bestial visage this one had was no mask, but was the man’s face warped by Chaos into something from a child’s nightmare. Fire glowed in his eye sockets and skeleton’s mouth, and he laughed.

‘Do you wish to call upon your False Emperor, so He may witness your death?’ he said. He had no tongue. Flames licked around his chrome teeth when he spoke.

Messinius tried to lower his left arm, to bring his plasma gun onto the targets before him, but he could not. His efforts only caused his finger to twitch, and the weapon discharged without effect towards the engine. The blackstone was powering for another strike, making the air shake and the outlines of his foes shiver.

‘Where is your Emperor now?’

The black tendrils squeezed. Ceramite creaked.

‘He is everywhere, fallen son of Colchis,’ said Rostov.

The inquisitor appeared from nowhere, behind the sorcerer. His power

sword hummed into life, then thrust through the waist joint below the traitor's backpack. The point scraped up, and emerged through the gap above the breastplate. Matter shattered around it, blood boiling off explosively. The sorcerer turned to deal with this unexpected threat, but was dead before he completed the move, falling heavily and tearing the sword from Rostov's grip.

One of the priests flung a bolt of writhing energy at Rostov. The inquisitor made a warding gesture, but it was not enough to stop the blast and he was thrown backwards. The distraction allowed Messinius to move, and he brought down his plasma gun far enough to shoot, burning a hole through the chest of one of the priests, and killing his primary heart. The sorcerer staggered, his psy-light dimming. He fumbled for his sidearm, but Messinius broke free of the fading blackness, and with a mighty blow he broke the traitor's armour, and flung him dead to the ground.

One priest remained. They stared each other down. Orange luminescence grew at the tip of his staff. Messinius' gun had not finished charging its coils. He judged himself too far to make the run before the psyker unleashed his power.

A lasgun shot, plasma stream and pulse round hit the psyker simultaneously: primary heart, secondary heart and head. The lasgun shot failed to penetrate, the plasma stream burned through the outer layers of armour, but did not damage the flesh much beneath, but the pulse round was perfectly placed, taking the sorcerer through the left eye, and he fell dead. 'Rostov's xenos,' Messinius said. The inquisitor's band was advancing behind him at a brisk, crouched jog, so fragile in that battleground of daemons and engineered humanity. He had rarely seen such bravery, and they were deadly.

'That's another you owe me, hero,' said Cheelche.

'That is a gun of the t'au,' he said disapprovingly.

'Yeah? So what? The t'au make the best guns, better than the backwards tech you people cling to.' She shrugged and waddled past him to her master.

Rostov was getting to his feet. His armour had an ugly hole in it, but he seemed unharmed.

'Don't worry, my lord,' said Antoniato. 'She's always showing me up too. The best shot I've ever seen.'

The blackstone device screeched, sending them all reeling. Another

discharge speared through the sky, this one hitting one of the Space Marine cruisers amidships. Its power cut out all at once, and it was sent adrift away from the asteroid, a million daemons swarming over its hull and ripping to get at the meat inside.

‘We are at the point of victory,’ said Rostov fiercely. His teeth were red with his own blood. Not wholly unharmed, then. ‘Cheelche, bring me the artefact.’

Chapter Thirty-Eight

THE CAPTAIN AWAKES

XENOS TECH

VANLESKUS TAKES HER CHANCE

A series of krak grenades detonated at the helm of the *Blood King*, taking out a large part of the vessel's controls. In response, light pulsed along crooked tracks under the deck, like signals along a nerve, all leading to the brazen statue. The cracks in the metal grew.

'Get back,' said Areios.

The two Intercissors on the platform with him backed up, guns trained on the statue. Metal flaked away in glowing chunks. Black fingers flexed.

The Space Marines opened fire, riddling the metal with bolt-rounds. Explosions peppered the statue. The head started to move, but slowly, as if in pain, and Areios thought the threat might be dealt with easily, but when a melta charge went off by the primary weapons control station, the metal coating on the statue glowed with sudden heat, and the being imprisoned within surged to its feet.

Molten metal sprayed across Areios and his two men. The captain of the ship confronted the boarders, revealing itself as a muscular daemon fifteen feet tall. Rivers of hot brass poured off hideous armour. The skull face was alive with infernal light. One hand was a giant claw, the other ended in a gristly mass of bone, flesh and metal, shaped in blasphemous parody of an Imperial boltgun.

Bolt-rounds deflected harmlessly from its front. It lifted its gun fist and screeched. A giant shell shot from the muzzle on a burst of purple fire, hitting one of the two Intercessors on the dais in the chest. His armour shattered, and he was carried off the dais by the impact, arms wheeling, to crash down on the floor. There the infernal bullet detonated, and the Space Marine exploded into a thousand wet pieces.

‘Take it down!’ Areios commanded. He and his surviving companion leapt from the dais, landing heavily on the main deck. The daemon pulled forward. Dozens of input leads uncoiled from its back, seemingly growing directly from its flesh to link it with the ship. They creaked as it pulled against them, heaving to be free. All of the Space Marines on the lower deck were firing now. Bolt-rounds crackled off the creature. A plasma stream burned across its shoulder, a hit that would have killed a Space Marine, but the daemon merely screamed its outrage and heaved harder.

The cables parted with singing notes. Blood spurted from their ruptured ends. Instrument lumens flickered all over the deck, and power died. Ill-maintained klaxons gave out sorrowful honks as the *Blood King* pitched forward into a slow dive.

The ship was coming under heavier fire as VanLeskus’ own task force drove through the centre of the Chaos fleet. *Blood King* was not the largest or most powerful of the enemy vessels, but the discipline it imposed on the ships around it made it a prime target.

‘Bring it down!’ Areios shouted. ‘Or we are all lost!’ He called for reinforcement from his beleaguered rearguard, knowing that it would cost them in blood to leave their fight.

The daemon’s fist opened fire, giving a report more akin to a choking spasm than a gunshot, each bolt blasting a Space Marine down with such violence there was little left. Areios wondered how such a thing, encased in metal, without a command crew, could command a ship, let alone a fleet. The galaxy he had woken to was insane. Messinius and his kind had been facing this for millennia. There were no rational answers to what he saw. The only possible response was violence.

The Space Marines’ guns blazed. Divots of fleshy bronze chipped from the daemon’s hide, but it did not stop its slow advance, nor did it stop blasting them from their feet, slowly, one at a time, like an agriworker on pest control. They were nothing to it. Areios could feel its contempt.

Guns ran dry. The last bolt-rifle magazines clattered to the floor. Coolant cells for plasma weapons rang empty from the deck.

The daemon lifted its head, roared, then charged.

It was unstoppable, slamming warriors aside with its bulk so hard their armour broke, stamping on those who fell. Its claws sheared through ceramite like it was cloth, and Adeptus Astartes blood sizzled on the thing's baking skin. Warriors who weighed hundreds of pounds in their armour were smashed aside like straw men. Areios threw down his pistol, and drew his sword. The power field activated with a hard crack. The daemon turned towards him, the struggling Dessnius in its fist. It ignored the jabbing of the Techmarine's servo-arms as if they were the slaps of a child.

The command deck shook as Imperial cannons pounded the craft.

'Fight me!' Areios called. 'Prove yourself to your bloody god by fighting me!'

The thing laughed. It held up its gun to Dessnius' chest, put a bullet in him and dropped his broken remains. Then it spoke.

'I destroy your men and you think yourself a worthy opponent?' it growled. Its voice came from everywhere. 'I who have earned the praise of Khorne for my service. Who have brought to wreckage a million ships. I, who was once a mortal man, denied the gifts you take for granted. I, who chose my path, and reached the end, while all the others died in bloody ruin at my feet. I, who master Khorne's rage, and turn it against his foes in holy slaughter?'

It halted in front of him. Hot, empty eye sockets stared down. Areios took his sword hilt in both hands.

'You are not worthy,' it said.

The talon swipe caught Areios by surprise, but he caught the blow on his sword edge, twisting the blade so the force of it spilled off and sent the claws past his head, or he would have lost the weapon. Ancient technology fought with unnatural power, the disruption field blazed, and the tip of a claw clanged to the ground.

Areios was ready for the next blow, a pile-driving punch from the gun fist. He pivoted out of the way, dodging both the hit and the bullet meant for him. He swung his blade up in a wide arc, adding the momentum of his turn to the swing, and cut across the daemon's upper arm. Burning ichor fountained from the wound, and the daemon roared with anger. The blood-

metal splashed across Areios' eyes, obscuring his view for a crucial moment. He pawed at his eye-lenses, clearing them in time to see the talon spearing towards him, but not to avoid it. The tips of the claws ripped through his armour, shattering power conduits and opening the chestplate. His undersuit tore. Blood welled from his chest.

Areios fell back onto the ground, where he struggled to rise.

The daemon licked his blood from its hand. ***'You are not like the others,'*** it said. ***'You taste different. Something new, but just as pathetic.'***

Areios got to his knees, bringing up his sword to guard his face, but he was lost. He stared down the repellent barrel of the daemon's gun.

