



WARHAMMER
40,000



FARSIGHT
CRISIS OF FAITH



PHIL KELLY

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FARSIGHT

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PHIL KELLY





WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

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

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TAU

FIRE CASTE

Farsight, High Commander of the Great Reclamation, also known as O'Shovah, Montka-Shoh

Bravestorm, Commander of Dal'yth, Veteran of the Blackthunder Mesa disaster

Brightsword, Farsight's protégé and wielder of the fusion blades prototype system

Sha'vastos, Commander of the Arkunashan defence prior to reinforcement

Shadowsun, Supreme expert in the Kauyon, pupil of Master Puretide, also known as O'Shaserra, Kauyon-Shas

Mo'ata, The Burning Chameleon, garrison commander of Vior'los

Puretide, Supreme Master of the Fire Caste

Kais, Monat Supreme, the Army of One, pupil of Master Puretide

EARTH CASTE

O'Vesa, Inventor and genius-level weapons scientist

Worldshaper, Earth caste terraforming expert

Fio'ui Pna, Earth caste senior scientist

AIR CASTE

Li Mau Teng, Admiral of the Kor'vattra

Y'eldi, Farsight's personal pilot

Sylphwing, Co-pilot of Y'eldi

WATER CASTE

Por Malcaor, The Water Spider, magister of unusual reputation

Peacebringer, Magister of Bork'an

Tsmyen Kais, Magister of Dal'yth

ETHEREAL CASTE

Aun'Va, The Ethereal Master

Aun'Wei, The Ethereal Supreme, the Whispering Wisdom

Aun'Tipiya, The Watchful One

Aun'Tefan, The Bringer of Harmonies

IMPERIALS

Caelos, Chapter Master of the Scar Lords

Vaethosis, Pyromancer of the Scar Lords Librarius

Shaegrus, Captain of the Scar Lords 3rd Company

Vrendaeon, Standard bearer of Command Squad Caelos

Darroleon, Apothecary of Command Squad Caelos

Treota, Champion of the Scar Lords 1st Company

Xaedros, Veteran, Command Squad Caelos. Returned from secondment into the Deathwatch.

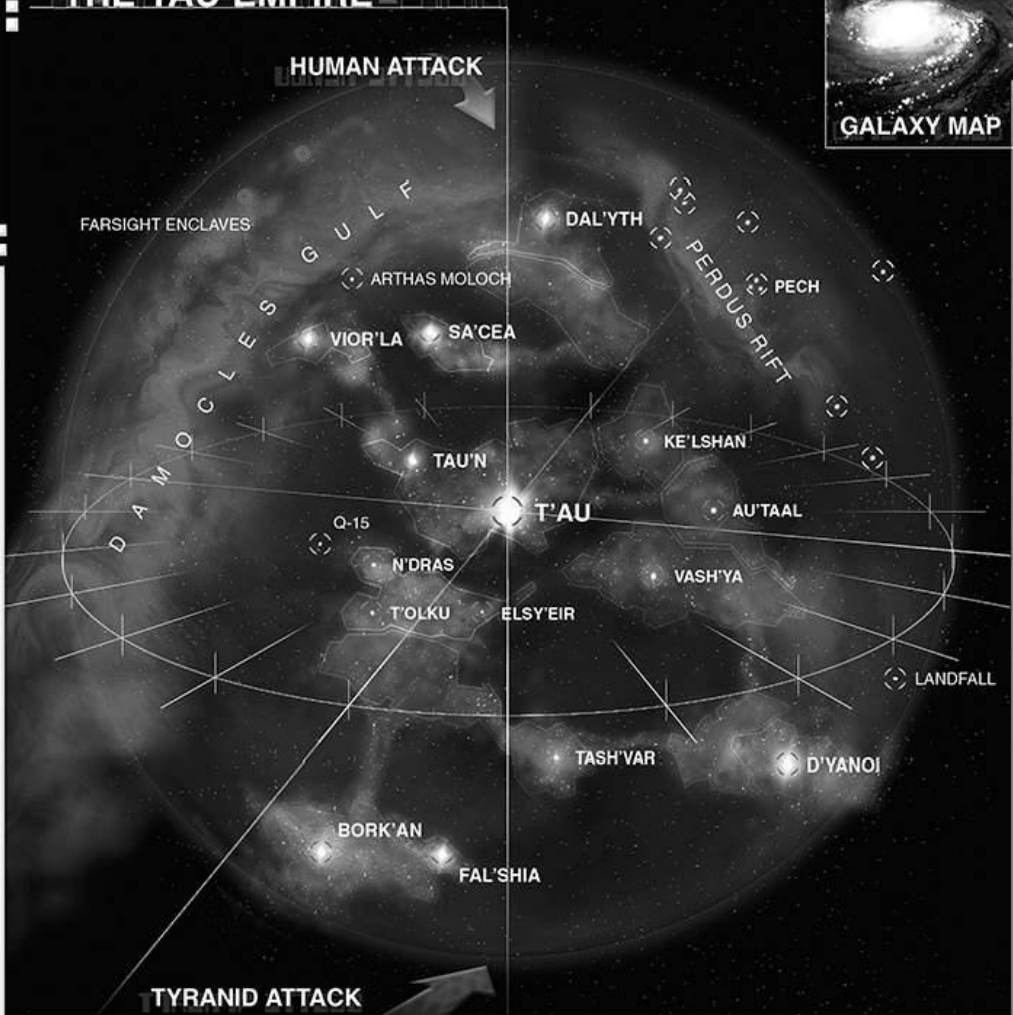
Tarrajaeo, Techmarine of the Scar Lords Armorium

Aortura, Captain of the Scar Lords 8th, Assault Company

Numitor, Captain of the Ultramarines 8th, Assault Company, veteran of Dal'yth

Vykola Niamh Herat, Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos

THE TAU EMPIRE



- MAJOR SEPT - WORLDS
- ⊗ LESSER SEPT - WORLDS
- ⊠ KROOT WORLDS
- ⊡ ARTEFACT WORLDS
- ◐ 1st PHASE COLONIES (pop. 100,000+)
- ◑ 2nd PHASE COLONIES (pop. 10-10,000)

PROLOGUE

THE RELIC WORLD

ARTHAS MOLOCH, 825.M41

A red-skinned hulk with tattered wings and a gore-spattered maw charged towards Farsight across the shattered square.

‘– – BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD – –’ it bellowed, barrelling past the pillars and broken statues of the plaza’s edge. Farsight’s translator spooled renditions of its battle cries on the rightmost hex-screen of his battlesuit. ‘– – SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE – –’

The audio spikes of the Molochite beast’s war cries were incredibly intense. They were well beyond natural boundaries, according to the autotrans. Farsight told himself it was an alien phenomenon, nothing more, but some part of his soul felt genuine fear.

His cadres had been hunting down the system’s last ork tribes, but in the process, they had found something far worse.

The creature leaped, its wings beating powerfully to carry it forward. It swung its greataxe, a weapon as long as a Hammerhead tank. The axe’s edge burned red hot on the battlesuit’s thermal imager. Farsight leaned back hard in his control cocoon. His XV8 battlesuit immediately copied the motion in a burst of jets, and the Molochite’s axe missed him by a finger’s breadth.

‘Why do you fight us?’ shouted Farsight. Veering away in a half-circle, he put a white marble henge between his hull and the creature’s next blow. Chips of pale stone exploded outwards as the axe’s edge bit deep into the rock.

Another blow, and another. Rock dust billowed out in white clouds as the Molochite smashed the stone structure’s lintel into powder.

Farsight was already sprinting away on a new vector. Darting from cover to cover at full speed, he put as much of the ruined landscape as he could between his battlesuit and the alien giant. His attacker ploughed on into Arthas Moloch’s

ochre dawn, half-blinded by the detritus of its own rampage.

The commander caught a glimpse of leathery pinions in the roiling dust as it stomped past. Skulls dangled and bounced from chains hooked into the creature's ragged wing membranes. They were human remains, by their cranial structure. Hollow sockets stared from heavy simian brows as if in accusation. One of them chattered, jaw clacking as the Molochite receded into the murk.

A migraine surged and tingled at the fringes of the commander's consciousness, agony and blackness competing to eclipse his mind. With a great effort of will he pushed it back, much like he had while crossing the Damocles Gulf to reach these far-flung worlds. Unsettling images still flickered on the edges of his vision, but he had bought himself a few microdecs of space to think. It was usually enough for him to turn a rout into victory, but here amongst the shattered alabaster ruins of Arthas Moloch, the laws of cause and effect seemed not to apply. His usual confidence was in tatters.

Farsight blink-pushed the autocommand for his cadre to fire at will, prioritising the protection of the ethereals. He felt a spike of despair pierce his heart as he checked their status. Aun'Diemn was directing the gun lines alongside Aun'Los at the landing site of the great star dais; their icons were a healthy gold, but the bio-sign reading for Aun'Xa was already charcoal grey.

'Honoured one, what enemy is this?' patched through Brightsword. 'How do we defeat them? They defy all norms. My uplink yields nothing.'

'I have no conception,' said Farsight. It was not entirely true. In the back of his mind, dark truths simmered, and suppressed memories of inexplicable beasts threatened to resurface.

'Apply a fluid anti-personnel doctrine until instructed otherwise,' he said, his tone terse. Brightsword's personal icon, a crossed pair of burning blades, flashed gold in confirmation. Farsight tapped into the sensory input from the young warrior's battlesuit for a moment – the young commander was slashing horned aliens apart with sweeping blows of his fusion blades, the prototype gun-swords giving him enough reach to avoid being run through in return.

Nearby on the distribution screen was Ob'lotai 3-0's icon, a stylised fortress. As ever, the Warghost was a bastion of stolid calm around which raged destruction. His XV88 Broadside was a castle from which flocks of missiles darted left and right, detonating with killing fury.

Farsight frowned. No matter the weapons they used, everywhere the tau struck the Molochites down the creatures did not fall to the ground. Instead they dissipated like ink droplets in water. Just like the winged beasts in the gulf.

For a moment, Farsight felt the ice of panic cool his blood.

The commander exhaled hard to clear his momentary frailty of mind. No matter

their race, no matter their strange technologies, these savages would be put down.

Farsight's custom XV8's blacksun filter pierced the gloom, designators already picking out new targets. Hundreds of hunched, slender figures darted towards him through the ruins. His targeting suite's ghostly reticules hovered over them, waiting to be blink-clicked into lethal solidity.

Instead, Farsight zoomed in on a trio of fire warriors close by. They were levelling a volley at a group of red-limbed Molochite swordsmen. As usual, his cadre's gun form was impeccable, but the creatures darted and dodged, evading much of the firepower. The horned alpha at the fore somehow deflected a pulse shot on the flat of his long, black blade. Some unknown technology was rendering the weapon darker than the void, as if a sliver of colour had been cut from the world.

'They use energy blades, it seems,' said Farsight across the cadrenet. 'Do not attempt to parry.'

Jumping in close, Farsight blink-clicked his grey targeting reticules gold. His plasma rifle strobed blue-white, and all three aliens came apart in explosions of blood. Instead of seeing corpses tumble backwards, he watched the Molochites evaporate around him in clouds of crimson mist.

'They also use emergency teleport technology,' he said grimly.

'These ones are more sophisticated than they seem,' said Brightsword.

'For now, kill them nonetheless.'

Farsight took down another two aliens near the fire warriors' position with a swipe of his fusion blaster. Taking their chance, the tau broke cover and rejoined their cadre's strongpoint in the ruins.

Another group of aliens was nearby, a variant caste of the first Molochite species. Pink-limbed, they capered forward, grotesque expressions of glee on faces that bulged from distended chests. Bangles, piercings and jewels decorated their repugnant frames.

'They value wealth,' transmitted Farsight over the cadrenet. He heard Commander Bravestorm laugh with a cold contempt in response. 'Wealth we can give them.'

Farsight blink-slid his outgoing autotrans to the common version of Imperial Gothic, and called to mind the entreaties of the water caste.

'We can trade you piles of gemstones,' his battlesuit boomed. 'We can lavish you with oceans of gold. Join us for the Greater Good, and we will—'

One of the pink Molochites stretched out its fingers, shuddered as if in fever, and sent a cloud of flame billowing out towards him. He boosted high, his thruster arrays lifting him out of danger. The creature sent out another sheet of

fire. Farsight winced as it consumed a nearby squad of tau pathfinders.

They used digital weapons, then, built into the rings upon their fingers. Miniaturised technology, and common enough amongst those who traded with the jokaero. But the bio-signs of the stricken pathfinders were registering as anomalous in the extreme.

Farsight zoomed in. The tau's flesh had been transformed. It was registering as glass, vitrified like stone under intense heat.

Features twisted in confusion and anger, Farsight swept his fusion blaster low to cut the nearest Molochite into an explosion of hissing pink viscera. Two smaller creatures burst from its corpse, blue-skinned instead of pink. Each was still decorated with gaudy jewellery. These strange infants too hurled fire. Odd energies crackled from Farsight's shield generator.

He glanced at the shield's custom sub-program in confusion and mounting panic, but it was still registering gold, at eighty-seven per cent integrity.

The high commander leaped forward, twisting mid-air, and came down hard in a double-stamp. Each foot crushed one of the two blue-skinned pyromaniacs into puffs of sulphur-scented flame. One of the fires caught on his Crisis suit's ankle. He twisted the XV8's sensor-head to catch a glimpse. The fire was climbing – literally climbing, with limbs of flickering light – up his battlesuit. He swatted the cackling fire-thing with the barrel of his plasma rifle, then stamped it out for good measure.

These creatures defied analysis.

The surviving pathfinders blasted more of the Molochites into puffs of living fire, then to nothingness. Farsight eye-stabbed a hard reset on the echo reader and zoomed again, this time bouncing sonic pulses from the frozen tau figures in the ruins behind. More Pathfinders, paralysed in the act of running, but this time the battlesuit's sonar registered them as entirely composed of bone.

Farsight stifled a fierce eruption of anger. These aliens made a mockery of the tenets of physics. Understanding was key to victory, and here he had none. No matches on the datacache, no idea what strange alliance this new foe represented. Standard anti-infantry doctrine had proven deadly one moment, and completely useless the next. The energies of ion cannon and plasma rifle fire had scythed down ranks of the long-limbed creatures, only to splash harmlessly from the glowing flesh of those behind.

Here, on this desolate relic world, logic was proving worse than useless.

The high commander's audio suite picked up on piercing screams in the distance. He blink-clicked on Moata's icon – that of a flame-backed chameleon – and Sha'vastos, a moon surrounded by numerals. Two hexagonal informationals enlarged, broadcast by the commanders' attendant gun drones. Moata was

shimmering, almost invisible, each burst cannon volley cutting down more enemies. A few metres behind, Sha'vastos and his drones shot down charging alien swordsmen with clinical efficiency. Still the enemy showed no sign of breaking.

They were everywhere, these creatures of blood and flame, always attacking.

Something loomed amongst the ruins to Farsight's left, an alert code ringing out strident and clear. Another Molochite giant, this time armed with a whip as well as an axe. It was bearing down on Aun'Dienn.

The commander felt the press of terror upon his chest like tightening bands of steel. Did these aliens somehow know that the ethereals, the least outwardly threatening of all the tau present, were the most important by far?

Farsight got the creature's attention with a plasma bolt to its pointed ear. It roared and spun, eyes blazing red. The whip cracked out, shockingly fast. Farsight raised his disc-shield generator on instinct. It flared white, deflecting the eight-pointed roundel on the whip's end in a storm of energies.

Silver, now, just above fifty-six per cent. The blow had force enough to split stone.

The commander scrambled backwards, taking care to stay in the alien beast's field of vision. It burst through a shattered colonnade into full view; the Molochite had taken the lure, and hard.

The greataxe came chopping down again, as sure and sudden as the blade of a guillotine. Crimson sparks cascaded across the force shield's invisible disc. Its display read copper, thirty-two per cent.

Farsight spotted a pulsing artery under the beast's upper arm. He took the shot, plasma rifle venting superheated air with a hiss. The Molochite's skin was cratered black where the volley struck home, but incredibly, its hide was still unbroken. The high commander sent a spear of light burning from his fusion blaster and swiped it in a tight arc. Its blinding beam cut the creature's wrist, but where it should have left a cauterised stump, it left only a red slash. Foul blood jetted out like water from a split pipe, hissing as it ate into the rock.

The beast snatched its hand back. It roared in anger, kicking Farsight's battlesuit in the chest with a hoof the size of a small boulder. The battlesuit flew back through the air more than fifty metres. Farsight struggled to right it with eye-flicked adjustments to the thrust/vector suite.

The XV8 righted itself, its targeting matrix bringing the Molochite giant back into tight resolution. The beast roared and shifted its grip on its axe, drooling blood through a fang-toothed smile as it looked for closer prey.

Puretide's words rose to the forefront of Farsight's mind, their principles as valid as ever. *When the enemy is unknown to you, retreat, learn and adapt.*

He had to lead the creature away from his warriors. Understand it, the better to kill it.

A knot of the red-skinned, sword-wielding aliens was charging in close, long tongues lolling and black blades held two-handed. Farsight leaped high, plasma rifle stitching bolts into the greatest concentration of the horned Molochites below. In the same instant his fusion blaster sought a fresh targeting solution on the winged giant that was now storming towards him, blood looping in gory strings from its axe. Gigantic pinions spread out behind it, booming full to lift the creature powerfully from the ground. It lunged, flames trailing from its braided whip.

Jetting to maximum altitude, the battlesuit commander leaped out of the creature's reach. He lined up a shot to cut its eyes from its head with a swipe of his fusion blaster. The Molochite flicked out the whip, the barbed ring at its tip lashing up to wrap around his weapon system. A jerking pull powerful enough to jar Farsight's neck, and the fusion beam went wide.

Another yank from the beast's over-muscled arm, and Farsight's entire gun-limb was torn from his body. Off balance, he veered from the sky, crashing down upon his back into the rubble strewn around the great dais. The doppel-holo on his damage control suite flared bright, its missing arm glowing bright red.

'Do not yield, warriors of the Tau'va!' sent Farsight across the command net. 'You must protect the ethereals. Should I die, Sha'vastos will lead in my stead!' He grimaced and shot another volley with his plasma rifle, leading his aim as the beast came in close. This time the Molochite stepped to one side, avoiding the killing beam before swinging its axe with shocking speed.

Farsight hit the jets to avoid the creature's next blow. The beast twisted sidelong to compensate. He raised his shield a heartbeat before the glowing axe struck home. Sparks flew from the shield array, the system blaring in alarm at the energy expenditure, but the blow was deflected. Its readout was steel in colouration now; only eighteen per cent left. Worse, the life signs of Aun'Dienn had changed from gold to a deathly charcoal grey. The unthinkable was happening, and he was powerless to stop it.

'Wait!' called Farsight through the XV8's exterior speakers. 'If we are trespassing, then the rest of us will leave in peace! No more lives need to be lost!'

The creature gave a deep booming bark, like that of some immense hound. It spread its wings again and leaped forward, iron-hard hooves crunching into the rock.

'-- WEAKLING --' spooled the autotrans. '-- GUN VERMIN COWARD --
-- UNFIT TO RULE --'

The whip came down once more. This time Farsight was ready, eye-flicking an emergency boost forward to avoid the blow. The manoeuvre put him within the creature's reach, but away from the whip's bite. His plasma rifle spat white fire as the shot took it under the chin. Tough red meat sizzled where it struck. The XV8's olfactory relays transmitted a smell intensely redolent of burning flesh and blood, like a cannibal's banquet left to ripen too long in the sun.

The Molochite spun on its heel, bringing the axe around. Farsight leaned away, but with an arm missing from the Crisis suit, his balance was shot. The creature struck him with the flat of its axe blade. He flew back once more, hurtling across the rune-carved dais before careening into the base of a looming statue. The monument's glowering visage grew large upon Farsight's targeting hexes as it toppled over at the impact, crashing into the dust with a thunderous boom.

Around the statue's neck was a metallic amulet, hexagrammatic in shape, glinting in the gloom against the alabaster of its torso. The Molochite giant recoiled from the statue as if stung.

In the statue's right hand was a sword so large and heavy it would have taken two strong tau to lift it. Somehow the blade had not been dulled by the dust of aeons. Farsight caught a glimpse of his reflection in the flat of the blade – not that of his all-enclosing battlesuit, but of his face, eyes wide in fear.

Suddenly the beast's cloven foot came crashing down, stamping Farsight's XV8 into the rubble with such force the hyper-alloy of the suit's construction buckled and shrieked.

Half blind with panic, Farsight eye-swept his fusion blaster around in a kill vector before realising the gun system was no longer there. The Molochite's axe came down hard, an executioner's blow. Farsight raised his shield once more. Three per cent left, now, and already dark grey. The next brutal swing would split his battlesuit like cordwood.

The giant's hoof stamped down again, buckling the XV8's plasma rifle and rendering the shield beneath it completely useless.

The heavy axe rose again, starlight glinting from its edge. In that brief moment, the galaxy seemed to contract to a single causal point.

Farsight unfurled a four-fingered hand from his battlesuit with a swift clack of pistons. He scrabbled at the fallen statue, and yanked the immense sword from its stony grip.

Then the killing blow fell.

PART ONE

AFTERMATH

*'Our conquest is inevitable,
our ascension a matter of time.
Let none who are wise deny our destiny.'*

– Aun'Va

CHAPTER ONE

A CLASH OF EMPIRES

DAL'YTH PRIME, 81 TERRAN YEARS EARLIER

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-20
238.744.M41

+++UNEXPURGATED ITERATION+++

The tau have the right of it.

Many of our fellow inquisitors would hang me by the neck as a heretic if they heard me say that, for all the good it would do them. But this little xenoculture on the fringes of Imperial space has a way of interacting with the universe that is fascinating to me. I feel they are somehow more likely to see the truths of existence afresh, perhaps by being so far removed from the shattered fragments of knowledge that the older races so habitually cling to. They have open eyes, and comparatively open minds. A very dangerous combination, unfortunately, and one that cannot be left unmonitored.

These tau know nothing of nameless doubt, of existential fear, or the hideous reflections that even the meekest human souls can cast into the hell-dimension of the warp. They are not a psychically active race – or if they are, they are so weak that even I find it difficult to read their Empyrric presence. What blessed ignorance that must be, to live unthreatened by one's own rapacious shadow. I can only imagine.

Given the grand scale of humanity's realm, a xenos empire of perhaps a dozen scattered systems is no great cause for concern. The little wretches haven't even mastered faster than light travel. Ambitious they may be, and technologically advanced in a way, yet their race is isolated and hopelessly outmatched. Conceivably, if they discovered the art of warp travel, they could one day pose an epsilon-level threat.

Frankly I doubt it will ever come to that. If not for their temerity in crossing the Damocles Gulf, I doubt the Imperium would have really bothered with them at all.

Far direr threats cast their pall across mankind's realm than the tau. The bio-ships first engaged at Tyran, for instance, may soon have the whole Ultramar empire fighting for survival. Still, whilst the greater mass of the Adeptus Terra concerns itself with ghastly fiends, void-borne terrors and brutish savages, I am content to keep an eye on this pocket empire of optimists. Why? Not through lack of courage; you know me well enough to realise that. In short, it is because of that which lies beneath.

Today marks the third year of my assignment to observe this xenos race first hand, from within their society and without. It is fairly common knowledge on the Eastern Fringe that the tau seek to 'enlighten' those they encounter with the truth of their precious communality. This is known in common tau parlance as the Greater Good. It might seem a laudable idea, to a naïf. Trust me, dear Xyndrea, it is not nearly as benevolent as it sounds.

In my late-night conversations with my initial contact, the garrulous water caste emissary that calls himself Tidebringer, I have learned much about tau philosophy. Far more than he wished to impart, I'll wager, but then the water caste do rather like the sound of their own voices. The blessed Tarot I see in the mirror has hinted at the parts of his mindscape he thought artfully concealed, those that concern his caste's hopes and dreams. The Blind Wanderer was much in evidence, as was the Fountain of False Tears. Filling in the gaps has been very gratifying, much like deciphering a puzzle that is challenging, but still within one's capabilities.

Once, the tau were very proud of their diplomatic conquests across the near side of the Damocles Gulf, and rightfully so. Not only had they finally managed to navigate across that vast expanse – no mean feat, given the warp currents that swirl and hunt within its nebulous reaches – but they had also talked their way into making uncontested planetfall upon Imperial territory.

Slowly, patiently, these silver-tongued newcomers managed to inveigle their culture – and even their technology – into a clutch of our fringe worlds. Perhaps that was easier than Segmentum Command would like to think, or even our fellows in the Ordo Xenos. All credit to them, the cunning bastards did a masterful job of subtly taking over four principal systems – and a string of orbital planetoids – without so much as a single shot fired. Tidebringer's fellows, these smug water caste types, refer to their interplanetary negotiations as the Silken Conquests. Though it shames me to admit it, I can see why.

The worlds in the Timbra sub-sector are so far removed from Terra's rule that

dissatisfaction grows like weeds through every stratum of society. It is much the same story on every frontier, of course, but when the aliens inevitably come knocking, humanity's inherent xenophobia usually sees the natives gather their guns under the Imperial eagle soon enough. That is sadly not the case in the star systems of Timbra. Not all invaders are ravening beasts hungry for destruction.

Slowly at first, with a merchant here and a trader there, tau agents with a near-perfect command of Low Gothic sold their excellent technologies to the indigenes of the fringe worlds. They did so at such a low price that many of the human populace considered the tau little more than idiot savants, gifted simpletons who would be easily exploited. The truth, of course, was closer to the other way around.

The sight of descending tau ships was soon welcomed everywhere from Vespertine to Matinsong. It was a precursor to easy deals, and weapons tech that gave a real edge in the black market – and on the field of conflict, should the deals turn nasty. The tau were relaxed and passive, more than happy to tell the Imperial citizens of their culture. For a while, even those faithful to Holy Terra's ideals thought they were doing the right thing in dealing with them. Know thy enemy: it's a maxim that even a backwater oaf can understand.

When asked about their home worlds, the tau merchants painted such a compelling picture of their sunlit utopia that the long-neglected fringers began to think perhaps they would like a piece of that lifestyle too. More tau tech made its way to the worlds of the Timbra sub-sector, more merchants and traders negotiated deals that seemed too good to be true. They had a hidden cost that none truly appreciated until it was too late – complicity. Minor tau settlements were established across the sector, all in the name of trade, of course. The dullards let them build.

Then came the medicine. The earth caste arrived, short in stature and humble in manner. They were introduced by the suave ambassador caste with such smooth grace that no one really objected to them toiling away in the background – especially when the earth caste's med-packs proved so effective. Within a month, rustjaw, leprosy, screenblind and pneumonia became distant memories.

After the first batch of successful treatments upon Vespertine, a third caste arrived – the pilots of the tau navy. They had to breach orbit in order to ferry the apothecarion packs around. Well enough, thought the fringers; the air caste kept themselves to themselves, and were rarely if ever seen in the flesh. Before long the sight of graceful ochre aircraft was no longer worthy of comment. None realised they had missiles concealed in their wings, nor that the drones on their wingtips were not just fitted for data retrieval, but for the generation of powerful force fields.

With every child saved from death by disease, with every smooth transaction in the marketplace, the arguments against the tau's presence on the fringe worlds became less strident. Here was something the citizens of the Imperium could sorely use – an easy victory, waiting to be taken from the benevolent lackwits next door. For the common people there was no question, these tau made valuable neighbours. And who knows, perhaps they were right.

Eventually, even the planetary governors were worn down by the endless words of Tidebringer and his kin. The tithes to the wider Imperium dried out to a trickle, and then stopped altogether as all wealth was invested in the future of the fringe worlds instead. Perhaps the governors were trying to impress the tau with their forward thinking. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to help their citizens, and the generations to come. We shall likely never know the truth.

But it was an insult the high Lords of Terra could not ignore.

The Timbra sub-sector became the subject of a redemptive war plan, telepathically transmitted to the Adeptus Astartes by a veteran team of astropaths. It took years, almost a decade, for the vengeance of the Imperium to manifest – Holy Terra has bigger fiends to slay, after all. But manifest it did. The wheels of the Emperor's justice turn slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

The Damocles Crusade would have put the fear of death into a tyrant from the Maelstrom, let alone a race of xenos upstarts with barely a single thread to their name in the greater tapestry of fate. Led by a coalition of Space Marine Chapters, this counter-invasion force slid through the unquiet currents of the warp towards the Matinsong system. They translated into realspace so close to the system's Mandeville point they most likely bypassed every cordon and alert network the tau had. The xenos navy, such as it is, never really had a chance against the armada of Imperial ships that appeared from nowhere and barged through to the planets beyond.

On each of the fringe planets, the xenos mustered as much of their military caste as they could scramble. Perhaps through hubris, perhaps due to the ease of their conquests in what they refer to as the enclave worlds, they had left those worlds lightly defended. The Space Marines destroyed the tau garrisons like a sledgehammer smashing a china doll.

The Ultramarines, Hammers of Dorn and Scar Lords led the aggression in grand style. I don't think the tau had any idea that we could bring such a tremendous concentration of force to bear at a single point and time. Each planetfall reduced a tau garrison cadre to a scattering of corpses and ruined tanks before its fellows could respond. With the Imperial beachheads established, the Astra Militarum battalions brought the fringe worlds back into compliance with slow but ruthless dedication.

The Ecclesiarchy in particular had a fine time ‘re-educating’ those who had strayed from the Emperor’s light. The Astra Militarum and a few elements of the Adeptus Astartes still have a presence there to this day, enforcing the Imperial way with bolter, blade and flame, but it is the Adeptus Mechanicus that has the largest demographic upon the capital worlds. I must tell you of Vior’los’ magma lakes in my next missive. I don’t think I have the spirit for it now.

The counter-invasion didn’t stop there. The Chapters that had launched the invasion had been given orders to teach the tau a lesson, to leave a scar on their collective psyche so deep they would fear straying into humanity’s realm for centuries to come. Making translation to the warp once more, the Space Marine fleet crossed the Damocles Gulf with relative ease and burst back into realspace in the heart of sovereign tau territory. This time the tau navy put up a fight, but against the capital ships of a crusade fleet, they were still found wanting.

The Space Marine armada bulldozed its way past the outlying worlds of Hydass, Sy’l’kell and Viss’el to strike directly at Dal’yth Prime. A sept world, as they call their prime territory, Dal’yth Prime was one of the jewels in the tau empire’s crown. I was part of that invasion force, posing at the time as a primaris psyker of the 122nd Baleghast Castellans. At one point I had the pleasure of fighting alongside the Eighth Company of the Ultramarines; it was a proud moment even for an inquisitor.

Dal’yth Prime is a very different story to the outlying fringe worlds. It is a world of indigo plains and vast hexagonal transit structures that link huge biodomes. Its infrastructure is so advanced the defending military brought thousands of soldiers to each crucible of battle in a matter of minutes.

This time it was the Imperium that was over-confident. The tau struck back hard, and for a long while, they were crushingly, horribly dominant. The Eighth took heavy casualties, as did every other Space Marine strike force that made planetfall. Captain Atheus himself was struck down by Farsight’s protégé, a young officer whose name translates as ‘Bright Sword’. Those battlesuits engaged the Ultramarines wherever they landed, and transmotes packed full of fire warriors were never far behind. For a while, we were losing badly.

The now-Captain of the Eighth, Numitor, came up with a hypothesis that the tau had no real experience of fighting psykers. It turned out he was right. The xenos have worked with psykers before, and were eager to learn more about them – I think that is the main reason why they accepted me as an advisor – but they still see us as a curious alien phenomenon. At Numitor’s behest my little gang was brought in to give the xenos a nasty fright. It turned out the tau commanders were relying heavily on the teachings of a venerable war leader who had never encountered psychic warfare, and the sheer chaos and confusion

engendered by my circus of freaks derailed their strategies over and over again. I miss them keenly, Darrapor's wide-eyed wonder and Cobliaze's pyrotechnics most of all. That old crone Malagrea promised she would take good care of them. I hope she stays true to that oath.

In truth, I think it was the assault squads of the Eighth that did more damage than my fellow psykers, but we wrong-footed the tau cadres, and victory is victory. The Imperial strategos ordered the tactic repeated, throwing the tau war machine out of kilter in a dozen zones. Captain Numitor's leap of faith was the breakthrough that turned a massacre into a grinding war of attrition – the kind of war the Imperium likes best.

Fighting alongside the Ultramarines was an experience I shall not soon forget. I think, towards the end, the sons of Macragge had almost begun to respect the tau fire caste. Some shared notion of honour, perhaps. All well and good for these warrior types, but not a luxury that an inquisitor can afford to entertain. There is too much at stake.

When it came to giving the tau a much-needed revelation concerning the true size and power of the Imperium, 'Operation Pluto' was a resounding success. We were not able to finish the job, however. News of the Tyran bio-fleet heading towards Ultramar forced us to withdraw. We left before Dal'yth's military heads, Commanders Farsight and Shadowsun, could be slain.

That was months ago, now, and those two war leaders remain at large. The water caste are claiming that the tau repelled us through skill, rather than a stalemate enforced by an exterior force. Still, the damage has been done. So shocking was the suddenness and violence of our attack that the tau will think twice before crossing the Damocles Gulf ever again.

Ostensibly, my posting here is to remind these xenos that they do not have the full measure of humanity, and to ensure that an incursion upon Imperial space does not happen again. It is my assigned task to learn about the inner hierarchies of tau civilisation so that if necessary, they can be swiftly and effectively beheaded. All well and good, on the surface of things.

In truth, however, there is another, deeper reason I am watching these new players in the great drama unfolding across the cosmos.

It is often the most innocent souls that turn to darkness.

Inquisitor Vykola Herat
Ordo Xenos

Post-script: For posterity and context, I have transcribed some of the tau material distributed across Vespertine. It has been taken from the data-slate

analogues the tau call 'informatives.' I have appended the actual footage in addition, though be warned – should its integrity hold in transit, it will make for unpleasant viewing.

VIGILUS REQUISITION: VYKOLA HERAT <ACCESS
THRICEBLESSED>
ILLUMINARIUM XENOARTEFACT GAMMA-PRIMUS-NON
INSURRECTION BROADCAST TRANSCRIPT
SECTIONS 11A, 12A
'TAU EMPIRE' 'WELFARE INFORMATIVE'
[ADDENDUM CLASS MAGNIFICAT]
XENOMANTIC ARTEFACT

The Imperium of Man. An institution so old and cruel it grinds its people under its crushing weight.

[PANORAMIC. Imperial industrial world EVENSONG. Horizon cluttered with jagged and broken architecture, chimneys belching pollutant into mustard yellow clouds. Zoom on sulphurous acid rain falling on citizens that queue for food slops in the alleys beneath]

The worlds of the Imperium have been abused and abandoned by their rulers. They exist only to give tithe to their overlords – tithes of flesh, and of steel.

[Interior, MUNITIONS MANUFACTURUM. Scalding steam jets, bubbling crucibles of molten metal heated by outsized bursts of flame]

The citizens toil at meaningless manual work, repetitive and soulless. They are locked into one single task, one stifling environment, from the cradle to the grave.

[Sweating, iron-collared workers clad in rags screw together ammunition varying in size from conventional bullets to arm-length tanker shells. Chains reach from the slave collars to overseer gantries above. CLOSE UP on a worker etching a word in gothic script on a bullet casing. He drops the round into a

crate full of identical artefacts]

A typical worker is covered in burns and calluses. He eats once per diurnal cycle, and will sleep no more than four hours, often in a makeshift bunk under his workstation.

[The overseers wear heavy greatcoats and stylised skull masks. Many have thick, ribbed tubes in place of their mouths. They yank the chains hard to awaken indentured workers beneath. Shift workers choke and scramble from oil-stained sleeping nests]

There are no labour-saving machines.

[Interior, MUNITIONS LOADING BAY. Thousands of hive workers pull vast cables to swing an immense warhead into a transport cylinder. Cut to close up of filthy hands. They are cut and worn by rough metal cables. Blood runs down pallid wrists]

There is no freedom of thought or expression.

[A loading worker mutters something to his teammate. A five-limbed cyborg overseer on a quad-tracked turntable rolls in close and begins to revolve swiftly at the waist, the electro-whips on its main appendages indiscriminately lashing the offender and his peers]

Every act is geared to the furtherance of more violence and strife.

[CLOSE UP of human faces etched with misery. The only clean areas are the tracts where tears have run down their cheeks, making runnels in the encrusted dirt]

In this endless wheel of pain and death, there is no hope of escape. A worker will live, sire offspring, and die in the same industrial habitation complex.

[ALLEYWAY exterior. Human female with straggly, greasy hair is giving biological birth on a rain-spattered street. The ground is slippery with grime and unidentifiable, rotting matter. The sounds of the birth are traumatic. Mutant rats look on hungrily, eyes red]

A worker's children will perform the same task as their parents, often at the same alcove station, in dynasties of unthinking graft that stretch back centuries.

[MANUFACTORUM interior. The malnourished corpse of a bullet worker who

has died of exhaustion is unshackled and cast aside. Skull-masked overseers step over the corpse without comment, force-marching the worker's daughter to the same workstation and collaring her to the gantry with the same chain. Its links are still wet with her predecessor's blood]

To be a cog in this relentless, grinding machine is to know nothing but futility and despair.

[MANUFACTORUM exterior. A crate of bullets is loaded at a bad angle into the back of a bulky transport by a badly calibrated lifter-cyborg. The crate catches on the transport's flatbed and tips over, emptying its contents. The bullets tinkle dully around the faulty servitor as they scatter across the street]

[CLOSE UP: the bullets roll to join a river of brass cylinders gently smoking in a gutter full of acid rain]

This culture is ten thousand years old, so ingrained in its deeply oppressive mindset that it is beyond saving.

[The transport's doors hiss closed, and it grinds away, containing little more than empty boxes and a scattering of bullets. Another transport truck takes its place. The malfunctioning cyborg continues its wasteful, blind charade with the next crate]

[CLOSE UP. Bullets with the word MORTIS hand-etched upon them, smears of bright red blood across the letters. Fade to darkness]

But it does not have to be this way. There is another life to be lived. A life of freedom and opportunity.

[ABSTRACT. Darkness brightens to show the white symbol of the Tau, clean and bright, against a purple sky]

The tau empire. Let us look to the stars in hope.

FADE TO WHITE

FADE FROM WHITE

[PANORAMIC. The vista of Dal'yth Prime's dawn horizon is a vision of blessed order and progress. A bright sun is rising, turning the deep indigo of the sky to a pleasing mauve]

The tau empire is a beacon of progress and idealism in the wilderness of the Eastern Fringe.

[Air caste craft soar in shallow arcs, ferrying citizens to and from the spaceports high above. The spaceships leave clean white trails across the limitless sky]

Here is contentment and harmony, every aspect of life seamlessly meshing with the others to ensure the minimum of friction.

[Neatly arranged hexodomies are linked with transit spars. Some are dotted with silently gliding transmotes. The regularity and elegance of the metropolis' form is broken only by mushroom-domed towers and contoured architectural masterpieces]

The tau are a welcoming people. Their advanced culture incorporates dozens of alien races, all willing comrades in the pursuit of the Greater Good – the philosophy of unity and selflessness known as the Tau'va.

[HEXODOME exterior. Tau boulevard lit by the violet of early morning. Happy, healthy individuals are already going about their daily business, smiling at one another as they pass. Dotted amongst the tau are avian kroot mercenaries and occasional invertebrates]

There is no violence within these cities. For one member of tau society to attack another is all but unheard of. Criminals – and those who waste the lives of their fellows – are simply exiled. The threat of banishment from the metropolis is punishment enough to ensure all participants strive for harmony.

[There are humans amongst the crowd too. Their apparel is similar to that of the tau around them, though some still wear standard Imperial fatigues]

[CLOSE UP on nuclear family group. The adult male has a faded Imperial eagle tattoo on his forehead. He has a female child upon his back, her small arms around his neck]

The tau themselves are the benevolent guides and helpers of this culture. They are formed into groups, or castes, each with its own vital function within society.

[ABSTRACT. Four geometric caste symbols glint against a golden background. The fifth – that of the ethereal caste – is conspicuous by its absence]

The earth caste are the most numerous. They are the medics, builders, fabricators and engineers of tau society, forming the vital foundation of our culture.

[HANGAR interior. A pair of squat, muscled earth caste scientists guide a hovering med-slab into a sleek transport. The med-slab has a human male child upon it. It is evident by his pallor and the dark patches around his eyes that the child is sick. He is smiling weakly, watching a colourful hologram of a dancer pirouette upon the edge of the med-slab]

The water caste are our diplomats and ambassadors. They are often the first tau to bring the way of the Tau'va to prospective allies. You may have seen them in the flesh already.

[DAL'YTH PRIME RESERVOIR, exterior. A water caste magister talks casually with an elderly human female as they stroll along the banks of a reservoir tributary. They share a gentle laugh at something the human female says. She hands the magister a flask, which he accepts, sips from, and returns]

The air caste are our pilots and messengers. We sometimes call them the invisible caste, for they are rarely seen – they prefer the low gravity of high orbit, and thrive on the sensation of flying high.

[HANGAR interior. A tall, willowy air caste pilot salutes a colleague as the canopy of his craft slides into place. The vid-thief pans back to reveal a vast Manta Missile Destroyer]

The fire caste are the honourable defenders of our way of life. When an outside factor threatens the Greater Good and the freedom it represents, these warriors are there to defeat it swiftly and efficiently. Their bravery is complemented by the best weapons technology in the galaxy.

[WEAPONS TESTING ENVIRONMENT, interior. A team of fire caste warriors rush through waist-high jungle to engage an automated facsimile of a giant, eight-legged arachen grandfather. Disciplined pulse rifle volleys cut off four of the behemoth's legs at the knee, and it stumbles to a halt]

[CLOSE UP. A battlesuit team drops from above, Commander Farsight's famous red battlesuit at the fore. The team's blasters slice into the arachen with merciless efficiency. An expert swipe from Commander Farsight's blaster beam takes the creature's many-eyed head from its neck in a spray of milky fluids]

United, these four castes work under the Tau'va's leaders, labouring ceaselessly alongside their allies to ensure the Greater Good provides the best quality of life.

[BALLISTICS RANGE, interior. A tau warrior gives advice to a human gue'vesa]

trooper aiming a pulse rifle. With a single shot, the human easily destroys a servitor-analogue of an advancing ork. It is left as a smoking, headless wreck]

Our technology and habitation is free, and readily available to all – not just for the tau, but for everyone who puts aside their troubles to join our vision of a healthy and happy society.

[DWELLING ZONE, interior. A tau and a human, silhouetted upon a balcony, watch the Dal'ythan sunset. A tray of sumptuous food and drink hovers of its own accord close at hand]

You can be a part of it. You will be a part of it. Our destiny is to unite the stars. The wise man embraces it – he and his kin will reap the rewards for the rest of his life. The fool will fall by the wayside, cold and hungry.

[The nuclear family embrace in spacious, clean living quarters with a broad panoramic view of the Dal'ythan sunset behind them]

Join us, friend-to-be. For freedom, for harmony and for the Greater Good.

FADE TO WHITE

END XENOMANTIC ARTEFACT RECORD

CHAPTER TWO

DARK VISITATIONS

DAL'YTH PRIME

The earth caste research hangar was a high-ceilinged hall, matt white and sterile. A vast chunk of blackened debris, as large as a hab-block, loomed at its centre. Around its edges were hovering consoles and receiver drones. Earth caste scientists clustered around them; some tapped information from source to source with data wands, others adjusted complex goggles or posited theories to their fellows in drab monotones.

The water caste speaker Por've Malcaor peered from hooded eyes. He smiled benignly as scientists and engineers cast sidelong glances towards him, but the expression was a mask, as ever. In theory it was a great honour to be asked to help by the students of the famed Stone Dragon, O'Vesa, but there was nothing of music or art in this hangar, little of social subtlety that was not already codified, well known and familiar to a fault. The only aspect of the room that truly caught Malcaor's interest was the monolithic hulk at its centre.

That was something truly unusual.

The monstrous lump of scorched metal and plascrete was shapeless at first glance, but the cone-like protrusions at its rear gave a hint as to its true purpose. The earth caste had already informed him he would be helping decrypt the runes on a vast generator or engine array, perhaps both. It was Imperial war tech, salvaged after the Dal'yth expedition to be slowly picked apart and analysed in excruciating detail.

To defeat the enemy, one must first know him. It was a fire caste maxim, one of the legendary Commander Puretide's if Por Malcaor recalled, but one with such universal application that even the water caste had taken to using it.

The speaker made all the appropriate bows and nods as he was led around the light-designated clearance zone that allowed the researchers to approach the

Imperial salvage without risking disruption. The earth caste were commendable sticklers for protocol, almost mathematical in their approach to life's mysteries. They had divided the enormous lump of space debris into quadrants, then subdivided those in turn.

One of these areas was far more heavily attended than any others, a strange toroidal structure with lights winking around its circumference. As Malcaor came closer, he saw one of the earth caste scientists using laser callipers to measure a strange protrusion. The thing was a gargoyle, fashioned something like a skull-faced ape with a kroothawk's wings. A strange cultural artefact, though as to its significance, he had no idea.

Then, at last, he saw symbols.

'Ah, Por'vere Dal'yth Malcaor,' said a nearby scientist, the right hand side of his face obscured by a compound half-helm. 'We are ready for your contribution.'

'Call me Por Malcaor, Pryfing,er,' said the water caste speaker, smiling kindly. 'I prefer not to draw attention to my rank.'

'As you wish,' said Pryfing,er, frowning slightly. 'To furtherance, then. Here is an Imperial runic inscription. We think perhaps it may give a clue as to the nature of this device. Maybe it will even help ascertain how it works.'

'I see,' said Malcaor, peering close. 'And the gue'la captives, they referred to this machine as a "warp drive"?'

'Yes they did,' said Pryfing,er. His tone was that of a reverent student standing before the works of a master. 'It is an honour to investigate it.'

'Were they under duress?'

'Actually, no. Your colleagues said they seemed almost proud of it. The human in uniform claimed it enables faster than light travel. But as to how it actually functions, they would not elaborate. The interpreter Allspeaker, he believes they truly do not know.' The scientist shook his head in disbelief. 'This is highly unfortunate. The implications for the Tau'va are staggering should we come to understand the functions of a human warp device.'

Malcaor nodded, blinking in surprise. He had never heard an earth caste say so much at one time; truly this must be an impressive find. 'May I have a closer look at the runes?' he asked, retrieving a data disc from his hip belt.

'That is why you are here,' said Pryfing,er. 'One moment.'

Malcaor stepped closer to the warp engine, feeling a strange sensation of heat as he did so. The sheer density of the thing was strangely oppressive, an almost physical force. It looked like it weighed a hundred tons and more. Nearby, Pryfing,er was directing his team in the removal of a panel, two engineers extracting rivets with exceptional care.

'Adjust tolerances,' said Pryfing,er to the two bulky drones at his side, 'optimise

anti-grav field. Initiate transport matrix. Containment generators on standby... and remove.'

There was a loud clank, followed by a low chorus of murmurs from the earth caste technicians. The muttering rose to excited chatter.

'Something illuminating?' asked Malcaor.

'Yes and no,' said Pryfinger. 'More puzzling.' He ran a data wand across the chamber they had exposed beyond, the device flashing and strobing. 'Organic matter in here,' said the scientist. 'Mostly ash, according to initial samples. Osseus, in origin. Some elements still largely intact.'

'Osseus?' said Malcaor, his forehead puckering. 'Why in the name of the Tau'va would there be bone matter in an engine? The result of an industrial accident?'

'Unlikely, given dispersal and volume,' said Pryfinger. 'There appears to be an interior casket built to house an artefact of unknown significance. There is a jewelled vial of fluid here too, auric plating. According to initial ultrasound feathering, it contains only water.'

Scratching his cheek, Malcaor forced his curiosity aside. It was not easy, given the strangeness of the situation, but he had a job to do. For him, the Imperial runes were the true prize. A water caste speaker could give a massive contribution to the Greater Good with an insightful translation of an enemy race's texts, and should his wisdom be instrumental in helping the earth caste develop true faster than light travel, it could prove the key to swift interstellar expansion. Should he unlock the secrets of this... this idiot-savant engine, this day could be one of the most important in the modern water caste's history.

Malcaor was relieved to see the Imperial text was in the archaic form rather than that spoken by the common populace. That was his specific area of expertise, and the reason he had been specifically requested by Pryfinger. The rune-forms were not gentle, harmonious shapes like the letters of the tau lexicon, but jagged and strange; one moment linear, the next circular. He recognised most of the word shapes from his studies in Dal'yth academies. Some were new to him, but their meaning could be dissected at a later date.

Malcaor felt the meanings of the inscriptions open in his mind, a sequential series of canal locks letting the fluid stuff of language flow to the scintillating waters of interpretation.

'*May the om-nis-siah's light bless this housing,*' he translated to his recording disc. '*The can-tic-les of saint gel-ler – jeller, perhaps – contain its divine aura...* pause.'

He frowned, his rush of joy in his work diminished all of a sudden. The earth caste had hoped for technical information, and in truth so had he, the better to

win their respect. But it looked very much like they would be left wanting.

‘Any conclusions?’ asked Pryfinger.

Malcaor shook his head absently. ‘Something to do with ancestor worship, by the look of it. It’s a specifically religious syntax. There is more to come. Resume... *‘Emp-yre-an’s ghouls we abjure thee...’*

A strange, thick gel seemed to have gathered across the next swathe of runes, obscuring them from further translation. Tutting, Malcaor absently pulled his robe’s sleeve over his hand and reached out to wipe the jelly-like substance away.

‘Do not touch the artefact!’ cried out Pryfinger.

Too late.

Malcaor was flung backwards as if swatted by an invisible giant, a crackle of strange black energy flaring out from the semi-liquid residue that clung to the warp drive and connecting to his hand like static electricity. His body, singed and steaming, crumpled to a halt in the path of a cargo drone that bleeped in alarm and backed away.

Then the hangar erupted into bedlam.

FOUR ROTAA LATER

At the sight of his fellow water caste speakers' approach, Por Malcaor put down the field-net he was using to skim insects from the surface of the fountain's edge. He shivered, and screwed his eyes shut. The magisters were airily discussing something as they walked down the green-lit boulevard, casting about and gesturing as if admiring the architecture. They lied with their body language as easily as they did with their cursed tongues.

Por Malcaor could feel the bitterness accrete in his veins, an acidic tang clotting like bad blood. It was a far worse feeling than that of the cloth of his robes sliding over his almost-healed burn tissue, for it was deep inside, the unwelcome precursor to the cruel pantomime to come. It was all part of the degradation that had occurred whenever he encountered his peers, ever since he had recovered from the incident in the hangar. Perhaps they sensed the change inside him. Perhaps they knew he would never be one of them.

'Oh, and there he is,' cried Por'vere Tsmymen Kais, an overly tall Dal'ythan with an obsequious smile. He clapped his hands together, as he tended to do at the slightest provocation. 'The Water Spider himself!'

'Oh wise speaker, enlighten us,' said Peacebringer, Tsmymen Kais' companion. A centred and handsome Bork'an, his serenity was just the other side of self-satisfaction. 'How best to translate runes with fingers rather than eyes? How best to tell our secrets to those who would do us harm?'

At his peer's remarks, Tsmymen Kais turned away to pick an edible flower and hold it up to his mouth. The magister was hiding a laugh, his dewy eyes alight and his cheeks flushed as he delicately tasted one of the leaves.

'I do not understand,' said Por Malcaor, dully. 'I do not understand what you mean by that. I fear that you are toying with me once more.'

‘And that is the beauty of it!’ cried Tsmymen Kais. ‘You have no conception! The rest of our caste swim like mercurial fish in the liquid substance of communication, darting left and right at need. You simply skim along the surface in a straight line, never so much as getting your feet wet!’ The grinning magister’s smile pulled a little wider, exposing broad flat teeth. ‘No wonder you are called the Water Spider. Noble, in a small way, to be as one with a simple insect.’

‘Though perhaps you should be named after a charging krootox, unwilling and unable to change course,’ said Peacebringer, nodding. ‘Tell us of your unusual diplomatic tactics, ox. How many times do you tend to batter your listeners with the same simple opinions before they take pity and change the subject?’

‘Usually around four times,’ said Por Malcaor quietly. ‘I sometimes rephrase the statements in order to minimise social friction.’

‘Aha! Do you hear, Peacebringer, he rephrases his statements,’ said Tsmymen Kais. ‘Such mastery of the linguist’s arts. Worthy of the Golden Ambassador himself.’

‘You are speaking ironically,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘Using sarcasm to highlight my shortcomings.’

‘Are we?’ said Tsmymen Kais, eyes wide with mock surprise.

‘This is to be expected, perhaps,’ Por Malcaor continued. ‘I have encountered such tactics before. Yet in tau society I believe it is unbecoming to trivialise the Golden Ambassador’s name by invoking it in jest.’

‘Oh dear,’ Peacebringer said dolefully. ‘Such bravery, to counter-attack from within the shadow of a giant. Perhaps we should send you to deal with the orks? They prefer the direct approach, I hear.’ His serious expression crinkled into an encouraging smile. ‘You might succeed where Por’ve Vral failed, eh? Make a proper name for yourself!’

‘Not such a bad idea,’ laughed Tsmymen Kais. ‘They would speak on much the same level – that of the witless brute.’

‘What do you think about that, Por Malcaor?’ asked Peacebringer innocently.

‘I am embarrassed and afraid.’

His fellow water caste members laughed uproariously at this, hands on their knees. Tsmymen Kais clapped in delight.

‘Afraid? What of, dear Water Spider? We mean you no ill.’

‘I fear that you are enjoying this process to such an extent you will speak of it to others, and that they will seek me out to do the same.’

‘Well, that is an interesting idea,’ said Tsmymen Kais, lips pursed and brow creased as if considering something for the first time. ‘Perhaps we shall do just that, to test out your theory for you!’

‘Please do not,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘I believe it will end badly for all concerned.’

‘Is this one of his clever word traps, do you think?’ said Tsmyen Kais to his companion in the whisper-intended-to-be-heard. ‘Caution, Peacebringer. He seeks to catch us in his web!’ He and his companion shared a sideways glance, their eyelids half-closed and their lips pursed to keep from smiling. Tsmyen’s shoulders shook as if he was in the grip of some sudden fever.

‘The truth has sudden strength, and in strength there is power,’ said Malcaor. ‘There are senior figures that know this.’

‘Oh ho! Oh, a spirited one, to have such confidence. We are merely content to serve the Greater Good in our own humble fashions.’

‘Are you more than a curio, then?’ asked Tsmyen. ‘Are your unvarnished truths so powerful they can teach us the error of our misconceptions?’

‘The fire caste has always valued plain speaking,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘As has the earth caste. Together they form the majority of tau society.’

‘True!’ said Peacebringer. ‘A cogent point, if crudely made. Who knows, perhaps you will be useful some day. Some amongst the earth caste already know of your skills. Only this morning our friend Pryfinger spoke of your eagerness to join them in their work, even if you do more harm than good.’

‘Or perhaps, if not the earth caste,’ took up Tsmyen Kais, ‘a powerful Shas’O will be in need of someone that will tell him if his warrior apparel is crinkled, or if his battlesuit has a scuff mark on its hindquarters.’

‘Failing that,’ said Peacebringer, ‘you can at least provide entertainment.’

Por Malcaor fought the urge to spill a mouthful of curses, to bunch his fists and punch these two harpies over and over until there was nothing left but shapeless, gory mush. The bitterness in his blood grew more concentrated still, growing so rich he felt it would coagulate into hard, slicing scabs. One day, perhaps, those shards of ire would make their way up into his skull to lacerate his brain.

‘I would like it if this conversation came to an end,’ said Por Malcaor coolly.

‘Well, who are we to refuse our friend’s wishes?’ said Peacebringer. ‘Tsmyen Kais, shall we find solace in the company of like-minded souls?’

‘Of course,’ said Tsmyen Kais, bowing. ‘We understand completely. And should you yourself wish for kindred spirits, dear Water Spider, I believe the Por’s cadet facility is admitting an influx of young rivulets this rottaa.’

Por Malcaor bowed in return, turning away to keep his twisted, aggrieved expression from his fellows. As he hurried away, he heard laughter behind him, light and carefree. It felt like razored talons scraping at his spine. He took a quick right turn into the lush green archways of an arboreal colonnade, desperate to shake the feeling of judgemental eyes boring into his back. One day. One day he would reclaim his mastery, and there would be a reckoning.

As he hurried past, fresh saplings and carefully cut topiary wilted around him. The edges of their leaves crinkled black and fell away, a tiny winter following the diplomat in disgrace.

Safe in the gloom of his quarters, Por Malcaor stared deep at his reflection in the mirrorfield, just as he had every day since the accident in the hangar. His mind screamed at him to brush a finger across the field's deactivation node and thereby end the ordeal, but he forced the instinct down, as he did every day. He had to make peace with the tau in the mirror if he was to find a way to rise through society. As it stood, the slick and manipulative world of the water caste magister was as alien to him as oil was to water. Immiscible. It was considered the worst of all curses for a speaker.

'This is all temporary,' said Por Malcaor to his reflection. 'Have patience. Have faith.'

The vision in the mirrorfield stared back balefully, unconvinced by its counterpart's logic. The face was offensively plain, dull to the point of caricature. Long worry lines ran down the side of a noseless slab of meat, almost elephantine in its wrinkled blue-grey massiveness. Sad eyes peered from under an apologetic brow, split by the vertical olfactory chasm the tau called the shio'he. The mouth was a lateral slash of rubbery lips that peeled back in distaste to reveal broad, flat teeth.

Bile rose in Por Malcaor's throat at the sight. No wonder he was struggling to make his mark upon Dal'yth, if this was the clay he had to work with.

This, and the unvarnished truth.

The dream of the winged serpent rose like bubbles of gas churning in his mind. His tormentor hissed at him, its forked tongue flickering in and out.

The tongue. Of course. The giver of untruths.

Por Malcaor stared grimly down as he reached under the hovering bowl of the preparation disc and depressed one of the long, thin drawers there. It ejected with a hiss of cool air to present a sterile tooth-sander and a paring knife provided for the maintenance of fingers and toes.

He took up the blade, its silvered metal cool and certain.

Staring into the wet black orbs of his eyes for long moments, Por Malcaor stuck out his tongue. It was a wide bluish flap of muscle; being water-born, it was far more complex than those of the other castes. With practice, it was capable of twisting into thousands of different shapes, all the better to speak the tongues of other races.

This thing, this thing was his enemy.

The water caste speaker gripped the paring knife hard, placed its edge against

the tip of his tongue, and sawed back and forth with frenzied determination. He had to clamp his teeth down hard to stop the involuntary reflex to withdraw his tongue. It was like a separate entity, deaf to his will, a mortally wounded animal seeking shelter in its cave. The pain was incredible. It blossomed through his mouth and rose behind his eyes, so intense it felt as if his whole face was on fire.

Still the paring knife sawed back and forth.

After crossing a mind-searing lake of agony, Por Malcaor dropped the paring knife. It clattered to the floor. The deed was done. The mirrorfield, undisturbed by the blood that had squirted through it, showed the flat grey visage once more. It was a far more pleasing sight now the lower half was a mask of dark red blood. The vital fluid still dribbled from his chin, filling his mouth. His bifurcated tongue flapped and twitched as if by itself.

It was now forked, like that of a serpent.

