



CRUSADE FOR
ARMAGEDDON
JONATHAN GREEN

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

CRUSADE
FOR
ARMAGEDDON

Jonathan Green

For JC

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

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

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

Priority level: Cyan Beta

Transmitted: Tartarus High Command, Tartarus Hive, Armageddon Secundus, Armageddon

To: Adeptus Astartes Battle Barge Divine Fury, Armageddon High Orbit

Date: 3.872.999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Vicero

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Garuhn

Author: Lord General Dashparov

Thought for the Day: *He who lives for nothing is nothing. He who dies for the Emperor is a hero.*

Greetings my lord marshal.

I pray that this missive finds you in good health and that your recent raids against the ork fleets blockading our sacred world have met with success.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for coming to our aid in our darkest hour. The alien abomination has for too long threatened the peace and security of Armageddon. The atrocities committed in the name of the Great Beast will earn that monster an eternity in damnation when the Emperor sees fit to strike him down as he revels in his blasphemous arrogance.

I know that the war continues in many arenas on our blighted planet. Indeed the siege of our own precious hive-city continues with no sign of abating, despite the courage of the soldiers who defend our walls from the relentless assaults of the orks with lasgun, tank and sword. If it were not for the unswerving loyalty of the Steel Legion battalions and the bravery of our Planetary Defence Force troopers, Tartarus would have fallen long ago.

We had hoped that the titans of Legio Magna, accompanied by a contingent of your own noble battle-brothers, might have broken the deadlock and that the enemy would have been routed for ever, driven back into the unforgiving wastes from whence they first came. We had hoped to see out the year besieging their vile rok-fortresses rather than beating them from our own city walls. But fate has seen to it that these things are not yet to be. In time I hope that the God-Emperor we see fit to deliver us from the greenskin menace.

With the guns of Clain's Stronghold now silenced the threat posed by the orks has increased greatly, our statisticians say ten-fold, and that is an estimate made cautiously, so as not to destroy the morale of our beleaguered troops. I thank the Master of Mankind that he has seen fit to send us aid from many quarters. Even now, the Astartes warriors of the Storm Giants and Celebrants Chapters fight alongside the valiant soldiers of the Imperial Guard. Their courage and resolve are truly remarkable. Indeed, the devout zeal with which the sons of Sigismund pursue their work is also the stuff of fables.

If only I could just have seen such legendary feats performed in battle before my own eyes, perhaps Clain's Stronghold would not have fallen, and the orkish hordes would already have been driven from the hallowed land of Armageddon Secundus.

Before I conclude, I believe that a noble servant of the Emperor is making ready to visit you aboard your flagship. He is a man who has done much for Armageddon's cause already and who has made many sacrifices in pursuit of the alien overlords that would ravage our world with bestial abandon. He has done much, in particular, for the people of Tartarus and I would wish that you pass on my regards to Lord Inquisitor Klojage when he rendezvous with your fleet.

May the God-Emperor smile on your endeavours.

I am ever your humble servant,

Lord General Antre Bashparov

Lord High General of Tartarus Hive Command, Allied Imperial Forces

[Message ends]

Priority level: Cyan Alpha

Transmitted: Adeptus Astartes Battle Barge Divine Fury, Solemnus Crusade, Armageddon Sector

To: Tartarus High Command, Tartarus Hive

Date: 3.886.999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Ankacyte

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Ralcos

Author: Marshal Brant of the Black Templars Crusade fleet Solemnus

Thought for the Day: Through the destruction of our enemies we earn our salvation.

General Dashparov,

I received your epistle upon my return, with my retinue, from purging the abominable vessel Grogran of its ork infestation. I read it with interest, if not with a little displeasure and disbelief.

My lord general, you imply that the brothers of my Chapter have been neglectful and negligent in their duties concerning their mission upon Armageddon, when you know nothing of the purposes the brethren of the Black Templars serve, beyond the defence of a mere single world in all the Emperor's almighty dominion.

You beseech us to help you rid your world of the savage alien hordes and then, when we deign to offer you aid, you call our actions into question and bring the matter before the Emperor's inquisition. Mere mortals, such as yourself and the men of your senior staff, who do not have the benefit of centuries of experience, would find it hard to understand the higher purposes we serve.

You imply that the lack of our presence at the defence of Tartarus Hive resulted in the loss of Chin's Stronghold. It is clear that you are ignorant of the greater conflict that my battle-brothers fought in the wilderness against the ork hordes, despite the fact that they were outnumbered and without recourse to reinforcements.

You dare to demand that we – the Black Templars of the Adeptus Astartes, elite warriors of humanity, the chosen of the Emperor and his strong right arm in battle – account for our actions. As a Chapter, we have undertaken the greatest quest in the ten thousand year-long history of the Imperium to rid the Emperor's immortal realm of the alien, the heretic and the thrice-damned servants of Chaos.

If Castellan Adlar's Fighting Company had not followed the signs and portents, through which the Emperor's will and quest was revealed to one of the Emperor's own champion, chosen by the Master of Mankind in his glory himself, then it would not only have been Chin's Stronghold that fell to the enemy. Instead Tartarus Hive itself would now be a nothing but a smoking ruin, and the way would be left open for the foul ork hordes to come out of the ash wastes and join with the accursed greenskin warbands already assailing Hive Helsreach. Perhaps even now, worthy Armageddon would have already fallen to the forces of the ork overlord, Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, Emperor forbid.

It is not for me to explain the reasons for the decisions that I – a marshal of the Adeptus Astartes – and my trusted commanders make upon the field of battle, nor is it your place to question them. You should thank the Emperor that the Black Templars fight for the relief of your solitary world at all.

But, for the honour of the Chapter I shall endeavour to explain the actions of Castellan Adlar, and all his gallant Fighting Company, in the Tartarus Campaign, in order that you might understand the greater triumph that was won as a result. You might then also see clearly that "through the destruction of our enemies we earn our salvation", as the holy proverb truly states.

I trust the attached file, encrypted for your consideration and contemplation only, will explain everything to the satisfaction of both yourself and the venerable Inquisitor Klojage.

The Emperor is beneficent.

[File attached]

Brant

PROLOGUE

THE KEEP

Twelve years ago...

THE TOWERING, CRENELLATED walls of the great grey stone keep looked like they had stood for thousands of years, as indeed they had. Everything about the ancient edifice gave the impression that it could withstand any assault, no matter how terrible, and that it could survive any siege, no matter how long. Walls a hundred metres high rose from foundations where they were sunk so deep within the craggy plateau of the hilltop that they appeared to grow up out of the bedrock of the planet itself. A thousand pennant flags fluttered in the bitterly cold wind from heavily fortified battlements that also bristled with cannon muzzles.

Additional heavy gun emplacements were embedded within the lower slopes of the twenty-metre-thick walls. Their barrel-mouths opened beneath turreted buttresses, ready to unleash merciless death upon any enemy foolhardy enough to attack the gothic fortress, although not many had tried in its long and noble history.

Huge doors, tall enough and wide enough to allow even the Emperor-class land-battleship colossi of the Adeptus Mechanicus comfortable entry, stood solidly closed. The vast black cross insignia of the holy order that called the great bastion home adorned them, and the prevalent *memento mori* skull of the Imperium that was reproduced in its centre stood ten metres high.

In front of the doors, and bridging the crevasse before the wind-scoured cliffs to which the ancient fortress clung, was a drawbridge wide enough, for six Conqueror tanks to comfortably advance across. Chains with links the size of Land Speeders rose up from their moorings on the drawbridge to the towers of the gatehouse eighty metres up. These housed the lifting gear that could raise the drawbridge and so secure the stronghold in times of danger, should such a tiling ever be necessary. It had been a long time, even by the reckoning of the Adeptus Astartes, since that had been the case. And before the drawbridge was another fortified gatehouse, flying the banner of the Templars.

It was said, by those who knew of such things, that it would take an army of titans a month to break the stronghold open and level it, and such a thing would never happen, by the will of the Emperor!

From its vantage point upon the crag of the uplands, the keep looked out over a rolling heath to lush green grazing pastures and on towards the nearest of the many stone-built towns that dotted these moors.

The keep was the largest man-made structure on the backwater world of Solemnus, a world forgotten for a time by the galaxy-spanning Imperium of Mankind, troubled as the sector had been by warp storms of great magnitude for many millennia. Some said that the only things larger than the chapter keep were the Lammass Mountains and from the steeply rising approach to the Templars' fortress, along the flint-laid road, even their distant glacial peaks were dwarfed by the edifice looming in the foreground.

It had all been part of the founding-brothers' grand design. They had intended that the keep should appear this way, so that any penitent or petitioner making their way towards the ancient sanctuary-fortress should be mindful of the power and might of the Black Templars, and the awesome, forbidding majesty of the Emperor of Mankind whom they served, whose powerful arm and wrathful vengeance the Adeptus Astartes embodied.

And yet, the keep was just one of the Black Templars' many Chapter strongholds, located on hundreds of planets. There was one for every world conquered or reclaimed for the Imperium by the Emperor's most devoted, heretic-persecuting warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, and they were each staging posts for the crusading fleets of the Chapter.

Over the last ten centuries the people of Solemnus had forgotten the terrible, bloody events that originally brought the fleets of the Black Templars to their world. The events of those terrible dark times had long since passed into myth, becoming the legend of the shape-stealers, nightmarish monsters that would steal people away from their beds in the depths of the night. Their human-seeming servants appeared to be like other men and women, but they hid terrible secrets of monstrous births and unnatural devotion to their devil offspring.

But the Templars remembered. The record of the purging of the genestealer cult from the world by their ancestor brothers were the first battles to be inscribed on the roll carved into the walls of the Hall of Heroes. The great keep had been raised after the eradication of the alien infiltrators, to stand watch over the evidently vulnerable feudal world.

No, the Chapter never forgot, lest in its forgetting it became complacent and thereby allowed the heretic, the mutant, the enemy within, the alien, the enemy without, the daemon, or the enemy beyond, a way in to harry the Emperor's divine galaxy-spanning realm and sow the seeds of discontent, chaos, conflict and corruption. And the Chapter's memory was longer than that of the people of Solemnus, it reached back ten thousand years to its founding in the fiery furnace heat of war at the end of the Emperor's own great crusade.

Ever since Lord Sigismund, the first High Marshal of the Black Templars, had assembled the first and largest of the war fleets of the Chapter, and begun the greatest crusade that the Adeptus Astartes had ever undertaken, the Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter spurned possession of a single homeworld. They had become a fleet-based Chapter, so that they might better fulfill their duty to the Emperor in protecting his Imperium.

Solemnus itself was aptly named. It was a world plagued by petulant storms. The system's yellow sun rarely showed for any length of time through the steely overcast skies and the chill yet temperate climate of the uplands benefited from steady rainfall throughout every season of the year. With the approach of the autumnal equinox the weather was seasonably cold and damp. Solemnus was a *p*-class world, its populace sustained by sheep-farming, forestry, the raising of livestock, basic mining and quarrying. The government was perpetrated by feudal lords and petty kings, but the true overlords of Solemnus were the Emperor's holy warriors of the Black Templars Chapter. For what Solemnus offered the rest of the Imperium was the strength of faith of several million hardy souls and neophyte recruits for the hallowed Astartes brotherhood.

One such batch of potential new recruits was even now advancing towards the great gates of the fortress-keep. There were ten young men, all on the verge of adulthood, aged between sixteen and eighteen standard years, and all strong of build. Growing to adulthood on a feudal world such as Solemnus in itself made them suitable to be considered for initiation into the Chapter. And so they were to begin the process that might one day lead to them being transformed into a neophyte Space Marine.

Each of the young men wore an off-white, hooded sackcloth robe, the only embellishment being a Templar cross picked out in black thread, denoting that they were all now of equal rank in the eyes of the brotherhood. They had nothing, having given up everything to make their petition, and yet with everything to gain, equal in their humble desire to join Sigismund's holy brotherhood.

From right across the continent they came, all of them having already bested ten, twenty, or a hundred rivals in the tournaments held throughout the medieval towns and villages of Solemnus in three-yearly cycles. They competed in the hope that one of the servants of the holy brothers of the great keep might be present at their contest and summon the winner to accompany him to the fortress-monastery, to begin his training so that one day he might become one of the Emperor's elite warriors.

There was no greater honour for the people of Solemnus. Even though they would likely never see their offspring again, a family whose son was chosen to journey to the chapter keep had its status raised to feudal nobility and, in time, often became the new lords of their region.

For the new novices this was only the beginning of their trials. And the price of failure, for those who did not eventually become a Templar, was high indeed. For many, death was their only reward. For a possibly fortunate few a life of servitude, within the vast stone keep, awaited them, whereby they served their fellows and the battle-brothers who had passed where they had failed.

The novice neophytes marched two abreast towards the first gatehouse, with its great open portal and the forbidding fortress doors beyond. The imposing figure leading them was a good two heads taller than any of them, a towering two metre giant clad in mighty, cumbersome armour of ancient design. It was lacquered black, but features standing proud of the hardened ceramite carapace were picked out in red and white.

The motif of the Black Templars was repeated again on both shoulder pads, stark against a white background. The cross also appeared, this time in white, on the greaves of the power armour's legs. Three great wax seals stamped with the Imperial aquila attached ribbons of faded, illuminated parchment to the battle-brother's suit. Prayers and invocations calling upon the protection of the Emperor and his saintly primarchs had also been painted directly onto the joints and seals of the armour in archaic gothic lettering. Even the boltgun the warrior carried ceremoniously before him was decorated with verses of Holy Scripture. Much of the armoured suit, however, was shrouded beneath a sackcloth robe, similar to that of the novices, only it bore a much larger black cross, outlined in red.

The warrior was without helmet. The expression he wore on his nobly defined features was strong and proud. Hair as black as his armour swept back from his forehead, and where it had been cut short at the temples it was starting to turn grey.

He might have been considered handsome, were it not for the fact that his flattened nose appeared to have been broken on more than one occasion. The left-hand side of his face was disfigured by a knot of scar tissue, the result of a tyranid venom-acid burn, and the right had two scars, running from cheek to jaw, from when an ork pirate had once tried to open up his head with its power claw. Nevertheless, his war wounds lent the battle-brother a distinguished appearance.

And there were other scars that couldn't be seen. The livid red knot of scar tissue across his midriff was testimony to where he had almost been gutted by a shrapnel blast following an explosion on a drifting space hulk his squad had been tasked with clearing.

The purple-black puncture wounds covering his torso where an alien eldar's splinter cannon had penetrated his armour and perforated his torso with poisoned crystal shards. And there was the whirring augmetic knee-joint that held his left leg together.

The novices followed their guide through the archway of the gatehouse and onto the lowered, ceramite drawbridge. The monolithic gates swung slowly and inexorably open. Beyond lay the gloomy high-ceilinged Hall of Heroes, that swallowed up the light from myriad ensconced torches. Only one tiny patch of coloured light stood out clearly for the approaching, awestruck young men, but still it appeared intricately small and minutely detailed, in this great dark hall. This seemingly small stained glass window at the far end of the sanctuary-nave was in reality ten times the height of the superhuman giant that led them. It depicted the climax of the Black Templars' first battle on Solemnus, when Marshal Emrik dealt the hideously bloated, malformed patriarch of the genestealers the fatal blow that brought an end to the insidious cult on the planet, and heralded a new age of enlightened devotion to the Emperor.

The warrior-brother's heightened senses had already picked out the familiar scents of the monastery-keep. He could smell the burning fat aroma of hot candle-tallow given off by thousands of votive tapers, and see their halo-shrouded tongues of flame. He could taste the delicate scents of dried flower blossom, collected months ago in the spring, that now adorned the chapel-tomb of Marshal Emrik, the keep's founder. He could hear the distant, echoing chants of the Templar choirs, marking the midday worship.

The Space Marine offered his own prayer of praise to the Emperor and the primarch under his breath. He felt the thrum of the throbbing void shield generators buried beneath the rock of the crag-top on which the fortress sat. And he knew that he was home. The keep maintained a population larger than many of the feudal towns of Solemnus. A hundred battle-brothers currently served here. Between crusades, when the fleet returned to the planet, that number could quadruple. Then there were the serfs, adepts and many other minions who saw to the needs of the Templars and the monstrous fortress itself. A cohort of cooks, an army of cleaners, technicians, guards, scribes, engineers, ratings, as well as their families, and that was without mentioning the battalion of mindless servitors that also maintained the keep's many systems.

Within the keep the neophytes would undergo all manner of military training and esoteric surgical procedures, as well as religious instruction. They would be given tuition in the art of warfare, strategy and tactical thinking and learn a thousand and one ways to smite the enemies of the Emperor. They would spend hours in prayer and be subjected to psycho-conditioning. They would be taught, via the ancient cogitator engines of the chapter keep, the glorious history of the Black Templars and learn of the magnificent Imperium of Mankind, in all its splendour, that existed beyond the tiny, backwater world of Solemnus. They would also learn of the myriad enemies that threatened its stability, that worried at its borders and that lurked within a million star systems.

Awaiting them now, in the widening aperture between the gargantuan opening doors, was another armoured warrior-monk of the Adeptus Astartes. This man also had no helmet; the top of his head was balding and bore a natural priestly tonsure. The hair that remained, as well as his close-cropped beard, was grey. His sharp eyes watched as the party approached.

'Brother Jarold,' the older man said, 'I bid you welcome. It would appear that your journey has been fruitful.'

Castellan Hagan's tight lips almost formed a grimace. Everything about the chapter keep's master, the way he held himself, his habit-robe of office and the standard that surmounted the banner pole and formed an integral part of his armour, emanated authority and power. He demanded immediate, unyielding respect.

'Indeed, Brother-Castellan,' the black-haired Space Marine said, bowing his head as he spoke. 'As you can see, there are ten whose actions and achievements have marked them as worthy of undergoing the sacred rites that would make them brothers of our Chapter.'

The Castellan's steely gaze fell upon the column of young men, who wilted before it. They all had their eyes cast to the ground, and their faces hidden within the cowls of their habits.

'And do they come with penitent hearts and shriven souls?'

'They do, my lord.'

'This is a propitious day for your novices indeed, Brother Jarold.' Hagan announced with a grim smile.

'Why is that, my lord? Has the fleet returned?' An edge of excitement crept into Jarold's voice.

Despite the feelings of peace and security evoked by his return to the keep, Brother Jarold hungered for war. Veteran of hundreds of battles, scores of campaigns and a dozen crusades, he had served his Chapter for one hundred and seventy-eight years. His tour of duty on Solemnus was almost done and, having completed his own pilgrimage, he longed to be at the face of battle again.

When the fleet returned from the Apollo Subsector, and the site of the Liberation of Lagnasad, he would join his battle-brothers as they undertook their next mission for the Emperor. He would seek out his enemies, wherever they might be, and deliver his divine retribution.

And yet, although Jarold was eager to rejoin the splinter fleets of the longest running crusade ever undertaken in the eon-long history of the Adeptus Astartes, he would not leave Solemnus without feeling pangs of longing, for it would be the second time he would farewell the world of his birth.

'We received a message from Marshal Brant stating that they hoped to return from their pilgrimage within the week.' Castellan Hagan explained. 'Earlier today we detected the signature of vessels coming out of warp and heading in system. We can only hope that it is the fleet returning and not... something else,' he added darkly.

'So soon?' Jarold's tone now verged on disbelief.

'You have been gone a long time, brother. It is four months since you set out on your own pilgrimage to find these novice-brothers.' Hagan reminded him.

'The Emperor be praised!' Jarold declared with zealous glee. 'Then today truly is a propitious day!'

From somewhere deeper within the fortress a bell began to toll, a deathly, portentous booming. It was a sound that hadn't been heard on Solemnus for over five centuries.

Hagan's expression immediately became deathly serious. He turned back to face the open doors of the fortress. 'Dorn's teeth!' he cursed. 'What in all the seven hells is going on?'

As if in response to the Castellan's entreaty, a dun-robed adept trotted breathlessly over to the party, his sandals flapping on the flagstone floor.

'By the primarch, what is it, boy?'

The withered, augmetic-eyed servant looked old enough to be Hagan's father but, not having the benefit of the longevity granted by a Space Marine's genetically extended lifespan, had probably been born when Hagan had already seen his first century in service to the Emperor.

'The fleet that we detected this morning, my lord—'

'Yes? Our fleet.' Hagan interrupted irritably.

'W-well that's just it, my lord Castellan. I-it isn't Marshal Brant's fleet,' the quivering servant explained, quaking in terrified expectation of his master's wrathful reaction.

'What do you mean? Explain how this can be!' Hagan roared, his rage a barely controlled beast.

'Y-you remember that we have been unable to raise a hail from any craft since they entered the system?'

'Yes, of course. I ordered the whole keep to be put on alert.'

'Well our astropaths have been unable to make contact all day. Two have burnt themselves out attempting to do so,' the adept went on nervously. 'Before he died Astropath Blythe declared that he could hear savage alien voices. Now that the fleet is within range of our augur-satellites orbiting the sixth planet, we have been able to determine why.'

'And the reason is?'

'They are the vessels of alien abominations, my lord.'

The terrified novices looked at each askance.

'Orks, my lord.'

Jarold remained calmly stoical, while Hagan's rage exploded.

'No blasphemous alien will take this world, not while I draw breath and the standard of the Black Templars flies above the ramparts of this fortress! Battle stations, men! We are under attack!'

Brother Jarold ushered his charges through the vast doorway of the chapter keep, pounding after them, long servo-assisted strides soon carrying him ahead of the novices.

'How long until they are in orbit?' Hagan demanded of the adept.

There was a brief pause, the servant tilting his cowed head to one side, as if listening to someone the Castellan could not see or hear. Then he answered, his face drained of all colour: 'Three hours.'

'Power up the void shields!' Castellan Hagan ordered, the adept scurrying to keep up with the Space Marine's great strides.

'Already done, my lord.'

'Our orbital defence platforms, what of them?' Hagan demanded.

'W-we have lost contact, m-my lord.'

'Then we must expect the worst. Prepare for orbital bombardment and full planetary assault!'

ALMOST EXACTLY THREE hours later, Castellan Hagan's words were proved horribly prophetic. A subsonic boom, which could be felt rather than heard, rocked the massive structure of the Black Templars' bastion. But that, in itself, was only the precursor to the devastating attack that was about to begin.

A beam of energy a metre wide streaked down through the atmosphere of the planet, burning its way through the dense cloud cover. Cumulonimbus evaporated under the heat blast as the beam cooked the very air around it.

The laser blast struck the dome of energy shield encasing the ancient stronghold. An aurora of luminous electrical colour blazed in the air several metres above the castle's ramparts and then rippled away across the crackling shield as the beam's energy dissipated. The human inhabitants of the keep howled in terror as their Templar masters urged their servants not to give up faith in the almighty Emperor of mankind.

How the orks had managed to locate the only place on the planet worth attacking, so fast and so accurately, nobody could fathom. Some spoke of pure luck on the aliens' part. Others made the protective sign of the aquila and spoke of foul alien warcraft. Yet others, with an almost heretical tendency, spoke of treachery from within. But whatever the case, the great keep was now under attack, and the Templars and their servants had to do whatever they could to repel the alien invaders.

More beams of burning light hammered the stronghold and blasted great scorch holes in the plateau of the hilltop, sending a rain of smouldering peat and splinters of rock high into the air. Percussive waves of sound shook the craggy landscape and sent scree skittering away down the slopes of the uplands.

The energy shield continued to absorb the laser impacts centred on the Templar's fortification, producing a dazzling show of spectrum-refracted illumination that under-lit the darkly glowing clouds untouched by the beams of intensely-focused light.

The shield generators hadn't been fired up in five centuries, other than for regular religious trial power-ups and tests. But a small army of tech-adepts and servitors had tirelessly maintained them – blessing them with sacred oily unguents and calling on the Machine God to keep them working within specified parameters. It had been done for such an emergency as this, when they would be needed to defend the battle-brothers' bastion.

Within seconds, the chapter keep's own weapon batteries had begun to return fire. Gun crews tried to pinpoint the location of the ships in orbit, through the dazzling flashes illuminating the fortress every second, and the steam rising from the boiling moorland. The crews traced the trajectories of the laser blasts.

Earthshaker cannon and Hydra emplacements launched their own assault on the fractured heavens, spitting shells into the sky, as their human operators prayed to the Emperor to guide their aim, hoping to catch any alien landing craft that might attempt to run the gauntlet. Long-range laser batteries and underground missile silos targeted the orbiting alien aggressors before returning fire or sending their deadly payloads heavenward.

The orbital assault on the fortress continued unabated, with horrendous shelling joining the laser bombardment. Missiles painted with snarling faces and grinning shark mouths rocketed towards the battlements of the keep, powered by smoking fossil fuel engines.

The cruel might of the orks' bombardment was comparable to the devastating firepower of the kilometres-long space-faring battleships of the Imperial Navy. It could even match the weapon batteries of the Black Templar Chapter's own mighty battle barges. The energy required to power such a bombardment was truly awesome, equivalent to the power unleashed by a thousand atomic detonations. And what made it seem all the more terrible to the keep's defenders was that it could come not from the fusillade of an Imperial vessel, but from something constructed by the barbaric greenskins.

Flickering cascades of blue-white light, sheeting across the energy dome, signalled that the shield was beginning to fail. In places it cut out all together. Half the colossal drawbridge disappeared into the crevasse below. A turret of the gatehouse blew out in a shower of shattered statues and masonry. Comm-masts melted. A buttress collapsed. A rampart crumbled.

The orbital bombardment suddenly ceased.

Then the rok came.

Descending from the sky, like a mountain torn free of its roots, it turned day to night, blotting out the weak sunlight, and eclipsing everything in its vast shadow. The tortured air around it became oppressively heavy and charged as if in an ion storm. Its six million cubic tonne mass descended almost gracefully, buoyed up and supported by modified tractor beams and force fields. Static crackled from the rok to the ground, discharging energy, and turning mud and stone to shiny obsidian black.

Many of the keep's weapons trained on this new target, the blossoming explosions of their heavy autocannon and siege mortar shell impacts illuminating the bristling fortifications and armaments of the floating asteroid fortress. The massive mountainous ork stronghold shrugged off everything the keep threw at it as it made groundfall.

The ground buckled beneath the rok. Rock melted smooth and then set hard again under the crashing down-pressure of the bow-wave of its force field cocoon. Countless mooring anchors and iron cable hawsers were launched from crater ports within the asteroid's raggedly mountainous sides in a hail of harpoon fire. Spiked anchor heads split the bedrock, securing the ork fortress to the broken plateau. Hydraulic ramps and great cargo-shutters opened and lowered, disgorging a veritable green tide of ravening, blood-hungry orks. As the chapter keep's batteries continued their assault on the impossible, near invincible asteroid, the rok's own massive weapon arrays came to bear on the ancient sanctuary-fortress.

With an alien roar that drowned out all other noise, the rok fired.

The shield-dome held twelve seconds longer, the ancient generators buried deep beneath the fortress going critical thirty seconds after the collapse of the void shields. The explosion melted the bedrock and ignited the arsenals of three siege guns in the west wall fortifications. A half-kilometre stretch of curtain wall blew out in an eruption of masonry shards the size of tanks as the green, zigzagging fire of lasers, bursts of blue-hot plasma and artillery shells as big as a man tore through the stronghold's central fortifications leaving shattered holes and molten, orange-red rock in their wake.

With that, the great chapter keep died.

MARSHAL BRANT OF the Black Templars Chapter entered the shattered ruins of the Hall of Heroes, now open to the ruddy, smoke-stained skies of Solemnus. Glass and rubble crunched underfoot. He could barely fathom what he was seeing with his own eyes. The fleet had returned from their pilgrimage to the Apollo Sub sector only to find an armada of ugly orkish ships in geo-synchronous orbit over the chapter keep of Solemnus and, more precisely, the ancient monastery-fortress of Brant's forebears. The blunt-nosed, rusting-debris vessels' were carrying out a devastating orbital bombardment.

Brant's fleet of battle barges and strike cruisers had delivered the wrath of their Chapter upon the enemy, smiting the orks with weapons of mass destruction dedicated to the Emperor's cause. They had broken the enemy armada in only a matter of hours, pounding the ugly, snarling terror ships with bombardments from their laser lances, and smashing the cordon of ill-kempt ships apart.

As the ork fleet broke orbit under this storm of vengeful wrath an abominable battle fortress like nothing Brant had ever seen rose through the atmosphere of the planet. So huge an object was it that debris from the space battle was drawn to its gravity well. It appeared to all intents and purposes to be an asteroid, but one fitted out with all manner of crude yet savage weaponry, and it resisted all the fleet's attempts to destroy it.

The Black Templars were forced to disengage when the starfield-obscuring form of an ork hulk drifted out from behind Solemnus's single small satellite moon. The hideous conglomeration of wrecked, millennia-dead spacecraft – belonging to a dozen different races – and other interstellar debris had also been fitted out by the orks. The hulk's weapons gave covering fire to the fleeing armada, and with the rok now in orbit around the titanic bulk of the cannibalised space flotsam, the hulk's plasma engines fired, carrying it out system again.

Three ships of the Templars' fleet had been destroyed in the engagement. Although he would dearly have liked to pursue the enemy who had wrought such death and destruction, Marshal Brant knew that his fleet needed time to recover and that there were doubtless battle-brothers still fighting for their lives on the planet below.

The ork forces routed and in retreat, Brant gave the order and drop pods crashed to earth in a storm of divine vengeance. The Black Templars descended, terrible in their righteous anger, and purged the alien abominations from the face of Solemnus with bolter, flamer and chainsword.

At last, what little was left of the once mighty chapter keep was theirs again, reclaimed in the names of the Emperor and the primarch. Now Brant stood in the shell of the razed fortress, disbelief, grief and incensed fury creasing the folds of his already heavily-lined face.

The bastion could have withstood a besieging army for months, but under the apocalyptic bombardment of the asteroid-fortress – the likes of which he had never seen before – it had fallen in under a day. How could such a tragedy have occurred?

The bodies of orks, Space Marines and serfs littered the broken hall. Everywhere he looked, Brant saw the sacrilegious destruction wrought by the alien attackers. They had stormed the breached fortress and laid waste to everything they found within.

Brant could only wonder at the purpose of such an attack. For all he knew the barbaric, warmongering orks had carried out the invasion merely to satisfy their vile appetite for destruction. But the presence of the asteroid-fortress troubled him. The technology required to create such a monstrosity had to be far in advance of anything orks were capable of producing.

One of the banner icons the ork armies had rallied around lay twisted and broken amidst the wreckage. He had seen such alien iconography before. Chaplain Ugo had once said that the grim iron ork-head images the greenskins carried into battle were supposed to represent the aliens' own brutal gods. But this banner-top was different. The usual green, tusked angular face, had been very deliberately crossed with a red-painted lightning flash. To Brant it looked like a jagged scar. He had seen bullhead, crooked crescent moons and crossed axe symbols, that were markers for various greenskin tribes before, but he had never seen anything like this.

'My lord marshal.' The arrival of the initiate-brother interrupted Brant's solemn train of thought.

'What is it, Torkel?' he asked the Space Marine. 'What have you found?'

'It's Castellan Hagan, sir.'

Brant fixed the initiate with a piercing stare, his eyes cold and blue as diamonds. The warrior bowed his head disconsolately.

'He's dead, sir.'

'How?' the marshal demanded.

'He was gored on the horns of an ork in what passes for their mockery of power armour, my lord. However, he died bravely. He took the monster with him, sir. It's still there, dead inside its suit with the Castellan pinned against the wall, his bolter in his hand.'

'By the Golden Throne!' Brant cursed. 'Have you found anyone alive?'

'Brother Faxon has reported finding survivors in the settlement down in the valley.'

Brant had already encountered one of the weeping peasants, an old man with greying facial hair, wringing his hood in his hands, tears of shock streaming down his bloodied cheeks. The yeoman had told him that a meteorite had fallen from the sky, as on the day of judgement, bringing the apocalypse with it.

'And here, in the keep?'

'No. Not yet, sir,' was Torkel's sullen reply.

'Marshal Brant!' came the sudden shout. 'A survivor has been found!'

Brant moved at a sprint, his armoured boots clanging on the broken flagstones as he ran. His bodyguard entourage kept pace behind him.

They found Brother-Apothecary Colber and his attendants in the Crusaders' Chapel. The shattered, blackened shell of the chamber was dominated by a mound of dead greenskins. It was apparent that as the orks had fallen, one after another, others had come to replace them in the fight, only to fall on top of their dead comrades. And lying atop the huge pile of alien corpses was what remained of a battle-brother of the Black Templar Chapter.

Brant recognised the veteran at once, despite his terrible injuries. Brother Jarold had been cut in half by a rusting cybernetic claw. The weapon belonged to an ork whose head the unmoving Space Marine gripped in one hand, having torn it from the alien's body. 'Is he conscious?' the chapter marshal asked the white-armoured apothecary.

'No.'

'But he's alive?'

Colber met Brant's anxious stare, his expression as stone.

'My lord marshal, he is dying.'

ONE

THE EVE OF BATTLE

The Present Day...

FLUTED COLUMNS ROSE a hundred metres into the buttressed, gloomy, smoke-clouded vaulted roof of the cathedral. Set into recessed alcoves, stained glass windows thirty metres tall, depicting ancient heroes of the Black Templars' Chapter, flickered with the light of the distant starfield. Candles and smouldering incense burners, along with ornate glow-globes, illuminated the holy sanctuary. Lamberent flame-light glinted from the gleaming carapaces of row after row of black-armoured warriors, who were standing to attention in the nave. Marshal Brant climbed the worn stone steps of the briefing-pulpit and addressed the battle-brothers of the Solemnus Crusade.

'Brothers,' he began, his voice echoing in the vast, cathedral space, 'we have journeyed far, in both space and time. We have faced many dangers and challenges in our holy quest, and have fought many battles in the name of righteousness.'

Brant cast his gaze over the assembled throng, picking out each and every face with his one good eye. His other was a red-blinking bionic replacement, a legacy of a ravaging Chaos warband's boarding action six years before.

'Since we abandoned the world that so many of us once called home, many of our brothers have already gone to meet the Emperor. We number but half of those who set out from the ravaged ruins of Solemnus to avenge those who died on that accursed day and to make amends for the dishonour done to our Chapter.'

Every neophyte, initiate and veteran brother returned his grim stare. Marshal Brant knew each of them. He had fought side-by-side with them all in a search for the alien perpetrator.

'Twelve years!' he suddenly bellowed. His calm dissipated, the anger, hatred and frustration of their quest turned his words to vitriol. 'Twelve years ago we quit Solemnus! Twelve years ago we swore an oath to avenge our brothers! Twelve years ago we began the hunt for their murderers! Twelve years ago we began the Solemnus Crusade.'

Brant paused, steeling himself as the snarling echoes of his outburst faded into the tallow-scented air. Every eye was on him. Not a single Templar moved.

'For over a decade have we searched. In that time we have battled the myriad enemies of humanity, and even the accursed traitors our ancestors once called brothers. We have braved the untold perils of the Warp and all the nightmare denizens that it spawns. We have lost entire ships and their crews.'

'Let us remember now the most blessed battle barge *Hammer of War*, claimed by the fickle tides of the immaterium, and we pray that one day Castellan Renwyk and all his company might find their way home. Let us also commend the souls of all those who died aboard the strike cruisers *Vengeance is Mine* and *Crusader's Sword* to the Emperor, that were so cravenly ambushed by relic tomb-ships of the long-dead Necrontyr.'

Brant closed his eye and bowed his head, casting up his own private prayers for those lost to them. The assembled companies did the same.

After several minutes he looked up again and intoned the words, 'Blessings of the primarch be upon them.'

'May the Emperor keep their souls in peace,' the throng responded as one, the whispering surging through the chapel like a mighty wave.

At times those twelve years had seemed like centuries to the weary marshal. He had spent over two years seeking out the clandestine keepers of the most secret and forbidden knowledge of the Inquisition concerning the foul greenskins. He hoped that one day he might find the totem of the scarred ork again and thereby the alien warlord responsible for Solemnus's darkest hour. In the end he had tracked the Ordo Xenos's infamous Inquisitor Ourumov to a mining facility on an abandoned colony world. Arduus Ourumov was undoubtedly the sector's foremost, and possibly least well-known, authority on ork-kind. From the evidence Ourumov uncovered amongst the wreckage of the mining outpost, it turned out that the colony on L-739 had suffered a similar fate to that of Solemnus.

Yet despite feeling worn down by the hunt for the alien responsible for the massacre on Solemnus, Marshal Brant would never give up. He would pursue the ork warlord to the grave, and see his blasphemous asteroid-fortress burn, or die in pursuit of that objective.

'It may have taken us twelve years, but now the end is in sight. We stand at the threshold of our destiny, with the completion of our most holy quest before us, as our ultimate enemy is within our grasp.'

'Five thousand souls perished on Solemnus. They were not just our wronged brothers but also adepts, serfs and the native populace to whom we owed so much and our duty it was to protect. We shall be avenged upon the greenskin plague.' Brant hissed, unconsciously clenching his right hand as if he were crushing an ork's skull inside the power-assisted gauntlet, 'but no matter how many we slaughter, no matter how much alien blood we spill, the numbers of their dead can never make up for our loss. One human soul is worth more orks than there are in the whole galaxy. But we must continue.'

Mutterings of consent passed among the Black Templars gathered in their serried ranks before the pulpit.

'Somewhere on the war-ravaged planet below us, or in orbit within the blockaded space of its exosphere, the foul alien perpetrator of that act of murder awaits our retribution, as he goes about his same foul business.'

An excited murmur surged through the cathedral-nave. It reminded Brant of the susurrant of the wind in the leaves of the valley-swathing forests he used to walk through on Solemnus, in the distant past, when he was but a boy.

'Having traced the murderous orks and their abomination of a hulk here, to the war-torn Armageddon Sector, Imperial agencies already aiding General Kurov's high command in defence of this tactically vital world, have been able to confirm the presence of the Blood Scar tribe both planet-side and in orbit around Armageddon.'

'Imperial spies were able to infiltrate the hulk designated *Krom Kruach* – the same vessel that carried the greenskins to Solemnus – and before their position was compromised, they were able to discover the identity of the tribe's warlord; the evil beast ultimately responsible for the attack on our chapter keep.'

Marshal Brant paused, breathing deeply as he tried to control his seething anger, as well as his almost neophyte-like excitement.

'At last our nemesis has a name: Morkrull Grimskar!'

The crusade marshal's bellowed roar of a revelation resounded over the heads of the assembled warriors, and rebounded from the columns and buttresses.

'Now is our time!' he declared, slamming his fist into the top of the pulpit, the stone fracturing beneath his blow. 'We are the last. Among the unnumbered billions of mankind we few are as candle-flames in the darkness of the eternal void. We are the Emperor's elite warriors, humanity's salvation. It is our lot to give our lives for the Emperor and for those same untold billions who will never even know the sacrifice we have made.'

Brant straightened. With one long, deep breath he composed himself again.

'But let us never forget our holy cause, the reason for our crusade. That oath we swore, we will swear again together now.'

'In the name of the Emperor, Primarch Dorn and Lord Sigismund.' Marshal Brant began and then continued to recite the oath they had all sworn when the Solemnus Crusade commenced twelve years before. The amassed battle-brothers echoed his every word as the three remaining Fighting Companies reaffirmed their vow to rain vengeance upon the alien hordes of the orks. 'May the Emperor ever keep their souls,' their leader finished, and then: 'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' Brant bellowed from the pulpit.

A crashing cacophony of sound swelled into the incense-fogged gloom of the vaulted chapel roof as the Black Templars beat their breastplates with armoured fists in response to the Chapter's battle-motto.

The Black Templars were going to war.

ANSGAR WALKED THE corridors of the five-kilometre long battle barge flagship of the Solemnus Crusade. He was following the armoured footsteps of his battle-brothers as the Black Templars made their way through the echoing passageways to their monasterial living quarters. Brother Cavell and Brother Gauthier walked ahead of him, the statuesque Brother Naldo behind, but none of the Marines spoke to each other. Now was a time for quiet, for meditation and spiritual preparation for the assault to come. Armour had been donned before the assembly of the Chapter-crusade, weapons checked and re-checked.

Ansgar was reminded of the sermons of the late great Chaplain Laji, which lived on long after the brave brother had passed into the halls of the Emperor's light, who had written: 'All the armaments of an entire Chapter cannot save a man who is not prepared in his soul.'

Some of the Black Templars would prepare for the coming assault on Armageddon, due to commence at dawn the next day, through prayer. Others would check and re-check their armoured suits and weaponry for the hundredth time. And still others would sleep, even though the cataleptan node implanted inside each Marine's brain allowed them to go without natural sleep for days at a time. But, of course, they could sleep, should they so wish and should their current situation allow it. The hypno-chant meditation of Blessed Rest, taught by the chaplains of the order, granted them natural sleep from which a Marine would awake at

a moment's notice feeling fully refreshed, with vigour renewed, and ready to take on whatever mission the Emperor and the primarch deemed necessary.

Gauthier and Cavell peeled off in front of Ansgar in turn. A few paces further on Brother Ansgar stepped into his own austere cell, the walls and floor rendered with stones cut from the rained shell of the chapter keep on Solemnus, the planet which many aboard the battle barge *Divine Fury* had once called home and which had given its name to this very crusade.

The chamber measured a mere three metres by two but in that space there was a pallet bed, a place for Ansgar to perform his ablutions, an alcoved altar and a prayer table. Were it not for the porthole opening onto the vessel-clogged starfield backdrop of the Armageddon system and the recessed alcove that contained his anointed power armour and arsenal of holy ordnance, the cell might have been that of any monastic brother or missionary hermit on a thousand medieval worlds.

As he entered, glow-globes sunk into the ceiling glowed into luminescence, sensors detecting his presence. The cell door closed behind him with an asthmatic hiss. Ansgar's first action was to lay his scripture-inscribed boltgun on the altar. He then placed the helmet he had been carrying under one arm next to it. Picking up a taper-shaped chrome igniter, he lit the two stout candles that stood on the altar in their pewter holders, either side of an enamel-painted triptych that rested there also. The glow-globes dimmed in response to the secondary illuminations.

The Space Marine raised a chain, that hung about his neck, with one meaty hand and kissed the black metal Templar cross at its centre. It was almost an automatic, almost preprogrammed, genuflection. Then, before kneeling down in front of the small votive altar to the primarch, Ansgar bowed his head, the candlelight lending his close-cropped blond hair a halo-like quality, momentarily surrounding his head with a nimbus of yellow light.

Having made obeisance to the holy images, he fixed his eyes on the triptych, held within its own, small custom stasis field. His heightened senses picked up the barely audible hum of the stasis generator, buried within the polished granite surface of the altar, and tasted the tang of ozone crackling in the dry, recycled air of the ship.

The three panels of the holy relic bore representations of the three individuals most highly venerated by the Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter. The centrepiece was an ornately painted miniature of the Emperor enshrined within the Golden Throne. His holy radiance bathed the upturned faces of a congregation of the devoted faithful, their expressions of blissful ecstasy.

The hinged panel to the left showed the primarch whose genetic material was bonded to Ansgar's very being at a molecular level, as it was with every initiated battle-brother and hopeful neophyte of the Black Templars. Rogal Dorn, primarch of the Imperial Fists, was wearing the yellow-painted armour of that ancient Chapter and bore the image of the clenched black gauntlet; he was the ultimate founder of not only the Black Templars, but also the Crimson Fists, and only the keepers of the Archivum Astartes knew how many others. Dorn was standing legs braced, boltgun held close to his chest-plate, the starfield behind him framing a likeness of ancient Terra in the top left-hand corner.

The last iconic figure, painted with great skill and devotion by some long-dead artist's cautious hand, and with as much careful attention to detail as both the other two portraits, was black-armoured Sigismund, first High Marshal of the Black Templars and the warrior who had initiated the greatest Space Marine crusade in the history of the Imperium. Ten thousand years on from that momentous event, the Black Templars Chapter was continuing that same crusade in his honour and in the Emperor's name. They would bring His divine retribution, vengeance and wrathful judgement down upon mankind's enemies, wherever they might be found, their very presence sully the face of humanity's most glorious Imperium.

Ansgar remained on his knees and began to intone the Prayer of Holy Supplication. The chant began to clear his mind of extraneous, irrelevant mental clutter, and helped to focus his thoughts on the planetary assault to come. It opened his mind to whatever the Emperor willed.

As he prayed, Ansgar felt his mind respond to the psychic resonances rising from the flagstones under him, pulsing from the walls of the cell around him, emanating from the stone of the altar before him. The psychic memories of a holy sanctuary that bore witness to the violent, cruel deaths of so many souls dedicated to the Chapter, fellow battle-brothers, adepts, servants. He felt the pain of their loss again, shared in the pain of their agonised death-throes, and his mind was swept away in a rush of grief and guilt to...

...THE HALL OF Heroes. The chapter keep of Solemnus.

A sonic boom rocked the mighty fortress and rumbled away over the upland crags like a roar of thunder. Stone-dust and mortar fragments showered down from between the great, megalithic blocks of the keep's walls. Ansgar felt the floor buckle beneath him, the flagstones breaking apart and rising up like a splintering ice floe.

A second crashing roar broke overhead, shaking the fortress to its bedrock foundations. A hot lance of emerald laser energy obliterated a stained glass window, flying glass vaporising under the intense sun-heat of the beam, and pulverised a great stone pulpit. The laser blast earthed in the centre of the pillared hall, melting the flagstoned floor to liquid magma in a fire flash. The Shockwave split the window's dressed stone surround, and fractured one of the many carved marble panels bearing the names of those who had given their lives in crusades mustered from that very Chapter keep.

Masonry crashing down around him in meteoric chunks, Ansgar ran for the orange and purple shape that was the opening where the titan-tall gates had once stood.

The darkening purple sky went black. Something monolithic, something terrible began to descend. The size of an iceberg, sprouting weapons like a cactus sprouted needles, the pressure wave of the rok flattened everything before it.

Ansgar reeled, the pain in his ears making him want to cry out. Gritting his teeth he continued to advance, the servos in his suit revving to sustain motion, the pressure hammering his body so that it seemed as if he was striding into the hurricane winds of Indra, planet of storms. He could feel his armour pressing against the tense muscles of his body beneath and was sure he could see tiny cracks, hairline impact fractures, crazing the black surface of the ceramite plates.

A wash of molten heat howled through the keep in a torrid tidal wave of superheated air. Ansgar braced himself against the after-burn blast, instinctively raising an arm in front of his visored face. He felt the rapidly rising inferno temperature of the hell wind. He heard the paint of his armour, dissolve, bubble and hiss as it first caught fire and then evaporated. Red warning runes flashed up on his visual display before that too cracked under the intense heat blast and the insidious burning air burst into his helmet, fire blinding him and boiling his brain inside his skull...

...ANSGAR OPENED HIS eyes on a vista of rippling savannah grasslands. The sun beat down on the lush grassy plain, pleasantly warming the air around him, as herds of mighty mastodon made their annual trumpeting migration across the plains to the southern inundations.

He was standing on the edge of a curved ridge that rose from the savannah in a gradual incline. To his left and right stood the massed ranks of his Black Templar brothers, supported by the armoured strength of their Predator tanks, Rhino troop carriers and the aggressive bulk of a brooding Land Raider Crusader. A Land Speeder skimmed overhead and banked towards the northern edge of the Space Marines' line.

Pollen-scents of flowering grasses and jojacacia trees drifted towards the troops on the barely moving air. Ansgar's heightened olfactory senses dissected the windborne pollen as the neuroglottis implanted at the back of his mouth separated it out into component pheromone secretions and molecular chemical bonds.

There was another scent mixed in with the natural aromas, an alien bio-chemical smell that spoke to him of blood, pain and unending terror.

And Ansgar remembered – Yenkatta, the Arcadian Belt.

The enemy, a probing tendril of Hive Fleet Leviathan.

He could see it now, like a fall of black snow on the distant purple mountains, dropping mycetic spores. But the tyranids were already here. The wave of plummeting meteor spores he could see were reinforcements to the chattering horde that had already made landfall on the equatorial plains.

Thanks to the enhancements of his helmet visor-scope and his own biological augmentations, Ansgar could see the encroaching tide of thrashing, clawed bodies, casting their shadow over the lush landscape, the savannah turning black under their advance of thousands.

The Space Marine caught a sudden flicker of movement as something sped through the long grass with bounding strides. There was a surprised bellow of terror and one of the megalithic mastodons keeled over, legs thrashing futilely as a spray of arterial blood geysered into the air.

'They're coming,' Ansgar whispered over his helmet mic.

It barely seemed possible, but in mere moments the tyranids were on them, a vanguard of leaping, lashing, whip-tailed monsters hurtling up the sides of the ridge into the guns and revving chainswords of the Black Templars.

With a shrieking scream, a gleaming carapace head rose up in front of Ansgar and opened a maw of needle sharp teeth as chitinous blades came crashing down on his ceramite chest plate...

...A MOUND OF bodies, a haphazard pyre of human carcasses, surmounted by an iron banner-pole bearing the metal-cut image of an angular, tusk-fanged head, split by a jagged blood-red scar.

Ansgar turned away from the sickening monument left by the orks. Just like Solemnus, the fleet had been so close, engaging the departing kill kroozers and savage gunships as they attempted to leave the blighted system. But ultimately, just like Solemnus, the Black Templars had been too late to save Conlaoch. The once-colonised moon spun in lazy orbit around the gas giant, now a dead memorial world, nothing left of its minimal human presence. Nonetheless the crusaders would add the deaths of the few thousand settlers to the tally of those to be avenged.

Ansgar turned and trudged solemnly towards the descending Thunderhawk. Landing jets firing, the craft came to rest on the cratered plaza with a lurching bump. Its rear hatch opened and the boarding ramp lowered. The Space Marines prepared to return to the fleet waiting ten kilometres above them beyond the bounds of the planet's atmosphere.

With a scream of jet engines, the ork plane careened out of the sky, the twin suns behind it blinding the Space Marines on the ground. One last insane ork, abandoned, or forgotten, by the horde, made one last kamikaze run on the landing pad.

Missiles detached from under the fighta-bommer's wings and, rockets firing, blasted towards the Templars who were now running. A missile struck only metres from the sprinting Ansgar. The warhead detonated. The Space Marine was lifted bodily from the ground and hurled forward into oblivion...

...THE PLANET LAY below him, like a bruised fruit hanging in the unforgiving void. Continents spun and shifted beneath the wreathing shrouds of cloud and smog as the sphere rotated about its axis. He could see ruddy bronze mountains rising towards the northern pole of the planet, the land a riot of savage volcanic activity. The overlapping cloud layers moved and a frozen expanse of arctic wasteland became visible.