'I am the same as all the others who came before me, the same as all those who fought for the Emperor and died to ensure things like you were ended. I am Ferren Areios, and I do my service gladly.'

'How poetic,' the daemon said. ***'Death to the False Emperor.'***

Explosions ripped all around the monster's face as fragstorm assault grenades detonated in clouds. Shrapnel scythed everywhere, spanging off Areios' armour and digging into his exposed flesh.

The roar of auto boltstorm gauntlets followed. Hundreds of rounds expended in seconds, carving out a deep crater in the daemon's chest. Areios saw the weakness, and threw himself forward into the deadly hail of fire. His own warriors' guns ripped at his armour. A bolt wedged itself in his thigh, blowing out a scoop of muscle. Pain almost undid him, but he kept his focus, angling the point of his sword at the daemon's wound, and thrusting it deep into its chest. Pushed by the impetus of his leap, it scraped through and out the beast's back in a spray of lightning and crackling detonations.

The bolt-fire stopped. Areios hung from his sword, his wounded leg-unable to support him. The daemon swayed over him, its limbs locked once more into the form of a statue. Areios pushed himself back from its topple, sprawling onto the ground as it hit the deck with a resounding crash.

He looked up. Most of the men who had come onto the bridge with him were dead. The last few were emerging from cover. Three Aggressors stood in the command deck gateway, the underslung guns on their forearms smoking.

His armour display sang out warnings of multiple breaches and systems failures. Mercifully, his pharmacopeia was functioning, and it flooded his

body with pain-nullifiers. They numbed his senses, but his mind raced.

He had never felt so alive.

The *Blood King* continued its slow plunge away from the plane of battle, now being pounded by several Imperial ships. The void was full of wreckage, of furious explosions, blinding flashes and silent death.

‘Contact VanLeskus,’ he said. ‘I would like to leave this place alive.’

Messinius’ Space Marines moved towards those priests who had chosen to face the Inceptors, pushing them back towards the device. The flesh-metal meld of machine casings burned with a frightful stench. The Inceptors could go no closer in the air to the spinning blackstone device, and backed off, landing and taking up position at the edges of the plaza. Warriors on foot came up the stairs, Intercessors, Hellblasters, and lastly Aggressors. Half of them advanced on the centre, while the others turned about to keep the armies of daemons at their back. Lacrante realised that this advance was not a sign of triumph, but that they stood on the precipice of defeat; the Space Marines were taking refuge around the device.

Cheelche knelt before Rostov. He hurriedly undid her pack, the whole back of which folded down, revealing inside a block of dull, silvery metal. At first Lacrante thought it was featureless, but then Rostov and Antoniato pulled it out, and he saw that a single line was cut into it across the middle, and a small cartouche was impressed on the centre of one face.

‘Here! Here!’ Rostov was shouting, pointing at the central bank of machines. He and Antoniato dragged the cube over.

Lacrante looked past the inquisitor. Daemons surrounded the Space Marines on all sides. Warriors in different colours stood shoulder to shoulder, their bolters pouring out a wall of fire. Plasma weapons and flamers scoured away sections of the advancing horde, but as he watched he saw warriors cast down their emptied main armaments and take out their pistols, and when they were exhausted, their knives. Daemons crashed into their lines. The Space Marines fought bravely, but their numbers were dwindling, while those of the foe never lessened.

He turned to the lord lieutenant.

‘How much ammunition do they have?’ he asked.

Messinius stared at his men. ‘Not enough.’

Lacrante looked back to Rostov, expecting to see them engaged in arcane

rituals beyond his comprehension. Instead, the inquisitor and Antoniato were swinging the metal block between them, like common labourers about to toss a heavy load into a cargo-8. Toss it they did, straight at the machinery. He expected it to crash through; instead it exploded like water, liquid metal showering all over the Dark Mechanicum devices controlling the blackstone engine before sinking into them without trace.

Overhead, the blackstone engine continued its thrumming spin.

‘It didn’t work,’ he gasped.

He looked at Messinius. He felt numb.

‘I won’t die a coward,’ he said, and powered up his hellgun.

‘Nobody’s dying!’ shouted Antoniato. He came running from the machines with Rostov. ‘Get into cover!’

Lacrante followed, skidding around the smouldering remains of a machine node. Messinius stayed where he was, staring at the device.

‘Stay down,’ said Rostov. ‘Do not run. If you get outside the emanation point and are exposed directly to the blast it will annihilate your soul. If the engine does not come down on top of us, we have a chance.’

‘What’s happening?’ said Lacrante.

‘Xenos technology, my friend,’ said Antoniato. ‘Watch.’

The light emitted by the Dark Mechanicum machines was changing from an angry red to a cold, steady green. Silver lines spread out over the devices, eating into them like acid, then he saw the silver was not consuming them, but reworking them, changing them to something else. Tendrils of silver spread across the ground from the machines, like roots at first, then forming regular lines that spread and connected, linking the changing machine node to others, and infecting those too with ruthlessly regular circuit patterns. The blackstone floor made a sound like cracking glass, and grooves appeared in the surface, spreading also, glowing the same, cold green light. As they multiplied their spread accelerated, until they were running swiftly over the ground all over the plaza.

The blackstone engine slowed. It began a pulsing hum, and a heavy feeling washed over Lacrante with each beat. The green lightning ceased. The red fires went out.

All of a sudden the device came apart, the great spears falling away from the hub, crashing down onto the landscape around the plaza, crushing combatants from both sides. The hub remained, wobbling madly on its axis,

until it too came loose, and was flung away like a giant's slingstone.

The ground was thrumming, and green light ran spider-swift over everything. There was the sound of rock on rock, and he saw the first of the spears thrown clear of the engine rising up on the plain, the green light playing all over it. Another grumbled upright, then another. When three were erect, the green lightning returned to link them, but this time it was cleaner, purer, and when it danced down from the pinnacles of each spear tip and lashed through the daemonic army, the creatures vanished. He saw then that they were not spears, but great obelisks, chipped, abused, but their shape was clear. Something had made these, long ago.

Another obelisk rose up, then another, until all eight were pointing skywards in a circle around the plaza. The obelisks were not perfectly aligned, they wobbled, their bases were ragged, and they were of differing heights. There was no telling how large the structures they were taken from had been, but Lacrante had the feeling he was seeing only a vestige of their power.

The asteroid shook. The pulse grew in intensity, until the tremors ripped at his guts. The daemons screeched, their cries of victory turning to anger, then to fear. The circle of Space Marines contracted, their numbers now much reduced, but the daemons did not follow, instead they wavered, then turned and fled.

'Lord lieutenant! Get down!' cried Rostov.

Messinius stared at them.

The pulsing tremors reached a crescendo, changing in pitch and tempo to a constant, bone-shaking hum. The green lightning became more regular, steadier, growing into a curtain between the obelisks that was so intense it seemed solid.

Just as Lacrante thought his skull would burst, the light flew outwards in every direction, and reality was upended.

Lacrante had a fleeting impression of daemons evaporating and Space Marines collapsing to the ground. A deadness smothered his heart, and he experienced a lessening of himself. His last sensations were seeing Messinius standing there, watching, and hearing Cheelche hiss through gritted teeth.

'Bloody xenos,' she said.

Then blackness so profound it was heavier than any death could ever be

pulled at him, and he was gone from the world for a while.

Athagey could count the remaining time of her life in seconds. The hellship remained clamped to the side of the *Saint Aster*. The daemons were butchering their way through the Space Marines, ripping them to pieces with their claws and swords. Sons of Dorn retaliated with such perfection, Athagey felt privileged to see them fight before she died, but for every daemon they slew two more stepped through the breach onto the deck, which steamed and writhed under their touch. She loosened her sidearm in its holster. Her crew were doing the same, abandoning their stations, taking cover and preparing to sell themselves to the last. The creatures emanated waves of pure rage, but she was proud that none of her company succumbed this time; they waited with their guns ready and prayers to the Emperor on their lips.

The last Space Marine fell down eviscerated. Red bodies were heaped high around the site of their last stand, but the daemons were legion, and more were coming through. They hefted their swords and formed into a loose phalanx around their leader, a creature twice the size of its followers, carrying a sword as long as Athagey was tall. It raised one massive claw and clenched it.

'Blood for the Blood God,' it hissed.

The psy-oculus set up an eerie wail. Everyone was staring fear-struck at the Neverborn, but Athagey noticed the alarm even as the daemons charged.

The energy wave from the blackstone device hit the battle group. The *Saint Aster's* void shields collapsed. The wave passed through the metal of the vessel and into the crew's flesh, and Athagey felt something vital lift from her body. She had a wrenching sensation that she was duplicated, or perhaps she had always been that way, two parts of one whole. Raging light and a scream of dying universes blasted her mind.