Now was the moment of truth – or untruth, if his desperate plan had worked. The magister gingerly withdrew his tongue back into his mouth, eyes streaming as a thunderhead of pain blossomed through his mind. Undaunted, he shaped the words in his head, feeling them out with a few experimental flexes of the mouth before speaking the lie out loud. The pulses of pain were incredible. They were purely one-dimensional in their physicality, but they were so intense they were worse than anything he had expected. Flesh was a weakness indeed.

‘My name is...’

He focused hard, screwing his eyes closed as he concentrated every fibre of his being on telling one simple lie.

My name is Pryfinger. My name is Pryfinger. My name is Pryfinger.

‘My name is Por’vre Malcaor.’

With a great sob of anguish, the magister spat a welter of blood across the preparation disc and stumbled towards the med-panel on the opposite wall.

A heartbeat later, when he looked back at the mirrorfield, something else looked back.

Pryfinger’s quarters were humble and squat, and in the twilight of the late evening, they seemed especially mundane.

Much like their occupant, thought Por Malcaor.

Ignoring the pain in his tongue, the magister concentrated on a relaxed gait as he approached. The Visitor’s Gift was packaged neatly in its cylinder held under one arm. He had seen other water caste members move as if gliding, or borne along upon a river, and he strove to emulate their poise.

It was imperative that Pryfinger give him admittance. He may already have left it too late.

A quick check of the informative image he had sent to his wrist strap, and Por Malcaor was sure. The iris portal before him bore the corresponding name-glyphs of the correct la'rua detail. The detailed hierarchies of tau society were fascinating to him, a porcelain house of cards built upon the blood-soaked sod of a primitive society.

So much upheaval could be caused, so much change, should they be given the right push.

The Water Spider slid his own holo-glyphs from the wrist strap onto the recipient panel next to the iris door, and waited. A few moments stretched past.

Then Pryfinger opened the portal, his heavily set features set in a quizzical expression.

'Por'el Dal'yth Por Malcaor,' said the scientist, 'I am honoured indeed. I see you have recovered quickly from your trauma in the hangar?'

'I truly feel like a new person,' said Por Malcaor with a wide smile. 'Dal'yth's medical scientists are skilled indeed. Might I confer with you upon a matter of some import?' He made the deferential bow of the guest-in-need, and held forth the cylindrical scroll case. It was vital that he kept the initiative, kept asking the questions instead of having to answer them. 'I bring you this gift, as an act of contrition for visiting you unannounced. It is a set of sketchprints from early Fio'taun siege cannons, taken from my personal collection.'

Pryfinger's eyes lit up. 'Of course!' he said. 'Come in. But I fear your gift is far too generous for the occasion. Fio'taun sketchprints, you say?' To Por Malcaor's relief, he reached out reverently and took the cylinder before leading him inside. 'I can hardly believe your generosity.'

'It is as nothing to me,' said Por Malcaor lightly.

The earth caste scientist removed an antique flintlock pistol from a tranquillity stand, replaced it with Por Malcaor's cylinder, put the pistol to one side and turned to face his visitor as the dwelling's iris door hissed closed.

'I will examine that later this cycle. So what is it you wish to discuss? I assume it is the matter we investigated in the hall?'

'It is,' nodded Por Malcaor sombrely. 'Do you have any sentinel devices active? I would prefer that we explore the ramifications of that event before any third parties become involved.'

'I have microdrones active, yes, but I shall dismiss them,' said Pryfinger, depressing a panel in the wall and tapping at the control disc that slid smoothly out in response. 'There.'

'My thanks,' said Por Malcaor, feeling a flood of relief. 'Now, to furtherance. How much do you understand of the Imperial engine we investigated today? Of its working principles?'

‘Not enough,’ said Pryfingler sadly, taking a pair of orchard greens from a nearby fruit disc and offering one to his guest. Por Malcaor looked at it thoughtfully, then took it to his chest with both hands in the gesture of cordial thanks. The earth caste scientist smiled, set down his own orchard green, and continued.

‘I am unsettled that my own lack of attentiveness to your translation work may have caused you harm. Hence I offer utmost contrition.’

‘It was through my own actions that I brought harm upon myself,’ said Por Malcaor, raising a shoulder in a gesture of dismissal. ‘Now, do you understand the function of the equipment we examined? Do you know what it is designed to keep out?’

Pryfingler looked at him askance. ‘You are being unusually direct today, Por Malcaor. Are you sure you should be dismissed from the care of the medicals so soon after the... incident?’

‘I am sure. Consider it post-traumatic reaction if you wish. Now, I have brought you a gift you desired, so kindly answer my questions. Do you have any theories about the function of that device?’

‘I do not,’ said Pryfingler uneasily. ‘I believe it is an engine, nothing more.’

The sour tang of falsehood hung in the air. ‘Liar!’ screamed Por Malcaor, launching himself across the room with arms outstretched. Pryfingler recoiled, but not quickly enough. In a heartbeat one of the magister’s scrawny hands was at the scientist’s throat. Orchard greens scattered as Pryfingler’s elbow struck the fruit disc, bouncing crazily. One rebounded from Por Malcaor’s foot as he thrust a hand into the earth caste scientist’s mouth. He pushed it in as far as he could, hissing manically.

‘That was a lie! I could taste it! You speak with the tongue of the serpent!’

The earth caste scientist’s mouth was thick and oily with saliva, his tongue twitching against the underside of Por Malcaor’s wrist as the magister forced his hand further into Pryfingler’s throat. He felt something give, a dull cartilaginous snap, and pushed harder. The scientist was gagging, choking, flailing wildly to dislodge his attacker. Por Malcaor took a few hard body blows as the scientist’s fists thudded in, but at this point mere physical pain was no more impediment than a mild breeze.

The blows grew weaker, less frequent, until the scientist’s body went limp. Then they stopped altogether.

Por Malcaor let Pryfingler’s body slump back against the wall, the cadaver’s dislocated jaw flapping. He withdrew his hand and forearm from his victim’s mouth. His fist was slick with a long string of bloody drool. The magister wrestled the corpse into the curlicue chair nearby, and looked around. He saw

some of the orchard fruits still rolling, and picked one up. Smiling, he prized Pryfinger's throat open with two fingers before using his other hand to roughly shove the orchard fruit as far into the scientist's craw as possible.

'Greed,' whispered Por Malcaor, 'is the bane of the curious.'

The magister lifted the hem of his robe and wiped his arm clean of bloody phlegm on the garment's interior, taking care not to get any on the outside before dropping it back into place. He looked back at his handiwork for a moment, savouring the delicious near-randomness of the fruits' scattering around the site of Pryfinger's unfortunate incident. He nodded to himself in satisfaction, waving two fingers across the iris portal's release reader, and slid back out into the night.

CHAPTER THREE

ELEMENTAL TRUTHS

GEL'BRYN CITY, DAL'YTH

Commander Farsight strode down the main boulevard of Gel'bryn City at the head of his entourage. Many citizens bowed low as he approached, talking excitedly amongst themselves as he passed. He kept his expression tranquil, but inside, memories of war were tugging at his mind.

The evidence of the severe punishment meted out by the Imperial invasion had been all but eradicated by the earth caste, but he remembered the pain and the confusion as if it were yesterday. Salvage and controlled demolition had taken place across the city, much of which Farsight and his fellow commanders had helped enact whenever the aftermath of war made recovery operations too hazardous for unarmoured personnel. He had insisted upon it, in fact.

With O'Vesa putting his weight behind it, the proposal had been carried, despite the fact several cross-caste meetings had been cancelled as a result. That had been fine by Farsight. All he wanted was to serve the Tau'va in as direct and effective a fashion as possible. Lately it seemed that the water caste – and presumably the ethereals behind them – would rather he spent his time talking about the Greater Good than actually working towards it.

As Farsight had feared, his volunteering to help the earth caste had caused some to whisper of a lack of focus. That in turn had inevitably caused the old accusations of his being *vash'ya*, prone to straying 'between spheres', to resurface. He had ridden the detractions out simply by ignoring them altogether. The water caste's constant insistence he was a great hero had proved useful for once, and all but the most hard line of his detractors fell silent.

It had proven to be the right course, and Dal'yth had been returned to its former grandeur all the quicker. None amongst the tau wielded pinpoint destruction as finely as the commanders of the fire caste.

The cleansing of those structures that were beyond repair had soon been followed by the assembly of prefabricated, interlocking architecture of excellent quality. Efficient and swift, the process had seen the scorched black ruins left in the Imperials' wake replaced by impressive new structures that were even more advanced than the previous incumbents. As with everything the earth caste did, the rebuilding was pragmatic and slick to an inspiring degree – as Farsight had heard it, High Scientist Worldtamer had begun a masterful programme of restoration work even whilst the Imperial invaders were still planetside. It had done Farsight's soul good, to witness the steady and swift pace of the earth caste going about their business. Dal'yth had been restored to its utopian grandeur, and more besides.

Some things, at least, were still reliable.

'All this prosperity is a welcome sight, is it not, famous one?' asked Brightsword, his fashionably-cut robes billowing in the autumn breeze.

'It is,' replied Farsight absently. He knew his pupil well enough to hear the bait under the question, to realise that the young warrior did not wish to be a part of peace, but of conflict. He felt the same, deep down, for the fire caste was made to fight. Brightsword had requested permission to accompany Farsight to the audience with the ethereals, and was dropping in jibes and lures whenever possible – conversational sparring was better than nothing, in his book. Even in times of peace the second incarnation of the Brightsword gene-pattern was just as bellicose as the first.

In that, the young bladesman was in good company. He walked just in front of two battlesuits: Commander Bravestorm, striding behind them in his cutting edge iridium XV8, and the artificial intelligence known as Ob'lotai 3-0, the hulking shas'vere Broadside who had been Farsight's bodyguard ever since his near death on Arkunasha. It was a temporary honour guard, for none of Farsight's battlesuit commanders would sit on the elemental council, nor bask in the presence of the legendary Aun'Wei. Only his old rival Shadowsun would have that honour.

Still, Farsight was glad of the moral support on the way there. It was considered a blessing to speak to an ethereal under any circumstances, but those luminaries were so close to the purity of the Greater Good they made Farsight feel a little uneasy in his own skin. Sometimes he felt as if he was not worthy of breathing the same air, and at others he felt as if he was being lied to, even when the ethereals had not said a single word.

The aftermath of the Imperial invasion had changed something within him, something that would not easily change back.

'Commander,' said Ob'lotai 3-0. 'There is another informational broadcast

ahead.'

'Can we go round it?' sighed Farsight, already regretting his decision to walk to the audience hall.

'No,' said Ob'lotai 3-0, a wry smile in the inflection of his voice, 'not if we want to be there in good time. It would not do to keep the Whispering Wisdom waiting. It was your decision to go on foot, was it not?'

'It seemed absurd to travel less than a hexspar's length in a transport, when we are all four perfectly capable of walking,' said Farsight. 'Besides, the exercise is good for the cartilage in my knee.'

'As you say, sprightly one,' said Brightsword, 'and if you soak up some adulation en route, then naturally, that is the price you are willing to pay.'

Farsight made the sign of young-life-cut-tragically-short. Ob'lotai laughed, the intelligence's deep rolling bass so convincingly replicated it was as though the old veteran was still alive.

The commander found himself grinning too. Since Ob'lotai's death and subsequent translation into an artificial intelligence via the Stone Dragon's mind-mapping device, the Broadside pilot had found mirth far more easily. Peculiar, given that Ob'lotai had long held contempt for simulacra – he still avoided drones whenever possible, and was impolite or even hostile to them, up to the point of open hatred. It was a paradox the commander had long intended to solve, but never seemed to find the right moment.

As they rounded the corner a massive, semi-transparent informative holo showed Farsight leading his commanders in battle. His signature XV8 was red against the ivory and tan of the Dal'ythan cityscape. This time their enemies were the brutish *gue'ron'sha* super-warriors that humanity used as its shock troopers. Farsight remembered these ones well: Scar Lords, they had been called. Facially disfigured, more often than not, and fearsome beyond sane measure. They fought with a ferocity that made the cannibalistic kroot seem gentle by comparison.

'I always thought this was a well-chosen scene,' said Brightsword, 'Look, in the background. I cut one of the big ones clean in half!'

'Congratulations,' said Ob'lotai 3-0 dryly. 'It's just as impressive the eightieth time you see it.'

As they watched, the holo of Farsight's red battlesuit, rendered some fifteen metres tall, swung around an abstract helical statue to blast back a bipedal Imperial walker. The phantom XV8 jetted backwards to stamp on a *gue'ron'sha* warrior firing explosive rounds at a giant holo of Ob'lotai 3-0 as he stood on a nearby roof. The ghost shots detonated harmlessly upon the Warghost's thickened plating. The spectral Ob'lotai did not flinch, and fired a salvo of

missiles in return. They soared down in winding trails, seeking out the translucent gue'ron'sha's comrades hunkered down in the ruins of a shattered hexodome. The holo missiles exploded with such force the Space Marines' headless corpses were flung into the road.

'I still can't believe they weren't wearing helmets,' said Ob'lotai in disbelief.

'Pride,' quoted Farsight, 'is the ruination of both warriors and kings.'

'They edited out the blood again,' said Bravestorm, flexing his onager gauntlet. 'Why not celebrate it?'

'Morale is low enough without the sight of gore in the streets, even that of the alien,' said Farsight. 'The water caste know their craft. They are managing the trauma well.'

'The giant red battlesuit destroying everything in its path is helping, do you think?' asked Ob'lotai 3-0.

'I suppose so,' muttered Farsight. 'Whatever needs to be done to rebuild.'

'Some would say, revered one,' said Brightsword, 'you are more use to the Tau'va as a symbol than as a soldier.'

The comment was meant as good-natured sparring, but it struck home like a poisoned dart. Farsight had seen the same engagements being played over and over again, night and day, for far too long. His bombastic Mont'ka assaults made for far better viewing than Commander Shadowsun's stealthy and patient Kauyons. His opposite number had amassed far more victories over the dark side of Dal'yth as the invasion had spread, and she had saved dozens of conurbations and hexodomes from destruction. But without the broadcasts singing her praises, few outside the fire caste were speaking of them.

Conversely, the informatives painted Farsight in the best possible light. Of course they omitted the inglorious truths of the war. There was no sign of the corpses of non-combatant tau strewn in the streets, or of torsos stacked one atop another, reduced to morbid bulwarks by the human line infantry digging in for a protracted land battle that would never come. There was no footage of Dal'yth Prime's horizon, the scorched remnants of shattered bio-domes gouting thick black smoke that scarred the skies, nor information concerning the utter demolition of the *kor'vattra* interception ships that had failed to stop the ramming Imperial assault.

'That time should be left in the past,' said Farsight dully. 'We should be looking forward, not back.'

The commander had long held the opinion the water caste was pitching its agenda a little too forcefully. It was a falsely bright summation of the war, and it did little honour to those who had given their lives to win it. The rebuilding of the city was complete, the stories of conquest so well told they were like old

friends. But there was not a soul upon Dal'yth who had remained unaffected by the Imperial invasion. For the water caste to pretend the tau had won an unequivocal victory was an obvious lie, and it cast doubt upon everything they imparted alongside it.

The tau civilians nearby did not even glance at the informative broadcasts, walking through the legs of warring holos as if they were not there. Farsight knew from experience many senior fire caste were growing tired of the constant reassurance that all was well. Even a child could see that was untrue. The Imperial invasion was a display of vulgar but terrifying power, repelled only at great cost; only Farsight and his immediate team knew just how close it had come to tearing the sept world apart completely. If not for a twist of fate that had sent the Imperials back to guard their own holdings, there would be nothing of Dal'yth Prime left to defend.

It was a truth that no one was giving voice to, but it hung over them all like a thundercloud, no matter the water caste's attempts to disperse it.

'There it is,' said Ob'lotai 3-0. 'The Spine.'

The massive segmented building ahead tapered from wide hexagonal lower floors to a tall pointed crest. It was built at a subtle twist throughout, its lines spiralling up with graceful fluidity. At its tip, held in place by hovering electromagnets, was a detached sphere of cool blue hyperglass large enough to accommodate an entire hunter cadre with room to spare.

As Farsight and his entourage approached, the sphere lowered and settled gently atop the Spine's tip, a portal irising open in its underside so the two elements could become one. The gentle gradations of the sphere and the curving hexes of the Spine itself made for an elegant sight against the mauves and indigos of the Dal'ythan dawn.

'A twin elemental council,' said Bravestorm with relish. 'It looks like we shall be going to war against the Imperials once more.'

Farsight sighed, his olfactory chasm puckering. He suspected his fellow commander was correct, but the excitement in Bravestorm's voice at the prospect of revenge was unseemly. Perhaps, thought Farsight, he had made the wrong choice for poor Sha'vastos' replacement.

At Blackthunder Mesa, Bravestorm had field-tested a prototype onager gauntlet by launching a reckless assault upon the Imperial artillery pounding a youth training facility. He had been caught in the firestorm of a titanic walker's retaliation as a result, and his entire body had been burned to a black and twisted ruin. Though O'Vesa's scientists successfully transferred him to a high-tech iridium XV8 from the molten wreckage of his own Crisis suit, Bravestorm was still technically in a critical condition. Even a few microdecs spent outside his

support systems would cause a drastic bodily meltdown.

‘There is a chance we will consolidate our position instead,’ said Ob’lotai 3-0. ‘If the council advises caution, you will have to content yourself with battering O’Vesa’s Imperial simulacra.’

Bravestorm clenched the fingers of his massive gauntlet, arcs of electricity snapping around his fingers.

‘Enough,’ said Farsight as they approached the hexagonal plate-lift that would bear him up the Spine’s exterior to the portal at its tip. ‘I am about to represent the fire caste to the greatest ethereal to have ever lived. Some decorum amongst my advisors would be wise.’

His fellow warriors bowed, Brightsword making the sign of contrition.

‘Be patient, please,’ said Farsight. ‘And if you see Shadowsun, say nothing.’

The audience chamber at the heart of the Spine’s sphere was pleasantly cool, the glass walls swathed in diffuse curtains of liquid nitrogen. The polarised view across Dal’yth’s horizon was breath-taking, especially with the sun filtering shafts of sunlight through the clouds, but Farsight made an effort to appear unmoved as he strode inside. The fire caste were a passionate breed, and he had lost his temper at just such a council before. He would not let his emotions rule him like that again. Especially not in front of her.

As Farsight moved through the entrance vestibule, the fireblades standing on guard made the hunter’s salute. Their faces were caricatures of awestruck pride. He returned the gesture, as he had done a hundred times that day already, and nodded reassurance. With so many salutes to honour, his arm joints would be worn to ruin before the end of the kai’rotaa.

There were twelve thrones around the circumference of the sphere. Each was marked with the name-glyphs of a hero or potentate vital to the furtherance of the war effort. Two delegates from each of the castes, and two seats for the Kindred Souls, emissaries from other races that had been united under the Tau’va in order to aid the council in the debates of the day.

Farsight cast a furtive glance at the proud warrioress in the throne opposite, and his heart thumped hard.

Commander Shadowsun.

The passing years had not diminished her. If anything they had strengthened the aura of sheer conviction that radiated from her gaze. Her unalloyed competence was worn like an invisible battlesuit that could deflect any attack, even when clad in the loose robes of a Kan’jian alumnus. She sat ramrod straight, hands on her knees, so tall her asymmetrical topknot of auburn hair – a style since adopted by thousands of female fire caste warriors – obscured the throne’s circular fire

caste symbol above her head.

Farsight and Shadowsun had once talked, under the stars of Mount Kan'ji, of what an honour it would be to meet Aun'Wei himself. That was back then, of course. Now the day of their ambition had arrived, their estrangement cast a long shadow. The strain of showing a united front did not sit easy with either of them.

The atmosphere in the room was one of tense anticipation. The ethereals had yet to arrive, as ever – even a second of their time wasted was a crime against the Tau'va – but each delegate there would be given a chance to speak their piece, and listened to without prejudice.

Many of the faces were known to him. There were even those whose attendance he had requested by name, and in his current position of influence, it seemed he had been obliged. Some were new, amongst them an ursine nicassar delegate floating in a healsphere with his ivory hair-quills slicked across his stubby, clawed limbs. Like all his kind, he would communicate rarely, but usually with great insight.

Seated to the nicassar's right was a slender human whose gender was difficult to determine from perfectly symmetrical features. Given the cultural norms of Dal'yth's elemental councils, she was almost certainly a female, or a close analogue. She had dark black glasses hiding her eyes, above them a rectangular tattoo upon her forehead that glistened as if still fresh. The ink-mark depicted an image – as Farsight watched, it seemed to shift from depicting a carefree traveller upon a precipice to a bone-armoured knight holding a flaming chalice. The commander had a feeling he had seen a similar tattoo once before, but with the ethereals' arrival imminent and O'Shaserra looking at him as if he was no more than a nuisance, he could not place its origin.

Shadowsun was still extremely distracting, after all these years.

Two ethereal guards rose up into the room, gliding up from the spiralling platform that led from the tip of the Spine to the centre of the audience sphere. As they stepped off and took their places either side of the ethereal command thrones, Farsight felt an unpleasant feeling in his gut. The duties of the ethereal guard extended far past the security of their revered charges, as Farsight had found out the hard way during the Dal'yth invasion. These two he had met before, and not under happy circumstances. His arrest at their hands had engendered a far more complex relationship than the simple respect of fellow veterans.

'Be upstanding,' said the first guard, the broad-shouldered giant Shas'tral Fue'larrakan. His fellow escort, Shas'tral Oa'manita, cast out a hand. A quartet of tiny drone-discs flew from his palm into the spacious central area. Two projected diffuse light, the other two played soothing wind-music.

‘The celestial delegates are amongst us, honoured delegates,’ said Fue’larrakan, bowing low. ‘May we present our ethereal masters, Aun’Va and Aun’Tipiya.’

Rising from the Spine’s platform came not the great Aun’Wei, as Farsight had been expecting, but Aun’Va, the right hand of the Whispering Wisdom. He wore the heavy white robes of his office, fringed with scripted benedictions. With him was the well-respected Aun’Tipiya, her grav-belt keeping her feet a hand’s breadth from the polished chrome of the platform’s floor. A pair of sleek, hyper-advanced drones hovered at her shoulders, lenses winking steadily.

‘Be seated,’ said Aun’Va magnanimously, linking his fingers in the sign of castes-coming-together. ‘We have much to discuss.’

Farsight’s heart beat even faster in his chest. Though the other delegates sat in reverent silence, he remained standing for a moment, perhaps in shock.

‘Is Aun’Wei not with us this day?’ he found himself asking.

For a long moment, no one answered. The ambient temperature of the room’s interior suddenly felt like ice.

‘Aun’Wei has more pressing matters to attend to,’ said Aun’Va coolly. ‘We must do without his wisdom, and follow his teachings as best we can. He has sent myself and Aun’Tipiya, the Watchful One, to adjudicate in his absence.’

Farsight nodded and sat down. ‘Of course.’

‘To furtherance, then,’ said Aun’Tipiya, folding her legs in the autumn lily position a clear foot above her seat. ‘The ethereal council has taken a momentous decision, and it involves all of you here. We will be launching a second expedition force across the Damocles Gulf, and reconquering the worlds the Imperium has ripped from our grasp.’

Farsight watched the other delegates carefully. He had suspected such a decision was in the offing, and sooner rather than later, but by the stiffened postures and wide eyes of those present there were many who were blindsided.

One of the delegate magisters, thick set for a member of the water caste, stood with a look of attentive inquiry upon her elderly features. ‘I am Wellclaim, magister of this fair city,’ she said. ‘We shall smooth the transition of Dal’yth’s efforts from rebuilding to reconquest, as per your wishes, ethereal master. I must ask, however. Does this mean an expedition initiated by the fire caste, rather than a reprisal of the Silken Conquests?’

‘It does indeed,’ said Aun’Va. ‘And I have put forward Commander Farsight to lead it.’

Farsight saw Shadowsun sit ever so slightly back in her seat at Aun’Va’s declaration. The landscape of her handsome features was unmarred by consternation, but he knew that decision would be grinding in the soul beneath, like icebergs colliding in the depths.

The commander too felt something move inside him. Last time he had spoken to Aun'Va, when the ethereal had come to collect Sha'vastos for lobotomisation after the botched Puretide engram project, Farsight had lied to the luminary's face. It was a shocking breach of protocol, so unthinkable that neither could admit to it happening at all. Volumes had remained unsaid between them. And now, for Aun'Va to elevate Farsight to the status of overall expedition leader...

'We have monitored the populace extensively, and their morale is far from optimal,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'They speak of the Imperials in hushed voices, fearing another sudden attack. This seed of doubt, should it truly take root, will do irrevocable damage to the Tau'va.'

'I am Farsight, of Vior'la.' The commander announced himself as he stood, trying to smooth over his earlier lapse of protocol, drawing the circle of the fire caste in the air as he did so. 'The honoured ethereal master is correct, of course. It is my belief the various informatives of the water caste, though excellent, do not penetrate to the hearts of those who view them. Only news of true and lasting victory can achieve that. Not in defence, but in aggression. It is our duty to attack the Imperium at the earliest possible juncture.'

Across the audience chamber, Shadowsun nodded sharply, just once. That simple affirmation triggered an explosion of relief and wellbeing in Farsight's chest.

'We must strike back,' he continued, the ghost of a grim smile on his heavily lined features as he grew emboldened by Shadowsun's approval. 'We must take back that which is ours by right of conquest. The enclaves of the Timbra sub-sector must be brought back into the fold, and with all speed. To cede them to the barbaric gue'la is to send a message of inadequacy.'

Aun'Va raised his brows, and spoke.

'Commander, I believe you are right.'

With that simple phrase, he set in motion a chain of events that would see worlds burn.

'We would welcome more war footage to work with, of course,' said Wellclaim smoothly, smiling at Farsight from across the council hall. She was difficult to read, that one, but Farsight suspected she was somehow diminished by the aun's announcement that the fire caste's commanders would lead instead of their ambassadorial counterparts.

'I would be remiss in my duty to the fire caste, however,' said Farsight, 'if I did not recommend Commander Shadowsun for this honour. Though I have studied the Imperial war machine extensively, her mind is better suited to an expedition of this scale. I truly believe she would use the resources of the fleet more

efficiently. She would win the fringe worlds back in a far more capable manner than I.'

'Noted,' said Aun'Va, 'and overruled.'

Farsight felt as if he had been physically slapped.

'I am High Scientist Worldshaper, of Bork'an,' interjected the skull capped female to Farsight's right, the earth caste overseer famous for her visionary terraforming. 'Leave the expedition logistics to O'Vesa and I, commander.'

O'Vesa stood up, grinning widely. 'O'Vesa, called the Stone Dragon. You should concentrate on prosecuting these noble wars, Farsight, not organising them,' he said. 'We shall ensure you have what you need to achieve an optimal death count, and that the enclave worlds are fashioned to the aun's liking once victory has been secured. I believe –'

'If victory is secured,' said Farsight before he could stop himself. 'The Imperials have functionally limitless resource, given time. We do not.'

'Your macrostrategy is that of the Killing Blow, commander,' said Aun'Tipiya archly. 'We need your bravery and skill, the better to show the fate of those who cross us. More than that, we need your conviction. We shall not give the Imperials time to marshal a proper defence. That is why we need a swift, decisive strike. And who better to land it?'

'Quite,' said Aun'Va, standing and bringing his palms together in a gesture of culmination. 'Your destiny is set in stone. From this point on, Farsight of Vior'la, I invest you with the rank of high commander.'

There was a ripple of approval around the room, though it faded swiftly. Aun'Va continued, his tone that of a king addressing his court.

'Statues will be raised across Dal'yth and beyond to commemorate your great deeds, and those deeds yet to come. You shall take back from the Imperial oppressors that which we won through fair advancement, and through the free will of the people.'

The atmosphere in the room was charged with approval and energy, all eyes gazing upon Farsight. He felt something wither inside his soul at the unqualified admiration radiating from those present.

'Three ethereal advisors will accompany you,' said Aun'Va, 'as per the council's wishes, to guide your hand. Should they be unable to lend you their wisdom, for whatever reason, you and your expedition will return to the core sept worlds immediately. Is that clear?'

'It is clear,' nodded Farsight.

'Good. Do not forget it, or the censure will be ultimate.'

Farsight felt his throat dry up, and merely bowed by way of answer.

'Commander Shadowsun will remain behind to defend the sept worlds. The site

of your meteoric rise, the Mont'yr Battle Dome, will be repurposed to better replicate your teachings. It will hold your war-style, the Way of the Short Blade, above all others.'

'You do me too much honour,' said Farsight. He felt vaguely sick, but held his composure as best he could. 'I will of course take this position and give my all, body and soul. But with respect...'

Aun'Va turned his head sharply, a raptor looking at prey suddenly revealed. He unfurled a hand and motioned for Farsight to continue.

'Honoured ethereal master, I do not understand why you have chosen a member of the fire caste for overall command when the water caste have proven so capable in inciting human rebellion from within. They would see the worlds all but conquered with a minimal loss of tau life.'

'It is simple enough,' said the male water caste magister opposite Wellclaim, 'they want rid of you.'

Sharp intakes of breath came from all around the chamber.

'My apologies,' continued the speaker. 'I should state name and home. My name is Por've Malcaor, and I hail from this planet, Dal'yth.'

The Water Spider, this one was called. Farsight had only recently heard of him, but he had been intrigued, and requested his attendance if possible upon the elemental council. It seemed his reputation for bluntness, often to the point of clumsy phrasing, was well earned. Even his naming protocol seemed foreign and clunky, but to his credit, he had cut right to the heart of the matter in the space of a few words.

Words that would likely see him sink beneath the tides of history. Opposite the new speaker, Wellclaim's composure was gone completely, her serene expression replaced by something halfway between embarrassment and horror.

'Yes, they want to see you set sail, and soon,' Por Malcaor continued. 'They fear the fire caste becoming too influential, upsetting the balance of things.' There was something wrong with his speech; it had a slight lisp sound with a glottal undertone, as if he was speaking with a mouth full of blood. 'They can't dispose of you without risking uproar. Hence they are sending you, and those closest to you, as far away as possible. If you succeed in reconquest, they can then use you as a figurehead without any real chance of your intervention.' Farsight saw a flicker of the speaker's tongue as he talked, stark red against the wrinkled grey skin of his face. 'If you die in the process, you will be one more martyr for the cause that won't be getting in the way. Isn't that what you were intimating earlier, Ambassador Wellclaim?'

'Oh, no, not me,' stammered the water caste speaker opposite Por Malcaor. 'You have severely misinterpreted me, I fear. I was merely positing that the

ethereals had given extensive thought to every possible course our manifest destiny might take.'

'Of course we have,' said Aun'Va, his words like slabs landing on a grave. 'It is a matter of such gravity I shall discuss it further with you and your colleague here. In private.'

'This one speaks his mind, I see,' said Farsight to the room, motioning towards Por Malcaor. Across from him, his old ally Admiral Kor'O Li Mau Teng smiled politely, subtly making the sign of too-many-gifts. Farsight continued nonetheless. 'I look forward to his counsel on the other side of the gulf.'

The silence in the room was oppressive.

It was Shadowsun that broke it. 'Master Aun'Va, O'Shovah said himself that I am the better choice for this post. Should my deeds not be recognised alongside his?'

Across from Admiral Teng, the second air caste delegate, a stick-thin female named Sylphwing, gave a nervous laugh that was half cough. A glance from Shadowsun skewered her into silence.

'Your reward, Commander Shadowsun, is knowing that you have served the Tau'va faithfully,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'The council has spoken. The fire caste will strike a decisive blow upon each of the enclave worlds, and swiftly. They will do this not only for material gain, but also to reassert our supremacy as a military force. The Tau'va demands it. A true warrior, a true believer in the Greater Good, does not question such a duty.'

Farsight looked down, humbled by the implied rebuke.

'That brings me on to the next matter,' said Aun'Va. 'Some dire news, sadly. Master Puretide, in giving his all for the Dal'yth war effort, has reached the sunset of his long and distinguished life.'

Both Farsight and Shadowsun looked up sharply, concern lining their faces.

'In reverent respect and utmost fondness we remember him. We will seek solace from our memories, and for those wisdoms shared like for like.'

'Is he dead?' blurted Farsight.

'No. But he declines, and to let his teachings slide away into history would be to commit a grave crime against the Tau'va. After all, Master Puretide understands the way of war better than any other.'

Many of the tau in the chamber nodded in solemn confirmation as Aun'Va continued.

'Where one warrior might hone the metastrategy of the Patient Hunter –' at this he gestured at Shadowsun, '– and another the Killing Blow, the lonely path of the Monat, or a dozen other war styles besides, he would invariably do so at the exclusion of all others. Puretide mastered every way of war with equal skill. His

insight cannot be lost.'

Farsight murmured an affirmation of agreement and respect, as did Shadowsun. They were joined by several of those from other castes, Admiral Teng loudest amongst them. It was known across tau space that Master Puretide was a sage amongst warriors, a genius whose contribution to the Greater Good could not be understated.

'For that tremendous skill to be retained, we have taken unusual measures,' continued Aun'Va. 'Commander Farsight was instrumental in their execution, as was the Stone Dragon, O'Vesa.'

At this, the scientist bowed as much as he was able, given that his body was almost as wide as it was tall. Farsight fought back a grimace. It had been O'Vesa's mind-mapping device he had taken to the top of Mount Kan'ji, approaching his mentor and placing it upon his scalp. That strange coronation still haunted him, some nights; a crux point of fate that had seen the fire caste's destiny take a strange and disquieting turn.

'The neural mapping device used to create the Puretide Engrams has been perfected since its shortcomings were revealed,' added Aun'Tipiya. 'It has been reapplied for a second reading as a preliminary failsafe against Master Puretide's death.'

Farsight knew well of the device she spoke of, an unsettling string of skullcap-hung neurodes. At first it had been used to pursue Aun'Va's desire to create prototype mind-clones, the infamous Swords of Puretide, in order to set the master's strategic genius against the Imperial invasion. Those tiny slivers of bio-ware that O'Vesa had created from the mind-map, though technically successful, had triggered so much in the way of cerebral dissonance that the removal procedure had left their former hosts as drooling simpletons.

Farsight had hidden his friend Sha'vastos from that fate by sequestering him in his personal quarters, then secreting him in cryo-stasis and essentially faking his death. In doing so Farsight had lied to Aun'Va's face. It was an infraction punishable by death.

'Unfortunately,' said the ethereal master, looking straight at Farsight as if he could read his thoughts, 'Commander Puretide is of advanced age, and Mount Kan'ji's winters have not been kind. He is showing signs of confusion and distress. The earth caste began the second neural mapping procedure just in time. We are confident we will soon be able to replicate Master Puretide's mind, replacing him with a hologram within decs of his biological demise.'

Farsight felt like he had been kicked in the chest. When he had last approached him atop Mount Kan'ji, his master had been advanced in years, but in fine health. He looked over at Shadowsun, but she avoided his gaze, forehead

puckered in stern disapproval.

‘However,’ said Aun’Tipiya, opening her hands like the petals of a flower in a gesture of revelation, ‘the procedure is experimental. Even with O’Vesa’s considerable intellect bent to the task, it is a delicate process. The risks of losing Master Puretide’s neural imprint are too great to rely on a single modus of recovery. Without his wisdom, the fire caste will be greatly reduced in effectiveness. And that the Tau’va cannot allow.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Aun’Va. ‘Because of this we are extending a historic opportunity to two of the master’s foremost pupils, Shas’O Kais and Shas’O Shaserra.’ Farsight saw Shadowsun’s eyes widen as the ethereal master smiled thinly at her. ‘They shall enter cryostasis, frozen in time to preserve the wisdom Puretide has imparted to them.’

Farsight caught the dismay in Shadowsun’s facial expression before she recovered her composure, her posture still as straight as an honour sword.

‘Whether that be in one generation, two, or even a hundred in the future,’ said Aun’Tipiya, ‘they will stand ready to lead the fire caste when the master’s wisdom is needed most.’

Silence.

‘Now,’ took up Aun’Va. ‘High Commander Farsight here, anxious for conflict as ever, has already broached the subject of the personnel leading this invasion. The Ethereal Council has decided upon a team of trusted advisors to accompany him, many of whom are the Kindred Souls you see in this room. Amongst them are Nicassar Unndt, a veteran star guide and noted mind-traveller...’

The bear-like creature in the glass healsphere blinked slowly, inclining its head by way of greeting.

‘...and Thransia Delaque, a gue’vesa diplomatic consultant well-schooled in the Imperial war machine.’

The tattooed human woman bowed. ‘I look forward to working alongside you all,’ she said, the rectangle over her round black spectacles changing to depict a winged messenger.

Farsight felt his thoughts turn inwards. Already Dal’yth Prime, site of his greatest victory and home of his fading mentor Puretide, seemed dead to him. His path had opened up before him to become a chasm, a yawning abyss of potential in which legends could be forged anew.

Preoccupied by the revelations of the ethereal’s declarations and the fractal possibilities ahead, the commander felt his eyes drawn across the chamber.

The intensity of Shadowsun’s gaze was like an ice cold javelin pushed into his soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEVOTION

AUN'AR'TOL, DAL'YTH

After sunset, Ambassador Wellclaim was escorted through the arterial corridors of Aun'ar'tol high command by ceremonial guards. Her looming shas'tral escorts had said not a word since her arrival at the giant white dome of the ethereal command site, merely regarding her with a palpable disapproval after waving the rest of her team back to the transport. She felt exposed without her ta'lissera bond-mates, almost naked without their support. The core of nameless disquiet that had settled within her grew heavier as she had crossed the threshold of Aun'ar'tol's fabled dome, her fingers locked in a gesture of supplication.

The building itself was tranquil, every angle and feature of its corridors organised for the optimum harmony. Its heavily guarded barrier stations unfurled like paper sculptures, beautiful in their symmetry, to allow her and her escort through. The stylised wind music coming from up ahead gave her a measure of reassurance. Surely no revelation was beyond a caste so steeped in serenity.

Wellclaim did her best to absorb the shame that swilled inside her and stow it in the back of her mind. Perhaps her opposite number's awful breach of etiquette at the council was a temporary setback, something that could be ridden out over time. As Por Malcaor's formally listed tutor, she would face censure, of course, and possibly a grave loss of face. Still, the years would see their shared stigma fade.

In actuality, she shared some of the fault. She had indeed spoken of the ethereals' most likely plans before the council. But that was in confidence. It should never have been one of the Water Spider's blurted truths.

He had been the one to speak out of turn, not her. Surely he would be punished far more severely as a result, perhaps even forced to rejoin the ranks of the recruiting corps or even the rivulets of a new influx. If the ethereals were

merciful, he would take the brunt of the punishment, and she would be treated leniently in light of her long service.

Even then, she thought as another barrier slid open before her, how had it come to this at all? She had told Por Malcaor to remain silent during the elemental council. What had come over him lately? His behaviour was perverse, almost like he was baiting those around him by deliberately swimming against the tide.

In retrospect, she had no real idea why on T'au she had complied with Farsight's odd request for him to attend in the first place. It was conceivable the fire caste officers had desired his presence specifically to undermine her, inviting him in the hope he would embarrass his caste, and hence making certain the reconquest of the enclave worlds was achieved through force rather than diplomacy. If that had been the commander's plan – the *high commander*, she reminded herself – then she had to hand it to him, it was a play well executed.

Executed. Such a powerful word, with two sharp edges.

She forced the unwelcome thought from her mind, and stood straight as the ethereal guard crossed their ornamental halberds in front of a field scanner. With their free hands they held neurostrips near their temples. The last barrier into Aun'ar'tol's inner sanctum unfurled, the iris door yielding to become a tube-like antechamber that led into a cavernous audience hall.

Inside was Aun'Va, the ethereal master. He was meditating cross-legged upon a grav-drone. A long-tailed robe flowed from his limbs, and a stylised hologram of a segmented aqueduct shimmered in front of him. No doubt he had been ruminating on how the water caste could better serve the Greater Good.

'This structure,' said Aun'Va as Wellclaim entered the room. 'Do you recognise it?'

'I do, master,' she said, her tones modulated to convey maximum sweetness and subservience – like honey on rose petals, as her bond-mates had put it. 'It is an aqueduct, of the early El'Moya school, is it not? Post Fio'taun, but not by more than a few kai'rotaa.'

'Correct. It was assembled by the earth caste after they were challenged to convey water from one settlement to another when our race was still in its infancy. Along its length, the liquid stuff of harmony is channelled. The flow of life itself. This truth you both know.'

The ethereal cast a sharp glance towards her, then at his ethereal guard.

'Where is the other one?' he asked Fue'larrakan. 'Did he not receive my summons?'

'He did, majestic one,' said Wellclaim. 'I was there at the time. Though as to his whereabouts...' she made the open-handed gesture of innocence-apologising-nonetheless.

The ethereal's mask of patient wisdom disappeared, replaced by an older and far fiercer expression, before reappearing as if nothing had happened. 'He must have been unavoidably detained, or slain. It is the only explanation.'

'As you say, your eminence,' said Fue'larrakan.

'This aqueduct,' continued the ethereal with a frustrated sigh. 'You can see how each of its arches, graceful though they are, converge at a singular point. All of the stone blocks that form them lean in towards the vital capstone.'

'A wonder of early design, master,' said Wellclaim. Hidden under the capacious sleeves of her robe, her hands picked at tiny curls of hard skin, as dextrous as birds fastidiously grooming one another.

'Should that capstone be removed, or its stability shaken,' continued Aun'Va, carefully reaching towards the hologram and flicking the capstone from the central arch with an antique data thimble, 'the entire edifice will tumble.'

Sure enough, the aqueduct silently crumbled away – first the arch with the missing capstone, then the arches on either side, until the entire edifice had tumbled to nothingness. A tiny river splashed from the structure's top to the edge of the hologram sphere, splitting into a dozen tiny waterfalls that shimmered in the gentle light of Aun'Va's quarters. The liquid was not crystal blue, as Wellclaim had imagined, but a rich arterial red.

'It is the same with our society, of course,' said Aun'Va. 'The ethereals are the capstones, supported by the blocks of society, but also supporting them in turn. Should our substance, our authority, be undermined, the entirety of the edifice we know as the Tau'va may topple, and the stuff of life itself bleed away.'

He paused, and stared directly at Wellclaim before continuing. The intensity of his disapproval lanced into her.

'That could mean the collapse of the entire tau race, and a return to the dreaded time of the Mont'au.'

Wellclaim shuddered at the thought, her revulsion quite genuine.

'The ethereal caste cannot allow that to happen, for the good of all,' said Aun'Va. 'Do you understand?'

'I really do,' gushed Wellclaim. 'A profound analogy, your eminence, and well made. In truth it unsettles and humbles me to see such a collapse, even in microcosm. My contrition is profound.' She made the sign of the Endless Wellspring, judging it a complementary metaphor, and bowed low. 'I realise that even in private one should never second-guess the absolute wisdom and power of the ethereal caste, let alone pass such baseless theories onto others. I vow that I shall not make the same mistake again.'

'That is correct, you will not,' said the ethereal, motioning to his shas'tral bodyguards to send away the attendant drones. They did so, the hovering discs

gliding soundlessly from the room before the far door irised shut. ‘You are ta’lissera bonded to your team?’

‘I have that honour, master,’ replied Wellclaim. ‘Six kai’rotaa now. We are very happy.’

‘Take out your bonding knife.’

‘Of... of course,’ said Wellclaim, reaching around to the ceremonial dagger she kept in a sheath at the base of her spine. She unclasped the lynx-skin sheath and unfurled the satin cummerbund that bound it around her waist, holding it forth for inspection. It was a truly beautiful example of its kind. She was always proud to show it off, and doubly so to an ethereal.

‘Now. Take the bonding knife out of its sheath.’

Wordlessly, she did so. The metal blade slid from its housing with a soft hiss. Something burned behind her eyes, in her throat, in her guts, making it hard to think.

‘Now kill yourself.’

Wellclaim reversed the knife in her hands and stabbed herself in the chest as hard as she could, burying the knife up to the hilt in her own heart. Eyes wide, she gasped out a welling glut of blood, toppled over, and spasmed her last.

A delta of crimson spread out from beneath her, rivulets tracing the hexagonal mosaic tiles of the Ethereals Bringing Calm to Fio’taun.

‘Clear this up,’ said Aun’Va to his shas’tral guards, ‘and find the other one.’

CHAPTER FIVE

ECHOES OF KAN'JI

DAL'YTH PRIME

Farsight sat in isolation in his quarters, head in hands. He had politely declined the extensive and well-appointed meditation chambers offered to him upon his promotion to high commander, instead opting to remain in the same cell he had been using since his days as a shas'la. Even the refreshment drones he had banished within moments of their arrival. Comfort was a distraction, an open gate for the lethal vices of sloth and complacency. Master Puretide had beaten that concept into him atop Mount Kan'ji, and not without reason. *No true warrior seeks false havens.*

Older now, Farsight was inclined to agree. Brightsword was wrong; he was far more than a figurehead. More than a champion, even. Provided he had a full archival command suite and a few decs of silence, he had what he needed to further the Greater Good.

This day, it seemed, silence would be in short supply.

The cross-caste communion frequency chimed, high and bright. Farsight looked over to see a stone dragon entwining around the earth caste's divided rectangle, projected in miniature from the simple holo array near the cell's door.

'High commander,' said the suite's drone mind. 'You have a summons reply from Fio O'Vesa.'

'A moment,' said Farsight. 'Just give me –' He shook his head. 'I will be there in a moment.'

The journey to O'Vesa's underground laboratories had become familiar to Farsight. He had never seen eye to eye with the Stone Dragon. Sometimes he felt that he and the scientist were from different galaxies, rather than castes. After O'Vesa had mind-mapped a recently deceased Ob'lotai 3-0 and turned the

veteran into an artificial intelligence without permission, Farsight had truly seen red. Necessity had demanded they work together on several occasions. Ever since Arkunasha, when their destinies had been intertwined.

Half of Farsight's most trusted officers owed their continued existence to O'Vesa's technologies. Bravestorm, forever bonded to his life support battlesuit. Ob'lotai 3-0, arguably the most advanced artificial intelligence ever devised. Brightsword's second biological incarnation, too; the Stone Dragon's controversial eugenics programme had seen a clone of the young commander released immediately after his martyr's death at Gel'bryn.

Together, they were miracles of the Tau'va that almost made up for O'Vesa's part in the Swords of Puretide debacle.

Almost.

Now it was the turn of the legendary Kan'jians to become part of O'Vesa's experiments. Not only Puretide himself, allegedly at the mercy of his winter years, but also two of his three most famous students. Kauyon-Shas, better known as Commander Shadowsun, and Monat-Kais, the army of one. Together, they were tau with whom Farsight had bonded most closely of all.

A nagging doubt had been playing upon Farsight's mind in his moments of reflection. Since the imperial invasion had been successfully repelled, the leading figures of the fire caste were being moved aside, neutralised, or otherwise removed from the unfolding destiny of the Tau'va. Had it been his own actions, his own reckless success, which had led the fire caste to this place?

Farsight put the thought from his mind with a spasm of self-loathing. It was unbecoming of a tau, let alone an officer, to entertain such notions. Even to contemplate such blasphemy was to damage the fabric of the Greater Good, and to speak it out loud amongst the worst transgressions of all.

'If the ethereals see fit to redistribute the strength of the tau caste system,' said Farsight quietly to himself, 'that is their prerogative, and not to be questioned.'

The well-lit corridor that led to O'Vesa's hangar workshop was flanked by massive archival displays. They held war materiel of all kinds, starting with primitive flint spears and bows before developing to the long-barrelled cannons of the first earth caste fortresses. It was a museum exhibit of sorts, O'Vesa's prized collection arranged and dated artfully to show how far the tau had come from cave-dwelling prehistory to technological enlightenment.

With each step Farsight moved further through time. He passed composite weaponry, then tower shields and banded mail, and finally first generation battlesuits, steam-powered, cumbersome and crude in proportion like a child's drawing of the Hero's Mantle. These gave way to petrochemical jets, electric engines and plutonium-powered fusion generators set within disassembled

battlesuits that hung in the air like an earth caste student's exploded holo-diagram.

As Farsight moved on, the war-tech became smoother and more elegant, the soot black and terracotta of the first exhibits eventually becoming the ochre and white of the latest innovations. Rather than the technological iterations growing smaller and more innocuous, as Farsight had first expected, the war machines became larger and more impressive as the corridor turned into a vault, then a massive hangar.

By the time Farsight strode into the heart of O'Vesa's mobile workshop he was flanked by a magnificent XV8 variant with long fin-like protrusions and a towering colossus with a shoulder-mounted gun suite as long as a Devilfish transport.

'Impressive, aren't they?' said O'Vesa, shuffling out from behind a hexagonal hover-console. 'They are works in progress, but I will hopefully have the time to fine-tune them on the other side of the gulf. The one on your left I call the Coldstar prototype. It is void-capable, in theory at least. A miracle of technology. The test pilot will need to be brave indeed. Do you know of such a soul?'

'And the other?' asked Farsight, pointedly ignoring O'Vesa's question.

'A ballistics engine prototype, fashioned by my esteemed colleague O'Shu'ron. He will go far, that one. Just look at it!'

'I heard the Gel'bryn incursion gave you a chance to use it in a live fire environment. Ob'lotai 3-0 has told me at length of the field test you two engineered. It crippled a unit of gue'ron'sha with one shot, did it not?'

'It did,' said O'Vesa, 'though it has two pilots, and is hence not a true battlesuit. The principal issue is the ratio of by-product to—'

Farsight made the gesture of the necessary-blade-cutting-swift. 'I offer contrition, O'Vesa. I am here for a reason, and if we get into the finer points of battlesuit usage I fear my opportunity will be lost.'

'Of course!' said O'Vesa, smiling obsequiously. 'You requested a consultation with your mentor before the expedition leaves.'

'Yes,' said Farsight awkwardly. The second reason could wait. 'Master Puretide. Is he reachable?'

'He is, for now. Please, follow me.'

Farsight measured his pace as he walked after the short-legged scientist, trying his best not to be distracted by the marvels of war-tech on either side of the light-limned walkway.

'In here,' said O'Vesa, waving his data wand at a smooth oval door. The portal opened without a sound, cool air escaping as the pressure of the hangar and the small room beyond it equalised. Farsight stepped over the threshold, expecting

to have to negotiate a bustling team of scientists as he ventured inside. There was but one figure beyond, seated in the middle of the room on an ergonomic throne – a wizened, stick-thin elder with a spry musculature under his blue-grey skin.

‘Master Puretide,’ said Farsight reverently, bowing low and dropping to one knee. ‘This day brings me great privilege.’

The figure did not respond. After a few microdecs, Farsight looked up with one eye. Puretide remained stock still, his face slack. Atop his head was the wire-dangling jellyfish of the Dal’ythan neural engram device, tiny lights rippling along its length.

‘He is incommunicado, I am afraid,’ said O’Vesa. ‘We cannot disturb him whilst the mind-mapping process is ongoing.’

Farsight felt his face fall.

‘Then why did you allow me to come here? How long will I have to wait until I can talk to him?’

‘Why, no time at all,’ said O’Vesa. There was something theatrical in his tone. Farsight gritted his teeth at the thought that the earth caste scientist might actually be relishing the process that had forced his mentor into mind-stasis. ‘Though imperfectly reinforced, the holo-doppel requested by Aun’Va is ninety-eight point seven per cent operable. I brought you here to see if you could tell the difference.’

At this, O’Vesa pressed a series of buttons on his data wand, and flicked it over and over at an empty area of space as if trying to dislodge something from its tip. A galaxy of light-motes coalesced in front of him, and Master Puretide appeared, cross-legged on a hovering disc-throne. The tutor looked every bit as real as the withered, elderly body to his right; every pore and hair was rendered in impressive detail. There was one stark difference – he was far younger. His skin was lustrous, his posture straight and his frame muscular.

‘Why is he not wearing the mantle of his years?’ asked Farsight, his voice hoarse with emotion.

‘Aun’Va thought he would be more inspiring this way, to future generations of fire caste,’ said O’Vesa, ‘and I am inclined to agree. A warrior should look the part, don’t you think?’

Farsight felt his temper rising, a hot hand of suffocation closing around his throat. Was he intentionally being goaded? How many new ways could O’Vesa find to miss the point?

‘Active speech,’ said O’Vesa encouragingly, waving his data wand once more. The youthful hologram peered around itself as if recently awakened.

‘Mont’ka-Shoh,’ said Master Puretide, his eyes deep wells of sadness. ‘You

have returned to me.'

'I have,' said Farsight, crossing his arms. 'Although it appears that I have come too late.'

'Not so,' said the hologram. 'I am here, in spirit.'

'Do you remember what you said to me atop Mount Kan'ji, last time we parted company?'

'I do,' said Puretide. 'I shall not repeat it.'

Do not trust them all.

Farsight looked at the aged husk still sitting to the hologram's right. The surety of poise that had made his mentor seem strong even after his spinal paralysis was now absent from his physical shell. For the first time, his mentor looked truly frail.

'I will never forget those words,' said Farsight. He screwed his eyes shut, exhaling slowly. 'Master, if not for me, this travesty would never –'

'This is no travesty,' interrupted Puretide, some of the old fire in his eyes. 'This is necessity. For the Greater Good.'

'Of course,' nodded Farsight, contrite. 'As you say.'

'None of you children mastered the full spectrum of the Code of Fire,' said Puretide, his long, bald head cocked to one side. 'You think that you and your would-be bondmates encapsulate my wisdom? Prideful youths!'

At this, Puretide slapped an admonishing palm on the console flank of the hover dais. No sound of impact could be heard. O'Vesa made a clicking noise with his teeth, stowing his data wand and tapping notes on a disc recorder.

'The learnings of the master cannot be so easily compartmentalised,' continued Puretide. 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.'

Farsight smiled. 'Of course. And will you be reinstated atop Mount Kan'ji, master, the better to keep with tradition?'

'What? You speak the tongue of fools. Look around you, boy. Do you not feel the peak's cold breath?'

O'Vesa fussed and flapped, his free hand waving in the air. 'Change the line of inquiry, please,' he said, fingers tapping at his disc, 'his sensory subroutine is far from complete.'

'So,' said Farsight, eyes narrowing, 'has our host O'Vesa told you of the aun's plans? I am to lead a retaliatory expedition across the gulf, whilst Kauyon-Shas and Monat-Kais are to be held in cryostasis so your teachings may reach new generations of fire caste warriors.'

'The wisdom of the celestial caste is not for lesser souls to question,' said Puretide gravely.

'Of course,' said Farsight. His mentor stared into his eyes, then, as a long

silence spread out between them. Farsight glanced at O'Vesa, but he was preoccupied with his data.

'Leave us, O'Vesa,' said Farsight. 'The master and I have much to discuss.'

'Leave you?' said the Stone Dragon, frowning. 'How would my presence hinder your ability to speak? I do not understand.'

The high commander sighed before continuing. 'There are matters of emotional import I wish to relate. They are of a private nature.'

'Ah,' said O'Vesa. 'Emotions, I see. I cannot leave the venerable Master Puretide, I am afraid. I must monitor him, and the mind-mapping procedure, at all times. I made a promise to the aun.'

'I see,' said Farsight with a sharp nod. 'Master, I shall follow your lead. Circumspection is a shield against the unseen blade.'

'And yet you so rarely use it, Mont'ka-Shoh,' said Puretide.

'All souls must change,' said Farsight.

'You remember that much, at least.'

'I do.'

'The warrior whose path leads to conquest must stride swiftly,' said Puretide, 'lest his reticence lead him to the tip of a spear. Go, my child, and forge a new destiny for the Tau'va. Only you have the power to do this. If your path leads far from the heartlands of the septs, then you will carve new realms from a bedrock of truth.'

'As you say,' said Farsight, bowing low. 'I understand, master. I shall not let this opportunity slip away.'

Puretide nodded, his expression that of a teacher whose pupil is ready for the next stage. 'First, Mont'ka-Shoh, make peace with the turmoil in your soul. If Monat-Kais allows himself to be found, so much the better. You and Shadowsun must reconcile with him, or the wound he dealt you both will fester. Your journey is long, and will likely lead into darkness.'

'Almost certainly.'

A memory rose, unbidden. *Our race will walk dark paths, one day.*

'Now go,' said Puretide. 'I wish to meditate upon the waterfalls, and witness the twilight hawks upon their hunt.'

'May you find peace in nature's war,' said Farsight, sketching the sign of the Great Cycle.

'There is more out there in the gulf than you realise,' said Puretide, holding up a finger in warning. 'Be sure to—' The hologram glitched and froze.

'Ah,' said O'Vesa. 'My apologies.'

'What?' said Farsight. 'What was he saying? Can you reinstate?'

O'Vesa hesitated for a moment before making more notes on his disc recorder.

‘The somatic vernacular is not aligned to speech patterns, as yet. That will take some time to decipher and quantify. It will mean reinstating the thought codes.’

‘So can we revisit that conversation?’

‘Alas, no,’ said O’Vesa. ‘Not before you are due to leave.’

‘I see,’ said Farsight. ‘And yet you do not know when I intend to leave.’

An uncomfortable moment passed.

‘Perhaps it is for the best,’ said O’Vesa. ‘He is not complete.’

‘I do not care,’ said Farsight. ‘Reinstate whatever you need to. I will have the entire conversation again if necessary, word for word.’

‘Would you like to visit Commander Shadowsun before she is placed in cryostasis?’ asked O’Vesa. ‘I believe we have less than a single dec left before she is installed.’

‘One dec?’ said Farsight, ‘You exaggerate.’

‘Never!’ said O’Vesa, his expression aghast. ‘The auns have requested a swift resolution. Shadowsun and Kais are both in hangar eighteen as we speak.’

Farsight looked at the frozen hologram of his mentor, then the feeble near-corpse beside it. An ocean of brine could not cool the fires that burned in his soul at the sight.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Lead on, Fio O’Vesa. You had best move fast.’

The tau officers, attended by a pair of shield drones at O’Vesa’s insistence, made haste down the interim passageways that led from the prototype hangars to the far smaller cryostasis units. Farsight strode as fast as he could without running, his pace eating up the ground. O’Vesa rode a drone-disc broad and sturdy enough to bear him along at speed, smiling faintly at Farsight’s exertions. When Farsight broke into a jog, then a run, O’Vesa simply accelerated upon his disc to come alongside him once more, his blunt features twisted into a moue of slight disbelief.

‘You clearly wish to impart knowledge to your fellow commander, and/or receive it,’ he said breezily, ‘why not spare yourself these exertions, and simply open a communion channel to her locale?’

Farsight said nothing, instead concentrating on regulating his breathing as he ran on. The airlock-style portal ahead opened at a flick of O’Vesa’s data wand, the first iris door hissing shut before the second opened to allow them through. In the brief moment in between, Farsight centred himself, straightened his simple red uniform, and took a few deep breaths, recovering his composure.

The cryostasis chamber before them was a large dome, its edges hexagonal but its upper portions perfectly smooth. Within it were several large white cylinders ribbed at regular intervals, each with a lozenge-shaped window. The two nearest

the entrance were underlit with cool blue light. The first was upright, swathed in liquid nitrogen.

‘They have already placed Shas’O Monat Kais into stasis,’ said O’Vesa in a matter-of-fact tone. ‘According to this uplink he requested to be processed as soon as possible.’

Farsight nodded. ‘Effectively, running away. That sounds like him.’

The second cylinder was still horizontal, the med-slab at its core surrounded by earth caste technicians that busied themselves with recordings and adjustments. Farsight caught a glimpse of a recumbent tau female upon the slab, and felt a swell of relief.

‘And how long until Commander Shadowsun is placed under cryo?’