Armageddon. The objective. The prize. From up here Ansgar felt that he could reach out and pluck the discoloured globe from the heavens.

The cloud cover shifted again.

Now he could see churning oceans, ragged coastlines and a fractured archipelago of rocky islets. He realised he was no longer observing the planet from space. He was soaring through its polluted atmosphere, cold wind blowing against his unhelmeted face. A cone of black metal protrusions rose from the abused landscape and then in another second the hive-city was rushing away behind him towards the stark horizon. A network of thin grey lines crisscrossed the plains, linking other mountain-cities together.

The tired, nutrient-drained hills, valleys and plains sped by below, growths of stunted trees and scrubby bushes a blur as they passed beneath. He swept over the equator, passing through banks of cloud that changed from yellow smog to billows of white cumulus. The ochre plains gave way to a sea of verdant foliage. In his flight he sped over hectare after hectare of thick, almost impenetrable, jungle. For a second he caught a glint of sunlight on something metallic and pyramidal jutting from the canopy, and then it was gone again. Silver sparkling rivers appeared through the green and then were gone in a fraction of a second. Unable to control himself, he descended closer and closer to the treetops.

Then the jungle vanished behind him and he was rocketing over grasslands, crisscrossed with yet more roadways, heading towards hives growing on the horizon.

Faster and faster he went, the wind a hurricane roar in his ears.

Then he was past the hives and hurtling towards the grey dunes rising up before him. A toxic pall clung to every ruined structure that dotted the polluted desert. Shapes loomed through the chemical fog. They were... they were...

...RUINOUS ARCHES ROSE from the grey ash, their broken sections looming over him through the fog. All was silence apart from the dull keening of the wind, which was tugging the clinging chemical mist from the structures around him. He was standing inside a heat-fused crater of atomic devastation. Amorphous shapes that once had form had lost all identity at the vaporising heart of an apocalyptic explosion. The surrounding curtain wall, a kilometre away, was breached in many places, the defensive perimeter's missing segments giving it the appearance of overlarge crenellated battlements. The liquefied and then reset shell that could once have been an Imperial firebase was now nothing more than a sand-blown ruin, waiting to be claimed by the hostile environment of the ash wastes that stretched out beyond it as far as the Space Marine's visor magnoculars facility could scan. Ansgar trudged through the drifts of ash-sand that had collected in the crater, through the blunted teeth of the shattered shield wall and out into the man-made wastes.

A structure rose up before him, half-buried, as if half-consumed, by the hungry desert. No, not a structure; an idol maybe; a fallen giant. It was lying on its side, but it was still the tallest thing for leagues around, a crumpled hill of broken metal.

This was unmistakably the wreckage of one of the colossal walking war machines of the titan legions. A land-battleship designated as a Warhound Titan. Servo-joints seized, grease hardened to a flaking black crust, its adamantium hide scoured clean of all painted markings.

The wolf-titan's weapons of mass destruction were now nothing more than scrap metal and decomposing fuel cells. Slicks of befouled oil and plasma-core leakage had pooled in a lake around the dead giant and then solidified in the baking chemical desert environment, ripples captured for all time in the frozen, multi-hued crystalline deposits.

A tremor passed through the comparted ash and sand, the crystal growths fragmenting. With the creaking groan of tortured metal the crumpled form of the Warhound unfolded and got to its monstrous, rusted clawed feet, the desert cascading from the hollows of its joints and clouding the air around Ansgar with skittering, abrasive particles.

The dust-cloud cleared and the reeling Space Marine looked up at the swaying dog head of the dead giant, its eyes blind, broken cabin windows. The Warhound rocked, standing unsteadily, cables protesting at the strain they were being put under. With a screech of metal grating against metal, the titan raised one arm, a snub-nosed Plasma Blastgun, and pointed with the weapon away to the north-east.

Ansgar followed the titan's aim but could see nothing other than the bleached wilderness unrolling monotonously on to the horizon.

Then suddenly the endless deserts were hurtling past him once more. It was as if he were watching a speeded up pict recording of the journey he was making. The breakneck pace suddenly slowed and he found himself standing at the edge of a featureless plain of glass that stretched for kilometer after kilometre in all directions. The smog-banks that dirtied the azure sky above were reflected in its shimmering surface.

The pause was only momentary and he was away again, passing over the vitrified desert. At last the blurs of speed resolved into rocky outcrops and a rift-edged valley. And there, rising from the broad valley floor before him was a vast crater. Several kilometres in diameter, its mountainous sides were steep and ridged with jagged projections.

Set into the side of the crater were towering double doors of riveted iron, a hundred metres tall. Ansgar could see quite clearly that the towers had once borne the malevolent cyber-skull symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus but this had been defaced. Its scarred surface was now adorned with an even more malevolent ork glyph. The icon, constructed from panels of rust-pocked metal, was of a chunky, angular ork head. A jagged lightning scar had been cut into the surface of the image, showing signs of plasma and melta work, and then painted a vivid red, in stark contrast to the green wash of the rest of the head.

Ansgar found himself approaching the doors, unable to stop himself. Hinges twice as tall as a man ground harshly, as the adamantium doors grated open...

'...NO PITY! No remorse! No fear!'

The voice was his, Ansgar realised. Raising the Black Sword he gripped tightly in his gauntleted hands he parried the descending exoskeleton claw and had to take a step backwards at the force of the blow. The shearing hydraulic pincers of the claw were pulled back and the Templar found himself looking up into the balefully glowing eyes of the horn-helmeted alien warboss.

Ansgar's genetically enhanced physique meant that in his power armour he stood almost two and a half metres tall. Yet despite this, the ork he was facing now still loomed over him, its own crudely customised battle suit making it as broad as it was tall. It was a virtually unstoppable killing machine.

The brute hammered home its advantage, kicking out with an iron-shod foot. Ansgar's consecrated suit of biomechanically linked armour was less cumbersome than his aggressor's and he was able to react swiftly, side-stepping the kick. The Space Marine

brought the crackling power sword around in a deft arc, the blade singing as its sheathing energy field cut through the molecules of the air.

There was a bright flash as Ansgar's weapon connected with the ork's armoured arm, slicing cleanly through a bundle of power cables. The snapping callipers of the claw closed.

The ork lunged. Its snarling face was mere centimetres from the Space Marine's, strings of saliva flapping from yellowed tusks, and the foul abattoir-stink of its breath washed over him...

MEMORIES – MEMORIES SO vivid it felt as if he was reliving the experiences, every breath, every beat of his two hearts.

He remembered Yenkatta, which had occurred a full four years after the commencement of their quest. Entering the Xobi system the Templar fleet had answered a plea for help from taskforce Krieg, battling a splinter fleet of Hive Fleet Leviathan.

He remembered the shattered vestiges of the colony on Conlaoch they had been too late to save. He had barely survived the fighta-bommer pilot's suicidal attack.

And yet he had never been on Solemnus when the ork attack came. He had been aboard the *Divine Fury*, returning from the pilgrimage to Lugnasad. He, like so many others, had only set foot on the planet when the ork forces were in rout.

And he had not yet set foot on Armageddon. How could he know the layout of the landmasses beneath the obscuring clouds of war-born and industrial-grown pollution when his only view of the planet to date had been as a small disc seen through the centimetres-thick glasteel of his cabin's porthole?

These were not memories. These were something else... something...

ANSGAR CAME TO with a start. He was sweating, clammy perspiration coursing down his face and dripping from the hair at his temples. His double heartbeat was racing.

In the still cool of the cell he began to make sense of what he had seen.

With slow, certain movements, he rose to his feet. He lifted his helmet and bolter from the altar and walked towards the door of his cell with growing conviction. It opened with a hiss of compressed air and he stepped out into the gloom of the arched passageway.

The glow-globes had been dimmed for the ship's night cycle, so Ansgar made his way through the *Divine Fury* in almost total darkness. But he didn't need much light to see. The slug-like oculolobe implant allowed him to see almost as well in low light conditions as he could in daylight. Besides, he knew where he was going.

Ansgar arrived at the entrance to the battle-chapel in a matter of minutes, the gothic-arched doorway was like a portal to some ethereal other world. Billows of backlit incense smoke filled its vaulted space.

He entered, striding past shadowy alcoves, flickering, ensconced candelabra and majestic fluted pillars. The marshal's briefing pulpit emerged out of the gloom to his right and then ahead, the high altar and its two, statuesque sentinel attendants.

The fully armoured, monk-robed figures of Chaplain Wolfram and Chaplain Ugo turned their grim skull-masked faces upon the brother who presented himself to them at such a late hour.

Ansgar tried to calm his racing hearts. Swallowing hard he opened his mouth to speak.

'Brother Ansgar.' Chaplain Ugo intoned before the petitioner could say anything, 'you are late. We have been expecting you.'

TWO

GOD ENGINE

'DVORAD! FULL POWER to the legs. Give me striding speed. We don't want any of these greenskinned vermin escaping our wrath! Tactical! I want a lock on those ork dreadnoughts. Orrek, charge up the Volcano Cannon. I need firing solutions *now*! Make it happen!'

Prinps Magnus Ekhardt, commander of the most venerated and feared *Tyrannus Maximus*, god engine of Mars, surveyed the bridge of the ancient Warlord Titan from the elevated position of his command-throne. He wore his customary expression of.

There wasn't much cause to smile when going into battle.

At his command, a thousand tonnes of steel surged forward through the ash dunes, obliterating crumbling rains from the Second War for Armageddon beneath splayed, metal feet with a footprint big enough to crash a city block.

At his command batteries of arcane augur devices assessed the titan's immediate surroundings. Surveyor-slaved cogitators built up a three-dimensional map of the terrain from radar scans, the returns of echo-locators, spectrographic readings and electromagnetic signatures. Using the fractal contour landscape constructed within the machine-mind of the titan, yet more sensor units, linked to the esoteric workings of ancient weapon systems, targeted the jerry-built ork dreadnoughts, as the tiny war machines brought an astonishing array of weaponry to bear against the striding titan-beast. Clattering autocannons, crudely-rigged energy weapons and rocket launchers all fired on the skyscraper-tall war machine, and had about as much effect against the titan as mosquitoes would against the alien greenskins' own tough, stinking hides.

An arsenal equivalent to the firepower of an entire Imperial Guard regiment, which would have reaped a bloody harvest amidst an infantry assault, barely even scratched the surface of the mighty Warlord engine: energy blasts scorched tiny tracks across the metres-thick adamantium armoured plates. Rockets imparted harmlessly against the powering legs in tiny blossoms of orange fire. At Ekhardt's command, a weapon the length of an Imperial Lightning strike craft of the Emperor's glorious Navy came to bear on the scuttling war machines and the myriad miniscule orks scurrying away before the titan's earthshaking steps. A subsonic boom that produced a concussion wave powerful enough to flatten troops and even buckle tank armour, accompanied the firing of the

titan's massive Volcano Cannon. A lance of explosive laser energy cut through the fleeing alien pack, vaporizing orks and machines in its beam.

It had started as a routine border patrol of the ash wastes surrounding the titan pens of Hellsbreach, one hundred kilometres east of Tartarus Hive within the battle-scarred industrial wasteland.

Routine, Ekhardt thought. There was no such thing as routine on such a world as Armageddon, against such an enemy as the orks. The greenskins were both utterly predictable and at the same time totally unfathomable in their approach to warfare. They would attack manically, against insane odds, as if just for the love of battle, or to satisfy some furious passion for carnage and bloodshed. For them bigger was always better, the more violent and destructive something was, the more it satisfied, and for some, it seemed, the faster the better.

Ekhardt had fought against the greenskin menace on many occasions on many worlds in many war zones, and in that time he had noticed that this particular alien race appeared to have a liking for painting their attack vehicles red. The old princeps could well imagine that the orks did this in the ridiculous belief that it made their war-trucks and bikes go faster! The orks, and their way of thinking, if it could be called that, were totally alien to him.

There was often seemingly little in the way of strategy in an ork assault, certainly nothing like that displayed by the noble commanders of the Adeptus Titanicus, as recorded in the sacred texts of the titan legions. These histories and treatises were required reading for any hopeful princeps cadet. But the orks would readily sacrifice each other, particularly the smaller, stunted sub-species that fought alongside their larger cousins regardless of the risks, to achieve their objective, aid their own flight from the battlefield, or to harry their enemies before bringing their big guns to bear.

On more than one occasion, on other battle fronts, Ekhardt had witnessed the orks effectively engineer their own downfall: it could be infighting, mutual animosity or their own lack of reason or control that caused their ultimate demise. When one strong leader was killed a deadly, world-conquering army could become a chaotic rabble, in an instant, as they would be too busy tearing out each other's throats to worry about anyone else.

But this gave Ekhardt pause for thought, for the ork hordes that mankind's defenders were now engaged in fighting, across an entire planet and beyond, had displayed a supreme knowledge of strategy. For so many hulks, kroozers and attack craft to breach the cordon of Armageddon's orbiting, space-borne defences – including the orks' deadly asteroid fortresses, with their terrible, city-levelling payloads – even after they had been so bolstered in the half-century since the Second War for Armageddon, there had to be some unifying, strategic element to their attack.

Ekhardt could not – dare not – believe that for the ork fleet to take on the might of the Imperial Navy and win was merely down to the fickle whim of fortune and random chance. To believe such a thing was to believe that mankind had no hope, that there was nothing beyond the stars watching over humanity's well being. To believe such a thing was to believe that the Emperor was dead and that the universe was merely a plaything to be toyed with by the uncaring, inconstant, savage dark gods of Chaos. And such thoughts were heresy.

Sheer, overwhelming numbers had played their part in the orks' massed invasion of Armageddon, but a terrible and cunning mind had to have been behind it all. That mind, he now knew, as did every other commander and trooper fighting within the Armageddon subsector, was the ork warlord Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka. What had made Ghazghkull so successful, Emperor damn his alien hide, and what still made him so dangerous were two things: he had both drive and ability in abundance.

Rumour said that the ork warlord was led by visions from his own brutal alien gods but whatever the truth, what was certain was that he had already cut a bloody swathe across the sector, set on a bloody path of conquest, that was unmatched in recent Imperial history. It was Ghazghkull's forces that had invaded Armageddon only fifty years before. That attack had seemed bad enough to the Imperial defenders and their commanders, it was as if the day of doom had come at last to Armageddon, but it was as nothing compared to the greenskin invasion they were attempting to repel now.

As it had turned out, Ghazghkull had shown remarkable foresight, particularly for a barbaric alien. Imperial strategists had extrapolated that the Great Beast's invasion fifty-seven years before had simply been a test of the Imperium's defences, in preparation for achieving his ultimate goal. Now the entire planet's population, and those soldiers and elite warriors who had travelled light years to come to Armageddon's aid, were tasting the bitter fruits of the ork warlord's planning and scheming. In the decades since his last attack, Ghazghkull's forces – that included, estimates stated, tribes numbering over a billion orks – had continued to challenge the Imperium's defences. The destruction wreaked on dozens of systems and scores of worlds, monitoring stations and naval facilities attested to that. Their names read like a roll of the fallen on a Guard memorial: Ignamundi, Pollux Castor, Vaagann's World, Solemnus, Lazarus VI, Minerva, Ruis, Desdena, Dante, Mannheim, Yarrick... And the list went on.

When consultations of the Emperor's tarot showed nothing but bloodshed and destruction Armageddon prepared for war once again, titan legions, Imperial Guard regiments, Space Marine Chapters, the Planetary Defence Force and hive-born militia were mustered, dug in or dispersed, as merchant vessels ran the gauntlet of ork ships moving into the Armageddon system. The last transport to get through before the aliens made planetfall carried the legendary commander whom the Imperial forces referred to with respect and affection as the "Old Man", the Hero of Hades Hive who had led them to victory over five decades earlier, Commissar Yarrick.

Six weeks after entering the Armageddon system, the vast armada of hulks, roks and ships that made up the forces of Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka engaged space stations and orbital weapons platforms. Three days later the orks made planetfall, the filthy contrails of their landing pods smudging the azure sky over Hades Hive. The scene of the most almighty battle in the previous war, Hades was the first to fall, smashed asunder by giant asteroids dropped from the space hulks in orbit over the doomed planet. Princeps Ekhardt had been briefed on Ghazghkull's attack, and how the war had progressed since, as the Adeptus Mechanicus titan transport *Barque of the Gods* traversed the shifting, fluid tides of the immaterium. Legio Magna had been mustered to reinforce their brother Titan Legions already battling the orks' own monstrous war machines on Armageddon. They might have

been able to answer General Kurov's call for aid quicker had it not been for the fickle flow of the warp. Instead, by the time the *Barque of the Gods* and certain Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes had arrived to join in the defence of Armageddon, the greenskins had already swarmed down onto the planet from their orbiting hulks and kill kroozers like a global plague of monstrous locusts. No matter where they landed, whether it was in the burning Fire Wastes north of the main continent of Armageddon or to the south in the frozen Dead Lands, the orks' alien metabolisms seemed able to cope with any climate and environment, no matter how harsh. It was almost as if they had been engineered in some way, for just such a purpose. But which alien race could have achieved such a feat of biomechanics and genetic manipulation he had no idea. Such things were now almost beyond the Emperor's own Magos Biologis Genetors of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Once again Ekhardt had cause to recall that the orks were as alien to the probings of the human mind as the working of a titan was to a grox.

As things stood now, the tribes that combined to make up the Great Beast's forces held, or had destroyed, three of Armageddon's eight mighty hive-cities – Tempestora, Acheron and Hades – and were besieging hives Volcanus and Infernus. Hive Helsreach was still contested and Death Mire was readying itself for an assault by feral orks massing from the planet's vast swathes of equatorial jungle. The orks also controlled many of the ore mines situated within the northern Fire Wastes and held sway over not only the frozen Dead Lands but also the Netheria Peninsula, starving the Imperial forces of desperately needed resources; not just fuel but also clean, fresh water.

If Armageddon were to fall, Emperor forbid, who knew what would be Ghazghkull's next target? As the inevitable ork rampage of bloodshed and conquest – or Waaagh! – grew, where would it head? Even unto Ancient Terra itself?

Things were indeed looking grim for Armageddon and it was feared that Hive Tartarus, on the edges of the barren plains and ash deserts of Armageddon Secundus would become the focus for the next big ork push.

So it was that Ekhardt and his crew were now patrolling the ash wastes east of Tartarus Hive with the ancient *Tyrannus Maximus*. But where two god engines had set out from the titan pens of Hellsbreach only one was returning. *Dominus Exitio*, *Tyrannus Maximus*'s fellow Warlord Titan, and its Princeps Tyack Damocles had fallen when they had chanced upon a large ork force traveling in the direction of Hellsbreach. At the heart of the advancing horde had been the biggest ork tank Ekhardt had ever seen. The battle fortress had been like an entire outpost on the move, rumbling over the desert sands on grinding tracks, crushing all before it.

He had no idea where such a thing had come from. Had it been birthed from one of the Great Beast's rok fortresses? Had it been teleported directly to the planet's surface from a hulk-factory in orbit over Armageddon? Or had it been created in some ground-based construction plant that the Imperial commanders were as yet unaware of? But wherever it had come from, the two Warlords had put an end to it.

In the heat of battle, however, *Dominus Exitio* had fallen, taking on the gas-guzzling craft of what passed for the greenskins' air support. *Tyrannus Maximus* had been incapacitated, recovering from a wound dealt it by the monstrous cannons carried by the battle fortress. An almighty plasma discharge had melted through the titan's flank. Ekhardt had screamed out in empathic pain at the war machine's injury, as power couplings were sheared and a void shield generator fractured. The ageing princeps felt it all through the mind-impulse link, as if it were happening to his own wasted body.

But Damocles's sacrifice had bought Ekhardt the time he needed to recover and now it was *Tyrannus Maximus* that was pursuing the routed ork horde, rather than it being the other way round, with the greenskins capering around the Warlord's blazing carcass. However, the great war-beast was steadily leaking plasma energy from the severed power arteries and it was taking some of the god-machine's old systems microseconds longer to react to the princeps's thought-commands.

'Dvorad, compensate for the delay in *Tyrannus*'s reaction time and proceed accordingly.' Ekhardt instructed.

'Compensating,' Chief Engineer Gorash Dvorad intoned and then proceeded to mutter litanies of calibration under his breath, sounding like one of his own tech-minions.

Each of the officers on the bridge represented a section of the titan's crew, charged with carrying out the various sacred rites and mechanical ministrations that ensured the war machine's continued operation. In Dvorad's case it was the adepts of the Machine God on board *Tyrannus Maximus*.

While every man on board one of the titan legions' great lords of battle were servants of the great Ommissiah, the Machine God of Mars, as well as loyal subjects of the Emperor, none were closer to that mysterious cybernetic deity than the tech-adepts of the Cult Mechanicus. Every one of them had improved or adapted their physical body in some way with bionic parts and mechanical augmetics.

They could be found on board every starship, every space station and every war machine of the Adeptus Mechanicus. And the machine priests were a vital part of *Tyrannus Maximus*'s crew, ministering to its many ancient systems: the colossus's plasma reactor, the great turbine engines – coaxing a little more motive power here, re-calibrating a scanner-auspex there – with prayers, smoking incense and the application of sacred lubricating unguents, ministering to myriad weapons batteries. The devastating, infantry-scything Gatling Blaster, with its 150mm explosive shells fired from silo-sized autoloader hoppers at a truly terrifying rate. The city-levelling Volcano Cannon, which harnessed a power akin to the boiling fury of an exploding mountain was put at the disposal of the titan's princeps – the one human soul linked directly to the machine-mind of the titan. Without the princeps, the god-engine would be nothing more than a forty-metre tall effigy bearing an arsenal to rival a dozen tank companies.

Ekhardt surveyed the command deck. Below him and to his left, at his tactical console, was Kasl Varne, who scrutinized the eyes and ears of the titan with his sensor arrays. To his right was Moderati Orrek, plugged into his station, and monitoring messages relayed to him from the gunnery crews. Behind the princeps's throne, Chief Engineer Dvorad was keeping a careful watch on a bank of brass-rimmed dials showing the parameters within which the plasma reactor was operating.

Gorash Dvorad was the oldest serving member of *Tyrannus Maximus*'s crew after the ageing and battle-honoured princeps himself. He had joined the titan as a cadet-engineer, and had worked his way up to chief engineer after several years and countless campaigns, following the forcible removal of his predecessor by the Adeptus surgeons after *Tyrannus Maximus* undertook a tour

of duty within the battle zones of the Eonquin Reefs. What Hosea had witnessed there, fighting the devotees of the dark powers on the warping world of Saggitax, had turned the poor man's mind inside out.

After psychic probing by the medicae, Ekhardt – hardened to the horrors of war, and all it might confront a commander with, after over a century and a half of conflict – had been allowed to resume active service, along with the rest of his command crew and the newly-promoted Dvorad. Even the ancient titan had been rededicated to the great Ommissiah, every system, down to the last component, purified and re-sanctified in a month-long rite of reconsecration, carried out by a small army of tech-priests.

But during that month's enforced bed rest at the medicae facility of Curare – or quarantine as Qwerts, his then tactical officer, had put it – separated from the titan, disconnected from the link, Ekhardt had begun to feel the pain and suffer the symptoms of withdrawal worse than he could have ever imagined. He and the god machine were one and to be apart for extended periods of time was almost more than he could bear. It was worse than trying to come off the most addictive drug, or so he had been told by a fellow princeps once – an officer who had originally hailed from the hive-world of Babel. There he had spent some time hunting, for sport, in the gang-contested underhives, where all manner of illicit substances could be purchased by young noblemen looking for something – anything – to relieve the endemic boredom of his stagnating highborn life. That was until a commission to join the Collegiate Titanicus had called him to war, and he experienced the unparalleled high of walking the world as a god, crushing cities beneath iron hooves.

Dvorad had proved a worthy successor to the run-mad Hosea over the years that came after, to the point now where Ekhardt rarely even recalled his predecessor or the dozen or so men who had served in that post during his tenure as princeps of the *Tyrannus Maximus*.

Radim Orrek, Weapons Moderati, was the next longest serving member of the command crew, an apprentice of the Gilgamesh Collegiate gunnery master, Notos Eodor. He had joined *Tyrannus Maximus* en route to the contested world of Su'Laal, where rebellion had riven the populace and a whole Titan Legion had turned from the Emperor's light. It was a sad day when Legio Magna fought war machines that might easily have been their brothers and allies on another world in another war.

And finally there was tactical officer Kasl Varne. Hailing from the forge world of Fornax Dei, his family had served the Machine God for a hundred generations. For one of their sons to be accepted by the Titan Legions was an honour that would stand them in good stead for another hundred, even though the demands of never-ending war across the galaxy would mean that Varne would likely never see his family or home again. The only family any of them had now was the titan's crew; their only home, the battlefields of the Imperium.

'Varne.' Princeps Ekhardt addressed the most junior member of his bridge crew. 'Life-signs?'

'Scanning, sir,' Ekhardt's tactical officer answered, his response a dull monotone. 'No life-signs detected. I repeat, no life-signs. We got them, sir!'

They had done it. What they had begun with *Dominus Exitio*, *Tyrannus Maximus* had finished. They had not only routed the advancing ork army, its battle fortress and air support, they had totally obliterated them. They had not left one of the foul greenskin abominations alive!

'All stations.' Ekhardt announced, flicking a switch on his control dash. 'This is your princeps.'

His words rung through the iron-walled passageways and vaulted chambers of the titan's interior, and were relayed throughout the giant man-machine by the ages-old comms-system.

'We have won another mighty victory.' Ekhardt proclaimed, his echoing words crackling out of vox-casters in every body cavity of *Tyrannus Maximus*, from the humid, steaming engine rooms to the gunnery nests high on the titan's hunched shoulders, another ten metres above the command deck of the war machine.

The old princeps continued. He had made Emperor knew how many hundred victory speeches in his two hundred years as princeps, but he never forgot how much they were appreciated by a crew who had just brought about a victory, and he never forgot their worth to a commander. Men who felt their princeps appreciated them were men who would readily follow him into the jaws of hell.

His heartening words of commendation filled the crew with warm satisfaction, despite it being delivered in the same grim tone that demanded more power from the seething plasma reactor or gave the command to launch rockets targeted on the enemy.

'Now.' Ekhardt said, disconnecting the inter-vessel comms link, 'plot a course for Hellsbreach. *Tyrannus Maximus* requires essential repairs before it goes to war again. Make it happen.'

'Princeps Ekhardt!' It was Varne again, his tone more anxious than elated. The tactical officer turned his pupilless eyes to look directly at his princeps. 'There's something on the scope, sir. I've got a contact, bearing one-two-seven. And another, bearing three-zero-four. Wait, mere are two more. Multiple contacts! I repeat, multiple contacts.'

A siren began to sound, echoing hollowly from somewhere within the titan's body, and the command deck was lit by the ruddy glow of warning lights.

'I want hard returns on those signals!' Ekhardt shouted.

'They're gone, sir!' Varne announced, suddenly at a loss. 'No, I've found them again. Now bearing zero-eight-two and there's six of them, sir.'

'Are you sure, Varne?' Orrek challenged. 'Gunnery crews report they are unable to get a target lock. They have nothing on their scopes.'

'What is going on?' Ekhardt growled, half to himself.

'I have conflicting readings coming from the aft sensor array and the fore surveyors.' Varne was sounding more and more anxious and frustrated.

'Run a level two diagnostic on all surveyor-cogitators.' Ekhardt ordered. 'Moderati Orrek, tell all gunnery crews I want visual confirmation, if possible, for any sensor-located target. I want all crew on standby. And that means I need striding speed at a moment's notice, chief engineer.'

'Princes, if we keep on pushing the turbines in this condition we'll start losing plasma again.' Dvorad warned and then immediately regretted doing so.

'I know the risks!' Ekhardt roared. 'Just do it!'

'Understood.' Dvorad responded. He cowered but did not turn away from his control console as he relayed the princeps's orders to his tech-teams spread throughout the vast titan.

Tyrannus Maximus continued at half impulse, through the decimated radioactive wastes, towards the titan legion base of Hellsbreach, with everyone on board in a heightened state of anxiety, waiting for an attack that could come from any angle at any time. In fact it never came.

'Diagnostic augur complete.' Varne stated at last.

'Well don't wait on ceremony, man.' Ekhardt chided. 'Give us the results.'

'The contacts we've been picking up are false readings. They're sensor ghosts, created by electromagnetic interference, the result of the unusually high levels of radioactivity in the environment.' Varne explained, the relief apparent in his voice. 'The desert's dead, sir. There's nothing out there.'

'It sounds as if we need the surveyors and augury cogitators overhauled as well when we get back to the forge-workshops then.' Ekhardt rumbled, 'along with the abdominal repairs and Emperor-alone-knows what else the tech-priests will find once they open old *Tyrannus* up.'

The Warlord Titan continued at a stately pace through the toxic wasteland, swirls of radioactive ash and oxide deposit dust thrown up from the dune sea with every earth-shaking step, each stride carrying the titan forward twenty metres.

As *Tyrannus Maximus* trudged on through the barren, war-poisoned wilderness, Magnus Ekhardt sank his aching body back into the padded leather comfort of his command-throne and allowed his mind to lose itself in the link.

The link. The esoteric mind-impulse connection with the spirit of the beast itself: the mind of *Tyrannus Maximus*. Thousands of years old, venerable as a god, bestial as an insatiable savage hunger, and malignant as a cancerous tumour, it was always there within his mind, within his very soul. Through the cranial implant he felt himself take massive steps through the desert, covering great distances in seemingly no time at all. He stretched out his arms to the horizon and weapons, monstrous ancient relics of a forgotten age, were brought to bear on the distant mountains. He turned his head and could see thirty kilometres in every direction. Ekhardt's mind melded with the ancient circuitry of the titan, neural relays laid down in the far-distant days of the Dark Age of Technology in the manufactorum-forges of Mars, ten thousand years ago and ten thousand light years away. Cosseted by the warmly familiar surroundings of the mind-impulse link, here he could think, consider and even fantasize, rather than simply having to react, making split second decisions in the heat of battle.

A legend in his own lifetime, some of the other, younger, princeps sometimes cruelly joked.

There were always barbs in their comments. Despite being the commander of one of the most venerated and feared god engines of Mars, he knew what they were thinking by the way they looked at him. Their eyes betrayed their feelings: pity, contempt, derision. Sanctimonious young up starts they were, barely out of the collegiate and elevated to the position of princeps before their arrogance and impudence had been beaten from them on the anvil of war.

And yet they were the new blood making names for themselves on the battlefields of Armageddon. Ekhardt and his ilk were the old guard – once mighty, brave warriors now considered to be too old to do their job, to fulfill the role they had been bred for properly. They were figures of legend and in legend was where the newly promoted princeps wanted them to be. After all, it was never a good idea to meet one's heroes.

But, by the Golden Throne, he damn well was a hero! He had the commendations to prove it. The Star of Vorittova for valour, the Freedom of Hegemenos, the Iron Eagle, the Honorus Machina. But he was also a frail old man now. The decades had slowly but surely caught up with him. A physique that had once won him the title of cadet boxing champion now lacked muscle tone: days and weeks in his command-throne had taken their toll. And the encounter with the battle fortress had left him drained. His face was drawn, and the colour had been bled from his liver-spotted cheeks.

Yet, his link with the machine also made him strong. For had it not sustained him beyond the natural span a man might expect his life to achieve, without the use of either juvenat drugs or augmetic-organ replacement? He might feel old but his two centuries of loyal service to the Imperium was nothing compared to the almost immeasurable age of the terrible, awe-inspiring *Tyrannus Maximus*. One thing was certain: he and the titan were bonded unto death. As the forbidding Princeps Judas Urquart, with whom he had served his cadetship, once told him, 'Once you're joined with a titan, there's no going back.'

An all-engulfing silence dragged Ekhardt painfully back from his musings in the link to the reality of the polluted wastelands. A rapidly expanding ball of light had appeared on the western horizon. The sudden, blindingly bright explosion threw the landscape into sharp negative contrast, as if the creation of this new sun had brought about premature night.

The light faded as suddenly as it had appeared and through the viewing vista-plate of the titan its crew saw the mushroom cloud, under-lit by nuclear fires, blooming in the distance.

The shockwave hit seconds later.

The blast threw up a wall of sand a hundred metres into the air before it, scouring *Tyrannus Maximus* with skittering grains, glass-sharp mica particles and larger objects cast up by the power of the explosion. Rocks and boulders bounced off the titan's adamantium hide as the ancient war machine was subjected to massive shuddering vibrations.

Cabin lights flickered fitfully. Consoles sparked and caught fire. Orrek convulsed out of his seat, cables popping out of his skull implants. Engineer Dvorad was flung against the side of the command-throne.

Ekhardt's world became one of pain as a migraine erupted at the base of his skull.

There were noises all around him. The clattering of shaking metal. Shouts and screams. The crackle of interference. Ekhardt became aware of a pitiful moaning and then realised that it was he who was making the pathetic mewling sound. Heat blossomed between his watering eyes as blood spurted from his nose.

The burning headache intensified until the old man believed his head would explode. Then there was nothing but darkness.

THREE

PLANETFALL

BROTHER JAROLD'S DROP pod shook as it entered the exosphere of Armageddon, its external hull temperature rising by several thousand degrees. The insertion had begun. There was no going back now. Either the Black Templars would stop the ork reinforcements in their tracks or they would die trying.

As the drop pod fell through the planet's atmosphere Brother Jarold maintained a trance-like meditative state to help prepare himself for battle. And it was at times like this, with conscious thought withdrawn and his subconscious coming to the fore, that the memories came to him...

...IT WAS WARM inside the amniotic tank of the sarcophagus. Cushioned by the viscous fluids, suspended by connecting tubes, he felt secure, as he must have once done inside his mother's womb.

The pain was disappearing, the tech-surgeons had done their work. The anaesthetising drugs had not been able to kill the pain entirely but the scalpel cuts and nerve grafts had been nothing like the agony he felt sprawled helpless atop the bodies of his enemies, with his organs exposed to the air, torn apart by the aliens' savagery.

He had slipped in and out of consciousness as the ritual progressed, hour after hour, within the medicae vaults of the forge-ship *Goliath*. When awake he had been aware of every incision, every transplant, every bypass, every amputation. Awareness was the best way to describe the curious invasive sensations, rather than pain, for he knew what was to come was so much better. He was being honoured in a way that most Space Marines could never dare hope.

His dreams, however, were hallucinatory nightmares, the many horrors encountered during one hundred and seventy-eight years of service coming to vivid, surreal life. But worse than the gnashing alien faces, the freakishly armoured warriors and the bloodily coalescing daemonic entities was a feeling, an emotion. Worse by far, for an elite warrior of the Adeptus Astartes, was the nerve-shredding, spine-chilling feeling of utter helplessness.

When he woke from these hellish fevered visions to the wheezing of arcane dialysis machines and the steady bleeping of life support auspexes, unable to communicate with the apothecaries and techmarines crowding round the surgical altar, one sound comforted him more than any other. The low chanting of his brothers filling the vault, eased his troubled mind and reminded him of the great future that awaited him.

For the ritual, at the heart of which was his incarceration, was of such great significance that all available members of the brotherhood were there to witness it and take part in it. None of the assembled Black Templars had ever been involved in such a thing before – ancient Brother Dedric having been interred a full two thousand years before – and it was likely that they would never do so again.

Brother Dedric had died a second death on Solemnus, the armour of his sarcophagus having been breached by the detonation of a tankbusta bomb, the shrapnel from the blast pulverising what was left of his brain. The treasured relic of his battle-suit had been recovered after the planet had been reclaimed, and carried aboard the forge-ship with all due pomp and ceremony.

There the ancient artefact had been painstakingly repaired by the fleet's techmarines and artificers, utilising arcane knowledge that had long ago passed into ritualised mythology, as Marshal Brandt's fleet began the Solemnus Crusade. Chanting prayers over the monstrous mechanical shell, applying healing welds and lubricating unctions, the keepers of the forbidden knowledge of Mars restored the adamantium-armoured fighting machine to its former glory, readying it for a new incumbent, one considered worthy of such an honour by his fellows.

And that honour had fallen on Brother Jarold. What was left of his devastated body was implanted inside the repaired sarcophagus of the dreadnought in the day long ritual and his fate had been sealed. He had been born again, into a body of metal, no longer a super-human warrior but two tonnes of stomping, crashing, high-calibre death-spewing killing machine. He would remain forever interred inside the shell of a machine three times the height of a man, the ultimate fusion of the biological and the mechanical, experiencing the world through mechanical senses, until one day, possibly many thousands of years later, the Emperor called him to the halls of his ancestors after an eternity of battle.

But that had all happened a long time ago – the ritual, the surgery, the adaptation to a life lived inside a metal tomb – twelve years ago in fact, but it was only the blink of an eye in the lifespan of an old one. The memories came to him at times like this...

BROTHER JAROLD'S WORLD lurched violently, his dreadnought body pushing against its restraining clamps, as something collided with the mark IV Mars-pattern drop pod. Lights flashed and warning sirens sounded for a few seconds then faded again as stabiliser jets steadied the plummeting insertion craft.

The Black Templars' mission was a straightforward one: insertion and interception.

Castellan Adlar's Fighting Company was being deployed via drop pods in a planetfall mission, running the gauntlet of the aliens' arguably superior air defences over the drop zone, to place as many troops, as quickly as possible, in the path of the enemy. The Black Templars were needed to stop motorised ork reinforcements emerging out of the ash wastes from reaching the main greenskin force assaulting the wearied walls of Tartarus Hive.

Tartarus was a hive teetering on the edge of oblivion. It was on the verge of falling to the aliens, just as Tempestora, Acheron and Hades had fallen before it. Having halted the ork advance coming from the toxic desert, at the request of Tartarus High Command,

Fighting Company Adlar was then to make its way to the beleaguered hive-city and lend their aid to a push that was designed to break the ork siege at last.

And a request was all it was, all it could possibly be. For the military commanders of one, war-torn world did not command the elite warriors of the Emperor who were so much greater than their mere mortal counterparts in so many ways. The Imperial forces on Armageddon had to thank the Astartes' indoctrinated sense of honour and duty for their assistance on this field of battle at all. Having responded to General Kurov's distress call, the Imperial commander on Armageddon pleaded to all loyal servants of the Imperium to help his troops defend the hive-world from Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka's terrible Waaagh! , it had to be remembered that the Black Templars were there solely of their own volition. However, they could also be relied upon to not quit until the planet had been purged of its rancid alien infestation.

And of course, the Templars of Crusade Fleet Solemnus had their own reasons for being there. Intelligence, from various, indeterminate sources, had confirmed the presence of the Blood Scar tribe both on the ground on Armageddon and in orbit around it. It was believed the hulk *Krom Kruach* had been detected amongst the ork fleet supporting the rok drops over the planet's southern hemisphere.

However, intelligence suggested that the ork warboss Morkrall Grimskar had disembarked the *Krom Kruach* to join the land war for Armageddon. Like all ork commanders, he revelled in the brutality of close combat. While it was enjoyable to blow things up from a distance it was far more satisfying to the ork mind to savour the savage pleasure of slaughter first hand. The site of his landing was believed to be within the ash wastes of Armageddon Secundus, east of Tartarus Hive.

Every battle-brother who had travelled the interstellar gulfs between feudal Solemnus and mighty Armageddon had sworn a sacred oath, stronger than life and more binding than death, to hunt down Grimskar and his horde and avenge the loss of their fallen comrades and their chapter keep. That was the ultimate objective in their crusade for Armageddon and none of them would forget it. They would make planetfall and aid Tartarus Hive. In the process they would hunt out their nemesis and put him down like the dog he was.

Conflicting intelligence suggested that Grimskar was still aboard his hulk, planning some appalling atrocity so the Black Templars would also engage the ork fleets in battle in another attempt to attain their objective. While Castellan Adlar's troops deployed on the ground, Fighting Company Gerhard and the marshal's own household would remain in orbit, fighting fleet based actions against the enemy, carrying out boarding actions against the multitude of roks and the malignantly monstrous ork armada still polluting the space ways high above Armageddon. They would be joining Space Marines of other Chapters in this approach, noble Astartes orders such as the savagely proud Celestial Lions, the evil-banishing crimson-armoured brothers of the Exorcists, and the Ultramarines successor Chapter the Sons of Guilliman.

As the dreadnought drop pod plunged through the stratosphere, freezing high-altitude winds cooled thousand degree entry-heated panels until a skin of ice formed around the craft. Inside it, insulation maintained the internal temperature at the optimum level for all mechanical and electronic systems to remain fully functional.

Ancient cogitators, their esoteric operation only half-understood by the erudite techmarines of the Chapter, downloaded thousands of gigabytes of data into the dreadnought, all the information he would need for the mission ahead. Details about the planet itself, from its topography and climate to its orbital distance from the system's sun and seasonal cycles; the accepted Imperial historical record of the Third War for Armageddon; current statistics of Imperial losses and gains; analysis of ork warband deployments; were all inputted directly into his brain. They were relayed via data-channels and cerebellum plugs through mind-impulse wetware, from ports that linked the dreadnought to the pod's systems, so that it could autonomously access the pod's data-core. The pod shook again as it hurtled towards the planet's surface at several hundred kilometres an hour, the ten-kilometre descent projected to only last a matter of minutes. But to the motion of atmosphere-buffed, high-speed descent was added the sensation of centrifugal spin. As well as being transmitted by the armour's surveyors through the links of his still intact sub-dermal black carapace, Jarold felt this new rotation through the movement of his paraplegic body locked inside the amniotic tank of the dreadnought.

Electronic ears heard, and motion-sensors detected the vibrations of, the explosions impacting on the hull of the drop pod. The craft lurched. Klaxons sounded stridently, although there was nothing Jarold could do to adjust the course of his descent. If a fin or rocket booster had been destroyed he could now be shooting off course at a sharp tangent. And without the stabilising jets or steadying dorsal fins operating as they were designed to, no matter what adjustments the pod's machine spirit made, Jarold was doomed to a crash landing of potentially catastrophic consequences. An uncontrollable disabled drop pod could all too easily become a warrior's tomb.

Something was carrying out an aerial assault against the drop pods as they plunged through Armageddon's carbon-and sulphur-dioxide ravaged atmosphere, and it did not take a techmarine to tell him what it was.

Orks.

As the fleet was deploying its insertion craft, Castellan Adlar's company had already run the green-fisted gauntlet of fire from the orbiting kill kroozers that had moved against the *Divine Fury*, the *Goliath*, and the strike cruisers *Sigismund's Wrath* and *No Pity*, like sharks homing in on a drop of blood in an ocean.

The urgent voices of his battle-brothers sounded over the comm-net. Some of them were mere neophytes, barely even blooded compared to Jarold's long and distinguished career. It was at a time like this that a veteran should lend his younger brothers the support and reassurance of his experience.

Brother Jarold cleared his throat instinctively – even though there was barely anything left of his trachea and esophagus to clear – his augmetic voice crackled from vox-speakers in the suit and reverberated over the comm-net to the other landing craft.

'Brothers,' Jarold's voice boomed, 'there is nothing to fear. Hold strong to your faith in our primarch and the Emperor. How can they answer your prayers when they cannot hear them? You babble uncertainties and anxieties to the void. Where is your trust in the one who made us what we are?'

Anxious calls were replaced by the sound of muttered invocations.

'What have we to fear when we are Adeptus Astartes? Are we not the Emperor's strong right arm? Are we not fear incarnate?' Jarold rumbled. 'Trust in the Emperor and he will send his angels on wings of fire to carry us into battle and smite our enemies. We shall make planetfall and when we do we will deliver divine retribution upon the greenskins. We will soak the sands of Armageddon with their blood!'

There was a series of dull clangs. The pod jerked violently, causing Jarold to cut short his speech, and an insipid whining began to rise from somewhere about the deployment craft. Cabling links spasmed free of the dreadnought as one of the pod's systems went down. Sirens blared and emergency lights flashed fitfully then failed altogether.

Throne of Terra! This is it, Jarold thought. It's going to be a rough landing.

STRAEKER SAW THE ork plane hit the plummeting drop pod with a barrage of rockets. Most impacted against the scarred side of the black craft, but one scored a direct hit on the pod's main engine. The engine cone exploded, tail fins shearing off from the pod and thick oily smoke began pouring from the wrecked nacelle. The drop pod lurched and soared off at a tangent from its original trajectory, spinning wildly.

Conrad Straeker swore loudly and punched the flight console. He jinked his Lightning hard to starboard as the pod rocketed straight towards him as it changed direction. The ork had been in his sights but now the fighta-bommer was gunning after its next target, while Straeker banked right, feeling the G's pushing him back into his seat.

The pod dropped away out of sight towards the curving horizon of the ash desert below, although it still registered on the Lightning's radar a few seconds longer. Going off course this high up, Straeker projected that the pod would crash down many kilometres away from its intended landing site. He didn't fancy the occupants' chances of coming out of the crash alive either – Space Marines or no.

He swore again in frustration. He had let one of the fly-boyz through. The ork had been in his sights! But there would be time to mourn the Imperium's loss after the battle. All that mattered now was that Blitz Squadron gave the Astartes planetfall the air support they needed, keeping the ork smokers off their tails.

Yanking hard left on his con-stick, Straeker pulled his craft out of its bank, bringing it level. To port, following a course thirty metres above him, was the ork. Drawing the stick in his gloved hands back ever so gently, despite the enormous pressures working against his body, he gave the engine a little more throttle.

The two amber circular crosshairs on the heads-up display of his cockpit glided towards each other as the fighta-bommer came into view through the front windshield of the plane. The crosshairs overlapped and changed to flashing red. The visual was accompanied by a high-pitched beeping. The Lightning's machine spirit had target lock.

He had let one get through: there wouldn't be any others.

Conrad Straeker, ace Imperial Lightning pilot of Blitz Squadron, depressed the lascannon triggers. Streams of brilliant white light streaked from the wingtip mounted weapons, peppering the fighta-bommer's tail fins with flashes of white fire. The alien craft veered sharply.

He fired again, his last shot puncturing a fuel line. The crude plane's fuel tanks ignited in a magnesium flash that left Straeker blinking away a purple after-image for several seconds. The ork's fate was sealed.

The greenskin craft appeared to be built with only two things in mind: speed and firepower. One system was not effectively shielded from another, so that if one part of the craft went down, was destroyed or ruptured, then the rest would soon follow.

There was no thought given to pilot safety, but then what Straeker knew of the ork flyboyz' mentality from first-hand experience suggested that the pilots didn't care. Even compared to other orks they seemed particularly mentally unstable, addicted to the adrenalin rush of travel at dangerously high speeds.

Orks didn't seem to go for much in the way of camouflage either, Straeker considered, as the burning shell of the alien plane nose-dived towards the swirling bronze wastes three thousand metres below. Their red-painted fighter craft, with snarling mouthed nose cones and flame-painted engine housings were all for show, the need to show-off born out of some alien sense of bravado. There was no attempt to hide the craft from an enemy that relied on its own eyesight rather than optically-superior surveyor arrays and machine-slaved auspexes.

The sky was like an azure canvas, soiled with the dirty contrails of the smoking ork aircraft. Everywhere the greenskin planes swarmed around the plummeting drop pods, far outnumbering the Imperial interceptors. The Space Marine deployment would soon be complete and once they were on the ground, Blitz Squadron would keep the aliens busy until their decreasing fuel reserves forced them to return to base. But before that happened, the Imperial fighter pilots would do their very best to make sure that not one ork was left to tell the tale of the air battle.

A shadow flashed across Straeker's cockpit and he glanced up to see the wing of an ork plane spin past overhead as another fighta-bommer dissolved into a comet-tailed ball of flame. The sleek grey V-form of another Imperial Lightning, wings swept forward, roared past close enough for Straeker to see its pilot throw him a salute.

'I make that three-two,' a cheerful voice sounded in Straeker's ears over his headset. 'But who's counting.'

'You sure you want to do this, Hellas?' Straeker threw back at the cocky pilot of Lightning Three. A large part of Blitz Squadron's success was down to the comradely rivalry of its fighter pilots.

'Well, if you're not up to it, Straeker.'

Lightning Three turned sharply to starboard again, homing in on a formation of ork fighters closing on the last of the falling drop pods.

'Let's keep this clean and professional, shall we?' came a third voice over the comm-net.

'Yes sir!' Straeker answered Commander Devereux automatically. 'But don't say I didn't warn you, Hellas, when you're hanging your head in shame in the mess tonight,' he chuckled, throwing his craft into a sudden dive.

Two fighta-bommerz, engines spewing out clouds of greasy brown exhaust smoke, were following the rapidly receding shape of a black pod as it hurtled towards the desert dunes. His own engines screaming, Straeker closed on the rickety, shaking craft, the stresses of the high-G dive on the ork planes visible as roughly riveted pieces of recycled metal began to shake loose of their blunt-nosed fuselages.

The orks must be close to stalling, Straeker thought. Primitive craft like theirs couldn't take what their maniac pilots were putting them through.

Lightning Two's machine spirit beeped wildly. Target lock acquired.

With the flick of a switch Straeker returned the lascannons to cogitator control and gunned the trigger on his control column that would fire the nose-mounted autocannon. The roar of the gun was lost amidst the roar of the engines and the doppler scream of the dive, Straeker followed the whizzing rounds to their target. His cannon-fire shredded the top of the nearest plane, tearing great holes through the body of the craft. The cockpit vanished in an explosion of glinting glass shards, which looked like diamonds in the sharp sunlight. Straeker didn't see what happened to the ork flying the thing, although the skill and mastery implied by the word "flying" hardly applied to these alien air-jockeys.

The second fighta-bommer suddenly jinked to port.

Had its pilot caught a glimpse of what had happened to its wingman, Straeker wondered? Or maybe it knew he was on its tail.

Whatever the reason, the bank had slowed the fighta-bommer's descent quite dramatically, and brought it within range of its plummeting wingman. The pilot-less plane collided with the back of the second craft, tearing away the tail section of its fuselage. A split second later, the second plane's tanks blew, setting off its payload of bombs and missiles in the process.

The fireball rushed up to meet Straeker and then he was blasting out the other side, pulling back hard on the con-stick, abandoning the ork-freed pod to make planetfall unhindered, and catching a third fighta-bommer in his sights. A rapid rattling volley put an end to the flyboy before the ork even knew it was in trouble.

'Wooo-hooo!' he yelled into his hood.

Harsh sunlight refracted over the Lightning Two's cockpit, the sudden glare making Straeker blink. Whickering fire blasted past him, quickly followed by yet another garishly painted plane. It wasn't looking for him: the ork pilot had a different target in his sights.