She held on to herself, feeling her spirit pulled away from the meat of her body. It was painful to her, but to the daemons it was annihilation. They screamed abominably as they were wiped to smears of glowing corpusant.

Everyone was screaming. Athagey felt the attention of unwelcome eyes on her from some place beyond the here and now.

The daemon ship was lifted up on the glowing blast and wrenched from the *Saint Aster's* hull. As it was torn free from its prey, daemoniac flesh

withered and became necrotic, flaking off into space; teeth detached and floated away before evaporating into nothing. The whole shuddered and died. Confronted by its own impossibility, the daemonic ceased to be, leaving clean void and the corroded hulk of a dead Imperial ship, tumbling end over end into the night.

Then the energy pulse was gone, racing into space, and the ship was adrift, its void shields burned out, tocsins wailing at the dangerous reaction of the warp engines to the wave.

Athagey found herself on the floor. The data claws she wore on her right hand were broken, and her wrist was sprained. She cradled her arm to her chest and pushed herself back into her command throne. The entire crew was affected, lying still, most unconscious, some groaning, a few like her of rare fortitude shrugging off the effects of the blackstone emission and shakily returning to their duties.

Lights flickered. The ship's systems seemed unaffected by the blast front, so long as they were rooted completely in the material realm. Those that weren't had suffered. A number of servo-skulls were dead on the floor, and at the rear of the room where servitors were linked in series to the ship many lay inert, smoke curling from their cooked brains. The portal was gone, as were the foe, leaving only their bloody handiwork behind to show they had ever been there at all.

Athagey was too weak to talk. All she could do was slump in her chair, her feet thrust before her at awkward angles. She tried several times before she remembered how to speak.

'Open the oculus,' she said. Her tongue was thick in her mouth.

Nobody responded. Clumsily, she pawed at a control board set into her throne arm until she had the necessary interface available, and keyed the oculus open herself. The shutters swivelled aside and withdrew into the armoured mullions of the great window. Although the ship was yawing out of control and taking the oculus away from the rift, she could see the blast wave's effect on it, and she could scarcely credit what she saw.

As the energy blast hit the tear, it rolled it up, like coloured cloth tidied away from a black floor. Already it had receded well beyond a safe distance, the gas and energy wreathing the rift dissipating quickly once the gash in the fabric of space was closed. The pulse raced on, accelerating against natural law, as if its consumption of the stuff of the warp energised

it. For millions of miles behind them, the rift vanished completely from space, until it was a sickly glow far away upon the horizons of infinity.

Finnula pulled herself up from the deck. Drool streamed from her mouth, and she was shaking; still she managed to key open a widecast vox-channel.

‘All ships, report.’

Nothing came back. She accessed another channel and tried again. Static hissed over the network.

‘All ships, all ships report,’ she repeated.

A tense pause. Static jumped. A voice came out of it, distant and weak.

‘Vox Lexica reports.’

‘Coming Light reports,’ came another.

More people were returning to their stations. Helmsmen worked to right the ship, firing manoeuvring jets to halt its slow rotation.

‘Ars Bellus reports.’

More affirmations of life came in from the surviving escorts and the remaining Space Marine craft. More of the crew were recovering. Noise returned to the bridge, mostly cross-checks and damage reports. Alarms were shut off. The groans of the wounded and the weeping of those whose minds had broken took their place.

‘Psy-oculus, report,’ croaked Athagey. ‘Give me scry-status on the rift.’

Hurried enquiries were made of the machines. Lieutenant Gonan delivered their verdict.

‘Psy-oculus is badly damaged, but indications are that the enemy are gone. The rift has receded beyond the range of immediate return augurs.’

In the dark, the asteroid floated, its blackstone burden inert upon the surface. The daemon ship had passed out of human sight, its speeding corpse a dull orange signum on the tactoliths, rune tags reading ‘threat negligible’. Battle light flickered still far away, where VanLeskus took on the main enemy fleet. Whatever happened there, this was undeniably a victory.

Finnula turned around, half holding herself up on the instruments. Her legs bounced like they would give out under her at any moment.

‘Well, Eloise, if she survived, I think we can tell VanLeskus that we won.’

Athagey shifted in her command throne, and leaned forward. Her strength was already returning.

‘No, Finnula, as much as I would like to claim credit, I think we will tell

her that Rostov won.'

The *Blood King* yawed out of control, plunging down through the battle. Areios' message finally got through, and VanLeskus ordered all fire upon it to cease immediately.

She ran her eyes over the main hololith. Battle Group Betaris had taken twenty per cent losses, but had punched through to the other side of the enemy fleet. Battle Group Alphas' split task forces embraced the outside of the formation, harrowing their flanks and bunching them up, while her own group was following in the wake of Betaris, forcing the gap wider, waves of bombers targeting ships already damaged by Betaris' run.

'Madame fleetmaster!' an excited voice relayed. 'The rift is closed. Battle Group Saint Aster has succeeded.'

A wild cheer went up from the strategium.

'Shhh, shhh,' she said. Her eyes were fixed on the far side of the battle. They were going to win, the question was by how much. For her, only total victory would do. 'One more piece remains to enter play.'

Minutes passed, then another report.

'Battle Group Delpharis is entering the battlesphere.'

VanLeskus turned her attention to a true-pict depiction. Visible through scintillating wreckage and flashing explosions, a warp egress was forming some tens of thousands of miles away. Ships speared from the warp on the far side of the enemy.

'There we have it,' she said with satisfaction. 'Send orders to Groupmaster Grunfeld to engage at full speed. Put out a general order to the fleet. As follows – Fleet Tertius, all groups, attack. Split them, hunt them. Finish this.'

The Slaughter Crusade was trapped between the two Imperial forces, divided down the middle, and the isolated groups enveloped.

Its annihilation was to take only four hours.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

SCRIBUM-ERRANT

1/8923-FG-4

JOURNEY'S END

‘Nawra Nison,’ Nawra said, holding up the missive she had carried for so long. ‘Scribum Processus, Departamento Processium Quintus, missive sorting division, scribum-errant claim ratified. I perform His will.’ The words had become reflexive since she first said them. The day after the stink river, she had said them so many times.

‘Hive bottom,’ the man in the booth said disinterestedly. He looked up at her. ‘Which adept are you here to petition?’ There was only a single small oval opening in the yellowed plastek surrounding him, and his voice had a muffled, submarine quality. He spoke loudly to overcome it.

‘1/8923-FG-4,’ she said. She had memorised the number. Every night she had gone to sleep with it whirling around her head, chasing her into uneasy dreams.

The man at the desk marked down her name and her destination in a thick ledger. He tossed a metal token into the security drawer at the front of his desk and shoved it out with unnecessary force. The rasp-squeak of it frightened her. He glowered at her when she was slow to take it.

‘You are holding up the line,’ he said.

She reached into the tray gingerly, fearing he would yank it shut, crushing the bones of her hand and bursting her dirty flesh. He did not. Instead he

stared at her with open contempt and waved her through. The rusty turnstile pushed against her legs and clanked round. Another dirty, exhausted person took her place before the booth.

After the stink river she had found there were protocols uphived to accommodate errantry, with stations laid out as regularly as those for pilgrims heading to the major cathedra on the surface. She was surprised by that, thinking she'd have to fight every step of the way. There was not much food, there was not much water, but there was enough, and there were small shrines where she could sleep for a few hours a night. There were unpleasant people mixed in with those on genuine errands, not a few of whom were insane. Twice she'd had to push off grasping hands in the night. She'd seen a fight where a man was killed.

She was tired, she was filthy, she had lost her shoes, her clothes were torn, but she was almost there. The tabularum of adept 1/8923-FG-4 was only a few miles ahead. Past the booth the line continued, each scribum taking one shuffling step at a time. She wondered if any of their petitions would be accepted, and the missives heard. She had faith that hers would be. In her mind, she had built a picture of 1/8923-FG-4 as a saintly man, an ascetic, in fine robes, in a wonderful office decorated with lights and pretty sculptures. She could almost see him, smiling at her, saying all would be well, as kind as a priest. A real priest, not like Shriver Leonard. He would know the Emperor had sent her, and because she had fulfilled her mission, she would be granted a portion of His grace.

The line continued its sluggish progress. It wound up steps, and through open arches she saw the world become more beautiful, level by level. A smile spread over her face, so exhausted she experienced a state that was neither sleep nor wakefulness. What did it matter that the finery of these higher levels was tattier than she expected, that the carpets were threadbare and the lumens broken? To her, it was a manifestation of the Emperor's heavens, light and lovely.

The line approached a large door. It took an hour to pass through, and come into a most wondrous place.

She was on a gallery landing. A huge, open space yawned to her right. On the far side were many other gallery landings, piled up like perfectly stacked documents. A sense of quiet concentration filled it. Important work was undertaken here. In her daze she wandered out of line, towards the

balustrade. She peered over the edge, down a dizzying drop, where thousands of offices shone little green ready lights, and cast welcoming cones of yellow lumen glow out of their open doors. There were hundreds of people in line on the landings, for today was errantry day. She had no idea if that was a lot or not, but it seemed many. Servo-skulls swooped and dipped between the levels, carrying scroll cases in metal pincers. She stared dazedly. This was the holiest place she had ever been.