‘Well, they are still engaged in the optimisation process, by the look of it. We have approximately a quarter-dec before she will be medicated in preparation for the stasis procedure.’

‘My thanks,’ said Farsight, already walking past him. First he approached the tapering cylinder that included Kais, and placed his open palm upon it. The giant, mist-wreathed structure, brushed steel alloy by the look of it, reminded Farsight of some primitive warrior’s bullet. In some ways, it was more than appropriate. Kais had achieved his unspoken dream, then, and become a warhead, launched through time into a future where the tau had need of a doomsday weapon.

The commander took a moment to look through the lozenge-shaped window at the being inside. Kais was compact, muscular and unassuming, but with a mind like no other, honed to vicious perfection by Puretide’s teachings. His mismatched eyes were closed, not so much as if he were asleep, but as if he were meditating on the optimal use of a gun. Farsight felt a swell of emotion at seeing those chiselled features once more.

Yes, that strange warhead had enough power to bring down a small empire.

‘Goodbye then, troubled soul,’ said Farsight softly. ‘I shall feel your absence keenly.’ He sighed, long and weary. ‘It was the only gift you ever knew how to give.’

The high commander broke away from Kais’ resting place and approached the horizontal cylinder beyond. O’Vesa was already waving back his subordinate earth caste scientists at his approach. There was Kauyon-Shas upon the preparation bier, her body language rigid and her facial expression tight. Farsight felt a wave of rueful feelings in his gut. Only the Arctic Spider could manage to look so formidable even when in a neutral state.

Preoccupied by the needle-patches and readout skins that covered her body, Farsight felt, rather than saw, her eyes upon him.

‘Shoh,’ she said, her tone soft and slightly groggy. ‘You cut it fine. As ever.’

‘My apologies, commander,’ he said. ‘O’Vesa, could you and your kin please leave us once more? Just for a microdec.’

‘But the aun—’

‘O’Vesa, is it safe to leave us to speak for a moment?’

‘Technically speaking it is safe, but that is hardly—’

‘Then do so!’ shouted Farsight, turning to bring the full force of his personality to bear. O’Vesa opened his mouth as if about to say something, but then smiled wanly and backed away, waving his fellow earth caste scientists to join him and briefing them with technical jargon that Farsight tuned out almost immediately.

‘Forgive me,’ said the high commander once the earth casters were out of earshot.

‘I am well used to your tardiness, Shoh,’ said Shadowsun. ‘And to your temper.’ Drone monitors beeped and whirred softly nearby, optimising her biorhythms. ‘I suppose you save your punctuality for those Mont’ka strikes you are so fond of.’

Farsight smiled. It was as close to a joke as Shadowsun ever came, and he did not want to discourage her. Not this day.

‘You were under no obligation to come here,’ she said.

‘I know that,’ said Farsight. ‘I wanted to ask your forgiveness for... for Mount Kan’ji. I may not get another chance.’

‘*You* are asking *me* for forgiveness?’ said Shadowsun incredulously. ‘After all I did to you? It should be the other way around. And Kais should be offering contrition too. He led us to this place. Yet even now, he abandons us, allowing himself to be sequestered without lending us so much as a single word.’ She craned her neck, taking in the silvered warhead nearby. ‘He has become that which he always strove to be.’ She paused, her mounting anger evaporating into melancholy. ‘It is a fate which awaits me as well.’

‘You are a weapon, true,’ said Farsight, ‘but you are also the hand that wields it, the mind that decides when to strike, and the soul that knows why the blow must land. You are complete.’

‘Not without my team,’ she said, her voice soft but certain. ‘Not without you two.’

‘You do not truly believe that, Kauyon-Shas,’ said Farsight. ‘The warrior who sat in the Kan’jian snow for weeks awaiting her prey without sustenance... She is stronger alone.’

‘You do not understand,’ said Shadowsun vehemently. ‘I nearly died of exposure up there, all because I was too stubborn to relent. Master quite rightly wished to teach me a lesson in humility. I am not Kais! We tau need one another if we are to find balance. The ethereals taught us that, long ago.’

‘Then think on this. We have worked as a team for long kai’rotaa now, despite the distance between us. We have worked for the propagation of the Tau’va, but in different zones, fighting against different forces. Then, we were separated by geography. Now, we will be separated by time. But we shall be just as united in our goals. Our team’s influence shall transcend one lifetime, and grow ever stronger as the Tau’va conquers the stars.’

‘Fine words, Shoh,’ sighed Shadowsun. ‘Yet you know in your heart this is the last time we will speak. Don’t you feel it in the air? Do not lecture me as if I am one of your students. We know each other too well for that.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Farsight. ‘Though I truly believe you will be there when the Tau’va needs you most, summoned by the aun to take down some dire threat to our race’s future. You are strong enough to unite the fire caste under the master’s teachings, and your own wisdom. I pity that distant enemy, whoever or whatever he may be, for he is already as good as dead. I know you will not fail.’

Shadowsun smiled, weakly. ‘That much is true.’

‘Until that day, Shas, I will fight on behalf of all of us. For you, for Kais, for master, and for every other tau alive.’

Shadowsun nodded slowly, looking away. A moment passed, and when she looked back, her expression was business-like and hard. ‘When you reach the enclave worlds, you will please meet with Shas’O Vior’los Moata,’ she said. ‘I trained him for many kai’rotaa, and co-habited with him for a time. He is to be my representative on your battle council.’

‘The Burning Chameleon?’ said Farsight, one of his eyes twitching. ‘His style is that of Kauyon. That will not be necessary on my command.’

‘I insist,’ said Shadowsun. ‘Moata speaks with my voice. I understand him, and he understands me.’

Whereas I do not, thought Farsight. That is what she means to say.

A moment of silence hung between them. This time it was Farsight that looked away.

‘O’Vesa has already fitted a prototype battlesuit so he can fight alongside you unobtrusively,’ said Shadowsun.

‘How kind.’

‘Just make it work, Shoh. He is my best student, and you could use a warrior that understands the Kauyon on your team of executioners.’

Several of the earth caste technicians were approaching, their body language as tentative and nervous as if they were approaching a pair of hyperfelids on the savannah. Farsight made the sign of the sacred moment, and they turned away. He reached out, and placed his hand over Shadowsun’s.

‘As you wish, then. I shall make you proud, Shas.’

‘Remove your hand,’ she said, cold and urgent. ‘It is unseemly.’

Too shocked to do anything else, Farsight complied, and stepped back. The earth caste scientists, each offering the sign of contrition as they passed him, surrounded her once more. O’Vesa placed an oblong mask across Shadowsun’s mouth and olfactory chasm.

Her eyes slid over to meet Farsight’s. The emotion in her gaze was as plain to him as it was invisible to the technicians fussing around her.

‘Goodbye, Commander Shadowsun,’ said Farsight, his voice thin. ‘I shall never forget the lessons you have taught me.’

She blinked, her eyes heavy as the earth caste placed their anaesthesia pads upon her neck and shoulders. Her gaze unfocused until her pupils had rolled upward completely.

‘Please clear the area,’ said O’Vesa, ‘the procedure must be completed within a set duration.’

Farsight nodded, his chest feeling as if it were full of concrete. He moved back as the inner cylinder of the cryostasis machine slid into place over Shadowsun’s hover-slab.

The last he saw of her was a pallid and expressionless face, much like that of a corpse.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MUSTER

DAL'YTH PRIME

The sky was filled with the might of the air caste. Over a thousand craft had gathered for the great launch, varying in size from one-pilot craft to vast Progress-class capital ships with bulbous ZFR horizon accelerator engines upon their curving hulls. The Grand Reclamation Fleet was humbling in its immensity. Even with his hundred-strong honour guard arrayed in formation around him on his viewing podium, Farsight felt like an insect by comparison.

'I cannot believe how far you have come, O'Shovah,' said Ob'lotai 3-0. 'I remember when you barely knew how to open a plexus hatch. Yet here we are, with the might of the Second Sphere Expansion at your command. They say this is the greatest fleet the Tau empire has ever amassed in one place.'

'Not bad, for a Vior'lan,' agreed Bravestorm.

'A half-compliment from Commander Bravestorm, this is a rare day indeed,' said Farsight. He could not tear his eyes from the vast assemblage above him, not even to glance at the podium where the Supreme Ethereal would be making his speech. 'It is an honour.'

'I pity the winged ones, myself,' said Brightsword, shielding his eyes as he looked up at the aircraft. 'To give so many kai'rotaa of the natural lifespan...'

'All those who wish to enter cryostasis may do so, as I have said several times,' said Farsight. 'The pilots are a necessary exception.'

'I have already made the requisite arrangement, generous one,' said Brightsword. 'I believe I serve the Tau'va best in the heat of battle. None have contradicted me. I will be in good company, I hear.'

'You will,' said Farsight absently.

O'Vesa spoke up, the lights on his XV88's sensor head winking. 'And we can still cross safely with so much of our military capacity in stasis?'

‘I am counting on it,’ said Farsight. ‘The gulf is so remote, its nebulas so occluded, the chances of encountering an enemy fleet are vanishingly small.’

‘In the deep ocean, even the brightest pearl sparkles untouched,’ said Bravestorm.

Farsight turned to the looming XV8, nodding in approval. ‘Just so, commander.’

‘I’ll be waiting, just in case we meet with violence.’

‘I truly hope you are disappointed, old friend. There are a lot of lives at stake here.’

Up in the skies, the order and unity of the castes was writ large. They were looking up at an entire expedition fleet, a force enough to conquer a dozen worlds and then bring them back to full operational primacy without pause. Theoretically, the high commander knew exactly what he was looking at, for he had commissioned the fleet over a series of long nights in consultation with O’Vesa and Kor’O Li Mau Teng. But tailoring holographic representations and seeing the actual physical reality were as different as making a paper sculpture of Mount Kan’ji and looking upon the soaring peak itself.

The might of the Kor’vattra was resplendent. Here were battleships, navy escorts, colony ships, gravpulse tugs, dropships, outrider patrols, coalition command ships, an armada of Protector class warships, Defender class starships and their larger Messenger equivalents, Gal’leath Explorer class flagships, Merchant and Hero class starships, and Emissary envoy ships. With them were smaller Mantas, Orca escorts, Shi’oni scramblers, Barracuda squadrons and Tiger Shark squadrons.

Amongst these ships were the designated transport craft of the tau work groups. The vessels held insertion contingents, breakthrough contingents, forward security contingents, encounter contingents and dense environment contingents. To the left were the water caste’s diplomatic corps, unity nodes, arrangement fleets and relay comms ships bristling with stubby antennae. In the middle distance were the earth caste’s settlement workgroups, bioformer vessels, prefab factory ships, space-capable prototype centres, mantlecraft, camouflage engines, engineering support frigates, special extraction teams, enclave specialists and Worldshaper’s sub-fleet of terraforming cutters.

Nearer ground level were those craft with which Farsight was the most familiar – the Manta transports of the fire caste’s hunter cadres, counterstrike cadres, retaliation cadres, ranged support cadres, rapid insertion forces and firebase support cadres, all supported by the Razorshark squadrons and Sun Shark Bomber squadrons of the air superiority cadres.

On the far horizon were the auxiliary forces of the allied advance. Farsight

recognised the silhouettes of nicassar dhows, domati wyrmships, the stalactite-like nest vessels of the vespids, kroot warspheres looming like orbiting moons, demiurg autominer bastions and greet stealthers.

Literally thousands of spacecraft were arranged in perfect, grid-like harmony stretching up into the clouds and beyond, the smaller ships and drones buzzing amongst them taking their number of airborne machines to mind-boggling numbers. They made a Bork'an locust swarm look sparse by comparison.

Farsight felt his chest tighten at the sight, his breath shallow as he struggled to come to terms with the enormous responsibility that had been placed upon him. The number of tau lives entrusted to him had spiralled over a hundred billion. It was a mind-blowing increase on his last command.

Such was the hidden might of the aun, the true masters of the Dal'ythan muster. They had given him this crown, and it weighed heavily indeed.

Farsight felt something change in the atmosphere of the crowd. He finally wrenched his gaze earthwards, his neck aching under his ceremonial mantle from staring at the skies so long. The hushed murmurs of the crowd had turned to expectant silence.

It was time.

There was the Supreme Ethereal, stepping from his throne-disc to the hover dais that glimmered white above them. He was a visionary whose courage of spirit had bound the tau together for three full decades, and whom Farsight had idolised since he was old enough to read.

Aun'Wei, the Whispering Wisdom, whose value to the Tau'va was greater than that of the entire fleet combined.

As usual, he spoke without preamble. His audience was well aware of who was addressing them. They would talk of it until the ends of their lives.

'We tau are a complex people,' said the Supreme Ethereal, his robes fluttering in the warm breeze. 'The galaxy is ours. We have the vision to look to the stars, the drive to reach for them, and the technology to claim them for the Greater Good.'

The gathered tau looked on in rapt silence, some nodding in agreement, some standing as if frozen where they stood.

'Yet we fear to do so,' continued Aun'Wei. 'To reach out and take our destiny from the stars. It is the same fear that drove us to division in the past. The same fear that brought us to the time of the Mont'au.'

At this, the crowd cast down their eyes as one.

'It will not be easy to claim our birthright. We will not find our path uncontested. The greenskinned be'gel have battered at the gates of our empire for generations. Too destructive to listen to reason. Too strong to be ignored. The

arachen sought to deny us the Western Veil. They were neutralised, though it cost us dearly.'

Farsight suppressed memories of arachen grandfathers and oestromystics, slashing and stabbing at his warriors with long, blade-tipped legs.

'A dozen other foes have been overcome. Many of their number have joined us in the Tau'va after realising the undeniable truth – that we will unite the stars.'

Caws of affirmation came from several kroot. Intense tau eyes turned upon them, and the avian mercenaries fell into silence.

'Of late, we of the empire have faced perhaps the worst threat the galaxy has to offer. The Imperium of Man. It is a collective so massive it spans from the tip of one spiral arm to the other.'

Farsight saw shivers in the crowd, the involuntary motions marking out those still haunted by the recent wars. He took a quick mental note of where they occurred. Post-war trauma could be a dangerous weakness.

'Not only have we survived the struggle with this violent colossus,' continued Aun'Wei, 'we have repelled it. We have sent it fleeing back into the darkness from whence it came. For all its raw might, it could not penetrate the shield of our resolve. Nor could it dim the light of our faith.'

A swell of triumphant energy crackled through the fire caste around Farsight, but to his relief, none of them were gauche enough to cheer.

'Now we bring the torch of our enlightenment to the stars once more. This time it will be borne not by a diplomat, but a warrior. This time, it is a searing flame that lights the way!'

The Whispering Wisdom made the sign of the fire caste, and the eyes of several billion warriors fixed upon him in adoration.

'We shall take the truth of the Greater Good to the enclave worlds on the far side of the Damocles Gulf. We shall reclaim that which is ours by right of logic, and of destiny. By the choice of our people, and by the choice of those who welcomed them, we shall take back these worlds. The expedition fleet you see mustered above you,' at this Aun'Wei swept a slender arm to encompass the skies, 'is the cutting edge of destiny. It is a flaming sword with which we will drive back the brutish trespassers upon our realm.'

Farsight felt his soul soar within him.

'The wielder of this blade shall be Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr, the true exemplar of the fire caste and saviour of Dal'yth.'

Aun'Wei held a hand over his heart in salute. The crowd saluted in return as one.

'All prosperity to High Commander Farsight, leader of the Great Reclamation!'

Aun'Wei raised his hands high, and millions of voices were raised in response,

echoing the ancient's words as their jubilation filled the air. Farsight felt his mind swim with the sheer tidal wave of emotion washing over him. It was almost too much to bear.

Then the words of Master Puretide came back to him, as they so often did.

The humble warrior learns each day. Only the prideful soul lowers his shield, satisfied his journey is complete.

Feeling hundreds of drone-lenses upon him, Farsight steeled himself as if for battle. He stepped up onto the hover-dais that glided into place, and prepared himself to make a speech long-rehearsed.

'My fellow tau,' he said as the dais rose high, its audio link broadcasting his words via countless drone relays. 'It is an honour of impossible scale to be entrusted with this historic duty...'

All the right words rolled from his lips, every sentiment as poetic and well-crafted as his water caste advisors could make it. As he delivered the message, a small part of Farsight's mind could not help but wonder why it had been a stranger that had brought it to him.

His designated Dal'ythan liaison, Ambassador Wellclaim, had vanished without trace.

TACTICUS DECK ALPHA-OPTIMUM,
THE SCABBARD OF FLESH

The giant bent over a canted shelf of scattered data-slates, the stub of a quill clutched in his blunt fingers. Candlelight played across his densely muscled frame. He did not write so much as slash and stab at the vellum parchment, scribbling things down and crossing them out as if ideas were forcing their way from his head at great speed.

Now and again the giant would turn upon his simple metal stool to look back at the forest of tangled combat servitors behind him, the collection poorly lit by spots of amber illumination in the gloom beyond. Some were broken wrecks, little more than skeletons of metal twisted out of true by some long-forgotten act of violence. Some were hulking constructs of pistons and brushed steel, poised as if to strike.

The quill-stub scratched and split, ink spattering upon the vellum. Growling, the giant grabbed a splinter of charcoal and brushed several swift lines on his diagram, turning the ink blot into another dynamic sketch. As he drew lines of motion he made a blade with his other hand and absently cut the air once, twice, three times at different angles. His good eye was alight with purpose, the other socket a blackened hole by comparison.

Nearby, a varnished yellow skull hovered on tiny anti-grav motors. Torchlight was reflected in the ochre patina of its forehead. Its manipulator arms, as tiny and precise as the skeleton of a mechanised bat, held a scroll-sized data-slate towards the giant.

Playing upon the slate's vid-screen was a recording of a rugged and heavy-set warrior. He was relatively young, and wore the heraldic colours of his power armour with pride – the unmistakeable cobalt blue of the Ultramarines Chapter.

His ident, near lost amongst half a dozen designators, read *Numitor, Jorus, Cpt, Eighth.*

‘They fight with logic first and foremost,’ said the Ultramarine under a fuzz of static. ‘Everything about their style of warfare is ordered and pre-planned. This in itself is a weakness. Acts of spontaneity, improvised assaults, unusual weapons and vectors of attack will wrong-foot them. Upon Dal’yth Prime, such tactics proved more effective against their set piece assaults than any exhaustively researched battle plan. The further we strayed from the beaten path, the more effective we became.’

The swordsman jabbed a finger at the slate’s delay rune and stood upright, striding towards the forest of metal-clad skeletons. He scooped up a cable-necked box unit, pressing the largest of the three buttons with his thumb.

The largest of the metallic armatures, a chain-draped monster with bladed extremities, hissed loudly. Powerful lance-torches had been strapped to its arms with leather belts. Each sent a bright white beam through the dusty interior of the vault.

The machine-thing shuddered, and a multitude of pistons and hydraulic valves activated as it jerked into a clumsy en garde. The beams of the lance-torches cut through the air.

‘They are creatures of order, and have no conception of unnecessary risk,’ continued the image of Captain Numitor as the slate resumed its broadcast. ‘They will always fight to minimise the damage to their own kind, and seek to defeat their enemies with the maximum efficiency. This leads them to abhor the vagaries of a close assault.’

The Ultramarines captain leaned forward into the pict-thief relay.

‘In melee, the shortcomings of their remote warfare style becomes abundantly clear. Close with them, brothers, and seize victory. First, however, you must penetrate their guard. It will not be easy.’

The giant shook his head, pressing the second button before dropping the box unit. He grabbed the skeleton armature by the forearms. Corded muscle bunched on his overdeveloped torso as he forced the metal creature into the stance of a gunfighter rather than a bladesman. He stepped back to assess his handiwork, and nodded before adjusting the machine again. Then he picked up a dull steel gladius and a heavy, articulated gauntlet from the table, sliding the glove over his right hand as he paced forward and reviewed the skeletal servitor from a dozen positions.

The warrior pushed one of the box unit’s buttons, eliciting a low hum from the combat servitor. Then he punched a finger into the data-slate’s cease-icon. The servo-skull holding the slate recoiled a little at the sudden motion.

There was a deafening screech and a loud clanking as the swordsman's improvised winch system chugged into life nearby. The chains pulled slowly taut, and with a scream of protesting metal, they lifted the combat servitor into the air inch by agonising inch. As it rose, the metallic thing swung and thrust with the manic energy of well-oiled hydraulics. Its extremities lashed out towards its creator with such sudden violence a single blow would have taken his head from his neck. The light from its lance-torches flashed wildly.

The giant smiled as he weaved and dodged, avoiding each swiping light-beam with impressive grace for a warrior his size. He did not strike back, at first. Slowly, the winches hoisted the servitor two, three, four metres into the air, its cutting motions becoming ever more frenzied and spasmodic. The warrior ducked under a glimmering beam of light, rolled with his sword extended, and slashed through the belt securing the leftmost lance-torch to the machine's bladed arm. The second long-necked device was cut away by another blow even before the first had hit the floor.

The warrior leaped high, levelling a roundhouse punch at the last moment that took the dented head from the servitor's metal stump of a neck. He landed with a thump, then backhanded the thing's headless body to the ground. The machine spasmed as it powered down, reduced to a skeletal wreck.

Chapter Master Caelos of the Scar Lords padded back to the canted shelf, took up his charcoal, and resumed sketching with the frenzy of a man possessed.

PART TWO

TEMPEST

*'When to stay back and command,
and when to lead from the front;
at the highest levels,
these are things a leader cannot be taught,
but each must find in his own way.
In the end, the final arbiter is victory.
To triumph with the least amount of risk,
that must always be the goal.'*

– Master Puretide

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-23
456.744.M41
+++UNEXPURGATED ITERATION+++

And so I have volunteered to be part of the Farsight Expedition, and in doing so, to cross that string of nebulas known as the Damocles Gulf.

I embark upon this new odyssey with no small degree of trepidation. Though in many ways it represents a chance at true freedom, the region of space is rightly feared by Imperial and tau alike.

Let me tell you of the gulf. It is an extremely dangerous interstellar phenomenon, not only because of the sheer immensity and unnavigable reaches of its volatile gas clouds, but also because of the uncharted Empyrean overlaps that are hidden within its depths. I have heard tell in the Dal'ythan mercenariums of ships mistranslating from the warp – not instantaneously, but over the course of hours, even days. As you can imagine, this makes them extremely vulnerable to assault from... well, from the entities that cannot be named.

The tau have long plumbed the gulf's depths, consigning countless souls and ships to oblivion in the process. It marks the limit of their domain, blocking further expansion – and that is something the ethereal caste could not abide.

With all the artifice of the earth caste and the skill of the air caste combined, they found only a handful of regions that could be deemed safe. Finally, at a great cost in lives and an even greater toll of artificial intelligences, the tau found a stable pathway through the gulf. The brave few that traversed it have been immortalised in sept history, for those dauntless pioneers located a quartet of systems on the far side that were within reach of a tau interstellar voyage. It was this discovery that saw the tau venture across the gulf, first in small groups, then in diplomatic fleets that slowly but surely brought the dubious creed of the

Tau'va to the humans of the worlds beyond.

The tau do not cross interstellar distances by navigating the tides of the warp, for such esoteric matters are beyond them. Instead they use conventional science, exceptional technology and a great deal of patience. The vast majority of those tau that undertake the crossing are frozen in cryostasis, put into cold storage like slabs of meat or livestock cargo to while away the years as their ship seeks new horizons. Should they make it across safely, they are then effectively defrosted on the other side. With a natural lifespan of around four decades, eight or nine at the most, they consider this limbo preferable to a years-long stretch of relative inactivity.

That tenacity has paid off, over the last few generations. Now they have found a tried and tested route through the gulf, they seek to push a grand exploration fleet through those haunted nebulae to retake the worlds beyond. I am part of that expedition.

The thought of making such a crossing without a Geller field is mind-boggling, akin to diving into shark-infested waters with a dozen open wounds. Perhaps the saving grace is the fact that the tau soul is so meek, in comparison to those of their elders and betters, that the entities beyond the veil may not judge their consumption worthwhile. Some tau take the spiritual leap of joining with their comrades into a permanent team of bond-mates – a sacred act known as the *ta'lissera*, roughly equivalent to a group marriage; they seem to have souls that glimmer brighter in my mind's eye. But their spiritual presences are still weak in comparison to that of a human, or even an ork, come to that.

One has to wonder, though – in sufficient concentration, would such a high number of tau souls not yield a great bounty, as a swarm of krill does to a deep cetacean? And would those truly psychic souls that accompany them – a nicassar, for instance, or a gifted human biomancer – draw the eye of predatory essences that might otherwise have slid past in the night?

If this is my last missive, dear heart, consider that theory proven sound.

The prize at stake is the Damocles fringe worlds, known to the tau as the enclave worlds. Located amongst a scattering of systems, they are close to one another in relative terms, with at least one life-supporting planet orbiting each star. Their proximity is a serious natural asset for a would-be empire builder.

To a Terran astrocartographer, this cluster of star systems would be just another frontier region on the mind-boggling vastness of the Eastern Fringe, hardly worthy of note but for their proximity to a potential xenos threat. To a rogue trader, I imagine they would represent a kind of paradise, rich with opportunities for wealth and lucrative contracts.

To the tau, the fringe worlds are an archipelago of new territories, a safe haven

on the other side of a huge and dangerous ocean. They are symbolic of conquest against the odds, and of possibilities unbound.

And to me? They were to be a fresh start. A chance to escape the stares of man and tau alike, to blend with the blasphemous melange of humans and aliens that typify these regions, and perhaps settle, for a while. To scout out a place for you and I to hide away, whenever we need to.

First, however, duty calls.

When the opportunity to leave the sept worlds as part of the Farsight Expedition arose, I was first in line to offer my services as an advisor. It was a speculative measure, and frankly I am amazed they took me up on it. But still they did.

Soon after that I had a long and difficult encounter with a low-ranking member of the ethereal caste, who examined me as if I was some manner of carnival curio or museum exhibit. I think, were it not for the fact I literally wear my psychic credentials in plain sight, he would have seen me as just another gue'vesa turncoat, and consigned me to the wider work programmes. But the ethereals pride themselves on their open-mindedness as regards those aspects of reality they do not understand. A chance to have a pet Imperial psyker, and a powerful one at that, was too sweet to pass up.

Dal'yth had taught the tau there was a weak spot in their military machine – *Imperial mind-science*, as they call it – and they intended to neutralise it as soon as possible. They wanted to study me, just as I wanted to study them. So here I am, ostensibly an advisor on the Imperials in the broader sense, a 'Kindred Soul' in their parlance – but really here to tell the tau about metaphysical warfare, a subject they barely understand.

These tau are easy enough to read. With the exception of the slippery water caste – and these ethereals, whom I find disturbingly opaque – I find it easy enough to parse their body language. Their communication includes many gestures, most of which are fairly intuitive. With the Tarot on my side I have built up a profile of many of the individuals currently prominent in their society. I am sure my contacts in the Adeptus Astartes would find it to be interesting reading, but it is not ready for transmission just yet.

As part of the Farsight Expedition I am essentially informing the tau of the basic machineries of the Imperial war engine, the better to instil a sense of dread at the sheer scale and reach of our glorious empire. By taking care only to imply how far out of their depth the tau are rather than outrightly stating it, I have worked my way up from the post of a lowly *vesa'la* advisor to the reserve list of the vaunted Elemental Council. One most unfortunate death later, and I sat in the same room as commanders Farsight and Shadowsun. I even advised them, after a

fashion. They treat me with some suspicion, but no more than any other newcomer.

I confess, these two luminaries of the fire caste have impressive force of personality, but they are not without their obvious flaws. The former, Farsight, has a temper that is far from even. The Tarot represents him either as the Knight Pyromantic or the Illuminator of the Void. A dangerous combination of traits: righteous fury, and a thirst for hidden truths.

The latter, Shadowsun, has a cold detachment that made even my ethereal examiner seem friendly by comparison. The tarot card in the mirror shows me the Lackheart or the Loner in the Crowd whenever she is near, or whenever I think of her at length. Both cards indicate introversion – not the most inspiring of traits in a leader.

I am sure we can work on these two, over time. Farsight seems like he could be goaded into acting rashly, given the right provocation, whilst Shadowsun might be tricked into total inactivity with the right feint.

There was a member of the elemental council present, one Por Malcaor of the water caste, who bears mention. He left me with a distinct impression of otherness, and I believe he is not what he appears to be. Perhaps he is hiding in plain sight, for when he speaks, he tells only the unvarnished truth. Believe me, that is very unusual for a member of the water caste, a brotherhood to whom honesty is but one shade of colour in a rainbow of deception – and one rarely used at that. Whether it is a compulsion or a deliberate tactic, I have yet to ascertain.

The card I see in the mirror when I meditate upon this Por Malcaor is that of the Veiled Fiend, a rotten apple of a devil's face peering out from behind a curtain of stars. To be frank, I fear it is not metaphor. I shall be keeping vigil upon him, and have already put forward a request that I accompany him should he ever need to travel planetside. Purely to act in an ambassadorial role with the natives, of course.

Nonetheless, my hellpistol will be close at hand.

Wish me luck.

Inquisitor Vykola Herat

Ordo Xenos

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTO THE DARKNESS

THE DAMOCLES GULF

High Commander Farsight watched Dal'yth recede almost imperceptibly in the bridge's central viewscreen of his flagship, the *Dawn Pioneer*. The slow-burning feeling of joy that his new leadership had awoken within him was marred by sadness, a jagged shard of regret at leaving his bond-mates behind.

He glanced back at the two ochre drone attendants that had been his constant companions since Aun'Wei's speech. Aun'Tipiya's water caste representative had said they were assigned as adjutants, ready to bring him anything he required. He suspected they were there as much to keep watch upon him as to act as his escort.

There was a soft hiss from the oval portal behind him, and the large black drone that sometimes held Ob'lotai 3-0's consciousness glided smoothly through the lavender-scented air to hover at his side.

'You look troubled.' Even outside of the Broadside, Ob'lotai's artificial voice was a perfect analogue of his deep Vior'lan bass timbre.

'I am,' replied Farsight. 'It is the fate of any who command well. What of it, Warghost?'

'It is best not to dwell too long on that which cannot be changed. You were made for this. I have every faith that you will rise to the challenge.'

'It is not the leadership aspect that troubles me most,' replied Farsight with a sigh. 'Well, it does, of course it does. But there is more to this than fear of failure. I know myself well enough to realise that.'

'It is that which you left behind that gnaws at you,' said Ob'lotai sombrely.

'Perhaps.'

They stood in silence for some time, the mauve-white sphere of Dal'yth dwindling in the Explorer vessel's principal viewport.

‘Why did they choose me, Ob’lotai?’ said Farsight after a while. ‘Hers is a far cooler head, and her record is unblemished. The same cannot be said for mine. Arkunasha. The reservoir outside Gel’bryn. The *vash’ya* scandal, which seemingly refuses to die. Why not her?’

‘No doubt because she wanted it so badly,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘You, on the other hand, do not care for glory. Nor even for recognition, it seems. Your reaction to the water caste’s informatives has not gone unnoticed.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You look uncomfortable at the constant obeisance of the fire caste, rather than proud. You lead only because the Greater Good demands it of you.’

‘Doesn’t everyone of O-rank?’

‘Yes, but some also hope to prove themselves in the process, leaving their mark on history. You have inner confidence tempered with humility. That in itself shows an innate understanding of the Tau’va. It is a quality of great value to the Aun.’

‘Hmm. Perhaps I can see their viewpoint,’ said Farsight. ‘I thank you for your kind words, my friend. They are a balm to the soul.’

‘I am merely telling the truth,’ said Ob’lotai, the disc of his droneform dipping slowly. ‘We artificial intelligences are not known for our fanciful imaginations, after all.’

Farsight shook his head, the beginnings of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Ob’lotai made a clicking noise. ‘You are about to say “*You never had much imagination in the first place, Ob’lotai.*”’

At this, Farsight did laugh, freely and long. It was a huge release of tension, far more welcome than any imparted truth. ‘Perhaps I am growing too predictable,’ he replied, chuckling.

‘Not something that is often said about you. You must watch your temper. One day it will get your cadre killed.’

Farsight puckered his forehead, affronted for a moment. ‘I should get O’Vesa to install some new etiquette programs, perhaps.’ Then he relaxed, making the slicing gesture of the teaching wound. ‘Or perhaps not. I value your candid opinion.’

‘You always preferred a plain speaker or two in your entourage,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘I see the magister Por Malcaor is part of your personal staff. Do you not find him strange?’

‘He is, a little,’ replied Farsight. ‘But he impressed me at the elemental council. One who dares speak so openly in front of the aun can likely be relied upon in a way that most water caste speakers cannot.’

‘Crass in delivery, but perhaps the truth,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘An old vice of yours,

too.'

'Not a vice. Not a flaw. A torch, to use Aun'Wei's metaphor.' The high commander's expression grew dark. 'A torch with which to burn away the tissue of lies that surrounds us.'

Ob'lotai said nothing, instead emitting a continuous blurt of white noise peppered with staccato bips. Something about the sound was grating in the extreme.

'It is unwise to make such a statement,' said Ob'lotai over the irritating machine-noise. 'I am emitting a scrambler field to alter the substance of our exchange should our friends back there, those "faithful helpers",' – there was genuine venom in Ob'lotai's tone as he spat the phrase, 'be listening, but even that is a divisive act that will bring many questions.'

'I shall consider my words more carefully in future.'

'I implore you, do not make me do so again, or else you may find me reassigned without warning, and our long friendship at an end.'

'Very well, Ob'lotai. You have made your point. I shall be more circumspect, and watch my tongue, unless I am sure of utmost privacy.'

'Good,' said the Warghost. 'Now, I presume you still carry a notation device with you?'

'I do. It is remote linked to my XV8.'

'Initiate it, and take a sample of this frequency. Do not speak, nor move. Just record. Looped back upon itself, it may be useful to you in future. It is a hundred thousand streams of complex data mingled as one, and will overload most listening devices that attempt to parse it.'

Farsight activated the recorder disc with a swipe of his thumb, recording a four-microdec burst of the frequency being broadcast by his old mentor. Storing it in a secure cache, he turned to look at the large black drone, his expression quizzical. The hovering discus flashed lights along its antennae-crested top half and dipped its edge by way of a salute.

'I was there at Arkunasha as well, remember,' said Ob'lotai. 'I gave my life for that war, and got this limbless prison,' – the drone wobbled left and right – 'as my reward. I have not forgotten how it felt to be withdrawn from command upon the brink of victory, O'Shovah.'

Farsight turned to the floating disc, wanting to put a hand upon it in a gesture of solidarity, but not knowing whether it would merely add to his old friend's pain.

'It was hard on us all, to have a ten tau'cyr war robbed of closure,' continued Ob'lotai. 'But we must let our wounds heal. There are times when the fire caste will need to realign itself with the Tau'va without the other castes watching. This is one of those times.'

‘As you say,’ replied Farsight, ‘some prefer to heal in private. I am sure this sound-form will be of great use.’ The high commander began to draw his hands into the sign of the treasured-gift-received, then realised what he was doing, and put them quickly down by his sides.

The scrambler field faded away, and calm returned.

‘Of course, that strategic aspect of the gulf has been extensively analysed,’ said Ob’lotai blithely. Farsight looked at the drone in askance, but knew better than to question the sudden change of subject.

‘As you say,’ the high commander replied, impressed by Ob’lotai’s caution. Was the Warghost pretending to speak of a military matter that those listening via the drone attendants had no right to be privy to, therefore giving himself an excuse for deploying the scrambler field? ‘It is good to see you have lost none of your perspicacity, old friend. How long until we engage the ZFR horizon accelerator drives?’

‘Less than a half-dec, I believe,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘We should make our preparations, and ensure we are fully registered before the drive initiates.’

‘Understood,’ said Farsight. ‘Again, my thanks.’ He made the sign of two-spirits-linking with his circled index fingers and thumbs before bowing and walking away.

Outside, in the far distance, the fringes of the Damocles Gulf shimmered with unknown energies.

ASTROPATHIC NODE,
VENTRAL CHOIR
THE *SCABBARD OF FLESH*

The ritual circle of the high-ceilinged perspicarium was small, perhaps only three metres across. It was drawn in chalk upon the rough granite of the circular chamber's floor. The thrice-blessed candles that burned at each of the circle's hexagrammatic points, however, were each worth more than a tonne of adamantium.

A trio of robed astropaths stood at regular intervals around the hexagram's circumference, each chanting softly over the thrum of the *Scabbard's* engines. They had been doing so for just over three hours, their intent to open a passage of communication with the astropathic choir of the *Hera's Majesty*. It was no small feat, and would require both ships to cross the same astropathic duct at the same time. The psykers were already drawn and haggard, and the one nearest Caelos had trickles of blood running down his age-lined cheeks.

If he was lucky, thought the Chapter Master, those tears would stain his alabaster skin as a permanent mark of devotion.

'Anything?' he asked hopefully. The astropaths did not stop the chant. Instead, the eldest of their number held up one slender finger, a gesture of admonishment as much as request for more time.

'Of course,' said Caelos. 'My apologies.'

The chant continued, droning and slightly hypnotic. Unconsciously, Caelos picked at the ragged skin of his cheek wound, pushing its edges back over his bared gums and the row of molars that showed through beneath. It hurt, but in a good way.

A few minutes later, a crackling will o' the wisp appeared above the cogitator

array in the centre of the ritual circle. The ball of light was projected by the complex, many-legged armature reaching up from the crown of wires and machinery atop it. The whole assembly reminded Caelos of a dead arachnid, its legs curled up in some macabre reflex to grip the holo-sphere with all eight of its extremities.

The astropaths' chant grew to a climax, then fell away. Slowly, the ball of light swam into focus, and became a face. It was that of the Ultramarine officer the Chapter Master had last seen on a dataslate in the ship's servitor catacombs.

'Captain Numitor,' said Caelos, 'can you make out my words?'

'I can,' said the apparition. 'Well met.' His close-cropped mohawk was a thick line of darkness cresting a pale and sinewy face. In this light, the disembodied head looked more like that of a thug than a lauded hero.

'Has your company engaged these xenos I hear of? The Tyran strain?'

'Not yet,' said Numitor. 'It is a point of some contention.'

'An ill omen,' said Caelos, 'but one that salves my conscience in consulting you.'

'What can I do for you, Chapter Master? We missed you at the muster point.'

'The Emphyrean,' growled Caelos, saliva leaking through his exposed teeth. 'Its tides are the death of surety.'

'That much is true,' said Numitor ruefully. 'Our astropaths tell me you are still stranded in tau space.'

'Not stranded,' said Caelos. 'Cut off. Given that we are so far behind you, I intend to continue striking at the tau until the warp is stable enough for us to try another long-range translocation. My battle-brothers and I have learned well of their many weaknesses.'

Numitor gave a mirthless smile. 'They will not be expecting you. We left under a semblance of stalemate, to fight a race with no more concept of negotiation than quicksand. We will one day finish that which we started, but with the fringe worlds coreward of the gulf back in Imperial hands, we thought it could wait.'

'My Librarian, Vaethosis, tells me the tau are back on the warpath.'

'That correlates,' said Numitor, nodding. 'We have a contact within the tau high council who sends us messages via one of our astropaths. Very useful, but communications are of course rare. You are better placed to finish what we started.'

'That was our conclusion. We lost Durian Raevor, our former Chapter Master, to a tau assassin's strike.'

'So I hear,' said Numitor.

'I was voted for in his stead. I won't lie to you, an opportunity to punish the tau will not be unwelcome.'

‘Many of our brothers died upon Dal’yth too. Emperor lend you speed.’

‘Durian is not dead, technically speaking,’ continued Caelos. ‘He is trapped in a stasis field with his attacker. A living monument to an enmity we should never forget. But not dead. Hence my role is that of a steward until his body is retrieved and the tau device disabled.’

‘That may be some time,’ said Numitor. ‘The tau are extremely capable tacticians. Beware their warsuit commanders. They pack a punch, and they are clever, too. Especially the ones in red. Kill them, and their wider strategic capability will fall apart.’

‘It was just such an adversary that laid Raevor low.’

Numitor nodded sagely, his holo crackling like hot fat in a skillet as the cogitators adjusted for the motion.

‘The archive reports suggest the tau armada is that of a trader race,’ said Caelos.

‘Essentially, yes. They have warships, but nothing next to ours.’

‘And if they seek to reach out across the gulf once more?’

‘Well, interception is not out of the question. Especially if your Brother Vaethosis is as gifted a seer as Epistolary Elixus tells me. We have received the coordinates of their first crossing points from our source in the upper hierarchies. It is a relay station in the midst of the gulf. We have also received a rough conception of their fleet’s capabilities. I shall make some estimations, and have my astropath transmit them as a vision-psalm at the first opportunity.’

‘My eternal thanks,’ said Caelos. A string of drool swung from the side of his jaw as he inclined his head in recognition.

‘Chapter Master, I must ask,’ said Numitor, ‘can you not have your apothecary see to that wound?’

‘He has seen to it,’ said Caelos abruptly.

‘He... he has?’

‘Aye. “The Emperor judges you not by your medals or diplomas, but by your scars.”’

‘With respect,’ chuckled Numitor, ‘I believe that phrase, though laudable, is meant metaphorically.’

‘We do not!’

The force of Caelos’ rebuttal was such that two of the ritual’s astropaths flinched away from him. The Ultramarine’s image flickered, becoming a ball of light, then buzzing like a startled swarm of bees before blinking out altogether.

The signal lost, the astropaths fell back, red smoke trailing from their mouths.

Chapter Master Caelos was already making haste for the battle-barge’s librarium, his footsteps resounding down the vaulted corridor like the booming of a drum.

Caelos could make out the *Scabbard's* astrocartography chamber up ahead, lit by half a thousand candles. The room was large and sumptuous, with broad candelabras and hung with tapestries that depicted star systems, warp routes and genealogies of Terran Navigator dynasties. At its heart were two figures of unusual appearance, one dwarfing the other, their intense features given animation by the flickering shadows of the half-light.

The smaller of the two had long embroidered robes and a silken bandana tight across his brow. The larger, some two heads taller, was a disfigured monster clad in terracotta battle plate. His aura simmered with potential violence like that of an armoured bull in a gallery of priceless glassware.

'There,' said Epistolary Vaethosis, pointing to a tiny amethyst in the wire-and-gemstone armature that mapped out the Damocles Gulf. 'Just there.'

'Don't touch it,' blurted the Navigator ven der Lucio, stretching out a scrawny hand to clutch at Vaethosis' power-armoured wrist. Caelos watched the Librarian turn his head, his eyes flashing, and ven der Lucio withdrew his hand to grasp nervously at the air instead.

'It's delicate,' he finished lamely.

The rug-strewn floor shook slightly as Chapter Master Caelos strode in. Looming over ven der Lucio, he peered down at the filigree framework. When seen from a certain angle, the navigational tool could be said to look a little like a three dimensional representation of the Damocles Gulf. Its gross shapes were reminiscent of those Caelos had seen on his predecessor's parchments.

'And this amethyst represents what, exactly?' he asked.

'That is the location that Numitor's contact spoke of,' replied ven der Lucio. 'An island of uncorrupted space in the heart of the gulf, roughly situated at its thinnest part. It matches the coordinates you received from the Macraggian fleet.'

'Then we shall be waiting,' said Caelos. 'Can you predict when they will arrive?'

'It is possible,' nodded Vaethosis, 'though I make no promises.' He shrugged. 'This is the warp.'

Caelos did not press the matter. The Epistolary was old; he had fought for the Scar Lords for three centuries if Apothecary Darroleon's account was accurate. Caelos was relatively young, yet to pass his fiftieth year, but his volcanic rise to command had carried him all the way to Chapter Master. It was a sore point with the Epistolary – he had allegedly voted not for Caelos, but Captain Shaegrus of the Third.

The Epistolary leaned further forward to peer into the Navigator's framework map. His face was illuminated from below by the sconces around the jewelled

device's auto-bier. Caelos could not help but be a little impressed when he got a close look at Vaethosis' features. They were a criss-crossed mass of scar tissue and badly healed wounds, his missing nose exposing an inverted 'V' that led straight to his nasal cavity. The wound gave his words an odd timbre, but they were no less strident for it. In Caelos' eyes, any battle-brother who had sustained that much damage in the name of the Imperium was worthy of utmost respect.

In a moment of sudden self-awareness, he realised Vaethosis' approval meant very much to him indeed.

'I will await your signal, then, honoured brother,' he said, standing up to his full height, 'and be ready to lead the strike, should the moment come.'

'So you will be leading the attack in person?'

'Of course,' said Caelos with a frown.

Vaethosis nodded, his lips pursed.

'Do my methods displease you, Epistolary?'

'You are the Master of the Scar Lords Chapter,' came the reply. 'You must do as you see fit.'

'Then let us hope the Emperor guides us straight to them,' said Caelos. 'We have a fleet to kill.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STORM GATHERS

DAMOCLES GULF

Farsight sat back in the control cocoon of his battlesuit, as comfortable as if sleeping in his ergonomic berth. Every contour was perfectly adjusted, the harness snug against his chest like the reassuring embrace of a bond-mate. The two v-shaped creases that usually lined his forehead were barely visible, though the muscles of his eyes were tight from intense data manipulation.

The XV8's every screen and monitor suite reconfigured to relay as much pertinent data as possible, and the high commander had been drinking it in ceaselessly since the fleet had engaged its horizon accelerators. He had exhausted three rehydration packs already; his face was a little swollen, but he had enough salve left to keep going for another six decs at least. When doubts as to the protocols of spending several cycles within his battlesuit crept into his thoughts, he quickly quelled them. The interface system had been painstakingly designed to allow fire caste commanders to assimilate information as swiftly and efficiently as possible. Why would he use the air caste version on the bridge?

The fleet's progress thus far was displayed on the leftmost informational hex. It showed their trajectory from Dal'yth Prime to the periphery of the Damocles Gulf, a thin gold line extrapolating their progress outwards towards the enclave worlds. Alongside it were views of the celestial sites they had passed so far. There was the dun orb of Pra'yen, so easily bypassed by the Imperial invasion. Beyond it was the charcoal ash world of Akul, long dead even before it had been the target of a hrud infestation. Next was the Dal'yth-Akul Trade Station, a vast orbital *ta'shiro* fortress so large it had thrust enough to resist drift, and therefore maintain a permanent interstellar location. The trade station was a true nirvana for the mercantile minds of the water caste, and many of their communiqués had tacitly suggested that Farsight's fleet might be better equipped for its journey

should they permit them the honour of a rendezvous. The high commander had politely declined, and made speed between it and the Gri-Lok asteroid field beyond.

That conglomeration of stellar debris surrounded them now, a vast band of lumpen megaliths drifting slowly through the darkness. Each sea-blue asteroid was shot with veins of silver and black, their criss-crossing patterns beautiful even to a fire caste warrior. They spun in strange orbits, a slow and dignified dance. No doubt they would be utterly entrancing to a member of the earth caste.

Dal'yth's mining fleets had reaped an endless mineral bounty from that region of space; even the lowliest shas'la had heard of it. Were it not for the gifted pilots of the Gri-Lok metalloharvests, the earth caste would likely never have been able to incorporate the ultra-hard iridium alloy into the fire caste's new generation of battlesuits. It was an obvious example of the castes working together in harmony, to protect as well as to conquer.

Farsight opened a communion channel to his contact on the bridge of the *Dawn Pioneer*. His personal pilot, Kor'vre Vior'la Mesme Y'eldi, appeared in the icon hex. He wore his usual overconfident smile.

'Y'eldi,' said Farsight, 'enjoying the journey, I see.'

'It is too easy, I am sad to relate,' said the pilot with a grimace. 'The dispersal of the asteroid field is thin. Only a few dense areas, and even then my colleagues are set on avoiding them.'

Farsight snorted something akin to a laugh. Y'eldi had once confided in him that it was something of a rite of passage to cross the Gri-Lok field, and that he had once done so with one hand clenched behind him. Farsight had genuinely wondered if he was speaking literally.

'Maybe you could convince them to fly the fleet through backwards, just to enliven the experience.'

'You hear that, my sad little moths?' called out Y'eldi. 'High Commander Farsight says to steer the fleet through backwards! You heard him!'

Laughter bubbled across the communion link. 'Very good,' said Farsight patiently. 'How long until we emerge, and enter the gulf beyond?'

'A matter of decs, really,' said Y'eldi, his eyes still shining with mirth. Farsight could hear the pilot's comrades berating him from the other side of the bridge. 'We have an intermittent but static signal from the relay station in the gulf's thinnest part, the area the water caste call Enclave's Ford. Ridiculous name. Only the ambassadors could see a cloud and mistake it for a river.'

'Any sign of other craft? We can't be the only ones to see that region as the most viable route.'

'Nothing,' said Y'eldi, a note of disappointment in his voice. 'Not a flicker.'

‘And if we were to encounter an enemy fleet?’

‘Then we would outdistance it,’ said Y’eldi with a tired sigh, ‘as per Admiral Li Mau Teng’s explicit command. We may not have anomaly drives, like our Imperial guests at Dal’yth, but our ships are far more manoeuvrable than their great whale-craft and our scanners at peak performance. We would detect them and be away before they could bring a single gun in range. Apparently there will be ample opportunity to take them apart once we reach enclave space. The greater mission of reclamation far outweighs any personal goals.’

His next words were echoed by his fellow pilots, a sing-song chorus that had clearly been oft repeated. ‘Focus on the task at hand.’

‘You remembered,’ said Farsight. ‘I am flattered. You will do well to listen to your elders, and Admiral Teng most of all.’

‘But Teng is so very much elder,’ laughed Y’eldi, ‘it is a wonder he is still able to pilot that golden monstrosity. I would have thought he would snap like a reed under the gravitic force.’

‘Do signature machines bother you then, Y’eldi?’ asked Farsight pointedly.

‘Only in that I do not have one,’ sighed the pilot. ‘Yet.’

‘The *Silent Aftermath* does not fit your idea of a desirable craft?’

‘Much as I have grown fond of it, the *Aftermath* is still only an Orca. It is as aerodynamic as a pulse rifle cartridge, and with far less firepower. You should upgrade.’

Now it was Farsight’s time to smile.

‘Perhaps. Go well,’ he said, ending the communion with a blink. On the rightmost screen, an update on Dal’yth Prime’s situation was provided by a water caste informational. He assessed it with one eye, finding it overproduced and edited to the point of sterility. He deleted it with a flick of his pupil, giving it no further thought. To a true leader, such anodyne and biased information was worse than useless.

Farsight’s thoughts turned to the speaker-caste, and their contribution to the ethereals’ Great Reclamation. Admirably, the Water Spider was one of a handful who had opted to remain on active duty throughout the journey. That was extremely unusual; the idea of so long spent without varied company was a kind of living purgatory for such a gregarious caste. Still, Farsight was grateful of the help.

The vast majority of the tau assigned to the expedition had entered a kind of suspended animation as soon as the gulf’s crossing was underway. He could not blame them. The journey to the enclave worlds took well over three kai’rotaa even under ideal conditions, and the tau could ill afford to spend such a high proportion of their lives in transit. Hence almost all submitted themselves to the

hibernation suites the earth caste had installed upon every major vessel.

Some few vital personnel had that option taken away from them by order of the Elemental Council. Others had volunteered to spend the duration of the crossing awake. Individuals from both groups smiled and made the sign of glad greetings when they encountered one another in the corridors of the transit ships. Amongst this loose meta-team were the more unusual of Farsight's fellow leaders – Ob'lotai 3-0, of course, whose lifespan was effectively infinite, and Bravestorm, whose battlesuit bio-support system was incompatible with hibernation technology. In contrast, Commander Brightsword had arranged to be amongst the first to be put to sleep. Farsight had always suspected that ennui was the young warrior's worst enemy; the empty cycles of an interstellar crossing would likely wound him deeper than any blade. The genius O'Vesa was also in stasis, judged too important to the war effort to fritter away his vital years.

In all, perhaps one in a hundred tau expeditionaries made the crossing awake. Some castes were represented more than others; most of the air caste remained active, being pilots. At the other end of the spectrum were the ethereals. Only Aun'Dienn had volunteered for the long vigil in the name of the Tau'va, and even then she was seen rarely.

Those who took the long vigil formed a cross-caste brotherhood of sorts, united in the sacrifice of years. A fitting term, Farsight thought, for to give up such a large part of a natural life span was dedication indeed, and one of the main reasons why the air caste were so well respected in tau society. To mark that service was all well and good. The water caste had been delighted when Farsight had been the first outside of the air caste to volunteer, and they had taken to singing his praises with renewed vigour.

He did not see it as much more than doing his duty. As the exemplar that all others were looking to since the victory at Dal'yth, it was only fitting.

Besides, the endless rotas of down time would come in useful. He had a lot of thinking to do.

The Water Spider padded down the *Dawn Pioneer's* long white corridors, his magisterial robes of office swishing around his feet. A hand-sized guidance drone hovered before him. It blipped as he reached each turning point, directing its sensors towards him and dipping its rim in obeisance. Now it hovered in front of a lozenge-shaped portal. He gestured, and the diminutive device opened it with a tight beam of light before passing into the vestibule beyond.

As he moved after the drone, Por Malcaor took off his azure cloth mantle and threw it over the disc-like machine. The drone made to shrug it off, but he caught the cloth's ends and gathered them in fast. The little machine squeaked in

confusion. It pulled away, and Por Malcaor yanked the ends of the cloth mantle hard, swinging it out wide to smash the drone against the portal's frame. Again and again he swung it, each impact a resounding crack. The drone's beeps turned to shrieks of alarm, and then silence.

When he was sure the mantle contained nothing more than a jumble of broken parts, Por Malcaor tied the ends of the cloth together into a rough plait, tucked the entire thing under his belt, and moved on into the cylinder-lined halls beyond.

It did not take the magister long to find his quarry. The guidance drone had done its job well up until the point of its untimely demise, and the tau glyphs on each cylinder were easy enough to decipher. Warring emotions crashed and roiled within Por Malcaor, anticipation mingling with a strange sense of terror – the dissonance of his former selves, perhaps, for the essences of the tau and the Architect were as different as water and fire. The feelings were violent and pure, their richness vivid in stark contrast to the cloying, ordered stiffness of the cryostasis hall around him.

Rank after rank of silent, still faces were visible through the viewports of each cool metal cylinder. Their hibernatory state lent them an unchanging quietude. To Por Malcaor, each tranquil expression was as nauseating as the last. The magister's inner being squirmed and writhed at the sight of such oppressive, stolid order.

Even corpses had the common decency to rot. These bodies did not change at all.

Their timelessness was an offence of the most grievous kind. It was all Por Malcaor could do not to set fire to the place there and then. His hands grasped at the air at his sides, anxious to wreak havoc, but he kept his charade of composure. A disappearance here, a strange accident there; these things were largely overlooked by the majority of the tau populace, for they would far rather look to the stars than observe the muddy truths beneath their feet. An act of arson upon a spacecraft was another matter. He could not afford such an overt display. Not just yet.

There were a few changes he could make, though, in the meantime.

Por Malcaor walked along the silent ranks until he found Tsmyen Kais' cylinder, clearly marked. Peacebringer was sadly absent; he had instead opted for the Sacrifice, and was active elsewhere on the great ship. Still, he could wait. Some things were better for the anticipation.

Por Malcaor studied the symbols running down the side of the stasis cylinder for a moment, then touched the most elaborate sigil. It glowed copper under his fingertip. As he brushed his finger slowly along the cylinder's length, the

symbols all turned to silver, then to gold.

The magister peered through the viewport in fascination as Tsmyen Kais' face, waxen and still as that of an effigy, began to twitch. His eyelids flickered, but were too gummed with the stuff of sleep to open just yet. Fast-tracking the awakening procedure carried severe health risks, but such concerns were trivial indeed, given the circumstances.

Por Malcaor smiled, all teeth and no humour, as Tsmyen Kais finally got his eyes open and focused upon him. A flicker of recognition, and the speaker's slack face twisted into an expression of confusion.

Por Malcaor hit the symbol of communion, and leaned in close.

'Full greetings of the morning, caste-mate,' he said brightly.

'Water Spider?' slurred Tsmyen Kais groggily, straining to gather his wits as the chemicals of the induced hibernation were sluiced from his system. 'Why are you here?'

'I have come to kill you,' said Por Malcaor.

'What?' said Tsmyen Kais. 'Whurr...'

'I am about to kill you.'

The speaker made a brave attempt at a false laugh.

'Your joke is amusing! We shall reminisce about it on the other side of the gulf.'

Por Malcaor noted with interest that his caste-mate's facility with words was returning to him. Falsehoods would soon spill from his lips like rain from a gargoyle's spout.

'You know I cannot lie,' said Por Malcaor. 'I am telling the truth. I have come to murder you.'

'You cannot! The Tau'va forbids it!'

'The Tau'va is nothing to me. The very concept is a falsehood. It is a confection, designed by the hidden rulers of your race, to keep the rest in order.'

'That is blasphemy of the worst kind!' said Tsmyen Kais, his eyes bulging. 'Now cease this foolishness! I must rest!'

'Then you shall rest in peace,' said Por Malcaor, holding one finger on the anti-stasis symbol and another on the override at the cylinder's base. Stimulant chemicals, designed to awaken the incumbent's nervous system, flooded the cylinder. Pryfinger had explained the process to him, in a former life; a small dose was automatically administered when the activation symbol was slid to gold. The cylinder's function had the option to add more chemicals, should the occupant have been in a deeper stasis than usual.

Por Malcaor kept the boost and override symbols depressed hard. More and more stimulants flooded the cylinder. Inside, Tsmyen Kais' imploring expression

had turned to a manic, rictus grin. He was shuddering, shaking, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth as the stimulants built up to lethal levels in his system.

Por Malcaor made a face of his own, an exaggeratedly tragic mask of sympathy. Then he stuck out his tongue, its stubby fork a mockery of a serpent's, and flicked it from side to side.

Tsmyen Kais' spasmodic convulsions grew even more intense until he broke into a hideous, wracking frenzy. He gnawed at his own lips, pulling them ragged as his facial muscles jerked and writhed beneath his skin. A rising scream emerged from the communion link. Por Malcaor savoured it like a favourite concerto. There was a regular tattoo of thumps as Tsmyen Kais hammered his face over and over again into the hard glass of the viewport, blood and spittle smearing in small blossoming striations of fluid. Por Malcaor found them quite fascinating. The frequency of impacts built to a thunderous pitch. It faded away to intermittent thumps, then nothing at all.

Por Malcaor grinned contentedly, making the sign of joyful reacquaintance before bowing low and unhurriedly making his way back to the door.

Today was a good day to be a tau.

Farsight nodded in satisfaction. His study of the human war schematic was far from complete, but he was making progress. Over the course of the Dal'ythan war, the earth caste had harnessed so much footage that he could have viewed it around the clock for eighty rotas and still only assimilated a small fraction of it. Nonetheless, he had watched and digested a significant proportion – some at triple speed, focusing his eyes independently so as to locate and digest the crux points of martial strategy all the faster. Now and again, Farsight stopped to make a new entry into his working conclusions file.

'Heraldic elements ninety-eight per cent consistent with previous enemy designations,' he said, his eyes still scanning fast. 'Cadres categorised as Ultramarines, Scar Lords and Sons of Orar follow the same pattern, though not those designated Black Templars, nor Iron Hands. Posit idiosyncratic structure based on nature of home culture, space station or world. Note: watch for anomalous indicators.'

Whole decs had slid past without Farsight taking his eyes from his command relay screens. He cut, edited, overlapped and contrasted every screed of footage he could find that showed the gue'ron'sha shock troopers in action, recording his observations alongside them.