Above him was the distinct silhouette of a Lightning. His heads-up display marked it as Maxx Hellas's fighter.

'Hellas!' he shouted into his rebreather's built-in mic. 'Greenskin, bearing two-four-zero!'

'Understood,' came the other pilot's crackling reply.

Straeker watched as Lightning Three tried to pull free of the incoming attackers, rising in a steep climb. The ork that had hurtled past his own craft missed Hellas's fighter by a matter of metres and then rocked as it was caught in the jet-wash from the Imperial Lightning. The pilot appeared to lose control and the fighta-bommer lurched as it banked sharply, going into horizontal spin about its central axis.

But Hellas was not out of danger yet. With the glaring ball of Armageddon's sun behind it, the ugly black silhouette of an ork plane zoomed out of the sky directly towards the Lightning. There was nothing Hellas, Straeker, or any other member of Blitz Squadron could do as the fighta-bommer hit Lightning Three with everything it had. Twin-linked wide-barrelled guns punched holes through the underside of the climbing craft in a chugging hail of fire.

Lightning Three continued to climb for a moment as if nothing had happened and Straeker wondered if, somehow, it had come out of the encounter unscathed. Then reality hit him as Hellas's fighter disappeared in a rapidly expanding ball of light as its power-core exploded.

Straeker's craft bucked as it met the spreading Shockwave that was all that remained of Lightning Three. He suddenly caught a snatch of guttural barking as interference briefly patched ork radio signals through on the squadron's comms-frequency. It sounded like laughter.

He hit the alien plane head on. He was so close he could actually see the horrified expression on the ork's goggle-eyed face as he put several rounds through the front of the cockpit, exploding the alien's brains across its cockpit.

'Maxx Hellas was my best friend!' Straeker bellowed, anger and grief welling up inside him.

He tugged back on his control column as the ork craft nose-dived abruptly.

'Say hello to the ground, you piece of ork shit!' he screamed in heart-rending triumph.

'Lightning Two. There are two on your tail,' came Devereux's calm, commanding voice over the comm.

'Thank you, commander.' Straeker responded, trying to suppress the emotional quaver in his voice.

Jerking the con this way and that, Straeker adeptly evaded the orks. First one, then the other disappeared from his scope as fellow members of Blitz Squadron took out his dogged alien pursuers. Lightning Four, piloted by the gung-ho Gidro Crowd, came alongside and performed a hasty victory roll before peeling off again after the choking contrail left by another ork flyboy.

A scream, riven with electrical distortion, crackled over Straeker's headset and then cut to the white noise of static.

'What was that?' Crowel voiced the question all the squadron were thinking.

'We've lost Devereux.' Lugas Tolyev, the pilot of Lightning Six, notified the others.

'Look, we've done our job here.' It was Josef Kacirk, Lightning Five. 'The pods are through, we've brought down half the enemy's air support, and those that are left will be running low on fuel by now, so let's return to base.'

The response to Kacirk's suggestion, if there was one, was lost to Straeker's ears as an explosion rocked his craft. Pieces of debris from the destroyed ork craft pelted the Lightning. They were from an earlier wound it had taken in the dogfight that proved suddenly and dramatically fatal. Straeker was sure he heard a whirling blade of shrapnel cut through an aileron. He certainly noticed the loss of control in the starboard wing as the plane threatened to go into a spin.

Bringing all his expertise to bear, Straeker wrestled with the con-column, desperately trying to keep the Lightning under control. If he couldn't tame the bucking, he would be an easy target and would not make it to the ground, alive or dead.

Bullets spanged off the craft's hull.

Straeker turned his head to see a fang-mawed plane bearing down on him in a strafing, killing run. Gunfire emitted from its chunky shooters and they riddled the side of his plane. His heads-up display blinked off.

The glasteel of his cockpit shattered and was torn away by the whipping wind.

Warning lights flashed on the dash of his flight console but he couldn't hear their alarms over the scream of the air around him. He tugged at the control column but to no avail.

The plane flipped over violently and went into a spin, leaving Straeker's stomach somewhere far behind. He no longer knew which way was up. One moment it was blue above him, the next the bronze-grey sea of the wastes had become his sky.

With the G-forces increasing with the rising scream of the wind, he reached for the handle beneath his pilot's seat. Fingertips straining, with a last, desperate lunge he grabbed hold of the ejector release and pulled.

Then Conrad Straeker blacked out.

FOUR

SPEED KILLZ

THE BLACK TEMPLARS' insignia-bearing drop pods made planetfall, landing jets firing at the last possible moment. Planetfall was accompanied by a series of ground-shaking thuds amidst the grey ash-buried ruins. Each juddering *crump* sent falls of dust cascading from the wind-eroded and sandblasted stone structures, and jarred the Space Marines restrained within.

Punching the release icons of their harnesses, the Black Templars pulled free of the restraining straps as the pods opened, like a dozen black orchids flowering in the desert, giving the ruins the appearance of a darkly, lush oasis. The blasted desert landscape of Armageddon – a hundred hues of ochre, yellow and grey – awaited them, under a pollutant-clouded sky the colour of rusted metal. Squad Bellangere was the first to break free of its deep strike craft. Brother-Initiate Garek pounded down the ramp formed by the pod's lowering side, and leapt off the end before the metal hatch clanged down on the broken stones of what might once have been the central plaza of an Administratum supply depot or Imperial firebase.

Following in his boot steps was Neophyte Gervais. Garek had accepted Gervais as his apprentice on leaving Solemnus to undertake the fleet's pilgrimage to the liberation of Luginasad. Normally this period in a Black Templar's training would only last a few years at most. Under the guidance of the Chapter's chaplains, as well as that of his initiate, the neophyte was inducted fully into the brotherhood, having trained in the art of war and been taught the rituals of the order. It was also during this novitiate that the brother would have the last of the specially-cultured organs implanted into him that would transform him utterly into a Space Marine.

But Brother Gervais still served Garek as his servant, when he was not in battle; he tended to domestic chores and waited on him at Chapter feasts. There had been few of those in the last twelve years, as the crusade ploughed its way between the stars, just as there were few of the specially grown gene-seed implants.

A Chapter's future was dependant on the survival of its gene-seed. It took many months to propagate new zygotes from a progenoid gland. Gene-seed could only be obtained by removing the progenoid glands from a still living, or more often very recently deceased, Marine. It was the responsibility of the Chapter's apothecaries to harvest these precious glands from their fallen brethren, extracting the progenoid organs from the dead and dying Space Marines on the battlefield, frequently whilst the battle still raged around them.

If the apothecaries failed in their appointed task then there was always the danger of the total loss of a particular type of gene-seed which could have disastrous consequences. The extinction of a gene-seed would result in the extinction of the corresponding zygote. Were that to happen to the gene-seed responsible for culturing fresh progenoids in new recruits, or the biomechanical linking black carapace, it would effectively mean the lingering death of a Chapter. It would be unable to replenish its ranks with novitiate Marines after their warriors had fallen in the endless battles to preserve the Emperor's galaxy-spanning realm.

With the destruction of the great keep on Solemnus, much of the fleet's precious store of genetic material had been lost too. What remained, preserved inside the battle-brothers of the crusade was now even more valuable. The apothecaries fulfilled their duties religiously, extracting the progenoid glands from the corpses of dead Marines. They could afford to waste nothing. It was a gruesome task, but one which had to be done.

And it had been done after the reclaiming of the great keep. For in death there was life for a Chapter. Within a year of that terrible dark day, a dozen neophyte novices had been implanted and raised to the rank of initiate. In the years since, others had gradually been given the honour of becoming fully initiated into the order and every time, the brothers of the crusade had celebrated the event with feasting, and the singing of devotional hymns and prayer. There were only a few neophytes left: in Fighting Company Adlar there was only himself and one other – Brother Mabon, Kyner's neophyte, of Sergeant Doane's squad.

Due to the severely depleted gene-seed stock of Marshal Brant's crusading fleet some of the zygote-producing genetic material now only existed inside the battle-brothers, so short were they of the precious progenoid glands.

This meant that until one of his brothers died in battle – which he did not wish on anyone, in fact he would give his own life to avenge such a death if need be – and the precious progenoid cells could be cultivated, Gervais would remain a neophyte, awaiting the final additions to the very fibre of his being that would make him one of the Adeptus Astartes at last.

So it was that in battle Gervais still followed Garek's example fully. He had become as close and as unnoticeable to the initiate, in a way, as his own shadow. But Gervais followed him now as Garek and the rest of Sergeant Bellangere's tactical squad took their places in the defensive line that the orks would not cross. They would make sure of that.

CHAPLAIN WOLFRAM JUMPED down from his pod, hitting broken rubble two metres below. His pod had hit part of a wall as it landed, crushing the ferrocrete under its great metal weight. It had come to rest leaning at a pronounced angle. The rest of his five-man squad disembarked from the crashed craft and quickly took up their places, following his hand signals and barked orders, and joining the defensive perimeter being established by the Fighting Company within the ruins.

But these rains were not from Ghazghkull's most recent invasion. In fact, Chaplain Wolfram doubted they were even testament to the aliens' assault fifty years before. Was it possible the place where they were about to make their stand against the greenskin menace was where others had once made their stand against the hellish forces of the traitor Primarch Angron, five hundred years before?

Wolfram's memory was longer than most of the brothers of the Solemnus Crusade, and his access to restricted, sacred information was greater than many of his Chapter due to his venerable position as a chaplain of the Adeptus Astartes. As such he held many of the secrets of the Chapter and the history of the Adeptus Astartes close, preserving them for future generations so that the warriors of the Imperium might never forget their sacred duty or rest on their laurels in damning complacency.

Wolfram hefted his crozius arcanum in one hand. The crozius was both the chaplain's rod of office and a weapon, and each one was different. The one in Wolfram's possession was an ancient artefact, handed down from one generation to the next for the last five thousand years. Its head was in the form of the Black Templar's cross insignia, but the edges of the flaring cross blades had been sharpened, turning it into a vicious, double-headed axe. A power source and disruptor generator concealed within its haft sheathed the axe-head in a shimmering blue energy field that tore apart anything struck by the weapon.

And he would make sure that it would smite the greenskin forces a grievous wound from which they would never recover. He would lead the Templars into battle against the foe, quoting the holy liturgies and singing rousing battle-hymns. In doing so he would exhort the brothers to acts of greater and greater bravery in their fight to bring the wrath of the Emperor down on the heads of his enemies. Fanatics, some called them. Loyal warrior-servants of the Emperor were how Wolfram thought of his charges and himself.

Chaplain Wolfram paused to watch as the Space Marines spread out around the broken compound. His own insertion craft's situarum had regularly updated him on the status of the other pods during the drop, so he already knew that one of those whose spiritual well-being he had been responsible for would not be joining his brothers in forthcoming battle. One of the veteran brothers of Fighting Company Adlar hadn't made it along with the rest of them: revered Brother Jarold's pod had gone out of contact range with the others as they fell through the planet's atmosphere and was now missing. They would miss the power of his assault cannon in the battle to come.

Fifty-three Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter had so far made groundfall safely, however, including the drop pod-inserted Land Speeder *Excalibur* and its crew. They only awaited the deployment of Assault Squads Phelan and Vortimer via the one Thunderhawk available at this time to Fighting Company Adlar's mission before the gunship had to return to the fleet-based actions taking place high in orbit over Armageddon. Yet despite having all these mighty warriors alongside each other, the loss of the dreadnought was one that would affect all of them and possibly the mission itself.

Zealous anger began to grow in Wolfram's heart at the thought of the loss of one of the Crusade's greatest heroes. His anger was further fuelled by the thought of the invading ork armies that infected this vital world with their corrupting alien presence. He knew the approaching ork force would be on them in a matter of minutes.

Glowering at the approaching dust cloud through the glittering ruby-eyed deaths-head skull of his devotional armour, Wolfram commenced the Invocation of the Golden Throne under his breath.

SERGEANT UTHUR LED his veterans to take up their positions at a run. Their drop pod had landed at the edge of the mined compound. Around them, now transmuted to mounds of corroded metal, were the long-dead hulks of tanks, Rhino transports, half-tracks and Trojan hauler-vehicles. Whatever had happened here centuries ago had happened quickly – without warning and with apocalyptic effect. Men had fought and died here. Men were about to fight here again, probably for the first time in five hundred years.

The veteran brothers didn't need to be told what to do. They had been briefed before embarkation. That was enough. While some of the brothers reacted – not with fear, for the Emperor's warriors were fear incarnate – but with trepidation as their planetary assault had become the subject of a counter-strike, Squad Uther had been muttering the Prayers of Protection, the meditative invocations that helped to focus their minds on their first engagement with the enemy on Armageddon.

For some of the younger brothers, those with less than two decades' experience fighting the Emperor's wars, insertion by drop pod was an unfamiliar experience. For the veterans of Squads Uther and Agravain it was no more unusual to them now than a flight on a Thunderhawk gunship or travelling the interstellar gulfs and warp-ways aboard the ships of the never-resting crusading fleets. Veteran Brothers Sagramour, Leorad and Elidor hunkered down behind the oxidised steel-rubble of a reinforced perimeter fence, sweeping the desert beyond with their boltguns. The hulking Brother Thayer, tall even by Astartes standards, swung into cover behind the overturned trackless chassis-bed of a Leman Russ, hefting the lascannon he carried into position. He aimed it into the thick of the ork convoy speeding towards the Templars' position.

Although the combat doctrine of the Black Templars' creed decreed that they should engage an enemy in close combat – so that they would be sure that when they slew their enemies they really were dead – there were times when they were grateful for the power of a holy lascannon, which brought light to the darkness and banished evil in the face of the Emperor's divine illumination. Uther looked out across the desert towards the rambling vehicles of the orks that were coming into view in front of the massive, slow-rising dust cloud. Through the shimmering heat-haze that rose from the baking sand and ash, the greenskin reinforcements heading for the Tartarus war front appeared to double in number as their buggies and bikes were reflected in the glass formed by the desert mirage heat.

Speed freeks, Uther thought. That was what the soldiers of Armageddon called them: orks that were addicted to travelling dangerously, at almost suicidal high speeds, even compared with others of their kind. That was why they formed their own Kult of Speed. These thrill-seeking insane ork joy riders had congregated in the polluted wastes, forming into roving lightly armoured warbands that roared through the deserts to hit the beleaguered Imperial forces without warning from practically any quarter. Uther could see them now, powering towards the Space Marines' position: a crazed collection of bikes, buggy-sized vehicles and two much larger trukks. With large tyres, pared-down armoured-plated hulls, ramming spikes and bristling with weapons, the transports looked like they had been constructed from what was left in an Imperial machine pool after the tanks and other vehicles had been patched up and sent on their way.

The ork machines had been upgraded with all manner of junk. Some sported banner poles bearing the chunky glyphs of their warband. Some were hung with pieces of armour and the wreckage of other vehicles, the trophies clattering against the metallic sides as the trukks jolted over the uneven wastes towards the Space Marines. Still others had been customized with hoist-mounted wrecking balls, sections of belted caterpillar tracks, super-charged engines and mechanised grabbing arms. Weapons ranged from wide-calibre cannons and chain-fed autoguns, to crude, chain-firing ballistas and unsafe looking flame-throwers.

But an unhealthy obsession with travelling too fast wasn't restricted to those orks who lived behind the wheel of a buggy or on the back of a petrol-guzzling warbike. Chugging through the sky above the convoy were three peculiar craft that looked, to Uther's eyes at least, as if they shouldn't be able to fly at all. Each was as individual in design as the various trukks and bikes. However, the craft seemed to be built around a chassis buggy, but with the addition of lifting propellers and whirling fan-blades, the axles and wheels having been removed. The air thrummed as they neared the wastes-claimed fortification.

Rumbling along behind the other vehicles was the long, cylindrical shape of a fuel tanker being towed by a tractor unit. Orks clung precariously to the side of it with one hand whilst waving heavy-headed chopping cleavers, fat six-shooter guns or steel bolt chucking crossbows at the Marines.

When the ork warband had first come into view they had been spread out in a ragged line half a kilometre long. But now, gunning their throttles, they were racing each other, with guttural whoops and cheers, to converge on the Space Marines' beachhead.

The orks might have been able to avoid the Templars, or at least try to escape them, by changing course. But such a diversion would rob them of the opportunity for a fight and the orks had no intention of that happening. If there was one thing that gave the speed freeks greater savage pleasure than driving at high speed, it was gunning down and then running over their enemies, at high speed.

Imperial intelligence had reported the presence of Kult of Speed warbands in the wilderness east of Tartarus Hive. Amongst them were the Red Wheelz, the Burning Death tribe and the Slugga Trakks. Through his optic-enhancing visor, the veteran sergeant could see that these particular ork vehicles, as well as being painted the mandatory red, bore arrow and knife glyphs. The data-core in Uther's suit flashed up, in gothic runes on his heads-up display, that these were orks of the High Speed Killz tribe.

Uther smiled to himself. It made no difference to him which tribe or clan the orks belonged to. He and the other Black Templars were going to put them down just the same.

Automatically, without thinking, Veteran Sergeant Uther clicked the ignition rune of his chainsword, to get the rotating toothed blade running to speed. Then, just as quickly, he clicked it off again. He had run the self-same test before boarding the drop pod back aboard the *Divine Fury*.

Subconsciously he stroked the pelt of grey-white fur tied at his waist. He considered the snow lion's skin a lucky talisman. The day he had killed it in the frozen Lammass Mountains of Solemnus, a century before, the Emperor had stretched out his hand and saved him. When his bolter jammed, the Emperor had provided him with a flint, just within reach of his grasping hand, which he had used to strike open the animal's iron-hard skull when it had him pinned beneath its great clawing weight. Uther believed that the pelt he had skinned from the lion's steaming carcass, using the same flint, had continued to bring him the blessings of the Emperor in the hundred years since.

Uther turned his attention back to the orks. He could clearly see their ugly green faces leering from the open-topped vehicles as they closed the distance between themselves and the still deploying Templars. Tongues lolled from their mouths as the desert winds beat them in the face; they looked like huge canines might look, enjoying the rush of speed. The ash wastes were alive with the sounds of the moaning wind, roaring engines and the clatter of the Space Marines taking up their positions within the ancient rains.

The orks were coming at them head on, apparently with no thought for strategy. Although the bikes and buggies were each differently designed, they all had a number of attributes in common: large, heavy-tread tyres, blocky construction, and fossil-fuel guzzling combustion engines that growled like caged beasts and spewed thick black exhaust fumes into the already rancid atmosphere.

Behind the smaller vehicles came the trukks, the fuel tanker and now, emerging out of the dust cloud kicked up by the rest of the speeding warband, a chugging monstrosity, twice as big as any of the trukks. It looked more like a mobile command bunker than a tank. It was a battlewagon: the warband's flagship vehicle and its warboss's mobile HQ. Driving was achieved via a huge roller, covered in riveted metal plates, that was as wide as the super heavy tank-sized vehicle itself. Without doubt it could crash a whole squad of Marines beneath it, only they would never give the orks the satisfaction of such a thing happening. Two massive chimneystack exhaust pipes belched noxious brown fumes into the pathogen-polluted air.

But the more immediate threat came from above. The three gyrocopters had soared ahead of the rest of the speed freek warband. Their pilots were hungry for first blood. The deth-koptas dropped out of the smoggy sky, twin-linked shootas blazing, kicking up plumes of ash from the wastes in a strafing line that moved in on the shattered perimeter defence.

'Brother Thayer. In your own time,' the veteran sergeant coolly commanded, but the towering Space Marine already had the first of the koptas in his sights. This was one of those times when the power and range of a weapon like a lascannon was a necessity. If the enemy wouldn't face you in hand-to-hand combat then you had to make it so that they had no choice in the matter.

Brother Thayer prepared to fire.

'SQUAD VORTIMER, GO!' the black-armoured sergeant bellowed, his voice only audible over the roar of the wind and the scream of the Thunderhawk's engines because it was relayed to the Assault Marines over their helmet comms.

Without a second's hesitation, Brother Bryce threw himself out of the gunship. Bolt pistol in one hand and chainsword in the other he dropped through the tortured air, his heavily armoured body forming a X-shape as he fell. Behind and above him the other initiates of Adler Company's first assault squad made the leap from the low-flying Thunderhawk – Brothers Daman, Notker, Halwn and the sergeant himself. Then the deployment craft peeled away, its rear ramp closing, leaving Squad Vortimer to carry out its duty.

Bryce took in the scene below him in a brief aerial snapshot. From five hundred metres up the octagonal outline of the sand-scorched structure was much more obvious. The black iron flowers of drop pods blossomed amid the ruins, the Marines positioned around them black dots clearly visible against the yellow, brown and grey chemical deposits that covered everything out in the industrial, war-spoiled wastes.

From the east the speed-crazed ork reinforcements were closing on them, a thick cloud of ash-dust and petrol fumes, ochre stained black, rising behind them. The Black Templars had not yet engaged the enemy: vox-chatter and the evidence of his own eyes told him that. The brothers of his Chapter were not like the siege warfare specialists of the Imperial Fists or the Codex Astartes-bound Ultramarines, with their utilisation of long-range combat and ranged weapons. For the sons of Sigismund, theirs was the way of righteous wrath, fighting face-to-face with the enemy. Conquest in close combat was the path to earning honour and respect, and making sure that the enemy was truly vanquished.

At a rough estimate Bryce guessed that the greenskins outnumbered the Templars two to one, and where the aliens rode into battle on a plethora of insane, but doubtless robust and heavily-armed transports, the Marines were practically without armour support. He could almost feel sorry for the orks, had they not been an abomination in the sight of the Emperor and all his loyal warriors. They wouldn't know what had hit them.

With a scream the jet turbines of Bryce's jump pack roared into life. The bulky jet engines hooked up to the Marine's power pack on his back could only be borne by someone wearing full power armour, such was their weight. He hurled planetward, the air and wisps of condensing cloud whipping past him, the adrenaline rush of the high-speed descent exhilarating his whole body.

The ork warband's flying support squadron was below him now. The three deth-koptas sported an array of different rotor blades and propeller configurations. Their goggle-wearing pilots were giving the Marines below them both barrels with their twin-linked autocannon-style armaments. As Bryce closed on them he was sure that he could hear the sound of hollering alien laughter over the chugging of the guns and throbbing hum of the kopta rotors.

The first craft was suddenly replaced by an expanding fireball as a lance of laser-light struck it, the beam originating from a point amongst the wreckage-strewn ruins. The laughter cut off abruptly.

Then he was on top of the kopta furthest from the ground. He crashed down on the back of the craft's buggy chassis, skillfully avoiding the slicing propeller blades. The deth-kopta lurched violently, forcing its pilot to push down hard on the con-rod to stop the craft going into a backward dive and stalling the rotor engines. The ork had the shuddering chopper back under control in moments, but in doing so it had stopped firing at the ground-based Marines.

The pilot turned, snarling, to find Bryce's pistol pointing into one goggled eye. The bolt, a tiny self-propelled, armour-piercing, mass-reactive missile in its own right, punched through the lens, into the ork's eye and took out the back of its head in a blast of blood, bone and brain. The force of the shot pushed the pilot over on top of the koptas controls. The craft nose-dived sharply.

Bryce kicked free of the doomed kopta, the only death it would be encountering now being its own imminent demise, and made himself a spear of jet-powered armoured vengeance.

The remaining ork piloted craft jinked to avoid the incoming Marines. The machine zigzagged this way and that, the targets on the ground forgotten, as the pilot pushed it to the edge of its tolerances to avoid the assault squad. Bryce's interception of the now plummeting kopta had allowed Brother Daman to draw level with him in their death dive towards the ground. Both of them now homed in on the last of the squadron.

Jump packs provided assault squads with incredible speed and maneuverability in one direction, but their limited flight capability meant that this ability to make a precision high speed strike was countered by a lack of complex aerial maneuvers.

Bryce rocketed past the last deth-kopta, clipping a protruding stabilising fin with the tip of his chainsword as the ork pilot pulled up. His moment was gone, he just had to focus on making groundfall safely and engaging the enemy at their heart. However, he allowed himself one sharp glance behind him and saw Daman bodily smash into the craft, shearing off its stabilising tail rotor.

The kopta went into an uncontrolled spin. Notker and Halwn finished off its pilot with short bursts from their bolt pistols.

The ground was rushing up to meet Brother Bryce. The ork warband was almost on the Imperial ruin. He chose his target, and began to pull himself out of his angled dive so that he was dropping feet first.

He crashed down on the iron plate floor of the wartrukk's open cabin, rocking the vehicle and flooring a greenskin with a vicious thrust of his chainsword as he did so. With smouldering chunks of deth-kopta wreckage raining down amongst the orks in a wide radius around him, Bryce set to with bolt pistol and sword before the greenskins were fully aware what was going on.

The rest of Squad Vortimer made groundfall within the mass of speeding vehicles. Brother Notker smashed an ork from the warbike it was riding. Halwn hit the ground at a run, bounding onto the back of a bouncing buggy with a jet-propelled leap and taking out its harpoon gunner. The driver sped on, unaware of his gunner's fate, or of his own. Sergeant Vortimer landed ahead of the converging convoy laying down carefully aimed covering fire with his plasma pistol.

An over-eager greenskin, who was already taking pot-shots at the dug-in Space Marines with a heavy-calibre weapon from the back of a wrecking ball equipped trakk, scored a lucky hit against Brother Daman as he came into land. The slug barely scratched

the Marine's armour, but the force of it spun him round so that he hit the ground hard, shoulder first, and the velocity of the impact sent him rolling into the path of another buggy.

A tonne of ork metal hit Daman, crushing him under its wheels. There was a sharp crack. The buggy bounced on, its occupants uncaring of the Marine's fate.

Daman sat up. His body had left an indent in the comparted ash. He was unable to move his left arm at the shoulder. The auto-reactive shoulder plate had been damaged in some way by the collision. The engines of his jump pack had also failed, sand and ash were now clogging the intakes.

Hearing a whooping cry, he turned to face another trakk that was swerving from its previous course to run him over too. In a few scant seconds the vehicle was on him. He flung himself back onto the ground and rolled to avoid the clattering treads of a caterpillar track. As the trakk passed harmlessly over him Daman brought up his chainsword. The spinning teeth screamed as they met metal and Daman found himself dragged along for several metres before his weapon sheared through the vehicle's back axle. With a grinding crash the back wheels of the trakk parted company and the rear of the transport's chassis thumped down onto the ground. A squealing mass of tiny, pale green creatures with overlarge facial features tumbled out of the back of the vehicle. The trakk ground to a halt, grey smoke pouring from somewhere underneath.

The gretchin jumped to their feet and ran at Brother Daman waving spanners, bits of pipe and even a few primitive pistols above their heads.

'Sigismund guide my hand!' Daman bellowed, revving his chainsword to top speed, and prepared to meet their charge.

WITH A FIREWORK *whoosh*, a wave of ork rockets soared into the air, fired from the backs of buggies, trakks and the rambling battlegwagon. The grinning shark-faced missiles followed erratic spiralling paths, trailing plumes of filthy smoke.

The Black Templars tensed, almost as one man. After the failed vanguard attack of the deth-koptas, the ork attack was now beginning in earnest.

'Hold your positions, men.' Castellan Adlar commanded, his inspiring voice ringing in through the comm-net to the waiting troops.

The rockets reached the apex of their flight. Warheads dipping, they began their curling descent towards the Space Marine lines. 'Wait.' Adlar ordered. 'Wait!'

The Castellan followed the trajectory of the rockets, fixing them within the scarlet gaze of his bionic eye. He began to track the nearest missile with his plasma pistol.

'Wait!'

Where the battle-brothers of other Chapters would have engaged the orks with long-range weapons, the Black Templars waited. They would savour the moment when their enemies paid for their sins with their worthless lives up close, having the satisfaction of seeing the aliens die right in front of them.

'Sons of Solemnus,' he shouted into his helmet mic. 'Vengeance is at hand. Fire!'

A hail of weapons fire tore upwards, bolter shells, plasma discharges and las-blasts detonating the falling ork rockets in a withering storm of fire.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!'

Bellowing wrathful zeal-charged battle cries the Black Templars engaged the enemy, following their leader into the fray.

THE SUPERHEATED hiss of the air cooking preceded the roar of spontaneous combustion as Brother Fiamain's meltagun found its target. The exploding ork warbike hit the slope of ash and spoil, and hurtled over the heads of Squad Bellangere, a screaming comet of disintegrating machine parts and burning greenskins.

As the warband's aerial vanguard had made their run, the warbike squadrons had peeled off in an attempt to come at the Templars from the flanks. Ansgar had waited until he could see the glowing coals within the pits of the orks' eyes before he had attacked, his battle-brothers around him unleashing everything they had at the aliens.

Another three-wheeled bike, this one with a sidecar gun emplacement, roared past, bullets spanging from Ansgar's ancient artificer armour. Bloodlust blazing in his eyes, abandoning his post, the warbike's gunner flung himself from the platform at the Space Marine. The ork's muscular body slammed into Ansgar, the momentum of its crazed leap sending the two of them rolling in the dust.

The downed Space Marine kicked the alien from him, sending it sprawling, and jumped to his feet. The ork rolled and recovered, springing to its feet with surprising agility. The greenskin creature was as tall as a Space Marine. Its head was angular with the narrow forehead of its kind and disproportionately wider jaw. From the ugly rift of its mouth protruded long tusks. Pointed ears jutted out bat-like from its bald head. The rest of the creature's broad shouldered body was made up of muscle and more muscle, covered by a leathery, pockmarked green hide.

The ork threw itself at Ansgar again, but the Emperor's chosen champion was ready. White fire crackling along the length of its blade, the Black Sword sliced through the alien's crudely manufactured flak armour and deep into the meat of its body. The fire in its eyes died.

Hearing the rocket engine roar of a missile launcher being fired, Ansgar darted a look to his right, as the ork's heavy carcass slipped from his sword, its foul blood picking out the grooves of the weapon's inscription. Brother Brannor's weapon found its mark. With a subsonic boom the convoy's fuel tanker blew. The concussion wave lifted two buggies into the air, flipping them over and sending their orkish crews flying. It shredded the tracks of one of the trukks, and the wastes behind were lit by the roiling red and orange fireball.

Orks ran from the devastation, some drenched in burning fuel. But Squad Phelan was there to meet them, dropping from the sky on the retro-thrusters of their jump packs. Close by, Squad Garrond met the charge of those orks who had jumped free of the trakk that had carried them into battle. Ansgar closed on the milling mob, choosing his next target.

Ansgar had noticed a change in how the other Space Marines viewed him now that he wore the laurel-wreathed helmet of the Emperor's Champion, and the master-crafted, lovingly ornamented Armour of Faith and wielded the hallowed Black Sword. It was in the way they perceived him. They were all loyal brethren of the Black Templars Chapter already, but now it seemed to Ansgar that they held him in reverent awe. He was no longer simply another squad sergeant or lowly battle-brother. He was now the blessed champion of the Emperor, chosen hero of the crusade. In their eyes he was a figurehead who would lead them to victory over the aliens. Failing that they would follow him into the jaws of death itself.

Gripping the hilt of the Black Sword tightly in both gauntleted fists, the ancient, sanctified weapon of heroes through the ages that had been presented to him by the Chapter chaplains aboard the *Divine Fury* only hours before, a surge of excitement flooded his body with adrenaline. At last he could begin to fulfil the role the Emperor had chosen for him!

Ansgar strode out to meet the next filthy alien that would taste the bitter fruits of its sacrilegious actions.

LAND SPEEDER *EXCALIBUR* swept in from the north, riding the desert-heated air over the irregular contours of the ground with the effortlessness of a wolf eagle riding the thermals high above the uplands of Solemnus. It might have been another matter, however, if the skimming craft hadn't been steered by Brother-Pilot Horek.

As Horek kept *Excalibur's* flight as smooth and even as possible, Brother Tortain riddled the enemy vehicles with rattling, explosive fire from the Speeder's hull-mounted heavy bolter. First a warbike went up, gas turbines igniting and launching the fat-wheeled contraption ten metres straight up into the air, then a buggy. Its driver dead, the vehicle careered into a mob of orks and gretchin that had just bailed out of an over-turned trakk.

Another burst of fire from Tortain's bolter tore out the links in a chain that attached a wrecking ball to its hoist on the back of another scratch-built contraption. The spiked ball spun free, and bowled over another bike; its loosened chain whipped through the grimy, scratched glass of a buggy's windshield and decapitated the ork behind the wheel.

'To your left.' Horek said, drawing his gunner's attention to a monstrous shape looming through the smoke, dust and confusion of panicking greenskins.

Tortain looked round. The battlewagon was virtually on the compound. But one of its kannons was trained on the Land Speeder. Brother Tortain took aim and fired. The kannon was torn apart, along with its operators, as the weapon's magazine was hit and detonated.

THE ORK ATTACK had been anything but subtle. The Space Marines had had all the time they needed to mobilise from their drop pods and take up positions around the rained octagonal structure before the assault came. The greenskins had come straight at them, head on. The aliens outnumbered the Templars two to one, and no doubt in their own warped orkish eyes they considered that to be the only advantage they needed. A simple hammer strike from their machines would be all that was required to beat their enemy. But they were sorely misguided in such an assumption, for their enemy was no mere hive-born militia, planet defence force, or even Imperial guardsmen: they were Space Marines.

Only the bike squadrons had tried to outflank the Templars, but this lame strategic tactic had also been easily thwarted. The Marines had engaged the orks in hand-to-hand combat at the first opportunity, as Fighting Company Adlar's assault squads dropped into the thick of the still arriving reinforcements. They had succeeded in causing chaos and confusion in the very midst of the greenskins before the aliens had even engaged those Templars defending the rain.

Castellan Adlar was used to the ebb and flow of battle – it was part of his daily life – but there was no ebb and flow here. The Black Templars had had the true advantage from the start. None of the High Speed Killz tribe would pass the line that had been drawn here by Adlar's troops. They only had to ensure the destruction of the orks' last rallying point – an ugly yet mighty battlewagon – and victory would belong to the Templars of Solemnus.

THE ORKS' MECHANISED assault effectively broken, many of the remaining warband bailed out of their damaged transports and piled together, swarming into the ruins through the many breaches in its broken walls. A bellow announced the brutes' charge but Neophyte-Brother Gervais held his position in the line next to Initiate Garek. Then the aliens were on them.

The greenskins all looked alike to Gervais, but Armageddon's homebred ork hunter specialists would probably argue differently. To the young warrior, they were all abominations to be purged from existence in the Emperor's name. The only difference between them he could see was their size. As a general rule it appeared that the larger, bulkier, more heavily-muscled an ork, the greater its status amongst the aliens, and the higher its position in the brutally hierarchical chain of command. As a result, these were also the better-armed warriors.

There was some subtle variation in colour between the aliens when he thought about it. Skin tone ranged from a pale emerald mossy tone through to a rich, dark jade. Gervais knew, thanks to indoctrination sessions in the Chapter's ancient teaching machines, that some orders of the Magos Biologis believed that the ork race was an ungodly amalgam of fungus and animal. If this was the case what more proof was needed that these alien abominations were contrary to the will of the Emperor and as such should be expunged from existence?

Then there were the jutting tusks, torn ears, stapled wounds, rebuilt limbs and rudimentary bionic replacements. It seemed that an ork's physiology was incredibly resilient and could cope with the most crude repairs, savage surgical procedures and brutal augmentic enhancements. Amongst them, the greenskin horde displayed proudly worn collections of scars, many of which would have denoted killing wounds for any human – other than a superhuman Space Marine.

A whole range of methods and materials had been used to repair these savage injuries: large, industrial staples; sutures of a thickness more akin to rope than surgical thread; sections of scarred metal plate; rusted bolts; industrial tape, like that used by the Imperial Guard to denote the nature of their ammo clips; and simple, knotted scar tissue. Sometimes the edges of the wounds bore the additional scars of tooth marks, as if mandibles had been used to clamp the flesh together until the wound started to knit. Whether these techniques were applied by the aliens' own medics or carried out by the injured orks themselves Gervais didn't know, but found both possibilities equally likely from such a barbaric race.

Joining his brothers in the shout of, 'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' he depressed the trigger of his bolt pistol whilst cleaving into the press of ork bodies with his whirring chainsword.

VETERAN-BROTHER LEORAD, of Squad Uther, raised his boltgun and blasted into the encroaching tide of green bodies.

The all-enclosing suit of thick ceramite plates not only protected Leorad from the orks' gunfire but also supplemented his already prodigious strength. Thanks to electrically stimulated fibre-bundles implanted in the armour he could wield the boltgun with ease, using both hands, whereas a normal man would have to have been incredibly strong even to lift it.

To the Space Marines, the boltgun was far more than just a weapon. It was an instrument of mankind's divinity, proof of humanity's right to rule the stars, the bringer of death to its foes, its howling blast a prayer to the gods of battle.

In comparison, everything about the orks' armaments and vehicles was crude: components hastily bolted on, roughly hacksawed and welded into place. Everything seemed to have been built in a hurry, at a moment's notice, by a creature that knew what a gun or a troop transport should look like, but that had little idea how one actually worked.

With spent shell-casings flying from the boltgun's breech, Leorad cut down the teeming orks in a withering hail of flesh exploding, bone-shattering fire.

A PARTICULARLY LARGE ork that appeared to have a shorn limb stapled onto its body at the hip, wearing a spike-topped helmet, charged clumsily at Chaplain Wolfram, bellowing as it did so. Strings of thick saliva flapped from its gums in the blast of its noxious breath.

Wolfram too despised the alien creatures. All of them were sinfully ugly and repulsive in his eye. The spike-helmeted brute came at him, wielding a chainsword, the rotating blades driven by a coughing petrol engine. Wolfram startled the ork by leaning into its charge. He grabbed the saw-toothed knife blade in one black gauntleted hand, and struck his attacker with the crozius arcanum he held in the other. The mighty servo-assisted blow, backed up by the crackling energy field of the weapon, snapped the ork's head round and sent a broken tusk flying from the alien's rubbery-lipped, malformed jaw.

Behind the skull-mask of his helmet, Chaplain Wolfram grinned. This was what all the hours of penitent training and abstinence were for. Wolfram never felt more alive than when he was on the battlefield, up close with the enemy, dispensing the Emperor's justice in hand-to-hand combat.

Nothing made you feel more alive after living for two hundred and thirty-three years than looking death directly in the eye.

CASTELLAN ADLAR HAD watched in satisfaction as the battlewagon was torn apart by a series of internal detonations that culminated in one almighty cataclysmic explosion. The damage done by the Land Speeder *Excalibur* had started a chain reaction as the command vehicle's own cruel arsenal was turned on itself. One magazine and high velocity shell after another went off inside the seemingly impenetrable tank.

Nothing now remained of the battlewagon, only a smoking crater in the spoil sands of the wastes and a scattering of armour plate. The death of the mobile ork command fortress had spelled the end for the entire ork force. The speed freaks of the High Speed Killz tribe had been vanquished.

Of the few surviving greenskins, those who could, had fled back into the inhospitable desert. Those crippled, but not yet killed, by the injuries they had suffered at the hands of the Black Templars could only wait to be dispensed with the Emperor's wrathful justice by bolter and chainsword.

'Our next objective,' Adlar said, addressing the assembled brothers, 'is to rendezvous with the beleaguered Imperial forces at the titan pens of Hellsbreach. However, there is a problem. Long-range auspexes and comms are currently out of action. Techmarine Isendur, if you would care to explain?'

'It's probably due to the surrounding environment,' the crimson-armoured warrior announced gruffly. His third, artificial servo-arm twitched as he spoke, as if it had a mind of its own. 'The ash wastes are giving off high levels of electromagnetic interference. Readings taken by the fleet before planetfall commenced hinted this might be the case.'

'Could it not also be something that the alien abominations managed to do?' Chaplain Wolfram suggested ominously, 'intentionally or not?'

Adlar considered the priest-marine's suspicions. It seemed quite likely that the orks' tinkering had created the interference, but how and why he could only guess.

'No matter what the cause,' he stated, 'there is nothing we can do now, other than proceed to the rendezvous point. *Excalibur* will scout ahead to warn us of dangers hidden from us by our blinded surveyors.'

FIGHTING COMPANY ADLAR set out. Hour after hour they trudged through the shifting sands of the wasteland. No ordinary men could have survived such a forced march, the toxic atmosphere itself threatening a lingering death for anyone breathing it in. But for the Space Marines, thanks to the filters in their suits and their own built-in biological ones, it was hardly any different to breathing pure oxygen.

'Castellan, I have something,' Techmarine Isendur announced, as the sun reached its zenith over Armageddon.

Adlar consulted his own auspex but saw nothing through the snow of interference. 'What is it, Isendur? Is it our objective?'

The techmarine paused before replying. 'Yes, sir, I believe it is,' he said at last.

'There is doubt in your voice.' Adlar probed. 'What is it?'

'Radiation levels are almost off the scale, I shall have to recalibrate, and... All is not as it should be, my lord.'

There was a crackle of static in Adlar's headset and then Brother-Pilot Horek's voice could be heard, '—ife signs. I repeat, we are not reading any life signs!'

'*Excalibur!*' Adlar barked. 'Report.'

'Castellan Adlar, sir. Hellsbreach is dead! We have carried out a sweep of the entire area and there is no one left alive. No one at all! There are sig... assive... mic detona...' Horek's words were swallowed up in a blizzard of static.

'Say again, Brother Horek! What has happened to Hellsbreach?'

More static, then: '—plosion. I say again, Hellsbreach base has been destroyed by atomics. Everyone is dead.'

FIVE

DEUS EX MACHINA

HE WAS DRIFTING into the mists of oblivion, cold and irresistible. He was seeing without sight, feeling without sensation. Dull red swirled to darkly drawing purple, and men succumbed to all-absorbing black. He was falling, interminably, inexorably, always falling. But there was no rush of air in his ears, no wind clawing at his plummeting body, only the feeling. Then...

A sudden spark of light struck out in the perpetual darkness. Oily black clouds parted. There was colour in the darkness again, a strobing spectrum beyond the visible. Quicksilver lightning erupted around him coursing along predefined emerald pathways.

Bursts of coral pink and topaz after-images. A crackling of electrostatic charge dancing on synapse endings. Ecstasy and agony.

The acid tang of metal in his mouth. Then...

Muscles spasming. Whiplash jerks and seizure paroxysms. Pain like molten fire melting through every nerve and fibre. Then...

Nothing.

MAGNUS EKHARDT OPENED his eyes and knew immediately where he was.

His own outline, blocking the wan light seeping through the dense manufactorum clouds, cast a deep, blood red shadow on crimson sand.

This was Mars, forge world of the Machine God.

He was standing on a plain, looking across the empty rust-red sands to the jagged horizon of the mountainous machine-forges and factory-temples of the Ommissiah. The ragged, rocky landscape echoed and shook with the pounding of the distant forges and the breathy roars of the belching exhaust-chimneys. The monstrous manufactories hugged the skyline like slumbering prehistoric behemoths. Cooling towers not unlike volcanic craters, in size and form, spewed steam and waste gases into the once oxygenated air – yet Ekhardt could still breathe. An almost incessant rain of fine ash and soot drifted down from the sepia heavens – yet not one speck settled on his braided princeps uniform.

But he was not alone on the plain.

It stood before him, dominating his vision, casting a shadow a kilometre long that obscured a great expanse of sky.

Tyrannus Maximus.

To look upon the ancient Warlord was to look upon one of the war-gods of Mars. Birthed from the forge-fires of that Adeptus Mechanicus world, many light years distant and dark millennia ago, it was a striding colossus of war, a lord of destruction, the greatest of battle-engines. A titan.

From massive iron hooves, large enough to crash a whole tank regiment beneath them, armoured adamantium greaves rose up hydraulically powered piston legs, more than ten times the height of a man, to an abdomen of hip servos, gyro-stabilisers and a swivel-jointed pelvis, larger than an Imperial turret emplacement. Supported on top of this was the thorax of the titan, housing the massive turbine engines and plasma drive power core – a reactor capable of generating enough energy to power a starship. The defensive void shield generators were also found within the main body of the god-weapon.

The hull of the titan bristled with machine-slaved weapons, communication arrays, counter measure dispensers, surveyor units and crew-operated gun emplacements: autocannons and rocket launchers. Surmounting the hulking body of the giant humanoid war machine were the silo-sized ammunition hoppers and autoloaders, along with the shoulder-mounted turbo-lasers, which dwarfed the torso's other armaments. But these were as nothing compared to the city-levelling arm weapons.

The first of these was the huge Gatling Blaster. Attached to the right shoulder socket of the land-battleship, it was capable of firing a chilling infantry-scything hail of 150mm shells that could turn lines of men into a bloody mist and pulverise the most well-armoured super-heavy tank. But the most powerful and devastating device borne by the titan was the laser cannon that stood in place of the gargantuan man-machine's left arm. It had been named the "Volcano Cannon" by the servants of the Legionnes Titanicus because of the raw power it could level at an enemy. It was a weapon capable of turning rock to bubbling magma, of slicing through a starship's armour and even of fracturing the bedrock of a planet.

These monstrous weapons – the legacy of an earlier, more enlightened age – attested to the intellectual magnitude of their creators. Now they were maintained by adepts who were half mechanics and half holy men. Priest-engineers, who didn't fully understand the means by which they operated, who applied as much incense as grease-oil to ancient joints. Their knowledge was arcane and esoteric, they lacked the wisdom of mechanics and hydraulics.

The titan's entire surface and countless internal compartments were riddled with access hatches, observation platforms, maintenance ports, access ladders and railed walkways: several hundred kilometres of them. It was said that a man could get lost

inside a titan and never find his way back to his post, to the of heat exhaustion, exposure to lethal radioactivity or even starvation, if he wasn't killed in battle as a result of an injury sustained by the god engine itself.

Secured to the outer hull of the god machine, with bolts the size of tree trunks, was the *machina opus*, the dread half-skull, half-droid helmet icon of the Adeptus Mechanicus. This was the galaxy-spanning organisation, without whose devotion to the Machine God, no war engine of the titan legions, no battleship of the Imperial Navy and no Astartes Chapter could function fully – however much none of them might like to admit it.

Ekhardt had heard dark rumours about the technomagi of Mars, how they were able to extend their lives for hundreds of years by means of ancient genetic-replication vats. Shrivelled husks that were once men maintained their secretive stranglehold on the secrets of technology that lay buried beneath the Adeptus Mechanicus's capital world. It was also alleged that the minds of the technomagi tragically continued to decay, no matter what life-extending techniques were used on their bodies, so that as the endless centuries passed they grew increasingly insane, their grip on reality slipping into a miasma of superstition, blood-sacrifice and madness. It was something he had heard but something he also chose not to believe, for if he thought that way surely madness would overcome him.

Above the *machina opus*, the helmeted robot head of the titan's command deck hung between its heavily armoured shoulders, thirty metres above the ground. From here, every system on board the ancient machine was monitored, whilst a crew of over a hundred maintained and operated them. Mindless slave-machine servitors, gunnery crews, power plant supervisors, tech-adept engineers and press-ganged ratings ensured the continued practical operation of a thousand systems, from life-support and gyroscopic stabilizing to missile loading and communications throughout the colossus. In turn, the titan's crew answered to the four officers who manned the armoured head command cabin.

Pennants and banners, hectares of embroidered cloth, hung from *Tyrannus Maximus's* arm-weapons and hull, fluttering in the Martian wind. Each one bore the heraldry of a long-dead princeps or that of the noble households the titan had aided in campaigns across a dozen sectors. There were the emblems of those campaigns as well, some faded or scorched beyond all recognition.

Looking upon the majestic form of the titan made Ekhardt feel proud, exhilarated and humbled: proud that the Warlord was his to command; exhilarated at the prospect of riding the gargantuan man-machine into battle against the Emperor's enemies; humbled before one of the living god-engines of Mars, created even before the Age of the Imperium.

And yet there was something else there too, creeping into his brain like a malignant worm, something that he didn't want to admit to: fear. He was reminded for the first time in an age of what the enemies of *Tyrannus Maximus* must feel like facing the Warlord in the hot heart of battle. But was that all he was afraid of? Or was it that, now seemingly separated from the titan, he was afraid of what two hundred years of service had made him, that without the ancient war-machine he was nothing? Was that what truly sent the ice-water chill of fear crawling down his spine and into the pit of his stomach?

Hearing the hiss of shifting sand and the skittering of pebbles, the ageing princeps glanced down at the ruddy soil beneath his feet. Something was breaking through the surface of the plain. Piercing scalpel blades and dully-gleaming connector-plugs emerged from the rust desert, rising up on swaying cables and fibre-optic bundles. They seemed alive, tips moving as if they were sniffing the air, searching for something – or someone.

Ekhardt took a step back. The wire tendrils froze and then, heads resuming their serpentine sway, began to move towards him. Snaking tendrils of metal homed in on his position as if guided by some sensory power he did not understand. There were more now, their jack-plug heads bursting through the crust of hardened soil and speeding towards him in a whipping frenzy.

Then Ekhardt did something he could never imagined himself doing. He turned his back on the ancient titan and ran.

The ground rose steeply before him. He could hear the grating slither of the mechadentrites and flexes behind him. His lungs heaved, his heart pounded in his chest like a thumping piston. He looked up towards the crest of the hill and the cerise-stained firmament beyond. Dirty brown clouds scudded across the sky. A storm was building. The clouds began to swirl in a tightening circle. Electrical fire scattered across the darkening sky. And within the torrid vapour, shapes began to emerge and resolve into a terrible aspect.

The face of his old tutor swam into focus among the smoky haze, the dreadful, awe-inspiring grand princeps, whom he had served his cadetship under. Here he was, reformed as a sepia ghost. His darkly hooded eyes were crackling thunderheads.

Princeps Judas Urquart. The terrible visage had returned to haunt him, filling him once more with fear-borne respect. He began to feel like a cadet, fresh out of the Titanicus Collegiate and still wet behind the ears. No doubt Magus Ekhardt had appeared just as awesome a figure to the score of cadets who had served their field tutelage under him. But it certainly wasn't how the younger princeps, those straight out of the collegiate or with only a decade's service under their belts saw him now, of that he was sure.

When he was a younger man, in those first early years after being bonded to the ancient war machine, he, and other princeps like him, venerated men such as Judas Urquart, and rightly so. And standing rooted to the spot before the grand princeps now – the Liberator of Deddorax, the slayer of Moloch the Warp-Titan, the Hero of Hallowstone – Ekhardt was no more than a boy straight out of the Schola Progenium.

Urquart fixed Ekhardt with a look of open contempt, one eye a bulging blind orb, slashed by the scar that bisected the left-side of this face, and twisted his lip into a disdainful sneer. The grand princeps's stare burned into him, seering into his very soul.