A meaty hand grabbed her and pushed her back into line. Literati enforcers armed with stout truncheons policed the queues. These were of a different sub-order to the ones in the lower hive, and wore ribbons crossed over their chests full of parchment scraps. The man shoved her and she staggered into the wall. He was more devout than his fellows, and had forced the pins holding the parchment through his clothes and into his flesh, so that bright blood spotted the cloth. She stared at them dumbly. Everything there seemed colourless in the face of the blood, its redness the sole vibrant hue in a world of grey and beige.

‘In line! In line! In line!’ he screamed into her face. ‘In line!’

She spent hours in a fugue. When she faltered, the hands of kinder petitioners steadied her. As she went further, the line moved faster, men and women leaving it as they reached the offices they sought, yet hers was still ahead. She watched these others go with magnanimity, glad that they had reached their destination, knowing that hers would be better than theirs.

Bells rang for worship. Those in the queue stopped and prayed. At midday, two pairs of literati passed down the line, the first doling out a ladle of water, the second a ladle of soup. Both Nawra was obliged to receive in her hands, gulping the water down before they slopped in the soup; she had no other receptacle.

The shift klaxon rang. Still the queue progressed. There comes a point where the human body will not tolerate exhaustion, and Nawra was approaching it. Then, by a miracle, she noticed the numbers were counting up: 1/8899, 1/8900, 1/8910... A few men left the line at once, turning to their left like soldiers on parade, and vanished into doorways.

The line surged forward. Ahead groups of people were shoving their way into the same room. Her heart sank when she reached the door and found it was 1/8923-FG-4. The door was open and there were many people inside, and that confused her. With rising apprehension, she went within.

A scene of devastation greeted her. The office had been upturned. Furniture was smashed. The wall panels had been wrenched free, cables and insulating materials filthy with the dust of millennia spilling out. Papers were scattered everywhere. She turned sideways to avoid the line of empty-handed people coming out of the inner room. A literati enforcer was shouting at them to move on, move on. Dazed faces staggered past her. A well-dressed adept was arguing with the literati.

‘...intolerable situation, these messages are of the highest priority. Tell me, have you ever seen anything like this? Something is going on here, someone must be informed!’ He was red in the face, and greatly agitated.

‘My orders are to ensure order,’ said the literati enforcer. ‘You will have to take this matter up with my superiors.’

The adept gestured to the desk. It had been tossed over and then set upright again. At the corners the wood was bruised, showing soft yellow under the varnish. Another of the literati was bellowing at the people to drop their missives and get out.

‘Look at it, man! Can you not see the Emperor’s hand in this?’ the adept said.

Then it was her turn. She stepped up. There were papers piled in no particular order, hanging off the desk, hundreds of them. As she watched, a small heap gave way and escaped across the room.

‘Paper on the desk, then leave!’ the second enforcer shouted at her. Her ears rang.

She held out her grubby missive, and placed it reverentially with the others. She read the words again, the content of it as familiar to her as the lines on her hands, though still not completely understood.

‘For the Lord Commander’s eyes... zone of the dead... Nephilim anomaly... probable xenos activity on an enormous scale...’ and its signatory, the exotic sounding but by now so familiar ‘Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron.’

Her gaze moved onto another. ‘Nephilim anomaly,’ it also read. ‘High xenos activity levels... non-functioning of astrotelepathy. Advise immediate response.’ And another. ‘Anomaly, Nephilim Sector, immediate action required. At rate of growth, Manumantia will soon be engulfed... ships of soulless... damned vessels. Nephilim anomaly... Nephilim anomaly... Nephilim anomaly.’

On and on it went, on every page, from dozens of sources.

She glanced around at the tired, dirty people. They were all there for the same reason. How could this be?

The literati enforcer grabbed her and manhandled her away.

‘No,’ she said. Her voice was a croak, her lips raw.

He shoved her hard towards the door.

Another bell rang. The two literati nodded at one another. ‘That’s it!’ said the one arguing with the adept, ignoring his continued protestations. ‘Everybody out! This office is to be sealed at this hour by command of Adept Duocentio Flavius Ashkoo. Everybody out!’

‘You will be hearing from me about this!’ the adept said.

‘Save it for my lords,’ said the literati enforcer. ‘I have ears only for the holy words of He on the throne.’

Nawra was propelled out of the door. Those still to gain entrance wailed in consternation. There was a maintenance team waiting outside with a plasma torch. Against the protests of the adept, they began sealing up the door as soon as everyone was out. The glare of the plasma torch drove the crowd back. Hot metal smell stung their nostrils.

‘This is ridiculous,’ the adept said. ‘Guelphrain has been gone for months, and you are sealing it up now, while supplicants are coming, all with the same message? This is insanity!’

‘This is Terra,’ said the scribum-militant, as if that excused it all. ‘These things take time to process, you know that. The proper channels must be followed.’ He adopted a more emollient tone. ‘I am doing my duty as is required, adept. Soon there will be another occupant here. The office is out for tender to the scribal lords. It’s not often a hereditary position like this comes up. Competition will be fierce. If there is cause to investigate this upset, it will be done. The wheels of the Great Machine turn slowly, but finely. The Emperor knows all.’

‘That will take too long,’ said the adept. ‘Something is happening.’

‘It is the Emperor’s will.’

‘No,’ the adept said. He pointed back at the door. He was shaking with anger. ‘That is the Emperor’s will. You are acting blindly. I will be back,’ he said, wagging his finger. It was an ineffectual gesture. Powerless, he left.

The crew welded the door closed with an efficiency uncharacteristic of Terran bureaucracy, and marched off carrying their equipment. The crowd

milled around, then they too dispersed, taking the literati with them, who now their duty was done were absorbed into the mass. Nawra was left alone in front of the cooling door.

She dropped to the floor, and began to cry.

Chapter Forty

FLEET PRIMUS DEPARTS

I WAS THERE

CRUSADE'S BEGINNING

There must have been a great celebration marking the departure of Fleet Primus from Terra. Fabian witnessed none of it, being confined to the librarium where he laboured night and day. He was informed that the fleet was due to sail, and he was dimly aware of the ship's ratings rushing about to make it happen. His world was narrowed to the dot of ink on the nib of his pen, and he stopped returning to his quarters to sleep, snatching a couple of hours now and then under his desk, eating his meals there, until he became so focused that the menials serving him fresh food were taking full plates away with them.

His mind fell back into the past, becoming a conduit for events centuries ago. He understood that in the life of the universe ten thousand years was an eyeblink, but for him it seemed unimaginably distant, and he underwent long periods of mental dislocation trying to comprehend the gulfs of time.

He only knew they had departed when Viablo tapped him on the shoulder with a long finger, and huskily said, 'That's it, we're under way.'

Fabian looked blearily up. Viablo's face swam in his vision like a balloon, tethered to some faraway meteorological station, dancing on alien winds. He was the fourth of the historitors, recruited a few weeks ago. He was odd-looking, with a low-g native's bizarre physiology and strange habits, but

Fabian liked him.

He blinked. His eyes were dry as desert stone. He must have looked like he did not understand, and perhaps he did not, for Viablo repeated, more gently, 'We have left Terra, Fabian, we are on our way to war.'

Viablo's words unlocked a door in Fabian's mind, and the present came rushing back at him, all the creaks and rumbles of a voidship, the barely perceptible hum of human life and the machine activity that sustained it. Under all that there was another note he had not noticed before, deep and thrumming. The ship had gained a voice and was singing to itself.

'The engines?'

Viablo nodded. He was a solemn soul. Fabian had once seen a tree when he was very young. He imagined that if that tree had a human face, it would look like Viablo, tall, woodenly sad, and far up above him.

'We left nine hours ago. Did you not feel the acceleration?'

Fabian shook his head. He remembered his ink pot developing an unexpected determination to jump off the edge of the table, but that hadn't lasted. He had caught it and carried on writing, quickly forgetting about it.

'Have you finished?'

Viablo nodded. 'Just. I have a couple of things I'd like to tidy up a bit, the presentation, not the content. I am ready for him.'

Fabian looked glumly at the tatty notebooks he'd scrawled his history into. There was a pile of them next to his right hand, most sprouting unruly tongues of paper where he'd stuffed in supplemental notes. His presentation was awful, when he used to take such care.

'Before all this, I thought writing forbidden histories in twenty-minute bursts every day was hard.' He smiled. 'I had no idea.'

'Are you nearly done?'

Fabian nodded. 'A few more pages. That's all.'

Viablo gripped his shoulder. 'I'll see you tomorrow then.'

'Tomorrow,' said Fabian.

Viablo swayed off. He had a curious, lurching walk.