'Swift dispersal tactic and overlapping field of fire consistent with previous tactical webs. See append text "*The Blind Mont'ka*."

Farsight was in his element. He had begun the process of understanding the gue'ron'sha mind-set from the moment their counter-invasion had been launched upon Vespertine, and had spent every waking moment of his recuperation in an earth caste healsphere analysing them after sustaining decompression sickness at Gel'bryn reservoir. He had found recurring principles at the heart of the tactical manoeuvres the gue'ron'sha made in each battle. The only possible conclusion was that they had their own equivalent of the Code of Fire. Farsight was piecing together its tenets, one by one, from the attack patterns used consistently by the Space Marine invaders.

On the largest screen, jetpack-wearing warriors in cobalt blue armour landed with a series of shattering impacts in a tau street before sprinting in search of cover.

'Anomalous drop procedure likely due to aerial intervention of Sun Shark bombers from Dal'yth squadron Morning Sabre, intervention cadre Heo'mas. Append and contrast with Gel'bryn first element.'

The attack patterns were so similar it was almost certain the Space Marines were cleaving to the tenets of a single text. Farsight's ultimate hope was to procure a copy, but was content to work it out himself in the meantime. By the time he had finished crossing the gulf, he intended to have a version that was all but complete.

'Theorised underlying tenet – "strike at speed and move on swiftly, thereby ensuring momentum."'

A proximity alarm chimed, closely followed by a double knock upon the outside of his Crisis battlesuit. Farsight was jerked from his analysis trance with a shudder.

'Still studying, commander?'

Thrensia Delaque's personal sigil, a single lidless eye, flared on a comms hex before disappearing to show her symmetrical, open features. Her hair was tied in elaborate strands that framed the card tattoo on her forehead, each braid clinging to her face like the tentacles of a hidden octopus attached to the back of her head. She spoke in passable tau, and had modulated her voice to seem smooth and casual. Still, to Farsight's ear, his own language coming from a gue'la mouth seemed twisted and strange.

He gave her symbol a swift blink-click and composed his thoughts before answering.

'Yes,' he said. 'I intend to learn everything I can about my foe. Armed with that knowledge, my strikes will be all the surer. Though it may consume most of my time, it will likely spare countless tau lives when we cross swords with the gue'ron'sha shock troopers once more. It is a bargain any true leader would

make, and few humans would understand.’

‘You underestimate your enemy’s resolve,’ came the reply. ‘The Imperium is like an ancient battleship, only still afloat because of an ocean of blood beneath it. We are no strangers to martyrdom. My own family frittered their lives away for the betterment of their uncaring masters, working their hands ragged to make munitions for the war that ultimately killed them. That is one of many reasons why I wish to see the realm of man... re-educated.’

‘Hmm,’ said Farsight.

‘Besides, I too was offered the option of a hibernatory state,’ she continued. ‘Tailored, naturally, to my particular physiology. Your comrades in the earth caste talked me through the process, at exhausting length.’ She smiled, the card on her forehead blurring like a waterlogged ink sketch to become the image of a hooded saint with a noose around its neck. ‘I declined, in order to better fulfil my part of the bargain to the Greater Good. Do not think for a moment I am incapable of sacrifice in the name of the Tau’va.’

‘I see. Then perhaps you can edify me on a matter I have not been able to resolve.’

‘I will do my best.’

‘These Space Marines,’ he continued. ‘They follow a warrior code. Yet there are times when they depart from it quite readily. What good is a code that is not adhered to?’

‘It depends on the Chapter,’ said Delaquer. ‘Some stick rigidly to the Codex Astartes, as it is known, because their primogenitor – the first of their particular brotherhood – readily agreed to its use. Hence they see it as sacrosanct, an honour code as much as a military doctrine.’

‘Then perhaps it is this... *Coh-dex As-tart-ees*... I seek to define in this mirror-text, the better to reflect in our own counterstrategies.’

‘Perhaps, but even then it will not work all the time. There are those Chapters whose forefathers scorned the use of that tome, preferring to follow the warrior culture of their parent world. They have kept their own strictures, titles and beliefs. Even in Codex-adherent Chapters, there are rebels and iconoclasts. Such is the price of recruiting new blood so young.’

Farsight nodded. They were essentially the same conclusions he had come to a long while ago. For a human to confirm them unbidden was an indicator of genuine loyalty to the Tau’va. The psyker was giving honest advice, or at the least, she believed that to be the case.

‘And you would see them fall?’

‘Not as such,’ she replied. ‘It is not the Imperium entire that must be scoured from the stars, but rather its worst excesses and manifestations. Does that make

any sense to you?’

‘It does,’ said Farsight sombrely. ‘Many of humanity’s constituent parts are worth saving. The gue’vesa prove that.’

‘Reality is rarely cast in black and white. Only a barbarian sees every iteration of a culture through a single lens.’

‘By that same principle, then,’ asked the high commander, ‘do you believe there are elements of the tau race that must likewise be scoured from existence?’

‘Undoubtedly,’ said Delaque, ‘though I would never presume to know what they are, nor how to find them. Neither is it given to me to lay them low.’

The high commander nodded again inside his battlesuit. It was a brave answer, one that could have seen her exiled into the void in the wrong company. Farsight found it philosophical, yet humble. She had given it without hesitation.

‘I am beginning to see why the ethereals put you forward for this duty, Thrensia Delaque.’

‘You will,’ she replied. ‘Sadly, this day I come to you with a warning. There is an anomalous region of the gulf ahead, the first of many. I can feel it like an itch in my mind’s eye. I believe it will manifest as an empyrean storm.’

‘Empyrean? I am unfamiliar with this word.’

‘A psychic storm, then, for want of a better term. Perhaps it is closing upon our vector of passage through chance. More likely it is being attracted to our position by our very presence.’

‘Have you informed the aun of this suspicion?’

‘I have,’ she answered, ‘they are preparing a broadcast via the water caste. We must batten down the hatches, and fast.’

‘This too is a term I do not know.’

The scryer-card on Thrensia Delaque’s forehead changed once more, first to show a glittering void, then to the image of a fanged whirlpool. Her smile was sinister, like that of a hungry ghost.

‘It means things are going to get rough.’

As he made his way onto the command bridge, Farsight felt a mounting edge of disquiet. The observation screens at the fore of the horseshoe-shaped chamber showed the scintillating clouds of nearby nebulae. The roiling masses of colour were shot through with crackling cables of electricity, each lighting the coloured swirls around them with intense blue-white flashes.

The fleet, once travelling at near light speed via the engagement of the ZFR horizon accelerators, had slowed markedly in order to avoid what looked to be a gathering storm of terrible magnitude. Turning aside from such a massive swathe of space would soon see them lost in the gulf, but waiting it out was not looking

like a viable option. If anything, it seemed as if the storm was headed for them as much as the other way around.

Here, in all its inexplicable glory, was the violent heart of the Damocles Gulf.

A sprawling region of space coreward of the principal tau sept worlds, the belt of nebulae and debris fields had once been seen as an incontrovertible barrier defining the limits of the First and Second Sphere Expansions. One of the key dangers was the intensity of the storms that haunted its reaches. Ship-killers, these tempests were called, each electrical storm so severe it could turn a fully shielded capital craft into a floating graveyard.

The stellar tempest opened into a spiral before them, as if they were diving headlong into the gullet of a colossal, multi-coloured maelstrom. Farsight clenched his teeth. He had analysed all the footage he could amass of the gulf, but he had seen nothing like this.

Lightning flickered once more in the throat of the vortex, throwing a cluster of alerts across the command bridge's systems. The scanner aerials mounted on each vessel, usually powerful enough to detect anomalies from several sept-spans away, were near crippled with the sheer amount of data they were amassing. By the look of it, their functional range had become appallingly short.

Dive any further into this, thought Farsight, and he would be leading his expedition fleet into jeopardy before the first tau'cyr had passed.

He cast a sharp glance towards his personal pilot, sat bolt upright for once in one of the foremost command thrones.

'Y'eldi. Surely we are not heading into this?'

'We have no choice, high commander. With a fleet this size travelling at our current velocity, we can avoid localised hazards easily enough, but we cannot bypass a swathe of space three sept-spans across.'

'You seem... undaunted.'

'The Gri-Lok run turned out to be a fairly simple challenge, despite our lengthy tail,' said Y'eldi. 'If the gulf did not give us something to chew on, my teammates and I would likely fall into a stupor.'

'Just get us through safely,' said Farsight, his temper grating at the flippancy of his pilot's tone. 'This voyage is of utmost importance to the Tau'va, and not to be taken lightly.'

The ship itself shivered, a mild tremor, but enough to spike Farsight's heart rate.

'Do you understand, Kor'vre Y'eldi?' barked Farsight.

'Yes,' said his pilot, making a stylised hand-symbol of contrition. 'Of course. I shall ensure we have as uneventful a journey as possible, high commander.'

'Good,' said Farsight, turning away to scan the observation hexes once more.

Less than a dec later, the throat of the Damocles Gulf opened like a wound, and something vast, dark and terrible ripped its way out.

CHAPTER NINE

THE STORM BREAKS

DAMOCLES GULF

The Imperial battleship appeared from nowhere in the roiling depths of the storm. Its canted prow was driven like a blade through the fabric of space.

Where the vessels of the tau reclamation fleet were built with a harmonious solidity of form and function, the aesthetics of their smoothed-hulled skimmers echoed in every curve, the Imperial ship was an insult to aerodynamics. Its flanks were encrusted with heavy buttresses and grim-faced statuary. It boasted jutting cannons in such profusion it was obvious the creators had but one thing in mind. The enormous warship dwarfed the *Dawn Pioneer* with its impossible bulk as it turned to come alongside, a gnarled and predatory shark next to a smooth pale ray.

The suddenness of the Imperial's appearance was a weapon in itself. Farsight watched his distribution suite in mounting frustration as the Kor'vattra pilots scrambled to engage evasion protocols, their craft moving apart from one another as fast as they were able to avoid presenting the target-rich environment of a convoy.

To Farsight, his systems linked to the dispersion holos of the *Dawn Pioneer*, it was much like watching footage of a startled shoal of fish scattering in slow motion.

A Kauyon, then, launched from who knows where.

Farsight put aside the questions running through his mind, instead analysing the likeliest outcomes of the ambush. Then the *Pioneer* shuddered once more. That was a hit, he thought grimly, and a solid one.

One of the air caste pilots called up a diagnostic, a large white holo-doppel of the capital tau ship appearing from nowhere. Alert signals flashed along its length. They were taking heavy impacts, and not just from firepower.

‘Aft sections twelve and thirteen breached,’ said Y’eldi. ‘High commander, we are being boarded.’

The pilot’s words sent a jolt of molten energy through Farsight’s soul.

‘How is this happening?’ said Y’eldi’s co-pilot, Kor’vre Sa’cea Xanro. ‘How did they find us?’

‘I do not know,’ said Farsight, his eyes narrowing to slits. ‘But in the name of the Tau’va, I will find out.’

Chapter Master Caelos led from the front.

The boarding torpedo barrage had been launched almost as soon as the *Scabbard of Flesh* had made translation from the Empyrean, as per his orders. The element of surprise was a rare commodity in ship-to-ship combat, where the distances involved made any kind of sudden strike all but impossible. Yet with Numitor’s contact within the tau fleet giving them near precise coordinates, Epistolary Vaethosis’ predatory sense of timing and the Astronomican as their guiding light, the Scar Lords had been able to launch the closest thing to a pinpoint assault that Caelos had seen in nearly two hundred years of service.

Considering it criminal to waste such an exceptional information harvest, Caelos had his battle companies ready and waiting in the torpedo bays just in case their steersmen pulled off the surprise assault. It had proven to be an incredibly effective combination. Before the tau could bring their guns to bear in any meaningful way, almost two-thirds of the Scar Lords strike force had been launched across the darkness of space to drive home the assault against the enemy flagship. To kill the commanders of the expedition, to show the tau their vaunted heroes could be cut down like dogs at the Imperium’s whim, would be a blow to morale from which they would never recover.

Caelos was leading the strike in person, the anticipation of imminent battle a sweet thrill in the front of his mind. Around him, the boarding torpedo’s claustrophobic cylinder had an oily stench, brackish and industrial. To Caelos the smell was like the most sacred incense. His brothers were at his back in single file, all present and correct. There was no need for the name-chant; he could see their icons glimmering in the bionic eye he wore in the vacant pit of his right socket.

His twin power fists hummed, energies playing over the scarred knuckles inside. He had opted for raw power over finesse, putting aside the sword in favour of the energised fist. He had once found the gauntlets uncomfortable in their heat, but he had grown to appreciate their sting. He flexed the digits, anxious to rip, to tear, to dig them into something dangerous until it became just another corpse.

Not long now. Perhaps twenty seconds.

‘With the Emperor’s Grace, we suffer new scars,’ called out Caelos.

‘*It is our duty to earn them!*’ came the response from his battle-brothers.

‘With the weapons of truth, we smite the foe.’

‘*Our purpose to hunt and slaughter!*’

‘With the blood of the fiend, we cover our blades.’

‘*It is given to us to anoint them!*’

‘With pride, we bare our wounds to the doomed.’

‘*Let them drown in fear as we slay them!*’

There was a thunderous boom as the boarding torpedo’s prow slammed into the flank of the tau ship. A backwash of heat doused Caelos as the melta cutters on the torpedo’s screw-like cone went to work. They drilled and cut simultaneously as they revolved around in sprays of molten metal until the enemy ship’s hull had been breached.

There was a clanking hiss of hydraulics, and the thrumming electromagnetic pulse under Caelos’ feet died away. He was free. He stormed through the still-glowing ring of molten metal around the boarding cylinder, gauntlets held wide. His command squad veterans were close behind him, emerging two by two to cover their Master’s attack. Caelos triggered his own ranged threats, the frag launchers on the back of his revered Cataphractii warsuit blasting explosions into the arterial passageways of the tau ship.

There was nothing to greet him – no enemy fire, no counter-attack. Only a sickening, sterile absence. The corridor they had stormed into was a featureless cylinder, lit too bright as it stretched in either direction.

Perhaps a quarter of a mile along the clean white passageway, Caelos saw a sudden burst of smoke and a flash of light. He felt his heart leap as he zoomed in to check for enemies, but his mood darkened as he saw Squad Maelvos emerging through the black-grey cloud, his bionic eye casting icons upon the heraldic terracotta of the Scar Lords battle plate. The tactical marines fanned out in textbook dispersal, so neat even the Hammers of Dorn would have raised a blade in salute, but they too found nothing.

This part of the ship was completely deserted.

‘Find them!’ shouted Caelos, striding away as fast as his battle plate could manage.

There would be blood spilt this day.

‘They are attacking in small groups all along our left flank, high commander,’ said Y’eldi from his high-backed throne on the *Dawn Pioneer*’s command bridge. ‘They are advancing through the corridors on the nearside edge of the

ship.'

Farsight's mind ran hot. With the vast majority of the expedition's manpower in a hibernatory state and no time to rouse them, those who remained awake had to muster a defence that could be both concentrated and fluid. They had to get the invaders out in the open if they were to bring their firepower to bear, but with the Space Marines prowling the corridors in ever-increasing number, and with reinforcements likely to arrive at any time, a proper *Kauyon* was out of the question. Every warrior would be needed in the fights to come, but Farsight would have to return to his battlesuit at a sprint if he wished to help repel the boarders in person.

The irony of the situation was painful. He was in command of one of the largest armed forces the tau empire had ever amassed, but in order to conserve the lifespans of his people, the vast majority of his command were inactive. He had perhaps a hundredth of the expedition's forces awaiting his orders, and them scattered throughout the fleet.

Against so sudden an ambush, it was nowhere near enough.

Admiral Li Mau Teng's voice emerged from a nearby relay drone.

'High commander, each of those drill-tipped torpedoes is a vessel of sorts,' he said. 'We are shooting them down as swiftly as we can, but six have already penetrated our defence web. We can expect more to come. I have already taken the precaution of evacuating every region targeted by the Space Marines, the better to give you room to work.'

'My thanks. All operative cadres, send in sniper drone teams to delay and gather data.' Farsight opened a patch to his own cadre. 'All teams, fall back whenever they enter within engagement range. They will have rocket launchers. Do not risk a staggered attack. I am heading for the battlesuit bays to engage at the earliest opportunity.'

Acknowledgement symbols blipped gold as he opened a communion patch to the command cadrenet.

'Bravestorm, Ob'lotai 3-0, listen well. This situation needs concentration of force. I ask you to put forward those elements of your assigned cadres you believe are best suited to repulsion of this sudden strike. Note that many of the areas in which you will be called upon to do battle are slender, or have low ceilings. They will accommodate no more than a single battlesuit.'

'I shall pilot my XV88 to the 4-8 breach site, via the mantle hangar,' said Ob'lotai. 'Long corridors.'

'And I will take the 12-14 breach,' said Bravestorm. 'I want to see their blood splash the walls first hand. I wish to paint the *Pioneer* red with it.'

'I admire your thirst for action, Commander Bravestorm, but do not let it colour

your decisions,' said Farsight. 'The Hero's Mantle is part of you, but you can still be stripped of command if your command suffers unnecessary casualties.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Bravestorm. 'Permission to engage? We are wasting time.'

'Granted.' Farsight frowned as he blink-flicked a series of intercept orders for the remainder of his active cadres. He already knew Bravestorm well enough to anticipate his actions; a fire warrior team was already en route to 12-14 breach in order to give him some back-up when the close quarter warfare began. The life signs there were the same density as in the other locations, but the mass readers of the *Pioneer's* internal microdrones indicated the presence of a very large warrior indeed, one almost the size of a battlesuit. Farsight knew enough about Imperial war doctrine to realise that was likely the gue'ron'sha's leader; the humans were not as far from the orkish 'might makes right' mentality as they liked to believe.

The ship shook hard, alarm signals blaring insistently from the bridge's damage control suite. Farsight felt the impacts in his knee this time. The enemy ship was taking heavy missile fire from the rest of his fleet, but it was determinedly gouging great wounds in the flank of the *Pioneer* all the while, no doubt gambling that its armour and shields would last long enough to ensure a capital ship kill.

Snatching the data strap from his command throne, Farsight made a swift gesture of thanks to the air caste pilots upon the bridge and ran for the eight-seater bullet shuttle that would take him to the battlesuit hangars. He clambered inside, pulled down the cushioned body clamp, and covered his mouth and shio'he with the respirator array before punching a four-digit sequence into its shimmering control holo. The shuttle shot off at such speed it felt as if someone was pulling Farsight's vital organs out through his chest. He struggled in a lungful of analgesic vapour, and as the feeling receded, he forced himself to focus on the distribution displays flickering from the data strap.

Two more breaches, one at 34-38, and one at 40-44. With a shuddering finger he dispatched stealth teams, already knowing they would not be enough.

They were fast running out of time.

Caelos grinned fiercely as he peered down the corridor, the side of his face peeling back to show ranks of white teeth. There was movement ahead, and that meant something to kill.

'Hover-servitors, Chapter Master,' said Vrendaeon, his standard bearer. 'Watch for the disc silhouette.' The veteran was keeping the Chapter's terracotta and gold colours furled, holding them like a lance until there was room to fly them

properly. Caelos thought it gave him the aspect of a feudal sword-noble, especially with a minoris tilting plate displaying his family's heraldry – a boar with blades for tusks – upon his shoulder.

'Advance on me, Vrendaeon. I shall take their fire,' said Caelos.

'We are your honour guard, Caelos,' said his Apothecary, Darroleon. 'We should be at the fore, protecting you from harm, not the other way around.'

'You wish me to fight like a weakling,' said Caelos. 'To keep my flesh as soft and unblemished as a child's.'

'No, Chapter Master,' said Treota, his company champion. 'We want a chance to win some wounds for ourselves. Difficult to do behind your impressive bulk.'

A trio of pulse beams, each as thick as a man's arm, shot down the corridor from three distant disc-servitors hovering over a bulkhead. They struck Caelos in the legs, the abdomen and the arm, sending him stumbling backwards in a cloud of acrid-smelling smoke. He heaved himself upright, deactivating a fist for a moment to field-check the integrity of the ashen patches of ceramite.

'You want one of those for yourself, Treota?'

Caelos strode onwards as another volley seared past him. The shots punched into the bulkhead behind, leaving wide craters that dribbled molten goop. Vrendaeon was closest to the last impact. He was slammed against the opposite wall by the force of the energy discharge.

'After you, Chapter Master,' said Treota. 'Rank hath its privileges.'

Running in close, Brother Xaedros leaned around Caelos' shoulder and squeezed a salvo of kraken bolts from his Deathwatch-issue bolter. The extra propellant of the specialised rounds sent them hurtling down the corridor to detonate upon the leading disc-servitor with a satisfying crack of impact. The explosion tore the flying gun into spinning discs and hoops of buckled metal.

'One,' said Xaedros.

Vrendaeon raised his own bolter and fired a bolt into the section of ceiling weakened by Xaedros' volley. Part of the ivory roof collapsed, burying another two hovering machines in chunks of superstructure. 'Two and three,' he said.

Caelos took another devastating pulse hit upon the shoulder of his Cataphractii armour. He snarled, returning fire with his frag launchers. The twin grenades arced gracefully down the corridor. One was picked out mid-flight by an expert shot from the tau controller skulking in the distance. The other detonated mid-air a moment later, shredding the xenos infantryman in a storm of shrapnel and sending his last disc-servitor crashing to the ground.

'Four,' said Caelos, 'and five.'

'I see,' said Treota, his powered broadsword held loosely at his side. 'None for Treota.'

‘There will be plenty for us all,’ said Caelos. ‘Come on.’

Commander Bravestorm was close to hyperventilating in the life support systems of his specialised control cocoon. It hurt him to breathe so deeply, but his excitement at the prospect of vengeance was making it difficult to be calm. In fact it hurt to breathe at all, to move even one muscle group under the wrinkled blackness of what had once been his subcutaneous fat. He had the relevant injector suites to numb it out for a while, but the temporary relief was a lie, and he would not rely upon it.

Now, the pain was welcome, a stimulus and a call to action. He felt like liquid fire burned in his veins. Soon he would have a chance to get revenge for it. Revenge for the pain he felt across his body, and for the mind-shattering conflagration that had consumed him at Dal’ryu’s Blackthunder Mesa.

‘Where are you?’ he said to himself, calling up his targeting suite and linking it to the ship’s microdrones. ‘What is taking so long?’

‘Commander Bravestorm?’ said one of his gun drones, Oe-saya. ‘Oe-dahn and I are in a holding pattern approximately one metre behind you. We will maintain it until you instruct us otherwise.’

‘I was not referring to you, Oe-saya,’ said Bravestorm, cutting off the passive communion link. ‘But to them.’

As Bravestorm turned into the quarantined zone, ten Imperial life signs appeared, the iridescent spectres of bulkily armoured gue’ron’sha jostling along a wirework representation of 12-14’s abandoned corridors. Five went north, away from them. The other five made directly for their position.

‘Positive ident, high commander,’ said Bravestorm over the command cadrenet. ‘I am about to engage.’ He cycled up his plasma rifle, anxious to start.

‘Ready, faithful helpers?’

‘Of course,’ said the gun drones in unison.

‘Then we go.’

Bravestorm’s iridium-plated XV8 was heavy, far heavier than a conventional Crisis suit, but thanks to O’Vesa he had more advanced jet thrusters as a result. He squint-slid their icon upward on the thrust/vector suite – controlling the suit through bodily movements was out of the question in his critical condition – and pushed them just active enough to raise him a foot above the floor. His battlesuit responded quickly, floating along the corridor with a low roar that was barely noticeable amongst the engine noise and the muffled detonations of Imperial ordnance outside the ship. The technique burned a lot of power, but it was a far less telling manner of approach than the thump of a heavy-duty prototype battlesuit at a run. Unless the Space Marines around the corner had active

scanners, he had every chance of gutting the intruding squad before they could retaliate.

Do not just charge in, he told himself. You are better than that. If they get past you, the tau in the cryostasis halls will be the ones to pay the price.

‘Yours is the duty of bait, Oe-dahn,’ said Bravestorm. ‘We stage a microcosm of the Kauyon. Commit hard, then come back to us as soon as you come under fire. Draw them back with you.’

‘Understood,’ said the drone. He glided fast around the sharply curving corner, opening fire as soon as he passed the apex.

The thunderous sound of Imperial small arms fire rang out. Bleeping in panic, the drone zipped back to ricochet from the wall. A bolt glanced him and exploded half a foot distant. Oe-dahn flew sidelong down the corridor, righting himself and wobbling to a halt.

‘Contact,’ he said unsteadily. ‘Five hostiles.’

A moment later two gue’ron’sha in heavy armour came charging around the corner, guns booming. A third was close behind; he primed a grenade, and hurled it like a rock. It bounced from the wall and detonated right next to Bravestorm’s suit.

A glance at the XV8’s damage control suite showed a slight tarnishing of gold on the left flank, but nothing more. Then a trio of bolts struck him, blasting him backwards. A fourth winged Oe-Saya. It sent the drone skidding to a halt near the pillar of a side portal.

Bravestorm returned fire. His first plasma bolt took one of the charging Space Marines in the helm. There was a puff of pink mist amongst the smoke. The warrior’s body kept on striding for a moment, then toppled with a loud clatter.

The gue’ron’sha next to Bravestorm ducked his second shot, reactions incredibly fast. The Space Marine’s sidearm boomed in return. The bolt struck the shimmering disc of Bravestorm’s shield generator. It detonated without harm.

An animalistic growl came from the gue’ron’sha’s helm. The Imperial warrior put his shoulder down, drew a chainsaw blade, and charged.

Bravestorm grinned fiercely as the Space Marine’s long strides ate up the distance between them. The gue’ron’sha was planning to get in close.

A microdec passed, and the commander eye-blinked a sub-routine he had waited a long time to use.

The XV8 took a stride forward, pivoting hard at the waist. Bravestorm’s massive onager gauntlet swung out in a backhand blow. The Space Marine’s blade was swept aside. The battlesuit gauntlet caught him in a full body blow, crushing gun and warrior alike against the lateral wall of the corridor.

Bravestorm resumed his gun stance, already firing by the time the gue’ron’sha’s

mangled corpse fell in a disorderly pile to the ground.

Oe-dahn floated in close. The drone's twin pulse carbines blazed bright, energy bolts hitting the third of the Space Marines full in the chest. They blasted him backwards into a stagger, sending his sidearm skittering away. The warrior drew a pistol from his hip and blasted Oe-dahn from the air with a single shot.

Nearby, the Space Marine's comrade fired his own weapon at Bravestorm. The fusillade, unexpected, wrenched his arm back with the force of serial explosions. Each compounded the impact of the last. His shield generator was forced out wide.

Around the corner came the last of the Space Marines unit, a scar-faced horror with a fat-barrelled plasma weapon clutched tight against his shoulder. The gue'ron'sha's gun spat a miniature sun, dazzlingly bright. Bravestorm's shield generator was badly out of position. The plasma ball roared in.

The shot struck not Bravestorm's torso, but the disc of Oe-saya flying to intercept. The drone vanished in an explosion of burning matter. His artificial life had been eradicated in a single instant. Bravestorm's iridium took a splash of energy discharge, but with Oe-saya's sacrifice, his systems were left intact.

Bravestorm was already charging, his onager gauntlet arcing in an overhead blow. It struck the nearest Space Marine with such force the warrior simply crumpled into a buckled mess. A blast from his jets, and the commander shoulder-barged the second. The Space Marine was knocked back sprawling into the special weapons trooper behind. This time it was Bravestorm that sent plasma sizzling through the air, burning glowing holes into both of his adversaries.

Another impact, knocking Bravestorm's stimulant suite offline. The commander saw red as he closed in to stamp, punch and kick, eyes raking across his control suite again and again to trigger another blow, then another. His breath came in ragged gasps as the battlesuit shook and tilted around him as if caught in the heart of a tornado. Sympathetic relays told his nerve centres that his blows were hitting home, but he could not feel them, not truly.

Tortured by loss and frustration, Bravestorm drank in a full-spectrum reading of the bloody carnage in the corridor instead. Only then he remembered himself.

'Oe-dahn,' he panted, 'I see you are still active.'

'Yes, commander,' bleated the drone, its weak tone indicative of extreme distress. 'I am at low copper status, quickly fading to tin. In dire need of repair. Is Oe-saya operational?'

'Oe-saya gave his life to protect me,' said Bravestorm.

'A noble sacrifice, he died as he lived,' managed Oe-dahn. 'Are there more assailants?'

‘Not within this hull section,’ said Bravestorm. ‘According to Farsight, these gue’ron’sha use a base-ten numerical, and organise their military forces accordingly. This team was divided into two smaller la’ruas. We have neutralised five. As of my last reading, the other five have headed towards 10-12. We must take a moment to recalibrate before resuming the hunt.’

A dull boom reverberated down the corridor behind them, then another. Bravestorm squinted, his targeting suite responding by zooming in.

In the far distance, on the other side of the meditation hall, a massive armoured figure was punching its way through the twisted metal of a ruined iris portal. Bravestorm zoomed again. Half of the warrior’s face was missing, one eye a glinting bionic above a grotesque mass of pink and red flesh that yawned open to show rows of white teeth.

‘My mistake, faithful helper,’ said Bravestorm to Oe-dahn. ‘They have come to us.’

The long white mezzanine was reassuringly solid, even under the weight of Ob’lotai’s massive XV88 Broadside missile suit. The Warghost stomped along its length, slow and methodical, drawing his boxy missile gauntlets in as close to the centre line as possible as he stepped into the cylindrical loader-lift that overlooked the mantle hangar below. It fit his bulk with ease, specifically designed to convey battlesuits from one level of the ship to another.

The mantle hangar was a wondrous triumph of efficiency. There was something both calming and stirring about the sight of hundreds of inert battlesuits, each standing as upright and proper as if an ethereal was inspecting them, each sparkling clean and charged to full capacity. So much potential power. It was enough to conquer worlds. It could always make Ob’lotai 3-0 feel something, though in the darkest nights, he wondered if that feeling was getting a little less real each time he visited.

Sometimes, Ob’lotai liked to go amongst the inert suits, occupy an empty berth, and power down completely. He found it calming to join the other ghosts in their meditative limbo, their poignant emptiness, until duty called him into action once more.

Now his fellows needed him.

Below him was the breach through which the gue’ron’sha had made their attack. The ingress point was a gaping circle, knife-like teeth of metal protruding from a rim that still glowed cherry red.

Only the Imperium would fire torpedoes designed not to carry munitions, but warriors. The team of Space Marines, ten in all by Ob’lotai’s initial readings, had to have been crammed in, packed tight like the tinned meat rations of a gue’la

trooper. They risked an inglorious death if hit by a stray shot, or even by the debris of the space battle outside.

A tactic without dignity. Without sense. But undeniably effective.

The harsh barks of the Imperial tongue filled the hangar below. They had detected him; the gue'ron'sha too had advanced sensory equipment.

Let them lay their barbarian's Kauyon, thought Ob'lotai 3-0. They would need every advantage they could get, given the circumstances. This was his domain, his castle, and he would not be found wanting in its defence.

They would pay for their transgression.

Ob'lotai diverted power to his missile racks, cycling them into full readiness as he stepped onto the mezzanine lift. He flicked out an imperative field, digitally setting the elevator in motion, and sent an override program flowing into the lift's door. The lift's cylinder-within-a-cylinder revolved so that its side was open to the hangar below. A heavy-set logistics drone buzzed nearby, agitated at the broken protocols. Ob'lotai sent a pulse of override code at it, shutting it up for good. The last thing he needed was some fussy drone complicating his targeting algorithms.

Two bolts rocketed up from behind a crate to detonate on Ob'lotai's lower abdomen. Another two struck the cylinder lift itself, blasting great chunks of composite alloy into the conveyance space. A fifth hit the high collar gorget that protected his battlesuit's neck. Were it not for the fact the shot had come from such a low angle, it would likely have torn the Broadside's sensor-head clean off.

Ob'lotai set crosshairs dancing upon the XV88's targeting suite, one over each of the marksmen that had given away their position with the trajectories of their shots. There was no pilot inside the suit to see the ballistics map, of course, but he kept them displayed out of a sense of tradition. He had already heat-scanned the enemy behind the hex-crates, but by giving them a target – and ensuring they leant out of cover to take the bait – he had ensured they would bare their throats to his return strike.

Measured, confident, Ob'lotai noosed the targeting solutions together and let fly.

The boxy gauntlets that formed the battlesuit's fists pulsed, high-yield missile pods launching a pair of blunt projectiles as long as a tau's forearm. At the same time, Ob'lotai's smart missile system gave a pneumatic hiss, ejecting a small but potent warhead into the cool air of the hangar's curving roof.

The first two missiles shot downwards on thin plumes of propellant towards the hexagonal munitions crates below. They missed the crates by a hair's breadth, smashing into the gue'ron'sha that had taken cover behind them. Both Space Marines were bowled back into the open with their ceramite armour torn open. A

heartbeat later, the second pair of missiles hit home, dead centre in the wounds the first had opened.

The Space Marines detonated like grenades made of flesh and metal, their explosive demise plastering gore across their nearby comrades. Shards of torn power armour flew across the hangar.

Return fire struck the lift, this time hitting the exterior control panel. The structure gave a shudder, and ground to a halt a good three metres from the floor of the mantle hangar. Ob'lotai was stuck fast.

There was a barked order from behind one of the weapons hex-crates. Ob'lotai triangulated the echoes. Perhaps thinking it better to see his foe with his own eyes, the gue'ron'sha had forsaken his helmet. A gift, thought Ob'lotai as he sent a tight-beam alteration to the smart missile. A gift, given from one who held contempt for death to one who respected it as a bladesman respects his sword.

The smart missile darted down on a near-vertical strike vector. It struck the officer's shaven scalp, ending his life in a moment of gory revelation.

As the cylinder lift shuddered in its attempts to grind downward, an enemy missile whooshed from the mezzanine opposite. Ob'lotai's sensor suite detected it a split dec before it struck home.

Time slowed. He snap-calibrated a shot, and fired.

The missile streaking from the Warghost's shoulder system hit the incoming tank-killer less than a metre from the Broadside's sensor-head. The explosion was devastatingly powerful, sending a wracking pulse of feedback through the XV88's frame. Ob'lotai frantically recalibrated, but the anti-tank missile had completely shut down his perceptor arrays.

With his visual sensors out and no flesh-form to fall back on, he had been rendered completely blind.

Ob'lotai heard the percussive thud of heavy footsteps. Chainswords, revved to high speed, shrieked in stark counterpoint. He knew such weapons well enough from Dal'yth, and Arkunasha, come to that; the ork race used a cruder version of the same weapon. They were devised to gnaw through armour and get at the flesh beneath, mangling it with such indiscriminate violence even a glancing blow would be fatal.

If the gue'ron'sha climbed up to reach him, and one of the gnawing blades reached the XV88's central processing hub, it would truly be the end. His stay of execution from the cold oblivion of death would finally be over.

Sensors sparking, Ob'lotai lurched from the aperture of the cylinder lift, launching his bulk into the hangar beyond. He fell, and slammed into the ground with all his weight, buckling the metal beneath. He managed to right himself by throwing his right missile gauntlet out wide as a crutch. He brought around his

left arm, lashing out in a vain attempt to strike at the attackers he felt sure were closing in around him, but hit nothing. He loosed a wide volley, and heard one of the missiles blast point-blank into a Space Marine to send him flying back across the hangar. The rest of them, agile and swift even within their heavy armour, had evaded his clumsy attacks. Bolt rounds detonated on Ob'lotai's joints, each shot intended to blast him limb from limb. Thank the Tau'va, the Broadside's plating held.

Ob'lotai heard a thump from his right. He fired a pair of missiles on instinct, but the sound of their explosions came too late for them to have struck home. He constructed a hypothetical image of gue'ron'sha ducking, weaving, and swaying away from his flailing gun pods.

The sound of a chainsword shrieked again, cutting out the cables at the back of his knee. The Broadside went down hard, toppling sideways to strike the deck with a loud bang. Ob'lotai kicked on instinct, winging something nearby, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain.

In a flash of inspiration, Ob'lotai sent a tight beam transmission to the heavy logistics drone nearby. It was still silenced, but exactly where he had left it. Its facilitator programs were easily overruled. He flicked out a fetch subroutine, and the drone came in close.

Ob'lotai heard the sound of chainswords carving through alloy. His alloy. He ran a diagnostic. The sum total of data that formed his entirety was astronomical, and there was no way it could be properly divorced from his host without specialist earth caste attention.

But he did not need the entirety of his consciousness for what he intended to do.

Ob'lotai prayed to the Tau'va that his system was robust enough to cope with the abuse it was about to undergo. He packaged his war-sentience into a glowing orb of information, each binary detail pared down and rendered by a reverse fractal program of his own devising. As the logistics drone came in close, he sent the sentience package winging through the ether, his projector aerials aiming it for the drone's memory banks. The transfer symbol slid from charcoal to lead, to iron, to tin, to bronze... still a long way before it reached gold.

Another, far smaller package of data he pushed into the single, flattened shark-form of the seeker missile that adorned his left shoulder. It was a sophisticated weapon possessed of a decent amount of autonomy; in conjunction with the drone, it might just be enough.

Then the XV88 fired one last time before it was ripped bodily apart.

Farsight's transit tube sped into his mantle-sanctum, braking hard on a cushion of air to come to a complete halt.

‘High commander,’ came a transmission over the command cadrenet. It was Bravestorm, his voice tight with tension. ‘They are boarding a new section every few decs. The air caste say they cannot deal with the munitions torpedoes and the personnel craft at the same time. Ob’lotai is not responding. We simply cannot contain every breach at once.’

‘Marshall the impromptu cadres,’ he replied, opening a parallel channel on his earbead. Ripping his respirator away, he punched the egress symbol and burst out to run over to his customised XV8. ‘Then isolate and destroy one breach at a time. Admiral Teng?’

‘Listening,’ came a strained and reedy voice. ‘But busy.’

‘I advise changing targets to the boarding craft, destroying them in preference to the munitions torpedoes. The *Dawn Pioneer* can take the punishment. Bravestorm, you are in effective command for the time being. We need to break the cohesion of these attackers, keep them focused on defence, or we shall lose this war before it has even begun.’

‘We need a miracle, commander,’ said Teng softly.

Farsight looked up at the impassive majesty of his XV8 for a long moment, every fibre of his soul straining to open the plexus hatch and climb inside.

Instead he ran back over to the transit tube, punched new coordinates into its ingress portal, and slid back inside.

O’Vesa’s hall of prototypes had been transferred to the *Dawn Pioneer* as a single unit; the scientist had requested it be taken along with him, and the air caste had been happy to rise to the challenge. It was just as Farsight remembered it. Each new iteration of tau tech was held high in a glass-fronted display case. Stepping out of the transit tube, he felt relief mingle with the angry buzz of concern. A series of experimental battlesuits stood at the end of the chamber, wired up but still whole. The goliath O’Vesa had called a ballistics suit loomed in the darkness, impressive in its majesty.

But it was its void-capable companion that the high commander sought this day.

‘Thank the Tau’va,’ he sighed as his searching eyes picked out the multi-finned Coldstar at the far end of the chamber. He sprinted over to it, calling out the override command of his singular rank. ‘*An enemy that stands divided is an enemy easily conquered.*’

A long, angst-filled moment of silence passed, but his luck held. O’Vesa had based the machine’s central processor, and hence its unlock protocols, on an existing fire caste model.

The battlesuit’s systems hummed quietly as they came to life. Its plexus hatch

hissed, coolant gases jetting in diagonal streams as it slid open and up.

Farsight held his breath as he peered inside. To his immense relief, much of the suit's ergonomics and control interfaces were the same as those in his XV8. Uncannily so, in fact – some of the features were clearly based on the requests Farsight had made for customisations to his own Crisis suit.

Last time he had visited the prototype hall, O'Vesa's intimations that he had a certain test pilot in mind had been a crude, paper-thin attempt to manipulate him. Today, Farsight would have kissed his hands in gratitude. He placed one foot on the towering battlesuit's knee, grabbed the grip-bar on the interior of its plexus hatch, and vaulted up, turning at the last moment to slide into its seat. It fit him perfectly.

'Welcome, High Commander Farsight,' said the machine in a smooth female Vior'lan accent. 'I am Coldstar. Shall we proceed?'

Ob'lotai 3-0 was literally being pulled apart.

A high-yield grenade detonated at the base of his battlesuit's spine, blasting the engine cells to smoking ruin. A microdec later, a powered gauntlet ripped a breach in the plexus hatch. A disruption field crackled around the oversized fist, frying the battlesuit's circuits even as the wielder forced his arm inside the XV88 and scabbled around in search of a pilot.

The Space Marine called out in surprise; he had found nothing within.

Making use of the distraction, the logistics drone sped away, roaring up into the hangar's high ceiling before gliding across to the other side. At the same instant Ob'lotai remote-fired every missile left toperative on his XV88, a last ditch attempt to shake off his killers. There was a thunderous boom as two of the warheads hit home. The rest streaked across the hangar to detonate uselessly in a dozen random locations.

Then the Space Marine with the disruption gauntlet ripped his fist up and out, tearing out the XV88's electronic guts to leave only burning scrap behind.

CHAPTER TEN

THE HIDDEN STRIKE

DAMOCLES GULF

Por Malcaor walked with a jaunty gait through the upper deck corridors of the *Dawn Pioneer*. He was still glowing from his wonderful shared experience with Tsmyen Kais in the stasis chambers.

Every so often, the empty stretches of the ship's insides would shudder, the lights flickering for a moment, and Por Malcaor would stand with his head cocked to one side, listening for screams before continuing. Now and again, he was rewarded. The sounds of anguish and pain were always a welcome treat, even to one as ancient as he. The divine acts he had wrought in the name of change were empowering; already he could feel some of his old power returning to him as his mastery of the hostform became complete.

The translation chambers were close by. Por Malcaor's host-memories indicated that the water caste's symbol readers would likely be in there, using the ship's sensor suites to zoom in on the flanks of the enemy vessels. Their mission was to decipher any Imperial scripts they detected. In the past, the locations of an enemy ship's hazard warnings and refuelling protocols had been translated and patched through to the air caste gunners mid battle, allowing firepower to be directed at the most vulnerable areas of the enemy craft – the engines and gun bays where the most volatile materials were stored. In this way did the castes complement one another even in void war.

Amongst the most gifted translators in the fleet was his quarry, Peacebringer. The magister was still active, according to the water caste's mission manifests. He was close to the next glorious offering, so close he could taste it in the air.

This time, however, he would not be alone.

A few more levels, a few more lengths of corridor, and there it was – the iris portal into the principal translation chamber. Por Malcaor took a moment to

centre himself, tucked his robes in neatly, and breathed onto the ident reader. A melodious chime announced his access protocol as clear, and the iris unfolded with a soft *whoosh*.

The magister stepped through into a large centre of operations. There were perhaps forty command thrones ranged around the consoles, but only three were occupied. On the screens positioned around the walls were displayed the flanks of the titanic Imperial warship, gothic script illuminated upon them.

Por Malcaor walked further in, a broad smile on his face and his arms wide in the gesture of all-friends-welcomed.

‘Greetings, fellow speakers of the truth!’

Not a soul looked at him, for the three water caste translators inside were striving desperately to detail as much of the Imperial rune-script as they could.

‘I believe it’s an imprecation,’ muttered a female speaker who Por Malcaor dimly remembered as Flowtide. ‘Religious syntax. It commands the reader to give respect to the flames inside.’

‘Very wise,’ commented Por Malcaor, chuckling to himself.

‘Then it contains volatile fuel, almost certainly,’ replied a voice from the other side of the translation bank. ‘They revere their machines. Some even fear them. It beggars belief.’

‘Peacebringer!’ called out Por Malcaor, walking around to spy the back of the magister’s head. ‘Old friend! How fares the war? Tsmyen Kais sends greetings from the next world.’

‘Next world?’ said Peacebringer, finally looking around. ‘What are you talking about? You are no battle translator, Water Spider. Why are you here?’

‘Only to kill you,’ said Por Malcaor innocently. ‘Nothing more than that.’

At this, the other water caste translators also looked up, their faces set in expressions of confusion that were almost comical.

‘To kill me?’ said Peacebringer, his tone dripping with scorn. ‘We have no time for your foolishness this day, Water Spider. Either contribute or disappear.’

Por Malcaor advanced upon the console banks. The broken drone he had captured in his mantle was held in his right hand, dangling like a rock in a sling. He began to swing it idly at his side, savouring the moment. ‘Do you truly believe that I am lying, Peacebringer? Are you not the same soul who so enjoyed pointing out my inability to do just that?’

‘So you have mastered basic duplicity, Water Spider. Felicitations! Now leave us to our work!’

‘Package the translation for sending now, La’Oira,’ said Flowtide quietly. ‘The high commander has need of it.’ Her companion, a youthful Por’la in practical all-purpose clothing, nodded in obedience, her hands dancing across the console.

‘Sadly, I am still unable to lie,’ said Por Malcaor as he slid, snake-hipped, between two empty chairs. ‘But the truth can set you free!’

He swung his makeshift flail up and over, the remains of the shattered drone inside it slamming down hard onto Peacebringer’s hands. They crushed his long fingers against the console desk with an audible crunch.

The translator screamed shrilly, his eyes wide with pain, terror and confusion. Flowtide and La’Oira stumbled out of their chairs, faces distorted in shock. La’Oira dived headlong for Por Malcaor and slammed into him with her shoulder, landing a swift jab from her left fist on the side of his face. Her hands scrabbled to grab his wrists as he reeled backwards, but he raised his knee into her stomach with force enough to wind her. She doubled over, and he elbowed her away with a sharp blow to the temple.

‘Feisty,’ he said. ‘You must be *vash’ya*. A pity you must die.’

There was a deafening bang as the iris door was blasted open. Smoke billowed into the room. A giant in heavy, clay-coloured armour forced his way inside. Half-hidden in clouds of charcoal grey smoke and cherry-red embers, he seemed truly monstrous.

Por Malcaor turned with a snarl, a hungry predator challenged over a recent kill. An invigorating thrill of fear passed through him as he recognised the warrior’s bulky silhouette.

He had faced a warrior such as this, long ago. It had not gone well.

The brute was truly hideous to behold. His forehead was bisected by a gnarled mass of scar tissue that pulled his eyes into a knotted scowl. He fired as he came. Two miniature rockets shot from the wide muzzle of his boxy sidearm.

Por Malcaor leaned back out of the way of the first, the unnatural curving of his torso impossibly painful for a mortal. Peacebringer’s shrill screams rose in intensity.

The second bolt struck La’Oira hard. The miniature rocket punched deep into her shoulder. It detonated with shocking force, coating the three water caste tau around her in bloody strings of matter. Flowtide was knocked back by the force of the explosion. She rebounded from a console with a loud snap of bone. Her body slumped across a command throne, then she slithered mewling to the floor. With a great effort she reached back up to the console, fingers shaking, and swiped the transit hex that would send on her team’s translation.

‘This one is mine!’ shouted Por Malcaor, stepping in front of Peacebringer protectively. He felt the hellfire roar within him, and stretched out his hands. For a moment, his fingers seemed freakishly long, their extra joints tipped with strange tubes in place of flat pads and hardened callouses.

The Water Spider smiled gleefully as multi-coloured flame jetted from his

beringed fingertips. It was pink, yellow and blue all at once, the channelled magic of the Architect far brighter and more scintillating than the paltry flames of realspace. The Space Marine intruder was engulfed by the fire, the conflagration curling after him like a living thing even as he broke right to take cover behind a console bank. Flames enveloped him head to foot.

Por Malcaor cackled in atavistic glee as the Space Marine's body *changed*, flowing like wax under a blowtorch to reveal a thing like a twisted skeletal vulture inside. The animalistic mutant squawked hideously, flapping bony wings in confusion before tumbling in a wash of nameless fluids to the ground.

The Water Spider turned back to Peacebringer, a broad smile on his face. The magister was sitting in a crumpled heap, his proud robes of office in disarray as he blanched in fear.

'I always knew you had something special about you,' said Peacebringer, speaking fast. 'Something precious and invaluable. You have clearly mastered the mind-science of the gue'ron'sha. It is quite incredible!'

At this, Por Malcaor laughed, long and wild. The mania in his voice was shocking, even to him.

'Let me explain to the aun how valuable your gifts could be,' said Peacebringer. 'I can ensure you are not seen as a disruptive influence, but as a hero. I have the contacts for it. Together we shall redefine the water caste's role in the Tau'va!'

'I think not,' said Por Malcaor, all mirth suddenly gone. He strode over to the still-smoking skeleton of the Space Marine and snapped off one of the long, tapering bones that formed the mutated wing sprouting from its back. The scorched half-thing collapsed in on itself as Por Malcaor turned back to his victim.

Peacebringer was half-standing with his back to the console, one hand pawing at an alert hex behind him whilst the other was held out in a placatory gesture.

'There is no need for this,' he said. 'I beg of you, do not do this. Let me be your servant, Por'vere! I can lie on your behalf! Think how much progress you will make. You could surpass the Golden Ambassador, and be second only to the ethereals in glory!'

Por Malcaor strode over to the magister. His prey was now grovelling on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. The Water Spider raised the mutated bone like a dagger.

Smiling, he plunged it through Peacebringer's collarbone straight down into his heart.

The magister's death scream ripped from his lungs, shrill and intense. Por Malcaor leant in close and inhaled Peacebringer's last breath as if it were sweetly-scented hookah smoke.

‘I have no more need for lies, my friend,’ whispered Por Malcaor, pushing the corpse to the floor and stepping over it to the communication console beyond. ‘I am truth incarnate.’

The prototype battlesuit shot out of the *Dawn Pioneer*’s hangar airlock like a shell from a cannon, the forces of its acceleration burst pulling at Farsight’s skin. He strained to keep his composure, eye-flicking the vane control suite in an attempt to master its subtleties before he flew headlong into a blossoming cloud of debris.

‘May I load a subroutine, high commander?’ purred Coldstar. ‘You can of course adjust and refine it as we fly. I need only a destination and a caution parameter.’

‘Make for the ship’s engines,’ managed Farsight. Coldstar reached an equilibrium, and his internal organs settled once more. The high commander composed himself, compartmentalising the battle in his mind before continuing.

‘The Por battle translation team has just sent over the optimal ingress points. Keep within silver bandings of any potential danger source.’

‘As you command,’ said Coldstar smoothly. Farsight felt a swell of appreciation. The battlesuit was already going twice the speed of any other he had piloted before.

The view that unfolded on the thrust/vector control suite was of such stark and forbidding majesty it was all Farsight could do not to turn the suit around and head back for the safety of the airlock. The swirling indigo clouds of the Damocles Gulf closed in on the edges of the panorama, filling the screen but for a narrow channel of deep black and glimmering stars crushed within immense, nebula-like thunderheads. Set against this tempestuous backdrop was a vast, crenulated spacecraft of staggeringly colossal dimensions, its jutting prow thrust forward in imperious challenge. The hideous thing was encrusted with the filth of a hundred journeys. Its arches, buttresses and giant sculptures were streaked black, the cannons bristling from every hull section darkened by heat discolouration. Its appearance carried a clear message – this macro-craft had been built for conquest alone.

It suddenly struck Farsight how alone and vulnerable he was in the face of the behemoth’s guns. Puretide’s voice swam into his thoughts, not to deliver a well-turned gem of wisdom, but to admonish him. What in the Tau’va’s name did he think he was doing?

In the distance, the Imperial ship’s aftquarters crackled with corposant, thick ropes of ghastly green lightning flickering around them. Wispy trails of some unidentifiable substance drifted back into the tempest. Clouds of gun discharge

blossomed along its flanks, the muzzle flare of titanic cannons sending tonnes of ordnance into space.

Their target, displayed on a separate viewscreen inside the battlesuit, was the *Dawn Pioneer*. The rest of the tau fleet was either too far away for the Imperials to engage effectively, or they had decided the best form of attack was a crippling strike at the fleet's vanguard.

Farsight's flagship was taking heavy fire. Explosions blossomed all along its length, stripping shield zone after shield zone from its smoothly contoured hull. Zooming, he could see the Imperial boarding torpedoes dug into the *Pioneer*'s flank. He recognised the devices from the footage of the Vespertine incursion. Each one had carried a Space Marine kill squad straight into the heart of the tau expeditionary fleet.

A communion request pinged over the cadrenet. Farsight glanced at it irritably as he swerved the battlesuit around the path of a transmotive-sized torpedo, riding out the enormous missile's wake with swift adjustments to the battlesuit's vanes.

The symbol was not that of a fire caste commander, as he expected, but a water caste magister.

'Por Malcaor,' said Farsight, blink-clicking the symbol. 'Make it quick.'

'High commander, the console I am looking at indicates you are heading for the Imperial warship.'

'Yes,' said Farsight tersely. He eye-flicked a boost program, turning away from a detonation and using it to propel him all the faster towards the vast, cliff-like hulk of the enemy ship. 'I do not intend to negotiate with them.'

'I have information that might be of use to you,' said the magister. 'Please listen.'

'Very well. Speak, and fast.'

'The Imperial battle-barge has a special type of generator within its warp drive. It is known to the Imperials as a Geller field. Deactivate it whilst the warship is still partially mistranslated from its realspace jump, and the Imperial flagship will be gutted from the inside out.'

'What? How does a water caste speaker know of such things?'

'Upon Dal'yth I worked on a decryption project that involved a similar engine. I confess I have some aptitude when it comes to understanding the workings of such devices.'

'You confess to being between spheres in the middle of a war?'

'I speak only the truth,' said Por Malcaor. 'We can but use it.'

Farsight felt the urge to nod in agreement, but stopped himself at the last moment, fearing the prototype's gestural interpreters would read it as a

command and dive sharply downwards into a cloud of shrapnel.

‘I appreciate your candour,’ he replied. ‘I had suspected an engine strike might be the best course, but had no idea their technology was so volatile.’

‘The Geller field generator is situated on the sixth level of the ship, roughly behind the third insignia plate,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘You can reach it from either flank, though you will need to penetrate deep into the vessel. Trust me. I have seen such ships before, and made a study of how best to disable their protective fields.’

‘Do not let the ethereals hear of it,’ said Farsight. ‘They do not take kindly to those who can be deemed *vash’ya*.’

‘I will tell them nothing,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘Unless they specifically ask.’

‘My thanks,’ said Farsight. ‘We shall speak again.’

He zoomed, slid, and zoomed again on the section of the Imperial craft mentioned by Por Malcaor, designating it as a priority destination.

‘New coordinates received,’ said Coldstar. ‘Altering course now.’

With new purpose flowing through him, Farsight devoted one eye to the coordination of the war effort upon the *Pioneer*, and the other to the Coldstar’s weapon systems. A fusion gun and a high-yield burst cannon. Both guns he knew like the back of his hand, and had trained with since his fourth year.

He had a warship to kill, and the requisite knowledge and weapons to do it.

Getting back alive was another matter.

Commander Bravestorm gritted his teeth as he thundered across the meditation hall’s open expanse towards the Imperial war party. Oe-dahn was close behind. Any moment now, and the killing would begin anew.

Farsight’s instruction, to repel the boarders by any means necessary, had been clear enough. Just what Bravestorm had wanted to hear, in fact.

The closest Space Marine was an officer, judging by his embellished armour and energised sword. The gue’ron’sha had his own shield raised, a thick slab of ornamented metal that harboured a force field of its own to ward off enemy firepower. Bravestorm hit him like a battering ram. The commander had expected to bowl his foe over easily, storming past him to take on the massive brute behind, but instead he glanced from the slab-like shield in a blazing discharge of energy.

Bravestorm recovered fast, sending two bolts of plasma scorching in. The Space Marine raised his shield, dissipating them in a crackle of cyan energies. Oe-dahn took advantage, hovering low to shoot out the Space Marine’s feet. The warrior went down hard. Bravestorm was already moving past, barging another gue’ron’sha aside with a shoulder charge before stabbing a plasma bolt into the

heavily armoured leader. That too was dissipated by a force field.

For a terrible moment, Bravestorm wondered if he should have waited for reinforcement after all.

Then the brute was on top of him. Bravestorm kicked out, an iridium-plated foot crashing into the charging Space Marine to send him staggering backwards. Another warrior took his place, shooting point-blank under Bravestorm's plexus hatch. The XV8's damage control suite blared, the holo-doppel's lower torso flaring red. The commander called up a preset routine and took a lunging step. The onager gauntlet came around in a wild haymaker. The nearest gue'ron'sha warrior turned his shoulder and braced. Bravestorm's punch crushed him like a beetle under the heel of a boot. Blood squirted from the cracks in his armour.

Then the leader-warrior charged, giant powered gauntlets grasping.

Bravestorm leaped backwards, plasma rifle spitting death, but incredibly the armoured giant had read his intent and dodged aside. He triggered the flamer system atop his shoulder, hoping the conflagration would drive the Space Marine back. On his adversary came nonetheless, half-turned into the inferno, the side of his face blackening even behind his massive pauldron. Bravestorm boosted high, but the leader-warrior leaped after him, swinging his outsized fist in a devastating right hook.

It connected, ripping Bravestorm's sensor head clean off.

Before the XV8 had even crashed to the ground the leader-warrior was on him, ripping away great chunks of the priceless battlesuit with his crackling disruption fists. Through the suit's vision slit, Bravestorm saw one of the Space Marines pull out a pistol weapon, its fat barrel whining to a crescendo. A violent blast of plasma hit him, and Bravestorm's plexus hatch glowed orange and white as it turned to molten slag. Through the dribbling hole, the commander could see the gue'ron'sha carrying a long-hafted banner swat Oe'dahn hard, sending the drone spinning before shooting it from the air with a bulky pistol. Then Bravestorm felt his battlesuit's legs being cut away with a powered blade, an unseen attacker hacking at the hydraulics behind his knees and ankles.

It was the leader that was the true threat. The lumbering figure was almost as large as a Crisis suit himself, clearly given incredible strength in his crude version of the Hero's Mantle. There was a hideous tearing sound, a blaring of shrill klaxons, and the front of the life support XV8 was ripped clean away.

The sight that confronted Bravestorm was a vision of tyranny, unstoppable and cruel. The monster hurled the front section of the battlesuit to one side with a roar. Hatred, pure and deadly, glimmered in the lone eye of a burned and ravaged face.

The gue'ron'sha bellowed in triumph, spittle flying from its ravaged maw.

The battlesuit hangar was lit by bright orange showers of sparks. Brother Chondraeon leaned into the grinding thrust of his chainsword, pushing it home into the Broadside warsuit's chest with the weight of his body. Scores of ripping teeth dug into the hard bulwark of the blasphemous engine's torso. A mortal man would never have been able to cut through the reinforced, many-layered composite of the machine's armour, even with a weapon as devastating as a chainsword. But Chondraeon was a Space Marine. With his strength behind it, the heirloom blade could gnaw through rockcrete.

There was another pleasing cascade of sparks as the Space Marine's saw-toothed blade dug deep into the ruined warsuit's electronic heart. Around him, his battle brothers were doing the same, seeking revenge for their fallen kin. Bursts of flame flew from the alien warsuit's core, the smell of burning electronics thick in the air.

An alert rune flared in the auspicator of Chondraeon's bionic eye. He turned, already aiming his bolt pistol, to see a glint of light in the gloom. Something was emerging from one of the alcoves – another tau warsuit, smaller than the one they had hacked apart, but still bristling with weaponry. Its chest unit was open, reminding him of a dreadnought without its sarcophagus. There was no pilot inside, yet still it lurched forward on the approach. Here was the tau's foul mockery of the machine spirit writ large.