'Why do you ran, princeps?' the long-dead titan commander demanded, his voice rolling across the Martian landscape like thunder. Urquart spat the last word as if he didn't believe the fleeing Ekhardt deserved the title.

Ekhardt opened his mouth to speak but his throat was dry.

'Well? Why do you flee from your future?' Urquart's spectre boomed.

'My future?'

The ghost raised one eyebrow sharply as if in surprise, although the rest of the stony grimace remained the same.

'Your past, your present and your future. It is your Machine God-given destiny. Why fight it?'

Urquart's face seemed to bend closer to the transfixed Ekhardt.

'What are you, Magnus Ekhardt?' it asked.

'I... I am a man,' he replied, eyes downcast.

'You?' Urquart roared and Ekhardt felt the ground tremble beneath his feet. 'You are a princeps of the Adeptus Titanicus! It is all you have ever been. It is all you will ever be. After two hundred years why doubt it? Once you are joined with a titan, there is no going back.'

'I am old. I fear I will not see an end to this battle for Armageddon,' Ekhardt confessed. 'After me the great tyrant will go on. There will be another princeps, a younger man. I am tired. My body is wasted and frail. My time is done.'

The ghost of the grand princeps's head moved back from Ekhardt.

'Weakness,' it muttered, 'and in one I would not have expected it.'

The scarred face seemed to swell until it filled the sky. Lightning flashed in its eye-sockets.

'Where are you now?' it asked.

'Blessed Mars,' Ekhardt replied.

'No, you are not,' the ghost contradicted. 'You forget. It is most likely the shock. Your mind is lost within the mind-impulse link of the titan. What you see before you, what you feel is but the ghost of a memory, preserved within the mind core of *Tyrannus Maximus* itself. You are not really on Mars. Neither are you old and frail.'

Ekhardt put a hand to the back of his head. Beneath the close-cut bristles of hair at the nape of his neck the skin was smooth. The cranial implant was gone.

'What about you?' Ekhardt railed, fighting confusion. 'How are you here? Are you a figment of my imagination?'

'I am a creation of your tortured psyche.'

Urquart's words rolled away over the ferrous hills until they faded to a distant echo.

'So I ask again,' it said, at last. 'Where are you, princeps?'

Ekhardt tried to find the answer, recall the memory, but his mind was a fog of confused images.

'I remember a second sun rising... an explosion. Then... pain, like a fire inside my skull.'

'Your body lies aboard your titan, on Armageddon. And until you return there, *Tyrannus Maximus* is stranded. There will be no other princeps unless you return and resume command. But you should not hear this from me. There is another who would speak with you.'

And then the titan spoke.

PRINCEPS, it said.

He could hear its voice inside his head, like the boom of impacting rockets, but without it having passed through the conventional auditory channels of his ears first.

I AM DYING.

The titan was speaking directly to his brain, just as he was lost within its mind-core. The ancient machine's words chilled him to the marrow. The thought that something as mighty as the near-immortal *Tyrannus Maximus* could die was truly terrifying.

TITAN AND PRINCEPS ARE AS ONE, thundered the machine voice, like slamming bulkheads. WITHOUT ME YOU ARE NOTHING. WITHOUT YOU I CANNOT LIVE. WITH ME YOU ARE AS A GOD.

A glimmer of reminiscence rippled across the surface of Ekhardt's mind, bringing with it, in its wake, the after-taste of endorphin-induced exhilaration. That was what it meant to be a titan princeps, man and machine joined as one, acting as one, feeling as one. SEE.

Ekhardt turned at the titan's bidding.

Advancing towards him, across the rugged, ruddy landscape, was a procession of incorporeal mist-grey figures, a parade of ghost-forms, receding into the distance beyond sight. Towering over all of them was the gargantuan mechanoid creature that had been named *Tyrannus Maximus* millennia ago in the holy sanctum of the Omnissiah.

Ekhardt recognised their faces, remembered their names, yet he had never met any of them in life.

'I know these men,' he gasped. 'I have always known these men but I don't understand how.'

THEY ARE THE PRINCEPS WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE YOU, the titan boomed. WHAT YOU SEE BEFORE YOU ARE THEIR SHADOW-TRACES, STILL HELD IN LIMBO WITHIN THE LINK.

The ghostly procession continued in its relentless march towards him, only now it seemed to Ekhardt that the figures of the titan's long-dead commanders were living, breathing flesh and blood again and it was the landscape around them that was half-real, faded and insubstantial as mist. Behind them flickering images filled the dome of the sky, like pict projections, unfocused recollections of the battles they had fought with *Tyrannus Maximus*.

The first in the line of princeps approached him, barely even giving him a glance before walking on past him. It was Ares Soth, Ekhardt's direct predecessor, renowned for the liberation of Boraphax, killed when feedback from the mind-impulse link fried his brain after the Warlord suffered terrible injuries fighting the foul minions of Chaos in the Arcanus Cluster. Electrical burns visible on the back of Soth's neck attested to the manner of his death. It had taken eighteen months of repairs before *Tyrannus Maximus* was ready for her new crew.

After him came Iago Laertes, commander-in-chief of the Sanquel Campaign, his right arm a heavy-duty bionic replacement. Laertes's most notable battle had come on the cardinal world of Orthoda Rex, defending the capital of Rex Primaris from its infamous idolater uprising. Under his command *Tyrannus Maximus* had held the breach in the Pontiff Wall for seventeen hours, until reinforcements from the Marines Errant Adeptus Astartes Chapter arrived to turn the tide of battle, and prevented the cultist followers of Kayloss the Detractor from breaking through into the heart of the cathedral-city.

Then there was Timon Cophis, hero of Eskalla, who had died of a stroke whilst in the command-throne of the ancient god-engine. Next came Parlon Agrippa, the *machina opus* badge on his peaked cap polished until it shone like a miniature star. Then Sezar

Askante, half his head a hairless, acid-scoured skull, following an attack by the devouring hordes of the tyrannid hive ship christened *Belua Balaena*.

The line snaked back, leading Ekhardt back through time. There was Vigo Prenn, wearing the heraldic tunic of the titan princes of Heschallon. He had marched *Tyrannus Maximus* across a continent on the death world of Ecorax, from Tiberius Mons to the isotope mines of Ultima Thule, to save the Mechanicus base's defenders from the predations of the eldar.

Following him was the Grand Princeps Xavier Neven, ignominiously killed during a raid on the titan transport ship *Glory of Mars* by ork pirates. Neven's tactics were proscribed reading for cadets at the Collegiate. Next in the procession, his face a mess of scar tissue and gleaming steel augmetics, was Arnulf Morgenstern who had fought as part of the Triumvirate Alliance on Thea with the militant Adepta Sororitas of the Order of the Valorous Heart and the 37th Cleondran Armour regiment. Further back still he saw Menenius of Brakka Harbour, the ancient naval world of the Segmentum Tempestus, the portly Philo Andronicus and the gaunt, stony-faced Richter von Starck. The line went on and on in the shadow of the mighty war machine.

Ekhardt had served with *Tyrannus Maximus* for two hundred and six years, one of the longest serving princeps the titan had ever had, yet that was nothing compared to the lifespan of the god-engine. There were still a hundred other princeps who had come before him and all of them had at least one thing in common, despite being separated by the light years of space and time it took civilisations to rise and fall: the great tyrant-titan, who had ruled all their lives from the moment they joined the mind-impulse link, *Tyrannus Maximus*.

NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND, the god in the machine asked him?

And he did. Without all those princeps who had gone before – without Magnus Ekhardt now – *Tyrannus Maximus* was an impotent shell. The other princeps had all played their part in keeping the titan alive and now it was nothing without him.

As a youth he had yearned to become one of the Omnissiah's walking war-temples, trampling cities beneath his feet and crashing tanks within his mechanical grasp. It had been a desire stronger than any other emotion he had ever felt.

So what was he afraid of now? What did it matter that he was alone? For he wasn't alone. He wasn't truly an individual any more. He was one half – the flesh and blood part – of *Tyrannus Maximus*. Without him the titan was as paralysed as the old man separated from the link, if not more so. He was as much *Tyrannus Maximus* as the Warlord Titan was. So why run from destiny? He looked up into the emotionless features of the mighty machine and this time recognised it as his own.

'Yes,' Ekhardt said, 'I understand.'

THEN IT IS TIME TO RETURN TO ARMAGEDDON, the titan's spirit encouraged.

The twisting cable tendrils were in front of him again, writhing like lashworms. Waiting. Magnus Ekhardt stretched out his arms and they came to him. Mechadendrites snaked towards him, wrapping themselves around his body, entwining themselves with his arms and legs. Then, when all the armoured tentacles were in position the link was made.

Scalpel-tips stabbed into flesh, jack-plugs pushed their blunt metal heads into veins, burrowing for nerve-endings. And blue-white light exploded inside Ekhardt's skull as a probing connector punctured the skin on the back of his neck and thrust itself into the base of his skull.

Contact...

CHILL DARKNESS. A black fog. Icy condensation forming on goose-fleshed skin. A torrent of blind, unidentifiable colours. White noise. Deaf ears opened again.

'His pulse is strengthening.'

'I thought we had lost him.'

'Not this tough old bastard.'

Vivid shadow-black resolved to amethyst, swelling purple clouds like milk in water.

'What is it? Have we got a short?'

'The connection's good.'

'Then why isn't he snapping out of it?'

Grey flashes bursting with yellow stars. Violet warmed to maroon.

'Test for brain stem death.'

'Brain activity is steady and increasing.'

'Sir? Can you hear me, sir?'

Sensation. Pressure on a vein. A dull itch in the centre of his brain. His scalp tingled with static. Sticky moisture clogged his eyelids. A dryness in his mouth. The smell of rancid oil and sweat. Maroon glowed to incandescent vermilion, to red-traced orange-pink.

EKhardt WAS LOOKING at the back of his eyelids. He blinked them open.

Standing over him were three anxious, cybernetic visages: his command crew. The second thing he noticed was how quiet it was inside the command cabin. The only obvious noise was a steady humming. Mote-shot golden light permeated the bridge of the titan, refracted through the visor-plates of the titan's helmet eyes.

'Sir?' Dvorad said through the grille of his rebreather.

Ekhardt muttered something unintelligible.

'How do you feel, princeps?' Orrek asked.

He tried again.

'What happened?'

'Electromagnetic pulse, sir,' Orrek explained, 'as a result of the atomic explosion. It overloaded the ancient's circuitry and shut down everything.'

'How long have I been out?' he managed.

'Almost two hours.' Varne stated.

'It was touch and go there for a while.' Dvorad confessed.

'We thought we had lost you, sir.' Varne admitted, his pupilless eyes blinking nervously.

'Lost me? You had lost your faith in the Machine God, I think.' Ekhardt coughed, weakly pushing himself up in his throne. 'You had no more lost me than on the day on Solus when we confronted the gigasaur. And what of the great tyrant?'

'Life support has been back on-line for half that time but that's all.' Dvorad said warily, in case his princeps's temper had returned as well as consciousness.

'No power?' Ekhardt coughed in disbelief.

'The tech-adepts are blessing the reactor before attempting to power it up again.' Dvorad explained.

'And no weapons?'

Moderati Orrek, dried blood covering the side of his face, moved closer to Ekhardt, his manner almost conspiratorial.

'The magna-weapons will need to be recalibrated, cogitator spirits purged,' he explained. 'And besides, without you, princeps, *Tyrannus Maximus* would not be going anywhere. With the link broken we could not access weapons even if they were functioning.'

Ekhardt pushed himself up in his command chair. His arms shook with the effort.

'Before I... blacked out, there was an explosion, an atomic detonation. Where was it centred?'

'All augury-systems are down, my lord.' Varne said, his tone almost apologetic.

'Emperor damn them!' he hissed, his hands clenching to white-knuckled fists.

'But,' the tactical officer continued, hastily, 'before the EM-pulse knocked out our systems the surveyors registered a spike of radioactivity that went off the scale.'

'Where from?' Ekhardt demanded, some of the old fire returning to his voice.

'Twenty-seven kilometres west, bearing two-six-three. The titan pens of Hellsbreach, sir.'

Silence fell on the command deck, apart from the continual purr of life-support, and hung there like a shroud.

They were dead in the water, a standing target, with no motive power, and no weapons to bring to bear against an enemy. The titan couldn't see, nor could it hear anything either, not that there were any comm-signals to pick up with Hellsbreach gone.

They were frozen, defenceless and probably alone in the toxic wasteland.

Blind and impotent.

As good as dead.

SIX

FEAR NOTHING

SERGEANT JELKUS BANE looked out of the rectangular viewing aperture in the rockcrete bunker at the baking dunes beyond. The building had once been sealed to protect the people inside from the toxic conditions outside. The only windows were narrow yet long horizontal rectangles set into metre-thick walls. Once they had been blocked by thick, clear plasteel, but now that too had gone and the bunker was no longer safely sealed from the deadly environment of the wastes. Gazing out of these glassless windows now, Bane contemplated his platoon's chances of getting out of this alive. Of course, for some of them it was already too late.

It had been referred to as a "special mission", but from where Bane was standing now, it looked more like a suicide run. Colonel Praxis had said the platoon had been recommended to him especially. At the time, Bane had considered that a source of great pride. Now he was wondering if somebody in the higher echelons of the Steel Legion had got it in for them.

They had been deposited, by Imperial drop ships, over a hundred kilometres east of Tartarus Hive. He didn't know where they were exactly, they were somewhere in the depths of the ash wastes. But they had instructions to locate, and if necessary rescue, a lone Imperial agent. Bane had also been given an encrypted codeword, and the coordinates of a pickup point.

That had been then.

The bunker had once had the means of being sealed off from the poisonous environment outside but these defences had been breached and its environmental safeguards compromised. Because of this Bane's men still had to wear their gas hoods and rebreathers.

The soldiers of the Armageddon Steel Legion were used to the gas masks, of course. They were as necessary as helmets, padded, chem-guarding knee-length trench coats, boots and heavy kevlar gloves. But that didn't make living in them any more bearable. They were sweaty and stank of a combination of hot rubber, chemical disinfectant and the soldiers' own sour breath. Whenever they could go without the hoods safely for any length of time, everyone did so and relished the often all too brief respite.

Bane turned his eyes away from the tedious wastes and looked again at the rag-tag survivors of his platoon holed up within the abandoned bunker.

This was now.

Some stood, watching the unchanging view through the narrow glassless windows of the bunker. Others crouched or squatted, backs against the bare rockcrete walls. Still others sat on the floor and two had been lying down. Their helmets and hoods lent them a faceless anonymity but, like a good sergeant, he knew all of them nonetheless. He even recognised the newest substituted trooper, if only by default.

Of the original fifteen men who set out from Tartarus, twelve remained – for the time being.

Bane adjusted his own helmet-hood and let out a puffing breath. He dearly wished he could remove his gas mask and heavy tan coat altogether, at least temporarily. It was stuffily hot in the bunker and his heavy legionnaire uniform didn't help make him feel any more comfortable. It might provide a man with some protection against the chemical agents in the toxic environment around them, but in it you roasted like a hive fowl.

Sergeant Bane turned his gaze back to the monotonous wastes beyond the bunker. He judged it to be around noon. Their chronometers had stopped working almost as soon as they had been abandoned by the drop ships: some kind of electromagnetic interference, Trooper Verhoef had said.

The rolling hills of grey ash shimmered in the rising heat-haze; the sky beyond their wind-curled crests a rippling cerulean blue. The desolate, polluted wilderness stretched as far as the eye could see. The industrial deserts of Armageddon were a myriad of hues, some of the most colourful, and deadly, environments on the planet. Wind-raised grey-black dunes swept over seas of red-ochre, rust-stained sands. And water ran in the desert too: brackish water, the chemical constituents of which would melt a gun-barrel. Copper-oxide runnels traced blue-green webs in the sand.

The still-smoking shell of their Chimera lay only twenty metres away. It had been spray-painted in the grey and white camouflage patterns used for ash wastes incursions but now it was a uniform scorched black. Not far from it stood what remained of Sentinel One: just two bird-jointed hydraulic legs, the cabin having been destroyed by another direct hit from an ork smoker. Pieces of wreckage covered the sand in a wide circle around the legs frozen in mid-stride: somewhere amongst it all were the remains of Trooper Koss.

They had been lucky to get the other two scout-walkers into cover as the ork planes made a second pass.

Attached to the bunker was a derelict vehicle hangar. From time to time the monotonous landscape of the ash wastes was broken by outcrops of rock that broke from the chemical desert sands like the backs of surfacing sea monsters rising from dark ocean depths. The whole bunker complex had been built into one of these outcrops, the thick metamorphic rock creating a protective barrier against enemy fire.

The survivors from the first attack had felt several more detonations overhead as they took shelter. The ground had shuddered. Rockcrete chips and dust were shaken from the ceiling in blinding cascades but the bunker had held. They had listened as the roaring diesel sound of the fighta-bommerz' engines receded into the distance. The guardsmen shielded from their guns, their bomb and missile payloads spent, the orks had doubtless returned to base to report the Imperial troops' position. Their commanders would then send in ground troops to clear them out. At least that was what Bane would do.

So now it was merely a matter of waiting while the injured were seen to. Bane did not want to leave any more of his men to die in this hellish desert than he had to.

It wasn't only compassion that motivated his actions but also an officer's strong sense of pragmatism. Jelkus Bane didn't plan on dying out here and having his name added to the interminable list of heroes who had already died for their world in their millions. Like the man they had been sent to save.

To begin with the platoon's mission had been a success. Incredibly, out in the barren wilderness, with long-range comms and reconnaissance down, and relying on hand-held short-range auspexes and vox, they had found Agent Braxus, but not before they found the wreckage of a bike, blown to smithereens by an ork mine.

A lone man, dying from the terrible wounds he had sustained at ork hands, but still, against all the odds, dragging himself through the caustic sands, high on pain-suppressors and muscle stimulants. He was wearing a black bodyglove, incorporating padded flak armour, which was torn and punctured in a dozen places, the flesh revealed beneath a red ruin.

Bane had jumped down from the Chimera before it even ground to a halt, his squad forming a defensive perimeter around them, ever watchful for greenskins.

The man was horrifically injured. It had taken him a few moments to comprehend through his thick narcotic haze that he was in safe hands. When comprehension came, after he and Bane managed to exchange code words, Braxus's body had sagged with relief, tears of joy running down bloodied, chem-scarred cheeks.

Trooper-Medic Liser had made a cursory examination and quickly diagnosed a broken arm, a fractured pelvis, a shattered kneecap, a broken tibia, several cracked ribs and a collapsed lung. Then there was the blood loss the man had suffered from numerous external injuries, and no doubt just as many internal ones.

Bane would have expected a man in his condition to have been dead already. But Braxus, knowing that he was dying, had managed to defy death just a little longer, to pass on the precious information he had recovered and for which he had paid the ultimate price.

'You must... inform... Tartarus High... Command,' he had wheezed as Bane held his head up. The sergeant said nothing but listened intently.

'I-I found it... out there... in the wastes... as suspected,' the man's words were coming in strangled gasps, his breath rasping through bloodstained teeth. 'A factory... a hidden ork base... a gargant factory.'

Bane realised that his mouth was hung open inside his gas hood in stunned amazement. Gargants were the orks' blasphemous parodies of the noble titans of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The ork roks had brought scores of the monstrous war machines down with them to the planet's surface. Yet more had been teleported in from the hulks waiting in orbit. Many had been lost in the opening engagements of the ork invasion but not before they had wrought untold damage against the infantry, armour and cities of Armageddon. And now the orks had a gargant factory in the ash wastes of Armageddon Secundus – as well as another airfield, which Bane suspected the Imperial forces had yet to discover.

It did not take an Imperial tactician to work out that the nearest Imperial target was the still-contested Tartarus Hive. If the orks already assaulting that beleaguered city gained the support of reinforcements in the form of gargants then the city was doomed. Such a force would eventually overcome the guns of Clain's Stronghold, which would then leave Tartarus wide open to an assault

by anything and everything the orks wanted to throw at it. That the orks were making a big push to bring down Tartarus was apparent, but the Imperial forces could not afford to see another of the precious hive-cities fall to the alien invaders. The location of a gargant factory would be invaluable to Armageddon's Imperial masters. If they knew of such a base then they could eliminate it. It could make all the difference in the war for Tartarus Hive, which could, in the final reckoning, turn the tide in the global war for Armageddon in the Imperium's favour.

'Where? Where is it? Where's the factory?' Bane badgered Braxus, his awestruck speechlessness gone in an instant.

Bubbles of blood formed on the man's lips. Bane leaned closer.

'I'm sorry, I didn't catch that.'

With his last breath, his voice barely a whisper, the agent gave Bane the co-ordinates of the gargant factory.

Then the spy, for truly that was what he was, had died in Bane's arms, the stimms no longer able to keep his heart beating. And his recon mission would have been a total failure were it not for the fact that he had passed on his precious information.

So the fact that Sergeant Bane and his platoon were now the ones bearing such important information made it all the more frustrating that they were trapped in the bunker, waiting for the inevitable ork ground attack.

Bane cursed.

'What is it, sarge?' Trooper Kolp Gynt asked, walking over to him. The stink of promethium hung heavy about Gynt. Bane could hear the fuel sloshing around in the tanks on the trooper's back as he moved, the scorch-muzzled weapon still held in the flame-trooper's gloved hands as if its familiar weight reassured him. The needle of flame of the igniter burned harshly blue in the dusty half-light.

'Oh, nothing new.' Bane sighed. 'Just this Emperor-damned war.'

There had been nothing more they could do for Braxus. They had stowed his body on board the Chimera and, believing the operation was over – all too soon, as it turned out – set a course for the pick-up point.

They had not gone far on the return journey when the ork planes had found them. Bane guessed that the greenskin pilots had probably been part of a contingent looking for the agent but they had got lucky. Before the Steel Legionaries could lock on with their own weapons, the first strafing run had taken out Sentinel One and exploded a crater in the ground, two metres deep, directly ahead of the troop carrier, shrapnel taking out the left hand track. Their transport had slewed into the hole.

On Bane's command its crew had immediately bailed out, and not a moment too soon. The orks' second strafing ran had dropped a bomb directly on top of the chimera. In the process they had lost their mortar as well. All of the guardsmen had made it out apart from Liser, the squad's medic, and Tamb Keyes, who had been driving when they crashed. There had been a number of minor shrapnel wounds but nothing worse than a gashed arm. That in itself had only been thanks to the trademark helmets the troopers wore as part of the Armageddon Steel Legion's uniform.

The bunker had been an Emperor-sent blessing. The billows of ash thrown up by the rattling shots of the fighta-bommerz' nose-cone mounted guns cleared in the turbulence of the low passing aircraft and there it was in front of them, the mouth to the hangar under the lip of rock and the strong wall of the bunker built into the outcrop itself.

But before Bane could get all the surviving members of his platoon under cover, the last of the ork planes – there had been three altogether – came in behind them, guns blazing, solid shot rounds pursuing them in their twenty metre sprint to safety.

Incredibly, it seemed now as he remembered the insane dash for the bunker – plumes of grey sand flying up around him as the fighta-bommer closed on their position, the rattling of gunfire and the daemon-roar of the plane's engines deafening white noise – only two troopers had actually been hit.

Mabe Reiner half of Bane's mortar team, had taken a shot in the back that had punched out the other side, taking half his intestines with it. Justan Neff had caught a glancing shot to his left arm as he ran. The impact had spun him round and sent him rolling over, screaming, into the sand. Their fellow legionaries had immediately gone back for them and hauled them to safety.

They had been under heavy fire one minute, the next they were listening to the planes disappearing into the distance.

Trooper Rumi had recovered User's scorched medi-pack, which had amazingly been blown clear of the Chimera when the ork bomb hit, and saw to Reiner and Neff. The little first aid field training he had received promoted him to squad medic, under the circumstances.

The lucky shot from the ork cannon had shattered half the bones in his arm. Rumi had closed him up with tranqs and painkillers, dressed the flesh wounds and put the rained limb in a sling to keep it out of the way. The only way Neff would get any use out of his left arm now would be if it were replaced with a bionic replica. He was still conscious – just. Rumi had him lying down to help his body recover from the massive shock it had received.

With Reiner it was much more serious. He hadn't regained consciousness since being hit and was losing a lot of blood. He needed the help of a surgeon, not a stand-in field medic. He didn't need pain-suppressors: his nervous system was being flooded by naturally produced morphine, such was the physical trauma he had suffered.

'How long, sarge?'

The question came from a figure squatting in the middle of the bare floor, polishing the barrel of his sniper's long-las with a piece of oilcloth. Practically all of the legionaries' bodies were covered, so that only a few patches of skin came into contact with the frequently caustic atmosphere of the wastes. Beneath his heavy uniform, the man's body was short and wiry. The smallest among the squad, Scout-Trooper Vin Steinbeck was the nimblest and their sharpest shot.

'Till what, Vin?' Bane asked.

'Till they come back.'

'Till we're dead, more like.' Kayvan muttered morbidly, just loud enough for Bane to hear.

Sergeant Bane cast Manro Kayvan a fierce glare. The sallow trooper had joined Bane's squad on this mission as a last minute replacement for Socar who had come down with a nasty case of pathogen poisoning.

It happened quite frequently amongst the Steel Legion troopers. No matter what precautions they took, the regular tours of duty in the polluted wastelands of Armageddon Secundus continually exposed them to the chemical, bacterial and radioactive fallout of years of battle and millennia of industrial pollution. Sometimes it just proved to be too much and the human body succumbed. All but the worst cases were treatable but it could leave men bed-ridden for weeks or even paralysed for the rest of their lives. Of course sometimes there were complications.

And there were rumours that other, even more terrible, things had left their mark on the ash wastes, when, five centuries before, the legends had it, daemons had walked upon the face of Armageddon and carried out unspeakable atrocities against the planet's human defenders.

'We're not going to die out here, trooper.' Bane stated emphatically.

'Who are you trying to kid?' Kayvan persisted. 'We're dead, all of us. He's lucky,' the sour-tempered trooper said, jerking a thumb at the unconscious Reiner. 'At least it'll be over quickly for him.'

Bane hadn't met Kayvan before, but from gut instinct Bane didn't like him. He thought him rude and coarse, with an unhealthy disregard for rank. Since then he had got to know Kayvan properly and had grown to like him even less.

'We are not going to die here.' Bane repeated, 'and I'll not have talk saying we will.'

'Oh yeah? Try telling that to Reiner, Neff and the others.' Kayvan pressed. He was like a dog worrying at a bone; he wouldn't let it drop.

'Trooper Kayvan, that's enough.' Bane snapped, 'or I'll have you on a charge of insubordination.'

'Right, sir,' said Kayvan. From the tone of his voice Bane could well believe he was smiling sickly behind his gas mask. 'I think the phrase is, "You and whose army?" sir.'

Then suddenly Bane had wrested Kayvan's lasgun from his grip and its stock was rammed into his stomach. The trooper was doubled up and retching, like poor Socar back in the field hospital.

'We're all feeling the pressure right now, Kayvan, me included. I know you're new to this squad so I'll give you a break, just this once. You mess with me and I'll mess with you, permanently.'

Bane pulled the lasgun away and Kayvan collapsed onto his knees, holding both hands to his midriff. The atmosphere in the bunker was thicker than the chem-smog of the desert. Bane and Kayvan's exchange had enjoyed a silent, staring audience.

'You show me such insubordination again and you'll wish the orks had got their filthy alien hands on you.'

Bane tossed Kayvan his lasgun, which clattered to the floor next to him. Leaving the insubordinate trooper coughing and gasping to catch his breath, the sergeant moved over to where Phandra Rumi was tending to the ashen Reiner.

'How is he?' Bane asked, gesturing with a nod of his head towards the wounded trooper lying on the floor. The others had done their best to make him comfortable, lending Rumi their kit bags as makeshift pillows and bolster supports.

'Not good.'

'How *bad* is he then?'

'He's lost a lot of blood already and in this environment, even if I could stitch him up, the wound's already been exposed to the pathogens in the air and tissue breakdown has begun. There's nothing more I can do for him. Perhaps if Liser were here—'

'There'd be nothing more he could do either.' Bane said stoically, 'and besides, he's not, so we can't think like that. It isn't helpful.'

'So what now?'

Without answering, Bane approached a legionary crouching over the squad's battered comm-set.

'You having any joy with that vox?' Bane asked the trooper fiddling with dials and switches whilst listening intently to sounds through the attached headphones that none of the others could hear.

'Still nothing but static, sir.' Trooper Dax Strevicz replied.

'Keep trying,' Bane ordered, 'at regular intervals. If you get a signal I want to know about it.'

It had been the same for the last hour, since they had taken shelter in the bunker, although it had actually started several hours before that, when the northern horizon had been lit as if by a second sun that had leached the light from the rest of the world for a vision-searing second.

Their helmet mics were still working, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to hear each other so clearly through their gas hoods, but they had no long-range communications. Strevicz had been unable to raise Tartarus High Command or any allied troops in the area, if indeed there were any.

That had obviously been Agent Braxus's problem too. That was why it was vital that Bane's squad got out of this alive. They had to survive, so they could inform the Imperial commanders of the existence of the gargant factory and its precise location.

This thought filled Bane with renewed determination.

'All right, men, this is what we're going to do,' he declared, full of fresh purpose. 'We're going to take the fight to the enemy. We have to get back to the pick-up point and Tartarus at all costs. Verhoef and Karnes, fire up the Sentinels. Neff, are you fit to move?'

'Yes, sir,' the gaunt-looking trooper said weakly, sounding anything but.

Bane turned to address Rumi. 'How's Reiner?'

Tight-lipped Rumi said nothing but shook his head. As one, the assembled legionaries closed their eyes, bowed their heads and soundlessly made the sign of the aquila.

'Right, the rest of you pack up and prepare to move out. Ercal, I want you and Broek—'

Sergeant Bane suddenly stopped mid sentence.

'Sarge?' Trooper Ercal said. 'What is it?'

'Listen,' hissed Bane.

The whining sound was growing louder. Bane returned to the viewing port. The missile was making lazy spirals as it spun across the sky. It hit the bunker wall with a thud and a second later detonated with a sound-suppressing *crump*. The shockwave threw Bane away from the rockcrete aperture.

As he had predicted, the orks were moving in to clear up after the fighta-bommerz.

'Right, this is it, lads.' Bane called over the whistling screams of ork rockets, getting to his feet. 'Change of plan. We're going to have to make our stand here. We're not going to let these alien bastards gain another centimetre of Armageddon soil while the Steel Legion defends this bunker. Are those Sentinels in position?'

'Yes, sergeant.' Verhoef responded.

'Then lock and load, men,' the sergeant commanded, taking his place on the fire step with the other legionaries. 'Fire at will!'

The first of their ork attackers appeared over the crest of a crumbling dune.

'Shit!' Bane hissed. He didn't know quite what he had been expecting – a mob of wild gun-toting ork boyz possibly – but it hadn't been this.

Clumping over the ash hills was something twice the size of the biggest ork Bane had ever seen, and ten times as deadly. It looked like a crudely constructed, heavily armoured pod, barrel-like in its proportions. Mobility was provided by two pistoning legs with splayed metal toes. Emblazoned on its front was a red-painted, horned ork-head glyph. The rusty metal body sprouted a variety of hydraulic weapon-arm attachments: a crushing pair of industrial-sized metal cutters and a whirling buzz-saw blade. It also had two autocannon style weapons mounted on its hull with which it was raking the legionaries' position. Bolted to its back was the frame of a rocket launcher.

There were elements of systems used by several Imperial war machines about the ork dreadnought's construction. Perhaps they were what had inspired its insane inventors. Its body was not unlike those of the venerable dreadnoughts that went into battle alongside the noble Adeptus Astartes Chapters. Its feet and robotic-limb weapons reminded Bane of scaled down titan armaments. But the whole that this peculiar amalgam produced was definitely orkish.

Thirty metres away to the left another ork dreadnought was sweeping the sand in front of it with gouts of oily flame from the nozzle of a flame-thrower. The two ironclads were followed by a wave of similar, and only slightly smaller, walking machines, all spewing high-calibre death at the legionaries' position. Bane recognised these as the less sophisticated ork armoured assault vehicles designated as *killa kans*.

Chunks of rockcrete flew from the external walls of the bunker and blackened craters appeared in the ground in front of it under the ork barrage. In response, lasfire burst against the metal bodies in firework sprays of sparks but the legionaries seemed unable to halt the orks' advance. The only weapons that appeared to be having any real effect on the stomping *kans* were Sentinel Two and Three's heavier armour-penetrating lascannon and devastating multi-laser. But even that would not be enough to stop the orks' inexorable advance, Bane feared.

In the end the orks would breach the legionaries' defences and then the aliens' batteries of weapons would wipe out Bane's platoon, turning every last man into a greasy smear on the bunkers' floor and walls.

A las-blast sent a mechanical cutting arm flying from the side of a *killa kan* and a lascannon blast from Sentinel Two sent the first dreadnought reeling, but neither were killing shots.

As Bane watched the ork dreadnought fired the last of its missiles. The rocket streaked past the firing guardsmen and into the mouth of the hangar. The concussive boom rocked the defensive structure. More dust showered from the ceiling and the bunker filled with clouds of roiling smoke. As the smoke began to clear Bane saw with relief that both Sentinels still stood. Positioned at the entrance to the hangar the scout-walkers hurled searing bolts of laser fire at the advancing ork machines.

To Bane, however, the future still didn't look too promising. There wasn't much of it to look forward to, for a start, and what little was left was a world of pain.

If we are to ever get out of this now, he thought, watching the *killa kans* and dreadnoughts pistoning towards them, we're going to need a miracle.

And then a miracle came.

With a deeply satisfying boom one of the *killa kans* exploded in a blaze of light, peppering the ash-sand with pieces of fragmented machinery. Rattling bolter fire tore through several other *kans*, smashing pieces from the ork machines or causing them to grind to a halt, their pilots dead inside them.

Bane realised he had been half aware of the grinding, clanking, clumping steps, merged with the clamour of the ork assault on the bunker, before he saw the form of their salvation. Grimy sweat rolled from his forehead into his eyes. Blinking at its saltwater sting he tried to clear his vision and bring the hulking black shape into focused clarity.

It was three times the height of a man, larger and heavier than the biggest of the ork machines, armoured with adamantium plates and carrying an arsenal that rivalled Bane's entire platoon's firepower combined – and that was including the two Sentinels. One huge arm of the armoured body was a massive assault cannon. The other was a huge, robotic power fist. The legionaries' liberator strode into battle on solid, servo-powered legs, each as thick as a siege-tank cannon.

Through the smoke of burning ork *kans*, Bane saw the ragged tatters of a banner still clinging to the pole that rose above the spiked halo cresting the machine body. On it he could see the fiery, semi-circular outline of a planet set against the void of space and above it, in gothic runes on a scrolled background, a name: "Solemnus".

On top of the black armour, picked out in places in white, Bane could make out what looked like entire passages of script. The most prominent device, however, was a large white cross on the left side of the armoured hull. The sergeant recognised the insignia of one of the allied forces that had come to Armageddon's aid in the aftermath of Ghazghkull's planetary invasion. It was the cross of the Black Templars Chapter of the mighty Adeptus Astartes.

Bane could hear a booming, augmented voice blaring from the dreadnought itself. 'Death to the invaders, in the name of the primarch!' it declared. 'Death to all alien abominations, for it is the Emperor's will!'

Where could it have come from? Were other Space Marines accompanying it?

For the first time since they had taken shelter in the derelict bunker, hope swelled in Bane's chest.

The ancient dreadnought's attack had taken the orks completely by surprise. Now they turned their attentions from the bunker and the holed up guardsmen to face the new and far more terrible threat. Shells rattled off its adamantium hide like steel hailstones. The dreadnought turned on the axis of its swivel-jointed waist and raked the second ork dreadnought with penetrating fire from the spinning barrels of its assault cannon. The ork machine's snapping power claw and chugging cannon-limb were torn from their mountings. Then the whole thing went up in an explosion of greasy promethium. The Space Marine dreadnought had hit the flamer fuel reservoir. The wreckage of the ork dreadnought crashed back down to earth over ten metres away.

In a matter of a few minutes the Space Marine dreadnought had neutralised the enemy attack. Only the first of the monstrous ork machines to assault the bunker remained. Still bellowing death to all of ork-kind, power fist whirring and twitching, the black leviathan advanced on the ork dreadnought, preparing to finish the battle in hand-to-hand combat, tearing the ork creation limb from robotic limb.

Jelkus Bane realised he was laughing with relief. The men around him were cheering and whooping, some casting up prayers of thanksgiving to the Emperor for their deliverance.

Against all the odds, they had been saved.

SEVEN

GROUND ZERO

AN HOUR AFTER picking up the first ill-boding sensor readings and Speeder *Excalibur's* sweep of the Hellsbreach base, Fighting Company Adlar reached ground zero. An air of solemnity hung over the Space Marine squads as they observed several minutes' silence, casting up prayers to the Emperor and Primarch Dorn in remembrance for all those who had lost their lives in the explosion that had wiped out the titan pens. The only sound was the clicking of auspexes and the bleeping alarms of the warriors' armoured suits, alerting the Templars to the dangerously high levels of radiation present in the area.

Thanks to implanted organs such as melanchrome and mucranoid, as well as the enhanced natural healing abilities granted them by the surgery that had transformed them into Space Marines, the Black Templars were able to survive in environments that would kill an ordinary human. They could breathe underwater, if need be, and could even survive in the vacuum of space for a short time, but in time the effects of radiation could still adversely affect a Space Marine. However much it might appear otherwise, the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were not indestructible. But they would be long gone from this Emperor-forsaken place before the radiation caused any lasting ill effects. They had a mission to fulfil and now they had yet another atrocity to avenge.

Hellsbreach had been turned into a heat-fused crater, towering adamantium-armoured war engines, rockcrete buildings and perimeter defences all melted, practically beyond recognition, at the heart of an atomic firestorm. The broken buttress spans of gothic structures arched over them. A coating of wind-blown grey ash already covered the explosion-fractured and reformed ground: in places it glowed. As the Marines stood in solemn silence, taking in the horror of the destruction, the only sound to disturb their prayers was the dull keening of the desert-born wind.

...All was silence apart from the dull keening of the wind, which was tugging the clinging chemical mist from the structures around him...

Ansgar separated himself from the rest of the company and began to walk towards the broken curtain wall of the ruined titan pens. The shattered remains of a titan gantry had been toppled in the blast and smashed against a section of the defensive perimeter. There, much of it had melted under the intense conflagration and fused with the surface of the wall which, in turn, had been burnt to ceramic smoothness.

...Amorphous shapes that once had form had lost all identity at the vaporising heart of an apocalyptic explosion...

How many had died in this one strike, he wondered? Hundreds? More like thousands. A Titan Legion, like that of Legio Magna, could number a dozen mighty war machines. Each of them could carry a crew of up to a hundred. Then there were the servants of the machine whose lives had been devoted to repairing and maintaining the walking war gods when they returned to what had once been considered the safety of the Titanicus base.

Ansgar looked to Adlar Company's own techmarine, the red power-armoured Isendur, to see him make the sign of machine across his chest. The destruction of Hellsbreach would hit Isendur particularly hard, especially on top of the pain he already bore for the loss of Solemnus. He had spent a number of years on Mars, the capital planet of the Adeptus Mechanicus. There he had been inducted into the machine mysteries of the tech-priests. He venerated the machine as a living, cybernetic deity. Some among the crusade fleet whispered that the beliefs of the techmarines bordered on the heretical but Ansgar found such a thing unthinkable in warriors dedicated to the most devout of all the Chapters.

A Black Templar would no more permit a heretic to remain within their ranks than they would a witch. This made the Black Templars unusual among the Adeptus Astartes, for their Chapter was without a librarian. They would not permit dangerous psykers within their ranks, so there were no warrior-mystics among their number. Had the Emperor not said that it was among the duties of the Adeptus Astartes to hunt out the mutant, the witch and the psyker? The fact that other Chapters tolerated the use of what was no better than warpcraft among their companies was a matter the Black Templars preferred to ignore. On more than one occasion their differing views had almost brought members of their Chapter into conflict with their brother Astartes.

Lacking librarians among their roving crusading armies, the duty of maintaining the record of the Chapter's battles, victories, crusades and pilgrimages fell on the archivist-scribes that accompanied the Black Templar fleets.

Ansgar turned away and continued to make his way across the ruins. He looked around and high above him as he paced his way across the crater taking in the devastation wrought by the detestable greenskins.

How had the orks engineered such a catastrophe for the Imperial forces? With the titans stationed at Hellsbreach destroyed, and Hive Tartarus's defences already stretched, defences would be severely weakened. Tartarus High Command was expecting the combined force of Castellan Adlar's Black Templars and the titans of Legio Magna to make their way to join in the defence of the walls of Tartarus. Their own reinforcements routed, the orks besieging the beleaguered hive-city would be crushed in a vice formed by the two Imperial forces. On one side they would have the resolute, if weary, guardsmen and hive militia defenders. On the other the vengeful massed ranks of the Black Templars and their land-battleship allies, would smite down the Emperor's foes like a hammer.

The crater created by the triggered atomic device was a gently curving glass-smooth, concave bowl two kilometres wide. The irregularly pierced barrier of the curtain wall reared up before him. It seemed that he had lost all track of time and distance, lost in his reveries.

He passed through a gaping breach, wide enough to drive half a dozen Predator tanks through, and paused in the shattered space. Beyond him rubble and spoil tumbled down to the desert floor, rocks scorched and blackened by the cataclysmic blast.

...A structure rose up before him, half-buried, as if half-consumed, by the hungry desert...

It was all so chillingly familiar. Reminiscences of the quest-vision that had come to him in the bitter watches of the night on the eve of battle flooded his mind, overlaying what he was seeing before him. Like solid reality rather than insubstantial echoes of the future.

Ansgar stopped dead in his tracks. He looked up at the partially buried idol-edifice that erupted out of the sand like a creature released from Armageddon's underworld by the tumult of war on the world above: it was a fallen dog-headed colossus.

Ansgar's visor display flickered with amber and green runes and overlaid vectors as his suit's sensors analysed the Warhound's carcass. But he could only see the iron monster from his Emperor-sent vision, that had set him on the path to becoming one of the Emperor's chosen warriors, and the sole champion among the forces of the Solemnus Crusade.

A gust of cold, desert wind swept between the chemical rusted girders and joints of the titan's buckled legs, keening like a wailing widow, whipping up sand and ash into a spinning dust devil.

The armour glass windshields of the canine titan's eyes were splintered and broken. Beyond, inside the dog-headed cockpit, Ansgar could see the vitrified skeletons of the Warhound's crew, still strapped into their age-cracked leather seats on the command deck, the surface of their charred and fused bones bubbled and blistered.

There was a flicker of movement and a metre-long iguanid lizard scampered from the shade afforded by a buckled armoured panel and darted into the open tunnel-barrel of the titan's plasma gun. Its two heads bobbing, its scales shimmered like lapis lazuli as the harsh, chemical sunlight caught it.

The sight of the scuttling reptile caused Ansgar to pause for a moment: even in this toxic desert life found a way, although the mutation-sick parodies it threw up were not truly worthy of the classification. Ansgar raised his bolt pistol, flicked off the rune-stamped safety catch and blasted a few explosive rounds into the cave-mouth of the titanic god-weapon. There was a shrill squeal, a spurt of blue ichor and another foul abomination was wiped from the face of Armageddon.

Ansgar looked again at the wolf-titan's snub-nosed plasma gun, although it was more rightly a cannon, having more in common with Earthshaker and Hydra static weapons platforms than a Space Marine's bolter. The way the crippled war machine was lying made it look as if the Warhound was pointing out across the desert with its weapon-arm.

It pointed north-east.

'EMPEROR KEEP THEM.' Castellan Adlar intoned, concluding the Templars' prayer for those lost with the destruction of Hellsbreach. 'Emperor keep them,' the gathered company responded.

'My lord, what are your orders?' Brother Kalan of Adlar's own command squad asked.

'We continue as Marshal Brant commanded, as Tartarus High Command would wish us to. We make for that besieged hive-city and bring down such a storm of the Emperor's wrath upon the heads of our enemies that they will truly know what vengeance is. Brother Murtagh will lead our noble company, bearing the banner of our company before us.'

'Aye, sir.' Murtagh said, saluting, the frayed and patched gold-embroidered cloth flapping from the banner pole affixed to his armour.

There was the sound of heavy armoured boots crunching on the mica sand dusting the floor of the vitrified crater. Adlar turned and looked up at the approaching Marine.

The Templar approaching him stood out from his brothers immediately. His armour was an intricately detailed creation. The eagle wings on the chest plate were pinioned around a *memento mori* skull bearing the cross of the Chapter. This motif was repeated over and over, on kneepads, elbows, on the armour's utility belt and even on the knuckle joints of the ceramite gauntlets.

Strips of faded parchment and vellum fluttered from heavy wax purity seals attached to the greaves, chest plate and auto-reactive shoulder plates of the suit. Here and there Adlar could see chips and dents in the surface of the black-painted armour, but there were no such blemishes on the gleaming helmet, which was surmounted with a wreath of laurel leaves cast from metal and burnished until they shone like jet.

Hung at his side was the heavy, yet perfectly balanced, jewel-encrusted black metal blade, a field generator built into its hilt. The inscription and scrollwork carved into the sword blade glittered silver in the harsh midday sun: *Imperator Rex*. Gripped in the metal fingers of one hand was a bolt pistol as intricately decorated as the artificer Armour of Faith. Striding towards them, the keening wind catching the skirt of cloth, bearing the heraldic crest of the chapter keep of Solemnus, the figure looked every part the mystical, vision-called Emperor's Champion.

'Brother Ansgar.' Adlar said, 'you missed our prayers.'

'Sir, before we set off for Tartarus Hive, there is something I must tell you.'

The battle-brothers looked at each other. Why was there reason to delay their leaving? Hellsbreach was gone, there was nothing more they could do here, and they had their orders.

'Go ahead, brother.' Adlar said.

'I am troubled, my lord.' Ansgar began, moving away from the assembled Marines, Adlar following. Chaplain Wolfram stepped in behind the Castellan and kept pace.

'Why? What is it that troubles you?'

'A conflict. A conflict of decisions. A conflict over how we should now best continue our mission.'

'There is no conflict, brother.' Adlar pronounced. 'Perhaps you did not hear what I said, your mind no doubt on higher things. We are going to reinforce the Imperial defenders of Tartarus Hive.'

Ansgar paused before saying: 'We must head north-east.'

'But Tartarus lies to the west.'

'And north-east is the way we must go.' Ansgar reiterated.

'By the Golden Throne, what are you talking about, brother?' exclaimed Adlar. He was not used to having his orders called into question.

'As we prepared for planetfall, a scant matter of fifteen hours ago, I was granted a vision.' Ansgar began to explain.

'This I know already,' the Castellan halted him.

But Ansgar was not to be stopped.

'And I saw a colossus rising from the desert on legs of adamantium, a dog-headed god-titan. And it showed me the way across the desert, to battle with our nemesis!'

'Have you taken leave of your senses?' Adlar demanded. He was suddenly aware that the rest of the Fighting Company were watching their exchange uneasily.

'No, my lord.' Ansgar said, calming his tone, realising how close to insubordination he had come.

'I would remind you, Brother Ansgar, that our mission is to now join with those loyal Imperial servants fighting off the ork warbands that assault the walls of the city.'

'Yes, sir. But is it not right, my lord Castellan Adlar, that the servants of the Imperium may not directly demand the aid of the Adeptus Astartes? None would presume to expect our help merely because they had requested it. If we deign to come to their aid, to assist them in their plight, then they are truly blessed.'

'I do not need to be reminded that we are here at the request of Tartarus High Command.' Adlar snarled. 'I am fully aware that we are not bound by what the Imperial commanders-in-chief there ask of us, but we are bound by duty. It is a matter of honour. However, we are also bound to do as Marshal Brant commands us, as master of our Chapter fleet. I am not one to disobey orders.'

'Are we not also here on Armageddon for another purpose as well, sir?' Ansgar reminded the company's commanding officer.

'And that purpose, amongst other things, is to win back the honour we lost when Grimskar's horde attacked Solemnus! If we disobey orders we fail in our duty and we lose honour. We have promised to aid Tartarus. Without the titans of Hellsbreach the threatened hive-city will have even greater need of our assistance.'

'I cannot believe you have even suggested such a thing to me! I do not disobey orders. And yet that is what you are asking me to do.' Castellan Adlar turned and made to rejoin the rest of his company. 'We make for Tartarus at once. I have given you my decision and let that be an end to it.'

'Adlar.' Chaplain Wolfram said, speaking up for the first time since the debate had begun, and showing no deference to rank. 'Did we not also swear to exact vengeance upon the heads of the alien horde that rained such destruction upon Solemnus? And we did so in the Emperor's name, vowing to do so without pity, without remorse and without fear. For what fear we, the Emperor's elite, his last line of defence against the forces ranged against mankind on all sides, if we fight to pursue his cause?'

The chaplain's words stopped the Castellan in his tracks. He turned back to confront the skull-mask face of the priest-marine.

'Dorn preserve us, Wolfram. You too? Have you also taken leave of your senses? Would you condemn us to go against the will of our marshal, to become traitors to our own Chapter, to be damned for all eternity?'

'I would remind you, Adlar.' Wolfram growled, his grip on the haft of his crozius tightening perceptibly, 'that it is my responsibility to attend to the spiritual well being of my battle-brothers. I would not support a suggestion such as Ansgar's if I thought for one moment that such an action would blacken our souls. But it is also my responsibility to see that the Emperor's will is done, above all things, as it is yours.'

'The lord marshal gave us our orders. I will not disobey his commands!' Adlar persisted.

'Marshal Brant is a great man, a great warrior. I am sure that the commanders of the Imperial forces of Tartarus are worthy men as well, in their own way. But none of them are here. None of them have seen what we have seen. And none could dispute that the right course of action is to satisfy the Emperor's will, else be accused of heresy.'

As he listened to Chaplain Wolfram's words, Castellan Adlar lowered his head, as if in an attitude of prayer.

'The Emperor sent Brother Ansgar the visions for a purpose, and chose him to be his champion. When Ansgar came to the chapel on the eve of battle, he told Chaplain Ugo and I what the Emperor had shown him, things that he could not possibly have known in any other way. And I myself am now beginning to see evidence of these dream-visions becomes solid reality.' There was the impassioned zeal of the devout in Wolfram's words.

Adlar remained silent for an uncomfortable time.

'So,' the Castellan said at last, 'we can either continue with our mission as planned, following the instructions of Tartarus High Command and the orders of our own marshal, or we can pursue our own mission based on our Emperor-chosen champion's dream-visions.'