'Tomorrow,' Fabian repeated softly to himself. 'Tomorrow.' His eyes ran over the lines he had written. He was deep into an analysis of the consequences of the war, and realised then that some of what he had committed to paper could possibly be construed as critical of the returned primarch.

Scratch that, he thought. It *was* critical.

He sighed. Guilliman said he wanted the unvarnished truth, so that was what he was getting.

Besides, he thought as he set his pen to the paper again, it's much too late to change it now.

The pen scratched over the pages, and did so for several more hours.

Fabian was the last of them to see Roboute Guilliman, leaving him fretting throughout the ship's nominal day about what the primarch would think of his work. Eventually they came for him, and he was led through hushed halls where columns braced the deck with spreading arms like so many iron trees. The light of electro-flambeaux danced from polished metal surfaces. His guide wore the uniform of the Officio Logisticarum, but he was not a man Fabian knew, and he rebuffed Fabian's attempts at conversation.

A Primaris Space Marine in Ultramarines robes took charge of him. He introduced himself as equerry to the Imperial Regent, but though he did say his name, it fell out of Fabian's head as soon as it had been placed there. The Space Marine led him through the back corridors of the regent's quarters. Guilliman's accommodation on the *Dawn of Fire* was scarcely less palatial than his buildings on Terra. Even in those narrow places intended for menials, the walls were decorated, and every fitting was of the highest technology.

The Primaris Marine walked barefoot, making hardly any noise despite his immense size. The corridors were not designed for Space Marines, and his shoulders brushed the sides. The few servants they met bowed out of the way. In a little time, the equerry opened a door that he could pass through without stooping, and they entered the primarch's personal domain.

Fabian had been in the primarch's quarters a few times since they had come up to Fleet Primus, but he had never seen it so tidy. A transformation had come over the scriptorium. Before the departure from Terra it had been arranged chaotically, with books in heaps left open at important pages. Now they were all stowed away, and although there were books out, they sat on lecterns neatly, no longer disturbing the fine symmetry of the chamber.

The walls and ceiling were clad in dark woods. A parquet floor covered over the decking. It was all new, but felt ancient, a venerability lent by the thousands of old tomes on the shelves. The ship itself was very old, but he

didn't feel it anywhere but there, in that librarium.

The Space Marine opened a pair of steel doors. Beyond them were less crowded spaces decorated in the restrained style of Ultramar, with layouts dictated by the golden ratio, and the stone cladding the walls was pale marble. There, Guilliman waited for Fabian in a massive chair reinforced to support his and the Armour of Fate's combined weight. He indicated a human-sized piece of furniture. Thankfully, this was on a platform opposite the primarch, which allowed humans to stand at the table. Fabian hated the tall-chair arrangement he'd experienced elsewhere. It diminished a man to sit like a child.

'Fabian,' said Guilliman. 'It is good to see you. Please, take a seat.'

Fabian was obliged to climb a run of three steps to get to the platform, but it was better than the alternative.

Guilliman wore an expression of open, honest interest, but Fabian became flustered, fiddling with the stack of books and dossiers of notes he had brought with him.

'You have finished the task I set you? The history I require for the fleet commanders?'

'Yes, my lord.'

Guilliman waited. Fabian said nothing. Guilliman leaned forward a little. 'Please begin, historitor.'

'Ah, yes, well, the er, Concise History of the Great Heresy War is finished, you will be glad to hear.' He put his books down. 'It was a large undertaking but I am of course very grateful to be given this opportunity.' He pushed forward the stack of notebooks that contained the manuscript. 'Here it is, all finished.'

He winced at his repetition. Finished, finished, finished. Is that all he could say?

Guilliman reached over and pulled the pile towards him. Fabian felt immensely intimidated. His bladder squeezed with the unwelcome need to urinate. Guilliman rested his hand on the books, but did not open them.

'There was a series of popular romances published in the late thirty-third millennium that proved to be surprisingly accurate, at least in parts,' said Fabian. 'For flavour I utilised those quite heavily, but for the style, you understand, to make it readable. History has to be accessible, doesn't it? I think so.'

‘Fabian,’ said Guilliman softly.

‘My reasoning being that a lot of these people who need to read it, great lords and ladies though they are, and far above my level of intelligence and ability, and’ – he was going pink – ‘well, they are all very busy and if I made it engaging, without bending the truth, you see, so it is all true—’

‘Fabian!’ said Guilliman more firmly.

Fabian jumped. He had forgotten the power Guilliman could put into his voice.

‘My lord? My lord! I... Er... Sorry.’

‘You are babbling. Calm down. I understand this is important to you, and that you are afraid, but nothing terrible is going to happen. We have left Terra. Even if I find this work lacking, you will not be sent back to your old home. I will find you work with the Logos Historica Verita in a lesser capacity instead. Rest assured, you have already been useful, so please, slow down.’

‘I...’

‘Breathe, Fabian.’

‘Well. Well.’ He took in a deep breath. ‘Yes. Breathe.’

‘Better?’ said Guilliman. There was the hint of humour around his eyes. ‘Do you want some water? Maybe some wine?’

‘No, thank you.’ Fabian shook his head and gulped. ‘Better.’

Guilliman’s armour whined softly as he lifted his hand. ‘Then continue.’

‘As I was saying,’ Fabian said, deliberately now, though Emperor alone knew why he had started with the tone of his work. He had to continue, to save some face. ‘The tone I took from the romances. I...’

He realised he was gabbling again. He took a breath, and slowed down.

‘But the facts came from the primary sources, particularly from the personal notes of a man named... Kyril Sindermann?’

Suddenly convinced that he had the name wrong, though he had read it and reread it at least a thousand times in the last month, he dropped his bundle of notes on the table and searched through them, fumbling in his haste and taking much longer than he should have. He found it, eventually.

‘Sindermann,’ he confirmed. ‘Sindermann,’ as if saying it again would stop it from changing.

‘Stay calm,’ said Guilliman, radiating immense calm himself.

‘I am.’

‘You are not,’ said Guilliman. ‘I knew Sindermann. He had an interesting and long life. He was a good man.’

‘Yes. Quite a lot of his work bears the highest seals of the Inquisition.’

‘With good reason,’ said Guilliman. He wasn’t going to elaborate.

Guilliman drew the top notebook off the pile and flipped it open. It was a simple thing, low quality, with a card cover and stapled spine. Fabian had the best available to him, if he wanted it, but he thought that a waste. He felt more comfortable using scraps, like he had for so long. If the history were approved it would be transcribed into a better volume to be prepared for printing and eventual dissemination, but for the moment Guilliman was forced to hold the cardboard cover down with one mighty finger to stop it springing up.

Guilliman frowned as he read the first page. He must have taken it in in one draught, but he stared at the opening line a long time.

“‘I was there, the day the Emperor slew Horus.’” He read out the quote Fabian had chosen to open his work slowly, giving Fabian the fear that he had displeased his lord, but the primarch nodded approvingly. ‘An arresting first line. Good.’

‘I thought so,’ said Fabian with a touch of pride. ‘It is from Sindermann’s work, he had quite a way with words.’

‘Words were his craft, originally.’ Guilliman commenced turning the pages rapidly. ‘Good, good. This is very good, Fabian. You have not disappointed me.’

‘I have succeeded?’ Fabian said, fighting to stop his voice squeaking.

‘You have.’ Guilliman picked up the second book, and read that faster. Fabian thought he might have been able to tear through it so fast the pages would blur, had he not been held back by the clumsiness of his armour.

‘Yes. I am satisfied. I will review all of this, make notes, and then you shall prepare it for dissemination. Fleetmasters’ eyes only. They need to know what kind of war we are fighting, but no one else.’ He moved onto the third book. He paused before opening it and looked Fabian in the eye, something the historitor still felt physically painful. ‘You have brought something for me, I have brought something for you. In that box, over there, there is a gift.’

Fabian headed over to another table indicated by Guilliman. A long wooden case lay on the polished surface. He pointed at it and looked a

question at the primarch.

‘That’s the one, yes,’ said Guilliman. ‘Open it.’ Guilliman continued to flick through the stacked piles of notebooks, digesting in moments what had taken Fabian weeks of frantic work to pen.

There were two simple clasps holding the box closed. Fabian snapped both of them open, and lifted the lid. A pair of golden chains held the lid in position, stopping it from dropping back to the table.

Inside the box, couched in velvet, was a beautiful sword – a power sword, if the finned cooling unit near the hilt was any indication – long and straight and worked with designs the length of the fuller. A laspistol nestled below it, snub-nosed and aggressive-looking, despite the fine etching that covered its bronzed surface. There was a belt, a holster and a sheath in the box along with the weapons.

A cold rush of fear coursed through Fabian. Nobody had said anything about guns! He had not even considered them. Surely, he had thought, a historitor’s main weapon would be a pen? He looked back at the box and understood he had made some catastrophic assumptions about his new life.

Guilliman had reached the midway point of Fabian’s history. He finished the book he was on, and placed it neatly on the pile of the books he had already read.