The machine took a heavy step forward, gun systems swivelling. Three blue fires flared at the end of its weapon systems. Chondraeon took his shot anyway. His pistol kicked as a rocket-propelled bolt burst out, two of his brothers following suit nearby. From the tau warsuit, three tight columns of fire billowed towards them.

There was a triple boom as the bolts detonated. Chondraeon's own bolt hit the warsuit dead centre. It exploded within the machine's chest, causing terrible damage. Chondraeon dived to one side and covered his face, but the fiery columns roaring towards him had already joined into a cloud. They swathed him and Brother Vardae.

The heat was desperately intense. He could smell the pig-fat stench of his own features cooking to blackened meat. He grimaced through the pain. It would be a good wound, if he lived through it. He caught a glimpse of Vardae as the flame billowed past. Only a blackened skull stared back at him.

Half blind, bellowing in outrage, Chondraeon sprinted in a headlong charge towards the empty warsuit. Foul-smelling smoke was gouting from the thing's open torso. It was motionless but for the blinking of lights upon the aerial of its sensor helm. He slammed into it with pile-driver force. Driving the point of his chainsword into its open cockpit, he dug in hard, twisting it at the last moment to

prevent its teeth embedding in the engine block. A circular sweep of the blade, and the thing's delicate piloting systems were ravaged beyond repair. The tau warsuit staggered back, slamming into a bank of alcoves in which more xenos constructs lay dormant.

In the alcove behind the stricken warsuit, Chondraeon saw a winking light turn from pale white to lustrous gold.

Blasting out of its convex surround with hydraulic force came another empty warsuit. It bore Chondraeon to the floor with the force of its ejection. This one was strangely bulbous, one of its arms little more than a boxy weapon system with twin barrels. As Chondraeon fought to get an arm underneath it, the thing sent a beam of blinding energy searing out. There was a short scream from Aslau, cut off abruptly by a thud. Another battle-brother dead.

With a jolt of shock and anger, Chondraeon realised he was the last of his squad left alive.

His mind burned. With a great roar, sinews tearing in his arms, Chondraeon physically hurled the warsuit backwards, blasting it with his bolt pistol as it staggered away. The automaton was sent crashing over onto its back. The thing spasmed frantically as if every motor impulse had been triggered at once, heels thudding on the deck. A high-pitched whine came from the sensor unit embedded in its bulbous torso. Waves of strange light played across its hull, its chameleonic fields scrambled by the hit.

Chondraeon grinned fiercely as he walked forward, ignoring the pain in his face. 'Vengeance,' he said, the syllables slurred by his ravaged lips. Burned flesh crinkled, his smile dislodging flakes of ash. He revved his chainsword in anticipation of the kill.

The warsuit sat up abruptly and levelled its boxy gun-arm straight at him. There was a searing blast of light, and Chondraeon of the Scar Lords ceased to exist.

Chapter Master Caelos kicked aside the sparking remains of the disc-drone by his leg. His blood was up, after the fight in the corridor, but to his frustration there were no more foes to slay.

He peered closely at the fallen tau warsuit he and his men had beaten to the ground. His clawed power fists still crackled with bolts of disruptive electricity, the energies that allowed him to rip steel as if it were paper. To his surprise, he had felt serious resistance from whatever xenos material formed the red battlesuit's superstructure. It had taken all his strength to tear the thing open, but tear it open he had.

With the front of the warsuit's torso ripped away, he could see its disgusting electrophilic innards laid bare. Amongst a tangle of nameless devices he could

see the pilot inside. The creature had clearly been cooked alive, either by plasma blast or by the disruption fields of his gauntlet. Its ravaged flesh was scorched entirely black.

Treota came forward, broadsword raised for a coup de grace.

‘It’s already dead,’ said Caelos disconsolately. ‘Come on. We have work to do.’

He motioned his men forward with a twitch of his fist. They moved on in close formation down the corridor, Treota powering his broadsword down with an irritable sigh as he passed.

Neither Caelos nor his men saw the scorched corpse-thing in the ravaged battlesuit twitch a cracked eyelid as they left.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CALL OF THE VOID

DAMOCLES GULF

‘Engage autonomous steering,’ said Farsight. ‘I must think on strategy.’

‘Certainly, commander,’ said Coldstar smoothly. ‘For the Greater Good.’

As his battlesuit shot towards the colossal Imperial warship, Farsight took in the vista of the Damocles Gulf stretching away from him. The prototype’s panoramic control suite rendered it in astonishing resolution. Its sensors were scanning in every direction at once, the images relayed to keep a constant visual feed active on his targeting suite. The result panned in fluid response to the movements of his pupils, as vivid as if he was viewing the vastness of space with his own eyes.

Far ahead of the tau fleet, a patch of star-dotted blackness stretched away into the infinity beyond. It gave shape to the mind-numbing voidscape around him. Spiralling nebulae in the purples and yellows of livid bruises swirled around the tunnel. Ball lightning burned white and swarms of comets soared within the clouds, bulbous spires and flares of ionised gases erupting in all directions from their points of origin.

Farsight felt, just for a moment, an all-consuming wave of wonder. He thought for a microdec he could see faces out there in the swirls of colour, the grimacing visages of nightmares given form. Perhaps this was what it was like to be an air caste pilot, struggling with epic journeys of the mind as well as the body.

Suddenly the prototype veered hard to the right, avoiding the ripple of force from a passing torpedo. The titanic battleship that slid across his viewscreens brought Farsight’s thoughts crashing back to the battle.

Against the stunning backdrop of the Damocles Gulf the Imperial battleship was an impossible iceberg of metal, looming from the fog to crush the tau fleet to splinters. Its cliff-like side, growing larger by the moment, was resolving into

separate decks and hangars as the battlesuit approached.

‘High commander,’ said Coldstar. ‘We near our destination.’

Something massive shot past. Farsight took direct control of the prototype’s vector as rippling bow waves of force tossed him around like a reed boat caught in a maelstrom. He veered hard, approaching the coordinates that Por Malcaor had given him as fast as he could. Timing was critical.

The immense wall of the Imperial ship’s flank filled the control suite. Four hundred metres, then two hundred, then one.

‘Their force field is anomalous in its strength,’ said Coldstar. ‘We cannot pass through it with systems active. The chance of it scrambling my systems beyond recovery are too great for me to allow us to attempt it.’

‘But we can theoretically do so?’ said Farsight.

‘My core programming does not allow it,’ replied Coldstar ruefully. ‘I am unable to endure such a field, even should I wish to. Although an object that moves relatively slowly might pass through the force field without triggering it, it would likely destroy my systems nonetheless, and leave you stranded in space. I must turn aside. My apologies.’

‘Very well,’ said Farsight. ‘Then I have no more need of your services. Kindly power down immediately.’

‘High commander, with respect I would not recommend—’

‘Coldstar, by the authority of the Tau’va I order you to power down.’

The battlesuit’s systems winked out one by one. In a matter of moments the control cocoon was dead, lit only by the bioluminescence of the gel-filled guidance strips that lined its plexus hatch.

The suit’s momentum carried it forward on the same trajectory, just as Farsight had known it would.

A few heartbeats later there was a frisson of energy that made the high commander’s skin prickle, front to back. Farsight could not suppress a shudder. The feeling of passing through the force field was a little like being hit with an electric shock, a sick sensation like being touched in every cell at once.

Once he was sure the crossing had been made, Farsight reached out and tapped the activation sequence on the underside of the primary control console. The screens lit once more, welcome texts spooling across the primary readout as the battlesuit booted up again.

‘That was a callous exploitation of command protocols,’ said Coldstar, a hint of rebuke in her voice. ‘I believe such manipulation is unbecoming of one holding your rank.’

‘Noted,’ said Farsight, ‘but I hold that rank for a reason. We have a duty to fulfil.’

Farsight was close enough to see the timeworn fascia of the Imperial ship in all its crude glory. Its flanks were slick with nameless slime, the cicatrixes of long silver welds and the crater-like impacts of a hundred munitions impacts. It was as unlike a tau vessel as any Farsight had ever seen. Even a kroot warsphere seemed neat by comparison.

Manually pivoting the battlesuit and using its retro-thruster protocols as he approached, he rerouted engine power to the weapon systems and eye-sketched a potential frame of entry. Coldstar sent a series of stereoscopic pulses at the area he had highlighted.

‘High commander, the hull integrity at this location would be impenetrable even to a fusion gun blast,’ said the battlesuit. ‘There is only one viable vector of entry at this level.’

‘The gun port?’

‘The gun itself.’

Farsight frowned for a moment before twitching his olfactory chasm in resignation, already zooming on the colossal macro-cannon that jutted nearby. It was one of dozens of such weapons that allowed the devastating broadsides of the Imperial ships.

The prototype panned a matrix of thin laser beams across the structure. A gold symbol of entrance appeared above the framework breakdown on Farsight’s thrust/vector hex. The giant cannon’s barrel was large enough to accommodate even a state-of-the-art battlesuit.

‘Estimated time until this gun fires again?’ said Farsight.

‘Six point two microdecs by current estimates, high commander.’

‘Then let us wait.’

The battlesuit’s feet mag-locked to the outside of the battleship’s hull, hidden in the shadowed lee of the vast superstructure that surrounded the macro cannon. Farsight pulled into a crouch.

‘Two microdecs,’ said Coldstar.

Anticipating a deafening thunder of gunfire, Farsight engaged the audio cut-out and braced for the worst.

The world seemed to turn black and silent for a moment as the tremendous pressure wave of the macro-cannon firing blasted through the prototype. Were it not for the gel systems that kept its control cocoon sacrosanct, Farsight’s innards would likely have been pulped by the extreme pressure wave, but he had chosen his position wisely, and O’Vesa’s genius did the rest.

‘— — BREECH CLOSING NOW, COMMANDER — —’ came the alert on Farsight’s command suite. He reopened audio, disengaged his mag-locks and launched off. The battlesuit sprang away, pivoting elegantly to come around the

lip of the gigantic cannon.

As Farsight peered into that black cylinder, he felt icy claws of doubt push into his mind. What if the breech system voided some kind of casing after each shot, mangling his battlesuit in the process? What if the projectile had been a boarding torpedo, and he was about to emerge into a weapons deck full of heavily armed gue'ron'sha reserves? Worse still, what if the breech had a portal at the barrel's end, and it simply closed around him like an airlock? Would it keep him trapped within the giant cylinder until another warhead was loaded, ready to blast him to specks of stellar debris?

'I advise against this course, high commander,' said Coldstar. 'We should return.'

'Noted,' said Farsight, 'and overruled.' Punching the controls, he sent the prototype speeding over the gun's lip and into its barrel.

Ahead, red lights flashed as a great riveted portal slid slowly into place. Farsight ramped up the prototype's speed, keeping his extremities and gun systems tucked in close. The dim light at the barrel's end diminished, like accelerated footage of a solar eclipse. For a horrible moment, he feared he had miscalculated. Cold sweat dried on his temples, his lips, the nape of his neck. He made the battlesuit's profile as thin as possible, angling it sidelong to pass through the rapidly diminishing gap.

He did not know this suit. He did not know its shape. One error, one fin scraping against the cannon's side or its heavy inner rim, and he was as good as dead.

Then, suddenly, he was through. A microdec later the heavy circular door clanged shut behind him. There was a sense of equalising pressure, a clanking of bolts and vault-locks, and the inner door of the breech clanged open. A thin crescent of light spilled through, growing wider as the primitive Imperial mechanism readied itself for another warhead.

Farsight waited until the aperture was large enough, then burst through into the hangar beyond with a sharp exhalation of triumph. Held aloft by the prototype's sophisticated jet pack turbines, he analysed the industrial scene beyond.

The munitions deck hangar, its vaulted roof hung with great chains that clinked in the gloom, was a vision from some primitive underworld hell. Red-lit and cavernous, it was filled with a thousand labour-serfs, each bent under the whip of a cruel slavemaster. Together the slaves hauled chain-lashed munitions shells the size of transmotive cylinders into position. The prototype's atmospheric samplers conveyed the smell – a vile stench of human sweat, vomit and excrement mingled with a nauseous upswell of oil, gun lubricant and mildewy slime. Farsight wrinkled his shio'he, but did not cut off the sampler.

Shouts of alarm and fear mingled with the screams and moans of the loaders as their whip-masters noticed the battlesuit soaring above them. Naval armsmen and ratings scrambled along gantries and mezzanines, racking their shotguns as they came. Farsight leaned in his control cocoon, and the battlesuit veered away, the scattering of armsmen that managed to hit him doing little more than pockmarking its paintwork.

‘Taking incoming fire,’ said Coldstar in her cool Vior’lan voice. ‘Technically speaking,’ she added.

Farsight turned mid-air, levelling his burst cannon at the ratings and eye-triggering it active. He could hardly feel the whirr of its rotary motors within his control cocoon as he panned it across the gantry, but the sensation was welcome nonetheless. Pulse beads shot out, as bright as tracer fire. Wherever they struck the Imperial troopers the humans came apart in bursts of mangled flesh and evaporated blood.

‘No longer taking fire,’ said Coldstar. Farsight thought he detected a slight smile in her voice.

‘There is little to be gained by lingering here,’ said the high commander. ‘Let us proceed further in, on the coordinates the water caste was kind enough to supply us.’ Even as he spoke he cast his gaze across the gun decks, taking in the massive cylinders that served as the warship’s broadside cannons. So primitive, these things, yet with brute force enough to unmake whole cities.

Farsight’s presence had triggered an explosion of activity amongst the teeming humans. There were hundreds of the ship’s labourers trying to close on him now, swarming and stepping over one another as they climbed stairs and vaulted rails. Some of the serfs clambered aboard rough wheeled vehicles that accelerated towards him. Others dashed along the periphery, knives and chains gripped tight in their filth-encrusted hands. They hooted and called like kroot-apes on the hunt.

Guns chattered and barked, the occasional bullet striking his suit from below. Every section of the prototype’s damage control holo-doppel remained gold; such small-arms posed little threat, and Farsight was unlikely to receive much heavier fire. Humans had little in the way of wit, but even they were not stupid enough to fire anti-tank weaponry amongst their own munitions. A stray plasma round could send up a warhead, and that in turn could rip out a section of the battleship’s hull, leaving its guts exposed to the deadly vacuum of space.

Farsight was tempted to try doing just that, tearing a crippling wound in the battleship’s flank and watching the Imperials flail away into nothingness. Bravestorm would have done it in a heartbeat. Yet he held true to his course. If Por Malcaor was to be trusted – and from what Farsight had learned of him, the

magister always spoke plainly – he already had the intelligence he needed to cripple the ship entire, or at least scupper it long enough for the tau fleet to pass unscathed. The thrill of unbridled destruction would have to wait.

Rough metal railroads stretched from one gun vault to the next in line, each a linear structure of sleepers and iron bars that presumably conveyed menials and war materiel throughout the ship. The largest of their number led back into a cavernous interior. Farsight tapped in a new course and followed it for a moment, passing out of sight of the slave caste in the munitions bay. He manually pivoted the flight vanes of the battlesuit until his passage curved into the hangar beyond, extruding a hand from his burst cannon weapon arm and clamping it onto the side of the massive doors ahead to climb halfway up the jamb.

‘I can fly this prototype automatically, high commander,’ said Coldstar. ‘Just tell me where you wish to go.’

‘I haven’t decided yet,’ said Farsight. ‘I am following my instincts.’

Ahead, under a vast vaulted ceiling draped with chains, were a variety of different warheads and torpedoes. Each was a colossal expression of mindless brute force given form. Most of them were conventional munitions – with the exception of their sheer size – but there were also empty versions of the conveyance torpedoes that had borne gue’ron’sha shock troopers over to the tau fleet. One drill-tipped nosecone was hinged open to reveal the spartan passenger compartment within.

Squint-zooming his sensor suite, Farsight took a spectroscopic reading and radiation analysis of as many of the warheads as he could. At the heart of the munitions hangar was a steel and glass framework containing a comparatively advanced-looking warhead. It had an energy signature so strong it made all the others seem pale by comparison. No doubt O’Vesa would find the data illuminating. Human icons of warning were stamped across the framework – he recorded them, too, as more fodder for the water caste translators.

There was a harsh shout from one of the hangar’s attendants, a wild-haired female that pointed up at him as he hung one-handed from the side of a vault door. A human skull, borne high on anti-gravitic motors, hovered into his sensor line. The bionic optics systems that filled its empty sockets whirred and clicked as they extended a tiny telescopic lens. Fearing a weapons discharge would trigger bedlam, the high commander extended a manipulator hand with a series of hydraulic clicks, caught the skull, and crushed it in his fist. He let the shards of bone and bionics fall as he boosted backwards, angling left and heading down the cyclopean hallway that led towards the spacecraft’s heart.

The more Farsight piloted the prototype battlesuit, the more he realised that

speed was amongst its foremost assets. The Imperial ship had been built as if to house giants; given the Imperial preoccupation with bulk, perhaps that was once the case. Either way the sheer scale of the ship gave him a clear path through the hallways of the spaceship, hurtling over one straggling group of cybernetically ravaged humans after another before they could so much as twitch a trigger finger. On occasion one of the ship's guards would raise a gun of some sort and take a shot, usually pistol weapons that had no real chance of compromising the prototype's integrity. Thus far he had encountered no gue'ron'sha, though he had seen the Scar Lords' zig-zag and skull insignia many times over. Presumably they had been in such a hurry to attack that they had little in the way of warriors to spare for defence.

Puretide had said it best. *Only the fool discards his shield, the better to wield the sword.* Farsight dwelt on that for a moment as the prototype battlesuit shot down yet another buttressed corridor. Was he the sword, this day? Or in deserting his own fleet, had he instead thrown away the shield? Either way, he was fairly sure that he was the fool in question.

The battlesuit flew smoothly on, making its way to the section of the Imperial warship that Por Malcaor had specified. The corridors were becoming narrower, more heavily lined with arches and buttresses. Farsight found several vault-like doors locked against his passage, but rather than being sealed all the way around, they were locked at a single point – that area furthest from the rudimentary hinges on which the door swung open. Under a sustained blast from his fusion gun, the locks ran like wax under a blowtorch. Then he would simply extrude a hand and, with the battlesuit's foot planted on the outside of the jamb, yank open the door. It was so like the humans to rely on weight and solidity rather than advanced thought – and so like them to be easily bypassed.

Ducking through the third such vault-like door, Farsight was forced to go at a crouch, the prototype's vanes brushing up against the dank and dripping ceiling. The radiosopic analysis of the battlesuit's sophisticated sensors had concluded that his target zone was up ahead. It was an engine that pulsed with extremely unusual energies, the readouts of which were unclassifiable. Farsight frowned, taking a sample reading before pressing on.

Further into the twisting guts of the Imperial vessel his battlesuit was forced into a waddle, his fusion gun held out in the manner of an underground explorer holding out a torch. Another vault door blocked his path, this one emblazoned with a large skull and cog symbol. Farsight was forced to burn away several locking mechanisms with his fusion blaster before he could finally pull it open. His quarry was nearby.

The corridor beyond was lit with flickering sconces, each held by a statue

representing one of what Farsight presumed to be the Imperium's holy men. The gangway was large enough to accommodate a Space Marine, but little more.

'To proceed further, you would need to disembark,' said Coldstar. 'I cannot in good conscience allow that to occur.'

'I have come this far,' said Farsight. 'Do you have a contingency pulse pistol in the control cocoon?'

'Of course,' said the suit. 'All up-to-date iterations have a sidearm in case the pilot is forced to eject into hostile territory.'

'Good. Present it, please.'

'I am not sure I should let you into a scenario where you should need to use it,' protested Coldstar. 'My programming is incomplete, but that runs contrary to my core directive of keeping you safe and active. Preliminary scans indicate large and powerful life forms in the chambers beyond. Likely they are guardians.'

'Either that, or the only operatives robust enough to work this engine Por Malcaor speaks of. Believe me, I do not like it. But ask yourself this – why would you be equipped with a sidearm of any kind, unless it was intended to be used in extreme circumstances?'

The suit said nothing.

'Kindly disengage the control interface, release the plexus hatch and allow me to debark. My thanks in advance.'

'Acknowledged, high commander,' said the battlesuit. 'Although I can be of more service with systems active than powered down, given past experience I can only assume that override will be your next recourse.'

'I had considered it.'

The plexus hatch hissed and, with a barely audible click, opened smoothly to allow Farsight out. Its interior screen systems still glowed and blinked, casting cyan rectangles of light across the corridor grilles beyond.

The high commander eye-clicked the tiny icon of a pistol that had appeared in the far corner of the master console. Almost immediately a bulky pulse sidearm, rectangular in cross section, popped out from a hidden compartment under his seat with a faint hiss of cryogenic gases. Farsight slid a hand around the weapon's guard and picked it up. The thing was almost painfully cold to the touch – likely a design wrinkle O'Vesa had yet to iron out – but its weight in his palm was reassuring nonetheless.

Peering under the plexus hatch, Farsight scanned the area. An empty corridor, ribbed with vaulted stanchions. The growling thump of engines came from up ahead.

'With silence comes revelation,' Farsight muttered under his breath. 'I look forward to seeing this ship becalmed.'

He dropped from the opened hatch to the ground, rolling with his landing so his horn-edged toes made only a soft clang on the metal grilles. He intended to come up with the pistol in both hands, but caught one of the buckles on his shoulder straps on the metal grid of the rusted iron walkway. Fighting to regain his balance, he fumbled the pistol, the bulky thing pivoting on his trigger finger before he scrabbled it back into a firm grip.

‘Tau’va’s sake,’ he swore to himself, his heart thundering in his chest. He looked back at the prototype battlesuit, but Coldstar wisely said nothing.

Ahead, an amber warning light flickered and strobed, the faint chime of a breach alarm audible in the distance. Farsight could not help but imagine the bulky silhouette of a Space Marine warrior rounding the corner at any moment, automatic gun raised for the kill.

Padding forward carefully with his gun held diagonally to one side, the high commander took cover behind a stanchion. He darted his head out, then back. There was nothing in the adjoining corridor but a thin mist and a revolving alert light casting shafts of amber illumination to light the undersea green of the metallic framework.

The place smelt strange, a distinct tang of resinous compounds giving the atmosphere a strange heaviness. Farsight could not place it. Some human invention, no doubt. It made the exposed skin of Farsight’s face and bare scalp itch, but with a slow, meditative breath, he put the urge to scratch it out of his mind. There was no way he was releasing his grip on the pistol, not even for a microdec.

Something small and pallid moved at the end of the corridor, hovering at head height. Farsight stifled a shiver as he realised what it was. Another human skull, given macabre animation by gravitic motors.

He had seen such things before, upon Dal’yth, even recovered a damaged one himself. The earth caste analysis teams had reported that the hover-skulls were not artificial constructs built to intimidate, as Farsight had first thought, but actual human remains, usually discoloured with age and marked with runes of long service. The thought still filled Farsight with revulsion.

The scientist Pryfinger had posited in his treatise *The Fabricated Ghost* that the Imperium utilised the skulls of trusted servants to create drone equivalents, believing they should serve after death and long into the future until they finally crumbled to dust. It had made for unsettling reading. How could a race so moribund, so backward, have amassed such galaxy-spanning power?

A thin red beam flickered out from the crude bionic in the skull’s right socket. Farsight took his shot just as the beam played over him. The pulse pistol’s bead of energy hit the thing in the nasal cavity, blasting the back of its head apart and

sending a skullcap of polished chrome spinning away amidst a shower of sparks. The smell of burning bone mingled with the unpleasant scent of the mist as the skull's shattered remains rattled like hail upon the metal walkway grid.

Too late, thought Farsight. No doubt the bio-drone had already sent an alert signal.

The high commander picked up his pace, turning his feet so the hard chitin of his nails made the least possible noise on the metal grates. The hot energy of the hunt burned through him, a genetic legacy from his caste's ancestors on the savannah of T'au. He had never felt more alert. Come to that, he had never felt more vulnerable. He glanced back the way he had come, but the reassuring silhouette of the prototype had been left long behind.

Farsight passed junctions, crossroads and walkways across precipitous drops, but the ever-present sound of the ship's engines was easy to follow. The strange mist was growing thicker, likely a by-product of their industry themselves. The sheer noise level of the engines was becoming uncomfortable.

Then Farsight rounded a corner, and all but collided with a nightmare made flesh.

The thing was a monstrous cyborg twice his height, silhouetted by the strange green fires of the engine furnace it was feeding with a pile of translucent amber coals. It turned to stare down at Farsight in confusion. On its barrel chest was a grimy bronze breastplate, etched upon its dented surface an image of an Imperial saint holding back a concentric ring of monsters. The scars of gross cranial surgery lined the cyborg's forehead, and it had a wide metal shovel in place of one of its hands. Farsight caught a whiff of spoiled meat and crude oil as it peered myopically at him through the dirty green lenses of a rudimentary gas mask.

The cyborg made a grunting noise and pulled back a balled fist. Farsight was already moving, stepping in close. His intent was to fire his pulse pistol up through its jutting jaw, but he met the thing's knee instead. It crunched into his chest with battering-ram force. The high commander staggered back into a stanchion, winded and gasping for breath.

The cyborg cast about for a weapon. Behind it, pipework rose around a massive column into the mist-shrouded gloom; to Farsight's pain-addled mind, it seemed like some vast evil tree clad in parasitic vines. Strange human runes glowed around a candle-lit porthole halfway up the vast trunk.

Picking up a heavy wrench that no tau could have lifted, the cyborg stamped forwards. Farsight put the pain in his chest to one side and took his shot, aiming for between its eyes. It dodged and hit it in the side of the neck instead. The creature gave a gurgling, muffled scream. Then it brought the massive wrench

down hard. Reading the blow, Farsight dived left. The tool thumped into the gangway with a shriek of ripping metal, embedding deep. Farsight took another shot, this time hitting the cyborg in the ribs.

The thing barely flinched, whipping its shovel-claw around fast. Farsight recoiled too slowly, and it backhanded the pulse pistol from his grip. The fingers of his right hand were almost ripped from their knuckles. A flare of pain consumed his mind. Some of the digits were almost certainly broken.

Farsight rolled away, stood, and ran through the mist towards the thumping, green-lit furnace beyond. Some primal sense flared; in his mind's eye he could almost feel the cyborg's wrench coming down to snap his spine. Sickly light flickered ahead. Farsight leaped, feeling a faint shift in the air as the wrench ploughed through the mist behind him.

The commander caught one of the pipes left-handed and scrambled up, his right hand flaring bright with pain as he looped it like a crude hook around an exposed iron ridge. He wedged himself in close, stepping up on the lower pipes to get even higher. The metal was near red-hot; he could feel the soles of his feet burning.

The cyborg's shovel-claw slammed into the pipes a finger's breadth from Farsight's neck. Scalding steam jetted out. Agony flared across his mind as the side of his face was consumed in boiling vapour.

He fought to focus. Farsight had once climbed the frozen facia of Mount Kan'ji blindfold, having memorised every potential handhold and crevice. He could do this. Except this time he had only glimpses of the climb in question, his skin was alight with raw pain, and the fingers of one hand were broken.

There was a muffled roar. Farsight jumped on reflex, reaching for a lateral pipe. The cyborg smashed the wrench into the cylinders below, narrowly missing Farsight's legs. Scalding smoke hissed out, strangely dizzying in its resinous scent.

The commander caught the pipe above left-handed, swinging with the momentum to hook a leg over the far side and clumsily pull himself atop it. In the process he had used his right hand, the skin torn away by the rough sandpapery texture of the pipe. After a moment of horrible anticipation, the pain from his broken fingers doubled. He cried out. The furnace beneath him growled as if in response, its roasting heat threatening to consume him altogether. Behind him was a circular porthole, human runes glowing around it. Two flickering candles were dislodged as Farsight fought to get his balance. They dropped, sputtering, to the floor.

A glimpse of dirty lenses to the right, then the wrench came in again. Farsight let himself fall backwards, keeping his arms and his legs locked around the pipe.

He clung to its underside, hoping against hope his instincts were correct.

The cyborg gave a bellow of rage as its wrench missed Farsight, smashed into the porthole instead, and drove into the workings of the engine behind.

Klaxons blared as the furnace below Farsight roared like an enraged beast. A blasting column of green flame shot out, engulfing the cyborg in a flesh-melting inferno. The creature screamed, the sound seeming far too shrill for something so large. It fell sizzling to the ground. The scent of burned fat, mingled with the strongly-scented miasma, threatened to overwhelm his senses altogether.

Every nerve in Farsight's body was alight, the escalating pain swamping his mind. He glimpsed winged figures bursting from the flames to dance in the flickering shadows below, frolicking as they turned the fallen cyborg to no more than a gruesome pile of sludge. Hallucinations, he thought, brought on by the sensation of slowly being cooked alive.

He had to focus.

Desperately pulling himself along the pipes to safety, Farsight saw two more shovel-armed cyborgs stomp around the edges of the circular engine column. He grimaced. All it would take was one glance upward, and he would be crushed like an insect amongst the pipes. An ignominious death, and one that could doom the whole tau fleet.

The first of the creatures came around the front of the engine cylinder, reaching out with its shovel-claw to push the furnace front closed with a clang. Steam hissed in two jets from the ripped-open pipe above its head as the engine's pressure built up once more.

The cyborg looked up, and saw Farsight clinging to the pipes.

It hooted in triumph, picking up a rivet gun from its belt and aiming right at him. The feed belt clanked active.

Then a winged, black-limbed creature coalesced from the shadows and dived headlong at the cyborg, burying its beak-like face in its throat. The rivet gun clanked loud, firing spasmodically into the air as a second winged creature rose up from nowhere to wrap its arms around the cyborg's cabled neck and bite hard into its spine.

Growling, the third giant backhanded the winged creature on its comrade's back with its shovel-claw. To Farsight's muddled vision, the alien seemed to dissipate into inky black smoke. The fumes escaping from the furnace were taking away his surety.

Another of the midnight-skinned creatures darted from the darkness to rake its claws across the eyes of the second cyborg. The giant bellowed in pain, staggering away and lashing out with its shovel as a fourth creature dropped from above to wrap its wings around the cyborg's head like a predatory bat.

Farsight fought down a wave of crippling nausea at the sight. Something was very wrong about these creatures, these stowaways that had hidden amongst the pipes. The green light of the furnace clung to them, outlining them and making them seem to glow and shimmer in the dancing light. The high commander felt the urge to reach for his pistol, but it was still down there somewhere, likely damaged beyond repair.

He had to get out.

The second of the masked giants went down under a flurry of black wings. The furnace boomed nearby, as if in appreciation. A halo of strange colours flared at the edges of Farsight's mind. Was there something in there, some entity or drug that had hijacked his perceptions? He banished the thought; it had no place in a logical mind.

It was too much. A swelling migraine of pain and fear mingled at the edge of Farsight's vision. His grip weakened, and he fell, bouncing bodily from one pipe to another before slumping over a large dusty conduit half-buried in the ground.

For a moment, Farsight saw Shadowsun's face. She was gazing up at him with undiluted trust and respect. Then her eyes widened, and her expression became that of utmost hatred. She raised a pair of fusion blasters and pointed them right at him. He could not move aside, for here he was a statue of stone, rigid and immobile. Millions of fire caste voices were united in a great roar of approval as she blasted him to pieces.

Now Farsight was a wax effigy, no more than a hand's length in height and surrounded by flickering autocandles. Looming around him was a circle of underlit human faces, the low amber light rendering them grotesque. They were chanting the name of the Greater Good, over and over. One of their number was bare-chested, the image of a many-armed, faceless deity carved into his torso in a series of ragged scars.

Farsight's soul spiralled through a sea of multi-coloured energy, crashing down on a dusty world of broken relics that filled him with a sense of impending doom. Priceless treasures lay scattered in the marble dust. Suddenly a massive, sabre-like blade grew warm in his hand. A sense of thirsting malevolence radiated up from its strange metal. His eyes fell upon a hexagrammatic shape nearby, a medallion hung around the neck of a saintly statue. Somehow, it called to him.

He grasped it, and awoke.

Shaking off the hallucination, Farsight forced himself to sit up. Bones ground within his chest, and his right hand was a pulsing ball of pain. His breath came in

ragged gasps as he got onto all fours, then snatched his wounded hand up, stumbling upright into the clinging mist at the edge of the engine chamber.

Strange shapes moved in the corners of his vision. They had gangling anatomies and grotesque, elongated faces, a demented artist's sketches of childhood monsters come to life.

Nothing more than a new alien race, Farsight told himself. Creatures that had infested the crawlspaces and shadows of the Imperial ship. Why they attacked the cyborgs he did not know, but in doing so they had bought him time. He had to get back to the prototype battlesuit, or he would die here, a bloodstained curio to be hosed off the deck by whatever clean-up crew put this place back together.

Trusting to instinct, Farsight stumbled through the sweltering miasma around the periphery of the circular chamber, always keeping the furnace heat to his right. Before long the entrance way glowed on the far side of the wall, its jamb lined with flashing alert lights. The corpse of a fourth cyborg creature lay ravaged in the archway, gas mask ripped away and eyes torn from its sockets. An automated door butted up against the cadaver over and over, stubborn hydraulics shunting its bulk back and forth.

'Hazard,' squawked a primitive loudspeaker on the doorjamb panel. 'Hazard. Empyric fire detected. Incense levels critical. Geller engine malfunction. Quarantine Extremis. Hazard. Hazard.'

Farsight jumped over the massive corpse and limped down the corridor, his eyes darting independently as he frantically searched for a weapon. He heard a raking, scratching sound behind him. He had fought alongside kroot enough times to recognise the sound of sharp claws on metal.

No time to turn. Speed and swiftness of thought were the only things that could save him now. His feet, scorched by the pipes in the engine room, were competing with the broken bones in his chest and his broken right hand to see which body part could send the most intense pain signals. He clamped down on the agony hard, binding it with logic, compartmentalising it. He could listen to his body's signals later. But not now.

The corridors flashed red around the high commander, klaxons blaring as he retraced his steps. Half-blind with pain and confusion, he could not remember which of the junctions and crossroads led back the way he had come, but there was no time to dwell on it. There was no amber light to signal him to safety. Everything was now bathed in red and black. He could hear screeching in the distance, the sound of predators on the hunt.

On and on he went, limping as fast as he could through the labyrinthine bowels of the strange Imperial spaceship. The screeching and scrabbling seemed to be getting closer with every corner he turned.

Exhausted, his lungs burning, Farsight took a left at the next crossroads and pressed himself against the wall. He was too experienced a hunter to truly hope that the aliens pursuing him would run past, oblivious. Still, even a slim chance was better than nothing.

The distant shrieks faded away, replaced by the solid clang of taloned feet on metal. By their steady pace, the creatures were in no hurry. A garbled strain of something that could have been laughter threaded between the blare of klaxons.

The air grew cold, the taste of ozone heavy on Farsight's tongue. He looked around desperately, hoping to see something, anything, he could use as a weapon. Not for the first time, Farsight found his thoughts drawn to his bloodstained bonding knife, left enshrined on a tranquillity stand in his quarters. Leaving it behind had seemed a necessary symbolic measure, but right now, it seemed like the height of foolishness. He bunched his fists, and cleared his mind as best he could.

A clawed foot, jointed like that of a hunting bird, appeared in Farsight's line of sight. Then an elongated, fleshy snout appeared, quivering and black. Wide nostrils dilated as the rest of the thing's head pushed around the corner, its matted red mane slick with nameless fluids. The creature grinned, exposing a mouth full of nothing but incisors.

'Little morsel,' it said, quite clearly. Then it shrieked, a cackling laugh, and came around the corner with its maw wide open.

THE IMMATERIUM

Amongst the roiling clouds of raw emotion, a presence stirred. The entity saw a light, glowing and fierce – a lantern and a portal both. It fixed one glowing red eye upon it.

A fresh breach, there for the taking amongst the swirling clouds of nothingness. Already the lesser ones flocked around it, flapping their weak little wings as they tried to force themselves through. Few furies had the essence-power to rip their way through into the flesh-world. Few were anything but insects by comparison.

The entity dived, shrieking in triumph. No doubt its kindred would hear the cry, and come in close, pushing through in their turn. It cared little. By then, it would have glutted itself on hot flesh and raw agony, and become strong in the sight of the gods. Either that, or the portal would close, healing up like a wound or a sutured mouth. If the portal closed before the predator could reach it, it would vent its frustration on the lesser ones, tearing apart every entity it could find. If the breach closed soon after the predator had passed through, all the better; it would hunt alone and unrivalled.

Soaring towards the flickering portal, the entity folded its wings, spitting red-hot bullets into the lesser ones that flocked like moths around the lambent portal. The wretches shrieked in abject fear as the creature dived through, scattering them like sparrows.

For a moment, the predator knew nothingness.

Then it felt its thoughts coalescing and crystallising once more. Its mortal form was hardening into metal and white hot anger. Piston-driven claws flexed as it ripped its way through the veil, its mechanisms and hull growing ever more solid as it emerged from the transdimensional chrysalis-stuff of the breach.

Nearly there. Nearly time to hunt.

The predator felt a strange gelid substance around it, and pushed through, its jet furnaces driving it forward towards the glittering black shroud ahead. There were silhouettes there, shapes in the darkness. The outlines of mortal ships. The shapes of prey.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PREDATOR AND PREY

DAMOCLES GULF

The stalking, long-limbed alien ran screaming towards Farsight along the red-lit corridor, its mouth wide and gangling arms outstretched. The high commander stepped out to meet it, adopting the stance of the Shielding Fire. Just as the creature raised its claws to strike, there was a blaze of light – the distinctive colour and eye-searing brightness of a pulse round. The creature was bowled over hard. It dissipated, dissolving into nothingness like a drop of ink in water.

‘Commander,’ said a thumb-sized drone hovering in the corridor. Its rectangular tip was smoking slightly, a recharge light winking red halfway along its length. ‘We should leave.’ The drone was the same clean white as Coldstar’s exterior.

‘I – I could not agree more,’ stammered Farsight. ‘My thanks, little friend.’ He took a deep breath, casting around for signs of danger. ‘And remind me to thank O’Vesa for his overprotective streak.’

‘If we achieve rendezvous with Coldstar, you can do so yourself.’

The drone carved around in a tight circle and zipped back along the corridor. Farsight sighed in relief and followed close behind, casting glances over his shoulder with every few paces. He had already mustered four decent, rational explanations as to what manner of phenomenon his destruction of the Imperial engine had triggered. Somehow, none of them rang true.

He would be very glad indeed to leave.

‘Then check it again!’ roared Epistolary Vaethosis, wiping a trail of blood from his nasal cavity with the back of his ceramite gauntlet and flicking it onto the deck. ‘I am telling you, there has been an empyric breach! You translated in haste, and now we will all pay the price!’

The naval bridge of the Imperial flagship was alive with activity, the sweaty

stink of human desperation mingling with the acrid tang of electrical fires and the coiling scents of protective incense. In dozens of alcoves around the bridge's periphery, half-human cyborgs plucked with bony fingers at the cogitator banks and valve arrays they were joined to via ribbed interface tubes.

Only three Scar Lords stood amongst the naval personnel and Chapter serfs thronging the bridge – the Techmarine Tarrajaeo, custodian of the battle-barge's mighty machine spirits; the decorated Captain Aortura of the Eighth; and the psyker Vaethosis, engaged in bellowing imprecations at any of the naval staff that met his gaze.

The ship's forecaptain, a uniformed senior named Harrow, was the current focus of the Librarian's volcanic ire. The starfarer's usual suave demeanour had been reduced to pallid and quivering palsy by the sheer intensity of the battle-brother staring down at him.

'The Geller fields are still intact, my lord,' stammered Forecaptain Harrow. 'I checked them myself. We rode out the translation without sustaining harm.'

'They must have taken damage in the firefight,' said Vaethosis through gritted teeth.

'Sire, no recorded tau weapon could penetrate that far into the ship. The rear of the ship is still clad in empyric caul, admittedly. That sometimes happens with so swift a translation in this region of the Eastern Fringe. But the chapter master's orders were highly specific. He himself gave us blessings as to the sanctity of our crossing.'

'I tell you, there has been a warp breach. I can smell it. This ship is infected.'

'The *Scabbard*'s warp drives have functioned without baleful incident for sixteen years,' said Harrow, smoothing the front of his uniform with shaking hands. 'I have been upon the bridge for every one of them, and I do not intend to abandon ship purely on the word of a passenger. Even if he be an Adeptus Astartes.'

'Forecaptain Harrow,' said Epistolary Vaethosis, his voice a dangerous hiss. 'I am telling you this ship is lost, and that empyric manifestations now stalk its corridors. I have seen them. It matters not how. Talk back to me once more, and I will break your neck.'

At this, the Librarian spun on his heel and pointed a finger at Aortura of the Eighth. 'Captain Aortura, I charge you with containment of the breach. This ship is doomed. We must salvage what we can, evacuating as many of our brethren as possible. Tarrajaeo,' he said, turning to the Techmarine nearby, 'you will thrice-bless the saviour vessels we will use to navigate the gulf. First, you will collaborate with this waste of skin we have for a forecaptain. We will not dishonour this grand ship by abandoning it without first taking a grave toll on

these xenos scum.'

'Then you are thinking of using the vessel to confound the enemy fleet?' said Aortura.

'He is thinking of using it to tear them apart,' said Tarrajaeo dully. 'Overloading the nova reactors, and crippling their fleet with the resultant electromagnetic pulse.'

'Not so,' said Vaethosis, 'for that would disable our own ships as well, and leave us stranded. We will use this ship as a weapon, plunging it into the midst of the enemy fleet and piercing their heart. By the time their retaliations trigger a total detonation, our saviour craft will be long gone.'

Tarrajaeo shook his head in disbelief. 'Massively destructive. But it could work.'

'Do we not need Caelos' verification for such a ploy?' asked Aortura.

Vaethosis snorted blood. '*Chapter Master* Caelos has decided to lead a team of ten brothers into the midst of enemy territory, with no way of ascertaining his desires.' He wiped his lip once more, his gauntlet streaked with crimson. 'We must act in his name. We have no option but to devise strategy on his behalf, and fight with every company and asset at our disposal. We cannot act as small-minded tacticians who can only react to the ebb and flow of war.'

For a moment, the tapping of frenzied servitor fingers was the only sound upon the bridge. Aortura met Vaethosis' eye for a long moment. The feeling of electric charge in the air was palpable.

'Very well, Epistolary,' said Aortura, looking away. 'In Caelos' absence, we shall follow your lead. I shall quarantine the infected decks and order any saviour craft that may be compromised to be destroyed.'

Vaethosis nodded, just once.

'Steersman Odaline,' said Harrow, his voice hollow. 'You heard the Epistolary's orders. Set course for collision with the leading tau craft. And may the Emperor save our souls.'

Farsight's battlesuit shot from the gun hangar at high speed. The prototype accelerated, gathering enough momentum to pass through the Imperial force field inactive before surging back to life again and pulling away.

Behind it was a scene of utter pandemonium. The hangar had been hit by a tau missile strike, and was alight from the inside. So were the engine decks that Farsight had passed through on his way back to the ship's flank. He had kept one step ahead of the strange flames that were spreading through the ship's interior, all but ignored by the human crew desperately trying to put them out. That too had been strange, but he was not one to refuse the gift most needed.

As Farsight had retraced his passage through the ship, peculiar shadows had darted through the conflagrations with increasing frequency. There had been far more of the stowaway aliens on board than he had first thought. They were making use of the destruction Farsight had left behind to launch their own invasion, it seemed; either that, or he had accidentally triggered an uprising of some Imperial thrall-race.

The cold vastness of space was almost comforting after his ordeal in the corridors. Behind him, the aftquarters of the Imperial battleship were swathed in tendrils of greyish light that trailed and danced as if carried by undersea currents. Multi-coloured coronas flickered out into the void, curling into strange symbol-like shapes that Farsight could not bring himself to look at for too long.

Farsight injected another course of anaesthetic stimulants into his system via the prototype's damage control suites, and thought of Por Malcaor. Did the magister have any conception of the strange consequences that his advice had triggered? And if so, how had he got such niche information? The water caste were known for their ability to eke out data from a network of informers that spanned a hundred different races and more, often without the informants knowing about it. But an agent as blunt as the Water Spider?

Farsight's mind felt cluttered with questions, the promise of revelation just out of reach. There was something strange behind all this. The Imperium's ambush had such lethal timing there had to be some attributing factor. Perhaps, in gleaning information about the capabilities of gue'ron'sha battleships from their Imperial sources, the water caste had somehow given away the route of the tau's likely crossing of the gulf. More likely, thought Farsight, that one of the empire's own – an insider, or a gue'la spy – had passed on the information, or even provided a homing beacon of some sort. The advisors at the Elemental Council bore another examination, especially the human, Thransia Delaque. Had she not previously served in the Imperial armed forces on Dal'yth?

The prototype spiralled back across the kilometres-wide gap between the Imperial and tau ships on autopilot. Now he had grown to trust Coldstar's expertise, he had found her flight was as graceful as a Fio'taun windglider. The battlesuit's systems were highly advanced, intelligent enough to detect and avoid the oncoming projectiles and stellar debris of the broadside battle. Farsight was more than grateful of the reprieve. His body throbbed with pain in a dozen different locations, and with several bones in his right hand broken, there was no way he could fly with any real dexterity. He was reminded starkly of the rust storms of Arkunasha. He still bore the scars of that desert battle on his fingertips – and in his mind, come to that.

Around Farsight, the majesty of the intensifying ship-to-ship battle was

something to behold. The tau armada was thickening its firepower as new craft came into engagement distance, each new group of vessels a small fleet in its own right. The Imperial battleship was listing, now, the unfolding disaster of its engine decks sending it veering slowly towards the tau vanguard.

Then Farsight felt cold realisation hit him. The titanic battleship was coming about deliberately. The damage to its centre line had lulled the tau into thinking they had crippled it, and perhaps they had, inside and out. But by the look of it, the ship's captain was intending to veer into the path of the tau fleet, presumably even inserting itself between the *Dawn Pioneer's* aftquarters and the prows of the rest of the armada to maximise the potential of its cannons. There it would right itself and level a broadside in both directions at once, simultaneously raking the *Pioneer* and a dozen vessels on the other side.

Farsight flicked his gaze across the command and control suite, navigating the unfamiliar layers of the prototype's system as he tried to open a tight-beam channel to the air caste. With so many clashing energies roiling through the space around him, however, he was getting little more than static.

Unnoticed on the distribution hex that showed the Imperial battleship, a cloud of strange forms burst shrieking from the shimmering fog around its aftquarters. Amongst the winged creatures was something huge and black, with a heart of fire. It plummeted straight down for a moment, then unfurled its jagged pinions and took off in pursuit.

Commander Bravestorm lay absolutely still. Every nerve in his body was screaming as if freshly burned, but he was quite used to a wide spectrum of agonies. With the gue'ron'sha still nearby, playing dead was his only hope.

His limbs were the worst, as ever. He mentally pushed their flaring, crippling hurt away, flattening it with the act of recognition – in telling his body he was aware of the sensation, and that he would learn from it, he made a kind of peace with it. He slid the screaming pain to one side of his mind, focusing his conscious thought instead on the hatred he felt for the gue'ron'sha that had done this to him. He then folded the slab of pain away, opening his conscious thoughts to the Greater Good and what it demanded of him. Then he concentrated on how his revenge could be aligned with those goals. Easy causal links to dwell upon, and powerfully distracting.

He folded the pain a third time, thinking of the friends he had left behind on Dal'yth, and then a fourth, thinking of the Imperium's bullish reconquest of the enclaves on the other side of the Damocles Gulf. Soon the agony in his limbs had been reduced to a tiny mental sculpture, compartmentalised and placed to one side.

He then did the same with pain from his exposed face, folding away the tiny angular structures of consciousness and placing them alongside the four that represented the pain in his limbs. He repeated the process with the searing, burning sensation in his chest. Divide, compartmentalise and nullify. It was a process he had taught himself after Blackthunder Mesa, and one he intended to teach to his fellow casualties of the Tau'va.

Should he survive.

One eyelid opened the barest sliver, feeding another wedge of input into his mind with which to marginalise his agony. Concentrating hard, Bravestorm could see one of the departing gue'ron'sha was still looking back his way as his squad passed out of the corridor and into the section beyond. He imagined hurling the tiny, jagged sculptures of pain at the intruder's back – using them as weapons with which to cut the Imperials to pieces.

One day, he told himself. One day.

Then the gue'ron'sha were gone. Over the ringing tinnitus of his missing ears, he could dimly hear their footsteps, heavy and solid, but receding.

Time to get to work.

'Suit,' he croaked softly. 'Suit.'

A thick mixture of phlegm and blood gargled in his throat as he spoke. He hated using a battlesuit's vocal control systems; since the advent of optical scanner technology, he had thought it a hopelessly outdated tool for pilots that were reassured by the sound of their own commands. Besides, since Dal'yth his flesh-voice had been that of a dying soldier, each word uttered without his XV8's relay a feeble death rattle rather than a stentorian imperative. Only with tremendous effort could he make himself understood.

'Suit.'

Nothing happened. He swallowed hard, a flaring knot of pain sent to join its fellows at the edge of his mind.

'Suit!'

A dim light flashed on the torn plexus hatch as the iridium XV8's voice recognition subroutines finally began to work.

'Vocal link re-established.'

'Thank the Tau'va,' breathed Bravestorm. The effort of simply speaking was incredible. 'Mantle breach,' he panted. 'Pilot severely wounded.'

A red light winked slowly on the control suite that formed the inside of the plexus hatch. The outside edges were badly mangled, but it appeared the core systems were at least partially active.

The image of a tiny blue med-drone appeared, a flickering hologram distorted and lined by some interior glitch.

‘Yes,’ said Bravestorm. ‘Three at least. And fast. Open a link to commander-level cadrenet.’

The pain-sculptures were unfolding within his mind, slowly and balefully, growing like jagged fungus as the act of talking threatened to send his chest into spasm. Black spots danced at the edge of his vision.

He summoned what was left of his strength.

‘Authorisation ident Shas’O Dal’yth Ko’vash Kha’drel,’ he panted. ‘Engage stasis chamber separation in rank order. Initiate evacuation. Situation critical.’

The jagged shapes of pain unfolded, blossoming and joining together. Then their cumulative agony hit Bravestorm like a hurricane of blades, and he was lost.

The battlesuit emitted a sensor warning, an insistent chime accompanied by a flashing hex screen that hovered on Farsight’s peripheral vision. Something was pursuing him. He eye-flicked the hex wider and squinted; reading his expression, the prototype zoomed in.

The craft in pursuit was unusual in the extreme, more like a mythical beast cast in metal than a conventional aircraft. He caught a glimpse of mighty segmented wings, long triangular pinions swept forward in a fan. Farsight frowned. He had made a close study of Imperial war machines, and none of them had looked anything like this. The aircraft had forelimbs of a sort, each ending in a tripartite claw. Stranger still, instead of a nosecone it had a reptilian head on a long, flexible neck ribbed with cabling.

‘What is that, Coldstar? Cross-reference with pan-caste craft archive.’

‘Nothing thus far, high commander,’ the suit’s artificial intelligence replied. ‘I should have a better reading in the near future if it continues closing with us.’

‘Something to look forward to,’ said Farsight drily. ‘Full zoom until then.’

Behind the peculiar craft was a cloud of smaller forms. For a moment, Farsight thought they might have been vespids mercenaries, but even they were not capable of surviving in the cold vacuum of space. With a jolt, he realised they were the same xenos species he had encountered in the red-lit corridors of the Imperial ship. Hundreds of wings beat soundlessly as they flocked from the aftquarters of the battleship and into the void.

He squint-zoomed again. The pursuing craft had thin, glowing triangles in its head unit, evidently intended to give the impression of eyes. They flared in the darkness, the slits trailing flame into the coldness of space. Farsight felt, just for a moment, that somehow the craft knew he was watching it. More than that, he had a distinct impression of extreme negativity, hatred even. As he watched, the craft opened its mechanical maw to expose jagged teeth. The craft had clearly

been built to intimidate, and whoever had built it had done a fine job.

The alert bleeping rose to a shrill pitch as a rotary cannon extruded from the aircraft's mouth section. Six bursts of flame flickered from the muzzle of the weapons system.

'Veer left,' said Farsight, eye-sketching a trajectory on the command and control suite.

'Acknowledged, high commander,' said Coldstar, peeling away. The enemy craft tracked her progress, twisting at the neck as its rotary cannon spat bullets. The prototype shook and twitched as the volley smashed home.

'Taking heavy fire,' said the battlesuit. 'Exterior blemished! Evasive manoeuvres recommended.'

'Why aren't you enacting them already?' shouted Farsight. 'I sketched a trajectory!'

'My vane adjustment protocols are incomplete,' said Coldstar.

'What? No!'

'I will improvise, high commander.'

The thing spat another volley of bullets, their impacts sending the prototype tumbling in a clumsy spiral for a moment before it righted itself.

'Truth of Tau'va!' cursed Farsight. 'Can't we outdistance it?'

By way of answer, Coldstar brought up a screen showing the energy expenditure they had used in crossing from the *Dawn Pioneer* to the Imperial flagship. It did not make for comforting reading.

'Unfortunately it is a much larger craft,' she said. 'I believe it is powered by some manner of jet turbine.'

'So we outmanoeuvre it,' said Farsight. 'Change vector every tenth-dec. Keep it guessing.'

The screen showing the thing's trajectory towards them showed a steadily lessening distance as it accelerated to the speed of a fighter plane on an attack run. Farsight's prototype dipped and spiralled, looping over an Imperial missile as it cut across the void between the flagships. The enemy craft stayed close behind, altering its segmented wings to loop around the hurtling cylinder on just as tight a course.

'I notice with interest that we are not shaking him off,' said Farsight, eye-sketching an even more extreme course alteration before remembering that the battlesuit could not enact it.

'Interim distance ninety spans and closing,' said Coldstar, a note of tension in her voice. 'Our pursuer is maintaining what appears to be a collision course.'

'Drop sixteen degrees, flip and return fire,' said Farsight. 'Burst cannon at

maximum yield.'

'Acknowledged.'

The prototype dropped like a stone, sending Farsight's stomachs pressing against his lungs. As it fell through empty space the battlesuit angled its arms and turned over, gracefully evening out its trajectory so it was facing its pursuer yet still flying headlong towards the *Pioneer*.

For a moment, Farsight saw the predatory thing silhouetted against the backdrop of the Damocles Gulf's nebulas. Its outline was all harsh angles and jutting spikes. Aerodynamically, it was perhaps even worse off than a gue'ron'sha craft. It looked built more for physical combat than for flight. Yet somehow it was still closing on him.

There was a punching impact as the battlesuit was winged by a stream of bullets. Solid shot projectiles streaked across the control suite, glowing fiercely in the darkness like wild tracer fire. Alarms competed for Farsight's attention.

'High commander,' said Coldstar, 'the projectile that struck the right pauldron is intensely hot. It is melting the hyperalloys around it. I am redeploying coolants accordingly.'

'Understood. Return fire when ready, high yield.'

The prototype raised the elongated burst cannon on its right arm and opened fire. The weapon system whirred, barrel rotating fast as a steady stream of plasma beads flew out across the cold void. The stream appeared to curve, arcing gracefully as the battlesuit compensated for the pursuing pilot's own evasive manoeuvres. A good few of the beads hit home as the battlesuit raked its target. They left blackened craters where they struck, tearing off some of the spikes that lined the craft's wings, but they did no lasting damage.

In striking home, the shotshad illuminated the pursuing craft for a few moments. It was truly hideous, a machine of ragged cables and slime-slicked armour plates. Farsight refined his targeting conditionals with a glance, but even as the prototype opened fire once more the pursuing craft darted hard out of his crosshairs.

The battlesuit juddered as it took more incoming fire.

'Tau'va, Coldstar! Keep on it!' Farsight spared one eye to the screens of the space battle unfolding behind him. 'We must reach reliable broadcast range, or this will all be for nothing!'

There was another insistent bleeping as the pursuing craft came back into the prototype's sensor field. Farsight saw the thing hurtle out of the upper left quadrant, its clawed limbs extended like those of a diving raptor.

'Hard right!' shouted Farsight, activating a pre-programmed evasion code with his good hand. 'Bank and circle!'

The prototype peeled away as the predatory thing hurtled past, its claws grasping the air less than three metres away. As the battlesuit's sensor head tracked its progress, Farsight recorded as much footage as his sensor array could provide. He saw the banded metal of its wings, heavy and sharp-edged, the outer edge caked with nameless filth. Each sharp triangle met at a heavy torso-like midsection. Lines of cherry-red fire glowed from within the hull's metal banding, a stylised ribcage containing a heart of fire. Farsight caught sight of the craters where his burst cannon had struck home; somehow, they were all but healed over.

Farsight glanced with one eye at the thrust/vector suite. The distance between the prototype and the *Dawn Pioneer* was still massive, a full dec's travel at the very least. There was no way he could make it across that gulf with a self-repairing, turbine-driven aircraft close on his tail.

An alert beeped loud and insistent as the pursuing craft rose to meet Farsight. This time he readied both weapon systems. The fusion blaster's limited range would be of little issue if the enemy pilot intended to physically attack them, and given the engagement thus far, he would not be surprised if he did.

For a moment Farsight recalled watching Kan'jian snow eagles as they hunted mountain swifts. The swept wings of the prey-birds gave them the advantage of manoeuvrability, but the eagles had evolved to hit them at such velocity that even a brush of the wing would send the smaller birds spiralling out of control to be easily plucked from the air. With the battlesuit already having taken heavy fire, even a glancing blow from this thing's metallic pinions would likewise be fatal, consigning Farsight to a few moments of agonising disorientation before he was caught in his pursuer's claws.

'Vertical boost, Coldstar,' said Farsight, flinging his legs forward in the control cocoon. The battlesuit engaged its microjets, shooting upwards and mimicking Farsight's movements so its legs swung out in front of it. The pursuing craft shot past beneath him, saurian jaws snapping upon nothing. Farsight took his shot, the fusion beam searing into the exposed back of the enemy craft. It was a perfectly timed set piece that should have ruined the thing, cut it into scrap with a single shot.

The fusion beam's energies dissipated in a burst of violet flame.

'Force fields,' said Coldstar helpfully.

Farsight was not so sure; he had not seen so much of a glimmer of energy surrounding the enemy craft.

'Our firepower is proving all but ineffectual,' said Farsight. 'We must use our environment against the enemy.'

'High commander, we are in space. There is no environmental advantage to be

had.'

'Think again,' said Farsight. 'You must learn to see, Coldstar, as well as to look.'

In the middle distance, a column of light as wide as a battlesuit's torso hissed through the darkness. It was so bright the prototype's sensors dimmed the hex-screen to preserve Farsight's vision. The *Pioneer* was opening fire, bringing a full broadside of pulse hypercannons to bear on the battle-barge looming through the darkness towards it. The titanic weapons fired sustained bursts, much like plasma rifles on full yield.

Farsight altered his trajectory and dived straight for the lozenge-shaped energy blasts. 'Has your reaction speed been affected by the incoming fire thus far?'

'I do not believe so,' said Coldstar. 'However, my diagnostic systems are incomplete, and so I cannot answer with any real surety.'

'Imprecise, for a supposedly advanced machine,' said Farsight.

'You understand that I am still a work in progress, high commander?'