'That is the choice before us – before you.' Wolfram confirmed.

'And you have faith in what Ansgar revealed to you last night, before we made planetfall?'

'I do.'

'I believe the Emperor was trying to reveal something to me.' Ansgar said solemnly, having held his tongue whilst Wolfram stepped into the argument on his side.

'I am torn, I truly am.' Adlar confessed. 'Before the path was clear to me. Now it is as though I am lost in a desert rad-storm and cannot even see the ground beneath my feet.'

'The path is still clear,' the chaplain insisted, now sounding as though he was giving a sermon. 'We can follow no other path, especially now that Ansgar has irrefutable proof of the truth of his visions.'

'In truth, I would speak with Marshal Brant. But thanks to this hellish wasteland and, no doubt thanks to the machinations of the damnable orks, we cannot communicate with the fleet. Our comm-net only works short range.'

'If Marshal Brant were here we could ask him his opinion, but he is not and we cannot. Yet I believe I know the marshal's mind and, if you stop to consider it, so do you. You know what he would command in light of what has been revealed to us, in the Emperor's wisdom.'

'You would have us abandon Tartarus Hive to its fate, chaplain, on a whim?' Adlar challenged the chaplain.

'This is no whim.' Wolfram maintained. 'Only the Emperor, in his omniscience, can see the fuller pattern. By abandoning Tartarus Hive to its fate we may yet avert a greater catastrophe elsewhere. You talk of honour, Adlar, but what greater honour can there be than to serve the Emperor's will? And in Ansgar we have the Emperor's will more clearly revealed to us than ever before.'

Adlar looked first to Wolfram and then to Ansgar. In all his decades of service to the Emperor never had he found a decision harder to make.

'Very well then,' he said and, turning on his heels, returned to the anxiously waiting company. The chaplain and the champion followed.

'Brothers.' Adlar announced. 'This is not a decision I take lightly.'

Uneasy murmurings turned to an expectant hush. Even the moaning of the wind died, as if in anticipation.

'Our champion has been singled out by our blessed Emperor to be the receiver of signs and omens of great portent. It is believed that these holy visions will lead us to the beast upon whom the warriors of our crusade have sworn to be avenged.'

The murmurings recommenced, excited now, no longer troubled.

'We are unable to contact the fleet or the other Fighting Companies, or indeed any other allies, to join us in our noble cause. There is no way we can inform the marshal or Tartarus High Command of the change in our intentions. We will be alone against the enemy, but this is our last crusade and I can think of no better way to die than in serving the will of the Emperor.'

A spontaneous cheer broke from the assembled Black Templars.

Castellan Adlar hushed them with a gesture.

'I must warn you, brothers, that the implications for our actions are that Tartarus Hive may fall and we may never be able to return to the bosom of our Chapter. We may be considered outcast heretics for disobeying the direct commands of our marshal and abandoning our needy allies to their fate.'

'Although I would readily send a man to his death in battle against the enemy I would not be so bold as to force a man to damn himself because of my commands.'

Adlar took an audible deep breath.

'And my command is this: that we follow the Emperor-sent visions of Brother Ansgar and take the fight to the enemy. If there are any among you who would rather continue with our original mission then they should leave for Tartarus now with no honour lost between us. If that is what you choose I wish you well and ask that you pray for us sinners in the days to come.'

Adlar scanned the lines of battle-brothers, the veteran squads, the assault troops, initiates and neophytes. No one stirred, the only movement the standard of the Fighting Company flapping from Brother Murtagh's banner pole.

'If the noble Castellan commands it, it shall be done,' someone stated from the thick of the crowd of armoured warriors. It sounded like Sergeant Garrond's guttural tones.

'What have we to fear of heresy or exile if we go to battle in the Emperor's name?' said another. This time the voice was clearly distinguishable as that of Veteran-Brother Calles, his augmetic replacement voice-box lending his words an artificial electronic monotone.

There were further calls of support for the Castellan's decision and for the verity of Ansgar's vision-quest.

Adlar looked across the men of his fighting force and felt pride swell within him. Perhaps this was indeed the right course of action, for how could so many of Lord Sigismund's noble warriors be misguided in their devotion to their Emperor and what was revealed to them all through his champion?

'Then we must go north-east.' Adlar declared, 'for that way our destiny lies! No fear!' he shouted, beating the chest plate of his armour with an armoured fist. 'No pity! No remorse!'

With a deafening clatter of armour on ceramite Fighting Company Adlar responded to their commander's cry.

The Castellan turned to Ansgar.

'Brother Ansgar, Emperor's Champion,' he said quietly, 'let us hope that you are not mistaken. The fate of our eternal souls is in your hands.'

EIGHT

ENGINES OF DESTRUCTION

ARMAGEDDON'S SUN, DESCENDING through the dust-laden atmosphere inexorably towards the dunned horizon of the ash wastes, suddenly bathed the command deck of the Warlord Titan in harsh ruby light. Princeps Magnus Ekhardt pulled the peak of his cap down more firmly over his brow, shielding his eyes from the sunset that, coloured by the toxic smog hanging over the desert, painted the wan landscape in sepia tints. 'Try it again,' he growled into his comm-link.

Ten metres and five decks below the princeps's command-throne, in the heart of the god-machine, the quaking tech-adept Nod Igaur, the cold sweat of panicked fear beading on his brow, looked up into the still colder eyes of Chief Engineer Dvorad.

'You heard the princeps,' Dvorad said.

The chief stood a whole head taller than the adept and was wearing an embellished uniform comprising flak armour in its make-up, whereas Igaur only had his filthy, oil-smeared habit. That and the *machina opus* that hung from his neck on a chain of greasy links.

Igaur blessed the dials and levers before him, once again, with shaking hands. He tumbled over the words of the blessing, so nervous was he in the presence of the titan's chief engineer. Closing his eyes, and praying to the Ommissiah for all he was worth, the anxious adept pushed a series of rune-marked buttons and then, holding his breath tightly, pulled a large brass-handled lever built into the console in front of him. The lever moved stiffly – had he applied enough of the ceremonial lubricating unction, Igaur wondered in a moment of panic? – and then locked into position.

There was a heavy click and then a sound like a rattling, metallic cough. Igaur swallowed hard. Dvorad turned his withering gaze from his minion to the wall-console. The audible whine of a generator turbine running up to speed filled the cramped chamber-corridor. The floors and walls began to vibrate gently, sending drops of condensation running from where they had collected on pipes and switches. A panel of colour-filtered caged lights on the wall above Igaur began to glow brightly and then dim again with a regular, repeating rhythm.

The tech-adept rubbed at the fogged lens of a dial with the sleeve of his robe and watched the needle behind the glass swing backwards and forwards on its pivot for a moment. Relief flooded through him. He let out his long-held breath and even allowed himself a weak smile as he looked up at the imposing form of Chief Engineer Dvorad.

'We have power, chief.' Igaur said. 'The war-god is awakening.'

BACK ON THE command deck, Ekhardt waited. His grim-set visage hid the anxiety he was feeling. Now that he was back, *Tyrannus Maximus*'s princeps was eager to return to the fight for Armageddon. The loss of Hellsbreach had to be investigated and Tartarus Hive still waited to be rid of the greenskin hordes relentlessly assaulting its defences.

There was the brief crackle of static in his earpiece and he heard Gorash Dvorad's voice again.

'We have motive power, sir,' the chief engineer informed his princeps. 'The reactor is back on-line and powering up.'

Ekhardt felt a surge of energy in his own chest and became aware of the pounding beat of his heart, as *Tyrannus Maximus*' own heart began beating once again. The princeps could hear cheers echoing throughout the titan, over the comm-link.

'Praise be! Thank the Emperor and the Machine God!' he declared. 'Men all over the land-battleship responded to his hail. The great tyrant is back with us at last.'

It had taken Dvorad's engineering squads several hours to replace all the burnt-out circuits, to repair the damage caused by the electromagnetic pulse, and recalibrate as necessary. The task had been made more difficult than normal since, as a result of the EM-pulse, *Tyrannus Maximus* had lost thirteen servitors and seven tech-adepts. The massive electrical short circuits, that had wracked the ancient, had burned out critical components and had caused devastating strokes or explosive coronary failure to those frail human bodies wired into the war machine's vital systems. But the surviving adepts had not failed the god-machine or its mortal master.

'Titan and princeps are as one again, my lord,' Tactical Officer Varne said matter-of-factly.

'Indeed.' Ekhardt mused.

'Weapons charged and ready.' Moderati Orrek announced, relief in his voice.

'About time too.' Ekhardt muttered.

It had taken three hours to regain basic life support, emergency lighting, and back-up generators, but the plasma reactor had taken longer still. While they were without it they had no motive power, or weapons capability, and with the main power plant off-line, so were the void shield generators.

'Tactical, can we see anything through this dust storm, beyond the end of our nose yet?'

'Surveyors recalibrating now, princeps.' Varne said. 'They should be—'

'Make it happen.' Ekhardt commanded impatiently.

Several slow seconds passed.

'Sir, I have two contacts!' Varne suddenly blurted out. Two huge signature spikes had appeared on the tactical auspex as if from nowhere.

'Sensor ghosts?'

The command deck shook with the impact of shells against the titan's hull.

'Not this time, sir.'

'Varne, I need visual!'

'Any second now, sir.'

'Dvorad!'

'Yes, princeps?'

'How long until we have void shields again?'

'Shields powering up now, sir, but it will be five minutes before they are working at maximum effectiveness.'

'Throne of Terra!' the old commander cursed.

'Connection re-established.' Varne intoned.

It suddenly felt to Ekhardt as if his mind was being sucked out of the back of his skull. He was back in the link. Through scanner eyes he saw the two gargants, less than two kilometres away, powering towards *Tyrannus Maximus* through the dust storm on stomping tank-sized feet.

The ork war engines were shorter than the towering, noble *Tyrannus Maximus*, but they were both still immense monstrosities, topping out at over thirty metres each. Their squat bodies were a mass of riveted, disparate elements, almost as broad as they were tall. Smoke belched from factory chimneys protruding from the top of the gargants and steam vented from various rifts in their armoured hides.

The first looked very much like an ork. This was in part thanks to the fact that much of its hull had been painted a lurid green. The turret of its head had been given a clanking, metal-fanged jaw, rather like the "iron gobs" worn by many orks to instil fear in their enemies and respect in their fellows. It also had bulbous viewing-port eyes behind which Ekhardt could imagine there was a hive of chaotic activity as the alien greenskins piloted the gargant towards his own awe-inspiring titan.

Mounted on one shoulder of the green gargant was a large-barrelled gun emplacement. On the other was a smoking stack from a factory shed. Could that be one of the sources of power for the war machine, the princeps wondered? The rest of the fat body bristled with kannon mouths and other weapons. One monstrous barrel jutted from a hangar-like opening in the centre of the fat giant's body. But the gargant's most obvious means of attack and defence, were its two huge arm weapons.

Fixed to the left side of the gargant was a monstrous super heavy gun. Above it was the silo-sized hopper that supplied its ammunition. From the war machine's right shoulder sprouted a multi-jointed, crane-sized robotic limb. It ended in clamping vice-callipers that glowed blue with the discharge of an energy field, generated by a polished silver cone at the centre of the gripping claw.

The second gargant, by contrast, was a brilliant red. The aliens had gone to a lot of trouble to paint yellow flames around the iron skirts of its practically hemispherical body. It too boasted numerous weapon platforms fixed to its hull in a haphazard manner. It too sported a heavy gun emplacement protruding from what could have been described as its midriff. This gargant's armaments, however, were different to those of its partner.

The monster-machine's left arm was an articulated limb supporting a slicing, blade-shaped chain fist, scaled up to match the size of the gargant. One whirling, hacking blow from that could shred a Leman Russ into its component parts or slice *Tyrannus Maximus's* Volcano Cannon clean from its body. The right arm was formed from twin-linked guns as large as those mounted on Imperial turret emplacements along the borders of the ash wastes to fend off the greenskins' predations.

Both shoulders were mounted with what looked like an Imperial titan's butchered Turbo Laser emplacements. Was it possible that the foul aliens had looted the carcass of one of the noble lords of battle of the Legionnes Titanicus in order to build a blasphemous parody of a titan? Ekhardt was appalled.

This gargant had a grim alien-visage on its domed head that housed its tactical command centre. It had teeth like castellated battlements and its triangular eye-windows, made it look like the engine was glowering obscenely at its enemy.

Looking more closely, Ekhardt saw that this second war machine was carried into battle on tank-tracked feet that ground their way over the desert, crushing anything that got in their way. The princeps also noticed a tribal badge of some kind bolted to its chest plate. In design it looked like an angular, tusked face, painted green, and bisected by a jagged red scar. That was a new one on the ageing princeps. In all his time fighting the greenskin menace he had never seen a clan marking like that one before.

Another barrage of missiles and mass-reactive shells fell on the titan. The command crew felt their detonations even through the metres-thick armour of the great tyrant. On reflection, they were lucky the orkish machines hadn't turned up earlier when they were utterly defenceless.

After the mental turmoil he had suffered, lost in limbo inside the link, with his time spent soul-searching, all doubts Ekhardt might have had were gone. On the verge of battle, he knew what he had to do.

'Varne, lock onto both those monstrosities. I want to know which one's going to fire its big guns first.'

'As you command, princeps,' Varne acknowledged.

'Orrek, is the Volcano Cannon charged?'

'Charged and ready, sir.'

'I want its operation slaved to my command-throne. Meanwhile, tell your crews I want one set of Turbo Lasers trained on each war engine's head.'

Eight years of training at the Collegiate Titanicus had prepared him for this, but after over two hundred years' service as princeps of the mighty god machine Ekhardt still felt the adrenalin rush of approaching conflict.

Another ringing impact shook *Tyrannus Maximus*. It was still only the result of rockets launched from the gargants' missile silos buried within their bulbous bodies. But Ekhardt suspected it was the precursor to something more, intended to keep them distracted while their heavy weapons were fired up. Despite being smaller, and less well-armed, than the Warlord Titan, together the gargants could still take out *Tyrannus Maximus* in a two-pronged attack, especially with the ancient being in need of further repairs, as it was.

'Dvorad, give me shields now!' the princeps shouted into his comm-link.

'Aye, sir,' the chief engineer's voice crackled back from somewhere within the body of the Warlord.

'Princeps, second target has a lock on us.' Varne announced.

'Brace for impact!' Ekhardt ordered.

Through the scanner eyes of the titan he saw the laser cannons mounted on the red beast's shoulders discharge bolts of searing viridian energy at *Tyrannus Maximus*. The bolts hit and were immediately dissipated by the titan's void shields. Dvorad and his men had come through at the last second.

'Turbo Lasers, fire!' Ekhardt roared.

Coruscating beams of light burst from the titan's own shoulder-mounted arsenal. The princeps watched with grim satisfaction as one of the red gargant's laser platforms exploded in a brilliant burst. A buckled hole appeared in the chest of its counterpart where the las-blast had torn away its armour.

He had ordered that the gunnery crews target the gargants' heads but both targets had been missed.

'Moderati, the Turbo Lasers need to be recalibrated.' Ekhardt stated, gruffly. 'Tell your men to compensate accordingly until we are out of this and in a position where the problem can be rectified.'

'Yes, my lord.' Orrek said deferentially. He began relaying the princeps's instruction into his own comm-link.

Ekhardt scowled at the gargants. The idol's shark-toothed, crocodile-jawed visages grimaced back at him. These mechanical abominations repulsed him. Despite their injuries, the brutal idol-machines were still powering towards the titan, neither having been slowed by *Tyrannus Maximus's* first salvo. Sensors had detected that the green giant's mega cannon was also preparing to fire.

'Now we take the fight to the enemy.' Ekhardt said, as much to himself as to anyone else. 'Engineering, full speed ahead! Make it happen!'

Ekhardt would meet the gargants' charge and engage them before the first gargant could fire its main weapon. He didn't want to risk a direct hit from a weapon like that with the Warlord still in its recovering state.

Tyrannus Maximus pounded towards the stomping, rumbling ork war engines on pistoning, hydraulic legs. Smoke churned from exhaust towers as the machines made their charge. The desert shook with every clanking stride, dunes collapsing, wind-worn ruins crushed like so much matchwood underfoot.

The titan was less than three hundred metres away from the first gargant now.

Ekhardt swung the barrel of the Volcano Cannon round, servos grinding as it came to bear on the hangar-hole in its stomach.

Two hundred metres.

Ekhardt was half aware of a number of dial needles approaching the red segments of their circular faces.

'Princeps, the second machine now has target lock as well.' Varne advised.

One hundred metres.

'Cycle the Gatling Blaster up to firing speed.' Ekhardt commanded.

With a subsonic boom the green giant's mega cannon fired. A fusillade of rocket-shells hurtled past the striding titan, one clipping an ammo hopper and tearing the shed-sized compartment open. But the weapon had been targeted on the titan's previous position. *Tyrannus Maximus's* bold advance had ruined the gargant's aim. The rest of the missiles soared harmlessly away into the desert wastes.

Fifty metres.

Fire, smoke and solid shot shells spat from the belly of the beast. The shields surrounding the Warlord's legs flashed and shorted out. A split second later Ekhardt fired the Volcano Cannon directly into the hangar-mouth housing the belly gun.

'Full stop!' he roared as the gargant's stomach kannon's magazine detonated.

A series of explosions ripped through the body of the green gargant. A geyser of flame erupted from the chimney stacks of its power plant. Over the tannoy ears of the titan Ekhardt thought he could hear the beating of drums. He watched, his curiosity piqued, as the gargant ground to a halt in front of him. The drumming had been the sound of something catastrophic happening to the internal workings of the machine.

But there was still another of the monstrous war-idols closing on his god-engine. Now Ekhardt turned his attention to the red-painted beast and sighted *Tyrannus Maximus's* Gatling Blaster on the trundling ork titan.

Under a storm of devastating fire the second gargant's power shields blazed blue and then failed. Gun platforms across its hull were torn apart by the attack and even the scarred ork tribal-glyph was torn free of its mountings. The ugly ork-head crashed down the side of the war machine, its rough-cut metal edge severing power feeds attached to the red beast's stomach weapon.

'Varne, status of target?' Ekhardt demanded.

'Reading fluctuations in the gargant's power systems,' the tactical officer said. 'It has lost target lock. All weapon batteries are down.'

Apart from one, the princeps noted. He watched as the red war engine brought the whirling blades of its chain-hand up to defend itself.

Ekhardt winced at a sudden sharp pain in his left arm. It felt like the limb was trapped in a vice. He looked to the first dying gargant.

The ork machine might be dying, but it was far from dead yet. The gargant had *Tyrannus Maximus's* Volcano Cannon seized it the crushing grip of its crackling power limb. The princeps could hear the terrible groaning of protesting metal as the lifta-droppa claw continued to steadily crush and twist the massive laser cannon out of shape.

At the same time the gap between them and the other monstrous machine was closing by the second. Its main weapon batteries may have been temporarily out of action but it was still mobile. And with *Tyrannus Maximus* held fast in the vice-locked grip of the dying war-engine, together the two gargants could still put an end to the mighty Warlord Titan.

Ekhardt considered his rapidly decreasing options.

If he fired the cannon again, the resulting destruction of the gargant would just as likely result in the annihilation of the Volcano Cannon as well. However, if he didn't act, the powerful claw of the ork war machine could wrench *Tyrannus Maximus's* arm clean off and who knew what other damage it might be able to effect with that monstrous robotic limb before it finally died? And that was disregarding the damage the second beast-machine would be able to inflict.

Data pouring into his brain from all over the titan told Ekhardt that the Volcano Cannon had charged again and was still operable, but only just. Bracing himself for the inevitable Ekhardt engaged the city-levelling laser cannon again.

A blast of super-heated energy, like that found only at the seething molten heart of a planet, ripped through the upper body of the giant ork war machine. The gargant was torn apart by the blast as it was consumed by an expanding ball of oily, green fire. Pieces of shrapnel the size of tanks pounded *Tyrannus Maximus's* shields and adamantium hide. But the clattering tattoo of the bombardment was drowned out on the command deck as the princeps's scream rang through the cockpit of the titan. The initial pain of the vice-grip was nothing compared to the agony of losing the empathically impulse-linked arm.

All that remained of the gargant was the burning shell of its lower body. The rest of it was nothing more than scrap metal dotting the industrial desert around the battle site.

Through the haze of pain, Ekhardt was half aware of the shouts of his command crew as they relayed orders to their subordinates throughout the body of the Warlord, and acted on information received. But before he had recovered from the shock of losing the titan's arm, before he could even gather his wits enough to stop the second attacker, the remaining gargant-beast was on the great tyrant.

Ekhardt suddenly vomited over the console in front of his command-throne, splattering dials and switches with a bilious gruel, as the red beast thrust its squealing chain fist into *Tyrannus Maximus's* midriff. The titan swayed as its princeps reeled from the empathically-transferred blow.

His movements motivated more by instinctive reflex than reasoned consideration, Ekhardt lashed out with his still-intact Gatling arm. The spinning gun barrels smashed into a looted Turbo Laser mounting, ripping the turret emplacement from the gargant's shoulder.

Metal screaming against metal, the beast-idol pulled its chain-hand free of the titan's abdomen, doing almost as much damage in the process as it had with its initial attack. It sheared through drive shafts and power couplings.

The Gatling Blaster's swing was halted by the gargant's head, becoming trapped between the battlement jaws. Retching again, and his body convulsing, Ekhardt fired.

The grimacing head of the ork was blown apart by the shredding rapid cannon burst. The force of the explosion threw the tracked machine off balance. Its centre of gravity exceeded, fires raged inside it, and the red-hulled monstrosity toppled over onto the ash-dunes.

A hush descended over the command deck of the titan.

WITH A HISS of compressed air a door slid open and Chief Engineer Dvorad stepped back onto the bridge. Smoke was filling the command deck, and its crew were sitting slumped in a daze at their posts. He found the old man curled up in his chair, eyes clenched tightly shut. His arms were held to his stomach and the front of his uniform was stained with vomit. He was whimpering. *Tyrannus Maximus* had suffered terrible injuries in its battle with the two gargants, coming so soon after the titan's engagement with the battle fortress and the systems-wide damage sustained by the atomic blast.

The titan's princeps had also been severely weakened by the encounter. The old man's physical state reflected the condition of the god-engine.

His mind lost amidst a miasma of pain, Ekhardt found himself wondering how long he could go on like this. It wasn't even a case of whether *Tyrannus Maximus* could take it, but whether his own body could survive the demands placed upon it.

'Princeps Ekhardt?' Dvorad said, putting a strong hand on the old man's quivering arm.

Ekhardt unfolded himself from the foetal position he had adopted in the throes of agony, and sat up in the command-throne.

Taking a handkerchief embroidered with his own family line's heraldic crest from a pocket in his tunic he wiped the corners of his mouth clean of vomit and dabbed at the stinking matter on his front. Then he mopped up the sticky, sickly mess covering the mahogany-veneered and brass-finished console before him.

'Varne,' he said weakly, 'what else can we expect to disturb our peace? Is there anything else out there?'

'Nothing in the immediate vicinity,' his tactical officer informed him. 'Long-range surveyors are being blocked by the dust storm. At least I think that's what it is.'

'Then power down,' Ekhardt instructed his crew.

'Sir, are you sure?' Moderati Orrek asked. 'We could be surprised again.'

'If we are, we're as good as dead already,' Ekhardt stated simply.

His officers looked at him uneasily, and then cast each other anxious glances.

What was going through their minds, Ekhardt wondered? Did they think the old man was past it, that he didn't know what he was doing any more?

'And before any of you say anything or, Emperor forbid, try to relieve me of my command, I have only this to say.'

Dvorad, Orrek and Varne made to protest but Ekhardt silenced them with a gesture.

'We need to effect repairs to the titan,' he explained, grudgingly. 'And Varne, try to get a signal through to Tartarus High Command. I would consult with the senior staff there as to our next course of action. Make it happen.'

Power down and effect repairs, Ekhardt thought sinking back into the warm learner of his command-throne. If only it was that simple for his old body, exhausted by all it had gone through in the last eight hours.

But for now, the enveloping, padded warmth of his chair soothed his aching body and mind. The war suddenly seemed such a long, long way away.

Within seconds sleep had taken him.

NINE

THE ROAD TO HELL

BROTHER DREADNOUGHT JAROLD of the Black Templars Astartes Chapter scanned the interminable desert all around. The surveyor-augurs that formed part of his mechanical body fed the images they registered directly into his cyber-grafted optical nerves. The dull browns and greys of the ash wastes had been transmuted by the afternoon sunlight into burnished gold and silver. Ahead lay hundreds of kilometres of industry-polluted, war-spoiled wasteland and the Hellsbreach titan base, the Templars' original rendezvous point. Behind him came the remnants of Sergeant Bane's platoon. The sergeant and his ten surviving troopers were bunched together between the two clanking bird-legged Sentinels. The two walkers swept the vast desert expanses with their laser weapons but there was no sign of any more orks – at least not for the time being.

Jarold had reached the bunker just in time, or so it had seemed, and yet at one stage even the resolute dreadnought had wondered if his fighting days were truly over at last...

JAROLD'S ADAPTED DROP pod had been thrown horrendously off course by the ork aerial assault, its main engine destroyed in the attack. Just before the tumbling pod hit the ground, at a speed of over three hundred kilometres an hour, the retro jets had fired, almost righting the pod and dramatically slowing its descent. The base of the pod had crumpled on impact and then the whole twenty-tonne craft had rolled as it hit the steep side of a rocky, ash-blown valley. It had come to rest at the bottom of the high-sided ravine, a battered wreck, its Black Templar markings obscured by the abrasions caused by its crash-landing. And yet, remarkably, Brother Jarold had been preserved, the ancient armoured shell of his body intact inside the pod, and he had been able to tear himself free using his mighty power fist and his sheer mass. He had thanked the almighty Emperor, Primarch Dorn and Lord Sigismund that he was able to walk away from the wreckage of the deployment craft.

Now on the ground, he knew that he was several hundred kilometres away from the point of planetfall that had been decided for Fighting Company Adlar's assault on the ork reinforcements. He also knew that by the time he was able to reach the original deployment zone the battle would have been over long ago and his brethren would have moved on.

The first thing he did was to try to contact his battle-brothers and alert them to his survival, but he could get nothing but static in response to his hails. It was the same with the fleet in orbit and even with Tartarus Hive Command. He did not know if his long distance communicators had been damaged in the crash, or whether there was something about the savage toxic environment that was blocking his signal. As far as his battle-brothers were concerned the venerable Brother Jarold was lost to them, and there was no way he could inform them otherwise.

Fortunately, as his pod plummeted towards the surface of Armageddon, its surveyors and cogitator had still fed information into the dreadnought – data regarding wind-speed, air temperature, telemetry and topography – right up to the moment it crash-landed. As a result he knew where he was now and he knew the co-ordinates of the Black Templars' secondary rendezvous point, at the titan legion base of Hellsbreach. Unlike the hive-city of Helsreach – named by the original human colonists on the now so vital industrial world – Hellsbreach was so called because it plugged a gap in the Imperial defences on the edge of the poisonous wilderness of the ash wastes.

Jarold's next course of action couldn't have been more straightforward – he would head for the rendezvous point of Hellsbreach and if he could not rejoin Company Adlar there, at least the loyalist Imperial forces would be able to inform the crusade of his status and whereabouts. Utilising one of the many maps that had been downloaded into his body-shell's cogitator, Brother Jarold plotted the most direct route to the titan pens and set off without further delay.

As he was following this course through the trackless wastes, he came upon the ork ground assault on the Armageddon Steel Legionaries holed up in the bunker. It had been the first time he had faced the greenskinned aliens in battle since the assault on the chapter keep of Solemnus twelve years before. His mind had flooded with feelings of anger, hatred and vengeance as he watched the ork war machines advancing on the beleaguered Imperial guardsmen. The last time he had fought the orks of the Blood Scar tribe he had taken every last one of them but they, in turn, had consigned him to the fate he bore now, entombed within the metal sarcophagus of a dreadnought body. A body that was all the more suited to wiping out the alien abominations.

From their crude tribal markings Jarold knew that these orks did not claim allegiance to the Blood Scar tribe but that mattered not. With cries of, "Death to the invaders, in the name of the primarch!", Brother Jarold had begun to exact his terrible revenge on the inhuman creatures that were responsible for making him the way he was now. It was not that he regretted having been made like one of the venerated warriors of old, a dreadnought. That was an honoured blessing that no Space Marine could hope to be granted. He had been given the opportunity to continue the fight for the Emperor's cause beyond his already unnaturally-extended lifespan.

But the orks had taken something from him that it was no man's right to take from another, something that could never be recovered, replaced or compensated for, and something that would drive Jarold to hunt down every last greenskin abomination, until his final dying day.

His arrival at the besieged bunker had rallied the holed-up troops, and in seemingly no time at all the ork machines had been eliminated, cut down between the laser weapons of the legionaries and their Sentinel walkers, and the deadly scything fire of the dreadnought's storm bolter and assault cannon.

As Jarold strode into the bunker hangar the Imperial guardsmen had run to meet him. They had all but prostrated themselves in front of his scripture-inscribed form, so in awe of him were they calling down blessings upon him and thanking the God-Emperor for their liberation. And yet not one of them came above the pivot-joint of his waist in height.

The legionaries' trench-coated sergeant had been quite happy to capitulate to the dreadnought's natural authority and did not question his instruction that they should make for Hellsbreach. In fact, it seemed the man was eager to make it back to any Imperial-held base for he had vital information of his own to pass on.

So it was that the whole party – the eleven legionaries, the two operable Sentinels, with the dreadnought leading the way – had set out for the original rendezvous point as soon as the guardsmen had buried two of their own under the shifting, caustic chemical

sands. Every now and then one of the troopers would scout ahead of their position and then backtrack to report his findings to the legionary officer. Hellsbreach was still several hundred kilometres away and the journey ahead of them was going to be a long, hard slog.

As Armageddon's sun dropped steadily towards the western horizon behind the advancing party, it briefly became a smudge of frosted white, behind the greasy brown banks of smog smearing the sky, as it tried to pierce the filmy chemical cloud.

After several hours of trudging through the desert, the party had come upon the shattered remains of a monstrous disused highway that cut a path through the wastes from north to south. A quick check of Trooper Steinbeck's map-slate suggested that it had once connected Hive Tartarus with some now-lost outpost on the southern coast of the great continent.

The highway was a thick black scar on the ochre-grey landscape. Ten lanes of tarmac rockcrete expressway claimed by the ash-desert, trails of wind-blown sand strewn across its pitted surface. In places the arched glasteel roof, which had once protected the route through the desert from the unpredictable ion storms, was still intact. But in just as many places, it was missing completely and the barriers that had been designed to keep the drifting sand dunes at bay had been eroded by the relentless desert, so that the caustic ash had collected on the highway itself. It would certainly not be much use for transporting heavy armour through the ash wastes but it was a welcome relief for the guardsmen. Walking on solid rockcrete was so much easier than traipsing through the always-shifting sand, and it was much less tiring. It was easier going for the chugging, clanking Sentinels and the dreadnought as well.

So that was what they were now doing. With any luck and the blessings of the Emperor it would speed their progress and allow them to reach Hellsbreach more quickly, a necessity now that the legionaries were down to their last basic food rations. They still had enough treated water supplies to last them two days, if they were sparing with it, but they were also woefully short of medical supplies since the attack on the bunker.

THERE WERE FEATURES, other than the wrecked highway, here under the thin wisps of yellow cloud, amidst the endless wind-swept dunes and effluent-charged crater holes of the toxic desert all around them. The chem-blackened skeleton of a listing comm-mast, rising from the ash sea, melted antennae drooping, the remains of parabolic dishes scorched and fractured. The discoloured brown walls of an octagonal building, its purpose long forgotten. A ziggurat mound of wind-blown sand, the rusted cannon barrel protruding from the heap revealing that it was a tank that had been buried by the ever-encroaching wastes.

Jarold was reminded that the current conflict was not the first war that had been fought for the salvation of Armageddon and the protection of vital resources for the Imperial war machine. Like as not, these ruinous landmarks were the legacy of the first battle fought to repel the arch-warlord Ghazghkull Mag Urak Thraka, fifty standard years before.

They could even date from the time when the planet had been overrun by the forces of the Fell Powers, five centuries before, Jarold considered. These wastes had been claimed by the incessant pollution of the hives and their never-sleeping manufactories thousands of years before the daemon-marines of the World Eaters traitor legion stepped foot on Armageddon. Jarold sincerely hoped not, and formed a hasty prayer to the Emperor. There were still a few relics of that dark time, dotted across Armageddon, cursed forever by the foul taint of Chaos, and to venture into such places was to invite soul-destroying insanity and a lingering death.

To distract himself from such ominous thoughts, the dreadnought paused, rotating on the axis of his waist joint to take in the Steel Legionaries slogging along the baking asphalt and rockcrete behind him.

Jarold was impressed by the constitution and resolute attitude of the guardsmen. None of the men had complained at all since they had left the bunker – not even the trooper with his arm bound up in a sling – although one of the men seemed more sullen and withdrawn than the others. They just seemed glad to be alive and to have a purpose to their actions again. Of course they were not as fast as a company of Space Marines on a forced march, but it was easy to forget what sort of tolerances the human body could take when you were a genetically-modified superhuman, and these men were bearing up incredibly well.

But then again he and the legionaries were not so unlike. They all needed assistance to help them breathe in this polluted atmosphere. They all relied on their weapons to mete out the Emperor's retribution against the alien hordes and they all wanted to see Armageddon, if not the entire Imperium, rid of them. They all had vital reasons to reach Imperial-held territories, and they all had the same determination to make it.

Brother Jarold of the Black Templars Astartes Chapter continued to scan the desert as the party made steady progress towards their ultimate destination, the great dreadnought lumbering at their head.

'LOOK!' SCOUT-TROOPER Vin Steinbeck called back from his advance position, on the cresting rise of a dune. He dropped onto his belly in a flurry of choking ash.

For the last hour the patchy highway had climbed a slow gradient, following the lie of the land. The latest of Steinbeck's scouting runs had taken him to the top of the rise and whatever lay beyond it had been revealed to him.

Sergeant Jelkus Bane and several of the other legionaries broke line and jogged up the rockcrete incline. Reaching the wind-whipped crest they too dropped onto their fronts, to minimise the silhouettes they made against the skyline that may be seen by a potential sniper in the toxic desert. The dreadnought clunked to a halt behind them, splayed metal claws sinking several centimetres into the sand it was traversing. The wheezing, pistoning, hydraulic footsteps of the Sentinels crunching on the broken asphalt also stopped.

'There.' Steinbeck said, pointing. The plain laid out before them looked like crazed ceramic.

Bane took out his magnoculars and put them to the lenses of his protective goggles. The distant desert was suddenly thrown into magnified detail.

Approximately a kilometre ahead of them was the beginning of another black scar running across the desert. It had been gouged through the sand and ash for a distance of roughly half a kilometre, from the southeast to their right. It intersected their path at a

forty-five degree angle and ended in a smoking mound ahead to the northwest. The ever-present breeze had not yet levelled the ridges.

Where the furrow crossed the road it became a jagged-edged groove where the asphalt had splintered and been reset by the friction heat of whatever had ploughed across the highway. There was nothing left of the protective shield or sand barriers on this section of the arterial route. There was nothing left of the central reservation barricade that separated the northbound carriageway from the southbound one either. Wisps of smoke still rose from the wreckage collected at the end of the skid.

'Any sign of the enemy out there, trooper?' the sergeant asked his scout.

'No, sir. Nothing.'

'Right then, let's get down there,' Bane commanded.

WITHIN HALF AN hour, with the sun sinking behind the distant horizon looking like the red eye of Ghazghkull Thraka himself, the entire party had collected at the crash-site.

Despite being a burnt-out, smoking shell, the plane was still distinguishable as an Imperial craft. It was a Lightning, a one-man fighter plane that utilised plasma engines unlike the crude fossil fuel jet engines of the ork smokers. The power core had ruptured and resulted in the destruction of the plane, but something else entirely was responsible for initiating the chain reaction. Large bullet holes riddled the side of the fuselage and the remains of one wing. The other had been sheared off at some point in the crash and flung away into the desert.

Having ploughed a blackened furrow through the desert, the crashed plane had effectively buried the front portion of its frame in the ash-sand. This sand, pushed up by the nose cone, had been fused by the heat of the burning plane. 'It's one of ours,' Bane pointed out. 'Well at least it was.'

'Bloody hell.' Gynt gasped. 'It's a mess is what it is.'

'Any sign of the pilot?' Ercal asked, not venturing forward.

'No.' Bane stated, clambering around the wreck. He put a gloved hand against the side of the Lightning's shell and withdrew it again immediately. The metal was still hot to the touch.

The top of the cockpit was missing and the hollow inside was empty. He could still see where the cover's bolts had been blown, before the plane crashed.

'Look's like he ejected before the plane came down.'

'So what now?' Kayvan asked sullenly.

'Now we continue to our objective,' the dreadnought said before Sergeant Bane could reply.

There was no arguing with the venerable dreadnought. Their course of action was clear. There was nothing they could do here.

'That's right, we go on,' affirmed the legionaries' sergeant.

The remnants of his platoon prepared to make their way back to the solid surface of the ruined motorway.

'Sergeant Bane!' Karnes called down from the cab of Sentinel Three as the chugging engine of the other walker coughed into life.

'Something's coming.'

Bane scrambled clear of the wrecked Lightning and looked north, to where Karnes was indicating. He didn't need his magnoculars to see the slowly expanding cloud of dust in the distance coming towards them.

'And I'll give you three guesses what it is.' Bane said grimly. 'Move out!'

THE GUARDSMEN HEARD the distant growl of the fossil fuel fired engines before they actually saw the warbuggies emerge from the dust-cloud trailing them.

Sergeant Bane's platoon had the advantage. The orks outnumbered them two to one, so in terms of vehicular support there was no comparison. But the aliens showed no sign that they had spotted the Imperials, and they had nothing in the way of aerial support to provide them with advanced reconnaissance of the Imperials' presence. Hence, the legionaries and Brother Jarold were able to take up positions, in cover, on either side of the highway, behind sections of collapsed sand barriers. They simply waited as the ork warband sped towards them.

Bane did not think that the cover they had found would be enough to hide them completely from the orks' attentions. If the legionaries did not attack, the chances were that the orks would spot them once they passed the sand barriers, and then they would turn and fight. Bane's mission was vital and, if it were to succeed, it was imperative that they ambush the orks before they were aware of their presence.

It was possible the orks were looking for the Steel Legionaries after the fighta-bommerz had failed to destroy them entirely. Then again, the aliens might have been hunting the dreadnought. Or was it just down to chance that they were here, now?

Whatever the case, it mattered not to the Emperor's devoted soldiers. They would make sure that the orks never lived to see another sunrise.

WITH A SINGLE sweep of his optical sensors, Jarold locked onto the speeding jerrybuilt harpoon-gun carrying vehicle, calculating speed and trajectory in a millisecond. His storm bolter fired. The buggy exploded in a ball of burning promethium. Grains of mica glass were whipped up by the blast of wind produced by the swelling fireball and skittered over the dreadnought's adamantium body.

The ork warband sped in from the north as evening drew colour from the landscape. Their blazing headlights gave the warbuggies the appearance of fiery-eyed monsters as they powered towards the Steel Legionaries' position, accompanied by the leviathan form of a battlewagon. But before the orks even knew the guardsmen, and their mighty ally, were waiting for them at the sides of the broken highway, the Imperials engaged. The Sentinels lay down fire that was finally returned by the orks, once they realised

they were under attack. In no time at all the orks were on the Imperial troops. But two of the ork buggies had already been destroyed and half a dozen boyz lay dead or dying on the cratered rockcrete.

Still powering towards the legionaries were three buggy vehicles. One had been painted totally red, down to its tyres, one had viciously spiked bumpers front and back, and another was equipped with an ork weapon known to Imperial troops on Armageddon as a mega blasta.

There was the screaming pulse of a laser discharge as one of the Sentinels fired, and Jarold's sensors detected a slight increase in the ozone levels in the poisonous air around him. The tyres of the red buggy were shredded and the vehicle slewed to a halt, engine revving, as it lost all traction in the soft sand bank it had driven into.

Jarold heard another pulse roar but it did not denote any weapon the legionaries were fielding. The noise was followed a split second later by a detonation that drowned out all other sound. Heavy pieces of shrapnel hammered into Jarold's metal body. As the percussive roar died the Templar heard the appalled cries of the guardsmen.

Sentinel Three and its pilot, Trooper Gohbah Kames, was gone. Some monstrous weapon – a hugely powerful energy cannon – mounted on the aft-section of the battlewagon had obliterated the scout-walker with a single blast. The shrapnel that had bombarded Jarold's body had come from the Sentinel. There was now virtually nothing left of the walker. Trooper Gohbah Kames had been vaporised by the massive energy discharge of the explosion.

'Brothers!' Jarold found himself declaring. 'Do not lose heart, for how can these godless aliens prevail against us when we have the Emperor fighting at our side?'

The ork buggies were circling the Imperials, engines revving as the greenskins pushed their scratch-built constructions to the limits of endurance. But the chemical sands churned up by their tyres slowed them down. Jarold could see one of the bouncing vehicles, mounting a smoking flame-thrower, closing on a guardsman who had managed to become separated from his brothers in the confusion. He was struggling to bring his lasgun to bear effectively against the orks speeding towards him. One of his arms was bound up in a sling. Las-bolts spat from his weapon only to be deflected from the armoured prow of the buggy. The legionary didn't have a hope of out-running the warbuggy. The ugly, tusk-mouthed orks were laughing in their guttural way as they closed on the man.

The flame-thrower fired. A jet of oily fuel sprayed from the scorched muzzle of the weapon and became a sheet of flame. With a *whoosh* it was ignited by a smouldering blue-hot pilot light. Roiling orange fire hosed the legionary, his tan coat, sturdy boots, helmet and rebreather hood caught alight in an instant. Trooper Neff just had time to scream before scalding molten rubber clogged his mouth, and choked him before he cooked to death.

Assault cannon spinning to speed, the dreadnought opened up on the buggy. His first dozen shots tore open the front cabin and killed the driver. The next ten pulverised the gunner and ruptured the flame-thrower's fuel tank. The explosion quite literally tore the buggy apart.

THE ORKS WERE dead, every last one of them, but the victory had come at a price. Jelkus Bane, sweating heavily inside his thick coat and the stinking rebreather hood, took in the smouldering debris that had been Sentinel Three, Gohbah Kames, and then the charred remains of Justan Neff. Strevicz and Gynt were already preparing a shallow grave to hold the guardsman's corpse, scooping a hollow in the sand with their hands and the butts of their guns.

And those two weren't the only losses his rapidly dwindling platoon had suffered. Rumi was seeing to a number of minor scratches and gashes which, if he didn't act quickly to sterilise the injuries and seal the torn garb of the victims, could prove just as fatal if the poisons in the atmosphere got to them.

Sentinel Two lay on its side in the sand. A head-on collision with an ork buggy had severed one its legs and toppled it. By the Emperor's grace Trooper Verhoef, its pilot, had suffered nothing more than a few cuts and bruises. Not only that, but the walker had fallen with the side mounting the lascannon uppermost, making it easily accessible. Verhoef had suggested they salvage the lascannon in anticipation of other sorts of opposition they might meet before they reached their target destination. Bane had agreed and so, with the dreadnought's help, Verhoef and Trooper Ercal were detaching the massive weapon from the crippled Sentinel.

That left just Broek, Steinbeck and the truculent Kayvan – who at least for the time being seemed to know whose side he was on. The three men were lugging greenskin bodies clear of the cabin and rear of the battlewagon. The tank-sized mobile fortress had proved remarkably durable during the battle with the Imperials.

Slower moving and larger than the other vehicles, it had been the target for a fair amount of Imperial fire. And it had soaked it up. Despite being holed by Jarold's cannon and having riveted glyphs and pieces of armour plate blown free by lasfire, the battlewagon was still operable. It was only the ork passengers that hadn't proved impervious to the weapons' discharge. After the monster truck's driver had died the ork-tank had obligingly trundled to a stop.

Having looked inside the cabin and taken in the crudely-fashioned, over-sized orkish controls, Verhoef, the platoon's mechanical specialist, had declared that he would be able to drive the monstrosity, or at least make a competent attempt at it. Bane had agreed. Time was of the essence and Bane's men were exhausted too. Transportation was just what they needed at this time. Due to its size, the battlewagon was perfectly capable of carrying the hulking six-tonne dreadnought as well. It also came with its own on board armoury. It really was a boon sent by the Emperor himself. To Bane it meant that there was still hope.

A shout went up from one of the troopers clearing the battlewagon. It was Broek.

'What is it, trooper?' Bane called, approaching the tank-tracked beast of a machine.

'I think you should come and take a look for yourself, sir.'

Bane holstered his hellpistol and, with his scabbarded sabre knocking against his thigh, he scaled the ladder into the back of the wagon. The three troopers were huddled over what at first looked like a bundle of oily rags. He heard Kayvan swear as he approached and his men moved aside.

It was in fact a man.

He was curled in a foetal form and he was either unconscious or dead. He was wearing the grey coveralls of a naval pilot but the uniform was torn and scorched, discoloured by the chemical sands. It was caked with dried blood.

'We didn't see him at first.' Broek explained. 'He was lying under the body of one of the orks. It had fallen on top of him after one of our party blew half the brute's head off.'

'Rumi,' Bane keyed his micro-bead, 'get up here now.'

When the legionaries' stand-in medic had joined them, they all took a closer look at the unfortunate individual.

Livid purple bruising covered his face, the flesh around one eye was a swollen black and yellow mess. Blood had crusted around a cut on his forehead, and his face having been exposed to the polluted environment, bore ugly septic blisters. Rumi carefully felt all over the man's body with his gloved hands.

'He's still alive.' Phandra Rumi told them, much to everyone's relief. 'Poor bastard's already starting to suffer the effects of pathogen poisoning though. There are various contusions and I would guess he could have any number of internal injuries. I reckon he's got a few broken ribs too.'

'There's a name here.' Steinbeck said, ever the sharp-eyed observer, pointing to a grime-stained embroidered badge over the man's left breast. The tag read, "Straeker, C."

'Do you think those greenskin bastards did this to him?' Broek asked.

'He could have suffered the worst of it ejecting from his plane.' Bane pointed out, recalling the crashed Lightning they had found.

'I mean, we've only seen one wreck out here that someone could have escaped from. But I wouldn't be surprised if he also suffered at the filthy hands of his captors.'

'But why would the orks take a man prisoner?' Kayvan wondered aloud.

'The same reason our side would in a war, trooper.' Bane explained. 'For interrogation.'

'Really?' Ercal said, obviously amazed that the barbaric aliens could be sophisticated enough to question their enemy for information.

'Why not?' the sergeant challenged. 'Our side have had men out trying to discover the whereabouts of the orks' hidden bases. Don't forget, Agent Braxus died on just such a mission. If one of our troops fell into their hands why wouldn't the greenskins press him for information? Imperial intelligence tells us that there are some among their kind who have a rudimentary understanding of the Gothic tongue. And do you really think they wouldn't be able to find out something useful from their prisoner? Don't underestimate them. That would be the worst mistake you could ever make in this accursed war!'

Bane turned away in a conscious effort to calm down. Despite having conquered the warband he was still angry at what the aliens had done to him, his platoon, his planet, and he was taking it out on the irksome Kayvan.

The sergeant turned back to Rumi, who was still crouched over the orks' prisoner. 'Do what you can for him.' He instructed the recently promoted medic. 'He'll be coming with us after all.'

The figure blinked open one bloodshot eye. The other, black and swollen, remained stubbornly shut. He looked at them blearily, as if trying to focus, and mumbled something through swollen, bruised lips.

'What was that? What did he say?' Bane asked, intrigued.

'Urn,' Rumi hesitated, looking uncertain. Despite the tension of the situation Bane was sure Kayvan was smirking.

'Well?'

The man coughed and fixed his bloody myopic gaze on the sergeant. As he opened his mouth to speak Bane saw his teeth were outlined with watery blood.

'I said, the name's Straeker. And as I've got a name, try and use it.'

WHEN ALL WAS ready, the nine remaining legionaries boarded the ork battlewagon. Pilot Conrad Straeker had been made as comfortable as the troopers could manage. After the battle with the orks, the Steel Legionaries had scouted round for what fuel they could find, siphoning it off from the tanks of the wrecked buggies, and transferring it into the battlewagon's reservoirs, to give themselves more of a fighting chance. It had been Trooper Gynt's idea to then blow up the remaining orkish vehicles, using the aliens' own stikkbombz and other crude explosives, to prevent any other greenskins making any further use of them.

Having loaded Sentinel Two's lascannon on board the massive machine, the hulking dreadnought brother pulled himself up into the back bay of the mobile fortress; the end-section lowered perceptibly as he did so.

Verhoef climbed the rungs two metres up to the driver's cabin of the tank-trukk and after a couple of coughing false starts brought the battlewagon's engines roaring into bestial life. Choking black clouds puffed from the exhaust stacks dirtying the already brown-smudged ochre evening sky. The setting sun was now nothing more than a hazy disc amidst all the pollution.

The ork tank began to move forwards in jerking hops as Trooper Verhoef became accustomed to the bulky, brutal controls. In no time at all the adaptable mechanic had familiarised himself with the battlewagon's operation, despite the fact that the controls were designed for a creature almost twice as big as he was in every proportion. And so Bane's platoon, with its two unexpected additions, was on its way again.

As the battlewagon chugged north over the ratted, broken surface of the desolate highway they sang a rousing battle hymn to the Emperor, Trooper Ercal adding surprisingly tuneful harmonies. The song had been one of Commander Kelman Bane's favourite devotionals and for a moment Jekus Bane dared to believe that if he could have seen him then, at that moment, his unforgiving, hard-bitten soldier of a father would have been proud of his only son.

THE WRECK OF THE ZAGGRASKAR

CASTELLAN ADLAR PAUSED and looked towards the roiling mass of black clouds gathering on the horizon. A storm was blowing up from the north. Jagged bolts of red lightning crackled and burst across the darkening skyline and the clouds were under-lit by a sickly green luminescence.

Having left the obliterated ruins of the Hellsbreach titan base, the Space Marines of Fighting Company Adlar had resumed their trek across the industrial deserts, following the path described by Brother Ansgar's Emperor-sent waking dream, that they believed would lead them to their destiny and their crusade's nemesis. But before that could happen they had to decide their current course of action in light of the approaching menacing weather.