‘Sergeant Hetidor reports that you have performed excellently in his physical conditioning sessions. Your health has improved remarkably. He recommends that you begin combat training soon, before the others, in fact. Apparently, you have the knack for it. He thinks you may excel.’

‘The others?’ said Fabian. He was so shocked he missed the implication of his own excellence, something that would ordinarily make him proud. ‘Combat training?’

‘Yes, Fabian. I am giving you weapons,’ said Guilliman slowly. ‘And you need to be able to use them. Pick up a power sword without learning its proper use and you’ll likely cut your own leg off.’ He laid both armoured hands flat on the table. ‘You really are not yourself today. This is not the most difficult of concepts to comprehend.’ Again, there was a little flash of humour.

Fabian looked back into the box.

‘But, but, what need have I of a sword and a gun?’ His face went white. If he was expected to bear weapons, he would be expected to kill, and that

meant he would also be expected to die.

Guilliman pulled a face that said it all, but he said it anyway.

‘Because I’m going to war, Fabian, and you’re coming with me, in case this most obvious of facts had escaped your attention. You know, the customary response when a primarch bestows a gift such as that is effusive thanks.’

‘Thank you?’ he managed in a small voice.

‘That will do,’ said the primarch. He got up. ‘Come with me.’

Fabian followed the primarch. Guilliman pushed open a set of beautifully inlaid wooden doors and took him through into another room that Fabian had never been in before.

He gasped at what he saw.

A mosaic floor radiated a starburst pattern out to a semicircular window fifty feet across. It was of a single piece of armourglass so flawless it appeared invisible, so the floor looked like it finished at the open void. Outside were dozens and dozens of enormous ships. Their plasma engines glowed soft blue. They were sailing above the plane of the ecliptic, and Sol shone from beneath and behind, lighting up the armada with stark, yellow light. The void was black as brushed fur, the stars diamond chips. There was no sound there, only the soft rumble of the *Dawn of Fire* as it pushed on through the void. Fabian was struck by a deep sense of peacefulness and blissful solitude.

Guilliman walked across to the window. The room was empty, and his heavy footsteps echoed. He turned back to Fabian, who remained in the door.

‘Come now, historitor, you need to observe this, for your records.’

Fabian hurried to join him. He pulled a notepad and an ink pencil from his belt pouch.

‘Fleet Primus,’ said the primarch. ‘We sail for Gathalamor, to take the warp gate there. At the Machorta Sound, we have had our first victory. Fleet Tertius has destroyed a large enemy force and prevented an attack into the heart of the Segmentum Solar. But there will be many battles to come. Thousands of them, and if we win them all, we may not win the war.’

Fabian wrote all this down in cramped shorthand.

‘But I tell you, Fabian, though I am a relic of another age, and my brothers are all gone. Though I am opposed, and the sky itself is wounded, I will

fight to the last breath. I will push the enemy out of Imperium Sanctus. I will do the same to whatever lies beyond the Rift, and bring order to the galaxy again. I will do all in my power to see that the Emperor's dream is not forgotten, and the nightmare that has taken its place is ended. One day, Fabian, perhaps you will write similar words to those of Sindermann, you too may pen "I was there" in pride.'

The returned and sainted primarch stared out over the force he had built, past the long convoys of ships arrowing towards the system's edge.

'It is time I lived up to my name, and became the Avenging Son again,' he said.

'The Indomitus Crusade has begun.'

Epilogue

THE HAND

GIFT AND A CURSE

AGENT OF THE WARMASTER

After three hours, the prisoner's screams stopped. Lacrante barely noticed. The parchment weighed heavily in his hand. He re-read it for the thousandth time, the terms that released him from all prior loyalties and bound him for life to the Inquisition. The blatant threats against his soul if he betrayed the ordo.

He shivered. It was cold in the *Omnes Videntes*. Its black metal greedily drew all heat from the air, and his breath steamed, but the document chilled him more. He supposed he should be terrified, but there was a numbness in his heart to match that troubling his limbs, and he merely felt uneasy at his change in fate. He had lost something when the blackstone engine had released its final wave, he was certain, and he was not alone in feeling that. They had returned to Fleet Tertius different. The campaign was going well. VanLeskus had regained nearly all the Imperium's lost territory already, and many heroes had been made, but the veterans of the blackstone battle were marked by their experience, and held themselves apart.

He looked around the austere room he and Cheelche waited in. The whole ship resembled a prison, even those parts where men walked free.

'Home sweet home,' said Cheelche. She grinned at him. He shifted uncomfortably. Cheelche had far too many teeth.

‘I suppose so,’ he said. The inquisitorial warship would be his home until he died, and that could be soon.

Lacrante rolled the parchment up and put it into its scroll case, which was by far the finest thing he had ever owned. It was apt, he thought, that his death warrant be so beautifully kept.

‘How do you feel, serving the Inquisition?’ she said.

‘One form of service is as valid as another,’ he said stiffly.

‘That’s your priests talking,’ she said.

‘How do you feel serving the Inquisition?’ he retorted. ‘You’re not even human. How do your people feel about it?’

He landed a harder blow than he intended. He still hadn’t decoded all Cheelche’s alien expressions, but he could see hurt.

‘We don’t talk about my people,’ she said stonily. She pulled her rifle in closer. She was never without it, and he found it easy to imagine her shooting him. The atmosphere grew chillier. At least the noise from the cell had stopped. He was grateful for that.

‘How did he do that?’ said Lacrante, searching for something to talk about that wouldn’t upset the xenos. ‘Come out of nowhere?’

‘We told you,’ Cheelche said proudly. Whenever she spoke about the inquisitor, it was with pride, like she was his mother. ‘He can shroud his presence and pass unseen. Lord Rostov insists his powers are weak, but he is modest.’

‘He can disappear and tell a man’s worth. You said he can do something else. What is it he can do?’ he asked.

Cheelche leaned forward, and grinned her hideous alien grin.

‘Pray you never find out,’ she said.

His eyes strayed to the cell door, and he remembered the prisoner’s screams.

Rostov shuddered and leaned against the corpse of the dead Traitor Marine for support, heedless of the slippery wetness of its peeled muscles. Touching his mind had been hard. The priest was steeped in the evil of his patrons, and no matter how pure Rostov tried to be, a little bit of the filth rubbed off every time.

Antoniato moved quietly around him, the instruments of the inquisitor’s art clicking on the metal tray. They were slicked with blood, but Antoniato

would see they were cleaned, ready for use again.

Nausea was his companion after the interrogations. He held on to the cross holding the body of the Apostle. Using his ability to touch the minds of those he tortured crippled him. To feel the pain and anguish of another being, even those so evil as to throw their lot in with daemons, was spiritually and morally ruinous, but it had to be done, for only in those moments of the greatest agony did his gift work best, and his mind might steal from theirs all the secrets they sought to keep. None could resist him, not even the minds of the Heretic Astartes. It was his gift, and his curse.

Such secrets. So black. So grim.

Antoniato touched his shoulder.

‘My lord?’ he said softly.

Rostov had fallen into an embrace with the dead priest without meaning to, slumped against its oversized corpse like a child holding its father. Antoniato roused him, and pulled him away. Rostov stumbled to a chair in the corner of the cell, and sat heavily. His body was covered in blood as much as his soul was drenched in the magos’ darkness.

‘Did you learn anything? Did you learn anything about the Hand?’

He nodded. ‘Dyre was right,’ said Rostov. ‘The Hand is a man. I have seen his face. He is a human being. Unenhanced.’

‘One of theirs?’ said Antoniato. He knew to speak softly after Rostov had performed his joining. It was a delicate time, but his interrogation of the inquisitor was vital to the process, for the stolen memories faded quickly.

‘One of ours, I think. An agent. It is hard to tell. No obvious signs of mutation. He looked well fed. Rich. I couldn’t see anything else.’

Rostov rested his head in his hands. The skin on them was tight with drying blood.

‘This one only saw him at a distance.’

‘It is something, my lord,’ said Antoniato. He went to a cabinet on the wall, opened it, and unspooled the hose inside.

‘There was one thing,’ said Rostov. ‘He was referred to as “the Hand of Abaddon”. That means this strategy is coordinated by the Warmaster himself. We were right. They do plan to plunge the galaxy into the warp.’

‘You must tell the primarch.’

‘I will, but the Avenging Son can wait,’ said Rostov. ‘I have to attend to my own soul first.’

Antoniato hosed blood down gurgling drains. Rostov got onto his knees, wrapped his rosary around his sticky fingers, kissed the small golden figure sat upon its throne, closed his eyes, and began to pray.

Appendix: Notes on the Crusade

The Indomitus Crusade was the largest single military operation launched by humanity since the dawn of the Imperium, 10,000 years ago. When Guilliman returned to Terra, he saw that only swift, decisive action would have any chance of saving mankind, and he called his crusade within weeks of his arrival. The first goal of this singular endeavour was to stabilise the beleaguered Imperium Sanctus, which had suffered greatly in the advent of the Cicatrix Maledictum, and thus vast crusade fleets began venturing across the void as Guilliman's audacious plan, whether ordained by the Emperor or not, was put into motion.