Farsight did not answer. Lips pressed together thinly in concentration, he used his good hand to manually describe a spiral course towards the nearest column of energy that shot from the flank of the *Pioneer*. If he was more than a few microdecs out of phase with the colossal pulse beam, he would be unceremoniously atomised in an eye blink.

Another stream of red-hot bullets whipped past them, trails of grey vapour marking their passage. The enemy craft was gaining on them once more, the irregular spiral of their evasion path all that was keeping the battlesuit out of its reach. One mistake, and pointed metal claws would sink into the prototype. They might even penetrate into the control cocoon, digging into Farsight himself.

The rear sensors showed the pursuing craft closer than ever. Its eyes glowed fiercely, mechanised jaws snapping at the prototype's trailing legs.

'Shut down all fine systems for two microdecs on my mark,' said Farsight.

'But high commander, if we—'

'Just do it! Now!'

A thunderous column of light shot past the battlesuit, so close and so intense that Farsight got noticeably warmer at its passage. The suit hurtled past, passing through a patch of coldness before its lights winked on again. For a moment Farsight saw another massive blast coming straight towards him.

'Again!'

Another massive energy discharge shook the prototype as it shot through the slim gap between pulse beams, a vast energy blitz roaring past in its wake. The battlesuit was safely out the other side of the cannonade, its delicate systems rebooting now the electromagnetic aura of the pulse beams was behind them.

Farsight eye-clicked on the rear sensor, his heart pounding.

Though they had put some distance between them, the enemy craft was still on their tail, mechanical jaws gaping wide.

‘We cannot shake it,’ concluded Coldstar.

‘Then we have but one option left,’ said Farsight.

‘I already have the cocoon’s ejection protocols primed,’ said Coldstar sombrely. ‘I shall lead it off, allowing you to escape. Merely give your authorisation and I shall enact. You have already done me great honour.’

‘That is not the option I speak of,’ said Farsight. ‘Though I appreciate the gesture. Approach the Imperial fighter craft in the twelfth abstract north east, but do not fire upon them. All power to engines.’

‘Inbound accordingly.’

Farsight thought he could hear a trace of relief in the battlesuit’s tone.

The aircraft was still in pursuit, closing the gap between them once more. In the distance was a squadron of three heavy Imperial gunships, their flanks clay-red and white in colouration. They were closing on an attack vector, inbound upon an aerial battle between a small fleet of air caste ships and the blunt-nosed fighters of the gue’ron’sha support wave.

Farsight eye-flicked an ident scan whilst zooming in. Amongst the air caste fighters was the custom-built golden Manta missile destroyer *Wing of Blades*, the personal craft of Li Mau Teng.

‘You do not mean to engage these ones as well, high commander?’ said Coldstar.

‘Just fly behind them, within standard Imperial sensor range. Then dive as soon as you detect a lock. Three microdecs of contact should be sufficient.’

‘Acknowledged.’

Arms folded by its side, the prototype shot towards the trio of Imperial gunships on an intercept course for the battle beyond. By the look of the thrust/vector suite, the gue’ron’sha pilots had adopted a low attack speed. The battlesuit could potentially catch them if it kept its current course and trajectory.

Their draconic pursuer was gaining once more. Bullets spat, several ricocheting from the prototype’s legs. The damage control suite flared again, angry and red. One of the holo-doppel’s limbs was represented as charcoal grey – crippled beyond recovery. That was bad enough for a battlesuit that operated from a ground position, but for a machine that relied so heavily on flight dynamics, it was potentially lethal.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the prototype drew within engagement range of the Imperial craft. At any moment Farsight expected to be caught by the ankle and hurled, tossed aside only to be caught again and ripped apart. Without an evasion

vector, he was an easy target, but for his plan to work he had little choice.

There was a bright chime from the battlesuit, a target lock warning flashing upon the distribution suite. One of the Imperial craft was breaking off, peeling away from the squadron. It carved around in a wide circle, but Farsight was already beyond the reach of its guns, dipping his trajectory so that he would pass under the Imperial craft and into their blind spot.

Suddenly Farsight felt as if he had been struck by a giant's fist. The prototype blared in alarm as it was yanked bodily out of its trajectory, its left weapon limb crushed and its thruster jet array torn off entirely. The enemy craft had him in its claws. He saw on the sensor screen its armoured, glowing torso, saw the light of the flame inside it and felt the heat of its internal engine even through the control cocoon.

Here was his death – cruel, inexplicable, and less than an arm's length away.

Another alert signal, ear piercing and shrill. Farsight grimaced, putting the noise out of his mind as he desperately sought to bring his burst cannon to bear on his captor. With a broken hand, his suit shaking violently and half his systems offline it was nigh impossible.

He saw a screen flash up, showing the Imperial craft that had curved around to make an attack run. Its own missiles were growing closer with terrifying speed.

There was an explosion of deafening, bone-shaking intensity. Farsight was plunged into darkness. A constellation of winking red alert lights indicated the prototype's backup systems were out as well, if they had even been installed at all.

By the lurching, dizzying vertigo that had seized him, Farsight could tell he was falling, all systems offline, into the infinite nothingness of the Damocles Gulf.

Then the black spots came for him, and he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COLLISION

DAMOCLES GULF

‘There he is,’ said Admiral Li Mau Teng, bringing up a new hex within the Manta’s custom triple cockpit. The mangled form of an advanced white battlesuit prototype was toppling away into space, hurled aside by a still-blooming explosion. Spinning away in an expanding sphere of jagged metal debris was the remains of whatever xenos craft had intercepted Farsight’s battlesuit. The Imperial gunship that had curved around to engage them had landed a direct hit with both of its interception missiles.

‘That cannot be the high commander,’ said Kor’vre Anda. ‘Can it?’

‘We must intercept whatever is left,’ said Teng, ‘and find out.’

‘Admiral, we are in an evolving combat situation,’ said the co-pilot Kor’vre Sa’cea Xanro. ‘If we disengage now we will abandon the air caste overlap net, leaving our teamcraft vulnerable, and possibly sustaining critical damage in the process.’

‘I know that, Xanro,’ said the admiral calmly. ‘Kindly obey nonetheless.’

‘Of course,’ said Xanro, tapping in a set of new approach patterns. Around them the Barracuda, Mako and Tigershark squadrons of Teng’s fleet were engaged in an ongoing aerial battle with the Space Marine flyers attempting to bully their way through the air caste cordon to the fleet beyond.

Teng took the antique pistol handles of his control bar in a gentle grip and sat back in his command throne. The chair was an old-fashioned model that had been moulded to every contour of his aged anatomy, and the admiral was never happier than when flying from it. Teng’s eyes fixed on the hex screens ahead as he gently aligned it with the Manta’s flight field, scooped control, and guided the missile destroyer out of the combat zone.

‘All weapons systems ready repulsion protocols,’ he said. The thin wheeze of

his voice upon Dal'yth was replaced by a soft but certain burr in the artificially thin atmosphere of the bridge. 'We're going in on a steep vector. The steepest.'

'I am unsure as to your intention,' said Xanro.

'We will overtake the high commander's current trajectory, position ourselves in front of him, and welcome him aboard,' said Teng, his face crinkling into a hundred folds as he smiled benignly. 'Then we will seek his wisdom.'

Xanro opened his eyes wide, but did not reply.

'And to do this,' said Teng, steering the Manta in a curving course and tapping open a communication channel to the upper passenger bay, 'we will be overriding the airlock protocols, opening the lower hold, and jettisoning its Hammerhead gunships. They will be sucked into outer space. Proceed.'

'And this is why you fly a golden craft, elder,' muttered Xanro. 'For just such occasions as when the water caste's eyes will be upon you.'

'Still your tongue, my impolite friend,' said Teng, his perfect white teeth revealed as crinkled lips drew back. 'Instead focus, if you can, on the matter at hand.'

Xanro muttered as his fingers tapped a firing solution on his hex pad. The turreted ion cannons of the Manta pivoted to blast a stub-winged Imperial interceptor into spinning fragments of shrapnel. His fellow co-pilot, Kor'vre Anda, launched a seeker missile across half a mile of empty space to tear a massive hole in the flank of a larger gunship. She chuckled contentedly, zooming in as gue'ron'sha troopers spilled flailing into the void.

The Manta accelerated hard, outdistancing the other interceptors with ease. The course that Teng was describing with his control bar led them on a trajectory that intersected with the stricken Coldstar. The battlesuit was a tiny white dot on the main viewing hex, but on the zoomed equivalent it could be seen spinning, one arm missing and its jet unit torn away. Closer, a trio of Imperial gunships was banking around, the one that had peeled off to kill Farsight's pursuer rejoining its fellows as they made a run straight towards the Manta.

'We are under attack, admiral,' said Xanro. 'Your orders?'

'Just kill them,' said Teng. 'Nothing elaborate.'

'Seeker missiles primed,' said Kor'vre Anda, pausing as the targeting suite's cross hairs flared gold, 'and away. Heavy rail guns aligned in three... two...'

The Manta's fire signature chimed readiness. A microdec later four long, sleek seeker missiles shot across the space between the golden tau ship and the outriding craft of the Imperial squadron. The Space Marine aircraft fired streams of explosive bolts at the missiles, intending to detonate them before impact. Anda huffed at the sight, sharing a glance with Xanro. The seeker missiles curved in their flight and slid out of the path of the interception fire, carving

back in just as the pilots of the Imperial aircraft realised their jeopardy and made belated evasive manoeuvres.

Anda tapped the air with a silvered fingertip, and the heavy rail guns fired.

Whereas the progress of the finned seeker missiles was obvious, the hypervelocity projectiles of the railguns were flung from sophisticated electromagnetic launchers, and were far too fast to see. They struck the central aircraft of the squadron at the same time the seeker missiles detonated on the two escort craft.

Two compound explosions blossomed either side of a column of fire as the railgun rounds punched through the central craft. Then that too detonated. The bow of the Manta was lit gold by the glorious light of the triple kill.

‘A celebratory pass through the flames, admiral? The iridium alloy will hold.’

‘Maybe next time,’ Teng replied. ‘Today we have a more pressing duty.’ He dipped the control bar once more, and the Manta swooped low.

A few moments later, the damaged prototype grew large on the main screens.

‘The high commander is unresponsive, admiral,’ said Xanro.

‘Maintain plus four per cent his speed,’ said Teng.

The internal dual airlock closed with a hiss. ‘Ready to receive,’ said Xanro.

The Manta was already overtaking the tumbling Coldstar, both appearing to travel slowly but in fact going at a speed that could spell disaster at the slightest mistake.

‘Open rear door,’ said Teng. A blaring alert sounded on the control suite, silenced a moment later by Xanro’s impatient finger. ‘Release mag-clamps.’

On a subsidiary screen, a pair of Hammerhead gunships toppled from the *Wing of Blades* into nothingness, leaving the right-hand hold of the Manta all but empty.

Admiral Teng’s face was lined with stress as he tilted his control bar, slowly, steadily, to bring the Manta’s rear in line with the stricken battlesuit.

‘Alignment,’ said Teng.

An internal camera showed the prototype battlesuit, still spinning, pass through the open rear door of the Manta in an ungainly tangle of metal that cleared the aperture by less than a hand’s breadth.

‘Retrothrust now.’

Every tau on the bridge felt as if their bodies were pressed by an invisible hand as the Manta slowed hard. The prototype battlesuit’s momentum forced it deep into the passenger hold, coming to rest jammed amongst a pair of dormant XV8s.

‘Admiral,’ said Xanro, his voice tight, ‘the extremities of the battlesuit are still blocking the door. We cannot close it.’

‘Are the high commander’s life signs still registering silver at the least?’

‘Our bio-readers have a lock,’ said Anda. ‘They are edging on electrum.’

‘Then his discomfort, and ours for that matter, is of no import,’ said Teng. ‘He is secure. Leave the rear airlock open. We shall return to the *Pioneer*, and cut him out. Our brave leader still has work to do.’

On the horseshoe-shaped bridge of the *Dawn Pioneer*, Y’eldi watched in disbelief as the trajectories of the Imperial and tau flagships intersected on his extrapolation screen.

‘Welcome back, Admiral Teng,’ he said, turning to the wizened elder making his way to the honour throne behind him. ‘You will not believe this, but it appears they intend to ram us.’

‘I can very well believe it,’ said Kor’O Li Mau Teng. His lined face creased, as he made himself comfortable in the curving seat. Eyes darting, he peered through the screens and holograms displayed on the massive curving screen at the fore of the bridge. ‘Observe their prow, young pilot. It is built like that for a reason.’

‘That is for show, surely,’ said Y’eldi’s opposite number, the former star of the piloting schools known as Sylphwing. ‘They seek to intimidate, not to actually use their own ship as a weapon. It would sign their own death warrant as well as that of their targets.’

‘That is their way,’ came a gruff voice from the rear of the bridge. The Nicassar, Unndt, was staring dolefully in their direction from inside his transparent hover-sphere. An egg-shaped translator drone hovered a few metres away, crackling softly as it translated the ursine advisor’s low growl.

‘So it’s awake,’ said Y’eldi under his breath.

‘Awake. Concerned,’ huffed Unndt via the translator. ‘Will ram us. Are keen.’

‘How do you know it’s not a bluff?’ said Sylphwing.

‘Know. Just know,’ said Unndt. ‘Sense the wrath. Scent on sun winds.’

‘It must be mind-science,’ said Y’eldi theatrically, casting a conspiratorial look towards Sylphwing. She just shook her head, preoccupied by the explosions buffeting the *Pioneer*’s flanks. Y’eldi looked hurt, but returned to coordinating his part in the air caste’s overlapping net of fire.

Neither the orks nor the arachen had craft swift enough to fight through the Kor’vattra’s combined firepower, but the Imperials had punched their cylinder-craft through it in a score of places. Only the winged vessels were being picked off by the point defence guns atop the *Pioneer*’s turrets.

A holo icon pulsed to life upon Y’eldi’s recliner screen; a stylised fortress overlaid with the symbol of Vior’la.

‘The one they call Warghost,’ said Sylphwing reverently.

‘Permission to enter the bridge?’ said Ob’lotai 3-0. ‘The lower decks are overrun. I have cleansed my designated sector, and seek consultation.’

‘In person?’ asked Y’eldi. ‘Cannot Farsight attend to your orders? Fulfil his allotted role, and leave us to ours?’

‘High Commander Farsight is currently recovering his strength within the *Wing of Blades*,’ said Admiral Teng. ‘He shan’t be joining us, remotely or not, without the intervention of a plasma cutter and a full med-suite. The earth caste are hard at work, but it will take time.’

‘Permission to enter?’ asked Ob’lotai again.

‘No,’ said Y’eldi. ‘I have a personal prohibition against letting fire caste personnel onto the bridge, mainly to keep them from shouting in my ear when I am trying to concentrate.’

‘Of course you may join us, Shas’vre Ob’lotai,’ said Teng, eye-flicking entry permission onto Ob’lotai’s icon with a slight smile. ‘He is here to guard us, Y’eldi, though he does not want to alarm us by saying so.’

The rear portal slid open with a hiss, the scented air equalising with that of the vestibule beyond. A bulbous stealth suit filled the door. Crouching, it stepped onto the bridge, its arm-mounted cannon and strangely bulky anatomy incongruous in the rarefied atmosphere.

‘My thanks,’ said Ob’lotai, taking a sentinel’s stance at the back of the bridge. ‘It appears we cannot repel the Imperial boarding torpedoes with so limited a garrison.’

‘They will board us with more than torpedoes, soon enough,’ said Y’eldi.

‘The Imperial ship is bringing its prow to bear upon us,’ said Sylphwing. She turned to Y’eldi, her expression one of total astonishment. ‘They really do mean to ram us!’

‘Have they sustained critical damage?’ asked Teng.

‘They must have,’ said Sylphwing, scan-zooming on the wounds in the Imperial ship’s flanks. ‘Or else why throw away their capital ship?’

‘Worse,’ growled Unndt. ‘Aethershell cracked. Rear decks infested.’

‘Infested?’ asked Y’eldi. ‘By what?’

‘Never mind that,’ said Teng. ‘Concentrate on the matter at hand. The Imperials will be on us in less than twelve point three decs. Let us not wait until disaster consumes us.’

‘An evacuation request has been made by Fio’O Worldshaper of the earth caste, and Por’O Tidemark of the water caste,’ said Sylphwing. ‘Commander Bravestorm of the fire caste sent his through before going dark, and Aun’Diemn concurs. Admiral, will you complete the elemental quorum?’

‘High Commander Farsight would not have evacuated,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘He would fight on.’

‘Farsight is incommunicado,’ said Teng. ‘And perhaps that is best. He is a born warrior, but now is not the time to fight.’

‘How can it be so?’ said Ob’lotai. ‘We beat the Imperials upon Dal’yth. They are fearsome opponents, and not to be underestimated. But if we run, if we simply yield, does that not run contrary to the point of this entire expeditionary force? Our mission is to prove that the Tau’va is stronger than the tyranny wielded by the human race.’

‘Then you would see our strength spent before we even reach the enclave worlds?’ said Teng.

The Warghost did not reply.

The impasse was broken by a bright chime from the airlock. This time the sign of the water caste appeared on Y’eldi’s control screen. It was accompanied by the icon of a blue arachnid, and the seal of the Dal’ythan Elemental Council.

‘Another visitor,’ said Y’eldi dully. ‘One Por Malcaor.’

‘The boorish fool from the last council?’ said Sylphwing archly. ‘The one who challenges the ethereals?’ Y’eldi nodded. ‘We have enough distractions as it is. He stays outside.’

‘He enters,’ said Admiral Teng. ‘We cannot leave him to die.’

There was a dual hiss of air as the doors at the back of the bridge opened, allowing a cloud of iridescent blue mist to seep onto the bridge. A water caste magister strode through it, arms open as if in greeting as he cast his eyes around the place. His robes were spattered in blood, but his expression was triumphant.

‘Greetings, friends!’ he said loudly. ‘What a glorious day.’

‘If you must seek haven, Por Malcaor,’ said Admiral Teng, ‘please do so in silence.’

‘Have you seen combat?’ said Ob’lotai, the stealth suit turning to look the newcomer up and down.

‘Why yes,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘I overcame my foes by using a series of improvised attacks.’ He smiled broadly. ‘Tragically, several of my fellow speakers died after the gue’ron’sha burst in on our position. I escaped unharmed.’

‘Interesting,’ said Ob’lotai.

‘Please, unless you have something pertinent to add, keep your peace,’ said Y’eldi, tapping at his console. ‘The fate of the entire expedition is at stake.’

‘The Imperials have taken a mortal blow, have they not?’ asked Por Malcaor. ‘The high commander has punctured the very heart of their vessel.’

‘Is that so?’ said Sylphwing. ‘He counter-boarded them?’

‘Did he not tell you?’ asked Por Malcaor innocently.

‘True. Is true,’ said Unndt. ‘Ship wounded deeply.’

‘O’Shovah is a master of Mont’ka,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘He could do it, even alone.’

‘The Imperial ship is closing,’ said Y’eldi. ‘We must reach a decision, and act on it.’

‘We should fight on,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘Change the course of history.’

‘I agree,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘We have an entire armada.’

‘This is not an earthly battlefield,’ said Sylphwing, ‘where reinforcements may be summoned within decs. The distances involved here are vast. By the time we bring more ship-to-ship weapons into play the fate of the *Pioneer* will already be sealed.’

‘She is right,’ said Teng. ‘We must act for the Greater Good, not for glory.’

‘What better way to show the tau’s manifest destiny over the realm of man than to destroy their every attack?’ asked Por Malcaor. ‘We must escalate. Only through domination will we claim what is rightfully ours.’

‘And incite yet more of these ambushes before we reach our destination?’ said Sylphwing. ‘We must pick our battles.’

‘I agree,’ said Teng. ‘I have reached my conclusion. I hereby recommend we evacuate. Begin, Y’eldi, in the name of the Greater Good.’

The personal icon of Kor’O Li Mau Teng appeared on the control screen next to those of Aun’Diemn, Worldshaper, Tidemark and Bravestorm. With a bright chime, the five slid across into one.

‘Elemental quorum established,’ said Y’eldi. ‘Evacuation procedure initiated.’

‘We make the *Lhas’rhen’na*, the sacrifice of shattered jade,’ said Teng. ‘By allowing the *Dawn Pioneer* to take the brunt of the Imperial craft’s assault, we will force it to expend its fury.’

‘Tarnishing the authority of the fire caste in the process,’ said Por Malcaor.

‘Nonsense, speaker,’ said Teng. ‘Quite the opposite. The high commander fell in battle. He singlehandedly took on the enemy flagship in an advanced prototype battlesuit and, if your intelligence is correct, did it critical damage before leaving. The gue’ron’sha ship has taken a mortal wound. The water caste have plenty to work with.’

‘It should have been his decision whether to fight on, or to leave,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘He is the expedition leader.’

‘Just so,’ replied Teng. ‘And as the figurehead of this entire endeavour, it is well that it is not he who gives the order to evacuate.’

‘How so? Is it not his choice?’

‘All know we must act in the interests of the Tau’va. There is no shame in retreat, even though our enemies’ guns are still active. Yet the casualties we incur

in the process would likely be laid at the expedition leader's door, and they will not be slight.'

'That much is certain,' said Y'eldi darkly.

'However, history will absolve the high commander of blame for the lives lost in the process of retreat, for he is unconscious,' said Teng. 'Others are acting in his stead, and we will carry the burden on his behalf. We fight an enemy that came upon us without warning, and is far stronger in this manner of warfare, yet we still dealt a mortal blow. Our decision is final. We yield, only to strike again another day. Any resultant recrimination, be it spoken or otherwise, will not fall at Farsight's feet. The water caste will make sure of it.'

Ob'lotai said no more, his stealth suit standing as still and silent as a monument.

'A shame,' said Por Malcaor. 'Will we at least see the collision from here?'

'Of course not,' said Sylphwing, her expression appalled. 'All critical personnel will be long gone, by the time the Imperial flagship reaches us.'

'That includes members of the Elemental Council,' said Y'eldi. 'You will be escorted to a saviour pod.'

'Cowardice,' said Por Malcaor bitterly. 'You only postpone the inevitable.' Waving a finger across the bio-recognition screen at the side of the portal, he left the bridge without another word.

Underfoot the smooth white deck of the bridge shook almost imperceptibly as the decoupling procedure was initiated. Parts of the *Dawn Pioneer* were breaking away from the central mass, peeling away to drift into parallel flight paths that gradually neared the rest of the fleet. Pod-like and self-contained, each had fuel enough to move out of harm's way. The decoupling was a lengthy process, however, and the Imperial ship was getting closer by the moment. Not all of them would make it to the safety of the fleet behind – especially not with the monstrous gue'ron'sha craft still loosing thunderous broadsides as often as it could.

On the main screen, the light of a distant star silhouetted the profile of the vast Imperial warship. The violent promise of its sloping prow grew more strident by the moment.

Caelos ground his teeth as another volley of killing energy seared down the corridor of the *Dawn Pioneer*. Up ahead, a lone tau warsuit had taken position behind a heavy bulkhead, and was loosing twin blasts of incandescent force every time Caelos or one of his brothers so much as leaned out of cover for a moment.

The crackling beams smelled to Caelos much like the superheated molecules

cooked off from melta fire. It was a diagnosis that the ex-Deathwatch veteran Xaedros had confirmed, claiming that tau fusion weaponry was a close equivalent. It was not a good sign. Even the Chapter Master was reticent to simply walk out in front of such firepower.

In the corridor behind them was the wreckage of what Treota had claimed was a stasis chamber. The command squad had spent almost a full minute tearing open the hibernation cells that contained slumbering tau, blasting and shattering the strange cylinders before Caelos had sated his fury and commanded them to press on. It was not fitting for a Space Marine to fight in such a manner, he had said, let alone a command brotherhood. They had more pressing concerns.

Their delay had been costly. Now they were pinned, with teams of plasma-armed warsuits in the stasis chamber to their rear and their melta-wielding equivalents to the fore.

What had been intended as a lightning strike at the head of the foe had been slowed, stymied, redirected and diffused until it had come to a complete standstill.

‘We have no option,’ said Caelos. ‘Grenades first, then rush it.’

‘We tried that,’ said Xaedros, motioning to Vrendaeon. In the lee of a bulkhead, the standard bearer was propping up the company banner in the crook of his neck. His right arm was gingerly holding the tattered remains of his left. Almost his entire shoulder was missing, pauldron and all, a black wasteland of flesh exposed behind the ravaged ceramite.

‘Then let the Emperor be my judge!’ shouted Caelos, barrelling from cover to thunder down the corridor. The grenade launchers atop his Terminator armour boomed, and twin frags exploded at the end of the corridor. The detonation stunned the battlesuit, forcing it to duck as Caelos pounded towards it.

Still half the corridor remained. The tau warsuit stood up in the dissipating smoke, its inhuman anatomy huge and powerful. It levelled its boxy melta weaponry at Caelos, taking careful aim.

The Chapter Master grimaced, roaring in denial as he stared into the face of certain obliteration.

Then the xenos warsuit crumpled in on itself. The shriek of tortured metals and ravaged plastics rang loud in the corridor as it was crushed, flattened from above as if by a vast and invisible hand.

Behind the wreckage stood a tall, slender human female clad in long robes, the shimmering rectangle of a tarot card hanging over her bespectacled eyes. She held a complex combi-weapon at her hip, its underslung grav-gun still glowing green from the pulsing emissions of its hyper-gravitic field.

Caelos pounded towards her, sliding into the lee of an oval arch. He turned

back to his squad and raised a bulky fist.

‘On me, brothers!’

‘Don’t be so hard on yourself,’ said the slim female. ‘You are only a Space Marine. Nobody expects you to think too deeply.’

Caelos stared down, livid pink tendons stretching as his features contorted into a scowl. ‘I am the Chapter Master of the Scar Lords. Have some respect, insolent witch!’

‘Had I not intervened, dear heart, you would currently be a smoking corpse,’ said the woman. ‘I am Vykola Herat, an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos, and you are compromising my operation.’

There was a distant crash. Xaedros and Treota came pounding down the corridor, Vrendaeon close behind with the Chapter banner held under his good arm.

‘Collapsed the damaged bulkhead,’ said Xaedros. ‘Should buy us some time.’

Treota triggered the activation rune on his powered broadsword, lightning cascading down the edges of its blade.

‘Who is the civilian? A xenos-loving traitor?’

‘This one claims to be an inquisitor,’ said Caelos.

Herat held up her Inquisitorial rosette, one eyebrow raised. ‘Observe. I have been posing as a turncoat, and you are in danger of destroying my work here.’

‘Apologies, my lady,’ said Treota, turning his sword point down and kneeling to rest his helm against its pommel. ‘I did not realise you were studying this scum, the better to defeat them.’

‘Something like that,’ she said. The tattoo on her forehead shifted to show the image of a hooded knight trapped in a cage.

‘Then how do we slay this ship from the inside?’ asked Caelos.

‘It is too late for that,’ said the inquisitor. ‘According to the tau cadrenet,’ she tapped a rectangular xenotech antennae that projected from her elaborate coiffure, ‘your ship is inbound on a deliberate collision heading.’

‘What?’ said Caelos. ‘They would not allow that with us still aboard!’

‘Don’t act so surprised,’ said Herat. ‘Your warships are all built with rams on the front. It incites a certain mind-set in a certain type of person.’

‘If they mean to ram this vessel, then we will die here,’ said Treota darkly. ‘Even if we do not, that act is as good as mutiny.’

‘If I were you, I would make haste to the Thunderhawk currently evacuating your brothers from the level below,’ she said. ‘I have made my own arrangements. And see to the spirits of your vox frequency. The tau worked out how to decrypt your combat wavelengths months ago.’

‘Aye,’ said Caelos, his expression clouded. ‘Good advice. And my thanks for

getting the tau's whereabouts to us without their knowledge. However you did it.'

'Excuse me? You say you are a Chapter Master?' said Herat, her expression quizzical. 'Not for long, I assume.'

Caelos gave her a dark look, and walked past her, twisting his massive bulk sideways before filling the passageway once more. His brethren went with him, heading for the hexagonal shaft that led to the floor below. Treota saluted with his blade as he passed.

'You have a long road ahead of you,' said Herat as they departed. 'May the God-Emperor show you the way.'

The immense Imperial vessel *Scabbard of Flesh* churned slowly, unstoppably, through space towards the *Dawn Pioneer*. The jutting wedge of its frontal ram turned as it came about, a parallel course turning into one of unmistakeable collision. Along the aft sections, a caul of warp ectoplasm shimmered and pulsed. Winged figures burst from within like swarms of gnats disturbed from their rotting feast. They spiralled and flocked around the giant cannons and gargoyles of the *Scabbard's* rearmost sections, many of their number trailing away into space as currents of nameless energy bore them into the void.

On came that pugnacious prow. The Imperial steersmen stood ready to amend their course if their opposite numbers in the tau fleet intended to evade, but if the alien pilots planned such a manoeuvre they were committing far too late. The *Dawn Pioneer* simply levelled broadside after broadside at its persecutor, supremacy railguns thudding their hypervelocity cylinders into the ravaged hull of the oncoming warship. Explosions of flame erupted along the buttresses and crenulations of the gothic monstrosity, but they were pinpricks in the flank of a giant, and only added to its terrible grandeur.

The main body of the tau flagship was sending pod-like saviour craft into the ether. They scattered like smooth little seeds launched from some exotic plant, borne aloft on the winds of fate. One by one, they reached a pre-set distance from the main tau ship and veered away, heading back into the mouth of the swirling nebula corridor in search of the safety of the tau armada behind. Some were consumed in explosions of laser fire or struck by the debris of battle. Slumbering tau bodies spilled out of several split pods to spiral away into the depths of space or flail away helplessly into the nothingness.

They were not the only ships departing from the ochre immensity of the tau flagship. Here and there, the bright heraldic colours of an Imperial boarding craft or a Scar Lords gunship would streak past the glimmering tau pods to chance the violent tides of the gulf.

Agonising hours slid past as the gap between the two ships narrowed. They were silent from a distance, but filled with clamour and panic on the inside as their crews desperately sought a way to survive the imminent disaster. Large sections of the two duelling hulks were reduced to skeletal wreckage that gouted flame into cold space. The wounds in the Imperial ship were like a cave system exposed by dynamite, untouched by natural light for millennia and encrusted with age. Those of the tau ship were like split honeycomb rendered in white alloy, neat little cells gouged open by the claws of a behemoth that sought the flesh and blood inside.

With the collision many hours in the making, thousands of souls had escaped from each ship. Far more were still aboard, for the evacuation protocols of their respective vessels were ill equipped to cope with such a massive exodus in so short a space of time. A hundred kilometres became ten, then became three, then two, then one.

With grinding, deadly implacability, the jutting prow of the *Scabbard* ground right into the central body of the *Dawn Pioneer*, its metal ram digging deep to wreck the fusion engines within.

The Damocles Gulf was lit anew.

ARKUNASHA THREE YEARS PREVIOUSLY

Red oxide particulate whipped around the shoulders of the Argap Plateau, the howling of the sandstorm gale reaching a nerve-shredding pitch as it raced through the canyons below. Every now and then the sound of distant chanting was carried on the wind, the guttural warcries of greenskins massing for war. Dok Toofjaw was back from the dead, the orks were saying, back to grind the tau into the sands. The water caste claimed just the opposite. The greenskins were beaten, their leaders slain.

The truth was that the war hung in the balance, and it could be won with a determined push from either side.

Atop the plateau stood a group of tau – two ethereals, each with an honour guard of two warriors from the fire caste. All six were staring up at the skies. One of the fire caste stood tall and straight, his uniform immaculate. Another had the clean and slender limbs of a youth, an ornate sword at his side. The figure between them stood to attention, but an observer might notice his shoulders were slightly slumped, as if weighed down by an invisible yoke. Last was a towering Broadside battlesuit, its missile pods softly purring with energy in case of a sudden greenskin attack.

‘One Orca,’ said Farsight for the third time in as many decs. ‘Just one.’

‘Do not embrace fear, honoured one,’ said Brightsword, the young commander’s hand resting lightly on the hilt of his blade. ‘This reinforcement craft is no doubt packed with a team of experienced war leaders to lead us to victory.’

‘I cannot tell if you are mocking your betters,’ rumbled Ob’lotai 2-0, the speakers of the Broadside carrying his voice over the wind with ease, ‘or

exhibiting the gormless optimism of youth.'

'Peace, Ob'lotai.' Farsight cast an admonishing, sidelong glance. A violent and untimely death had not changed his mentor's habit of speaking plainly, even in the presence of the blessed ethereals. The two honoured leaders behind them were no doubt listening with interest. The fact they had accompanied the fire caste at all spoke of something of significant import about to happen.

Through the swirling sandstorm came an Orca transport craft, silhouetted for a moment against the diffuse pink blur of the planet's evening sun. It was blunt and functional in its core design, yet softened by the sleek curves typical of all tau vehicles. An engine unit pivoted on each corner as it prepared to land.

The craft was large enough to contain two la'ruas of fire warriors and a similar number of battlesuit teams, but little more. Perhaps, Farsight told himself, if those teams were comprised of the most expert leaders in the empire – and perhaps, if they were split apart in defiance of all protocol to bring that expertise to bear in as many teams as possible – one Orca full of fire caste personnel could make a difference on a planetary scale.

The commander could not shake the feeling that was extremely unlikely.

The metallic sand that pervaded Arkunasha swirled in eddies as the Orca came in low, lights flashing gold. It adjusted its flight to settle amongst a cloud of rust particles like a flat-bodied ray nestling into the sand of the ocean floor.

Farsight and his warriors took one knee, holding their pulse pistols on their palms in the testament-of-blades. Close behind them, Arkunasha's ethereal overseers opened their arms in the sign of welcome. There was a hiss of unlocking hydroclamps, and the Orca's main disembarkation ramp opened in a swirl of sand. Lambent light spilled out to shine through the spiralling djinns that danced around it.

A single figure, clad in traveller's robes, emerged from the craft.

He was in the winter of his life, but wore his years easily. The diamond stud of the ethereal caste glimmered at the tip of his olfactory chasm. He smiled broadly when he saw Farsight and his escort, and raised a long, bladed polearm by way of salute before walking over with the gladness and ease of a traveller visiting old friends. At a distance behind him came two muscular warriors: shas'tral honour guard, by their robes and halberds. Farsight nodded, waiting eagerly for the battlesuits and fire warriors to disembark from the rear of the Orca dropship.

None came.

Farsight felt frustration welling up inside, curdling into despair as he turned to the ethereals behind him. Their faces remained impassive, eyes hooded as they watched their caste-mate approach. They extended the gesture of greeting, yet by their facial expressions he could tell they were not pleased to see this particular

visitor.

There would be no decisive victory here, no redemption for the lives already lost in the name of this cursed world.

‘Greetings in the name of the Tau’va!’ the newcomer called. ‘I am Aun’Shi of Vior’la.’

Aun’Shi. He Who Fought.

Farsight felt the sense of desperation swilling inside him calming, a self-belief emerging that grew stronger with every second he spent looking at the ethereal’s kindly features.

‘I am Shas’O Vior’la Mont’ka Shoh,’ said Farsight, meeting the visitor’s gaze. ‘It is truly an honour to meet you.’

‘And I am Commander Sha’vastos, of Arkunasha,’ said the officer next to Farsight, a tall warrior clad in immaculate dress uniform. He eagerly offered the sign of the willing servant. ‘It is the crowning achievement of my life to make your acquaintance. I have heard much of your personal victories over the orks, and your boundless heroism at Fio’vash.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Aun’Shi. ‘I fought the sweaty green brutes at close quarters, it is true. Between you I’ll wager you have killed thousands more be’gel than I, Commanders Farsight and Sha’vastos. It is lucky our kind is long past measuring the greatness of a warrior’s spirit by the number of kills he has made, is it not? Or else I feel I would be the one making the genuflections. My knees are cruel masters, and frankly they would not allow it. Stand, please.’

Farsight felt a flash of confusion. As the ethereal’s words sank in, his thoughts settled somewhat. He stood.

‘I myself lost a leg against the Arachen,’ he said. ‘Careless of me, in retrospect.’

‘Well, we come with a spare,’ said Aun’Shi, waving the hand-that-dispels-the-ghost.

‘Are you here to tell of the reinforcements?’ asked Farsight.

‘I am the sum total of the reinforcements, I am afraid.’

Farsight’s world turned cold as a stone, his hot-blooded confidence draining away into the sand.

Battle scars puckered in the ethereal’s face as his features twisted into a mask of empathy. ‘Not what you had hoped for, I would imagine.’

‘No,’ said Farsight. ‘I confess that is true.’

‘Well, steel yourself, commander,’ said Aun’Shi. ‘You will not like what I have to say next.’

Farsight braced himself for the news he had suspected was coming since a single Orca had descended from the clouds.

‘You have done well here,’ said Aun’Shi. ‘Famously so. You have carefully and patiently prosecuted this war, and are on the brink of a truly memorable victory. Not only that, but you have unlocked the secrets of this world, and how it came to be so barren a wasteland.’

‘The civilisation that came before us,’ said Farsight, ‘they faced the same enemy, I believe. It speaks volumes of the ork threat that the natives’ final recourse was to kill the world entire. They destroyed everything they had ever built, and cleansed the world in flame.’

‘This is the human way, in extreme circumstances,’ said Aun’Shi, his face creased with a mixture of sadness and resignation.

Then his expression changed to a bright smile, and Farsight felt his spirits soar.

‘But that is not the way of the tau! Though it has taken ten tau’cyr and more, you have all but defeated an enemy that outnumbered you four hundred to one. Using wit, forethought and valour as your tools, you have overcome a mighty foe indeed. In doing so, you have won great glory for the fire caste, and proven yourself a champion of the Tau’va in the process.’

Farsight made the sign of the grateful recipient, but already his ebullient mood was fading. Such praise was rarely given without a new challenge swift to follow – and his work was still incomplete.

‘I thank you, Aun’Shi. I assure you I will complete that which I started here with all speed and surety.’

‘I am sure you are capable of just that. However, you have done so well here that others have taken notice of your skill. The Tau empire has need of your talents elsewhere, commander. You are to begin withdrawal from Arkunasha, effective immediately.’

Farsight felt his stomach clench hard.

‘You will oversee the first phases of the extraction in person. No more attacks, no more Mont’ka strikes – only defence, from this point on, until every living tau has been extracted from the planet, fire caste included. This you will do in the name of the Greater Good.’

‘Of course,’ said Farsight with a curt nod. He bowed low and formal, almost bent double. When he stood, he could no longer meet Aun’Shi’s gaze.

‘It is necessary, commander,’ said the old ethereal with a sigh. ‘I can imagine how this feels, but it is necessary. We have a wider war to win.’

‘I cannot hope to understand the full measure of the Elemental Council’s plans,’ said Farsight. ‘I know my role.’

‘That is a solace,’ said Aun’Shi. Out of the corner of his eye, Farsight caught a glimpse of something unreadable in his expression. The elder made the sign of the castes united to each of the Arkunasha ethereals. Then he turned away, and

walked slowly back to his Orca.

‘Far-sighted one,’ said Brightsword as the ethereal and his honour guard faded into the rust-coloured haze. ‘Are we not throwing away the planet just as we finally have it within our grasp? What of those who made the worthy sacrifice to get us this far?’

‘The ethereals have spoken, Brightsword,’ said Farsight, his scowl thunderous. ‘And we shall never speak against them.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CRISIS POINT

THE *MANIFEST DREAM*

‘How could you do this to us?’

Upon the bridge of the *Manifest Dream*, Commander Farsight coughed bloody drool as his body convulsed once more. His hand still throbbed with dull pain at the slightest motion. He had been installed in a healsphere for perhaps half a rotaa after having been cut from the prototype battlesuit, but it was nowhere near enough to see him regain full health. He had remained unconscious throughout the transferral procedure, and hence had been evacuated from the combat zone, Commander Bravestorm overseeing the rearguard in his stead as the tau saviour pods had made their escape.

When the news that the ethereals were holding an emergency Elemental Council had reached him, Farsight had insisted on an early discharge from the earth caste’s care. They had reluctantly obeyed him, bearing him from the *Advent of Reason* to the bridge of the *Manifest Dream*. The *Dream* was an enormous planet-claimer ship, second only in grandeur to the *Dawn Pioneer*, and it had rescued a great many of the stricken flagship’s saviour pods with its mag-haulers.

How it had done so was a bone of contention that stuck in Farsight’s craw, and would never be dislodged.

The saviour pods had been remotely prioritised by the *Pioneer*’s auto-launchers, with those of platinum, gold, silver and chrome level given priority alongside the vast, self-contained hangars that broke away from the main body of the warship to carry the machines of the fire and air castes to safety. The rest had been left behind, consumed in the vast explosion that had resulted from the collision of the two starships. A third of the expedition lost, and all from the lowest ranks.

‘How could you consign so many of our people to such pointless deaths?’

‘Pointless?’ said Aun’Diemn. ‘They gave their lives for the Greater Good. How can you not see the virtue in that?’

‘But they did not have to die! We could have evaded the strike!’

‘Do not dishonour the memory of those who have bought us this second chance, high commander,’ said Aun’Tipiya. ‘It is not befitting of one of your rank.’ She made two fists and brought one atop the other, the lower one turning to a splayed hand as if broken by the upper. ‘They made the sacrifice of shattered jade. Costly, but worthy indeed.’

‘If it were not for their selfless act,’ said Aun’Tefan, ‘the gue’la warship may have turned its attentions instead to this craft, and the next, and the next after that. We contained it. By exposing a weakness, we turned its strength against it, beckoning it to its own destruction. Now we have cut off the wounded limb, so that the greater body may live on.’

‘And is it right that only those above *la*-rank were rescued? Is it right that every person below that rank is now dead?’

‘Unquestionably so. Theirs was a noble sacrifice, and they would have made it willingly, as you well know.’

‘You took away their ability to choose!’

‘The Tau’va demanded it. They died as heroes. The fact you challenge that shows that perhaps your understanding of the notion is not as complete as we thought.’

‘They died comatose, and under automated control,’ said Farsight. His thoughts turned to his mentor, Master Puretide, his last few years of peace torn away by the mind-mapping procedure that he himself had facilitated.

There was a palpable chill in the air as the ethereals shared meaningful glances. Then all three looked in Farsight’s direction at once. Their combined scrutiny was terrifyingly intense.

Farsight pulled together as much resolve as he could muster and ploughed on nonetheless.

‘I do appreciate that an elemental quorum gave the order for the evacuation to commence,’ said Farsight, ‘and I thank Commander Bravestorm for acting on my behalf.’

At this, the recently repaired battlesuit in the corner of the room bowed slightly at the waist. It was the first communication of any kind that Farsight and Bravestorm had shared since the evacuation.

‘But I have to say that there must have been other paths to lead away from that disaster. Paths that would not have proven so costly to our expedition. We have lost perhaps a third of our strength, and the vast majority of our basic teams.

Who knows how many kai'rotaa it will take for the reinforcement ships to reach us across the other side of the gulf?'

'Reinforcement ships?' said Aun'Tipiya. 'There will be no reinforcement ships.'

Farsight felt his mind fall backwards into a blind void. He struggled to centre himself, to find some kind of control.

'There have to be.'

'That is not so.'

'It is not the ships I seek, of course, so much as the passengers,' he said softly. 'I speak of the reinforcements to replace the losses of those *la* rank. Billions of tau lives. We cannot conquer these Imperial ravagers without them, let alone turn the enclave worlds into full septs.'

'You must find a way, high commander,' said the ethereal Aun'Tipiya, her hands held palm-upward with fingers spread in the gesture of the question-with-many-answers. 'If the Tau empire's trust in you is to be repaid, you will find a way.'

Farsight felt his blood rushing hot in his veins as the import of Aun'Tipiya's declaration sank in. They were not a vanguard of a larger expedition, as Farsight had long thought. They were the sum totality of the strength the Tau empire was prepared to commit, and every death had brought them a little closer to failure. How could he have been so blind?

To lose a third of their strength before they had even crossed the gulf... it beggared belief. But it was the fact that on some level Farsight had assumed he would have access to more resources that made him feel like a fool twice over. How had he misunderstood so badly, and so soon?

'Tau society without its lower ranks cannot work,' said Farsight. 'Those at the bottom of the hierarchy support those at the top. Without them, we will soon fall. These are the words of the Whispering Wisdom himself.'

'There are tau by the billion on the other side of the gulf,' said Ob'lotai 3-0 from the back of the bridge. 'If we can link our strength with theirs, we will have a functioning society once more.'

'You should listen to your former mentor,' said Aun'Tefan, running her fingers across her electroharp to chime a pleasing, harmonious chord. 'Even when deceased, he has wisdom to offer.'

'More than ever, I would say,' added O'Vesa, sitting forward in his command throne. 'His memory stacks are now one hundred and seventy three per cent more efficient than—'

'Thank you, Stone Dragon,' interrupted Aun'Tefan, smiling thinly. 'You may rest.'

‘And thank you, Ob’lotai, for your timely insights,’ said Farsight, his eyes narrowed as he stared at his old comrade. ‘With your memories set in liquid crystal, I am sure you remember the events of Arkunasha even more vividly than I.’

‘It is possible.’

‘Then you will remember that we were on the brink of victory when the ethereals gave the Great Decree,’ said Farsight. ‘Even a single hunter cadre could have tipped the balance, and made short work of what became several more tau’cyr of conflict. By hesitating, by withdrawing our command structure, we sacrificed thousands of tau lives. There was no reason for it, not that I could discern.’

‘Just because you cannot perceive it,’ said Aun’Tipiya, ‘does not mean it did not exist.’

‘You let them die!’ protested Farsight. ‘The very tau we made planetfall to protect! I fought for half my adult life to protect that world, to wrest victory under the most hostile and unlikely conditions I have ever seen.’ Farsight felt his breath coming in ragged gasps, felt a warning voice in his head telling him to be silent, but fierce emotions long suppressed bubbled through his mind. ‘Then, at the last moment, the aun snatched our best chance of freedom and peace away. To what end? To conserve resources? When an entire planet’s population and infrastructure were at stake? And here you have done it again, consigning countless lives to the void!’

There was nothing but ringing silence in answer. Farsight looked around, but saw only eyes cast downward. The exceptions were the three ethereals. Each stared straight at him with their heads slightly cocked at the same angle. It made Farsight feel sick inside.

‘I – I offer the deepest contrition,’ he stammered. ‘I do not know what made me speak out of turn. Please,’ he made the clasped hands of the unworthy supplicant and put them to his forehead, ‘please forgive my outburst.’

‘We know that you care deeply about the Tau’va,’ said Aun’Tefan. ‘And that is why your emotions soar high. It is well known that the blood of Vior’lans runs hot. For these reasons, and for your exemplary service to the Greater Good, we forgive you.’

Farsight bowed low.

‘Should you speak to us in this manner again, whether in public or in private counsel,’ said Aun’Tipiya, ‘you will be exiled forever.’

A cold fear crept across Farsight’s skin, puckering it in a dozen places.

‘You will trust our judgement, now and in perpetuity,’ said Aun’Tefan. ‘In this matter, we speak as one. You will rally this expedition and conquer the enclave

worlds in the name of the Greater Good. Those who have remained in stasis over the evacuation and recovery phases will have the news of their lost comrades broken to them once their diurnal cycle is re-established, and not before. Do you understand what the Tau'va asks of you?'

'I do,' said Farsight quietly. He could not bring himself to meet the gaze of any one of the ethereals. Some iron certainty told him that even had they tortured his teammates in front of him, he still could not have stood against them.

'We will enter enclave space before the end of the tau'cyr. By that time, you will have reorganised your military structure and made provision for a new garrison procedure. Complete your work on the analysis of the Imperial war doctrine and circulate it to your fellow commanders as soon as you are able.'

'I will.'

'You may leave, high commander. Remember the fate of those in your position who fail to act in the interests of the Greater Good.'

Farsight nodded, his temples stinging with stress. He cursed himself inside. No matter how many autumns he had seen, no matter how many worlds he had walked, something inside him still burned as hot as a forge, and he could not hold it at bay forever. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, it was the best of all possible assets. On days like this, he felt it would consume him, destroying him entirely.

Temper the weapon. Quench the blade. Thus do we forge the finest tools of war.

The mantras rang in his head as he left the bridge, his throat tight and his breath thick. This day, he had disgraced Master Puretide, and made himself seem a blind fool by openly challenging the wisdom of the aun. He had a stain upon his soul that would never be washed clean, not by a thousand victories.

Ultimately, that humiliation was nothing next to the absolute disaster of the crossing.

The Farsight Expedition, a spear thrust into the unknown, had been blunted and broken before it had even struck.

PART THREE

ERUPTION

*'Learn to anticipate. Learn to adapt.
Sharpen the mind, young warrior,
it is the deadliest weapon you shall ever wield.
But take care, attentive one, not to hone it too long
for it may turn upon its wielder,
cut away his certainty and his strength,
excise his confidence and slash away his love.
Take care not to turn its blade inward,
for the wounds of the mind do not heal easily.*

– Master Puretide

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ARRIVAL

VIOR'LOS SYSTEM
ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-25
456.744.M41
+++UNEXPURGATED ITERATION+++

So here I am, in orbit above Vior'los. It is an angry-looking planet, and I am not in haste to set foot upon it. Still, duty calls.

In my missive before last, I said I would tell you of the magma lakes, when I felt strong enough. That time is now, so pour an amasec – though knowing you, dear, you have one already to hand – and sit down. The following will not make for pleasant reading.

Of all the enclave worlds, Vior'los is the key, but it exists on the threshold of disaster. The lakes of molten rock under its energy farms are the site of a daily atrocity writ large. What happens there is an industrialised occurrence, slowly becoming the norm purely by virtue of its frequency. Yet it lessens all those who allow it to continue. When I think of it, I can feel my forehead burn with the likeness of the Sickened Seeker. It is not a pleasant sensation.

The planet Vior'los is studded with volcanoes, as many active as dormant. They exist due to the constantly grinding tectonic plates that cover its mantle like an ill-fitting suit of armour. The Imperium seeks to harvest the energy of these towering peaks – as do the tau. Instead of seeking a harmonious symbiosis with the planet, as would the earth caste, the tech-adepts of Vior'los have installed vast metal reservoirs within each viable volcano and above each open fault line. These are heated by the lakes of magma that swirl around the cracks in the planet's mighty crust, and the steam that billows from each reservoir is funnelled into vast turbines from which energy is generated. Plumes of sulphurous by-product drift in serried diagonal lines across the planet's sky, punctuated by the

vast cloudy masses belched out by the captive volcanoes. It is a sloppy and inefficient process, of course, wasteful and expensive in the extreme, but in a manner of speaking it works.

Uncontrolled pollution is a fact of life in the Imperium. What are a few billion ravaged lungs in the great scheme of things, after all? Personally I find the lack of effort to lessen the by-products of these sites deplorable, not that it matters; such viewpoints are long out of fashion. But it is the last innovation the tech-priests of Vior'los have made – likely more as a statement of dominance than as a genuine attempt at sourcing more power – that is the horror of which I speak. It is based on the tau themselves.

Every day the Adeptus Mechanicus send out their Skitarii legions to round up the scattered tau civilians that have been unable to leave the planet. Long columns of aliens are herded across the plains by pitiless Skitarii killers with their faces half-hidden by rebreather masks. Wherever the tau rebel – and it is always, always en masse – they are put down without hesitation by rad bullet and galvanic charge. Long trails of corpses scar the land as a result, picked over by bald carrion and mangy savannah leonids. Some of these cadavers have decayed to the point the ground is covered by long chains of broken skeletons. At the end of these bone roads are the volcano complexes where the geothermic energy is farmed.

The tau captives are marched into these underground lairs and either herded onto high platforms or pushed onto crude transit belts. Electric currents often flow through these conveyors, their charge enough to stun the tau and prevent them breaking free. Then the unfortunate captives are simply carried over the edge of mechanical cliffs to fall into the magma, each xenos civilian burning bright yellow as he or she sinks into the molten rock.

The Adeptus Mechanicus claim detachment, as usual. They say they are simply adding fuel, the better to power the steam engines high above. But I know better. This is a lesson, a statement so vile and extreme it will be carried by word of mouth across the Damocles Gulf and still further afield. The message is clear enough – those who sought to take advantage of the Imperium will find themselves on the pyre, becoming part of humanity's great war machine in a far more direct fashion than they intended. Cross the sovereign territory of Mankind at your peril. We have inhumanity to spare.

It is not only the tau that pay the price for allowing the fringe worlds to fall under the spell of the water caste. Many of those humans that complied with the tau, whether directly or through the complicity of inaction, now work the machineries above the magma lakes as indentured slaves. Their fate is a slow asphyxiation, or perhaps a quick and agonising death by scalding when the

machineries inevitably malfunction.

The strongest citizens, the heaviest set, have instead been chemically lobotomised and rebuilt as battle servitors. Their lower halves are cut away and replaced by track units even as their arms are replaced by weapons of war. The most dextrous, those who pass the Trial by Knives with all their limbs and digits intact, are instead sent to work their fingers bloody in the weapons shops. Those who fall asleep at their stations, or even so much as raise their heads, soon find an electro-scourge descending to encourage them back to work. All the while these poor benighted fools are lambasted by deafening Imperial catechisms and hypno-psalms, blasted from rank upon rank of laud hailers. These are ostensibly to reaffirm an errant people's faith in the one true creed, but it is more likely they are intended to shred what is left of their willpower. Tried and tested Imperial bombast, designed to break a man body and soul so those who witness their fate never stray a single foot from their designated roles.

It is my opinion that the Adeptus Mechanicus have voluntarily abandoned that which makes the human soul so remarkable. They neither understand nor care that their methodical tyranny might breed resentment and desperation in those they oppress. I fear our xenos enemies understand the hearts and minds of the common people far better than their overlords, and that should a rebellion occur, they will be swift to capitalise upon it.

The fringe worlds have become tinder-dry after spending so long in the heat of war. Let us hope I can stop them from burning to cinders entirely.

Inquisitor Vykola Herat
Ordo Xenos

TIMBRA SUB-SECTOR
VIOR'LOS LOW ORBIT

Farsight's every joint still ached after the ordeal of his battle in the gulf. He hung suspended once more in a healsphere, this time in the medic cells of the earth caste ship *Advent of Reason*. The thick nutrient serums swilling around him lending his body everything it needed to accelerate the recovery process. Self-regulating cannulas and articulated scaffolds formed an exoskeleton around his body. Despite the pain, he was doing everything in his power not to move, not to twitch and spasm and shudder under the composite layers of pain that assailed his mind.

It took a great deal of focus; only those who had mastered the Seven Meditations had a chance of riding out serious injury to benefit fully from a healsphere's ministrations. Farsight wanted nothing more than to sleep, to slide into the welcome embrace of unconsciousness, or at the very least to lose himself in reminiscences of simple times, decs spent well with Monat-Kais and Kauyon-Shas upon the slopes of Mount Kan'ji.

But his desires were irrelevant. There was work to be done.

On the inside of the healsphere's sterile glass walls, drone-captured footage of the Imperial boarding action played out on a dozen projected screens. Farsight's eyes danced across them, his perfectly controlled pupil movements pulling one section to prominence in one area whilst editing footage down to its pivotal moments in another. Independent focus was a true gift; he remembered Kauyon-Shas teaching him to focus on two falling leaves simultaneously one balmy autumn day, and like all truly gifted battlesuit pilots, he had mastered the technique to use it every day hence.

On one hex-screen, the gue'ron'sha stormed a well-defended auditorium

balcony that a group of fire warriors had used as a defence line. Half the Space Marines pinned the tau with grenade detonations and suppressing fire whilst the other half moved in to take enfilading shots. Good basic fire discipline, but easily countered if the defenders took maximum cover and repositioned to strike the advancing party whilst they were exposed.

On another viewing hex, Space Marines in extra-heavy armour not dissimilar to Crisis battlesuits stormed a team of stealthers. The bulky shields of the gue'ron'sha were raised to deflect cascades of burst cannon fire. Farsight blink-froze the image; the Space Marine barking orders at his fellows had forsaken his helm. He sent the still to Ob'lotai across the cadrenet for his amusement, and then devised a vertical attack trajectory that would bypass the energy shields entirely, adding it to the mirrorcodex under Weakness Exploitation.

Farsight had seen a similar phenomenon in the tankers of the Imperial armoured divisions; their commanders liked to lean from the cupolas of their vehicles even in the middle of an engagement. The more he broke down the recurring patterns and strategies at large in the Imperial attack strategy, the more limited they seemed. This was a race that had long abandoned the evolution of its tactics in favour of linear, predictable doctrine.

Slowly, painstakingly, the correlations Farsight saw in the human war methodology were catalogued and cross-referenced. With each thrust the Imperium pushed into the tau territory, he devised a parry and a riposte. With each defence the Imperials mustered against the tau, a new avenue of attack opened up.

Farsight fought to keep a cold smile from tugging at his lips as conclusions and counter-strategies crystallised in his mind. Dec by painful dec, his master work grew nearer completion.

Por Malcaor sat cross-legged in the air, hovering several hand-spans from the floor of his quarters. Around him floated nine candles he had made from his own waxy saliva and the fingers of his victims. Their tongues of flame were burning steady and long. Shimmering coronas of colour flickered between him and the candles – one minute visible, the next only present in the Empyrean – as his thoughts ebbed and flowed around the mysteries of his new existence.

In one corner of the hexagonal room was the body of an air caste pilot who had failed to let Por Malcaor pass through a corridor before him on his way through the ambassadorial suites. The stick-thin tau had looked down on him, both literally and figuratively, as he passed. The Water Spider had no patience for such things, not now he was so close to achieving his goal. He had wrapped his mantle of office around the lanky alien pilot's head, bundled him into his

quarters, and bashed his skull against the wall until it had split apart in a mess of red slop.

Por Malcaor had taken great pleasure in clipping the index finger from the tau pilot's hand. It was far longer than the others, but the Architect had no taste for uniformity, and would no doubt appreciate the stark and final change Por Malcaor had introduced into the air caste pilot's destiny.

He closed his eyes, savouring the fullness of the moment, and the thought of redemption to come.

'Great Tzeentch, Architect of Fate,' said Por Malcaor in the Dark Tongue, 'heed the sacrament of your most humble servant.' The syllables were difficult to shape at first, and his mouth felt burned and cut at the same time. Yet once he started each sentence, the words came tumbling so quickly they felt like they were forcing themselves out of his mouth.

'This day I offer you gifts. Nine lives, taken in secret.'

He breathed in deeply, robes rustling in the candlelight, and exhaled in several short bursts.

'Nine fingers, pointing to the void.'

The coronas of colour around him flared, one after another, linking him with each of the severed digits in turn.

'Nine flames, burning in your name.'

He concentrated hard on each flame in turn, staring at them from such a short distance he felt his skin begin to crisp under their heat.

'Nine souls taken in your glory.'

Por Malcaor closed his eyes. Tiny after-images of fire danced across his vision, a blurred approximation of how the psychically impoverished spirits of the tau sometimes appeared in the warp.

'These are but the first. I shall offer you an entire world of these thin souls, and of humans besides. Then, when the heavens are lit with the fires of damnation, I will ask your forgiveness one last time.'

Por Malcaor opened one eye a crack. Nothing had changed, but for the mouthful of blood that swilled around his tongue. It hurt like nothing else, a red hot blade set in a raw and tender mouth.

As the long seconds stretched past, his optimism, his anticipation, soured to bitter resentment. He spat the blood out in disgust, at himself, at his weakness and at his presumption that such meagre offerings and grandiose promises would somehow win the favour of the god that had cursed him. His concentration waned, and around him the hovering finger-candles fell to the floor, scattering and rolling in brief puffs of coloured flame.