This was no ordinary storm. According to Techmarine Isendur's auspex readings, it looked like the building tempest was rapidly turning into one of Armageddon's deadliest killers. Far worse than any ork bommer raid, potentially more destructive than an orbital strike, and more threatening even than Ghazghkull Thraka's Waaagh! – a radiation storm was heading their way.

This was a meteorological monster – a creation of thousands of years of unchecked industrial pollution, the aftermath of several world-devastating wars and a climate traumatized by the resulting series of ecological disasters. The only things that were capable of withstanding the battering of a rad-storm were the shielded hive-cities of Armageddon and the mountains themselves.

Everything else was at the mercy of the storm's primal fury. At its heart a rad-storm could create an environment ten times more inhospitable than the burning Fire Wastes at the planet's northern pole.

It could have begun as a dust storm, blowing out of the ash wastes, but as it had passed over the irradiated wilderness it had picked up the malignant sickness that war and engineering contamination had left on the plains. The tempest had mutated and grown until it had become the beast that was now approaching the Space Marines' position.

'How long until it reaches us?' Adlar asked the crimson-armoured techmarine.

Isendur's artificial third arm twitched, servos whirring, as the Mechanicus-trained Marine made some calculations from his auspex's readings.

'One-point-six-eight standard hours, Castellan,' Isendur said at last.

Adlar looked back to the growling rad-storm. It wasn't only the storm that was darkening the sky. Night was falling, velvet midnight blue staining the firmament on the eastern horizon – the way the Black Templars were heading.

'And nightfall?' the company commander asked.

'Less,' Isendur said. 'One-point-four-one hours, to be precise.'

Adlar looked back along the line of slogging men. The warriors of his Fighting Company stretched away behind him along the crest of the desert dunes, their black-armoured forms, stark against the ochre and grey landscape, casting elongated purple shadows onto the desert. Even the jump pack carrying Assault Marines of Squads Vortimer and Phelan were grounded for the time being, rationing their engine fuel in ignorance of what they might have to face on their quest.

'We have to get under cover,' Adlar said, addressing the ornately armoured Marine standing at his side. The dying rays of Armageddon's sun caught the burnished edges of the metallic leaves encircling his helmet.

'Agreed, my lord,' Emperor's Champion Ansgar said. 'Exposing the men to the radiation of the storm would be an unnecessary risk. I suspect it will be worse than the levels present at Hellsbreach.'

'Isendur, how long do you think it will take the rad-storm to pass us?'

'Without accurate long-range sensor readings I am having to rely on what I can calculate from my auspex,' the techmarine explained.

'Give me an educated guess.'

'I predict that it will have passed by morning.'

'How far do you think we have to go?' Adlar turned back to Ansgar.

'It was not clear from my vision,' the Emperor's Champion said.

Castellan Adlar cast him a withering look from behind the visor of his helmet.

'But something tells me we will reach our destination sometime tomorrow,' Ansgar went on, as if he had somehow caught the Castellan's contemptuous look.

'Then we can afford to lose a few hours,' Adlar decided. 'That is if we can find anywhere to shelter from this rad-storm.'

The wind was already picking up, blowing dust from the curled crests of the dune hills. A sudden gust threw yet more ash from the desert into billowing clouds around the Marines and with a subsonic roar Land Speeder *Excalibur* cleared the line of marching Templars.

'Adlar to *Excalibur*,' the company's commander spoke into his helmet-mic. 'Brother Horek, is there anything out there, anything at all, big enough to provide shelter for our company?'

'Yes, sir,' the voice of the Land Speeder's pilot crackled back over the comm-net. 'Over the next rise the dune levels out to what looks like a plain of glass. Some colossal battle must have vitrified the sand there.'

Adlar turned his head sharply to look at Ansgar, whose stance remained impassive. At Chaplain Wolfram's behest, the Emperor's chosen one had told the men of Fighting Company Adlar the details of his divinely inspired vision.

...He was standing at the edge of a featureless plain of glass that seemed to stretch for kilometres and kilometres in all directions...

'Nine kilometres from your position, bearing zero-eight-five, is what looks like some kind of wreck,' Brother-Pilot Horek went on.

'Could be the remains of a space-faring vessel. But whatever it is, it's big.'

'Praise the Emperor!' Adlar declared. 'Excalibur, we need to get out of the way of that rad-storm. We'll see you at the wreck. May Primarch Dorn watch over you, and safe landings,' he said, watching the black silhouette of the flyer bank over the rippling dunes to the south of their position and turn back to head east.

'Company Adlar, after me at the double.'

The Castellán set off at a jog, heavy ceramite boots sending fissures skittering away through the sand with every footfall. He was followed by the rest of the Black Templars, all matching his pace without complaint and with barely any effort. They had walked for hours and covered many kilometres already since wiping out the ork Speed Freek relief force, ever wary of further encounters with the greenskin invaders.

Brother Murtagh's banner flapped at the head of the line; sixty of the Emperor's most fanatical elite warriors followed in its wake. It was a sight worthy of legend, which would surely instil fear in the most hardened of enemies when they saw the Black Templars pounding towards them out of the desert.

It did not take the Marines long to crest the rise where they set eyes on the wreck for the first time.

NEOPHYTE GERVAIS LOOKED up at the immense craft, appalled that a culture as barbaric and backward as the orks must, at one time at least, have plied the interstellar gulfs in something so forbidding.

The edifice was truly immense. It rose from the vitrified plain more like a mountain of rusted metal than the wreckage of a spacecraft. And that was part of the cause of Gervais's appalled horror, the novitiate Space Marine realised. The fifty metre tall, angled sloping hull, was only one tiny fraction of the whole vessel. All that was visible above the smooth surface of the glassy plain were the massive rocket boosters that had powered the hulk through the frozen depths of space – and these alone stretched for half a kilometre across the blast-transmuted wastes.

Conjecture was that the ork ship – for it was definitely orkish in nature – had crashed at this spot fifty years ago, during the Great Beast's last invasion attempt. Thrown down from the heavens by the might of the Emperor, and trailing a tail of fire, the dying hulk had hit the wastes. The impact had buried it under the tonnes of sand and spoil laid down over the millennia, and the intense heat-blast of the resulting explosion had turned the silicates to glass. It was not unlike the polished black obsidian produced by the fires of volcanic eruptions, spreading for several kilometres in every direction.

Gervais could see a section of the hull's plating that had been scarred using some industrial process or a melta to form letters five metres high. These markings triggered some impulse within the machine spirit-mind of his suit's cogitator unit and a name appeared in glowing runes on the heads-up display of his visor. It was the closest that human speech could come to translating the ork glyphs: *Zaggraskar*.

The Black Templars clustered around a rent in the side of the wreck, blacker than the encroaching night, and dwarfed by the mighty rocket motors. The Land Speeder had been left in the shelter of a huge booster cone, its crew now among the party waiting at the entrance-rift to the vessel.

A smattering of stars, their shrouded light barely visible through the high pollutant clouds against the dramatically darkening sky, reflected back from the mirrored ground. Closing on the Fighting Company, from the direction of the dunes, were the green-tinged roiling black clouds of the rad-storm. Lightning broke in a dozen places at once across the hundred kilometre-long storm front, the resulting rumbles of thunder vibrating the very ground beneath their feet.

Gervais watched from his place at the edge of the waiting circle of Marines. There seemed to be some discussion going on between the senior members of Fighting Company Adlar at the twisted metal opening in the side of the hull. Then the Space Marines began to troop through the torn hole into the vessel-wreck, the beams of lamps attached to their armoured suits piercing the darkness with cones of hazy white light.

Although a Space Marine's enhanced vision allowed him to see in almost total darkness, inside the wreck it was as black as oblivion itself, with little ambient light to help their sight. It was better to go in prepared than have one of the brothers suffer some accident in the darkness that could ultimately alter the outcome of the whole company's mission.

The Marines of Squad Bellangere dropped into step behind their battle-brothers, and without even glancing back over his shoulder, Initiate Garek said, 'Let's go.'

'Yes, initiate-brother.' Gervais acknowledged respectfully, his rebreather giving his voice a grating quality. Garek led the way, while Gervais followed the last of them inside the wreck.

The passageway ahead of him was lit by a network of crisscrossing, strobing beams that picked out the shapes of rusted, ooze-encrusted pipes. Heavy sealed bulkheads and tilted metal ladders leading both up and down, further into the hulk. The corridor the Space Marines were following sloped down sharply, the internal topography of the ship all out of kilter after the devastating crash. However, the passageway was wide enough for two fully-armoured Terminators to make their way through the wreck side by side. It was almost twice as tall as that again.

'How far are we going inside this abomination?' Gervais asked Garek, keying his micro-bead so that only his initiate could hear his question.

'Far enough so that we're protected from the storm,' came Garek's plain reply.

Tactical Squad Bellangere continued to progress into the depths of the hulk, after the rest of the Black Templar company. The grilled metal floor began to level out, the result of internal damage to the structure of the ork craft, but it made the going much easier.

Strangely, to Gervais's mind, the environment smelt musty and damp. His heightened senses picked out the scents of rust and mould as well the acrid smell of burning. But that could hardly be from fifty years ago, not now. So what was causing the smell? As if in response to his own musings, Sergeant Bellangere's voice came to him over the comm as he addressed his squad.

'Weapons ready. Signs are we're not alone.'

Gervais looked back at Brother-Initiate Fiamain, who brought up the rear, his meltagun held at the ready in his gauntleted hands. Every three or four paces he would pause to sweep the twisted tunnel behind them, the damp air hissing as it came into contact with the heated muzzle of his weapon.

Water ran down the rusted surfaces of the walls of the corridor. It seemed that the wrecked hulk acted like some kind of atmospheric condenser, the liquid it collected from the desert air eventually ending up down here inside the cooler depths of the vessel. In places the constant trickle of water had begun to lay down chemical deposits. Gervais noticed that in one dark, dank corner, a clump of peculiar fungi was growing amidst a pile of detritus, the conical caps of the toadstools green and pointed. The passageway wound onwards and downwards through the buried hulk. Gervais considered that the party must be at least twenty metres under the ground by now, well out of range of the rising rad-storm's deadly touch.

Gervais's developing super-keen senses detected the beating, scraping noise, over the sounds made by the Space Marines' advance, before the attack came.

So did Brother Fiamain.

The squad had already passed a dozen open pipes, their purpose long forgotten. But the one they now faced was a metre in diameter. The scampering steps grew louder and the neophyte turned to see Fiamain turning the nozzle of his gun on the opening. Before he could fire, a red blur the size of a wolf hurtled out of the end of the pipe, smashing into Fiamain's chest. The Space Marine was thrown backwards, the meltagun knocked from his hands.

Gervais looked at the creature now squatting on the Black Templar's chest plate in horror. It was about the same size as the wolves that inhabited the foothills of the mountains back on Solemnus and it had the fangs to match. But that was where the similarity ended. It appeared to be little more than a bloated, spherical body – mostly made up of a large fanged maw – supported on two, muscular, almost amphibian legs, and with a stub on a blunt tail. Its pockmarked skin was the colour of dried blood and dotted with patches of hardened scales.

Fiamain grabbed the snapping creature, avoiding its powerful, animal-trap jaws, and hurled it from him. It landed in a corner of the corridor with a wet, squelching sound and quickly righted itself.

At that moment the thing turned to look at the Space Marines. It fixed them with the tiny glowing orbs of its beady yellow eyes, and growled, the sound rumbling up from somewhere deep within its fat body.

By the time the neophyte had taken in the full horror of the abomination in front of him, the rest of Squad Bellangere had reacted to the commotion of the attack.

Bolter fire tore into the creature, exploding chunks of meat from its bulbous, bloated body and tearing it apart in seconds.

'What was that?' Gervais hissed in disbelief. 'Was it some kind of ork?'

'No.' Initiate Garek murmured. 'I've never seen such a thing before but I've heard of them. It was a squig, part of the mobile ecosystem that seems to follow the greenskins wherever they go. The orks are said to keep them as guard dogs, hunt with them and even eat them.'

'So there could be orks still here after all,' Gervais suggested.

'So there could,' Garek whispered impassively, turning away from his charge and sweeping the high walls of the corridor, with their jutting pipes and open tunnel-ways, with his boltgun.

Gervais started darting glances at his brother Marines as the grilled metal floor they walked on began to vibrate. The shaking became stronger, heavy pounding vibrations.

Then squigs seemed to burst forth from every pipe and opening in the wide passageway.

The alien creatures charged at the trapped Space Marines from every direction. Some dropped on them from above as they leapt from vent-tunnel openings and ancient access ports. The Templars opened fire with bolters, plasma guns and the like.

However, bolter fire soon gave way to chainsword and fist in the close confines of the corridor, as none of the Templars wished to injure his fellows in the battle against the densely packed squigs.

The alien monsters flung themselves at Gervais out of the strobing darkness. Caught in the swinging beams of the Marines' flashlights he saw them as they really were.

The squigs were a myriad of colours. As well as crimson and scarlet the bounding creatures were coloured from a mottled brown with grey underbelly, through orange and lurid green, to black-striped purple, blue and pale mauve. They all had the fat, round bodies that were almost all mouth, and two foreshortened limbs. But there were other differences as extreme as the colour of their hides, which meant no two squigs looked alike.

Some had tails, others did not. Some sprouted horns, others had rows of spikes protruding from their backbones or even their broad chins. Some of the ferocious animals had rows of fish-like teeth while others had their jaws forced apart by distended tusks. Some had five-clawed feet, others had something more like sharpened hooves.

They came at the Black Templars, relentless in their ferocity, unforgiving in their savagery. The entire company was engaged. Shouts of, "No pity! No remorse! No fear!" echoed up and down the line of fanatical warriors. Prayers to the Emperor, as well as curses were called down upon the spawn of abomination they were fighting with now. Although they were a whole Fighting Company, every one of Castellan Adlar's men was fighting for himself.

One of the monsters sprinted directly at Gervais, all teeth and claws, as he bisected another snapping beast with a slicing blow from the long blade of his combat knife. The squig, its glistening skin the colour of the contents of a cesspit, bounded into the air in front of him. Its mouth opened to reveal several rows of pointed, bone-white teeth and a thick purple tongue lashed like a whip from the black depths of its throat.

Neophyte Gervais swung his bolt pistol up and put a mass-reactive shell through the back of creature's head – or was it through the back of its thorax? He couldn't be sure because of the squig's bizarre, alien anatomy.

With a shout of, "By Sigismund's Black Sword!" Gervais tugged his knife free of the squig corpse it was embedded in and got the measure of his next target.

CASTELLAN ADLAR SWUNG his thunder hammer in a mighty arc that crushed one of the leaping creatures between its crackling, charged head and the wall of the passageway. The beast was utterly obliterated by the blow. Liquid squig-gore splattered the shell of his armour with stinking yellow putrescence. Even in death the alien monstrosities defiled that which was holy to the Emperor, Adlar thought.

The monsters had come as if from nowhere, assaulting the Black Templars on all sides. And there seemed no end to the tide of vile alien beasts. They reminded Adlar of the gar-wolves of his homeworld, in that they were similar in size – if not proportions – with bloodthirsty fangs and the temperament to match. They were possessed of a lean hunger, a malicious cunning and savage ferocity.

Adlar suddenly stumbled forwards as something landed heavily on the back of his shoulders. He both felt and heard the scraping of fangs on ceramite as the horror tried to bite through his helmet. Throwing his empty left hand behind him, he grabbed hold of a muscly leg and yanked the squig free of his armour and hurled it on the ichor-splattered grilled floor. The creature's scaly skin was mottled pink and yellow with markings not unlike a large feline predator.

He brought his hammer down, giving a mighty yell of anger. Before his power weapon made contact with the squig, however, the savage animal leapt upwards with a powerful thrust of its short legs. The passageway rang with the blow as the Castellan struck the walkway with the thunder hammer. A section of the grilled metal buckled and broke beneath it.

Adlar instinctively brought his left arm up to defend himself. The leaping squig opened its jaws wide. The Castellan lunged forward, plunging his armoured arm fully inside the creature. His gauntleted fist closed around something wet and pulsing and the animal gave a strangled croak. With a strong tug, Adlar pulled out his hand, extracting a tangle of the creature's internal organs from its body. The dying squig fell to the floor, like a deflated balloon at the end of a rope of discoloured intestines.

His Fighting Company hadn't been inside the shelter of the wreck for longer than an hour before they were attacked. None of his men had fallen to the bestial tide – yet – but the numbers of the squigs seemed limitless. Outside the rad-storm ranged. Inside the hulk the Black Templars were once again fighting for their lives. It really had been a case of out of the warp and into the Maelstrom. They had to get to a better position.

'Techmarine Isendur,' he called into his helmet-mic, 'can you scan the layout of this part of the wreck?'

'Yes sir,' came the techmarine's monotone reply. 'What are you looking for?'

Adlar stamped down hard, crushing a squig's face beneath his ceramite-shod heel.

'Away out of this passageway. A room. Somewhere we can make our stand as one, with the support of our brethren, not fighting lone battles against a common foe.'

'Understood.'

It wasn't that Adlar minded being trapped inside the wreckage of the ork hulk, dispensing the Emperor's justice, and purging it of its alien infestation, but he and his men had another mission to complete. Chaplain Wolfram and Brother Ansgar might have had a hard time convincing him that to follow the champion's Emperor-sent vision was the right course of action at first, but once he set his mind to something he would not cease in his pursuit of that path until either he had succeeded or had died trying, in the Emperor's name.

'Scan complete.' It was Isendur again. 'This corridor opens out into a large chamber forty-two metres further on, around a right-hand bend. I am detecting several heat sources there. The path we have already followed will lead us back out but I'm reading a large number of bio-scans heading towards us from that direction,' the techmarine stated impassively, his voice devoid of any emotion. Adlar sometimes felt Isendur was rather too like the machines it was his calling to minister to.

'Squigs?'

'No, my lord. The bio-readings are ork in origin.'

The Castellan pulverised another of the bounding monsters with his hammer.

'What is your command, Castellan?' asked the white-armoured figure of Apothecary Bliant, who fought at Adlar's side. He had heard his commanding officer's exchange with the techmarine over the command squad's comm-channel.

One way led Adlar to the stronger position he was looking for but also took them further into the hulk, as well as leaving their exit barred by the approaching orks.

'Adlar to all squad leaders,' the Castellan intoned, selecting an open channel. 'Squads Wolfram, Garrond, Lir, Bellangere, Vortimer and Phelan clear us a way out of here. Horek and Tortain go with them. When you make it back to the entrance assess the state of the rad-storm and keep us informed of its progress.'

Chaplain Wolfram, his crozius arcanum swinging through the press of the squig pack as he decried the alien aberrations, began to fight his way through to the rear of the Space Marine line, ready to lead half of Fighting Company Adlar to take on the approaching orks.

'Vortimer, Phelan, Pendaran, Doane, Dynadin, Agravain and Uther, you're with me.'

All of the Black Templars started moving towards the leader of their half of the company.

'What are you going to do, Castellan?' asked the Emperor's Champion from among the press, as he ran one of the slaverling jawed creatures through with his ichor-dripping Black Sword.

There was a pause as an idea took root in Adlar's mind. He kicked a squig clear of the fighting warriors, and destroyed it with a blast of glowing energy from his plasma pistol.

'We're going to bring the Emperor's judgement down upon this nest of monsters and purge all evidence of the alien from this place...'

The burning body of the squig fell to the floor, fizzing and popping as its unnatural, alien flesh dissolved in the flames.

'...with the fire of retribution!'

SQUAD PENDARAN WERE the first to fight their way through into the vast, pipe-vaulted chamber after Castellan Adlar's command unit. The smell of burning was strong here. There was no knowing what purpose the cavernous hangar had once served, or, in fact, its origin. However, it was quite clear what it was used for now. Dotted throughout the massive space, five decks deep, were a number of smoking campfires. Gathered around these were the hunched figures of greenskinned orks – hundreds of them – but different to the ones the Black Templars had so far encountered on Armageddon.

They were almost totally naked; those with any clothing at all were wearing simple hide loin cloths. Neither did they sport the sort of weaponry the Space Marines were used to seeing the aliens toting. Instead, tucked into belts of squig-hide or clutched in strong fingers were lengths of broken pipe or pieces of crudely shaped metal adorned with tusks and horns, that transformed them into brutal clubs and mauls. They wore necklaces of teeth and bones and had adorned their flesh with crude tattoos and war paint. Brother-Sergeant Pendaran could see what looked like the carcass of a squig roasting on a spit over the nearest of the fires. But that wasn't the only squig he could see. Secured to rings in the floor at the centre of cavern was a creature that looked just like the things that had attacked Fighting Company Adlar as they advanced into the wrecked spacecraft, only it was many times larger. At least twice as tall as a Space Marine, the beast's skin was almost black in colour, making it look more like a dreadnought than a squig.

The Black Templars had obviously interrupted some kind of feast, as these primitive orks celebrated capturing the monstrous creature on a squig-hunt in the deeper depths of the wreck. And interrupted it they had. With whooping shouts, no doubt full of bravado after the success of their earlier hunt, the feral greenskins were capering towards the Space Marines.

The Templars quickly fanned out, taking up positions at the edge of a walkway a deck higher than the floor of the cavernous chamber. As the orks began to scamper up ladders and pipes to reach the invaders Castellan Adlar gave the order.

The most devout brotherhood of the Emperor's elite warriors opened fire on the green tide of aliens.

Sergeant Pendaran took a bead on a stringy-limbed creature clambering hand-over-hand up the rungs set into the wall beneath his position. The bolt pistol roared in his hand and Pendaran felt the recoil kick in his strong wrist. The feral ork was thrown from the ladder and blown into chunks of bloody green meat as it dropped back towards the floor of the chamber.

But where one alien fell it seemed there were another five ready to take its place.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' Pendaran shouted and fired again.

'SQUAD VORTIMER! ATTACK pattern epsilon!' the assault team's sergeant commanded.

At once, the squad's jump packs fired, a brief burst of the thrusters carrying them over the heads of Tactical Squad Lir and into the midst of the pack of green bodies filling the high-ceilinged corridor.

Brother Halwn opened fire with his bolt pistol, spraying the heaving mass of orks before him with bolter fire. Then he revved his chainsword up to its highest speed, and thrust it into the squig herd milling around his legs.

Orks fell back under the attack. Brother Daman was only able to make use of his chainsword; he was still unable to raise his left arm after the collision with the ork truck.

Halwn watched as the scaly flesh of a squig's hide became entangled in the teeth of Daman's chainsword. His weapon momentarily useless and his left arm locked, Daman was open to attack from a bellowing ork that wielded a dented metal panel over its head.

Halwn took aim and fired. A single bolter shell exploded the ork's skull. The greenskinned brute dropped in front of Brother Daman. Suddenly his chainsword revved up to speed, cleared of the tangling skin.

'Thank you, brother.' Halwn heard Daman say, and then the next wave of feral aliens were on them, scrambling over the bodies of their fallen comrades, and slipping on the sticky ichor that passed for squig blood.

If sheltering from the rad-storm inside the crashed ork craft had been like going from the warp into the Maelstrom, then the situation they found themselves in now was like falling into the Chaos-cursed Eye of Terror itself.

The Space Marines sent to secure the exit from the hulk had managed to clear only fifty-six metres in the last hour.

APOTHECARY BLIANT FOLLOWED the flapping, ichor-splattered banner carried by Brother Murtagh as the Black Templars spread out across the vast chamber. The ork horde surged towards the Astartes, goading the monstrous squig-beast ahead of them at the armoured warriors.

He had heard it said that both orks and the related squigs developed from fungal spores. After the hulk crashed into the ash desert during the conflict five decades before, spores scattered by the resulting destruction of many orkoid creatures had in time found themselves in an environment that caused their propagation. The various fungi had developed and had eventually somehow produced yet more of the tenacious aliens. Isolated in the atomic-scarred wilderness, away from any form of established ork "civilization", the greenskins had developed in a feral state, preying on the squigs that developed alongside them in their primitive culture.

A feral greenskin, wearing a clattering string of squig bones around its neck, flung itself at Bliant who blasted its chest open with a stuttering blast from his bolter pistol – an instant kill-shot. Ork gore splashed the winged red helix the apothecary wore with pride on the right shoulder plate of his clinical white armour. On the other shoulder was the black on white crusader cross insignia of his Astartes Chapter.

Hearing a guttural, almost reptilian, roar, Apothecary Bliant turned his attention to the huge creature at the centre of the ork pack. It was charging towards the Space Marines with thunderous footfalls that shook the plate metal floor beneath their feet. Emperor's Champion Ansgar was hacking his way through the greenskins, his Black Sword singing, to reach the behemoth-squig.

Suddenly Brother Elazar of Squad Dynadin was in the path of the black-skinned squig. The alien-fungus hybrid was horrifyingly soaking up the damage dealt it by the Marines' bolters. Something else was needed and that was what Elazar was planning. Bliant

saw the krak grenade gripped in Elazar's right hand as he drew back his arm to throw it. Then the events of the scene unfolding in front of him seemed to slow before the apothecary's eyes.

The squig, its red coal eyes locked on Brother Elazar, moved far more quickly than seemed possible for something its size. It was on Elazar in a split second. The Marine had begun to hurl his arm forwards again as the beast lunged towards him. It caught the armoured warrior between its jaws and with a sickening crunch bit through ceramite, flesh and bone with equal ease.

His body severed in two by the monster's terrifyingly powerful jaws, Elazar's lower body collapsed onto the floor, spilling intestines. The squig tossed the rest of him up into the air. It caught the Marine's upper body in its mouth and swallowed with an audible gulp.

The very next moment the alien monstrosity was blown apart as the krak grenade exploded, the squig's body turning into a red mist under the force of the detonation. Everything within a twenty-metre radius was showered with alien ichor and the remains of brave Brother Elazar.

Witnessing the dramatic death of their totem beast, the feral orks began to panic, falling back in the face of the Templars' advance. The tide of battle had well and truly turned.

'BROTHER BRANNOR, WE have need of your missile launcher once again.' Veteran Sergeant Agravain informed his heavy weapon specialist.

'Yes, sir.' Brannor answered the experienced officer, 'may the Emperor guide my aim.'

Brannor hefted the sturdy missile launcher onto his shoulder, taking a moment to adjust its position, and then sighted on the orks ahead of him. Through the cross-hairs he could see still more of the greenskins piling down on the Space Marines – caught in the beams of their suit lamps – too stupid to realise that they were eagerly bounding towards their deaths. Beyond them, Brannor's enhanced eyesight was able to distinguish the differences in the dark walls of the grounded hulk and the rent in its hull, opening onto the rad-storm wracked night beyond. The tempest was not through here yet.

With a prayer to the Emperor, Brannor touched the ignition rune. With a rocket roar that temporarily drowned out the sound of the storm, the missile launched from the tube. It hit the pack of orks and ploughed its way through them before exploding.

As the smoke cleared, the men of Veteran Squad Agravain allowed themselves a brief cheer of satisfaction for a job well done. Castellán Adlar's way back through the hulk had been cleared.

AS THE REST of the men left under Castellán Adlar's command continued to push the broken orks towards the back of the chamber, Techmarine Isendur finished placing the last of the charges at the edge of the ork fires.

It had not taken Isendur long to work out that the camp-fires had been constructed over flue-vents that had once been an integral part of a power plant buried deep below this chamber within the hulk. This one plant had somehow survived the crash – at least partially intact – where so much of the wrecked craft had not. Its energy had continued to leak out in the fifty years since, providing the feral orks that had made their home here with heat and a means to cook their favourite – if not their only – food. Detonate a number of explosive charges here, and it would start a chain reaction that could potentially result in the total destruction of the hulk.

The techmarine rose, power axe in hand once again.

'Castellán, the last of the devices has been placed,' Isendur informed his commander.

'Then our work here is done.' Adlar's voice came back over the comm-net, accompanied by the stutter of gunfire.

'Company Adlar, it is time we were gone from this place. Move out!'

BROTHER ANSGAR WAS the last out of the hulk, close on the heels of Brother Kalan and the bold Castellán Adlar himself. The waiting Space Marines laid down covering fire as feral orks and even the occasional persistent squig-creature tried to follow them. It wasn't the Black Templars' custom to run from a fight, but their time here was done, and, their Emperor-sent mission awaited them. The lord of mankind required them to lay down their lives in his name elsewhere.

A pre-dawn glow was beginning to colour the eastern horizon of the desert, illuminating the chemical emissions hanging in low-lying fog banks over the slag dunes to the west. To the south the rad-storm continued to scour the wilderness for what little life might remain, but as far as the warriors of Castellán Adlar's company were concerned, and as Techmarine Isendur had predicted, the danger had passed.

The Black Templars did not stop moving once they were free of the wreck. The *Excalibur* lifted off from the glassy surface of the plain, leading the running Space Marines in their flight as they made for the illuminated eastern skyline.

They didn't hear the first series of explosions caused by Isendur's carefully laid devices, but they felt them – rattling vibrations passing through the vitrified sand beneath their feet. What followed, however, left none of the Space Marines in any doubt that the techmarine had successfully completed his task.

A section of the plain, within which the hulk was trapped like a fly in amber, shattered, and geysers of brilliant white light shot up into the dark blue sky. Molten fire and smoke gouted from rents across the crashed vessel's hull in a daemonic roar that echoed across the plain as far as the distant dune sea.

As the Marines ran, the plain fractured and shattered, huge cracks zigzagged through the glass in their wake. Behind them, the towering remains of the ork ship disappeared into the void of the opening crevasse. Beneath the frozen glass plain fifty years of chemical erosion had worn the sand and soil away until the vitrified ground was no more than a shell covering a network of worn canyons and empty space. The fires were replaced by billowing clouds of black smoke rising from a jagged-edged hole covering an area of several hectares.

The wreck of the *Zaggraskar* was no more, claimed by the angry planet in retribution for the crimes committed against it by Ghazghkull's ork hordes.

As the vast glass sheet continued to shatter and collapse inwards behind them, the victorious Black Templars made their escape from the fracturing plain. They had a destiny to fulfil.

ELEVEN

DOOMSDAY

THE WARLORD TITAN *Tyrannus Maximus* strode on through the night at a stately pace, its outline illuminated by thousands of tiny twinkling lights. It looked like the Emperor had pulled the stars down from the cloth of night to shroud the war machine and light its holy quest. Huge searchlight beams lit the desert wastes around the colossus, marking its path through the ash dunes.

But where the desert had been a baking chemical hell during the hours of daylight, it was now bitterly cold. Sensors in the gigantic man-machine's surveyor arrays indicated that temperatures had dropped to well below freezing.

Methane ice formed on the outer hull of the titan. With every massive stride, sheets of frozen chemical fluids cracked and splintered, and icicles crashed down to the ash-sands from adamantium greaves and creaking joints.

The men and servitors inside the god machine were insulated from the freezing cold by the metres-thick armour. They were warmed by the massive amounts of heat produced by the war machine's various systems which kept the atmosphere on many decks of the land-leviathan uncomfortably hot and humid. The core of the plasma reactor itself generated ferociously hot temperatures, like those within the boiling magma chamber of a volcano, that provided the means to power the god engine through the desert wastes.

With every colossal step, the ancient covered a distance of twenty metres. The war machine had been powered down, repaired, and powered up again. Since then they had travelled just over one hundred and twenty-four kilometres, according to Kasl Varne's readings.

Ekhardt had not slept for long after his latest battle. His crew did not disturb him. It was not their place to do so, for the princeps gave more than any other man aboard the god engine. It was not uncommon for the princeps of a titan that had suffered traumatic injuries in battle to suffer some form of sympathetic trauma, either physical, mental or emotional, and sometimes a combination. It was the duty of his crew to allow him to recover in his own time, in his own way.

Princeps Ekhardt had woken from tortured dreams concerning Mars, where he was battling against a horde of gargants that seemed to be half monstrous machine and half flesh and blood ork. Meanwhile the old Grand Princeps Judas Urquart berated him for making one tactical error after another.

Ekhardt's left arm still felt numb. Thinking about the surprise attack caused the ache to worsen to the point where he caught his breath at the pain. He knew he was only imagining the sensation – there was physically nothing wrong with his arm – but that didn't make it seem any less real.

He had felt fire consume his arm from inside and out during his desperate attack on the crocodile-jawed gargant. It had taken servitor fire fighting teams two hours to finally extinguish the fires burning within the devastated laser cannon. The weapon was now utterly useless and Ekhardt still found his left hand locked into a clenched claw, barely able to bend his fingers.

He remembered the first time he had felt agony like this, relayed to him by his empathic connection to the god machine through the mind-impulse link, fighting the spawn of the Great Devourer on Tarcicus. He had certainly never forgotten it, so nerve-shredding an experience it had been.

It had been his very first battle as master of *Tyrannus Maximus*, and it had truly been a baptism of fire. His Legio had faced the full fury of the tyranids head on, in an attempt to stop the alien xenomorphs from raping the frozen world of its natural resources. He had been young and naive then, too eager for glory and too hot-headed in battle. In fact, he was not so unlike those younger princeps he now resented.

He had taken on a hierodule single-handedly, without any other titan support, and within minutes *Tyrannus Maximus* had suffered a blow to its carapace from a venom-bladed razor claw. The injury almost put him out of the battle and could have spelt doom for the young princeps had it not been for the quick dunking of his old weapons Moderati Cadmus.

Oh yes, he remembered the first wound he suffered as a war god of Mars.

In an attempt to shake himself free of the grip of the agony coursing through his withered arm, Princeps Magnus Ekhardt addressed his command crew.

'Varne, how far have we still to go?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell, my lord princeps,' his tactical officer replied weakly. 'Long-range sensors are still blind and close-range scans are not revealing anything other than the desert wastes and the petrochemical trail left by the ork machines.'

'Hmmm.' Ekhardt grunted.

'I will continue to monitor the long-range surveyor array.' Varne said nervously, desperate to fill the awkward silence, 'and I will let you know the instant there is any change.'

'Make it happen.' Ekhardt confirmed.

With the titan pens of Hellsbreach utterly destroyed, and unable to raise a hail from Tartarus High Command, the ageing princeps had decided that the best contribution *Tyrannus Maximus* could make to the war that the Imperial forces were embroiled in on Armageddon Secundus was to head in the direction from which the gargants had come. The ork behemoths came from somewhere, and there might well be more gargants, or a large ork force approaching, or even a previously unknown beachhead established by the aliens.

It was certainly true that in the opening days of the war the Great Beast's forces had deployed via the many ready-made asteroid-fortresses classified as roks. Wherever the massive mountain-sized strongholds landed, right across the planet, the orks were able

to instantly establish mighty citadels from which poured warmongering, battle-hungry orks, rumbling battlewagons and terrible idol-gargants.

Ekhardt did not know what he and the titan's crew were heading into but he strongly suspected that they would find honour, glory and death. He strongly doubted that in its crippled state the Warlord would even be able to make it as far as Hive Tartarus. If he were being totally honest, Ekhardt doubted that he would make it as far as the hive-city. At least the ancient titan and its old princeps would go out in a blaze of glory and not die in the desert, victim of their own failing systems.

Travelling through the night, *Tyrannus Maximus's* sensors were able to isolate the signature of the polluting petrochemical fuels used by the orks to power their war machines. Wherever the gargants had been their filthy exhausts and leaking oil sumps left a trail of pollution. And so the god engine was able to follow the gargants' route, as a hunter might follow an animal's spoor to lead him to his quarry.

'Engineer Dvorad.' Ekhardt said, turning to where the augmented tech-officer was engrossed in monitoring a bank of dials and analogue displays, 'how is the reactor faring?'

'Surprisingly well, princeps,' Dvorad said, 'all things considered.'

Although Dvorad hadn't specifically mentioned it, Ekhardt knew that the titan's reactor must have still been leaking plasma. He could feel it, like an open bleeding wound in his own frail body.

'Moderati Orrek, how does our weapons' capability currently stand?'

'The Gatling Blaster is operating within standard parameters and we still have Turbo Lasers as well as most auxiliary weapons platforms.' Orrek responded.

'How would we fare in a fight?' Ekhardt asked, his tone grim.

'Without the Volcano Cannon, our capability has been severely compromised.'

'I don't want problems!' the princeps snapped. 'Give me solutions.'

'It might be possible to divert some of the energy channelled to the laser cannon via the power couplings to the Turbo Laser shoulder mounts.' Orrek suggested, 'but I'd need the chief engineer's expert advice on that to be absolutely certain.'

'Dvorad, could it be done?'

'With the Machine God's blessings, if the correct hexes were cast, I think it could. I'd need to get half my teams on to it.'

'Then do so.' Ekhardt instructed. 'Make it happen.'

The princeps turned his gaze to the darkened desert visible beyond the visor-eyes of the land-leviathan. The dunes, gullies and dried effluent riverbeds picked out in the spot beams of the titan's searchlights barely registered in his consciousness. His mind was preoccupied with greater things, full of thoughts of the battles to come against the defilers of Armageddon. He was hundreds of kilometres away, beyond the ragged horizon. The land seemed to rise from the endless ash sea to blunt mountain peaks, like the molar teeth of some prehistoric beast, buried for millennia and now disturbed from its rest by the onslaught of global war.

And beyond the mountains the eastern sky was beginning to lighten behind a pall of dirty, chemical smog. Dawn was approaching. Another day was about to begin on Armageddon, a day when the Emperor alone knew what *Tyrannus Maximus's* fate would be.

Unheeding, the ancient machine plodded on towards its waiting destiny.

'SIR, I HAVE something!' Varne suddenly exclaimed, drawing the attention of everyone on board the command deck.

'What is it, Varne? What do you have?' Ekhardt added.

'Throne of Terra! It's gone again.'

'What has? What's gone? Come on, man, pull yourself together!'

'I picked something up, just briefly, through the static and interference, but there *was* something.'

'What was it?' Orrek asked, his voice urgent and anxious. 'Are we about to come under attack again?'

'No.' Varne reassured him, 'at least not as far as I'm aware. It was on the long-range sensors.'

'But I thought you said our long-range surveyors and auguries weren't operating.' Ekhardt insisted.

'They weren't, but the machine spirits slaved to them have been on-line and have still been scanning our surroundings nonetheless. They just weren't detecting anything through the static,' the tactical officer explained. 'For some reason – don't ask me why – there was the merest break in this damned interference and the surveyors were able to take a scan of what lies ahead of us.'

'And what is it that awaits us out there in the wastes?' the princeps enquired ominously.

'It will just take a moment for the cogitators to decode the signal and make sense of the data, my lord.' Varne said deferentially.

The princeps began to drum the fingers of his liver-spotted right hand on the carved mahogany arm of his command-throne. Varne held his breath as the logic engines interpreted the information collected by the augury arrays.

'The surveyors have scanned the higher ground to the east and have detected the contours of what appears to be a wide crater.'

Varne began tripping over his words in his nervousness.

'Volcanic?' Ekhardt asked, bluntly to the point.

'Quite possibly.' Varne replied, 'particularly when you consider the high levels of volcanism across the planet. But these readings would suggest that it's no longer active. However, the sensors also picked up readings of a huge radioactive source.' Varne turned his pupilless eyes on Ekhardt. There was an appalled look on the tactical officer's face.

'What could that be?' the princeps considered aloud. 'Do the readings suggest that whatever happened to Hellsbreach happened there?'

'No, sir.' Varne said. 'The readings I have here do not suggest radioactive material of a weapons grade.'

'A fuel source then.' Engineer Dvorad contributed.

'But nonetheless dangerous for all that, I am sure.' Ekhardt mused.

'And an unstable one.' Varne added.

'Orks,' the princeps hissed.

'I would think so, sir.'

'Do the sensor readings suggest that the course we are following will lead us to this radioactive source?' the princeps demanded.

'It is highly likely, my lord.'

'Then it is also likely, is it not, that the blasphemous idol-engines we defeated came from this crater as well.'

Varne nodded. 'That is what the evidence suggests.'

'And you say that this radioactive source *Tyrannus Maximus* detected is of immense size?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Can you tell if it is contained within just one construct?'

'No, sir. Without further scans to confirm, the reading could denote one fuel source or several smaller ones contained within close proximity of one another – say a kilometre apart at most.'

'Dvorad.' Ekhardt addressed his chief engineer. 'Your opinion please.'

'I would say that we could be looking at several gargants.' Dvorad said, 'or maybe even one enormous engine, much bigger than the war machines we encountered previously.'

'Your thoughts concur with mine, engineer. How far are we from the crater?' Ekhardt asked his tactical officer.

'Approximately one hundred and eighty-three kilometres.'

'And how long will it take us to reach it?'

'I estimate that, at our current speed, we should reach it within another six hours, sir.'

'Then the course of action we must take is clear. Our fate has been predetermined by the wisdom of the Emperor,' the princeps declared solemnly.

It could not have been more clear, Ekhardt considered, than if *Tyrannus Maximus* had spoken to him directly again from the link. Whatever awaited them in the crater, they had to reach the suspected gargant base and stop the orks. If they did not, the aliens already assaulting Tartarus Hive would inevitably gain vital reinforcements as the gargants would inevitably join in the attack, particularly with the loss of the titan pens at Hellsbreach, along with the war colossi stationed there. Then there would be nothing to stand between the gargant advance and the ork hordes already assaulting the walls of the beleaguered, contested hive-city. At that moment Ekhardt would have appreciated being able to communicate with Tartarus High Command. And if he could not gain affirmation for what he was about to do, he could at least inform the commanders of his decision and the sacrifice he was preparing to make for the good of the war for Armageddon. But there had been no alleviation of the comms problems the titan had been suffering since Hellsbreach had been wiped from the planet.

The princeps also seriously doubted that the titan would be able to reach Tartarus in time to bolster the defensive push being made by the Imperial forces there. And it wasn't just a matter of time. Although he hardly dare to admit it, deep within his heart, Ekhardt knew that, after endless millennia of service to the Imperium, *Tyrannus Maximus* was nearing the end of its long life. He didn't think that the Warlord could make it all the way back to the besieged hive-city, in its current condition, without receiving the repairs it truly needed. The work Chief Engineer Dvorad and his tech-adepts had been able to effect was only a stopgap measure. The old tyrant needed the attention of an Adeptus Mechanicus facility or forgeship and the prayerful ministrations of an army of the Machine God's servants.

If Ekhardt had heard one of his men voice such thoughts he would have berated them for their lack of faith in the ancient god engine. And there was a time for such battlefield bravura, but Ekhardt had to be realistic in their current situation.

Then there was the risk that the titan could be brought down on its way back across the wastes to Tartarus Hive. They had already encountered two gargants in the wilderness, a mobile battle fortress – the likes of which the old princeps had never seen before – and its supporting squadron of ork smokers. Who knew what else might be waiting for them out there in the war-ravaged industrial deserts?

No, there was only really one option for the valiant titan and its courageous crew. Ekhardt would risk all in what was effectively a suicide mission but the success of which could preserve the lives of millions, if not billions, of the Emperor's loyal subjects. It was better to go out in a blaze of glory, of that Ekhardt was sure.

The old man flicked a switch on the control panel in front of him, with an ever so slightly shaking hand. Clearing his throat, Princeps Magnus Ekhardt addressed his crew.

'Servants of the Machine God. Soldiers of the Emperor. My loyal comrades in arms. We go now to face the enemy on their own ground. We go to bring down the retribution of the Emperor of mankind upon the heads of the alien abominations. We go to battle against the worst the orks have to threaten Armageddon and the Emperor's forces. It is likely we go to our deaths. But we go too to find glory in the eyes of the Omnissiah and the God-Emperor. May we prove worthy of the Machine and may the Emperor and all his saints give us their blessings and their protection.'

Ekhardt flicked off the switch and spoke directly to his command crew.

'Moderati, charge Turbo Lasers. Tactical, continue to scan for further signs of that gargant base and be ready to prepare firing solutions. Dvorad, push the turbines as far as they'll go and give me striding speed. The sun is rising on our doomsday. Let us go and face it. Make it happen!'

TWELVE
INCOMING

'BLOODY HELL! I don't believe it.' Conrad Straeker gasped and whistled through his teeth, the sound muffled by the gas hood the legionaries had provided him with. 'There really is an ork airfield out here. I thought there had to be! It explains so much.' The pilot strained forward, to peer further over the edge of the outcrop, and immediately regretted doing so. He winced and caught his breath, feeling bruised muscles and cracked ribs protesting at the strain.

They had fixed him up well, all things considered. When they had found him after the orks' rough handling, lying huddled in the back of the battlewagon, he had been barely conscious. The party's medic had done his best with the supplies left in his medipack, but Straeker knew that he was still in a lot of trouble if they didn't reach an Imperial base with a better-equipped medicae station soon. He had been exposed to the pathogens in the atmosphere for too long, long before the orks had found him. The skin on his face felt hot and tender and he had developed a rasping, wheezing cough. But he had a feeling that wasn't the only thing that was making him short of breath.

That said, a decent night's rest had done wonders for him as well. It felt like it had been the best night's sleep since the naval frigate *Chenkov* had arrived in orbit over Armageddon seven weeks ago.

In fact, a good night's sleep had done wonders for all of them. The legionary called Broek had demonstrated a downright eagerness to have a go at driving the monstrous tank-trukk and Verhoef, the technical whiz among the troopers, who was himself still getting used to the out sized controls, showed his fellow guardsman what he had learnt so far. The two of them had taken turns at piloting the battlewagon, changing shifts every hundred kilometres or two hours.

Neither had any of the troopers been required to keep watch, Brother Jarold had demanded that he take on that responsibility. Standing braced in the centre section of the monster trakk he had scanned their passing surroundings without pause, following the same sequence of movements with his mighty weapons trained into the distance of the desert around him. From where Straeker lay, looking up at the colossal machine-shell body, the dreadnought was silhouetted black against the jade-traced ultramarine of the chemical night. It looked like a statue of one the Emperor's beneficent angels that watched over his people, wherever they might be.

At that time the dreadnought had seemed almost unreal to Straeker. Certainly the rest of the men were in awe of the mighty Astartes veteran. Dreadnoughts were truly mythic, the stuff of legend. Most men, even those serving in the galaxy-spanning fighting body of the Imperial Guard, were never even blessed enough to meet a Space Marine. But to meet a veteran whose wounds and valorous deeds had meant that he had been encased within a living machine-body so that he might continue the fight against the enemies of mankind in the Emperor's name was the stuff of legend itself!

In a moment of wakefulness between periods of gratifyingly welcome sleep, as he lay staring up at the hulking form of Brother Jarold, Straeker had heard the legionaries discussing whether they should try to do without lights as they drove through the night. They had decided that the orks would be able to hear them coming as much as see them and the risks of driving without any light beyond the ambient frosty glow of the moon that occasionally broke through the filmy cloud cover were potentially worse than being discovered by the very aliens it was their duty to purge from the planet.

In that brief period it had seemed to Straeker that the distant horizon was on fire. The Emperor only knew what other life and death battles were being fought out across the planet at that moment while, bizarrely the tiny piece of world centred on the ork juggernaut and its passengers was at peace.

As it turned out, the night had passed without incident anyway. Having driven right through the night, with the dawning of a new day there came another surprise. It had been only a few hours after daybreak in the desert that the party had come upon the airfield, in the dry river valley.

Brother Jarold's surveyors had located the huddle of basic hangars, the tarmac strip of a runway, and what looked like a crude flight control tower. They had first appeared as simple blips on his in-built radar. The highway ran straight past the airfield so there was no way the Imperials could easily work their way round it without exposing themselves to a direct attack.

At the Templar's booming command, Trooper Verhoef had brought the huge trundling machine to an abrupt halt, inadvertently applying the brakes rather too firmly. The rest of the legionaries were thrown forward by the sudden stop. Fortunately for the rest of them the solidly braced Brother Jarold was not thrown.

The orks would have had no trouble recognising the guardsmen for what they really were, had they approached the airfield, exposed in the morning light. So, all except Verhoef, who waited in the driver's seat in case transport was needed in a hurry, and the injured Straeker, the legionaries had disembarked from the battlewagon. The dreadnought had also stayed put, as there was no way its approach could be kept quiet from the orks.

Scout-Trooper Steinbeck had scouted ahead, scrambling to the top of the rocky ridge to survey the dusty valley-bed beyond. He silently beckoned the other legionaries over with hand gestures. There had been a low muttered exchange between the sergeant and his scout, the outcome of which was that the promethium-reeking flamer trooper, Kolp Gynt, had been sent back to bring Straeker over too, to assess what they saw. Straeker had hobbled over to the group, once Gynt had helped him down from the wagon, and had seen the alien's airfield himself for the first time.

Learning from his earlier mistake, Straeker pulled himself forwards more cautiously to the edge of the ridge-cliff.

The airstrip itself hadn't so much been laid as cleared. It was quite possible that the orks were utilising something that had already been there before they ever came to Armageddon, as their culture took over many things.

The single runway ran several kilometres south-west to north-east parallel to the ridge, which curved away to Straeker's right. To his left the rocky crest levelled out towards the end of the runway where the valley opened onto the desolate, wind-swept plain beyond. To the right of the tarmac strip was a cluster of three hangar-like structures of riveted corrugated iron. To the left were one much larger hangar and the blocky, hexagonal structure, now confirmed as a control tower. At the far end of the airfield was the aliens' fuel dump: four huge cylinders supported on iron legs sunk into the hard ground. Next to them was parked an orkish fuel truck. The whole place was an untidy mess, with barrels, rolls of wire, cabling and parts scattered around the airfield.

The site was littered with ork planes, fighta-bommerz painted in an array of gaudy reds, yellows, greens and oranges, or even in a black and white check. The airfield was a bustle of alien activity. The smaller greenskins known as gretchin, or grots, were poring all over the planes, reloading kannon hoppers, fixing shark-faced missiles from trolley racks beneath their wings, checking oil pressure, and the like, while their ork controllers lorded it over them, behaving like nothing more than Schola Progenium bullies. Watching them, it seemed to Straeker that the orks had already refuelled, following their assault of the day before and were now preparing for whatever missions their commanders might choose to send them on today. There was a whole squadron here on the ground, ten planes in total. There would never be a better opportunity to hit the orks before they could launch another strike against the loyal Imperial forces.

Looking at the ugly ork planes, Straeker was suddenly and poignantly reminded of how much he missed his own Lightning. The Imperial planes were so much sleeker and prouder than the blunt-nosed, petrol-guzzling alien flyers. The Lightnings, Thunderbolts and Marauders were like sleek-pelted wolves compared to the ork mekaniks' pig-like fighta-bommerz.

'What do we do now, sergeant?' the anxious Ercal was asking.

'Well, let's consider our options,' Bane, his commanding officer, replied. 'We have a duty to reach Hellsbreach and deliver the precious information Agent Braxus left in our hands. Then again, we also have a duty to rid our world of the greenskin menace.'