CRUSADE FLEETS

At the core of the endeavour were the great crusade fleets. There were ten of these planned to begin with, although fleets Octus through Decius did not finish their mustering until most of the others had departed.

Each fleet was huge, comprising dozens of warships, many more transports and all the support vessels needed to supply them, so every fleet when gathered together numbered well over a hundred warp-capable vessels, and sometimes many more.

Obviously, sending one of the crusade fleets against a single target would have been an exercise in overkill, so each was broken down into battle groups, then further into task forces, then further still into smaller flotillas called strike groups. Forces were divided and deployed as need demanded. Occasionally, the full force of a crusade fleet might be applied to a single warzone, as was the case with Fleet Tertius at the Machorta Sound, but this was rare and only applied to active theatres of war extending throughout entire sectors. More usually, the uppermost level of organisation was the battle group, with each groupmaster being invested with considerable latitude to do as she or he thought fit.

The various configurations of the crusade fleets would constantly diverge then rejoin, but although the different components of the fleets could spend months apart, even years, each fleet had an overall strategic goal, and the general progress of all elements would be towards the achievement of that goal, with most ships and attached military formations operating in relative proximity.

The battle groups generally bore High Gothic alphabetical designators, but some came to carry names, either of their command ship, commander, or of notable campaigns. And this affectation was also occasionally adopted by task forces.

Example:

Fleet Tertius, Battle Group Hephaestus

Hephaestus' first major engagement was at the Machorta Sound campaign, where it was deployed to retake the recently abandoned Fomor System while the main body of the fleet engaged the largest concentration of the Slaughter Crusade. Thereafter it remained in the sector for several months. Once control had been reestablished around the Sound, Hephaestus left the Machorta Sector and headed south in the wake of Fleet Tertius' main force. The below list details its composition at the time of the Drennox Cleansing.

Senior Battle Group Command Staff

Groupmaster General Maastren Gnoxx, Eighth Vusillian Praetors

Ordo Hereticus Inquisitor Lady Brennika Lymis ^

Baron Gottrich of House Hawkshroud *

Hordemistress Tyrene Skath of the Gattakar Rampagers

Lord Commissar Lukas Uhl

Canoness Preceptor Persphone Sheng of the Order of the Ebon Chalice *

Captain Jorn Tanna, Black Dragons Fourth Company *

Librarian Bael Vordhane, Exorcists Second Company ^

Battle Group Naval Assets

Command ship: Retribution-class battleship *Intolerant*

4 Imperial Navy battleships *

12 Imperial Navy cruisers * ^

9 squadrons of Imperial Navy frigates ^

2 Adeptus Astartes strike cruisers, the *Argent Blade* * and the *Wraith of Threnna* ^

26 Imperial Navy troop transportation macro-landers ^

1 Adeptus Mechanicus war barge, the *Veracitus*

1 Adeptus Mechanicus macro-transporter bearing 6 drop keeps *

3 Adepta Sororitas Invasion cathedra *

1 Inquisitorial warship of [[REDACTED]] class, the [[REDACTED]] ^

Battle Group Military Assets

9 regiments of Vusillian Praetors (armoured / artillery)

14 regiments of Gattakar Rampagers (10 infantry / 4 airborne) ^

3 lances of House Hawkshroud Knights

1 full Preceptory of the Order of the Ebon Chalice

4 additional Commanderries of the Ebon Chalice *

10 maniples of Metalican skitarii and attached combat support maniples

1 strike force of Black Dragons Adeptus Astartes *

1 strike force of Exorcists Adeptus Astartes ^

Assorted strength of Unnumbered Sons Adeptus Astartes ^

* entries marked with this symbol currently contributing elements to Fleet Tertius Battle Group Haephestus Task Force IV

^ entries marked with this symbol currently contributing elements to Fleet Tertius Battle Group Haephestus Task Force II

THE LOGISTICARUM

Faced with an influx of chaotic and often contradictory information, beset by war and troubled by internecine strife, the Adeptus Administratum came dangerously close to collapse more than once during the early days of the crusade. Although the crusade fleets reestablished astropathic ducts, trade routes and tithing patterns, at the beginning overwhelming disorganisation led to Roboute Guilliman issuing the Borachee Decree, which established the Officio Logisticarum.

Comprising principally elements drawn from the Departamento Munitorum and the Adeptus Administratum, but drawing on personnel from across the vast Terran and Martian bureaucracies, Guilliman's new officio was staffed with men and women of unusual purpose and initiative, traits long suppressed in the Imperium. To them fell the unimaginably complex task of gathering and supplying the grand fleets.

The Officio Logisticarum had a military mindset, with military style uniforms rather than adepts' robes, their own armed units, and the authority to call upon any other organisation they saw fit. Though effective, they often found themselves butting heads with the established machineries of Imperial governance, a factor that played into the problems that were later to beset the Imperium.

BASTION AND REDOUBT WORLDS

The Indomitus Crusade needed a firm supply chain in order to have any chance of success. In order to create strong points for resupply and rearmament, a chain of redoubt worlds were established across the Imperium. The first of these was at Ganymede, in the Sol System, designated Hub-Fortress Aquila Adamant after its completion, and becoming the chief base of operations for the Officio Logisticarum. Aquila

Bellicos at Gehenna and Aquila Furians at Hastos were to follow soon after, established ahead of the crusade's departure. The number of these worlds proliferated as the crusade spread out, often being taken in advance of the main force's arrival by specially tasked battle groups.

Bastion worlds were another important category of planet, these being already established seats of Imperial power that had managed to weather the opening of the Rift and Abaddon's invasions relatively intact. Most were sector or segmentum Naval bases, such as Hydraphur, Space Marine Chapter homeworlds, or sector fortress planets. Often safeguarding wide interstellar hinterlands as well as their own systems, the bastion worlds offered muster points for gathering Imperial forces, making them hubs secondary only to Terra in importance.

These heavily fortified worlds were links in long chains leading back to Terra, and the only basis by which Imperial control could be reasserted in Imperium Sanctus, with the reestablishment of the astrotelepathic network being given greatest priority.

WARP GATES

The opening of the Great Rift upset the warp in every way conceivable. Warp conduits offered swift passage through the immaterium along stable currents. These were disrupted along with everything else, and passages stable since before the Great Crusade were shut off, while at other places new, rapid tributaries of empyrical flux opened parts of the galaxy previously difficult to navigate to. Eight systems were identified by both the enemy and the Imperium as keys to Terra. Without possession of these systems, movement outwards through the Segmentum Solar would have been slow and especially perilous. Utilising sorcerous divination techniques, the enemy identified and took nearly all of these worlds while the Imperium was still reeling from the so-called Days of Blindness.

These included worlds of all kinds, from those already of high strategic importance, such as Vorlese, the only such gate in Imperial hands at the beginning of the Indomitus Crusade, to dead planets like Olmec, which had been abandoned for millennia. The opening moves of the war were around these systems, as Roboute Guilliman sought to free his armies from their Solar prison.

THE TORCHBEARERS

Early during the muster of the Indomitus Crusade fleets, specialised task forces were assembled and sent racing out into the galaxy. Known as torchbearers, they were tasked to make contact with specific Space Marine Chapters and to furnish them with the Primarch's Gift – the genetic technologies and magi-biologis required for those Chapters to create their own Primaris battle-brothers. Torchbearer task forces typically comprised small, fast, heavily armed craft and were garrisoned with a mixture of Silent Sisters, Adeptus Custodes of the Emissaries Imperatus and Unnumbered Sons Primaris battle-brothers of the Chapter to be reinforced. These escorts – which also occasionally included forces of the Grey Knights, Inquisition and warranted rogue traders to help forge paths through particularly treacherous regions of the galaxy – ensured that their precious cargo reached its destination regardless of threats and impediments, and was put swiftly to use by its recipients.

TEMPUS INDOMITUS

Warp travel has always had a deleterious effect upon the linear flow of time as humans perceive it. Even a comparatively minor journey through the warp has the potential to put those who make it out of synch with Terran sidereal time by a measure of days, months or even years. Tales abound of more extreme phenomena being experienced by craft caught amidst the lashing energies of a warp storm, with Imperial ships being hurled centuries back or forward in time. An entire ordo of the Inquisition exists, the Ordo Chronos, whose duty is to track and swiftly neutralise such temporal heresies.

Knowing that they would be venturing far across the galaxy, campaigning for many years and performing warp jump after warp jump through an immaterium whipped to fury by the Cicatrix Maledictum, the Indomitus Crusade fleets attempted to mitigate this effect by each establishing their own Tempus Indomitus. Each crusade fleet set its own self-contained chronology, fixed upon the temporal coordinates of its fleetmaster's command ship. Even should a battle group or task force discover that they had slipped years out of reckoning with their command ship, upon learning

where their fleet's Tempus Indomitus stood they would fix their records and chronos accordingly, stoically shrugging off the sanity-stretching implications of such arbitrary adjustments and soldiering on regardless.