For a moment, the candlelight illuminated the gobbets of blood Por Malcaor

had spat onto the floor.

Unmistakeably, they formed the fire-tailed sigil of the dark god Tzeentch.

Farsight stepped from the rear door of the *Silent Aftermath*, with Brightsword, Ob'lotai and Bravestorm close behind. It felt good to be back in his custom XV8, despite the advantages of the prototype he had piloted in the gulf. The control cocoon was as familiar and reassuring as if it were a second skin. He felt he could face any challenge Vior'los could throw at him, as if he had come through a trial and emerged the stronger for it.

Vior'los was a world as wild and untamed as Dal'yth was ordered and predictable. On the horizon was a chain of volcanoes, the peaks jutting at near-regular intervals like the vertebrae of a Fio'taun world-beast. Some were dormant, some were capped with tongues of flame and long plumes of smoke.

Such potential here, thought Farsight. Such boundless energy. The planet had been aggravated by the Imperials' crass idea of industry, reaching a volcanic fervour that threatened to erupt at any moment. In Farsight's mind, he saw billowing pyroclastic clouds roaring across the horizon, their violence so intense they wiped away the infestation of the Imperials and consumed the broken, war-torn remnants of the tau settlements in a single stroke.

'Perhaps it would be for the best,' he muttered.

The cadrenet blipped in response. 'High commander?' said Bravestorm. 'Your orders?'

'My apologies,' said Farsight. 'I was purely considering our macrostrategy, and spoke out of turn.'

The atmosphere was so still that the commander's audio picked up the gentle purr of Ob'lotai's missile systems, the hum of Brightsword's famed fusion blades and the low, threatening crackle of Bravestorm's onager gauntlet. After their near deaths at the hands of the gue'ron'sha, both Bravestorm and Ob'lotai had been restored to active duty by the ceaseless labours of the earth caste. To have their simmering potential for violence close at hand was reassuring, even with the matter of the evacuation still unresolved. He was even glad to be reunited with Brightsword after his cryostasis cessation – not that he had yet admitted it in the arrogant young commander's presence.

Cutting towards them from the horizon was a Mako gunship. Farsight zoomed, focusing on a smooth-cornered wedge of a craft with an ion cannon and two heavy railguns jutting alongside its foremost point. On the XV8's command and control suite the ship was ringed with screeds of analytical information, the text a healthy electrum to indicate the craft's allied status. The symbol of a red chameleon, heat rippling across it like an ember plucked from a fire, was

superimposed across the graceful craft.

‘And so we are to meet Shas’O Moata at last,’ said Brightsword. ‘I imagine you are especially keen to make his acquaintance, great one. Is he not an old team mate of Commander Shadowsun’s?’

Farsight did not rise to the bait, instead blipping across the sign of the guest-ready-to-receive. He extruded his XV8’s manipulator gauntlets and turned its palms face up, his sensor head bowing in respect. In doing so, he showed humility, but also displayed that he had one of the most advanced battlesuits in the entire Tau empire.

The Mako came around in a wide half-curve, ash billowing from the downdraft of its descent. The four red battlesuits drank in a wide spectrum of stimulus. Antennae vanes panned up and down as their sensor heads swivelled smoothly left and right. Info suites churned through their data harvests. Yet Farsight could not shake the feeling something was out of true.

Updates cascaded down the side of Farsight’s environment analyser. The XV8’s instruments were fuzzed, in places, by some strange static; Farsight had at first put the phenomenon down to the vast pyro-electric forces churning beneath the planet’s crust. He checked again for life signs nearby; his suit’s sonar registered several collections of biological matter, but none contained enough liquid mass to correlate with anything larger than a kroothawk. The high commander filed his analysis under pending, and prepared himself for the rendezvous he had been dreading since Dal’yth.

The Mako had landed, and it lit the ash plains with a cool blue glow as the passenger ramp structure unfolded slowly from its hull. The rear door irised open, and a tall tau warrior clad in the official dress of Vior’los stepped out. It had to be Shas’O Moata. Escorted by a quartet of drones, the figure made the sign of imminent greeting before walking down the ramp onto the ashen ground.

The staccato drill-sound of sub-machine guns rang out from the ashen hillocks on the left. Moata was lit by the blinding flash of his personal drones’ force field, then pitched off his feet as the sheer volume of solid shot fire that was poured into his defences overcame the drones’ shield limits. Farsight was already moving, his battlesuit blasting from diplomatic stillness to full war mode in the matter of a heartbeat. His sensors had pinpointed the source of the sound – it had come from a ridge of black, coal-like detritus. His plasma rifle flared hot in readiness.

Almost in range to strike.

The ridge was suddenly obliterated in a lateral storm of pulse cannon fire, sustained and focused as it panned back and forth. Three explosions of red liquid discoloured the clouds of off-white ash that rose up from the volley.

Farsight panned left in confusion, his finger a hair's breadth from the plasma rifle's activation icon. Shimmering on his flank was a bulbous suit of stealth armour, only visible because of the drifting ash clouds that billowed around it. The white fog was divided by the oncoming stealth-form as the flickering figure strode down the dunes towards Farsight.

'They mask their energy signatures with neurostatic,' said the newcomer, his voice confident and deep. 'Not much flesh and blood left to detect.'

'Are you then Shas'O Vior'los Y'ken Moata?' said Farsight, pulling up a dual informative to show both the stealthier and the dignitary that had exited the Mako.

'I prefer the Burning Chameleon,' said the stealth suit's pilot. 'Though Moata is formal enough for me.'

'Did you just use us as bait, Moata?' said Bravestorm.

'Not quite,' replied the stealthier, 'I used you as a catalyst, and as an excuse to make myself look vulnerable. Or rather, to add veracity to my latest stand-in. My thanks, Ui'Vrenda. The Greater Good salutes you.' The stealth suit sketched a bow, its high-yield burst cannon tucked across its waist.

The dignitary that had debarked from the Mako, already being borne away on a hover-bier by two earth caste medics that had exited the gunship, raised a shaking hand in response.

'Do not feel unwelcome,' said Moata, turning back to Farsight. 'The Imperial forces that we fight here would far rather their assassins destroyed me than a visiting officer, even one of your pedigree.'

Farsight nodded, his XV8's sensor head dipping. 'Of course. I am Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr, known to most as High Commander Farsight.'

'Shadowsun spoke well of you,' said Moata. 'It is an honour.'

'May I ask what she said about me?' asked Farsight.

'I am Ob'lotai 3-0,' interjected Farsight's old mentor smoothly, the Broadside stepping forward with its heavy railgun sweeping out and low in a gesture of subservience. 'Although I am not technically alive, it is still a highlight of my existence to visit the new world Vior'los. Perhaps we should turn our thoughts to immediate strategy, given the situation.'

'The Warghost,' said Moata. 'I have heard tell of your accuracy ratios.'

The Broadside inclined its sensor head in acknowledgement.

'Ob'lotai is right,' said Bravestorm. 'We are wasting time once more.'

'This is Commander Bravestorm of Dal'yth,' said Farsight, motioning to the iridium XV8. 'He is here only to kill.'

'He will not be short of opportunity,' said Moata.

'This planet has inestimable potential,' said Farsight. 'If we can scour it clean,

burn away the Imperial spoor encrusting it, I feel sure the earth caste could harness it to drive the Second Sphere Expansion even further into the stars.'

'The humans will not give it up without a fight,' said Moata. 'A show of strength, to the Imperial mind-set, is almost always taken as a challenge.'

'These gue'la are much like the kroot ape,' agreed Ob'lotai, 'even making eye contact is an invitation for an exchange of grievous violence.'

'I would welcome that,' said Bravestorm. 'We tore apart their cordon on the fringes easily enough. We can eradicate every trace of them if we so desire.'

'So simple!' snapped Farsight. 'Were you not present at Dal'yth? Did the earth caste not scrape you from the corridors of the *Dawn Pioneer* after a squad of gue'ron'sha overcame you?'

Bravestorm said nothing, his XV8 taking a step back as if physically struck.

'To underestimate a powerful foe is to give him your sword!' continued Farsight. 'These humans have colonised the galaxy through strength, obstinacy and misplaced faith. That is a dangerous combination. Their gue'ron'sha are more than a match for our finest, the Imperials have nearly killed you twice over, and yet you still speak of them as if they were no more than insects waiting to be crushed underfoot. It makes me ashamed to think that we once shared a rank!'

Bravestorm shook his sensor head, clumsily raising his shield in a gesture of utmost defence. The sight made Farsight's rage dissipate like mist in the sun.

'This planet is vital, commander,' he sighed. 'Even with its geothermic power harnessed by the humans' crude capacitor coils, Vior'los forms the energy breadbasket for the worlds around it. Yet they waste more than they could ever use. They have not the wit to employ the tau infrastructure we installed here, nor the technology to capture the potential of the neighbouring systems without years of construction beforehand. But they have more than enough raw power to shatter our expedition into ruin if we give them a chance.'

'Take this planet back, and we can break the chain the Imperials have forged around the enclave worlds,' said Moata. 'We must outwit them if we are to achieve that goal.'

'That was my conclusion,' said Farsight. 'Our grand strategy is much like the siege, but we will starve them of energy, not sustenance. And though it may take us several tau'cyr to do it, we will claim these worlds for the Greater Good, starting here upon Vior'los.'

'Our beloved high commander has always been fond of symbolism, Moata,' said Ob'lotai. 'Conquering a world of flame and sulphur appeals to his sense of theatre.'

Farsight inclined his head, a tacit admission that his old mentor was not too far from the truth.

‘So we still have strength enough to do it, despite the disaster in the gulf?’ asked Bravestorm, his usual bombast absent for once.

‘That remains to be seen,’ said Ob’lotai.

Farsight kept his peace, but inside he felt the sting of failure threaten to rise up like bitter stomach acid. The answer to Bravestorm’s question was almost certainly in the negative. Ob’lotai would likely already have run hundreds of theoretical simulations given the data available; for him to report only an inconclusive diagnosis was as good as an admission of defeat, and those closest to him knew it. There was a reason why young Brightsword was keeping his peace on the matter. He too felt the battle was lost before it had even begun.

In lieu of answering Bravestorm’s question, Farsight strode forward and triggered the hollow sampler cylinders under his XV8’s heels. They thudded into the planet’s crust and withdrew immediately, the battlesuit’s interior scanners already hard at work. A few microdecs later the results flashed across Farsight’s environmental suite. ‘Take your own geological readings, please,’ he said. ‘I wish to draw something to your attention.’

The data sample correlated perfectly with those Farsight had taken as soon as he had left the *Advent*. The planet’s crust was close to barren, with only the hardiest cacti able to eke a life from its meagre soil. The strata of ash and soot deposited upon it by the supervolcano chains had choked most complex life forms from the planet, but the readout showed that a thin dusting of a different kind of ash covered the upper layer. Its composition was far from the igneous, pumice-rich signature of the others; if the preliminary reading was accurate, it was biological in nature.

Farsight’s stomachs curdled as the suit matched the genetic signature underneath the ash.

‘Is your analysis suite giving you the same environmental readings as mine?’ asked Bravestorm softly.

‘The ash,’ said Farsight. ‘I have just confirmed it.’

‘Yes,’ said Moata, ‘I am afraid it is... biological.’

‘It is tau.’

A moment passed, the words hanging in the still air.

‘They will all die for this,’ said Bravestorm. ‘Every one.’

‘We shall act as the Tau’va dictates,’ said Farsight dully. ‘Nothing more, nothing less.’

‘You saw the water caste’s debrief?’ said Ob’lotai. ‘The strength they have here?’

‘Cyborg soldiers numbering upwards of fifteen million,’ said Moata. ‘Unaugmented gue’la numbering slightly under eight million, with the vast

majority labouring in one thousand and twelve energy farms. Since the Imperial counter-offensive they call the Damocles Crusade, they have reinforced their strength here a hundred times over.'

'I know what you are about to say, Ob'lotai,' said Farsight. 'I am well aware of the disparity between our duty to the Code of Fire, and the reality of our situation.'

'We lost over a third of our force in transit,' said the Warghost. 'We cannot take them.'

'Tau'va, Ob'lotai, do you think I do not know that? Do you forget the lessons of Arkunasha so easily?' Farsight's battlesuit stomped over to stand in front of the Broadside, an unmistakable display of confrontation. 'We can do this. We were outnumbered four hundred to one, and yet we defeated the orks there. It took ten tau'cyr, and hundreds of thousands of lives were lost, but we defeated them. Just as we will overcome the humans here.'

The right words, thought Farsight. He only hoped he had delivered them convincingly enough to hide the abyss of doubt in his soul.

'It is true,' said Bravestorm. 'The high commander has deciphered the human war schematic. It made my blood pound to read it.'

'The mirrorcodex is incomplete,' said Farsight, 'but it should more than suffice. It is fear that has conquered the people of Vior'los. Fear is the tool of tyrants, and the more it tightens its grip, the more brittle it becomes. We can turn it against them.'

'I hope you are right,' said Moata. 'You have not yet seen the foe.'

'I have all faith in your methods, O'Shovah, of course,' said Ob'lotai. 'But this time they are ready for us. They will seek a war on their terms.' The inverted swords of the victory-that-is-loss appeared on Farsight's cadrenet informative.

'They will not find it.' Farsight flicked the symbol away with a glance.

There was a distant roar as a volcano spat flame in the distance. Farsight frowned, and opened an exo-cadre command link. The symbol of the Stone Dragon flashed for a moment before unfolding to reveal the earth caste genius behind.

'Greetings, high commander,' said O'Vesa with a shallow bow. 'How can we work towards the Tau'va this day?'

'O'Vesa, I have a challenge for you. Could you in theory trigger an eruption from a dormant volcano?'

'That is more Worldshaper's sphere of expertise, but I shall consult her on the matter.'

'You have my thanks,' said Farsight. 'It could lend us a pivotal advantage.'

'I understand your intent. Only the Imperials would build their power stations

in such volatile environments without extensive failsafes.'

'Should we fail to conquer the humans swiftly,' said Ob'lotai, 'we will lose even more of our strength, and have no chance of freeing the other enclave worlds.'

Farsight sighed inwardly. There were times when his old mentor's pragmatism was as much a curse as a blessing. 'Perhaps we will not need to,' he said, his battlesuit straightening as he turned to his fellow officers. 'Perhaps, through humility, we will find salvation.'

On his exo-cadre link, Farsight slid a priority communion request over the blue arachnid symbol of the Water Spider.

The *Deific Splendour* cut through the swelling tides of the warp, riding the vast rivers of the immaterium as a piece of flotsam might ride a raging flood. Within its hulls, almost a thousand of humanity's most lethal warriors sparred, meditated and saw to their wargear, intent on the battles to come. Many of the Scar Lords had been recovered from the *Scabbard of Flesh* after the climactic strike against the tau flagship, the ash of penance upon their foreheads ever since they had stepped from the gunships that had rescued them. The censure just made them all the more eager to fight. Perhaps one in a hundred felt a seed of concern that they might arrive too late, that their abortive attack in the gulf and rendezvous with the *Splendour* had cost them too much time, but they pushed the doubts down as they had long trained to do. One way or another, the xenos would be crushed.

Deep within the giant spaceship's labyrinthine guts, the practice cages shook and rattled as two bald giants, each bare to the waist, fought to outdo one another against the skeletal metal constructs that populated the cages. Each wielded a long broadsword forged from a single ingot of titanium. They were dull of edge, but they could still break bone with a solid impact. The stamp and thump of huge, bare feet on the iron grates of the cage floor was a barbaric tattoo, the drumbeat of a culture obsessed with war and thunder.

The first warrior was heavily built to the point of caricature, his ravaged skin covered with a thick sheen of oily sweat. His face was burned and torn, and his broad frame was packed with muscle so dense that with every lunge and blow, sloping ridges formed and smoothed away across his limbs. His companion was lithe and tall in comparison, but still powerful. The blows he landed upon the constructs in the cages were measured and precise rather than forceful and blunt, but no less effective. Both warriors had long striations of scar tissue on their limbs, each cicatrix thick and ropy.

Wherever a blow from a sword hit the wire-tendoned facsimiles, the cages to

which they were attached would clang and shudder. To a normal man, the noise would have been a deafening racket, disorienting in the extreme. To a Space Marine, the clamour was invigorating, a welcome break from the ennui of space travel.

‘A little slow, brother,’ said Caelos, his broadsword smashing a barrel-chested combat servitor aside and taking down another on the backswing in the space it took his tall rival to down a single adversary.

‘Better slow than blind,’ replied Vaethosis, taking the head from another one of the servitors with a classic Engelosian sweep.

‘Is there something you wish to broach, Epistolary?’

‘Aye,’ said Vaethosis, his backswing coming less than an inch from Caelos’ burned and stub-like ear, ‘there is.’

‘Then spit it out,’ said Caelos.

‘You still fight like a captain!’ said the Librarian, his voice a nasal hiss. ‘Your focus is on combat.’ He swung again, then thrust, a shower of sparks marking another servitor’s demise. ‘You focus on yourself, and on your wounds, all but ignoring your battle brothers and the worlds around you. Even in challenging me to test myself against your blade, you show yourself as inward-looking, unworthy for the post of Chapter Master.’

Caelos said nothing for a moment, running a combat servitor through the chest with an impaling charge. Then he turned, ripping his blade free and letting it fall. ‘I am listening.’

‘You made it back to the Imperial fleet by fortune more than skill. If the *Winged Falchion* had not been nearby, you and your command squad would likely have died in that boarding action.’

‘As you say. Yet was it not your command that saw the *Scabbard of Flesh* consigned to an untimely death?’ Thin strings of drool flew from Caelos’ blackened cheek as he lashed out without looking, the tip of his sword striking a combat servitor’s head from its neck. ‘Was it not you that signed the death warrant of a warship that has served the Scar Lords for thousands of years? How many battle brothers died as a result of that headlong charge?’

‘I had no choice. It had become infested with scavenger-daemons. Better it died in fire than bear that empyric curse for a moment longer.’

‘We could have cleansed them! Enlisted the aid of the Knights of Titan, and banished them back to their hell-realm!’

‘No,’ said Vaethosis. ‘The Grey Knights would have been there at the time, if they were going to intervene at all. We salvaged what we could, and turned a broken shield into a blade.’

Caelos felt the truth of that, and it hurt. ‘You did not consult me,’ he said, his

tone dangerous. He smashed a servitor with the back of his blade, its body coming apart in a shower of metal shards. ‘You could have sent a telepathic missive.’

‘Not with an empyric overlap so close at hand,’ said the Epistolary, ‘not without drawing the attention of a thousand warp-things.’

Caelos sighed heavily. ‘What’s done is done. I have already given the order for our ships to move in pursuit of the wider tau fleet. They will lead us straight to the areas they consider most vital. Meanwhile, cease this talk of impropriety. The men look up to you. And my tally speaks for itself.’ At this, he brought his broadsword up and around in an overhead sweep that bisected a combat servitor from shoulder to hip.

The Librarian’s eyes blazed, and cerulean fire cascaded out from his gaze to line his heavy iron blade with flickering energy. He charged, blade lashing out again and again to smash the combat servitors in Caelos’ path into flinders of twisted metal.

‘You use the weapons of the mind in a training bout?’ said Caelos, his tone incredulous as he let his blade drop to his side. ‘Is your need to win so fierce?’

‘The psyche is the most potent asset we have against these tau,’ replied Vaethosis. ‘When the body is found wanting, be it disabled, trapped, or even rendered comatose, the mind can fight on. You need only look to the Master of Mankind to know that.’

His expression troubled, his burn-scars weeping, Caelos turned away.

‘It is a lesson you must learn quickly. Fight with the mind, not the body, and you will carry far more than a single battle. You will change history itself. Focus only on yourself, and you disrespect Lord Raevor’s memory with every moment you draw breath.’

The Chapter Master nodded once. ‘In my soul, I know you are right. Perhaps I have let my hatred of these xenos cravens rob me of a wider perspective. It is not becoming of a senior officer, let alone the Master of an entire Chapter. I will not make the same mistake again.’

‘See that you do not,’ said Vaethosis, ‘unless you wish to be remembered as an impostor, rather than a king.’

‘Have a care, epistolary,’ said Caelos, the tip of his sword flicking up to point at Vaethosis’ throat. ‘My patience has been known to fray.’

‘And that is why I fear you will lead us into damnation,’ said the Librarian gently, pushing the sword away with his palm. He let the psychic corpusant fade from his blade in a hiss of cyan mist. ‘I beg of you, Caelos. Prove me wrong.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MIRRORCODEX

VIOR'LOS, NORTH VIOR EXPANSE

A double column of Imperial battle tanks prowled the pumice flats of the North Vior Expanse, scattering ash with their churning tracks. They ground into single file in a complex manoeuvre that saw the two columns meshing into one like the teeth of grinding cogs, ordered by their machine-priests into near perfect collaboration. Ahead of the column was a jagged ford that led over a saline lake, a natural path across thrown up by a grinding tectonic collision that had left a ridge jutting from the gently bubbling saltwater.

The lead vehicles were a trio of squat battle tanks modified to carry the pre-fabricated, charcoal grey camo-slabs common to the fringe worlds. Picking a careful path across the ford, they avoided the lake's lapping waters. For them to stray even a foot into that milky, acidic solution was to risk malfunction and abandonment in a region where potable drinking water was as rare as good meat.

There was a shimmer under the brackish water's surface, and three stealth suit teams straightened up, their bulbous head-units poking above the water as their dripping cannon-arms rose to take aim at the passing tank squadron.

Ahead, Ob'lotai 3-0 stood up from a submerged basin, wading through the salt water to bring level the heavy railgun he had commandeered the cycle before. A staggered volley of battle cannon shells hurtled out towards him, but Ob'lotai did no more than turn his shoulder into the volley. The shells detonated on his pauldron and chest, rocking him backwards, but not felling him. He righted himself and came on.

Then he returned fire. His railgun mag-launched its cylindrical ammunition, the hypervelocity shot fired at such incredible momentum it smashed straight through camo-slabs and frontal armour alike to burst from the target tank's rear in an explosion of metal shards. The bloody remnants of its crew followed a

microsecond later, pulped by a hail of spall and the pressure wave of the incredibly violent impact. Buckled inside and out by such wrenching force, the battle tank exploded, its fuel reserves igniting. A massive fireball lit the column behind. The railgun cylinder had already continued on its course, slamming into the tank behind with force enough to scramble its sensors and stun the driver inside.

The order to fire freely crackled over Imperial comms nets, and one squadron after another opened fire in return. The vehicles in the main body of the column pivoted their turrets to fire shells at the rippling outlines of their stealth suit persecutors, but they found nothing but sulphurous steam. Most of the battlesuits had already sank back into the water and slipped away to attack anew. Less than a minute later the tank at the rear of the column blew up in a ball of flame and greasy black smoke, its fuel cylinders detonated by sustained burst cannon fire.

Ob'lotai strode forward and stood, legs braced, right in front of the burning wreckage of the foremost tank. Engaging his blacksun filter's sonic imagers, he fired again and again through the holes his first shot had torn in the wrecked battle tank. So closely packed were the vehicles on the ford behind that each shot slammed through another tank, then another, a killing rhythm that punctured the Imperial armour as if it were no more than brittle wood.

The tankers, in desperation, sent their left and right tracks grinding in opposite directions to pivot their vehicles around on the spot before changing gear and venturing out into the saline lake. The fronts of the vehicles dipped, then slowly sank. Many of the crew opened their hatches and evacuated their vehicles, preferring to brave the tau firepower than face a slow death drowning in acidic water.

Many of the tank crews, covering their mouths with scraps of cloth to escape the worst of the lake's eggy stink, screwed bayonets to their long rifles and prepared to make their last charge, no doubt inspired by the barked orders of their tank commanders and the rhetoric of their tactical primers. On the cusp of hearing, the purring engines of tau bombers were growing steadily louder. Those soldiers at the rear of the column turned in mounting terror, squinting into the mist.

The tanker teams that broke and ran were cut down by whipping volleys of pulse fire from the burst cannons of the stealth teams. A few vehicles succeeded in making a break for it, sheets of saline spume thrown up by their tracks as they found their way back to solid ground. In doing so they exposed their flanks to Ob'lotai's railgun, and were methodically destroyed.

In less than two minutes, every human in the tank column was nothing more than a cooling corpse.

‘Where are those damn tanks!’ shouted Brother-Captain Drexian. Around him, his fellow Hammers of Dorn ran to take up gunner’s crouches behind a long strip of synthplas that had once formed a tau communications tower. Their bolter fire ripped fist-sized chunks out of the strange floating rampart the tau had brought out from the lee of the Weeping Cliffs, ivory shrapnel spinning in all directions with each detonation.

The first and second volleys had been aimed at the ochre-armoured fire warriors standing atop the rampart, but a force field of elongated blue hexagons protected them from each impact, detonating the bolts prematurely. Drexian had ordered his men to destroy the rampart itself, but it was slow going without armoured support. The heavy firepower of the Baleghast 331st’s Lemman Russ squadrons would have torn them to shreds in moments, laying the floating fortress open to a lethal kill-strike from the Space Marines, but their allies were nowhere to be seen.

‘Storm it,’ said Drexian grimly. ‘Tacticum Septimus from the Codex. First element advance, second element suppress. Flank and enfilade.’

‘Aye, brother-captain,’ came a chorus of responses from Drexian’s sergeants. All around him, pockets of stark black and yellow armour appeared amongst the shattered ruins, one ten-man squad after another abandoning its drop pod beachhead to split into two five-man units. As their battle-brothers stood up to level a hurricane of bolter fire, the first elements sprinted, leaped and charged headlong towards the unprotected flank of the tau rampart.

A dozen Hammerhead tanks drifted into view atop the crumbling lip of the Weeping Cliffs, their vantage point a perfect firing position to slaughter those in the open below. Drexian cursed himself. No heavy Imperial tank could have made it up there, but the tau used a kind of anti-gravity technology that was far more versatile. He had underestimated their warrior caste this day, and likely for the last time.

Turret-mounted ion cannons whined to full power, and in a firestorm of plasma spheres, the Space Marines were cut down to a man.

‘Drexian! Where in the Emperor’s name are you? We should be taking them apart!’

Abraksis of the First Hammers strode forward as if into a raging gale, his storm shield raised to deflect the lancing volleys of azure fire. The massed tau rifle-drones were punching a near constant hurricane of plasma into them. Their fire patterns overlapped with such mechanical efficiency that barely a second went past without one of the First Hammers taking a punching impact on his storm shield. To lower the energised bulwarks for even a moment was to invite a

killing shot.

Still Squad Abraksis was making ground, slowly and determinedly. The indomitable combination of Terminator armour and storm shield had been proof against every weapon the xenos could throw against them, and even a wounded Space Marine was a lethal opponent at close quarters. Abraksis was confident that every stride forward was a step towards retribution.

The Terminator sergeant saw a set of cylinders spin through the air towards him. A moment later there was an intense flash of light that rendered his autosenses glitching and inoperable. Electrogheists danced across his lens arrays, leaving static and gibberish in their wake.

‘Shields high!’ he shouted, raising his shield to cover his face entire. ‘Helms off!’ He mag-clamped his thunder hammer behind the storm shield and took off his malfunctioning helmet with a hiss of releasing valve-seals, his battle-brothers following suit behind him. ‘Gather close,’ he ordered, ‘Codex-pattern overlap. Advance towards the heaviest fire. This is a xenos ploy, I can taste it.’

The Terminators stepped in shoulder to shoulder, those at the back turning their shields and walking sidelong. Even should the enemy ambush them from the rocky wastes behind, they would meet only a wall of energised ceramite and plasteel.

Blocky shadows danced on the ground. The cold tingle of suspicion crept over Abraksis’ scalp as some sixth sense warned him that their walking fortress had one weak spot left.

‘Shields up!’ he shouted, raising his eyes to the heavens.

It was too late. The last thing Abraksis saw was a trio of deep red battlesuits silhouetted against a blazing sun.

The hunter cadre designated Sundering Blade sped through the lava tunnels of Mount Vasocris, their ochre-hulled transports and gunships skimming in single file. The mobile tau army was completely enclosed by the huge dusty tubes that lined Vasocris’ slopes, hidden from the sight of the Imperial facilities on the great peak’s shoulders.

Mount Vasocris erupted perhaps once in a thousand years, though what it lacked in frequency it more than made up for in strength. Whilst igneous rock was hurled for kilometres in all directions, the magma that overflowed from its caldera poured out in thick, globular rivers that spilled down the sides of that mountainous cone. The tubes had once been streams of rich orange lava so thick they formed complex deltas as they had cascaded down the shoulders of the mighty supervolcano. The exterior surfaces cooled and turned to static rock as the streams found new paths down the scree-covered slopes. Their interiors had

continued to flow, however, running out onto the flatlands far below. Now they were tunnels, hollow and inert, pitch black and cold but for the lights of the tau vehicles speeding inside them.

Over time these flat tubes had become hidden by dunes of ash and dust, buried by the debris of aeons. They had been used as smuggling tunnels by Vior'los' criminal elements in the past, but the formal institutions of the Imperium had long forgotten about them. Within days of making low orbit, however, Worldshaper had discovered their potential using the sonic resonators of the *Advent of Reason*, catalogued them and sent the data to the fire caste as a potential point of interest. It was not long before Farsight and his strategic teams had field-tested the use of this hidden network, and dispatched a dozen strike elements to move unseen upon the geothermic facilities of the human machine-caste.

The Sundering Blade cadre was the first to move on their targets, slipping silently through dusty lava tunnels lit only by the searchlights and scan-readers of the vanguard craft.

The geothermic energy farm was a matter of metres away when the first elements of the cadre turned their guns on the rock wall of the lava tubes. In a storm of glowing blue pulse fire, the sides of the lava tunnels were blasted away, and the cadre moved out on the attack even as the dust was still settling.

The machine-caste complex beyond was a vast, ironwork cage built around a deep square pit. Inside that cavernous hole were enormous metallic coils that spiralled down into the hidden belly of the supervolcano. Thousands of soot-stained workers were passing buckets of dirty water in long human chains that led all the way down to the sulphurous river of the Vasocris Valley below.

Some of the worker-slaves turned to look at the sudden explosion of activity as the tau attacked, but others had been so badly beaten down they did not so much as raise their heads. Whenever the towers glowed hot enough to melt, the workers still went about their business, dousing the giant spiralling towers even as their hair and flesh crisped in the heat. The scars of buzzwhip and power goad marred their rag-clad flesh; cyborg guards in the uniform of the electro-priest lashed those who faltered with long sparking cables. Each blow left a livid pink weal amongst the blackened scabs and burns caused by the sparks and embers of the pyroclastic winds.

Cresting the tops of the giant energy cage were crenulated bastions manned by helmeted cybernetic warriors. As the tau armoured assault fanned out from the dust, the machine-caste troops set up long arquebus-style rifles on the battlements of the framework castle. Their long-range shots punched into the leading Devilfish transports with force enough to smash straight through the

sophisticated armour.

One of the ochre skimmers veered out of position, flames gouting from its stricken wing, before ploughing into the black scree that covered the peak. Fire warriors debarked from its side door, clambering behind the wreckage to use it as an impromptu firing position. The crack of rifles and the whine of discharging pulse weaponry filled the air, drowning out the stentorian hymns that boomed from the laud hailer arrays on each stanchion of the framework castle.

The machine-caste warriors had reacted with impressive speed, but the tau's method of approach had allowed them to all but surround the enemy facility at the loss of only a few vehicles. The trap was already closed. The markerlights of networked drones flickered out, and the arquebusiers atop the battlements were lit by red designator beams. A hail of shots slashed diagonally upwards from the tanks and their debarking fire caste passengers, each volley so accurate that the shelter afforded by the battlements was nullified entirely. The sallet helms of the cyborg vanguard lent them little protection. Puffs of blood and brain matter exploded outwards as the tau pitilessly scoured all life from the crenulated cage.

On the right flank, an armoured assault of Devilfish and piranhas moved in, their burst cannons blazing. The cyborgs ran along the battlements, levelling their carbines and hammering radium-infused bullets into the light skimmers closest to the energy farm. As one the skimmer tanks of the armoured assault backed off, taking more hits as they went, but only losing a few of their number. When they reached the threshold where the cybernetic warriors ceased their fire, they sent their diagnostic reports to the rest of the cadre. The tau reserve skimmers took up positions just outside of the machine-caste's effective range, and levelled killing volleys of their own.

Besieged from all sides, the defenders of the cage-like structure were hammered by smart missiles, pulse rifles and railgun fire. Though scores of cyborg overseers and guards were cut apart, not a single round hit the workers beneath. Many of the benighted serfs still toiled on, half-blind and deaf to outside stimulus as they continued to baptise one malfunctioning geothermic coil after another. Much to the surprise of the fire caste that had killed their masters, not one of the indentured workers broke and ran.

When they were certain that the cybernetic troops had been slain, the tau moved in, the noose closing tight as they consolidated their position. Only then did the machine-caste counterstrike attack. Several warrior groups that had hurried up from the industrial workings around the edge of the pit crested the edge, guns crackling and booming, to take a lethal toll on the tau that had moved in close. The Sundering Blade fought back hard, their missiles and pulse rounds ripping into cyborg legions with clinical efficiency.

As minutes turned into hours, piles of red-robed bodies mounted up on the edges of the pit, yet still the machine-caste came on. The second wave fell, then the third, but each new assault took a chunk of the hunter cadre with them. The fourth wave, using the fallen bodies of their predecessors as impromptu barricades from which to mount a point defence, brought up heavy walkers armed with neutron cannons that punched tau skimmers from the air with each shot.

The command to withdraw blinked across the cadrenet. The surviving tau began to fall back, each Devilfish swooping low to allow its passengers to climb back inside. The cyborgs, seeing their foes moving away, came over their grisly barricades to stride forwards, rifles raised to the shoulder. Those at the vanguard fired in near-perfect synchronicity before stepping aside, those behind them striding forward to take their own shot. They in turn allowed the next wave to shoot, and the next, each wave covering the next with clockwork timing.

The tau infantry were soon scrambling to the safety of their skimmers. Many were caught by the sudden and vicious attack. They were shot down in droves.

By the time the last of the ochre vehicles had borne their bloodied warrior teams back to the safety of the lava tubes, over half the cadre's strength lay dead upon the black scree.

Throughout it all the energy farm's workers toiled on, too broken to do anything but obey.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EXTREME MEASURES

VASOCRIAN COLOSSEUM, VIOR'LOS

‘Por Malcaor,’ said Farsight, ducking down from his vantage point upon the inert caldera the humans called the Vasocrian Colosseum. The stylised image of the Water Spider unfolded into a hexagonal informative on his XV8’s exo-cadre command screen, revealing a smiling tau face. ‘So you are still with us.’

‘But of course I am,’ said the magister. ‘I am enjoying myself immensely.’

‘I heard from Ob’lotai you left a bridge council under strange circumstances.’

‘That is true. You could say I was in an emotional state after witnessing the death of my caste-mates. However, I would not miss this grand visitation of violence for the world.’ Undiluted glee shone in the Water Spider’s eyes. ‘How can I best help you exterminate this unfortunate infestation?’

Farsight sighed. ‘It is not the wider civilian issue I wish to address,’ he said, ‘but that of their masters.’

‘I do not fully understand,’ said the Water Spider, his mirth fading fast. ‘I thought we were here to destroy all human life.’

‘We cannot, even if we wanted to,’ said Farsight with a frown. ‘This is not a matter of simple destruction.’

‘So how do you plan to win this planet back?’

Farsight made the interlaced fingers of the spider’s web. ‘I have spent many kai’rotaa codifying their war schematic, and it is proving time well spent. My cadres are using my treatise, which my advisors call the Mirrorcodex, to unpick the Imperial strategies before they happen. The war progresses well, for the most part.’

Por Malcaor nodded eagerly. ‘It does my spirit good to hear that.’

‘Do not rejoice yet, for we are still severely outnumbered. We have done perhaps a thousandth of the work necessary if we are to conquer this world

through force.’

‘Surely the might of the expedition is enough to take one small Imperial world?’

‘Perhaps in time,’ said Farsight, ‘but victory here must be swift. Vior’los is but one of four principal planets I believe integral to our success. We cannot tarry here, and with all our warriors of *la*-caste lost in the gulf crossing, we are in danger of having our swift strike ground into a war of attrition. I will not see the nightmare of Arkunasha repeated.’

‘And so you wish the water caste to join forces with those of the fire,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘If the cadrenet is anything to go by, my colleagues are thrilled with the footage your drones have supplied in the last few engagements.’

‘It is not a *Por’sral* information-war I speak of,’ said Farsight. ‘Not in the conventional sense, at least. I wish to trigger an uprising. Many of the humans that live on Vior’los once joined the Tau’va willingly. They may wish to serve the same ideals again.’

Por Malcaor snorted; it was an ugly sound. ‘They did not join the Tau’va through willingness to serve an ideal. They joined it because they believed it would benefit them directly, change their circumstances to give them more in the way of wealth or freedom than they had before.’

‘Then you believe that the humans have no sense of commonality at all?’

‘They understand it, academically,’ said Por Malcaor, gesturing dismissively, ‘but they care only for themselves. All other concerns are secondary. One human would work to the downfall of another if it would benefit him to do so.’

‘Then I doubt they could ever understand the Tau’va,’ said Farsight sadly.

‘There are many ways to harness their immense self-interest, believe me,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘The Imperium’s rulers oppressed the lower classes with unstinting and heavy-handed force. There is always great resentment amongst their ranks. It is easy enough to plant seeds of corruption in such fertile soil.’

‘I saw sign of this on the recent informatives. The footage from the lava tunnels of Mount Vasocris indicated clearly that their worker caste is heavily abused. I saw a similar scene within the battleship that ambushed us in the gulf. Yet they seem not to want their freedom, even when it is there to be taken. We had every advantage upon the slopes of Vasocris, and the Mont’ka trap we coordinated was extremely effective. I helped devise it myself, and I still stand by it. Yet still we were forced to withdraw after taking heavy casualties. The uprising we had hoped for simply failed to materialise.’

‘So we must escalate.’

‘You may be right. The machine caste known as the *Ad-ep-duss Meck-an* –’

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus,’ interjected Por Malcaor.

‘Yes. They have brought thousands of reinforcements to bear in the space of a single dec. The confusion and fear our strike was intended to generate appeared to have no effect.’

‘Oh?’ asked the Water Spider innocently.

‘Almost all of their worker caste simply kept on performing their allotted tasks.’

‘Perhaps you are using the wrong stimulus,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘The civilians within these geothermic installations are slaves. They are being forced to act in a manner that benefits the whole, not doing it voluntarily.’

‘Then why do they not take the chance of escape when it is presented to them?’

‘They have been broken on the great cogs of Imperial industry,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘The machine-worshippers have ensured it. These priests of the machine god once had some conception of the greatest good for the greatest number, but theirs has become a hollow mockery of the Tau’va. They seek knowledge and power for its own sake. It is a mind-state they have arrived at through the application of pitiless logic, without any true understanding of why.’

‘Our race’s entire philosophy has its basis in logic, does it not?’ said Farsight.

‘Ah, but they have reached it by a different road,’ said Por Malcaor with a grin. ‘Self-interest, not enlightenment. Their lust for power is quite entertaining in its crudity. The machine-priests wish humanity to thrive purely so they may increase their own standing, and thereby advance their own agendas.’

‘Unbelievable,’ said Farsight. ‘A system founded on such notions cannot work. It will decay and turn in upon itself.’

‘True. Without resources and minions to enact their wishes they are all but powerless. Worse still, they understand little of the fires that drive a man to fight for a cause, or of the simmering fury that can result from forcing him to act against his will.’

‘That is the fury I hope to harness here,’ said Farsight, making the gesture of the fire-clenched-tight. ‘If we somehow ignite that anger, we will have millions of allies rising up from within. We must fan these sparks of resentment into an inferno.’

‘Speak on,’ said the Water Spider, his eyes alight.

‘They represent millions of blades, broken and tarnished, perhaps, but blades nonetheless. With such strength in numbers, by turning the numerical advantage upon the enemy, we can overthrow these tyrants within a matter of decs, not long kai’rotaa.’

The high commander stared intensely at the Water Spider, meeting his gaze in the hope of somehow sharing his vision, or at least having it affirmed. He fought the urge to frown. There was something behind the magister’s eyes, something

he could not place.

‘High commander, is there something wrong?’

‘Por Malcaor, I come to you not only because you seem uniquely knowledgeable about the humans, but also because your dedication to honesty seems not to compromise for station, nor seniority.’

‘I see all, I hear all,’ said Por Malcaor with his palms upward, ‘and I merely tell others of that which I witness with clear eyes.’ He smiled once more.

Farsight paused for a moment before continuing. ‘I do not seek sycophancy, nor false assurance. Instead I seek the blunt and difficult truth. I believe you will tell me if the unsanctioned course of action I have in mind is madness, or a genuine chance for victory.’

‘I will do just that.’

‘With the right stimulus, could this human uprising be brought about? And could it be done without the knowledge of the Elemental Council? It is important the fire caste is seen to be at the helm of this conquest, not the agents of the Por.’

‘In theory, yes,’ said the Water Spider. ‘All things are possible. We would need a mouthpiece, of course, to instigate such a rebellion. And a catalyst to drive it.’

‘We would indeed,’ said Farsight. ‘I have one in mind. I will ensure you are escorted to a wide-spectrum communion array. Moata tells me there is a communion station on the outskirts of the Mount Vasocris energy farm. As for the catalyst,’ he said, striking one hand across the other in the sign of the fire-that-lights-the-darkness, ‘I already have plans in motion.’

With the care of an artist setting a priceless sculpture upon its plinth, O’Vesa placed the large, concave disc of the seismic fibrillator on the bedrock of the test zone. He waved his data wand across its interface panel, leaving a string of holographic numbers in the air. The activation code chimed, the panel beneath it glowed blue and a countdown began to flicker through the colours of the metallospectrum.

O’Vesa nodded in satisfaction and waddled at speed back to the waiting tidewall, a floating rampart that linked large round bunker sections. A flick of his data wand caused the nearest section to extrude a conveyor disc. He stepped onto it and let it carry him up to the top of the viewing area where his colleagues waited.

‘The Stone Dragon always has to get his claws dirty,’ said Worldshaper, her mouth a moue of amused disapproval.

‘If an operative devises a hazardous new technology, should he not be courageous enough to field test it?’ said O’Vesa. ‘I could not in good conscience risk the lives of others without sharing their fate.’

‘Besides,’ said the senior geologist Fio’ui Pna, her antennae-crowned head leaning out from the other side of Worldshaper, ‘how could a stone pass up a chance to start an earthquake?’

An ominous hum came from the fibrillator disc, steadying into a pulsing, thrumming rhythm. The top section of the disc raised up on hydraulic runners and thumped down, over and over, pounding out a percussive tattoo. The sound and rhythm, keyed to the resonant frequencies of the bedrock, caused the ground to shake so profoundly it shivered the alloys of the tidewall rampart, despite the edifice being raised several metres off the ground.

O’Vesa watched in eager fascination, only taking his eyes from the device to direct his recorder-drones with gestures of his data wands. The ground around the fibrillator disc was cracking, and as the cracks grew wider, lava seeped upwards to spill from the lip of each tiny chasm. The disc thumped on, its alloy hyper-construction proof against the temperatures of superheated molten rock.

Then, just as the disc began to tilt to one side and slide down a crack, a massive geyser of lava burst from the ground. The seismic fibrillator was consumed by the huge, spraying fountain of molten rock, its eruption of reds, oranges and yellows accompanied by billowing clouds of white vapour. The miniature volcano continued to erupt, throwing ash and dirt everywhere in a wide radius. Only the tidewall rampart’s modified force field stopped it from being showered with burning debris.

Worldshaper stamped her feet in an ancient earth caste gesture of wholehearted approval. Clearly amused by the anachronism, Fio’ui Pna joined in, steadying her antennae crown as she pounded her boots onto the rampart.

O’Vesa bowed slightly, eyes crinkled in quiet glee.

‘My compliments, Stone Dragon,’ said Worldshaper. ‘The high commander will be pleased. Though I am not sure Vior’los itself would thank you for what is soon to come.’

The cavernous interior of the energy farm’s pit was lit red by the glowing metal spirals at its centre. Every few minutes the hiss of evaporating water would fill the air, seeming to Farsight like a serpent’s whisper against the bass thrum of titanic capacitor coils. In every corner, on every scaffold, human workers with rags tied across their faces ran, scampered or climbed like Pechian kroot-gibbons as they negotiated the burning, scorching hazards of their hellish industrial home.

Farsight looked out from the smog-like pall of steam and smoke that billowed from the pit, his XV8’s blacksun filter penetrating the greyish-yellow fug with ease to survey the landscape of the interior below. Far below, a lake of magma

hissed and bubbled in the base of the massive cavern. It was large enough to drown a Manta missile destroyer with room to spare, and the amount of heat it generated was intense; the spiral capacitors that rose from the molten rock glowed bright orange where they plunged down into the lava.

Humanity's brutal determination to steal the resources of its host planets never failed to amaze Farsight, but the more he learned of their rapacious methods, the more they repulsed him. If his plans came to fruition, their works would soon be no more than smoke on the breeze.

The Stone Dragon had already entrusted him with the devices he had commissioned, delivered via the lava tube network by a squadron of Devilfish transports. Two dense, multi-ridged discs were mag-clamped to his XV8's thigh plates, his honour guard bearing pairs of their own. Accompanied by a fire caste escort, Worldshaper and O'Vesa had each borne two of their own seismic fibrillators to critical sites; their expertise was critical if the wider geological operation was to succeed. They had already blipped confirmation across the exo-cadre net to show they were already in position to trigger their own eruptions, sited in the far north and east respectively. If the devices were activated just as Mount Vasocris went critical, the resultant quakes could trigger a serial reaction that would see entire chains of volcanoes erupt at once. It was a massively destructive gambit, and one that lit a fire in Farsight's Vior'lan soul. There was a reason he had earned the name Warscaper in the deserts of Arkunasha. Perhaps he could coax this world into fighting for him as well.

Farsight's Mont'ka strategy of descent, maximum impact and initiation under the conditions of battle had been outlined, studied and practised over and over again by his insertion cadres. Each cross-caste team was fully confident in their ability to convey one of O'Vesa's devices to a geological nexus and trigger it before the Imperials could overwhelm them. The only catch was that the devices needed time to operate, to shatter enough rock and summon enough lava to trigger a premature eruption.

Not even the earth caste knew how long it would take for their devices to slide from the grey of initiation to the gold of optimum yield. The fire caste would have to defend each insertion site with everything at their disposal, giving their lives without hesitation if they were to bring about the downfall of the Imperial tyrants in as swift a fashion as possible.

Farsight had claimed command of the strike that would fall upon Mount Vasocris itself, the largest of the supervolcanoes that dotted Vior'los' tectonic ridges and site of the ill-fated lava tunnel assault. It was proceeding well thus far. In conjunction with Kor'O Li Mau Teng, Sylphwing, Y'eldi and their air caste comrades, he had ensured that each cadre strike coincided with the emergence of

a volcanic cloud or a billowing pall of sulphurous vapours rising from the pits of the energy farms. In doing so he had hidden his descent from the sentries below. It had proven a very effective tactic; as Farsight had long maintained, a battlesuit team could hide from enemy augur arrays where an insertion craft could not. Alongside Bravestorm and Brightsword, he had dropped from the hold of the Manta missile destroyer *Wing of Blades* in low orbit directly onto the upper levels of the invasion site.

Shas'O Moata had coordinated his own strike alongside the humans. He was working in parallel with the Water Spider and Thransia Delaque as they had approached the Vasocrian communion array, sequestered in a captured Imperial transport. Delaque, being human, had found it much easier to approach the Mechanicus-held outpost of the comms station unchallenged than any tau. Farsight had read her preliminaries with avid interest; she was proving a resourceful ally indeed. By taking Por Malcaor to the communion array at gunpoint under the pretence of forcing him to translate secret tau intelligence, she had gained entrance to the master vox complex without a shot being fired. Her last communiqué had claimed that she had managed to get the Water Spider all the way to the master comms array. O'Vesa had confirmed it – they were now in control of a vast concave dish but a stone's throw from the lip of the pit where Farsight now stood.

To the south east, the eruption of the Gharastopol Chain was under way. The temperamental volcanoes, triggered by an early strike from O'Vesa's contingent, were intended to draw the attention of the Vasocrian cyborg overlords away from Farsight's vertical assault. Worldshaper was in position to trigger her own eruption, and was awaiting the signal to act. Ob'lotai was also awaiting his order to strike, should the need arise, but for him, Farsight had quite another mission in mind.

All was in readiness for the killing blow to fall.

The *Deific Splendour* was lit only by dim starlight. It hung over Vior'los like an executioner's axe held high above the neck of a condemned man. Augurs softly purred as the vast spacecraft mined data from the fringe world below.

Even from space, the figures standing in conference upon the bridge could make out the tiny flares of exploding volcanoes along the Gharastopol Chain.

'They are making their play, Caelos,' said Epistolary Vaethosis. 'We must strike now.'

'Aye,' said the Chapter Master. 'Though I fear we may already be too late. From boarding to planetstrike, a drop pod insertion takes the best part of half an hour to effect.'

‘I can get to the site of the most grievous threat in an instant.’

Caelos turned, fixing Vaethosis with his good eye. ‘You speak of the Gate.’

The Epistolary nodded solemnly.

‘Then do it,’ said Caelos. ‘Take my command squad with you, and use their skills well.’ He turned to the warriors standing at a respectful distance nearby, and beckoned them forward, addressing them one by one. ‘Treota, it is past time your blade dripped with xenos blood. Vrendaeon, fly our colours high, for these scum should know who brings their doom. Xaedros, use your hard-won wisdoms to advise as well as to slay. Darroleon, see that our friend Epistolary Vaethosis does not return without his progenoid glands where they belong.’

‘Will you not be leading the strike yourself, Chapter Master?’ asked Treota in disbelief.

‘I will not. My role is here. I will oversee the wider battle before committing where I am needed most.’

Vaethosis smiled. ‘A wise choice, Chapter Master. You can trust me to do what is right. I shall slay their war leaders, and bring this planet back into the light.’

‘See that you do,’ said Caelos. ‘And fast.’

Raising his ornate force staff high above his head, Vaethosis called out a string of glottal syllables in the tongue of Old Engelos. The horned skull at the staff’s tip, its fang-toothed jaws cast in blessed gold, crackled with psychic corpusant. The relic’s eye sockets glowed bright red, so intense that Caelos reflexively shut his good eye to focus through his bionic instead.

Down came the skull, chattering as it gnawed through the barrier between the materium and the warp. It left a ragged wound, sulphurous smoke billowing from within. Vaethosis used the triangle of crystal on the bottom of the force staff to slash the aperture wider, and then stepped through the rip in thin air as if he was entering a feasting tent. Treota and Vrendaeon looked warily at one another.

‘Go,’ said Caelos, gesturing with his power fist. ‘Emperor be with you.’

Treota saluted, his broadsword raised high, then stepped through. Vrendaeon was close behind, with Xaedro and Darroleon at his back.

Caelos saw the glowing coals of the horned skull’s eyes light once more from the other side of the veil, its weird red light pulsing in time with Vaethosis’ chant. As the relic passed across the tear in the material dimension, the ragged wound healed over, sealing once more amongst streamers of grey-green mist.

Vaethosis’ chanting grew quieter and quieter until it was inaudible, and the sounds of the bridge command rose to prominence once more. A weird scar hung in the air where the Epistolary had opened the Gate. As Caelos moved to check its integrity, he saw it was visible from one angle, and utterly absent from

another.

The Chapter Master raised a gnarled eyebrow, impressed despite himself. There was something sinister about Vaethosis' works, that could not be denied, and the scar in the air would likely linger upon the bridge until the end of time. Still, only a fool would deny the tactic's efficacy.

Caelos had seen such a portal opened once before, during the Great Decapitation of Vross Prime. With the blessing of the Emperor, the supreme leader of the tau crusade would soon find himself at the point of a Space Marine blade.

That said, the Emperor's grace had not been in great abundance over the last few months. He had to have a contingency plan in place, if he was to call himself a Chapter Master worthy of Raevor's legacy. Many a warp-strike deviated from its intent, after all, stranding those passing through the Gate in terra incognita. Caelos had heard tell of psyker-led teams half-materialised in solid rock, or disappearing entirely into the haunted limbo of the warp.

Shaking his head, Caelos forced himself to think of the wider battle. Even should Vaethosis' psyker-strike go perfectly to plan, the Scar Lords were likely to make only a temporary gain. The planet was infested by the tau, and the creatures would find new leaders soon enough. Likely the stain they had brought to the fringe worlds would never be eradicated by anything short of the most extreme sanction of all.

Caelos unclenched his fist, and looked at the medallion that had been digging into his palm for the last few hours. It was a seal of Pluvian obsidian, much like those used by the Inquisition. The disfigured skull symbol of the Scar Lords was engraved upon it, atop a hand-etched rendition of the Imperial eagle. The medallion was a humble thing in appearance, no larger than a fist, and without a trace of the gilded pretension so beloved of the Adeptus Terra's higher orders. But it had been passed down from Chapter Master to Chapter Master ever since the Scar Lords' inception during the Second Founding.

With it, Caelos had the power to unmake worlds.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FIRE AND BRIMSTONE

VASOCRIA, VIOR'LOS

'LISTEN TO ME, WORKERS OF VIOR'LOS. YOU ARE BEING BEATEN INTO AN EARLY GRAVE.'

Across the world of Vior'los, the loudspeaker arrays of one thousand and twelve energy farms boomed loud with the strident Low Gothic of Por Malcaor.

'YOU ARE NOT POWERLESS. YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.'

Something about the simple speech was extraordinarily compelling, even to the ears of the tau strike teams that monitored it via their autotrans suites.

'YOU HAVE THE STRENGTH OF NUMBERS IF YOU CHOOSE TO USE IT.'

These were not the mellifluous tones of the water caste, persuading, suggesting and coercing in a constant stream to gently wear down the resistance of the listener. This was the undiluted truth, loud and bombastic, a sledgehammer of shattering revelation that demanded the attention of those who heard it.

'YOU ARE SLAVES, BUT YOU CAN BE FREE AGAIN. YOU CAN TEAR AWAY YOUR CHAINS, AND USE THEM TO STRANGLE YOUR OPPRESSORS.'

In red-lit pits and energy harvest chambers, the heads of the desperate and the suicidal began to turn. Some stood up and gazed skyward, heedless of electrified lashes brandished by their jailors.

'SOME OF YOU WILL DIE. FOR SOME OF YOU IT WILL BE A BLESSED RELIEF. FOR THE REST, THESE SACRIFICES WILL BUY FREEDOM. YOUR LIFE OF SLAVERY WILL BE GIVEN MEANING BY A HERO'S DEATH.'

The cyborg soldiers on the gantries above peered down through the fog, growing ever more uneasy as their work gangs began to look away from their work and stare upwards in greater numbers. Those tech-soldiers of high rank, communing with their overseers through complex remote links, sought to shut

down the broadcasts with blurts of machine code.

'LOOK AT YOUR PERSECUTORS. ARE THEY NOT HATEFUL?'

Dirt-streaked, scabrous faces peered up at their overseers with undiluted hostility burning in their eyes. Again the cyborgs sought to close down the loud hailer arrays through remote control, but when that failed, they used bullets and energy discharges from their guns. The arrays had been built to last in anticipation of acts of violence from the slave gangs, however, and their armoured shells were not easily penetrated.

'DO THEY NOT ENJOY WATCHING YOU SUFFER?'

The slave gangs were turning their heads en masse now. Many of those slaves still in thrall to their own misery were awakened from their work-stupor by the crack of the tech-soldiery's rifles as the cyborgs attempted to restore order. The atmosphere in each energy farm was souring, the air crackling with tension.

'THESE MASKED SADISTS WOULD SEE YOU SPENT LIKE LUCIFER-STICKS. NOT JUST TO LINE THEIR OWN NESTS, BUT BECAUSE THEY HATE AND DESPISE YOU.'

Some of the tech-cyborgs were moving fast, now, the gantries clanging to the thunder of their metallic prostheses. The first of them to make it to the command posts emitted strange grating syllables into primitive transphonic arrays.

'RISE UP AGAINST THEM,' said the voice, an undercurrent of relish in his stentorian command. *'PICK UP TOOLS. PICK UP ROCKS. BALL YOUR FISTS AND BARE YOUR TEETH. IT IS TIME FOR REVENGE.'*

Shouts were coming from the slave gangs, now, shouts of anger and calls for vengeance. The most strident of the agitators were cut down by electrowhips and barbed goads, but for every slave violently put down, another dozen found a long-lost spark of defiance fanned to a blaze.

'THEY CANNOT KILL YOU ALL,' said the voice, *'BUT YOU CAN MURDER THEM, EVERY ONE. IT IS IN YOUR POWER. THROW THEM INTO THE LAVA THAT BURNS YOUR SKIN WITH EACH AGONISING DAY.'*

Even the meekest slaves were looking around themselves now. Some peered in confusion, some as if woken from a dream. Others had the grim light of bloodlust in their eyes.

'RIP AWAY THEIR COWLS WITH THE FINGERS YOU HAVE WORKED BLOODY ON THEIR BEHALF. BASH IN THEIR SKULLS WITH THE ROCKS THAT CUT YOUR FEET. YOU KNOW YOU HAVE DREAMED OF DOING IT. NOW IS YOUR CHANCE.'

The workers formed knots of resistance, those spurred into action thronging together into impromptu gangs. Howling, they rushed their cyborg overseers. The largest and fiercest of their rebels were shot down. Hundreds died in a

matter of moments; in the most brutally suppressed regions, the workers quailed before each volley. Yet there was an undeniable truth to the Water Spider's words, and it inspired all who heard it.

'KILL THEM, STRANGLE THEM, BEAR THEM TO THE GROUND. RIP OUT THEIR THROATS WITH YOUR TEETH. COOL YOUR RAVAGED, OVERHEATED FLESH WITH THEIR BLOOD. IT MATTERS NOT HOW YOU DO IT. WHAT MATTERS IS THAT YOU KILL THEM, KILL THEM AND BE FREE!'

In every pit and energy farm across the surface of Vior'los, a roaring, shouting tide of revolutionaries swarmed their overseers, grabbing them with their bare hands in a mingled outburst of pent-up aggression and tearful hope. Above it all carried the voice of the Water Spider, growing louder and more zealous as it thrived on the fires of change.

'RISE UP AND KILL, MY CHILDREN! TODAY IS THE DAY OF YOUR REVENGE!'

At the edge of the Vasocris work-pit, Farsight watched the autotrans translate the Water Spider's speech with a mixture of fascination and horror. The icon of the stone dragon flashed on the cadrenet.

'High commander,' said the scientist, 'are you hearing this? The broadcast your team has sent from the Vasocris comms-dish is strange in the extreme. Would it not be better to inform these gue'la of the Greater Good instead?'

'Evidently not,' said Farsight. He had not yet launched his main strike, but already a chorus of screams and gunfire was rising through the sulphide stink of the pit below. 'Perhaps Por Malcaor understands the human mind far better than I. Even better than his fellow speakers. According to my autotrans, his command of the vernacular termed Low Gothic has a one hundred per cent correlation rate. That is unprecedented. Ambassador Wellclaim managed only eighty-six, before her disappearance. Not even the Golden Ambassador made a perfect match.'

'Peculiar. Yet given the resultant disruption, it would be a shame not to capitalise.'

'Agreed. We can unpick this later.'