'Strevicz,' Bane said, turning to the vox-trooper, 'any luck in getting a signal through?'

Trooper Strevicz looked up from making adjustments to the knobs and dials on his battered vox-set. 'Nothing yet, sir,' he replied sullenly.

'Okay, so it's still up to us to get the message through in person, so to speak.'

'We could circumnavigate our way around this obstacle.' Steinbeck suggested.

'That could take ages,' complained Trooper Kayvan. 'These greenskins would hear that rattling heap it passed.' He jerked a thumb at the battlegwagon behind them.

'What, over the roar of their engines and the planes?' Broek challenged.

'Well, it would make our journey much longer.'

'He does have a point there.' Rumi agreed.

'Those planes are going to be off the ground within half an hour, I would guess.' Straeker piped up, joining in the discussion.

'Then we'll be sitting targets.' Bane nodded. 'There's no way they wouldn't see us and then our futures would be short and filled with pain.'

'Are you suggesting we take them on?' Ercal asked, aghast.

'Why not?' Gynt asked.

'Because there are only nine of us, for a start!'

'Don't forget the venerable brother over there, and that heavy-firepower packing battlegwagon.' Gynt almost chuckled.

Straeker had decided that the flamer trooper and the obviously younger and less experienced Ercal were a stark contrast to each other. Gynt seemed to relish any excuse to use his flame-throwing weapon.

On the other hand, Riseley Ercal, though keen to serve his Emperor and play his part in ridding Armageddon of its alien invaders, was still nervous of war. And all that he had experienced since with the Armageddon Steel Legion had done nothing to dispel or ease that feeling. If anything, recent events had only served to make him more uncertain about the appalling situation he now found himself in.

'But you do need to get the agent's message through to Hellsbreach, and as quickly as possible.' Ercal said, reemphasizing the point. 'It's our duty.'

'Yeah, and it's also our duty to give those greenskin hides a kicking,' Kayvan snarled.

'What's that noise?' Strevicz suddenly interrupted. All eyes focused on the larger hangar, furthest from their position. The great sliding doors had grated open and a big-wheeled trakk was driving through them. But the truk wasn't the source of the sound they could all hear now.

The truk was towing a plane out of the hangar. None of the Imperials looking from the top of the ridge had ever seen an ork smoker of such size before. It was an ork flyboy's dream, and was definitely the pride of the squadron. The bomber had a wingspan at least four times that of any plane around the runway. Four heavy-propped engines, positioned along their length, were purring up to take-off speed and were the source of the roaring wind.

The craft's cylindrical body looked large enough to transport a fleet of gunwagons to the frontline. Befitting something of its size, the plane bristled with gunnery positions and carried enough wing-strapped missiles to rival the complement of the entire fighta-bommer squadron. Perched above its huge fang-maw-painted nose was the glass bubble of the cockpit.

Gynt swore. 'Will you look at the size of that bastard?'

'It's big, I'll give you that,' Broek agreed.

'Yeah,' added Verhoef, 'it's a big bastard and no mistake.'

'You know what, sergeant?' Straeker said, as if he was wryly smiling beneath his gas hood.

'What?' Bane asked, sounding intrigued.

'Well, as we're in such a hurry to reach Hellsbreach, we would get there much more quickly if we could fly there.'

'HOW'S IT COMING, Gynt?' Sergeant Bane's voice crackled over the trooper's micro-bead comm. The platoon still only had close-range radio contact.

'We've set tube charges on two of the four tanks, sir,' Gynt whispered in reply.

'You need to hurry it up, trooper,' Bane hissed back over the comm.

The plan was a simple one. To steal a plane, the legionaries would have to take the airfield by surprise. Without the cover of darkness a distraction was needed. So it was that Gynt and Steinbeck were sent ahead, to the other end of the airstrip, skirting the

far slope of the ridge, out of sight of the greenskins. They were to blow the aliens' fuel dump. With the orks preoccupied with the resulting situation, the rest of Bane's platoon would attack from the south from the battlewagon, accompanied by Straeker and the formidable Brother Jarold.

'There's a problem, sir.' Gynt said into the comm, glancing across at Vin Steinbeck, who was hunkered down behind the furthest of the rusted tanks in the orks' fuel dump. The scout was holding his right hand out behind his back with four fingers showing.

'What sort of a problem?' Bane was beginning to sound distinctly irritated.

'Four orks, coming our way, sir.'

'Have they seen you?'

'Not yet, sir.'

'Then what the hell are they doing there?'

'I can't answer that, sir.'

Steinbeck had unslung his long-las and was taking a bead on one of the greenskins.

'What are your instructions, sir? Should we open fire?' Gynt asked, prepping his flamer.

'No. Get out of there. We don't want to spoil the surprise.' Bane instructed. 'Move back.'

The two troopers began to move. However, as Steinbeck drew back from the approaching orks he pulled his lasgun's bayonet fitting from his utility belt and thrust it into the rust-weakened side of the third tank. Clear petrochemical fuel immediately began to dribble from the hole. As Steinbeck pulled the knife blade out again he gave it a twist, opening the rent even further so that the trickle became a steady stream.

Gynt heard the orks granting, as if in surprise. He was sure they could smell the leaking promethium. He gestured to Steinbeck to hurry up. The two of them jogged back towards the shadowy wall of the ridge and the outcrop that hid the path to the higher ground to the airfield.

'Okay, sir, we're in position,' Gynt informed his sergeant.

'Then detonate when ready, and may the Emperor be with you. Bane, out.'

From their cover, the two troopers watched as fuel flooded across the hard-packed earth, following the natural camber of the ground, in the direction of the airstrip. It was turning the pale ochre soil a deep umber. Before they knew what was going on, the orks were splashing through the promethium-slick.

Pursing his lips, Gynt activated the detonator. The explosion shook the very ground around the troopers and sent scree skittering from the ridge path. A ball of roiling black smoke and vivid orange flame ballooned into the sky. The third fuel tank was torn apart by the detonation as, in turn, was the fourth; both their contents fuelled the raging conflagration.

The four approaching orks were thrown backwards, landing spread-eagled on the wet ground. The attention of every other greenskin on the airfield was immediately drawn to the exploding fuel dump. Shouts rose from every corner of the site.

The four orks picked themselves up, their leather jerkins and britches doused with promethium and began to run as the spilled fuel ignited. They had not got more than a few metres before the flames were licking up their legs and setting light to the rest of their doused bodies. Squealing like hogs with arms flailing, the four stumbled on for, what seemed to Gynt, a long time after being torched, falling at last as their flesh began to blacken and char.

Fire raced across the ground from the ruptured tanks to the refueling truck. Blue, purple and orange flames as tall as a man leapt into the air. The fire reached the truck and the discarded pump-hose caught alight. For a moment nothing more dramatic happened. Then, with a savage bestial roar, the truck exploded. Pieces of twisted black metal rose into the air at the centre of the rising fireball. A wheel hurtled out of the roiling, greasy flames, the rubber tyre on fire, and bounced past the troopers, only a few metres from their position.

Just as the echoing resonance of the explosions was beginning to die down, gunfire barked from the opposite end of the airstrip.

Gynt could see the massive, steamroller-wheeled battlewagon motoring around the end of the ridge into the open mouth of the valley. It was traveling at about forty-five kilometres an hour, kicking up dust behind it from its caterpillar tracks and huge wheels. The huge kannon, and two twin-linked shootas, mounted on the back of the machine were spewing forth high-calibre death into the backs of the surprised orks. They were manned by Sergeant Bane, Broek and Kayvan, while Ercal loaded, and Rumi and Sttevicz fired from the sides of the wagon with their lasguns. Straeker had found a cache of stikkbombz in the back of the wagon too and he was now launching these in the greenskins' direction using a purpose-built throwing device.

Orks either fell before the haphazard hail of fire, or were obliterated by the heavy kannon shells. They whined as they fell spinning all around. But it was not only the battlewagon that was creating such heavy casualties amongst the greenskin horde that scrambled for cover across the airfield. Striding towards them, parallel to the tank-like wagon, was the black-armoured, halo-crested hulking form of Brother Jarold of the Black Templars Adeptus Astartes.

Muzzle-flash and smoke obscured the barrels of his spinning autocannon and blasting storm bolter. Alien flesh turned to a green sappy mist under the pounding blasts as orks and gretchin were torn apart by the heavy weapons' fire.

At the same time, the dreadnought's voice boomed from speakers built into his armour. It declaimed the aliens as blasphemous creatures whose existence was against the will of the Emperor and it called down divine retribution upon their malformed ranks. It was the voice of doom itself.

As if in response, unintelligible barked orders boomed out over the airfield from the tannoy of the con-tower.

But whilst most of the gretchin were running for cover, a number of the larger orks seemed to have kept their wits about them and were running for their planes. On the ground they were useless against the battlewagon but if they could get into the air that would be a very different matter altogether.

'We've got to stop those bastards getting airborne,' Gynt said to Steinbeck.

'Understood,' the scout replied and, without another word, the troopers ran from the cover of the outcrop into the enclosure of the airfield.

BANE WAS SUDDENLY thrown forwards as the battlewagon slewed to a halt. He slammed into the controls of the kannon he was manning. 'What's going on down there, Verhoef?' he growled at the battlewagon's driver.

A split second later the whole vehicle was shaken by an explosion that struck a matter of metres from the spiked, drive dram at the front of the wagon. If Verhoef hadn't stopped, the shell would have made a direct hit on the legionaries' looted vehicle.

'Sorry, sir!' Verhoef called back, his tone jovial despite their current predicament.

'Don't worry, trooper.' Bane answered. 'Well spotted. Keep it up.'

Ahead of them the massive bomber was still being towed onto the runway. The orks were obviously determined to get it airborne, even in the face of the Imperials sudden strike.

It would have been a simple matter for Bane to turn his kannon on the plane's missile-slung wings and blow it all to kingdom come, but that wasn't their objective. When the pilot had suggested he could fly them out of there, to Hellsbreach, aboard the monstrous craft, Bane's imagination, and sense of hope, had fired up once again. It had been the Emperor's intention that his platoon rescue Conrad Sttaeker so that they might fulfil their mission.

But the ork pilot was already on board and firing up the engines as the plane was towed out onto the runway. They had to act now to stop their one chance of escape from evading them.

'Verhoef!' Bane yelled over the clattering roar of the twin-linked shootas firing either side of him. 'Take that truck out!'

'Yes, sir!' came the excited reply.

The battlewagon's engine roared and thick gouts of black smoke poured from its exhaust stacks. The huge tank-machine powered forward.

Bane saw the horrified look in the eyes of the ork driving the truck just before the battlewagon hit. With the tearing screech of metal the battlewagon ploughed into the side of the truck, buckling its chassis and smashing it sideways. The joist attaching the truck to the plane twisted and snapped. The ork driver disappeared as it was buried amidst the crumpled wreckage of the machine. Bane suddenly felt a hurricane blast of wind against his body. Turning, he saw the scything blades of the propellers of one of the bomber's huge engines moving inexorably towards them. Due to its size, the wing would pass over the top of the battlewagon and the propeller would then chop through whatever was in its way. Over the low thrum of the propellers he could also hear weapons cycling up to speed.

'Now get us out of here!' he roared.

The whole airfield was consumed by chaos and confusion. The battlewagon lurched forwards, past the front of the plane, smashing the wreckage of the tow-truck to one side as it did so. Then, with a stretch of clear ground ahead of them, Verhoef sped away, towards the con-tower. The bomber's guns opened fire, tearing up the rockcrete surface of the runway behind them.

'Strevicz, take Broek's place.' Bane commanded, as they hurtled away from the bomber. Strevicz obliged, slinging his lasgun over his shoulder.

Stepping back from his former position, Broek turned to his sergeant. 'Where do you want me, sarge?' he asked.

'Broek, whatever you do, get Straeker on board that plane!'

ENGINES SCREAMING, THREE of the ork planes lifted off from the runway, ascending sharply, as their pilots pushed them to launch velocity. Brother Jarold trained his cycling autocannon on the last of the steeply rising craft. It was probably already out of range but he had to try. A sudden, brilliant flash momentarily distracted him.

The second plane to get airborne was in trouble. It must have been hit whilst still on the ground. Now, under the stresses its pilot was subjecting it to, an engine had caught fire. A second later the fuel tank under its left wing exploded. The plane immediately banked abruptly left, diving at full speed towards the ground. Before it reached the ground, however, it found the third plane to take off, which was only twenty metres off the ground. The two fighta-bommerz collided in mid-air and hurtled into the runway becoming a twin-tailed comet of flame just before they hit.

Sections of wing and pieces of fuselage were thrown out from the destruction of the two planes, killing a dozen or more panicking gretchin and half a dozen still grounded orks.

The allied Imperial surprise attack had made sure that seven of the planes never managed to get airborne. Three had been destroyed where they stood by the combined firepower of the dreadnought and the requisitioned battlewagon. One had been made incapable of flying. Thanks to the exploding fuel dump, its whole tail section had been removed by a piece of flying refuelling truck.

One had even been destroyed by another fighta-bommer. As its engines fired up and cycled to speed, the pilot had tried taking pot shots at, Gynt and Steinbeck who had appeared from the other end of the airfield and were clearing out pockets of greenskin resistance. The legionaries had easily avoided the clumsy attempt on their lives and, as the flyboy steered his plane round to chase the escaping troopers with blasta fire, he had found the craft of one of his fellows in his sights. A wing-mounted missile had been hit and the plane had been destroyed.

The last two were still whole but were grounded for other reasons. In one the pilot had been killed by Imperial gunfire, and in the other the plane's undercarriage had been destroyed by the dreadnought's carefully placed blasts. There was no way the fighta-bommer could get up to launch velocity now.

That left one plane airborne and, if the Emperor found them wanting, it could be enough to put an end to the Imperials' assault on the airfield.

The ork smoker banked and turned, as if in preparation to make a strafing run on the airfield. Jarold's suit-cogitator calculated the craft's projected trajectory and fed the result directly into the Black Templar's surgically altered brain. The fighta-bommer was coming straight at him.

Jarold stood his ground in the middle of the cratered runway, six tonnes of immovable, braced metal. Autocannon fire tore up the rough tarmac, spitting shards of asphalt into the air.

Closer and closer came the fighta-bommer.

Unflinching, Brother Jarold, the armoured veteran of a thousand such confrontations with the enemy, held his ground.

The plane levelled off as it came in low over the airfield – closer, ever closer.

Still the dreadnought did not move.

Closer.

Servos whirring, Jarold trained both his weapons on the hurtling plane and locked them on their target.

Closer.

Almost subconsciously the Templar began chanting the calming the Litany of the Emperor's Protection.

Closer.

Twenty metres.

Fifteen.

Ten.

In a roar of fire Jarold opened up with both his weapons. Fragmentation shells tore from the autocannon at a terrifying rate, in a welter of fire, smoke and noise, while the mini-missiles that were the storm bolter's ammunition also found their mark.

Autocannon fire raked the ork plane as Jarold's weapons gave vent to the anger and injustice of the wrongs done to his Chapter by the greenskins. Metal tore from weapon's sponsons, wings and fuselage as hard round shells spanged from the armoured hull.

The windshield shattered. The engine manifold tore open. Shoota mountings buckled. Ailerons were holed and black smoke began pour from the plane's wounds. Ork blood and brain matter splattered the inside of the cockpit as an autocannon shell took out the pilot.

Then the fuel tanks erupted.

Sheathed in flame, trailing fire, the fighta-bommer went into a spin. Only metres from the ground the burning plane soared over the immobile dreadnought. As the plane completed another death-dive rotation, a wingtip clipped the dreadnought and Brother Jarold was spinning after the wreckage of the plane, tossed aside by the impact as if he were no more than a child's doll.

The dreadnought rolled for almost ten metres through the dust and sand thrown up by the Shockwave of the passing smoker before coming to a stop. Behind him the burning wreckage of the fighta-bommer ploughed into the fractured tarmac of the runway.

There was another explosion. Stone chips rattled down like rain.

Electrical feedback and genuine searing pain told Jarold what had happened. Servos whirring he tried to right himself, pushing down against the rockcrete ground with his power claw. But on the right side of his body there was nothing he could use to correct himself again. The autocannon that had been Jarold's right arm for the last twelve years had been torn off in the collision with the plane.

TROOPERS GYNT AND Steinbeck rounded the back of the second hangar to the right of the runway and immediately ducked back into cover as fire from some, as yet unknown, ork weapon tore up the dusty ground in front of them. The rattling blasts continued and the corrugated wall of the hangar became peppered with holes a couple of centimeters across.

The two men sprinted back around the other side of the hangar. There they ran into a gang of gretchin workers being herded in front of a bionic-eyed ork mekanik.

Steinbeck snapped off a killing shot, putting a cauterising las-bolt through the skull of the ork as Gynt hosed the gaggle of smaller greenskins with his flame-thrower.

Moving around the front of the empty hangar they saw what had been shooting at them. The grounded plane was on the other side of the runway, totally lacking an undercarriage. But the pilot was still intact inside the cockpit and had turned his guns on the attackers. Seeing Gynt and Steinbeck again the nose guns swivelled round under his control and pointed directly at them.

There was a dull boom and through the smoke drifting across the runway from the burning wreckage Gynt saw the battlewagon emerge like some growling beast of metal. Its main kannon fired again and the front of the grounded fighta-bommer was torn apart as the kannon-shell detonated.

Three orks died in the hail of shrapnel. Part of an engine was thrown by the blast through the roof of the hangar behind them. A chunk of fuselage buried itself in a corrugated iron wall only a few centimetres above Gynt's head and remained there quivering. They had been saved by Sergeant Bane's sharp shooting. Gynt found himself wondering if the venerable Brother Jarold had been saved too. He and Steinbeck had both watched helplessly as the last of the fighta-bommerz met its end at the death-dealing hands of the dreadnought. They had not seen what had happened to the dreadnought after the plummeting plane had appeared to hit him head-on.

If the most honoured of Black Templar brothers was out there, still alive, the legionaries owed it to him to bring him back.

Troopers Gynt and Steinbeck fought their way through the chaos and confusion intent on finding the felled Brother Jarold, the two men gunning down and setting light to any aliens that got in their way.

'GO!' BROEK HISSED in Straeker's ear.

The pilot half-jogged and half-stumbled from behind the corner of the massive bommer shed, with the burly legionary padding after him. Every stumbling step he took jarred his aching body. It seemed to him that there wasn't a part of him that didn't ache but it would be worth it in the end, he kept telling himself.

The bommer was no more than ten metres from them now. The orks must have been intending to load it before take-off – although the Emperor alone knew what with – as the ramped door at the back of the plane was still open, its edge bouncing on the broken runway as the bommer slowly but surely powered up to speed, preparing for immediate launch.

Boarding the massive craft wouldn't be the problem. It was greenskins that scurried between Straeker, his bodyguard, and the plane itself that would be.

Naval-issue autopistol in hand, the Imperial pilot fired at the running gretchin and their larger ork cousins, while Trooper Broek, now keeping pace at his side, cut the aliens down with carefully placed shots from his lasgun.

Straeker was starting to get used to the confining vision of the gas hood. And he was making a good account of himself. He was renowned as something of a marksman among his squadron, and this still held true despite the sight-restricting, gas hood and his injuries. He didn't see the open heavy toolbox on the ground in front of him, however.

He tripped and fell. Normally he would have been able to recover from such a stumble, but not in his current condition. A spasm of pain shot through his chest as he hit the rockcrete and for a moment his whole world was a white lightning storm of agony. He rolled onto his back and took a great wheezing gasp.

Broek was there, crouching at his side. 'Are you all right?'

No he wasn't, of that he was sure. In fact he was horribly certain that one of his poking broken ribs had just caused him more serious harm.

Straeker half-opened his eyes against the lancing pain and tried to speak. He saw the silhouette of the ork looming over them.

Up on the ridge in comparative safety, capturing the bommer had seemed like a good idea. Now he wasn't so sure. Had it really been the best plan? The excitable Sergeant Bane, with hope renewed, had certainly thought so. But had it really just been Straeker's old bravura coming to the fore again, the need to make one more kill than your wingman?

'Look out!' Straeker managed to call, but his warning came too late.

Weaponless, the ork made a two-handed fist and clubbed Broek around the head. Without a word the legionary slumped to the ground. Then the ork was coming for Straeker.

He had to do something. A desperate hand reached out, fumbling for something – anything – that he could use to defend himself. He didn't know what had happened to his gun.

The ork was standing over him now. Straeker could smell its stinking breath.

His fingertips scrabbled against something hard and metal. Straining, the effort sending more shocks of pain through his side, he grasped the object firmly in his hand.

The ork grabbed him by the torn lapels of his pilot's jumpsuit and began to haul him up, towards its foul-begotten face.

Using all the strength he could muster, Straeker heaved up the heavy object and smashed it into the side of the ork's skull. There was a moment during which nothing happened. Then the ork let go of Straeker's jumpsuit and dropped him, leaving him rolling on the ground in renewed agony.

The alien staggered backwards. There was a sharp crack and the ork crashed into the dust next to Straeker, with half its head missing. Half-kneeling on the ground was Broek, his just-discharged lasgun in hand.

Dizzily the trooper helped the groaning pilot to his feet. 'Come on,' he slurred, 'we've got a plane to catch.'

Straeker looked down at the crudely machined steel spanner he still gripped in his hand. It was over half a metre long and looked like it had been designed mainly for hitting things – hard – as an ork would do to make them go, rather than for loosening and tightening large bolts.

And then there was his pistol, lying where he had dropped it on the runway. Dropping the heavy spanner with a resounding clang, Straeker carefully bent down and recovered the weapon.

The enticing open ramp of the bommer was now twenty metres away. Broek was steadying Straeker, although he was quite possibly concussed himself, and the two of them resumed their pursuit of the plane.

Later, Straeker wasn't entirely sure how he had made it. He could barely even remember the run across the smoking tarmac. But then, incredibly, he was dropping to his knees on the cold iron floor of the bommer's hold. The Emperor was truly looking down on them and blessing their venture.

Whatever the orks had been planning to do with the bommer, the Imperials' attack had meant they had had to abandon their plans, for the hold was empty. There was not an ork in sight. That said, Straeker knew that the pilot and some gunners had managed to take their places before the great plane made its break for freedom.

'You go for the cockpit,' Broek said, over the constant throbbing hum of the engines that reverberated the whole airframe of the plane. 'I'll deal with any other... resistance.'

The legionary stumbled off into the gloom of the bommer. It was not long before Straeker heard the crack of lasfire and quickly silenced guttural roars. Now it was his turn.

With what felt like his last reserves of strength, Straeker loped through the gloom towards the front of the plane. He passed through two bulkheads and hauled himself up laddered steps. The dull light of the bommer's interior was suddenly replaced by the dazzling daylight streaming in through the glass window plates of the cockpit.

The huge muscular form of the greenskin piloting the plane sat squarely in front of him, with two huge hands gripping the crudest of flight controls. Without a moment's hesitation Straeker put the gun to the back of the ork's head and fired.

The alien soundlessly slumped forward over the controls. The pitch of the engine whine began to rise and the bommer veered sharply left. Straeker looked up through the windshield of the cockpit and saw the tall hexagonal structure of the flight control tower filling the glass panels. He had to get control of the plane or it was going to hit the tower.

Bracing himself against the pilot's seat, with pain stabbing through his body and making him cry out, Straeker took hold of the ork's padded flight jacket with both hands and pulled the huge, stinking creature towards him. The beast didn't budge. He tried again, and then he tried pushing against the alien's mass. Still nothing.

For a moment Straeker panicked. The ork was too heavy and he was simply too weak and tired. He couldn't shift its great bulk out of the driving seat.

The control tower loomed closer.

There had to be something he could do. His desperate eyes caught sight of the large red button on the end of control lever that was still held down by the alien's slumped body. Without a second thought Straeker hit the button with his fist.

Two missiles roared from their stanchions under the bommer's wings like smoking tailed comets. Three seconds later they hit the con-tower. The structure disappeared in a welter of black smoke and licking orange flames. Smoke and dust was thrown back over the cockpit of the plane, obscuring Straeker's view.

When the wind had blown the smoke dear again, Straeker saw that the bommer was still heading directly towards the smouldering pile of rubble that had been the ork's flight control tower. There was nothing else he could do.

'Looks like you could use a hand,' said Broek clambering up the ladder into the cockpit.

ENGINES WHINING, STRAEKER pulled back on the con-rod with both hands and the nose of the huge plane rose. The view through the cockpit changed from the rugged, sandy cliffs of the parched valley to the smog-painted skies of Armageddon. Anton Verhoef watched as the pilot struggled with the over-sized orkish controls, the strain evident in the way he held his body. He had had similar problems driving the battlewagon to begin with but had adjusted in time, just as Straeker would. But the pilot had done it, nonetheless. He had kept true to his boast and now he was flying them out of there, towards Hellsbreach.

The legionaries of Bane's platoon had snapped themselves into the uncomfortable, over-sized, plate-metal seats in the cockpit and the compartment behind it. Verhoef looked back, past the tired men, down into the gloom of the hold and what was held there. They had just managed to load the battlewagon onboard, so huge was the bommer Verhoef himself had unwittingly christened *Big Bastard*. The name had stuck with the legionaries and, while they were waiting to board and take off, Troopers Ercal and Gynt had sprayed the name on the hull of the plane using a paint-gun found in one of the hangars. The legionaries didn't know what they might face on reaching Hellsbreach and so Sergeant Bane had said they should go prepared for anything. So the battlewagon had come with them.

It had taken the Imperials two hours to prepare for take-off, having rid the airfield of its orkish defenders. Those greenskins that Brother Jarold hadn't killed in his furious purging riot, which he had pursued with zealous fanaticism, had fled into the desert wastes and not been seen again since.

And then that brought the platoon's expert regarding all things mechanical back to the dreadnought.

Brother Jarold stood braced in the back of the hold, in front of the battlewagon. The legionaries had had to clamp him in with restraining bolts, just as they had the tank-trukk. The leviathan stood there now, his black armour gleaming dully, in what little light permeated the hold, where it wasn't scarred to bare metal or powdered with ash-dust. Brother Jarold was methodically testing his new arm-weapon, tracking it from side to side, up and down, making minute adjustments to calibrations with the machine-spirit of his armour aiding him.

Verhoef considered Brother Jarold's new arm to be his greatest achievement. They had been right to salvage the Sentinel's lascannon and bring it with them.

At first the dreadnought had rejected the idea that the Sentinel's weapon be spliced onto his ancient armoured body, even though he had lost his autocannon attachment. He had soon come round to the idea, however, once Verhoef and Sergeant Bane calmly suggested that it would mean the devout crusader would be able to carry on his fight to purge Armageddon of greenskins.

But the venerable brother had doubted Verhoef's ability to accomplish such a task. He was, Jarold pointed out, only a man after all and not an Astartes techmarine. Verhoef had taken the slight with good grace and had at last managed to persuade the dreadnought to let him make an attempt, having explained in minute detail exactly how he was going to perform the procedure.

The task finally complete, after several hours of bodged engineering and the assistance of four legionaries, Verhoef was rightly proud of his handiwork. He had managed to get the Sentinel weapon attached, with minimal functionality, but such a temporary repair was miracle enough.

And yet the pride he felt was nothing compared to the astonishment felt by Brother Jarold. The dreadnought was amazed at the guardsman's skill, heaping vociferous praise upon him. He likened the skill to that of a Tech Priest of Mars itself, until it got to the point when Verhoef was began to feel awkwardly embarrassed in front of his fellow troopers.

The legionaries were all exhausted. No one said anything, as there was nothing to say. They sat in silence for over an hour, as the bommer soared through the quiet Armageddon skies towards the Imperial stronghold at Hellsbreach. The men took the opportunity provided by the flight to check over their weapons, replace dwindling power cells, clean the lenses of their rebreather hoods, and carry out a myriad other small tasks that passed the time. And despite their tiredness there was an air of optimism about the platoon. They had almost completed their mission. It was almost as good as if they were on their way home.

There was a sharp click and the crew compartments of the bommer were filled with reverberating feedback. Straeker was attempting to use the internal comm-system. There was another click and the pilot's voiced echoed throughout the interior.

'Sergeant Bane, can you come up to the cockpit? I think you should see this.'

JELKUS BANE PEERED out of the cockpit windshield towards the horizon, but there was nothing there. It looked much like the rest of the ash-clogged wastes of Armageddon Secundus. That was not so unusual, except that in this case something should have been there. The titan pens of Hellsbreach. 'What's happened to it?' he gasped in disbelief.

'I don't know, sergeant,' Straeker said, looking at the auspex-scanner Verhoef had managed to patch into the plane's primitive sensor array. 'This ork equipment is pretty basic. I'm reading a spike on one wavelength of some sort. I'm guessing it's radiation.'

'Strevicz!' Bane called back to his vox-trooper sat in the compartment behind and below the cockpit. 'Are you getting anything on the vox?'

'Still nothing, sir.'

'Would you expect to be able to pick up a signal from Hellsbreach from this range?'

'With their communication arrays, definitely, sir. But there's nothing.'

'You're sure that vox-set's working?'

'Yes, sir. I've taken it apart and put it back together twice. It's working all right. It's just that there's no signal for it to pick up.'

'Look,' said Straeker, pointing away with one hand through the windshield.

Bane's heart fell. They had fought so hard and so long and for nothing. Hellsbreach was gone. What he could see, left in its place, was a glass-smooth polished bowl of a crater two kilometres across, surrounded by a melted wall of rockcrete and metal, dotted with the heat-warped shapes of Imperial gothic arches and titan gantries.

He himself had said that they should go prepared for anything. But he hadn't been prepared for this.

His men had been relying on reaching Hellsbreach and a respite from the war it could have provided. This discovery would be the biggest dent to their morale since the loss of their Chimera and the ork dreadnought assault on the bunker, before Brother Jarold's appearance, when they thought it was really the end of them.

'What do we do now, sergeant?' Straeker asked.

'Do you think you could fly this crate all the way to Hive Tartarus?' Bane asked, a sudden spark of optimism entering his voice.

'No,' came the pilot's blunt reply. 'With the weight we're carrying this thing hasn't got enough fuel. The tanks were only half full when we took off and there wasn't any promethium left to top them up with. Besides, the guns of Tartarus would blow an ork bomber out of the sky before we could even get in range for our comms to tell them who we really were. So, sergeant, what do you want to do?'

Bane said nothing. He simply stared forlornly out of the glass windows of the cockpit. Now Tartarus High Command would never know of the existence of the gargant factory and the threat it posed to the Imperial forces.

'Straeker,' the sergeant said, suddenly animated, 'can you work out how far we are from these coordinates?' and he reeled off the information passed on to him by the dying spy.

'That's another hour away,' Straeker said.

'Yes, but could we make it?' Bane asked.

'Possibly.'

'Then that's where I want you to take us. We have a new mission to complete.'

THIRTEEN

WARRIOR'S VOW

THE LAND SPEEDER crested the rise of the slag-dunes. Suddenly there it was, spread out before them: a rift-edged valley over twenty kilometres across at its widest point, or so the Speeder's sensor-augurs were reporting, delineated by rocky outcrops and projections. And rising from the broad valley floor, still ten kilometres away from the Speeder, was the vast caldera crater of a dormant volcano.

Brother Horek gasped. Despite all the things he had seen since being inducted fully into the Black Templars Chapter, following the liberation of Solemnus, it was still an impressive sight. And it was just as Brother Ansgar had described it.

The Land Speeder's auspex was telling its crew that the cone was two point three six seven kilometres across its diameter. Its mountainous sides were steep and ridged with jagged projections, the cone rose to a height of two hundred metres.

'Dorn's teeth!' Brother Tortain declared. He tightened his grip on the trigger handles of the pintle-mounted heavy bolter, while the cogitor-slaved lascannon whirled and clicked, as it flitted from target to target as one rocky outcrop after another came within closer range of the gliding Speeder.

Brother-Pilot Horek brought the *Excalibur* in low, the downdraught of the craft's anti-gravitic motors kicking up grey dust from the rocky ground beneath it. The flyer's shadow skimmed the uneven ground behind them. Horek guided the Speeder into the shadows beneath the towering cliffs of the rift, keeping them as well hidden as he could from any prying greenskin eyes.

'Do you see anything, brother?' the pilot asked his gunner.

'Nothing,' Tortain replied bluntly. 'The auspex is not picking up any life signs. If the greenskins are here they must be inside the crater.'

But there were signs of activity within the crater-base. They could both hear the distant sounds of coughing machinery, steady hammering, the rattle of drills and chugging engines, relayed to their helmet-sets via the Land Speeder's vox-speakers, so loud was the noise of the manufactorum processes.

There was a roar and they saw the desert to their left become a shimmering blur as the open mouth of a vast pipe, emerging from the rock wall at the base of the crater, came into view. Exhaust gases blasted from the vent in a jet of superheated air.

The Land Speeder's crew could now see more of these vents, as well as smokestacks that belched waste gases out into the desert, to be carried away on soaring thermals to join with the high stratus smog. Occasionally a spout of flame would burst from one of them.

'There's definitely a power plant of some kind operating within the cone,' Brother-Pilot Horek considered. 'Whatever's been set up here, has been for quite some time.'

The *Excalibur* continued to circle the volcanic remnant, skirting the edge of the valley as it did so. The rugged cliffs of the caldera continued to turn past them. The climbing sun beat down on the barren valley.

'By the Golden Throne!' Tortain suddenly declared, tearing Horek's attention away from piloting the Speeder on its course.

Slowly coming into view, as the Land Speeder circuted the great edifice, set back into the wall of the crater, were two towering double doors. Constructed from riveted iron and adamantium armour, no doubt, the doors were at least a hundred metres tall. It suddenly became clear what the crater had once been used for. Still adorning the doors was a colossal badge, formed from adamantium and ceramite, a sinister image that was half robotic visage and half human skull, only many, many times bigger. Horek instantly recognised it as the *machina opus* insignia of the mysterious Adeptus Mechanicus.

However, the symbol of the Machine God had been defaced and its scarred surface had been supplanted with an even more malevolent glyph of orkish origin. The icon, roughly put together from panels of rust-pocked metal, resembled a chunky, angular ork head. Plasma and melta-tools had been used to cut a jagged, lightning scar into its surface. This had then been filled in with red paint, whereas the rest of the image had been haphazardly covered with a green wash, so the scar stood out in stark contrast. Horek felt a quiver of excitement and awe. It was what they had been looking for these twelve long years: the sign of the Scarred Ork, the tribal marking of the Blood Scar tribe. It could surely mean only one thing, that their nemesis awaited them inside the crater.

The doors were firmly shut. There was no sign of any alien presence other than the blasphemous glyph.

'Horek to Castellan Adlar,' the Speeder's pilot spoke into the comm.

'Adlar here,' the commanding Marine's voice echoed back tinnily over the speakers built into Horek's helmet. Thank Sigismund their short-range communications were still operating, despite the Land Speeder patrol being at the limit of their effective operations. 'What do you have to report?'

'We've found it, my lord. Brother Ansgar's prophecy was correct. The orks are definitely here. And they are orks of the Blood Scar tribe.'

'Emperor be praised.' Adlar exclaimed.

'What are your orders, my lord?' Horek asked. 'Do you want us to see if we can get closer to the objective and carry out further reconnaissance?'

'No, brother-pilot,' his commander replied. 'You would risk compromising your position. Rendezvous with us at these co-ordinates.' There was a bleep as the Land Speeder's cogitator received the data relating to the Fighting Company's current position, transmitted to the *Excalibur* by Techmarine Isendur.

'Co-ordinates received.' Horek confirmed. 'We're on our way. The Emperor protects.'

The pilot adjusted the position of the con-rod and the Speeder banked away in a sharp turn over the valley floor. For a moment it was illuminated by blazing sunlight as the orb of Armageddon's sun appeared between a cleft in the valley rim. Brother Tortain continued to watch the crater for signs of life as they made their return pass.

'Brother, I see something,' the Speeder's gunner suddenly declared.

'What?' Horek asked.

'A flash of metal up towards the rim of the crater, as if something caught the sun for a moment.'

Tortain immediately took a bead on the spot. He saw another sudden brilliant flash and then heard the distance echoing report of a kannon firing. There was a whistling roar and something hurtled past the Speeder behind the flyer. A section of cliff face exploded in a cloud of rock dust behind them and crashed down to the valley floor in a colossal landslide.

'Hidden gun emplacements.' Tortain muttered. 'I thought there had to be some.'

'Prepare for evasive manoeuvres.' Horek warned his gunner.

Pushing the Land Speeder's engines to their limit Brother Horek sent the craft rocketing over the valley floor, bouncing over the ground, only a metre or so above rippling contours and fallen boulders.

There were two further distant booms and more of the valley exploded around them.

'Sigismund's wrath!' Horek swore. 'Can't you target their gun emplacements?' he asked Tortain over the rash of air.

'By Terra, I wish I could, but at this range our weapons haven't got a hope,' the gunner responded disconsolately.

'Then we can only hope to outran their guns. Hold on.'

Horek jinked and flung the machine violently from side to side as it hurtled towards the entrance to a rift pass, dodging the shells now falling all around them. The clouds of earth and dust thrown up by their impacts obscured Horde's view but travelling at speed the *Excalibur* pelted out of the obscuring clouds a moment after each explosion.

The Land Speeder suddenly bucked and rocked violently. It took all Horek's strength and expertise to stop them smashing nose first into the ground.

'Dorn's teeth! What was that?' Horek bawled. 'Damage assessment!' he ordered. He didn't dare take his eyes from the course he was steering to look at the warning lights flashing on the Speeder's console.

'The anti-gravitic manifold has been hit by shrapnel from a blast.' Tortain said looking back over his shoulder. He turned back to the instrument panel in front of his seat. 'The comm-relay's down too.'

'Look out! Incoming!' Tortain suddenly screamed.

For a split second Horek looked back towards the crater and saw the glowering, ork-eyed shell spinning towards them. He gunned the throttle and the Speeder shook again as the starboard engine gave a rattling cough. The missile hit the ground directly behind them and detonated, the resultant shockwave hurling the *Excalibur* forward and making it pitch roughly to one side.

And then suddenly a stack of wind-blown, sand-eroded rock was in front of them.

With Brother Tortain screaming for him to pull up, Horek yanked back on the Speeder's con-rod. Feeling the force of the G's push him back into his seat, and the smoking engine hot at his back, he prayed to the Emperor with all his heart.

CASTELLAN ADLAR OF the Black Templars paused in his trudging climb of the rocky escarpment and looked back at the snaking line of men following Brother Murtagh's flapping standard. They were in regal procession – sergeants leading their squads, Tactical Marines, assault troops and veterans – all marching solemnly in line. The sun beat down on the Space Marines' black

armour as it climbed towards its zenith. There was now no sign of the rad-storm that had scoured the desert the previous night. The radiation-mutated tempest had continued southwards over the hellish wastelands at a hungry pace, carrying some of the polluted cloud-cover with it. The air was still, apart from the shimmering of the barren landscape in the heat-haze.

The Fighting Company had been walking at a forced march now for hours and had covered many kilometres. Their only break during their long trek had been to cleanse the wreck of the ork hulk. But the Templars could keep going almost indefinitely, at least until their suits' power cores were drained of power, and as long as the men inside them had enough to eat and drink and weren't ultimately overcome by the heat or pollution.

During the Plautus Campaign on Quovar VII, Adlar and his troops had walked for four days without rest to reach a rebel-held spaceport, and had then fought for two days solid to liberate it from the insurrectionists for the Emperor.

Having crossed the vitrified plain of glass, with Armageddon's sun crawling into the sky, behind the ever-present smudges of toxic smog and gas emissions, the monotony of the ash-dunes had resumed. However, their path had begun to steadily climb as the desert gave way to firmer rocky ground. They were no longer trudging through the fallout of man's pillaging of the planet. The ground they were walking on now was actually the planet's natural rock formations.

Castellan Adlar considered the force ranged before him now. Since making planetfall he had only lost two of the sixty Black Templars that made up his Fighting Company.

First there had been the venerable Brother Jarold, denied the chance of even engaging the enemy in battle before he had been taken to join the warriors at the Emperor's side. Remembering the dreadnought filled Adlar with remorse and anger. Sorrow for the loss of such a valiant, honourable warrior, and fury that such a noble brother had been denied the opportunity to exact revenge on the aliens. But the Emperor, in his wisdom, had decided it was time Brother Jarold joined him in the war. He now fought against the dark gods beyond the physical realm.

The second initiate of his Fighting Company to fall had been Brother Elazar, taken as the Templars fought the feral packs infesting the wreck of the *Zaggraskar*. His valour would not be forgotten either. Adlar would make sure of it.

And now, it seemed, they might have lost the *Excalibur* as well and Brothers Horek and Tortain with it. After they had reported sighting the ork stronghold their communication had been abruptly cut off and there had been nothing from either the pilot or his gunner since. Neither had there been any response to hails from the main fighting force directed at the Land Speeder.

There were only two Templars in Adlar's company not clad in the same white-highlighted black armour as the rest of his men: the white-armoured Brother Bliant of the Apothecarion and the crimson techmarine.

Techmarine Brother Isendur approached Adlar now.

'My lord Castellan,' the dour-toned warrior announced, 'I have a contact, dosing rapidly.'

Adlar looked into the green glass eyes of the techmarine's visor. 'Is it the *Excalibur*?' he asked.

'I can't be certain at this range, my lord.' Isendur replied grimly.

'All units, prepare for possible attack.'

Despite having traversed a distance that would have exhausted even the fittest of Imperial Guard troopers the forced march had not dulled the Black Templars' reactions one bit. The squads smoothly took up position along the rocky path, weapons trained on the rise ahead of them. The assault squads fired up their jump packs ready to launch themselves at any potential attackers, while those troops armed with heavier weapons sighted on the ridge, aiming over the heads of the other Marines.

'Target closing,' Isendur informed his commander. 'We should have visual in eight seconds.'

'Prepare to fire at my command.' Adlar instructed his men.

Fighting Company Adlar froze, waiting. The sound of a roaring, misfiring engine could be heard quite clearly now, approaching their position. It had to be orks, Adlar considered.

With a roar the damaged Land Speeder *Excalibur* shot over the top of the ridge, smoke pouring from its tail end.

'Hold fire!' Adlar commanded.

The Speeder swerved violently overhead and only just cleared Brother Brannor, who was had been standing with his missile launcher targeted at the top of the rise. Adlar could see Brother-Pilot Horek straggling to keep the craft under control. He pulled the nose of the *Excalibur* round straight again but it was apparent that the Speeder was coming down.

Templars scattered before the plummeting craft as the Speeder careered towards them. The landing gear was already deployed. A strut clipped the top of a boulder and the Speeder was jerked round sideways once again. It hit the ground with a screaming grating of metal on rock, gouging claw-marks through the stony surface, and bounced up into the air again. It cleared another hundred metres before crashing down again on the slope of the escarpment, its landing gear buckling beneath it. The *Excalibur* skidded to a halt amidst a great flurry of dust and sand.

Then there was silence.

The battle-brothers of Company Adlar ran towards the downed Speeder to aid the crew, ceramite boots pounding on the weathered rock of the hill. As they reached the crash-site, Brother-Pilot Horek and Brother-Gunner Tortain were already extricating themselves from the grounded Speeder without any obvious signs of injury.

Castellan Adlar and Techmarine Isendur joined the other brothers gathered at the crash-site. Apothecary Bliant was already checking the two survivors for injuries but there were none. It was only thanks to the beneficence of the Emperor, and Horek's piloting skills, that they had been able to walk away from the crash unharmed.

The techmarine immediately turned his attention to the damaged Land Speeder.

'Can you repair it?' the Castellan asked him, after he had exchanged brief words with Horek and Tortain.

'The landing gear has gone completely.' Isendur moaned, 'but I can repair the damage to the engine, at least for the assault on the ork-held crater.'

The *Excalibur's* dramatic crash-landing had evidently made it appear that the Speeder had been more seriously damaged than it actually had.

'But it will take a little time.' Isendur added grimly.

'How long, brother?'

'An hour would be my best estimate.' The servo-arm projecting from Isendur's backpack twitched, the robotic claw at its end snapping fitfully, as if it was eager to start.

'Then you had best set to work. We'll need everything we've got if we're to take out the ork base.' Adlar turned back to the pilot and the gunner. 'Were you pursued?'

'No, sir.' Brother Tortain replied. 'I believe the orks thought they had hit us. As Brother Horek steered us into cover along a pass leading out the valley I thought I could hear guttural whooping and hollering. I sounded like the vile aliens were celebrating our defeat.'

'Very good.' Castellan Adlar said. 'Now I want you to debrief us on what you found. Tell us everything.'

'THERE IT IS.' Techmarine Isendur said, pointing at the tunnel-like mouth of the huge heat-vent emerging from the rock, fifty metres up the side of the crater-peak. 'That is our way in.'

As the Black Templars watched, a gout of flame ten metres long burst from the open pipe with a roar like that of one of the fire-breathing monsters of legend.

It had been Isendur, with his knowledge of Adeptus Mechanicus operations and manufactories granted him by the time he had spent in the company of the Machine God's priesthood on Mars, who had suggested that there might be a way into the crater through the power plant's exhaust ports. So it was he who was now leading fully half the Fighting Company on a mission to infiltrate the crater.

Castellan Adlar had realised that sixty Space Marines had very little hope of taking the ork base which would likely contain hundreds of the aliens, along with whatever it was they were building inside the crater. Even though the Space Marines were among the finest warriors of the Emperor, at least part of the force under his command needed to get inside the base undetected. He was not afraid of death – this was their destiny after all – but for them to fulfil the task the Emperor had given them, still required careful strategic planning and clear tactical thinking.

So it had been decided that Fighting Company Adlar would be split into two separate attack forces. One half – comprising Chaplain Wolfram's command squad, Tactical Squads Doane, Lir and Pendaran, as well as the two Veteran Squads Uther and Agravain – would infiltrate the ork's bastion via the fiery, exhaust ports of the crater's operating power plant, guided by Techmarine Isendur. The independently minded Brother Ansgar, the Emperor's Champion, had also chosen to accompany this group.

The second force would be led by Castellan Adlar himself and consisted of Squads Garrond, Bellangere, Dynadin, as well as those who remained of his own command squad, supported by the aerial fast attack units of Squads Vortimer and Phelan, and the hastily repaired Land Speeder *Excalibur*.

When all was ready the Space Marines had made their way to the edge of the rift valley in less than two hours. Once there they had deployed according to their commander's instructions. However, Adlar was not prepared to wait until nightfall before the Templars attacked, even though it would likely give the infiltrator team a better chance of making it to the heat vent unobserved. Brother Ansgar's vision had quite clearly shown them assaulting the caldera by day and the Emperor's Champion had a strong feeling that that day had come. Despite taking some convincing of the veracity of Ansgar's vision ever since he had followed the path it had shown, everything had happened as had been predicted. Castellan Adlar was not prepared to risk jeopardizing the success of the Black Templars' mission by turning his back on Ansgar's Emperor-sent visions.

'It is time, brothers.' Chaplain Wolfram declared, pointing with his crozius arcanum across from where his force crouched behind the cover of a bouldered landslide at the foot of the sharply steep valley wall to a spot three kilometres away.

Force Adlar were running from their own cover and closing on the gargantuan doors of the desecrated Mechanicus base. The jolting Land Speeder *Excalibur* was in the vanguard, along with the leaping Assault Marines, their jump packs lifting them twenty metres into the sky on the rising thermals.

The Space Marines had covered half the distance between their original position and the goliath gates before the aliens' gun emplacements opened fire on them, so overconfident were the orks that their impregnable bastion would not be assaulted, even after the climax of the *Excalibur*'s patrol. Adlar's troopers responded with rattling bolter fire and searing blasts from their heavier weapons.

'For the Emperor! For the primarch! For Sigismund!' Chaplain Wolfram declared, inspiring the men under his command. With his holy crozius raised above his head he led the charge towards the crater and the vent from the power plant.

A tense ten minutes passed, Isendur monitoring the slow seconds via the chronometer displayed on his visor-plate, as the thirty warriors moved at a run towards their objective. There was no point in trying to make their approach subtle. There was no cover to mask their approach, only the distraction provided by the Castellan's company that was zealously and aggressively assaulting the obvious way into the orks' lair. This was the only hope they had of completing their Emperor-sent mission and even then the techmarine dared not calculate the odds of them succeeding.

It was not that he had lost his faith in the Emperor, Primarch Dorn, or the Machine God, it was merely that he was a man of superstitious, supernatural science and was used to dealing in measurements. Whichever way you looked at it, their chances were slim. A hidden gun emplacement could fire on them at any moment. Even if they made it into the tunnel-pipe who was to say that they would make it through to the power plant itself unscathed? But if a way could be found, the Emperor would guide them to it and they were all sworn to achieving their mission, to fulfil the vow they had made those twelve years before, or die trying and take as many of the alien abominations with them as possible.

Armoured boots crunched on parched desert earth, as the Emperor's elite closed on the pipe-mouth, the walls of the crater rising up before them like the walls of a mighty hive-city. Then, almost unbelievably, they were scrambling up the steeply rising

contours of the caldera, loose scree skittering away from under their footfalls. Isendur's helmet display lit up with astronomical temperature readings as they closed on the heat-vent and its scalding exhaust bursts.

Chaplain Wolfram's men came to a halt beneath the colossal jutting maw of the pipe as a jet of searing flame erupted over their heads in a deafening, animal roar. It was just as the techmarine's readings had predicted. The readings from Isendur's visor went off the scale. If any of the Space Marines were caught inside the pipe when the power plant vented a blast of burning exhaust gases like that one, even with the shielding of their power armour, they would be vaporised as if suffering a direct hit from an orbital laser strike.

With a sucking snarl the flame-blast ceased. The air around the steel mouth of the pipe was still scalding hot.

'Brothers.' Chaplain Wolfram announced, making the sign of the aquila over his chest, 'may the Emperor be with us all.'

And with that the Black Templars piled into the vent opening, after the fanatically eager Brother Ansgar, himself following Isendur as he led them into the mouth of hell.

HINGES, AS TALL as two men, ground rustily, as the gigantic gates swung open seemingly as slow as a glacier's crawl. From his vantage point high above the ominous portal to the crater-base Brother-Gunner Tortain saw a seething mass of green bodies pour through the growing space between the adamantium doors, like grains of pulverised jade spilling through the stem of an hourglass, or a flood breaking through a ruptured dam. There was a never-ending press of bodies, pushing one after another.