BLACK CROWS

The Black Ships were feared throughout the Imperium as harbingers of doom. To these ominous craft and the Sisters of Silence who garrisoned them fell the duty of visiting the worlds of the Imperium and weeding out those with the potential to become psykers. Harvesting such dangerous mutants without mercy until their null-shielded holds were packed with miserable human cargo, they then turned their prows for home, returning their bounty to Terra, where the assembled psykers would feed the Emperor's rapacious appetite or undergo the agonising soul binding ritual that allowed them to join the choir of the Astronomican or serve the Imperium in some fashion as a sanctioned psyker.

With the opening of the Great Rift it had become nigh-impossible for the Black Ships to continue operating as they once had. The solution came in the form of the Indomitus Crusade fleets. While some Black Ships continued to ply the space lanes they always had, many more were deployed as so-called Flights of Crows that followed in the wake of the Indomitus battle groups. So did the Black Ships continue to function, throughout the reconquered systems of the Imperium Sanctus at least, and so did they keep the Golden Throne and the Astronomican from faltering in this desperate hour.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *The Lost and the Damned*, as well as the Horus Heresy novels *Titandearth*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, and the Primarchs novels *Konrad Curze: The Night Haunter*, *Corax: Lord of Shadows* and *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*. He has also written many Warhammer 40,000 novels, including *Belisarius Cawl: The Great Work*, *Dark Imperium*, *Dark Imperium: Plague War*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Darkness in the Blood*, *Astorath: Angel of Mercy*, *Baneblade* and *Shadowsword*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Indomitus*.



‘They shall be pure of heart and strong of body, untainted by doubt and unsullied by self-aggrandisement.’ Praxamedes had spoken without thought, the words of the Codex Astartes coming to him unbidden and reaching his tongue before he could stop them.

‘Is that censure of a senior officer, Lieutenant Praxamedes?’ asked Aeschelus as he looked away from the command bridge’s main viewing display. The Ultramarines captain paced across the strategium of the *Ithraca’s Vengeance*, heading to where his second-in-command stood alongside the task force’s other lieutenant, Nemetus.

The polished blue of their armour danced with the amber-and-red glow of console lights, smudged by a bright plasma gleam shining from the tactical videolith that dominated the wall of the large command chamber. Tac-slaved servitors wired to terminals and augur banks grunted and chattered their dataflows to azure-robed overseers, who in turn compiled reports for their Space Marine officers. Behind them, Shipmaster Oryk Oloris, in heavy trousers that were tucked into knee-high boots and a crisp white shirt beneath his Ultramarines uniform tunic, prowled the deck with a watchful eye.

Praxamedes instantly regretted his momentary lapse.

‘As a scholar of the lord primarch’s teachings, you would know that the Codex Astartes has much to say on respect for the chain of command.’ Aeschelus came alongside his two officers and half-turned back towards the main screen. He opened his hand towards the screen, indicating the starship that drifted across the spray of stars, plumes of blue and white plasma ejecting haphazardly from a ruptured reactor. ‘Our preliminary surveyor reports indicate that we have disabled their weapons grid. The threat is

minimal.’

‘My words, brother-captain, were in reference to Nemetus’ overly keen desire to lead the boarding,’ Praxamedes told his superior. ‘There are still enemy vessels in the vicinity.’

‘Two destroyers,’ scoffed Nemetus. ‘Too fast a prey to hunt on our own. As soon as we give chase, they will disappear into the asteroids and gas clouds on the boundary of the third orbital sphere. Would you follow them into that, knowing that they could turn on us under the cover of our overwhelmed scanners?’

‘That was not my suggestion, brother-lieutenant,’ said Praxamedes, frowning. It was an occasional fault of Nemetus to protest against an ill-thought strategy that had not, in fact, been raised, perhaps purely to show that he had considered and discarded such action himself. ‘Our primary objective is destruction of the enemy. Boarding brings unnecessary risk, at a time when the battle groups of Fleet Quintus must conserve their strength.’

‘That is a Hellbringer-class cruiser,’ added Nemetus. ‘Nobody has built one for eight thousand years. It is a piece of archeotech in its own right.’

‘The lord primarch would also favour heavily any intelligence we might glean from its cogitator banks,’ said Aeschelus. ‘We are at the forefront of the crusade, encountering foes fresh to the battle. This is a raider, an assault ship built for planetary attack. Perhaps this ship comes from beyond the Cicatrix Maledictum and could shed light on what is occurring in the Imperium Nihilus lost beyond the warp rifts.’

This time, Praxamedes was wise enough to hold his tongue, wishing the whole conversation would be forgotten. Aeschelus noticed his lieutenant’s reticence and continued.

‘You urge caution with a depleted resource, which is laudable, but I would not spend the lives of the lord primarch’s warriors needlessly.’ Aeschelus allowed his voice to travel a little further, carrying to other members of the command crew across the strategium. It was typical of Aeschelus’ fine touch of command that he would turn potential remonstrations into a moment to inspire others. It was a knack that Praxamedes sorely lacked, nor had any idea how to acquire despite his efforts.

‘For near a decade, as ship-board chronometers reckon it, we have fought hard in the crusade of the lord primarch. At the outset there was treachery and catastrophe, losses suffered before the fleet had even left Terra. Our

own task force lost its noble group master to the plague purges. Those here, and that came before, knew that there would be no easy victories, that a galaxy broken asunder by the witchery of our enemies would be an unwelcoming battlezone. Yet even the most pessimistic among us would not have countenanced the uncountable labours and obstacles that Fleet Quintus has found in its path.

‘Every victory has been hard-fought and we have met with more reverses than those in other fleets. Each foe must be overcome in turn – every opportunity to rise from the shadows of past setbacks must be seized. Before us lies a prize, won by our own endeavour, that may lift the fortunes of not just the *Ithraca’s Vengeance* or Battle Group Faustus, but perhaps bring heart to all of Crusade Fleet Quintus that our extraordinary travails have been to purpose.’

‘A prize that is even now trying to slip from our fingers,’ growled Nemetus, nodding towards the videolith. ‘See how they crawl towards the stellar flotsam, seeking sanctuary in its midst. We must seize the moment, brother-captain.’

‘And I stand ready to lead the attack, as always,’ said Praxamedes. ‘As the longest serving lieutenant it would be my honour to do so.’

‘I have no doubt that you would be determined and diligent in the execution of the attack, Praxamedes, but I think this operation is more suited to the temperament of Nemetus.’ The captain turned his full attention to the second lieutenant. ‘Assemble your boarding force swiftly. Take control of the enemy strategium and extract what you can from the cogitators.’

‘You’ll need charges, to scuttle the ship when you are done,’ said Praxamedes.

‘There will be no need for that,’ said Nemetus. ‘It looks as though their reactors are already descending towards critical state. A few hours from now there will be nothing left but plasma.’

‘All the more reason to fly swift and fight with narrow purpose,’ said Aeschelus.

‘If we’re set on the mission, I’ll review the augur data and calculate the approach vectors that will bring you most swiftly to your objective, brother.’ Praxamedes lifted a fist to his chest to salute the departing officer.

Nemetus returned the gesture of respect with a nod. ‘For the primarch and

the Emperor.’

When the lieutenant had exited the strategium, Praxamedes turned to move towards the augur terminals. Aeschelus stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. He spoke quietly.

‘I know that you think I undervalue you, Prax. I will give you battle command soon, I give you my word. It’s just...’

‘Nemetus is the more dynamic of us?’

‘Restless,’ Aeschelus replied. ‘Nemetus excels in direct action. In all truth, would you have him providing overview for the expedition while you were leading the squads? Is that truly the best use of his and your aptitudes?’

Praxamedes said nothing. He had spoken out too much already and did not wish to push his superior’s patience any further. In truth, he felt it was Aeschelus, in longing to prove his worth in the eyes of the primarch, that felt undervalued. Like many in the latest cohort of recruits pushed to the leading edges of the crusade, Aeschelus had not been in the fleet when those early disasters had occurred. He had not witnessed how the hope and excitement of the crusade’s potential had withered in a matter of months.

Perhaps that was a good thing. Praxamedes had enough self-awareness to admit, to himself if no other, that those early experiences had given him a more pessimistic outlook than his new commander. The captain hoped Nemetus would bring glory to the *Ithraca’s Vengeance* with some daring act, and Praxamedes was well aware of his own deficiencies in that regard. He was neither charismatic nor blessed with startling initiative. He was diligent and capable, and those were qualities that perhaps Battle Group Faustus needed right now when another serious setback might break the morale of the whole Fleet Quintus.

But Aeschelus was not interested in such thoughts and so Praxamedes kept them to himself.

‘As you will it, brother-captain,’ he said simply.


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