Farsight slid the icon of the Mont'ka across those of his cadres, opening a pan-caste communion channel as he did so.

'All cadres, begin the final attack. In the name of the Tau'va, strike!'

Farsight and his battlesuit team dropped over the lip of the pit, and descended into hell.

O'Vesa was lit by the fires of the volcano chain to the west of his current

position, known to the Imperials as the Gharastopol Chain. Bare-footed, he could feel the ground shiver ever so slightly with every pulse of the seismic fibrillators he had ordered placed around the waist of each peak.

The earth caste scientist wondered idly if he would come under attack before he could witness the eruption he had planned for. He hoped not. It was a matter of microdecs before he would have to activate his shield dome and complementary coolant system, but what a view he would have when the pyroclastic clouds rushed out to meet him. Magma was already spurting from the tips of the volcanoes, and smoke billowed high. By his reckoning the calderas were less than three decs from full eruption.

Almost everything had gone to plan, for the fire caste's strike upon the Gharastapol garrison was so sudden and violent it had reached completion before the human machine-caste had mustered a counter-attack. Placing the fibrillators had been a textbook exercise, most gratifying in its geometric accuracy. He was looking forward to showing it off to Worldshaper once the retrieval craft had carried him back to the vessels in low orbit.

Only now was the machine-caste's counter-attack coming in force. O'Vesa could see it with his own eyes, but zoomed in with his microlenses nonetheless. Across the ash-strewn wastes below, the legions of the machine-caste marched in lockstep. Rank upon rank of augmented soldiers advanced upon the towering volcanoes. Incredibly, they were not racing to battle in the lumpen transports or rugged, trundling tanks so common to their warrior caste, but going on foot.

To O'Vesa's eyes, it was anachronism writ large. Even the human war machines strode purposefully forward on metal limbs; long-legged engines stalking like flightless birds amongst the throng. Towards the rear came the piston-legged quadruped walkers so beloved of the machine-caste's legions; squat and armoured, there was something of the insect or undersea arthropod in their build. O'Vesa jotted a few notes on his recorder disc; each walker toted an entire suite of weapons, from flamer-like devices to long-barrelled cannons and anti-aircraft batteries. Force fields crackled around the larger walkers, no doubt in the process of being optimised for the slaughters to come.

On and on the legions marched, gaining the shoulders of each volcano chain like termites swarming to claim an empty nest. A rough quadrant analysis put their number at well over ten thousand.

From what O'Vesa had learned from the water caste's informationals, the expenditure of so many lives was as nothing to the masters of humanity's machine-caste. They saw flesh, blood and steel alike as resources to be invested in garnering the only thing they really cared about – power.

O'Vesa smiled to himself. This day, as High Commander Farsight's plan came

to fruition, the human machine-caste would learn the true meaning of the word.

The sweltering heat of the magma lake sent Farsight's thermal readers spiking as he descended into the cavern below. His XV8's sensor head registered a dozen spectrums of information at once. The machine-caste were barking and cackling in their strange grating language, but Farsight did not so much as glance at the autotrans. Here he had a mission to achieve, and he would not be distracted.

'Brightsword teams, form the ring of fire. Bravestorm teams, prioritise heavy assets. Adopt Monat tactics if you need to. We cannot fail.'

Along the side of the cavern was a lake of magma throwing orange light across the scene. Metallic platforms jutted over the expanse of molten rock. Farsight could see spindly shapes on the lips of each staging area – tau captives, roughly shoved around by the masked, lens-eyed cyborgs that sought to use them as fuel. At the rear of the platforms were holding cells, tau limbs reaching imploringly from within.

'Stay focused,' he whispered to himself. 'Stay calm.' He had to ensure that O'Vesa's seismic devices were placed quickly and defended to the last if Mount Vasocris was to bring its full wrath to bear. He told himself his warriors could free the captives on his behalf, until the devices were planted, at least.

It was no use. Farsight felt a dangerous heat grow in his chest. He glanced at the hex that showed the tau captives, only to see scores of the tau being pushed over the lips of the platforms, screaming as they fell into the lava below to be burned alive.

Raw, undiluted rage filled his soul.

Farsight's guns were already spitting as he landed with a thud on the sandy soil. Bolts of plasma struck the nearest cybernetic human, a spider-legged cyborg in robes, incinerating its gangling form in a blazing moment of retribution. A split dec later his fusion blaster cut a hulking industrial machine-thing in half at the waist. An alert blipped from his rear vanes, and he spun, kicking out hard. The hard metal hoof of his battlesuit's primary toe caught a would-be assassin under the chin, dislocating its neck with an audible crack. Its corpse was sent flipping backwards to land hard in the sand.

'You must pay!' shouted Farsight. He pivoted at the waist, the superheated columns of air projecting from his fusion blaster slashing around to evaporate the top half of another cyborg assassin in a puff of nameless fluids.

Realising their facility was under attack, the cyborg soldiers on the shores of the magma lake were turning and raising their rifles to their shoulders. Even those on the far platform were abandoning their vile work, leaving the tau citizens to their wretchedness as they set up long-barrelled arquebuses to take

sniper's shots at the battlesuit attackers.

Nearby, Bravestorm's flame teams were already dropping in from above. Each Crisis suit pilot was a specialist in close-range ambush, and the machine-caste warriors in the beachhead zone did not even see their doom before it was upon them. The XV8s each sent twin gouts of flame roaring out. Their firepower combined into a roaring conflagration that consumed scores of cybernetic soldiers, swathing them in searing heat as the flamer teams cruised overhead. Fire-clad humans scattered, screaming in panic as flesh melted and scorched prostheses fell away.

Bravestorm himself dived down amongst the flames, the iridium of his advanced battlesuit making him all but impervious to the backwash of heat. His onager gauntlet lashed out again and again, pulping or flattening everything within reach. Even through his anger Farsight frowned at the breach of commander protocols, but inside, he felt tempted to dive into the thick of the fight himself.

Knots of riflemen on the fringes of the devastation took pot shots, bursts of electricity flashing from wherever they struck the Crisis suits. Two of the Bravestorm battlesuits withdrew, trailing smoke, but none fell to the stony ground. It was not long before yet more Crisis suits dropped in, flamers still roaring, to take revenge.

The machine-caste warriors were rallying in the lee of a spiral capacitor tower, but Brightsword was ready for them. He led the second group of teams in his mural-painted XV8, heading straight for the tracked gun-cyborgs that were trundling from a side passage in a pall of pollutant smoke to join their fellows.

'Your death is amongst you, mechanised ones!' shouted Commander Brightsword. He was the first to take a kill, slashing his energy blades down in a signature 'X' that carved a grey-skinned gun creature into cauterised slabs of meat. His fusion teams followed suit, blinding beams stabbing out from their blasters to slash through the flesh and metal of the cyborgs below.

One of the battlesuit pilots misjudged the angle of his attack, and was caught in the grip of a strange energy field fired by one of the tracked weapon-cyborgs. Farsight spared a glance as a small charcoal icon flashed on his screen; even in midair the stricken XV8 was buckling, twisting, and collapsing in on itself. Brightsword rode his jetpack in close, bisecting the gun-machine with a slash from his blinding energy blades, but it was already too late.

All around Farsight the fires of war belched thick black smoke, mingling with the sulphurous air to obscure him from sight. The suddenness and surety of the attack had won them a beachhead, and a few moments of peace in which to use it.

Putting the sight of the civilian tau deaths from his mind as best he could, Farsight extruded the gauntlet manipulators from his XV8's weapon arms and hit the mag-switch that held the seismic fibrillators clamped onto his suit's thighs. They clunked down to the sandy soil. Within microdecs, he had arranged them in the coordinates given to him by O'Vesa and triggered their activation with a pulse of data from his sensor head.

The devices thrummed to life, their rhythmic pounding so intense it shook Farsight within his suit. Trickle of rock dust cascaded from the lip of the pit above.

The flamer teams, now Bravestorm had rejoined them, were already fanning out to form a perimeter. Any machine-soldier that came close found a gouting, billowing cloud of fire roaring towards him. It was a powerful tactic, and not just as an offensive measure. Those cyborgs that favoured long-barrelled guns found it difficult to pick out any details of their targets amidst the wall of flame and smoke, and only the most accurate fire could hope to take down a Crisis suit at range.

The seismic fibrillators thumped, over and over, goading the supervolcano into new and terrible life. The temperature was spiking on Farsight's readouts; the devices were working already.

'Ready for my signal,' said Farsight. 'We may have to leave earlier than I thought.'

Suddenly the air in front of him ripped in two, a vertical slash of cerulean fire. A disfigured, flame-eyed giant burst from its crackling heart, four hulking killers at his back. There was a rune-covered sword, flickering with blue energy, in his hand. The autotrans spooled as the hideous gue'ron'sha leader pointed the tip of its blade straight at Farsight.

'-- AND NOW YOU BURN -- XENOS SCUM --'

Then the cavern exploded into violence.

The Space Marines struck with the force of a hurricane.

Farsight, Brightsword and Bravestorm took the brunt of the gue'ron'sha attack. A lateral storm of bolts hit all three of them, the detonations of their impact hammering the battlesuits backwards in a spasmodic, jerking dance like that of puppets bouncing on their strings.

The Space Marine leader, a noseless horror whose face was criss-crossed with scar tissue, outstretched a gauntlet. A blue ball of flame appeared in his palm. It shot outward to strike Farsight in the chest.

Incredibly, the flaming ball penetrated Farsight's energy shield as if it were not there. Alerts bleeped as a foul smell permeated the control cocoon. The damage

control holo-doppel registered a serious wound; by the initial diagnostic, the fireball had burned through several layers of ablative material on the battlesuit's chest and chewed into the alloy beneath. He could see a large discoloured spot on the targeting suite, concentric rings of green and yellow where the strange missile had almost burned through.

'Put these ones down immediately,' ordered Farsight.

His plasma rifle blazed at the first of the Space Marines, a sprinting warrior carrying a sword and shield that crackled with strange energies. The gue'ron'sha read the shot and rolled at the last moment, the bolts passing overhead, before continuing his sprint towards Bravestorm. The Space Marine's two-handed broadsword came up in a diagonal sweep, bouncing from the knuckles of Bravestorm's onager gauntlet in a burst of clashing forces. With a flick of the blade, the warrior reversed his swing. The second blow cut Bravestorm's plasma rifle from his arm in a spray of sparks. Bravestorm levelled a weighty kick that connected hard with the warrior's midsection, sending him staggering back, then raised his outsized fist for the coup de grace, but by the time the gauntlet fell the warrior had already recovered and slipped away.

There was a blaze of light as Brightsword charged in from the left, his energy blades swiping out to cut the Space Marine champion in two. A silver-armed gue'ron'sha warrior intervened, his firearm spitting bolts. They detonated with a series of thunderous cracks, leaving fist-sized holes in Brightsword's torso. The young commander spun at the waist, boosting forward as he did so; his fusion blades burned around in a well-honed spiral manoeuvre designed to be impossible to parry. The Space Marine ducked the first, weaved back from the second, but was slashed apart by the third and fourth pass, his cauterised limbs falling to the sandy ground.

The autotrans spooled as the gue'ron'sha leader called out.

'-- YOU THINK YOURSELVES SO MIGHTY -- LET ME PROVE HOW WEAK YOU ARE --'

Blue flame swirled like angry djinns around Brightsword's feet. He was lifted bodily from the ground as the flame flowed upward to become a sphere of crackling fire, translucent and impenetrable. It caught the young commander in a prison that even his fusion blades could not cut apart.

'They have a mind-warrior!' shouted Farsight. He boosted diagonally forward, a fusion beam of his own stabbing out towards the Space Marine leader holding Brightsword aloft in the sphere of flame. The warrior caught the beam in his palm, letting it run around his fingers as if it were a pet serpent. Farsight bared his teeth, charging headlong towards the invader.

Nearby, Bravestorm still duelled the Space Marine swordsman. The

gue'ron'sha was landing powerful blows with his broadsword, Bravestorm swinging great punches in response, but with both combatants expert in the use of their energy shields neither was able to land a telling blow.

'Compromise the helm!' transmitted Farsight.

Bravestorm blipped a symbol of thanks. His onager gauntlet swung out in a crushing backhand. The warrior ducked, only to find Bravestorm's other fist – bereft of its plasma rifle since the Space Marine's earlier strike – cracking hard into his faceplate. Iris lenses smashed, ceramite splintered.

The warrior staggered back, ripping his helm away. He growled, hacking at his adversary's leg with a blow so powerful it nearly sheared through the limb entire. Bravestorm raised his knee, trapping the warrior's blade against the underside of his shield; the warrior did not relinquish it. Then he leaned forward so his shoulder-mounted flamer was an arm's length away from his face.

A burst of flame shot out, but it did not strike the swordsman. Instead it whirled around Bravestorm himself, swathing his sensor head entirely.

'Aagh!' The commander gave a strangled shout. 'The god-machines! They have me! Save the academy!'

To his left, a white-armoured Space Marine took clinically efficient shots at Bravestorm's exposed joints, each detonation chipping away chunks of priceless iridium.

'Fight it, Bravestorm!' called out Farsight. 'It is a mind-science illusion!'

An explosive impact struck the high commander's XV8 from the side, sending him skidding to the ground mid-charge. As he pushed back up, Farsight could feel the seismic fibrillators' pulsing rhythm through the cavern floor. He made to stand, only to see the tip of a long pole smash into his sensor head with force enough to knock him back down.

An informational hex unfolded to show a banner snapped out in the hot winds, the symbol of a white skull riven by lightning bolts emblazoned proudly upon its terracotta field. The Space Marine holding it aloft sprung atop Farsight as he lay, stamping down hard before planting the standard's bladed pommel in the centre of his plexus hatch.

'Not so easy,' said Farsight grimly, triggering his jets. The XV8 shot sidelong, sending the standard bearer staggering away. As Farsight righted himself, he sent a triple burst of plasma winging from his rifle. Two of the three bolts cored the banner bearer through the torso, the smoking holes lacing the air with the scent of cooking meat. The third burned a hole right through the skull in the centre of his heraldic standard.

'You will not find your symbolic victory here,' said Farsight, his voice cold. 'This is our world now.'

For a moment, Farsight's screens went black, then all became blinding white at the same time. A microdec later visuals were restored as the XV8's backup systems kicked in. Energy discharge. The cyborg soldiers, given time to rally by the Space Marine strike, had formed firing lines near the edge of the magma lake, and were sniping with their long-barrelled guns at the battlesuit teams. Several red-armoured XV8s, the commanders' honour guard, lay in smoking, burning heaps around the cavern. Some of the machine-caste's spider-limbed overseers, were already stalking towards the seismic fibrillators with gangling arms extended.

A bolt of crackling blue fire hit Farsight from the left, passing straight through his force shield once more to melt away the front of the shield generator itself. The gue'ron'sha leader was now striding towards him, swathed in blue flame.

'This one is the greatest threat,' said Farsight tersely. He punched up a targeting reticule, tracing the ballistics of the fireball that had struck his shield and loosing a plasma shot along the same path.

Farsight watched the plasma bolt hit the Space Marine mind-warrior – then pass through him entirely as if he were no more than a ghost. The high commander gawped like a new recruit seeing a battlesuit for the first time. The Space Marine had somehow transformed – he was not surrounded by flames, he *was* flame.

'– – YOUR WEAPONS CANNOT HARM ME, XENOS – –' read the autotrans. '– – I EMBODY THE EMPEROR'S HOLY FLAME – –'

A chorus of tau screams rang out. On the far platform, the captive civilians were being shoved into the lake of fire once more. The sounds of agony... Farsight could not endure it a moment longer.

Abandoning the fight against the gue'ron'sha, he boosted high, pivoting in mid-air to shoot over to the platform. As he flew, his plasma rifle took a mercilessly accurate toll on the gangle-limbed cyborgs approaching the seismic fibrillators, then switched to overseers that were trammelling the tau captives towards the lip of the platform. With each thudding boom of the earth caste devices another machine-caste persecutor was partially blasted into vapour, his corpse a steaming mess.

'– – YOU CANNOT ESCAPE MY WRATH – –'

Farsight called up a hex from his rear lenses. The Space Marine leader was behind him, borne aloft on wings of fire, a blazing angel of death that soared over the magma lake to close on his tail.

The high commander landed on the nearest platform with a thump, sending one of the cyborgs over the edge with a kick even as the barrel of his plasma rifle swept two more to a fiery demise.

'I do not intend to escape,' he called back in heavily accented Low Gothic. The

psyker – the term made him think of Thrensia Delaque, and he blipped a priority request for her presence – landed close by, arms outstretched. The platform’s heavy metal grilles ran molten under the Space Marine’s feet as he strode in. Farsight took a shot with his plasma rifle, but it splashed from the psyker’s incandescent form like liquid. To one with a body of flame, such energy attacks were useless.

Master Puretide’s words bubbled to the front of Farsight’s fevered mind.

Water is harmless enough, most of the time. But not always.

A lance of blue fire speared out from the mind-warrior’s palm. This time Farsight flung himself to the side, ploughing into a knot of cyborg warriors as he did so. They scrabbled and clung to his battlesuit, throwing off his aim and threatening to pull him down by sheer weight of numbers.

‘-- I HAVE THE RAW POWER OF THE WARP AT MY COMMAND --’

The gue’ron’sha leader called out as he strode forward, his voice the crackling roar of a Vior’lan summer wildfire. A fireball grew large between his outstretched hands.

‘-- I HAVE COMMAND OF PLASMA AND FLAME -- WHAT DO YOU HAVE -- ALIEN WORM --’

Farsight redirected a full half of his custom shield’s power into one massive outward burst, sending the cyborgs clambering upon him scattering in all directions. He took aim at the iron padlocks holding the tau captives inside their jail, and bolts of plasma winged out.

The locks fell away, and hundreds of tau civilians burst from the iron cages in a shouting, screaming mass. They did not flee, but charged straight for their oppressors and the flaming psyker-thing in their midst. Half a dozen earth caste tau barrelled into the mind-warrior bodily, the momentum of their solidly-built forms bearing the Space Marine over the lip of the platform. In a knot of bodies they toppled into the magma below, plummeting down in a flailing mass of flame, flesh and cloth.

The earth caste scientists screamed as they burned alive in yellow flame, but still they did not release their grip. Farsight watched the psyker sink into the molten rock, borne under by the most unlikely of assailants. The Space Marine screamed in defiance as the liquid magma flowed into his eyes, his nose, his mouth. To him, the incandescent lava may have been like water. But then water could still drown.

‘We have communnality,’ said Farsight in response. ‘It is called the Tau’va.’

‘All augurs have lost long-range contact with Squad Vaethosis,’ said Ignatio Amadan, the vox seneschal of the *Deific Splendour*. ‘Their icons are blank,

Chapter Master.’

Caelos stood immobile, arms behind his back as he gazed upon the panoramic view of Vior’los.

‘Archmagos Dominus Venst has sent word via a tight-beam binharic transmission,’ said the Enginseer Malagratus, his voice a buzzing monotone emanating from the vox-grille in his throat. ‘The higher orders of tech-priests are already clear from the Vasocrian warzone. Their prognosis is dire. If triggered en masse the volcanoes will sweep away all we have accomplished here. If that happens, there is a high percentile chance the tau will re-establish dominance.’

‘But we can take the planet back, even then,’ said Captain Shaegrus of the Third, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword.

‘We cannot,’ said Caelos, turning with an expression of sadness and rage. ‘I will not expend yet more of my Chapter’s strength here when there remain three other principal worlds in contention. Vior’los –’ at this he gestured widely at the viewscreen with a message scroll clutched in his hand, ‘– is not worth saving. It is infested. As you can see, Shaegrus, the volcanoes Venst speaks of are erupting as we speak. We must act as our duty demands.’

‘Then what would you have us do?’

Caelos turned, his one good eye burning into Shaegrus’ soul, but said nothing.

Farsight boosted away over the magma lake, his jetpack vanes directing his passage over the hot thermals. The tau prisoners, freed now, were climbing slowly down the cavern walls to reach the sandy ground beneath. The magma below was seething and rippling, great arcs of fiery liquid thrown high to spray gobbets left and right. Presumably the seismic fibrillators were doing their work, agitating the subterranean currents to the point of eruption.

On the shores of the lake, Bravestorm’s ring of fire had been re-established. The flamer-equipped Crisis suits were moving outward as one, burning any cyborg soldier that ventured too close, then contracting the circle once more. Brightsword, freed from the sphere of flame by the gue’ron’sha psyker’s death, had slashed the white-armoured Space Marine in half, and was now cutting a deadly path through the primitive robotic constructs that the cyborg overlords had sent to stop them. Commander Bravestorm, no longer wracked with the memories of his own fall into fire, had stopped trying to land a solid punch upon the broadsword-wielding champion and instead kicked him in the face with such force the Space Marine’s unprotected skull had caved in. He too was now diving into the fight against the cyborgs, his great gauntlet lashing out over and over to stave in heads and sunder metallic bodies.

Emerging from a transit tube to the east – the one that led to the

communications dish above – were Thransia Delaque and Por Malcaor. The Water Spider was limping badly, his thigh bound tight with a bloodstained tourniquet.

‘High commander,’ transmitted Brightsword, ‘how much longer until the devices reach optimum yield?’

‘I do not know for sure,’ said Farsight, ‘If we can just–’

There was a deafening roar as the magma lake erupted, hurling geysers of molten rock in all directions. Farsight veered his XV8, twisting to avoid the glowing spray. He saw a massive, glowing figure emerging from the lake to reach towards him, wings of flame burning high from its back. It was humanoid, but only just, like a metallic statue of an angel melted until it drizzled rivulets of thick goopy magma.

The flame angel’s mouth yawned wide, strings of glowing drool pouring from its jaws as it grasped for Farsight.

‘– – I AM FIRE – –’ roared the apparition, the XV8’s audio spikes pinging red. Farsight twisted left, avoiding the thing’s sweeping attack by a finger’s breadth. He slid a targeting reticule over it on instinct, then cancelled it.

‘Do not fire energy weapons at it,’ he transmitted. ‘It is made of flame, and heat will only make it stronger.’ Farsight grimaced. If that were true, he had given the psyker far too much power already.

The creature’s half-liquid arm came down hard, a boulder-sized fist splashing red hot magma across the surviving Crisis honour guard at the edge of the lake. Three fell back, their engines sizzling and their hulls on fire. The team’s icons turned dark grey on Farsight’s distribution suite.

The monstrous psyker swung again, and this time it clipped Farsight’s XV8 on the heel. He found himself spinning out of control, his alarm systems blipping insistently as internal heatsinks sought to regulate the control cocoon’s temperature. He touched down briefly on the lake’s edge, stabilised himself, then shot straight up.

As the XV8 climbed high, he felt the sharp punch of a sniper’s bullet hit him in the back. The damage control suite showed red in a dozen different locations. The suit could not take much more punishment.

‘High commander, well met.’ Thransia Delaque’s face appeared in a new hex-screen. ‘Keep the giant occupied. I have a plan.’

‘I will achieve more than just keeping it occupied!’ shouted Farsight, his voice strained.

Water can quench fire. Fire can disincorporate water. But earth can bury them both.

He boosted up to the cavern’s roof and sketched a targeting solution, a slashing

strike upon the rocky ceiling itself. The fusion blaster hissed as it carved through a jutting clutch of stalactites. The strike was near perfectly judged; half a dozen of the stone daggers fell away in a moment. Two dropped straight into the magma lake, but the other four hit the molten beast hard from above, liquid splashing in great gouts. The creature roared in pain and lashed out, smashing two Crisis suits from the air as they leaped in to attack it.

Then Thransia Delaque gave a fierce cry.

‘Leave this place!’

Farsight glanced at her image just as a bolt of green-white lightning leaped from her mouth. Arcing high, it struck the creature in the chest. The fire angel bellowed, rearing back, but then came forward once more, swathed in lightning.

‘-- YOU TRUCK WITH DAEMONS, WITCH -- YOU HARBOUR YOUR OWN DOOM --’

‘We are your doom!’ shouted Por Malcaor. ‘On this world, and a hundred others! There is no way you can stop us! We tau are a disease, and we have infected your empire already!’

Farsight was aghast. How could Por Malcaor talk that way?

‘-- YOUR INFECTION WILL BE SEARED AWAY --’ shouted the psyker
‘-- WHEN WE RAIN FIRE FROM THE SKIES -- YOU HAVE CONVINCED ME LITTLE MAGGOT -- THIS WORLD WILL BURN --’

Por Malcaor crowed in triumph. He opened his hands wide, a circle of multi-coloured flames dancing between them.

‘What?’ cried Thransia Delaque, turning to the Water Spider. ‘No! You can’t be--’

The Water Spider touched her on the hand, just once, and she froze, her mouth open in mid-protestation. Then the grinning magister pulled the flame-circle wide, and hurled it outwards like a lasso.

The flame-loop spun lazily through the air towards the magma angel. The giant swung a fist to bat it away, but Por Malcaor extended his index fingers, and somehow twitched the noose of fire aside. The multi-coloured lasso grew wider and wider, settling over the shapeless head of the lava-beast before contracting sharply.

The monstrous beast screamed as it shrank, collapsing in on itself and turning pale as the fires within it were extinguished. In a matter of moments the fiery angel had become a man – heavily muscled and covered with the scars of a lifetime’s battle, but a man nonetheless. He was naked and pitiful in comparison to the raging beast he had been moments before.

The Space Marine reached up to the noose around his neck, struggling to tear it away.

‘Release me, daemon!’ shouted the psyker, his voice a strangled rasp.

‘Certainly,’ said Por Malcaor. He puffed out his cheeks and blew, as if extinguishing a reading-candle. A hundred metres away, the multi-coloured noose dissipated like gossamer in the wind.

The gue’ron’sha leader fell without a sound. He placed his fingertips on his temples, straightening his body as he dropped into the lake of molten rock below. Farsight saw the Space Marine mouth something as he fell, but the autotrans could not make sense of it.

Then the magma began to burn the mind-warrior alive, and he was silent no more.

‘This planet is lost,’ said Caelos sadly, staring down at the Adeptus Mechanicus punch-scroll in his hands.

‘Chapter Master?’ said Captain Shaegrus, ‘we have several companies still at full strength in the torpedo bays. If we strike the right targets, we can take it back.’

By way of answer, Caelos gestured to the enormous viewing portal that dominated the front of the *Deific Splendour*’s bridge. The planet of Vior’los, a vast red-brown curve dotted with mountain ranges, was swathed in fire and smoke. Dozens of massive volcanoes were now erupting across it, their blossoming pyroclastic clouds visible from space.

‘The tau have already triggered their weapons of denial,’ said Caelos. ‘I just heard Vaethosis’ last words, quite clearly, in my head. He said the world was lost, and my duty clear. My command squad has died to a man, and the Epistolary was not far behind.’

He turned his hand palm up, and an obsidian seal glinted in the torchlight.

‘Forgive me, Captain Shaegrus,’ said Caelos. ‘I did not answer your earlier question. I would have you escort me to the terminus armorium. Captain Aortura, you have the bridge.’

‘Chapter Master,’ said Shaegrus, ‘I—’

Caelos cut him off with a cutting motion. ‘No. We must keep perspective, Shaegrus. I have a duty to the Emperor, and I mean to fulfil it.’

‘But how?’

The blackened sinews in the right hand side of Caelos’ face twitched.

‘By any means necessary.’

‘High commander,’ transmitted Ob’lotai 3-0 from the command centre of Moata’s Mako, currently stealth-cloaked near the giant communion dish of the Vasocrian complex. ‘I have detected the anomalous energy signature you

recorded from the warhead bays of the vessel *Scabbard of Flesh*. The communion dish is picking it up in far greater strength, by a factor of twelve point three recurring.'

'As I thought,' said Farsight. 'Initiate contingency. Go in glory, old friend. I shall not forget you.'

'I shall succeed in great magnificence,' said Ob'lotai, 'for the Greater Good.'

The Mako gunship lifted off, its turbines roaring, and shot upward into the glittering skies.

Chapter Master Caelos, surrounded by his escort of four Scar Lords officers and lit by the sconces of the terminus armorium, stared at the resin-clad cadaver in the reliquary before him. Embedded in its chest was the recipient node for his seal of pluvian obsidian. The skeleton, its bones brown and ragged with the remnants of mummified flesh, was the incarcerated remains of the last Chapter Master to have used the Scar Lords' ultimate sanction upon an Imperial world. The corpse's hands were posed to grip the recipient node, eyes staring blankly up as if to present a physical vision of the morbid fate the present incumbent was about to unleash.

'Here is my destiny,' said Caelos. 'Whatever happens, this shall be my defining moment.' He had already given the order to activate the macro-missile that would split into a dozen cyclonic torpedoes on its way down to Vior'los, each capable of destroying a continent in its own right.

'It does not have to be this way,' said Techmarine Tarrajaeo.

'He has made up his mind,' said Captain Duona. 'And I stand by him.'

Caelos closed his eyes, knelt at the foot of the reliquary, and prayed to the Emperor and all his ancestors for guidance.

He heard nothing in response.

The Mako shot through the thin, wispy clouds of Vior'los' upper atmosphere, heading straight for the slab-sided spacecraft that hung above the continent of Vasocria. Inside the gunship's cargo bay was a single battlesuit, powered down but for the engines and the most vital of reserve systems.

Inside its cockpit, there was no one at all.

'Captain,' said Auspicator Enda, his third and fourth eyes twitching. 'There appears to be a single tau craft closing on our location.'

'Designation?' asked Aortura, rushing over. 'Position?'

'Unknown. It is inbound on our starboard midsection. It is not much larger than a Thunderhawk, sir.'

'Probably ambassadorial. Shoot it down, please, Master Gunner Threnst. We

are long past the point of negotiation.’

‘Aye, captain,’ said the impeccably-uniformed Threnst. A thin trace of a smile took over his taut features. The master gunner depressed a comms-rune, pulling the ivory speaking horn close to his mouth. ‘Gunnery deck five. Kindly greet the foreign body approaching us with a salvo of melta torpedoes.’

There was an affirmative crackle from the comms cogitator, and Threnst stepped away, snapping a sharp salute.

‘It is done, captain.’

‘Let us hope so,’ said Aortura. ‘Chapter Master Caelos is at a crux point in fate. He will not be pleased if anything disrupts it.’

The Mako gunship’s bridge alerts blipped the alarm for incoming ordnance. A hex opened like an unfolding paper sculpture upon its interior screens to show four massive, black-tipped melta torpedoes shooting through space on an intercept course.

In the Mako’s hold, Ob’lotai readied his battlesuit, bringing its systems online in a cascade of gentle light. His vane-like aerial arrays, recently replaced by versions eight times their usual strength, sent a tight-beam transmission to the ship’s bridge. The Mako’s rear doors clunked with a triple hiss, and slid open.

Vior’los was visible far below, a backlit orb swathed in black cloud. The timing had to be perfect, if this was to work. Not only for the initial escape, but for the grand entrance, and the final act.

Ob’lotai felt a strange swell of pride, new and unfamiliar. For an artificial intelligence, perfect timing was no real challenge at all.

The gunship corkscrewed hard as the volley of melta torpedoes shot towards it, its vector altered so it would pass between them and continue its flight. Watching his prey as avidly as a starving eagle, Master Gunner Threnst jabbed three fingers into the rune of awakening, in doing so remotely triggering the resurrection circuits of the servitor cores nestled inside the melta torpedoes.

Like hungry ghosts the corpse-spirits in the missiles sniffed out the xenos presence in their midst. One after another they altered their trajectories sharply to intercept the gunship once more. The alien craft dived and rolled, and for a moment Threnst thought he saw a slim white shape detach. An evacuating pilot perhaps, soon to meet a violent death.

The missiles veered in close, three passing a matter of metres away. The last of the melta torpedoes clipped the xenos craft’s wing. The warhead detonated with colossal force, the immense potency of the explosion triggering a chain reaction in the other three missiles.

Threnst chuckled darkly as the clouds of killing energy blossomed, yellow and orange, to consume the gunship entire. To a certain mind-set, it was undeniably beautiful.

‘Got it!’ shouted Master Gunner Threnst, thrusting forward a fist in celebration. He quickly recovered himself and stood straight, pulling down his uniform. ‘Affirmative strike, captain. The alien craft is no more.’

‘Very good,’ said Aortura dismissively. ‘Now please be silent. You are about to witness something very few mortal humans have ever seen.’

‘The Chapter Master has made his decision, then?’

‘He has.’

‘Is it...’

‘It is. Exterminatus.’

Ob’lotai shot through the void like a hurled spear. The newly prepared prototype he had transferred his consciousness into was every bit as advanced as Farsight had promised. It was travelling at over two hundred kilometres per hour, and its powerful jet arrays were not yet at their full potential. His orders were to ride the pressure wave of the explosion as far as he could; at this rate, it would carry him all the way to the Imperial craft and beyond.

Farsight had told Ob’lotai it was the Imperial way to swat a dragonfly with a sledgehammer, and he had not been wrong. By employing a ship-to-ship combat weapon, the gue’ron’sha craft had enabled him to bypass the missiles on minimum power signature, fly past them, and ride the bow wave of the explosion for so long he barely had to expend any fuel at all.

It was the only way the battlesuit could have made such a long trip, in truth – but the gamble had paid off. Ob’lotai felt an abstract sense of regret that he could not let Farsight know in person. He would have very much liked to have given the validation the high commander craved.

But this day was not for Ob’lotai 3-0, nor for High Commander Farsight. It was for the Tau’va.

And sometimes, sacrifices had to be made.

A thousand chains clanked and shivered as the slave workers of Gun Deck Quintus went about the most important task of their lives. By the sweat of their brows and the breaking of their backs, the mighty Exterminatus engine was lifted from the interior rails that led to the weapons hall. Fifty metres of malignant black cylinder with livid green extremis signs emblazoned across it, the world-killer was winched into place and pulled steadily upon its elaborate loading gurney, borne with the greatest of care upon a network of sling harnesses

as it was conveyed to the *Deific Splendour's* main breach.

The evil-looking thing was heavy with the weight of destruction and of dooms to come. When it entered low orbit it would split into two warheads; the first would deliver the voracious life-eater virus that would reduce every living thing upon the planet to biological mulch and hyperflammable gas, whilst the second would detonate with such force it would ignite that chemical fug across the entire world, scouring it clean with a killing firestorm.

The gun deck's naval taskmasters usually drove their charges with a mixture of intimidation and capital punishment, filling the weapons hall with shouts of anger and screams of pain. This day, the hall was silent, the gun-serfs already working in reverent terror. To misjudge the device's loading process, even by a fraction, would have spelled utter disaster.

Slowly, painstakingly, the vast Exterminatus engine was loaded into the breach. As its chains fell away, ten hundred souls sighed as one. The sacred cargo had been borne to its cylindrical womb.

Soon it would be born into the cold void, and the death of a planet would follow.

The titanic Imperial warship loomed large on Ob'lotai's screens, its gothic façade encrusted with guns and gargoyles. The section Farsight had indicated to him was boxed off in gold, advisory symbols flashing around its edge. Timing was of the utmost importance. The suit would have perhaps two microdecs of leeway if the plan was to come to fruition.

A slight shimmer in the starscape ahead indicated the presence of the ship's anomaly shields. He was closing upon them fast. Ob'lotai steeled himself, and shut every system down, his world becoming utter blackness.

Nameless oblivion stretched out, perhaps for a few demi-decs, perhaps for a lifetime.

Then the world burst into colour and light once more. Ahead, the centremost of three massive gun ports slid open in readiness to launch the missile that Farsight and O'Vesa had referred to as the Imperial world killer. Ob'lotai accelerated hard, putting everything the prototype battlesuit had into that last burst of speed – everything bar the energy he had apportioned to its sensor vanes and weapon systems, at least.

The battlesuit shot into the dark cylinder, then braked hard, Ob'lotai swinging the suit's legs forward until he was upright. Something was emerging from the darkness, something huge and blunt-nosed. Ob'lotai read its energy emissions. It was a near-perfect match.

This was the world-ending missile the high commander had spoken of. The

same calibre of device that had turned Arkunasha from a civilised world plagued by ork invasion to a haunted desert of rust and sand.

Ob'lotai gave thanks to the Tau'va and hit the pre-prepared transmission code, triggering his fusion blaster a microdec later.

There was a red glow at the tip of the vast Imperial warhead, just for a second.

And then the heavens were torn apart.

The night sky was lit by a blinding flash. Farsight looked up to see expanding rings of flame around a burning white dot. He made the sign of the Tau'va, the skin of his face burning with emotion. Around him his cadres were emerging from the Vasocris energy farm's pit, their jet packs carrying them above the seething tides of lava even as the Orca dropships he had commissioned from the fleet evacuated the captives and grounded personnel from the rapidly flooding site. Bravestorm and Brightsword were both wounded, but their battlesuits had enough power left to see them lead their teams to the waiting Manta missile destroyers above.

As the exodus passed over the massively curved radar dish of the Vasocris communications complex, Farsight called up a lance-sensor and zoomed through its arched windows to the broadcast suites behind.

There, in the darkness, a tiny transmission light flickered from amber to green.

Farsight smiled to himself, and jetted upward, towards the transport bay of his waiting Orca transport, the billowing black clouds of a hundred erupting volcanoes filling the horizon far behind him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BARRAGE OF TRUTHS

THE MANIFEST DREAM

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-29

112.745.M41

+++UNEXPURGATED ITERATION+++

And so I have become that which I once claimed to be. Falsely at first, but in playing the role, perhaps I have grown to appreciate its virtues. The tau race needs guidance if it is to stay outside the grasp of the abyss, for they have proven themselves quite capable of walking in the darkness.

The chain of volcanic eruptions triggered by the tau weapon scientists started slowly, but when it reached its peak, it was as if the end of the world had come to Vior'los. We were away, by that point, already in low orbit before the first of the supervolcanoes truly vented its fury. The ships still shuddered at the megatonnage of each eruption. I can still see the effects upon the planet now, from the hexagonal viewport of my quarters. Vior'los is ablaze, rivers of lava criss-crossing its wastes.

The Adeptus Mechanicus war convocations, those massed battle maniples that had strode across the ashen fields to reinforce their brethren at the energy farms, had no nimble transport crafts to bear them away. They chose to walk to the active warzones, just as their forefathers did, and their forefathers before them. Hence the convocations faced the wrath of the volcanoes first hand.

Billions of Skitarii died in the first hours of eruption, those tough enough to survive the pyroclastic blast melted into half-organic slag by the swilling tides of lava that followed. The senior tech-priests had already left the planet, of course, if they had ever descended to it in the first place. But as for their slaver minions, I believe around eighty-nine per cent of their strength was eradicated by the

volcanic eruptions and the demise of the energy farms. Small wonder the rest opted to withdraw from the planet. It is an easy equation even for a mere human to work out.

Vior'los now belongs to the tau. No subtle infiltration this time, no silken conquest. The Adeptus Mechanicus have been thoroughly broken on the surface, and the Scar Lords, who my tattoo now represents with the card Destruction of All Towers – usually a sure sign of Exterminatus – have been scattered to nothingness in the stars by the premature detonation of their own doomsday weapon. All told, a comprehensive victory for High Commander Farsight and his tau cadres against a foe that should have easily outmatched them. And when the fire caste claim a world, they leave no doubt as to who is in control. The message is clear – challenge the dominance of the tau at your peril.

Perhaps their much-prized ethereals are not the ones to see this race walk the right path, despite what their indoctrinated truths insist. Perhaps it is the duty of those races who have gone before, and been seduced by the darkness, to guide those who have not yet fallen from that same path.

On the other hand, perhaps these are just lies I tell myself to justify the heresy I have committed here. At the height of the battle I initiated an aggressive act against a member of the Adeptus Astartes, a high-ranking member of the Librarius no less, in defence of an alien race.

So I am a radical, now and forever more. Perhaps you saw that in me all along, my dear. Perhaps not. But I promise you I serve the same ends, and always will. The Imperium must endure, even if it must make use of strange allies to do so.

There is another matter that disturbs me in the night, dear heart. Allow me to confide. I feared a baleful presence would take root here eventually, and now that I know it is real, I fear I am of the wrong order to root it out. I am preparing a carefully worded missive to the Ordo Malleus, for they alone are –

Vykola Herat put down her autoquill, turning to look at the elongated hex of her doorway at the end of her cavernous quarters. It had chimed, just once. She frowned, for she was not due to receive any visitors. The tau were usually so scrupulous about informing their guests when they sought an audience.

The Tarot card on her forehead twisted and shimmered with almost painful swiftness, over and over again. She reached into the pocket of her voluminous greatcoat and pulled out a small circular mirror on a golden chain, holding it up for a moment to catch her reflection.

The Fool Amongst the Flames. The Great Exile. Then – to her mounting horror – the Lord of Hellfire.

Dropping the mirror on its fine chain, Herat picked up her ornate hellpistol and

spun for the door.

It was already open. Framed within it was Por Malcaor, a wide smile on his face.

‘May I come in?’ he asked, walking inside before she could answer.

‘You already have.’

The door closed behind him with a soft hiss. ‘I cannot sleep.’

‘I gave that habit up years ago,’ said Vykola. ‘Such a waste of time.’ She kept her voice level. Playing the charade, buying time, was the only thing that would keep her alive. If she could somehow reach the door panel...

‘I was thinking about you.’

‘You were? I am flattered.’

‘Yes. I wondered what wisdom lies in that wonderfully symmetrical skull of yours.’

‘Human concerns,’ she said, ‘human emotions. Probably beneath your interest.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Por Malcaor. ‘You are a biomancer, are you not?’

‘I am, yes. That is no secret.’

‘You are a fellow student of change, then. We have much to discuss. Would I be right in thinking a biomancer could withstand tortures even a Space Marine could not endure?’

‘Come any closer, and you might find me a difficult subject.’

At this, Por Malcaor picked up a decorative bowl and hurled it sideways, dashing it with terrifying strength against the wall next to his head. Splinters of jagged crystal ricocheted to embed themselves in his shoulder, his cheek, even his eyeball, but his smile did not so much as twitch.

‘Don’t you know what I am?’ said the Water Spider, extending an open hand above the shattered shards. The longest of them leaped from the ground into his hand, a jagged shard that he squeezed tight enough to draw blood. Eight more splinters leaped from the ground to embed themselves in his scalp, forming a horned crown that lined his flat blue-grey features with long dribbles of crimson.

‘Why not tell me?’ said Vykola, her voice cracking. She visualised her body turning to living steel from the inside out, feeling her inner organs harden and grow cold in response. An old trick, but it had saved her life on more than one occasion.

‘Why, I am a daemon, of course,’ replied Por Malcaor with a chuckle. ‘A herald, in the service of Almighty Tzeentch. I had his favour, once. I will have it again, for his curses are not to my taste.’

The doorway chimed again. Por Malcaor’s expression turned savage for a moment, a grotesque mask that struck crippling fear into Vykola’s heart. Behind him, the icon of fire caste command flickered on the lintel’s hex-shaped

informational.

‘Mistress Delaque,’ came the voice of High Commander Farsight. ‘Is Por Malcaor with you? The drone-net lists this as his current whereabouts.’

The informational hex above the portal showed an image of Farsight standing outside. He was wearing fire caste fatigues embroidered with fine scripts. He carried no weapon at his side, not even a pistol; in his hand he had nothing more than a notation disc and a stylus.

The Water Spider dropped to all fours in a flurry of cloth and scampered like an insect across the lounge-chairs and tables. Vykola gritted her teeth and took her chance, double-firing at the thing’s chest. Against all reason the energy bolts turned to tinkling music in mid-air, then to cruel laughter, then to the screams of burning tau. Suddenly the Water Spider was up against her, one long-fingered hand grasping her wrists and his shard-knife pressing up hard under her chin. ‘Speak not a word,’ he said, ‘or I will burn you in ways that you can never heal.’

Farsight sent the audience chime again.

‘Por Malcaor, are you present?’

‘Yes,’ came the reply. The voice was startlingly loud in its anger.

‘What is transpiring? I seek audience.’

‘I am attempting to torture Mamzel Delaque,’ said Por Malcaor through clenched teeth, ‘but your presence is making it difficult.’

Farsight felt a jolt of panic. He quickly flicked some skin cells onto the identifier panel and hit the override. The door hissed open and he stepped inside, letting it close once more behind him. He waved two fingers across the portal’s screen, turning it from dark to full lock. This exchange was not for the eyes of the common populace.

‘I shall peel her face for you,’ said the Water Spider, blood still dribbling down his features and across his neck. ‘As a gesture of respect, and an offering to a great leader. She is skilled in the biomantic arts, she can always grow a new one.’ Por Malcaor laughed, high and shrill.

‘I listened to your every word, Por Malcaor,’ said Farsight. ‘I trusted you.’

‘Then you have the mind of a precocious child,’ the daemon replied. ‘Just as with all your kind.’

‘You underestimate us.’

‘You overestimate yourselves! So nearly worthless. Beneath the notice of the proud and the ravenous.’ Por Malcaor’s face became an exaggerated mask of pity. ‘But for poor wretches like me, cursed by the very god they revere? Not quite irrelevant. Consume enough tiny souls, and who knows? I could become a god!’

Por Malcaor laughed, a madman's shriek. Farsight took a step forward.

'You thrive on conflict,' said Farsight. 'You pressed for escalation. You wanted the death of this world, but you were denied.'

'I wanted change,' said Por Malcaor. 'And you brought it. Would you like to experience it yourself?'

Farsight took another step. The Water Spider howled and thrust his crystal knife upwards. Its point snapped upon Delaque's jaw. She snarled and grabbed him by the throat, ripping hard with talons that shone like chrome. Por Malcaor's neck, then his head, came apart with a nauseating sucking noise.

The infernal laughter did not stop, but instead bubbled up from two throats, one high pitched and shrill, one deep and menacing. The daemon tightened his grip around Delaque's steel body.

'Physical harm,' said the Water Spider. 'How quaint.'

Farsight met Delaque's eyes, a warning glance, before approaching once more. 'So it was you behind the disappearances? It was you that killed Wellclaim?'

'Pryfinger,' said the creature, 'Peacebringer. Tsmyen Kais. Only those who I wanted to kill in person, though a sympathetic astropath in the Ultramarines fleet allowed me to trigger an ambush that killed billions more. Oh, and Mamzel Delaque.'

At this, the Water Spider grabbed the advisor around the neck, conjured a fireball of multi-coloured fire in his other hand and forced it into her chest. She spasmed as if caught in a fierce all-consuming fit, back arching and eyes rolling wild. Farsight leaped forward, whipping his bonding knife from the scabbard in the small of his back. A moment before he could punch the blade home the Water Spider flung out a claw, and Farsight found himself caught in midair.

The high commander put every ounce of his focus into moving, but he was held fast. Every muscle was frozen, paralysed by a force he could not understand.

The Water Spider giggled. He licked the shard of crystal with his bifurcated tongue as Thransia Delaque spasmed at his feet, multi-coloured light pouring from her mouth, eyes and ears. The silver sheen of her flesh faded away, replaced by the soft pink of human skin once more.

Por Malcaor made a spiralling motion with his hand, and Farsight's mind froze too, catapulted into a strobing, nightmare vision of doom-filled futures and shameful pasts.

The Water Spider leaned over the shuddering body of the fallen biomancer, and began to cut.

The migraines were back, gnawing at Farsight's mind worse than ever. With them came images, scenes and emotions that he could not dispel.

A horde of green-skinned monsters poured over the lip of the vast crater, their outsized cannons blazing in celebration of a trap well sprung. Farsight felt the bile of defeat eating away at him. His mont'ka had been turned back upon him, and his people were dying in droves.

Chitinous, scythe-limbed creatures poured over the horizon, an endless tide of alien anatomies that had more in common with a tsunami than an army on the attack. They numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but ranged against them were only eight.

Shadowsun stared at him, her eyes cold. She had her fusion blasters levelled at his head, and wore an expression he knew only too well. With a shock, Farsight realised that it was not contempt in her eyes, nor disappointment, but hatred. She truly was here to kill him.

The crimson-skinned giant brought down its greataxe in a massive overhead blow. Farsight raised the ancient blade he had scabbled free from the statue, heavy and solid, in a crude attempt to parry. The axe shattered into a thousand pieces. Farsight looked in wonder at the mysterious artefact. He felt something, just for a moment, of its nature, and of the weight he had taken upon himself by taking it up.

His soul quailed. As his vision began to fade, he saw something hexagonal glint in the dust of the relic world. He felt the shadows of the future flow away, leaving only the distant past.

The Argap Plateau receded beneath him, an island in a sea of greenskins that roared in triumph as his ships fled the warzone they had fought in for over ten long tau'cyr. Atop the plateau were flashes of light, the last signs of the fire caste warriors that gave their lives to secure his unworthy retreat.

Once more he lay in a puddle at the side of the ice-cold River Kan'ji, cruciform on the cold muddy bank where Master Puretide siphoned the neurotoxins of the slate eel. For Shadowsun the trial by paralysis had taken perhaps three rotas; for Kais, less than one. For Farsight, the trial had already taken four times as long. It would be repeated every dawn, until the lesson of mind over matter was finally learned.

This day, he would defeat it. This day, he would rise again.

He focused every iota of his will into the single movement of a single muscle in his finger, rehearsing it over and over again in his mind. He had to move. He had to move.

Theory, practice, perfection, then...
Action.

Farsight's index finger twitched, just once.

Suddenly Delaque's guest suite was filled with utter cacophony. The notation disc signal, triggered by Farsight's skin cells hitting its reader panel, was deafeningly loud. Given to him by Ob'lotai as a defence against eavesdropping drones, the disc contained countless streams of auditory data mingled together into a single blast of white noise. Farsight had taken the precaution of combining it with over a thousand water caste informational holograms. The storm of stimulus had been triggered all at once, a barrage of white noise and multi-spectral light.

Por Malcaor reeled backwards, screaming and clutching at his ravaged features. He tripped over Delaque's recumbent body, stumbling to smack his head hard against a tranquillity stand. Suddenly Farsight was free, landing clumsily in a stumbling crouch before righting himself and tightening his grip on the bonding knife.

'You hear all,' said Farsight. 'You see all. I remember you telling me.' He strode over the Water Spider, kicking him hard to roll him away from Thransia Delaque's bleeding form. 'I commit everything I can to memory, too,' said Farsight, bringing his blaring notation disc in close to the magister's blood-slicked ear. 'I remember what the gue'ron'sha psyker called you before you slew him. He called you a word I did not recognise. *Daemon.*'

'Turn it off!' gibbered Por Malcaor, his flesh splitting and churning to form a dozen mouths at once. 'I cannot stand it!'

'I even remember a symbol I have not yet seen,' called out Farsight over the din, 'a symbol that your kin recoil from, even upon their own planet. I have a theory about its efficacy.'

The daemon still reeled, flame drizzling from between its teeth.

'You do not fear pain,' snarled Farsight. 'But do you fear this?'

Jumping astride the convulsing creature, his knees pinning its arms, Farsight turned his bonding knife point down. He dug the point into the creature's chest and carved one line, then another, then another, doggedly recreating the hexagrammatic design he had seen in his vision.

'Yes!' shouted the daemon. 'Yes, I fear it! Stop!'

Farsight grimly continued his red work.

'They are playing you for a fool! Your whole culture is built on lies! The ethereals, they are using you all like puppets. It was they who murdered Wellclaim, not I! It was they who killed your precious master!'

On carved the bonding knife. Farsight's hands were shaking hard, but still steady enough. The creature was trying to bind his thoughts with its treacherous words, but somehow the purity of his anger was keeping him focused on the dire task at hand.

'You know I am telling the truth!' screamed Por Malcaor. 'Stop! I can tell you the secrets of the universe!'

Another line carved. Then another. Then, with a vicious slash, the hexagram was complete.

The daemon screamed from a dozen mouths at once, its convulsions so severe Farsight was hurled aside. The creature's flesh was bubbling, now, tiny limbs sprouting from a hundred places across its anatomy to clutch spasmodically at the air. Streamers of multi-coloured smoke poured from its skin as it slowly deliquesced, then turned from liquidising flesh and blood into foul-smelling gas. There was a plaintive wail, and the vaporous thing vanished altogether.

Farsight slumped, his back against the wall, for a few long moments. Then, as his mind began to clear, he shook his head, hauling himself to his feet and staggering over to check on the fallen human advisor nearby. She was badly cut, and livid scorch marks had blistered the flesh around her eyes, nose and mouth, but she was still breathing.

'Do you still live, Mamzel Delaque?' asked Farsight.

'I will,' she croaked in response. As the high commander watched, the scorch marks faded slightly, and the gouges that had been cut into her flesh began to close up and heal over.

'Psyker mind-science,' he said.

Delaque choked, the sudden cough turning into a laugh. 'Yes, if you like. It takes a lot to kill the likes of me.' Her voice became stronger, more certain, as she got to her feet and rearranged her clothes to a semblance of order. 'And call me Vykola. Vykola Herat.'

'Is that your true name, then?'

'Yes,' said Herat, a strange look in her eyes. 'That is my true name.'

HALF A TAU'CYR LATER

The great muster stretched across the Vasocris Plain, rank after rank of fire caste warriors standing at full attention. The earth caste were much in evidence, too, ensuring every battlesuit was as close to perfection as they could make it. Farsight stood on the grey slopes of the super volcano, the fresh pumice and solidified lava underfoot still plinking and hissing as it cooled.

He opened an aerofilter gill to full, leaned over and took a deep breath of the air. It was hot and stifling to some, but to a Vior'lan, it was much like coming home.

To his left was Brightsword, the foot of his flame-painted XV8 planted firmly on a boulder in what the young commander no doubt hoped was a classic conqueror's pose. To his right was Bravestorm, his iridium suit polished to a high sheen. His sensor head panned, its aerials lifting as it scanned the skies for signs of Imperial aircraft.

'They are not coming back, Bravestorm,' said Farsight. 'Not for a while, at least. We will have to find you something else to kill.'

'I would advise silence,' said Ob'lotai 4-0 from the jutting rock behind them. 'The devices of the water caste are close by, and they must have their due.'

Farsight smiled ruefully. His old mentor was just as prudent as his former incarnation, his personality intact despite the loss of memory he had suffered from his journey across the heavens as a tight-beam transmission.

'He is right,' said Moata. 'We should talk in private.'

In lieu of an answer, Farsight turned away and stared into the distance. The low purr of tau engines came over the peaks of the volcano range. As they grew louder the sky was filled with a perfect display of aeronautic skill. Admiral Teng's air caste squadrons were showing their appreciation, their fly-by leaving

geometric trails of vapour in a perfect hexagonal grid.

‘All wholly unnecessary, of course,’ said Bravestorm. ‘But gratifying nonetheless.’

‘Li Mau Teng knows I do not consider this an appropriate use of resources,’ said Farsight.

‘So laudable, joyless one,’ said Brightsword. ‘Vior’los is ours, won at great cost. We might as well enjoy it.’ Igniting his fusion blasters, the young commander turned to face the assembled masses, sending twin blades of light whipping around him as he made an elaborate bow. Farsight sighed and raised his own weapons systems in salute.

At this, the fire caste warriors arrayed in the valley below roared in approval, every one of them raising his weapons to the sky. Without exception, over the last few cycles the tau had changed their armour from the ochre of the core septs to the red of Farsight and his inner cadre.

‘They wear the colours of Arkunasha, O’Shovah,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘Is that not gladdening to your heart?’

‘It is,’ admitted Farsight. ‘It honours the blood of the fallen, and it bodes well for the wars to come.’

‘It is not just the fire caste that salutes you this day,’ said Bravestorm. ‘Look around you, high commander. The other castes are out in force.’

‘Yes,’ said Farsight, staring once more at the horizon. ‘Every caste but one.’

TAU XENOLEXICON

TAU WORD – BEST TRANSLATION

Aun – Ethereal/Celestial

Aun'ar'tol – Ethereal caste high command

Be'gel – Ork

D'yanoi – Twin moons

El – Second highest tau rank

Fio – Earth

Fu'llasso – Overly complicated situation (lit. 'cursed mind knot')

Ghoro'kha – Death hail

Gue'la – Human

Gue'ron'sha – Space Marine (lit. 'engineered human warriors')

Gue'vesa – Humans who have joined the Tau'va (lit. 'human helpers')

J'kaara – Mirror

Kais – Skilful

Kau'ui – Cadre

Kauyon – Metastrategy of patience and ambush (lit. 'Patient Hunter')

Kavaal – A temporary grouping of contingents (lit. 'battle')

Kor – Air

Kor'shuto – Orbital city

Kor'vattra – The tau navy

Kor'vesa – Tau drone (lit. 'faithful helper')

Ko'vash – To strive for (lit. 'a worthy cause')

La – Lowest tau rank

La'rua – Team

Lhas'rhen'na – Euphemism for noble sacrifice (lit. 'shattered jade')

M'yen – Unforeseen

Mal'caor – Spider

Mal'kor – Vespids (insectile mercenary race)

Malk'la – Ritual discipline meted out to leaders who fail the Tau'va

Mesme – Combination

Monat – A solo operative (lit. 'lone warrior')

Mont'au – The Terror – a barbaric time of war

Mont'ka – Metastrategy of the perfect strike (lit. 'Killing Blow')

Mont'yr – Blooded (lit. 'seen battle')

Mor'tonium – Highly reactive alloy used as key element of ion weaponry

M'yen – Unforeseen

Nont'ka – Time of Questioning (concept used by Ethereal caste only)

O – Highest tau rank

Or'es – Powerful

Por – Water

Por'sral – Propaganda campaign

Rinyon – Metastrategy of envelopment (lit. 'Circle of Blades')

Rip'yka – Metastrategy of cumulative strikes (lit. 'Thousand Daggers')

Run'al – Observation post, small blind or bunker

Saz'nami – Ethereal honour guard/enforcer of the Tau'va

Shan'al – Four Ua'sho 'commands' under Ethereal guidance (lit. 'coalition')

Shas – Fire

Shas'ar'tol – Fire caste military high command

Shas'len'ra – Cautious warrior

Shi – Victory

Shio'he – Olfactory chasm, tau scent organ equivalent

Shoh – Inner light

Shovah – Farsighted

Ta'lissera – Communion/Marriage/Bonded; sacred ritual for tau groups

Ta'ro'cha – Unity of a specific trio (lit. 'three minds as one')

Ta'shiro – Fortress station (spacebound)

Tau'va – The Greater Good, cornerstone of tau philosophy

Tio've – Contingent

Tsua'm – Middle

Ua'sho – All forces of a given caste in one location (lit. 'command')

Ui – Second lowest tau rank

Vash'ya – Focused on more than one thing (lit. 'between spheres')

Ves'ron – Robotic being

Vior'la – Hot blooded

V'ral – Undercut

Vre – Middle tau rank

Y'eldi – Gifted pilot (lit. 'winged one')

Y'he – Tyrannid (lit. 'ever-devouring')

A NOTE ON TAU UNITS OF TIME

A **tau'cyr** is an annual cycle on the core sept planet T'au (each is approximately 300 Terran days).

A tau'cyr is comprised of 6 **kai'rotaa** (each is approximately 50 Terran days).

A kai'rotaa is comprised of 80 **rotaa** (each is approximately 15 Terran hours).

Each rotaa is broken down into 10 **decs**. Decs are either light-time or dark-time.

Most tau need only 1-2 decs of sleep per rotaa (each is approximately 1.5 Terran hours).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kelly is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Blades of Damocles* and the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Farsight* and *Blood Oath*, as well as the Warhammer titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*. He has also written a number of short stories. He works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham.

To our beautiful baby Evelyn, for 'helping' me write this book.

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