Then the enemies were on the Templars, meeting their charge. The orks slammed into the black-armoured Space Marines and broke against their unyielding line like the roiling waves of the distant Tempest Ocean breaking on the ragged coastline of Armageddon Secundus. Explosions and the fire-flash of discharging weapons blossomed along the line where the superhuman champions of humanity clashed with their abominable alien enemy.

The Land Speeder circled again, bucking as it rode unseen thermals rising from the baking plain. Tortain gave his full attention to the weapon emplacement the *Excalibur* was closing on. In the same instant that the firing laser emplacement flashed, Tortain transfixing the big gun's goggle-masked operator between the crosshairs of his heavy bolter.

The *Excalibur* banked sharply. The engines screamed in protest. Blistering lances of laser light streaked past the tail of the Land Speeder.

Tortain kept his target calmly in his sights as Horek pulled the craft round again, bringing the gunship even closer to the bunker emplacement built into the rock wall above the towering gates. He could see quite clearly now how the weapon position had been vandalised by orks, daubed with blocky alien symbols and adorned with barbaric trophies that ranged from bones and the furred hides of tusked animals to spent shell casings and the still-helmeted eyeless heads of unfortunate Imperial Guardsmen.

Tortain depressed the triggers and sent a volley of bolter shells directly into both the ork gunner and several of the smaller, gretchin-creatures milling around him. As he did so, the slaved lascannon peppered the rock-face beneath the emplacement. Then two shots hit a crudely boded power feed. It was only a matter of seconds before the resulting chain reaction turned the laser turret into an expanding ball of vaporising energy that wiped out the rest of the screaming gretchin and took out the rock-face around it. All that was left was a fire-blackened, smoking hollow above the reinforced gateway.

The *Excalibur* bucked violently and Tortain felt a cold chill suddenly pass through him that washed away any feelings of satisfaction or thanksgiving he should have had. The Speeder was plunging prow-first towards the ground and there was nothing Brother-Pilot Horek could do to bring it out of its death dive. Smoke poured from where the engines had once been.

There had been another emplacement, one that they had been unable to bring their guns to bear upon. Tortain could hear the orks whooping in delight.

The air screamed around them as the Speeder plunged towards the ground. Brother Horek managed to force the stubbornly resistant shorn ailerons to respond as he pulled on the con-rod, so that the *Excalibur* could pull away from the fighting throng in front of the gates, and not obliterate the whole company.

Before he died, Brother Tortain saw the swirling ochre sands rushing up towards him, his visor-display morbidly counting down the microseconds to impact. But before the *Excalibur* hit the ground a second blast from the accursed ork emplacement found the wrecked Land Speeder and blew it apart utterly.

Pieces of ragged razor-sharp shrapnel were sent spinning into the crater wall, the ground, and the tightly packed throng at the gates. What had once been part of the engine housing took off an ork's head. Other twisted slivers of metal embedded themselves in Templars and orks alike. Another scything piece severed Brother Bladud's arm below the elbow. As his limb fell to the ground, whirring chainsword still gripped in the gauntleted hand, Bladud continued to support his brothers in Squad Garrond with fire from his bolt pistol.

The fact that so much ork blood was spilt was little compensation for the loss of Land Speeder *Excalibur* and the brave battle-brothers Horek and Tortain.

'FIVE, FOUR, THREE—' the dour techmarine was counting down for the benefit of the other Marines accompanying him through the maze of the power plant's exhaust gas venting system.

Emperor's Champion Ansgar pressed himself back into the hollow formed by the bulwark behind him. The other Templars followed his lead.

'—Two, one,' Isendur finished.

The tunnel they had been running down was engulfed in flame; it was accompanied by a roaring horribly like some insane creature of the warp. The archaic heads-up visor display of Ansgar's armour flickered with information about the composition of the burning exhaust gases and flashing red runes informed him of the blistering hot temperatures all around him. Nonetheless, the heat of the blasts here was less intense than in other sections of the tunnels.

Chaplain Wolfram's voice came to him – came to them all – over the comm. 'Hold firm, brothers. We have nothing to fear from the Emperor's cleansing fire.'

The priest-marine's words filled the fanatical warriors with renewed resolve, but none of them were actually foolish enough to put his claims to the test by facing the full fury of the flames. The design of the tunnels incorporated niche-like alcoves that the Marines could duck into at regular intervals. They provided protection from the worst of the flaming bursts. But still the paint on several of the initiates' suits was already starting to bubble, blister or crack.

The same safeguards, both biological and mechanical, that had stopped the Marines cooking in their suits whilst exerting themselves in the desert came into play even more vitally in the power plant's burning exhaust tunnels. If it was not bursts of magma-hot fire that had assaulted them, or gusts of super-heated steam, it had been the ambient furnace heat of the pipe-tunnels. It had been a nerve-wracking journey into the plant so far, but there wasn't far to go now, according to Isendur's scans. As well as avoiding the burning exhaust blasts they had run the gauntlet of the gargantuan inner workings of the generatorium: colossal piston-buffers; sweeping turbine-fans; rotating cams as long as a city block; swinging beams; iris-opening vents. They had run through constricting tunnels and huge open column-spaces in turn as they progressed through the lethal labyrinth.

The gas-blast ceased and Force Wolfram resumed their infiltration of the ex-Mechanicus forge-base. Brother Ansgar found himself wondering what arcane activities the clandestine servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus had once pursued here to need the star-like power provided by this geothermal station in the bed of the dormant volcano.

Thanking the Emperor for his continued protection, Brother Ansgar chased after the fiery-armoured giant striding down the pipe ahead of him, wreathed in smoke like some daemon of hell himself. Without a word of command the other Space Marines filed after them. And so they went on.

As their course wound on, they scaled an S-bend as wide as a transit tunnel and negotiated a series of hissing vents. From here they found themselves inside the ventilation shafts of the air-con system operating within the power plant.

Ansgar stopped at last alongside Techmarine Isendur who had come to a halt in front of a large grilled opening, taller than a Space Marine, and set high into the wall of the gallery beyond. Noticeably colder air, heavy with the smells of grease and musty dampness, swept in from the large chamber beyond. The chamber was dimly lit by a network of lamps and glow-globes connected by snaking lengths of bound cables. From the pulsing glow of these light sources Ansgar was able to see the curious banks of consoles, the hissing piston-valves, the walls of brass-rimmed dials and the greenskinned creatures scurrying and bustling around the control centre, five metres below. Most of them appeared to be gretchin, but there were a few scrawny examples of orks amongst them whose jobs appeared to mainly involve whipping and beating the smaller greenskins into action.

There was one, however, that stood out from all the others by sheer dint of its size and the armoured exoskeleton encasing its body. Ansgar soon realised that much of the ork's body had actually been replaced by bionic parts. The brute's jaw was in fact a triangular-toothed iron mandible and one of its eyes was a blinking red lens. Dull orange light gleamed from the ork's left arm, which was made entirely from a mechanical augmetic. Holstered at a belt around the creature's waist was a large, custom-built gun that looked like the orkish equivalent of a las-weapon. In its right hand the ork was clutching a sledgehammer, probably for making finer adjustments to the power plant's systems.

In the flickering flash of a glow-globe Ansgar became aware of the defaced symbol that hung from the gloom of the chamber's vaulted ceiling: the *machina opus*. Seeing the orks infesting what had once been a bastion of the Adeptus Mechanicus and, as such, part of the Emperor's realm, Ansgar felt his double heartbeat quicken and his blood begin to boil inside every vein and artery. The Emperor's Champion was only half aware of the Space Marines gathering quietly behind him.

The ork mek was snarling gruffly at one of the ork overseers. The overseer, which was over a head shorter than its superior barked something in reply. Then, without a second thought, the mek brained the other ork with its hammer. As the overseer slumped to the floor half a dozen gretchin ran squealing towards the corners of the chamber, out of range of the mek's wrath.

'Brothers,' Ansgar hissed into the comm, 'under the circumstances I would suggest that our best approach is a surprise attack. May the Emperor watch over you and follow me. Ansgar out.'

With a scream born of fury and zealous hatred Ansgar swung his Black Sword at the grille. The power-forged blade sliced through the bars, trailing sparks. Two halves of the grille fell clattering into the chamber beyond. The attention of every single greenskin in the control centre was on him now but Ansgar cared not. All he wanted was to bring the Emperor's divine judgment down upon the foul aliens.

Brother Ansgar leapt forwards into the chamber, dropping five metres to land in a crouch, his heavy ceramite boots clanging on the hard adamantium-enforced floor. Then he was up and running towards the only alien worthy of a champion's attentions. That didn't stop him truncating an ork overseer that got in his way. His fellow Black Templars followed him into the vaulted nave-chamber to mete out the Emperor's wrath.

The room was filled with the clattering roar of bolter fire and the whine of chainswords. Every so often there was the accompanying boom of a plasma discharge and the hissing pop of melta blasts. Before the greenskins had had time to react to the sudden, and totally unexpected, invasion, half of them were dead. It would not be long before the power plant had been purged of all of them.

Ansgar ran at the mek, leaping onto and then over a control table. He came down on the large ork like some avenging Imperial angel. The edge of his sword's black blade flashed with the ice-blue scintillating aura of its energy field as he brought it down with all the power his enhanced muscles and the servos of his power armour could muster.

The ork raised its bionic limb to protect its body as it drew the gun from its belt. It discarded its brutal hammer in favour of the louder and more destructive firearm. With a fizzing crash the Templar blade sheared cleanly through metal, torsion cables and power fibre-bundles. The mek's mechanical arm fell to the floor, flexing spasmodically. Then Ansgar himself hit the ork, the impact of his landing bowling it over and knocking the half-drawn gun from its hand.

The ork recovered surprisingly quickly, no doubt assisted by its own bionic exoskeleton, so that as Ansgar made to bring an end to the creature it met his lunge with a charge of its own, grabbing the champion's wrist with one huge meaty paw. The two champions were locked together, face to face, the ork desperately trying to hold back the Space Marine's descending two-handed sword blow, the muscles of its one organic arm bulging unpleasantly.

The mek snarled, spittle flapping from the rusted spikes of its iron jaw. Brother Ansgar, Emperor's Champion of the Solemnus Crusade snarled back. Then he did something the ork wasn't expecting: he shifted his weight onto his rear foot and stepped back. The mek's own strength then worked against it and, unbalanced, it stumbled forward.

Ansgar shook himself loose of the ork's grip and brought down his sword a second time. There was a sickening crunch of breaking vertebrae and a sucking of severed meat, and the ork mek's head rolled away across the floor, coming to rest against a spool of cabling.

The battle for the control of the vault-chamber was soon over as Chaplain Wolfram's Templars cut the orks down in a withering storm of vengeful fire, calling down a hundred Emperor-inspired curses on the greenskins as they did so.

The greenskin threat quashed, at least for the time being, Techmarine Isendur was assisted by the brothers of squads Uther and Agravain as he set a number of strategically placed explosive charges around the control chamber. He then made a number of adjustments to the override controls of the Mechanicus-forged machineries, whispering prayers to the Omnissiah under his breath as he did so. Chaplain Wolfram had declared the desecrated power plant *purgatus* – beyond salvation for the Emperor and his Imperium. He had gone on to decree that there was only one thing that could be done. The geothermal energies that had been harnessed by the techpriests of Mars so many centuries or millennia ago would now be used to cleanse the power plant of its alien infestation.

Whatever else might happen as the Black Templars stormed the ork-held crater, at least the aliens would be denied the energies generated by the power plant.

The charges set, Force Wolfram quit the power plant. Their decision to destroy the orks' means of generating power, for whatever blasphemous practices they had put the ancient manufactory engines to, was communicated to Adlar's force, that was still preoccupied at the gates to the caldera. They were determined that none of their own should be harmed. Wolfram and Ansgar seemed supremely confident that they would come through this in the end and find another way out of the factory-base.

The Space Marines met little resistance as Isendur led them out of the generatorium and what little they did meet they gunned down in fury. Then suddenly there was clear open sky above them, as they emerged from the cathedral-form of the power plant generatorium abutting the caldera wall, and they were inside the cone of the volcanic crater itself. But what the battle-brothers saw there filled them with revulsion and horror.

The vast cone was teeming with greenskins, from skinny-limbed bat-eared gretchin to orks of all hues and sizes. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of them milling around within the hollow of the crater. A thousand metres to his right Ansgar could see a great mass of orks, on foot and mounted on warbikes or in roaring trucks. They thronged the gated entrance to the alien-claimed factory-fort, where Castellan Adlar's diversionary force was making its direct assault on the caldera. But that was not what filled the Templars with horror. It was what the orks had built inside the shell of the Adeptus Mechanicus cathedral-factory. Still a kilometre away from the Black Templars, squatting in the shadow of the curving crater wall was an abomination the likes of which even the long-serving Chaplain Wolfram had never seen before. Of course the Templars all knew of the idolatrous war engines of the enemy, which towered over battlefields wherever large numbers of orks gathered, but even these were dwarfed by the monstrous construction taking shape on the far side of the enclosure.

Quite simply it looked like an alien god made manifest in adamantium, steel and ceramite. Utilising rusty machinery that looked distinctly Imperial in origin, all of the aliens' energies had been channelled into working on the monstrosity of a machine that was revealed to the Emperor's most devoted and fanatical warriors. Ork-built smoking-chimneyed engine houses clung to the inside wall of the crater peak, cranes and hoists winching parts into position on the mega-gargant. The shells of two smaller ork-titans sat beneath the gutted cathedral spires and hangar-naves of the manufactory buildings. The aliens were cannibalising pieces of the smaller war engines to help complete the construction of this new abomination, the largest gargant any of them had ever seen in their twelve-year hunt for the ork hulk *Krom Kruach* and the alien warlord Morkrull Grimskar.

The mega-gargant looked as if it could be taller than an Imperial titan. Ansgar briefly found himself wondering if the war machine would even be able to fit through the portal into the manufactory base, but then, even if it didn't, the brutal orks would probably simply use the gargant's deadly weapons to smash their way out anyway. It was clear that the gargant was, as yet unfinished, but Ansgar could well imagine that its drive systems were fully functioning even if all of its weapons and armour were not in place. Such a beast-machine could turn the tide in the battle for Tartarus Hive in the favour of the alien invaders.

Ansgar could sense the change in the mood of his brethren, as they looked in awe-full horror at the mega-gargant. If they were not careful Fighting Company Adlar's trek through the wastes of Armageddon would have been for nothing. They could not let the appearance of this blasphemous alien fiend-god steal their determination to exact revenge upon the ork hordes.

A dull *crump* came from behind the Black Templars and the ground at their feet shook. A second later the roaring sound of the power plant's explosive destruction consumed the caldera. Bellows and cries of anger and panic rose from the alien masses.

Almost as one, the aliens that were not preoccupied with the battle at the gates, turned and surged towards Chaplain Wolfram's warriors infiltration force, along with vehicles of all kinds.

'Brothers.' Ansgar said suddenly, addressing the Marines gathered behind him, but keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the surging orks, 'we vowed to hunt down and destroy the fiend who razed the chapter keep of Solemnus, who was responsible for the deaths of so many of our holy brethren, and who slaughtered so many hundreds of innocents. Since reaching Armageddon, the Emperor's hand has guided us, showing us the way to our nemesis that we might fulfil the promise we made a dozen years ago. We swore a warrior's oath. Let us swear it again now, that, Emperor willing, we shall not rest until the greenskinned abomination Morkrull

Grimskar is dead and we have destroyed the idol the orks have raised here to their blasphemous gods. They have defiled a most holy place.'

Ansgar looked to each side of him. To his right stood the skull-faced chaplain, to his left the hulking techmarine.

'I feel we are close to achieving our objective,' he said, his voice calm despite the racing pulse of his two hearts. 'We are nearing the end of my vision-quest.'

'This is your fight. You are the one who has brought us to this point.' Wolfram said. It was not a criticism. He was placing his trust in the Emperor's chosen one.

'Chaplain Wolfram is right, of course.' Isendur said, his tone measured and respectful. 'It is only right that the Emperor's Champion should lead the most devout warriors of humanity in our final battle against the enemy.'

'Indeed.' Chaplain Wolfram added, 'for, as our own Marshal Brandt has decreed, is this not our last crusade?'

Raising the shimmering Black Sword above his head, Brother Ansgar strode out to meet the enemy.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!'

FOURTEEN

WAR MACHINE

SLUGGA FIRING WILDLY, the ork pounded towards Neophyte Gervais. The novice brother felt the bullets impacting against his body armour but they did nothing to stop his advance. The ork was wearing a bandolier of shells across its torso and a sleeveless, filthy leather jerkin. On its head was a spike-topped helmet lined with black fur. In its other hand it gripped a cleaver and around its wrists were spiked vambraces.

Gervais raised his bolt pistol and fired twice. The first bolt hit the ork in the right shoulder but, incredibly, did nothing to slow it. The second shot hit the bullet bandolier. The bolt detonated three of the shells, which in turn set off the rest. The ork was suddenly surrounded by a belt of bullets blasting into its own body. It fell to the ground bellowing as its torso was blown apart by the shells. The neophyte turned as another alien threw itself at him. This one wore a studded leather harness. The blasta it carried had to be held in two hands. Its green head was bald and it wore a bolter shell casing in one ear like an earring. The beast bellowed and Gervais saw an iron-shod tusk gleaming dully at him.

Gervais tried to jerk his body out of the way as the blasta fired. Then he was lying on his side in the sand as his fellow battle-brothers pounded around him engaging the orks. He felt like he had been hit by one of the aliens' bodge-job trakks. There was a hole the size of an ogryn's fist blown in his left shoulder plate, the ceramite blasted away down to the reinforced adamantium mesh beneath. The punch from the ork's blasta had caused a frightening amount of damage at such close range.

But, the novice brother reminded himself, it was not a Black Templar's place to show fear, or even give credence to such an emotion. For how could the spawn of alien gods hope to prevail in the face of the golden light of truth of the Emperor? Neither were the Emperor's most devout warriors to show any remorse in their persecution of the alien, nor even the slightest suggestion of pity for the blasphemous creatures.

The ork charged in, racking its weapon, preparing to take another shot. Gervais lashed out with his foot, kicking the ork's legs from under it. The startled ork came down on top of the neophyte and onto the long blade of his hastily drawn combat knife. Gervais twisted the blade as it sank into the alien's chest. He couldn't be certain but he guessed it was where whatever passed for the ork's heart would be. Whether this was the case or not it had the desired effect. The crimson fire in the ork's eyes died and Gervais knew that his enemy was dead.

Heaving the dead ork from him, muscles straining with the effort of moving the massive dead weight, Gervais rose, knife ready in one hand, bolt pistol in the other. The Templars' objective lay before them, through the towering open gates. It was just a case of fighting their way through the mass of greenskins to face whatever the desecrated Adeptus Mechanicus base held for them. Bolt pistol spitting mass reactive death into the orks, Gervais charged into the fray once again.

WITH JET PACKS roaring Squad Vortimer soared beneath the arch of the great gothic gates and over the heads of the greenskins. For a moment Brother Bryce caught sight of something colossal and idolatrous on the other side of the crater. Despite the distance he could see the gigantic squat form of the mega-gargant quite clearly, an expression of feral ferocity bolted to its hideous ork-face. The alien war machine was absolutely massive.

For a moment Bryce felt a chill in his heart. This was replaced by a wave of renewed resolve. Seeing the titanic gargant had only served to make him all the more determined that he and his battle-brothers should stop the aliens here and now, otherwise Hive Tartarus was almost certainly doomed.

'Squad Vortimer,' the assault squad leader's voice echoed over Bryce's helmet-comm, 'descend and engage. Follow my lead.'

Bryce saw his sergeant reach the apex of the arc he was describing through the air and then begin to drop to the ground, feet first, his jet pack acting like the retro-thrusters of a drop pod to stop him crashing to his death. Vortimer was followed by Notker, Halwn and Daman. Bryce was the last in the swooping squad.

As Bryce assumed the position for descent he focused on Brother Daman, who was dropping five metres below him, chainsword in hand. Below him was the milling throng of orks, all eager to engage the Space Marines in hand-to-hand combat.

There was a flash of energy from somewhere to Bryce's right and Brother Daman exploded. What remained of the noble Assault Marine plunged towards the ork pack, trailing fire and smoke.

Bryce tore his eyes from his dying battle-brother and saw the gun emplacement built into the crater wall above the gate. There was nothing he could do himself, but hope that he did not meet the same fate as Daman, and alert others to the danger.

'Brother-Sergeant Phelan, sir,' he spoke into his helmet-mic, selecting the appropriate channel. 'Gun battery to your right.' 'Understood, brother,' came Phelan's deep-throated tones, that were more like the snarl of a Solemnus snow wolf than a human. Leaving the threat of the gun battery to Squad Phelan, Bryce turned his attention back to the rapidly approaching ground and the milling greenskins.

Brother Daman's burning body landed just before he did. There was a secondary explosion that threw several orks into the air. Then Bryce was crushing an ork skull beneath his feet and hacking at another with the whirling blade of his chainsword. By the primarch, he would make the greenskin scum pay for Daman's ignominious death.

CASTELLAN ADLAR, STANDING within the open gateway of the caldera-base, stared through the portal at the appalling, blasphemous form of the grim-faced gargant. Adlar had seen other abomination-machines like it before on battlefields a thousand light years away but he had never set his eyes on one so huge and so terrible.

It stood in the shadow of the caldera's rim and the broken shell of the original cathedral-spired factory, looking like some monstrous idol to an alien god.

The monstrosity had four arms, mounting weapons that could deal out death in a variety of devastating ways. It was apparent to Adlar judging by the cranes, hoists and bustle of activity taking place around it, that the gargant was as yet incomplete. It was also obvious the orks were desperate to finish it and field it in the battle against the Space Marines. If the mega-gargant could make its way to Hive Tartarus, with an army of orks in its wake aboard all manner of war trucks, wagons and bikes, then the Black Templars' gambit would have failed.

Castellan Adlar hoped and prayed that his Space Marines could prevail against the orks of the gargant factory. More importantly, he was determined that they should take out the mega-gargant. But the thought was tempered by the bitter experience of serving the most devout of all the Adeptus Astartes Chapters for decades. They were outnumbered and outgunned, and no matter how great their resolve their ammunition could not last forever. It was true that the brethren of the Black Templars Chapter wanted to prove themselves in combat with a crusading fervour, but the fact of the matter was if it came down to a fist fight, the orks would have the advantage thanks to sheer weight of numbers.

If Fighting Company Adlar was going to prevail in this battle they were going to need a miracle.

And then a miracle happened.

All of the battle-brothers felt the ground shake with every super-heavy tremor-inducing footfall. There was a screaming roar, deafening in its intensity, and something exploded against the side of the crater. Fractured rock and tonnes of spoil crashed down onto the heads of the greenskins, some of it showering the Templars.

Adlar dared to turn and face the land-leviathan that strode towards the caldera cone, across the open plain of the rift valley floor, and his two hearts swelled with pride.

The Warlord Titan was a monument to the artifice of the techpriests of Mars. Its head swayed thirty metres above the ground, searching out the greenskins. Then, with a cataclysmic roar, its batteries of weapons fired. Great bloody swathes were cut through the ranks of the aliens as the orks were blasted with laser fire as well as huge earth-shaking shells fired from the spinning barrels of a Gatling Blaster bigger than a Thunderhawk gunship.

But Adlar could see that the gigantic man-machine was wounded. Its adamantium hull was scarred with the marks left by all manner of weapons and the titan appeared to be unbalanced, its left weapon-arm nothing more than a melted, twisted mass of metal.

The Warlord, the grey plate of its hull painted with zigzagged black and yellow hazard markings and sporting an array of battle banners, marched towards the entrance to the crater base, steadily clearing the ork horde in a purging wave. The crater's remaining defences came to bear on the titan but the ancient war machine had obviously faced worse than the orks of the gargant-factory could throw at it. It shrugged off their attacks.

'Well met, noble battle-brothers of the Adeptus Astartes!' a voice boomed out across the valley. It sounded grim and heavy with age, and it was issuing from massive vox-casters built into the hull of the titan. 'I am Princeps Magnus Ekhardt of the Warlord Titan *Tyrannus Maximus* of the Legio Magna, war brother of the god engine *Dominus Exitio*. We come to aid you in your battle against the alien abominations, in the name of the great Omnissiah.'

'Well met, *Tyrannus Maximus*.' Castellan Adlar bellowed to the sky, joy filling his hearts.

Encouraged by the mighty titan's presence, the Space Marines – cheering prayers of thanksgiving to the heavens –redoubled their zealous attack against the ravaging hordes of greenskins.

'Well met indeed!'

FROM HIS VANTAGE point Princeps Ekhardt looked down on the tiny, emerald-skinned creatures scurrying around at the base of the volcanic crater shell and he smiled. 'Varne, locate any potential incoming threats and then give me firing solutions accordingly.'

'Yes, my lord,' the tactical officer replied subserviently. Kasl Varne knew when he was witnessing a master at work.

'Orrek, fire Turbo Lasers again, there are still too many of the greenskins for my liking. Rid me of these alien abominations. Make it happen!'

'At once, princeps!'

Man-made lightning burst from the titan's shoulder-mounted weapons, that fried the aliens.

'Engineer Dvorad, push turbines to the red line. Maintain striding speed.'

At Ekhardt's command the legendary war machine bore down on the terrified orks like an avenging colossus.

The orks were now confused as to which of their enemies they should tackle. Some chose the larger, more dangerous titan, whilst others turned to the Marines threatening to breach their defences. The alien force was torn in half by indecision and uncertainty.

At the princeps's command, the Gatling Blaster turned on rank after rank of greenskins, scything through them and reaping a bloody harvest of death.

The orks fled from the titan in a green tide. Pushing and scrabbling to get away from the crushing feet of the man-machine-monster and the scything hail of bullets coming from its guns, some orks exit each other down in their rush to get away.

At Ekhardt's command, legs like power pylons carried the Warlord ever closer to the caldera and the gargant-factory it contained. Iron hooves crashed down into the screaming pack, pulverising half-fungus, half-animal blasphemies beneath them, and obliterating much of the greenskin opposition to the Imperial assault.

He commanded and it was done. This was what it was to be a princeps of the Adeptus Titanicus: to walk as a god among men, bringing the wrathful judgement of the Emperor and the Machine God down upon the enemies of mankind's Imperium.

And somewhere, at the back of his mind, *Tyrannus Maximus* snarled hungrily in the darkness, wanting revenge for what the orks had done to its brother titans as well as for what followers of the Great Beast had done to the ancient itself.

But now the slogging foot soldiers of the enemy were joined by mechanised support. War trukks and bikes were beginning to barge their way out of the crater base.

Magnus Ekhardt rode his titan towards them, luxuriating in the adrenalin of war again. The ancient Warlord didn't like to be confined, either when he was transported between war zones aboard the great interstellar vessels of the Adeptus Mechanicus or in the titan silos of Hellsbreach, or when he was waiting to patrol again or engage the enemy. *Tyrannus Maximus's* place was on the battlefield, hunting down the enemies of the Emperor, decimating their armies, destroying their war machines and levelling their bases.

And this was war – filthy, bloodthirsty and evil. It was the only thing the ageing princeps lived for, for he knew the time for him to join those who had gone before him as princeps of *Tyrannus Maximus* was fast approaching.

The war machine's ancient, but religiously-maintained, weapons of mass destruction fired and the enemy died in their hundreds. The sandy floor of the plain before the gates of the crater-cone was now dark with alien ichor and carpeted with severed limbs and mangled corpses. Great indeed was the wrath of an old god.

Ekhardt steered the titan towards the great gates of the desecrated Adeptus Mechanicus stronghold. Then he saw it for the first time – the mega-gargant.

It was as he had suspected. The brief readings Varne had been able to cull from *Tyrannus Maximus's* augur-arrays, during the briefest of respites in the otherwise interminable interference that was produced by the polluted ash wastes, had denoted not several small orkish war machines but one immense monster that could wreak terrible slaughter against the Imperial defenders of Hive Tartarus if it were ever allowed to reach that proud and ancient city.

His command crew had also seen the monstrous machine, their gasps of horror telling Ekhardt all he needed to know. Cries of dismay echoed over the titan's comm-system from all over the Mechanicus land-battleship.

Once again, Magnus Ekhardt gave credence to the belief that this would be his last battle as princeps. A salty tear swelled at the corner of his eye and, breaking free, ran a course down the side of his face, unseen by any of the men on the command deck. But at the thought of facing this monster in battle – a true clash of titans – new energy, new life, pulsed through his veins, and reddened the skin of his liver-spotted cheeks.

'That, men, is the object of our quest, the culmination of our hunt.' Ekhardt informed his command crew. 'That is why the Omnisiah has brought us to this place. Everything that has brought us here is at the God-Emperor's behest. We are to join with the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes that we might rid Armageddon of this most blasphemous idol. With their figurehead gone, the greenskins will fall before us to be purged from the deserts of Armageddon Secundus. Without their idol to lead them the orks will be broken. Then, without the flagship of their army to bolster the hordes assaulting the walls of Tartarus, the hive-city too will be freed from the tyranny of the besieging alien hordes.'

Princeps Magnus Ekhardt surveyed the faces of his command crew – Dvorad's face half-hidden by the grille of his rebreather, Varne's pupilless eyes, Orrek's implant-dotted pate – and a grim smile began to spread across his pursed lips.

'Men, *Tyrannus Maximus* is going to war. We are likely going to meet our end. But whatever else happens we are going to glory. Make it happen!'

WITH ALL FOUR propellered engines purring, the long-bodied, broad-winged form of the ork bommer *Big Bastard* cleared the blanket of low cloud and banked over the rim-cliff wall of the rift valley, still trailing clinging wisps of turbulence troubled tendrils of stratus. Pulling on the over-large controls of the massive plane, Conrad Straeker pointed the nose of the huge craft at the volcanic crater rising from the valley floor like a truncated mountain peak.

'There it is!' Sergeant Jelkus Bane exclaimed excitedly, supporting himself against the pilot's chair as the lumbering bommer came level again. 'There's the gargant factory!'

Bane hadn't doubted the Imperial spy for a moment but now that he saw Agent Braxuss's discovery with his own eyes, he was filled with elation. The last forty-eight hours had been a tumbling drop ship ride of emotions.

Through the windshield he could see the battle raging at the entrance to the cliff-walled caldera. The colossal form of a giant Imperial titan was driving a path through a massed horde of ork slugga boyz, and was ploughing its way towards the contested portal. As the bommer neared the battle site Bane could also see a few tiny figures in black armour amidst the ork pack, and others spiralling through the air on smoking jet packs.

The legionary sergeant could also see something rising from behind the rim of the caldera crater.

'What on Armageddon is that?' he gasped.

'Let's take a look.' Straeker said and set the bommer on a course to circle the crater before landing.

The strident klaxon of an alarm suddenly started to sound within the cockpit of the plane and echoed through the hollow space of the hold.

'What is causing that?' Trooper Ercal blurted out, ever anxious.

'It must be some automated system the orks put in,' Verhoef suggested. 'But what it's trying to tell us I don't know.'

'Are we low on fuel?' Bane asked the pilot.

'Yes, we are.' Straeker said, 'but I don't think that's—' and suddenly he couldn't go on; his body was seized by a wracking coughing fit.

'Sergeant,' the dreadnought's voice boomed from his place within the belly of the plane, 'that is not the reason for the alarm.'

The siren continued but now the pulse of its strident call was increasing in pace.

'What is it then?'

'My machine-spirit informs me that the venerable titan has weapons lock.' Brother Jarold stated, grimly.

The *Big Bastard* was about to be blown out of the sky by the loyal god machine.

'TURBO LASERS LOCKED and ready to fire, my lord.' Moderati Orrek informed the titan's princeps.

'At my command then.' Ekhardt said solemnly. 'Let us send these orkish allies to join their brethren in whatever hell we have sent them to.'

'My lord!' Varne shouted. 'I'm picking up a vox-signal.'

'Where from?'

'It appears to be coming from the incoming bomber.'

The shoulder guns remained targeted on the huge craft as it roared overhead.

'And you can understand what they're saying?'

'Yes, my lord, because they're speaking Low Gothic.'

'Princeps, we must fire.' Orrek informed Ekhardt. 'We may not get another chance otherwise.'

'Hold fire!' snarled the princeps. 'Put the transmission on main speakers. Make it happen! Now!'

Ekhardt's command crew obeyed, without another word.

A tinny voice echoed over the command deck tannoy, its tone distinctly desperate and urgent.

'—do not fire. I repeat, this is Trooper Dax Strevicz of the Armageddon Steel Legion. Do not fire on the incoming bomber. It is under Imperial control. I say again, do not fire!'

FIFTEEN

CRASH AND BURN

FOR TEN LONG seconds Jekus Bane held his breath. A deathly hush descended over the crew compartment of the *Big Bastard*.

Then, at last, the siren alarm cut off mid wail. 'Weapons lock has been disengaged.' Brother Jarold boomed from the hold.

The legionaries, their sergeant and the pilot let out their breath in a sigh of relief.

'Thank the Emperor for that!' Bane exclaimed with heartfelt relief. 'His Imperial majesty really is looking down on us today.'

'But of course he is.' Brother Jarold said, his tone almost chiding. 'The Emperor protects. Those who trust in his bounteous goodness will receive a double portion.'

'Sergeant.' Dax Strevicz called, 'one Princeps Ekhardt has a message for you.'

'Does he now?' Bane said, turning back to look at the tired but relieved survivors of his platoon. There had been fifteen men when they set out. Now, they numbered eight. 'Can you put it on speakers, for us?'

'Yes, sir, but you'll need to listen hard.'

The vox-trooper made a number of adjustments to his battered vox-set and turned the gain up to maximum. Strevicz said something into his mic.

There was a moment of distant, snowy static and then a voice, rich with age and darkly grim, resonated from the vox-set's speakers.

'I am speaking with Sergeant Bane of the Armageddon Steel Legion?' the voice inquired, almost irritably.

'You are, my lord princeps.' Bane replied respectfully, yet unable to hide his unalloyed joy at the sudden change in their predicament.

'I am Princeps Ekhardt of the Legio Magna titan *Tyrannus Maximus*. It would appear you have chosen an opportune moment to join the battle to purge the vile alien scum from this once mighty edifice of the holy Adeptus Mechanicus.' The disembodied voice rang in the legionaries' ears before being swallowed up by the background noise of the plane's interior.

'Indeed it would, sir.'

'We welcome your arrival, although we are somewhat perturbed by your choice of transport.'

'We are but using the aliens' own machineries against them.' Bane suggested cheerfully.

'Be warned, sergeant,' the princeps suddenly boomed, 'for that way heresy lies.'

'O-of course.' Bane replied, somewhat taken aback. He had never been so abruptly chastised in front of the men under his command. Then he added almost sarcastically, 'my lord.'

'And let me tell you, sergeant.' Princeps Ekhardt went on, 'if your intentions are not true and this is some foul trickery on the part of the aliens or other agencies, I will gun you down with the rest of the heretic rabble.'

'Yes, sir.' Bane swallowed hard. They weren't necessarily out of this yet. 'I understand.' After all, he had no idea how sane this Princeps Ekhardt might be. The polluted environment of the ash wastes had been known to do strange things to a man's mind. Why should the master of a titan war machine be any different?

'And let me assure you, I will make it happen. Ekhardt out.'

The link went dead. An awkward silence among the platoon remained. It was broken by another hacking cough from the ashen-faced Straeker.

Taking another deep breath, Bane said at last, 'Take us in, pilot.'

'Aye, sir.' Straeker managed before his words were overwhelmed by further coughing paroxysms.

CONRAD STRAEKER KNEW he was going to die. This was no mere grasping of his mortality. He was going to die and it was going to happen soon; he knew it with the certainty of a man with a gunshot wound to his gut. It would either be in a horrific plane crash or from one of a dozen untreated, and untreatable, internal injuries that were steadily taking their toll on his body. It was just a matter of time.

He coughed sharply, bubbles of pink blood appearing on his lips. A lung had been punctured, he was sure. The injustices the orks had dealt him had taken their toll, but after three attempts on his life he wasn't dead yet.

He ached all over, inside and out. The orks had shot his Lightning down, beaten him within an inch of his life and the airfield ork had broken his rib and punctured his lung. But he still breathed – just.

Whatever happened – whether he died in a plane crash or drowned in his own blood – he would make the aliens pay. It was an old cliché, but he was determined.

Peering through the windshield of the cockpit Straeker saw the ork vehicles pouring out of the gates of the factory-crater, on a dozen jerry-built contraptions. They were zooming between the fighting orks and Space Marines, and into them as well.

For Straeker the scene was edged by tendrils of feathery grey. He tried to blink it away but to no avail. His vision was starting to be affected now too. It blurred and swam, as if he was intoxicated. He wished he was. In fact, he didn't know when he had last been so clear-headed. He knew what he had to do, what fate he was about to consign himself to, and considered it with a detachment such as if he were someone else entirely, looking upon himself and his life as just another pawn to be used against the relentless enemy.

He blinked again and caught the glint of a dial on the dashboard in front of him. The round face was marked with a graduated scale. On the right was a fat white line that reduced in thickness as it circumscribed the rim of the dial until it was superseded by a fat red-orange line. The dial's needle was firmly at the bottom of the red end of the scale. The plane was almost out of fuel.

As if on cue, an engine on the starboard wing started to cough and shudder.

Straeker was suddenly aware of Bane at his side.

'Pardon? What, sergeant?' His mind had started to wander, lost in thoughts of his own imminent demise.

'I said, how long till we land?'

'Er... ' Straeker made a hasty calculation in his head. 'Three minutes, maybe four.'

'What's wrong with the engine?' Bane asked, obviously concerned.

'Trust me, you don't want to know. Let's just say it was time you got ready to disembark.'

Speaking made Straeker cough again. He took one hand from the awkward, bulky orkish controls and put it to his mouth. Flecks of blood speckled the flight gloves.

'It's not going to be an easy landing, I can assure you. I'm going to need to put this thing down on the plain at least one hundred metres from the crater. There isn't the fuel or the time to find a better landing spot,' the pilot's tone was almost apologetic. 'And we're going to be landing slap-bang in the middle of an all out war. You and your men need to be ready to leave as quickly as possible.'

'I hear what you're saying, commander.' Bane muttered grimly. 'Just keep *Big Bastard* as level as you can for us as we're coming in.'

Unable to answer the Steel Legionary because of convulsing coughs, eyes watering, Straeker was only able to nod in confirmation.

'EVERYONE ON BOARD? Everyone ready?' Bane enquired of his platoon – all eight of them.

A chorus of affirmative responses came from Troopers Rumi, Strevicz, Gynt, Ercal, Steinbeck, Verhoef, Broek and even the ill-tempered Kayvan.

The legionaries quit the harnessed seats and made their stumbling way into the hold of the rocking, wind-buffed plane. The dreadnought had then joined them, Brother Jarold's clunking steps shaking the rattling fuselage of the bomber even more.

'Verhoef, start the engine.' Bane commanded their driver.

'Yes, sarge!'

Verhoef punched the chunky ignition button, depressing the plate-sized accelerator pedal at the same time. The battlewagon's huge engines roared into throaty life, filling the hold with a gust of filthy smoke. Verhoef hauled on a trigger-released lever and then took hold of the handles of the cumbersome steering column with both hands.

The plan was simple. Straeker would do his best to land the gargantuan craft, with the back ramp open. Verhoef would then reverse the battlewagon straight out of the hold and carry Bane's platoon to join the god engine and the Black Templars against the ork usurpers.

'Straeker, we're ready,' he informed the pilot via his micro-bead.

'Deploying ramp now.' Straeker answered. There was a clunk and a loud grating whirring noise. A narrow beam of light pierced the gloomy interior of the bomber and expanded to a yellow-white flood as the ramp began to descend and daylight streamed into the hold.

Looking out of the open rear of the plane, Bane could see the distant southern curve of the rift valley wall retreating from them and the cracked, parched ground rising to meet them. Straeker was flying them in low over the desert.

'Hold on.' Straeker told the legionaries. 'This could get a little bumpy.'

The dusty floor of the plain came closer. Closer. Closer...

The lowered ramp hit the ground with a resounding clang. The guardsmen felt the huge plane buck as it did so but somehow, against all odds, the *Big Bastard* stayed level. The Emperor only knew what sort of battle Straeker was fighting with the controls to keep it so.

'He calls this a little bumpy?' Gynt exclaimed.

The ramp kicked up stones and dust in its wake, as it clattered over the rough, rocky ground. The zooming plane was only a matter of a few metres off the ground. The tips of the propellers must have been within centimetres of catastrophically smashing into the valley floor.

The pitch of the engines changed noticeably, becoming somehow lower and louder, and the bommer began to decelerate

'Ready to release locking clamps, sarge?' Verhoef asked over the roar of the wind whipping around the rear section of the plane, the throbbing of the propeller-engines and the banging of the ramp on the rocks. Broek was poised to hit the large switch protruding from the sidewall of the hold with the butt of his lasgun.

'Straeker!' Sergeant Bane called. 'We have to go.'

'Then go!' came the pilot's blunt rebuttal. 'The undercarriage won't deploy and I'm not going to be able to stop.'

'But what about you?' Bane asked, knowing the answer.

'Don't worry about me, sergeant, just give them hell from me, okay?'

Now there was no doubt. They both knew he wasn't getting out of this alive.

'Go now! Go!' Straeker coughed at Bane over his micro-bead.

'Broek? Hit that switch!' Bane commanded.

The gun butt hit the switch with a crash. There was a hiss of compressed air followed by a loud clunk as the huge vice-clamps gripping the caterpillar tracks and massive roller-wheel of the battlewagon unlocked.

The fossil-fuelled engines growling throatily, tracks rattling noisily, Trooper Verhoef drove the battlewagon out of the back of the bommer. The monstrous vehicle crashed off the back of the ramp, throwing up even more dust and sand into the air, that enveloped the legionaries in a pall of ash.

The battlewagon screeched to a halt, as the plane hurtled on. Motor revving, Verhoef slammed it into gear and pushed the pedal to the floor. The machine roared forwards towards the throng of orks, buggies, trukks and war bikes.

Then the bommer came down.

STRAEKER FELT AND heard the battlewagon disembark from the back of the bommer, as he fought with the clumsy controls to retain control of the plane. He knew it was only a matter of time – the tone of three of the engines told him they were almost out of fuel, the propeller of one now only being kept moving thanks to the wind blowing into its angled aerodynamic blades – but if he could maintain control it could make all the difference to his erstwhile compatriots. He could either die, trapped inside the shell of the *Big Bastard* as it went nose over tail and span away across the valley plain, or he could pilot it into the greenskin pack and take the aliens with him.

The muscles of his upper body ached, and his whole body juddered as he kept a tight grip on the bommer's controls.

Perhaps there was just time for one last prayer to the Emperor before his soul went to join him in the afterlife that awaited a man who lay down his life for the Imperium. Straeker began to intone a prayer to the Emperor, to take his immortal soul into his safekeeping, so that he might fight with him in the next world against the otherworldly manifestations of the enemies of mankind. Then the inevitable happened.

Both engines on the port wing failed almost simultaneously. The propeller engines on the starboard side were maintaining lift, but only just. Then the tip of the port wing dropped and hit the ground with a terrible, screeching, tearing of metal. Then the nose came down, crumpling as it went into the ground.

The plane bellied in the dust but did not slow significantly. The bommer bounced over the rocky ground, great sprays of sparks flying from where the fuselage grated against the uneven valley floor. The sparks became flames as they ignited splatters of leaked fuel and splashes of lubricant oil.

The bommer slewed around on the point of the starboard wing, hurtling towards the revving ork trukks. Its nose cone hit the first of them, a flatbed with a hoist-mounted wrecking ball, and smashed the vehicle to smithereens on impact. Sheared axles and wheels flew into the air, alongside parts of the shattered chassis, and the truck's ork crew.

A warbike, mounting a heavy gun either side of its rider, swerved to avoid the massive plane careering towards it. The hurtling bommer clipped the back of the bike, flinging it first in front of the *Big Bastard* and then underneath it.

Bellowing, the ork boyz that had been charging out of the defiled caldera to engage the Imperial forces were now fleeing the bommer, their war-cries turning to screams of fear. The Space Marines they had been fighting had the good sense to scatter from the path of the oncoming plane. Their strength-enhancing power armour carried them in great leaping bounds out of danger.

At first the orks had seemed overjoyed at the arrival of the bommer and the battlewagon, believing them to be reinforcements. Cheering whoops had broken from malformed mouths. Then the battlewagon had started raining fire on them and the massive boomer had ploughed into their forces. Suddenly it looked like it was all over for the greenskins of the Blood Scar tribe.

The bommer, still bearing its load of wing-slung missiles, had become a huge missile itself, just waiting for the final collision that would set off the unstable alien armaments or for the missiles to catch fire.

Straeker had his arms locked now, and was holding the flight controls in position. His reeling mind flooded with images of the faces of the other members of Blitz Squadron, who were all dead as far as he was aware. It was of no matter; he would be joining them soon.

Trailing flames and throwing up clouds of ash behind it, the *Big Bastard* rocketed over the stony ground, through orks and into war trukks, towards the great, half-opened gates of the gargant factory. A wagon bearing a missile launcher sped out of the way of the nose of the plane and under the port wing. But the launcher rack caught on one of the wing-mounted missiles. The munitions of the smaller trukks detonated first but it was enough to set off the bomber's cargo – the missile was the size of a small plane. There was a blinding flash and a subsonic boom that became the screaming roar of an explosion: first one missile then the next. The starboard wing sheared off and hurtled into the left-hand gate of the towering entrance, destroying one of the great rusted hinges. In turn the pressurized oil of the gate's hydraulic opening and closing mechanism touched off and part of the adamantium gate was blown apart.

The main body of the *Big Bastard* was still crashing towards the partially open gateway. What little fuel remained ignited and the rest of the bomber's stored munitions blew.

Conrad Straeker died with a triumphant smile on his face, as the burning fuselage smashed through the routed orks, clearing a path through the greenskins for the Marines and legionaries. Vehicles were bowled over by the Shockwave of the explosion, tank tracks were shredded and gun sponsons torn free. Templars and orks were flattened, thrown into the dirt. Pieces of hull-plating winnowed off into the greenskin horde, decapitating and dismembering orks, destroying gun turret emplacements and scything through the gates into the factory compound to cause yet more damage.

The blackened remains of the burning fuselage smashed through the gates, only coming to a stop when it ploughed into the side of an ork construction shed, touching off further explosives or fuel stores. The rickety panels of the corrugated iron roof were blown off by a rising sheet of orange-white flame.

BANE WATCHED IN horrified joy as the prow of the burning plane smashed into the ork horde thick around the gate, barging through the gates like a giant's battering ram.

With a dang that rung across the valley, echoing from one side of the rift to the other and back again, one of the gates crashed to the ground, toppled like a slain titan. The scarred ork head broke free and crushed a score of greenskins beneath it.

The Steel Legionary screamed a whoop of joy to the skies and punched the dust-filled air with his fist. He cheered again and again, and was joined by the men of his platoon. But now his cheers became half-choked sobs and tears streamed down his face behind the goggle-lenses of his rebreather-mask.

CASTELLAN ADLAR FELLED the slaving ork before him and, raising his huge thunder hammer in one hand, pointed its gore-splattered head at the broken-open crater-factory.

'With me, men!' he bellowed over the comm-link, powering towards the breached gates. 'The Emperor has shown us the way!'

With their energy levels renewed, the Black Templar battle-brothers that were still standing smashed aside the last of their orkish opponents and piled after their leader, joining him in the battle-ay of their Chapter.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!'

SIXTEEN

GODS OF WAR

CRUSHING THE WRECKAGE of ork trukks and war bikes beneath its tank-sized iron hooves, the Warlord Titan *Tyrannus Maximus* marched into the shell of the infested cathedral-factory. At its feet black-armoured Space Marines poured through the breach into the caldera, to join their number already fighting there.

The scene inside the compound was one of utter chaos, confusion and devastation. The burning torpedo-shaped fuselage of the ork bomber lay in the wreckage of a construction shed. Ork vehicles sped around the industrialised bowl of the crater, throwing clouds of stinking black exhaust fumes into the air along with the dust kicked up by their over-sized tyres. Greenskin warriors wielded all manner of weapons from huge blastas, sluggas, and cleavers, to improvised arms such as pieces of piping, welding gear and club-like wrenches.

And in the background, like some megalithic monster, the hideous, bloated form of the mega-gargant looked on, as its servants hurried to complete it ready to fight off the Imperial invaders.

The greenskins, mustering in their hundreds, were fighting on two fronts. For as well as the Imperial forces now pouring through the breach in the factory gates, the clearing of the caldera from its alien infestation had already begun.

Templars with jump packs had broken through the ork defence at the gates, leaping over the barricade formed by the press of their foul, alien bodies, and were engaging the ork vanguard at the gate from the rear. Exploded craters showed the scars where a number of the assault troops had already paid with their lives but in every case the scorched blisters in the ash-sand were surrounded by a dozen or more dead greenskins.

But there was also a second contingent of Black Templars advancing across the factory plaza from the direction of another burning building. Clouds of oily black smoke roiled from the cruciform shell of what had once been a power plant, abutting the caldera wall. No doubt it was tapping into the geo-thermal energies of the magma reservoir beneath the dormant volcanic cone to provide the manufactory with the energy required to power its production lines and foundries. Ekhardt had seen such cathedral-plants on half a dozen forge worlds in his two hundred years fighting on the frontline of mankind's endless wars with its implacable enemies.

From his vantage point thirty metres above the battleground, Princeps Magnus Ekhardt could see somewhere in the region of thirty Marines engaging the orks in hand-to-hand combat. They were hacking their way through the orks, and cutting them down

with chainswords and bolter fire, in a determined advance. Around them the sandy soil was thick with greenskin blood, corpses and overturned bikes and buggies.

Amongst them three figures stood out. One was a red-armoured giant that appeared to smite the enemy with three powerful arms. The skull-face of the second almost shone in the sunlight that was also reflecting off the honed axe-blades of a hand-wielded Templar-cross icon that exuded an aura of power. The orks obviously thought so too for they tried to fall back before his advance. But the wreath-helmed warrior was able to cut them down as they ran, the black metal sword gripped strongly in his hands shimmering with a crackling blue haze.

There was the flare of a rocket exhaust and a line of grey vapour described a course from the Templar company as a missile launcher fired across the compound and found its mark on a speeding truck. Greenskins were packed into its open carriage and hanging from its sides. There was the *crump* of a dirty explosion that emanated from beneath the truck, throwing it into the air, the chassis splitting into two distinct parts. The ork boyz were sent spinning out of the vehicle and the rising smoke and flames. Ekhardt realised that the Space Marines were not trying to fight their way through to meet up with the force accompanying *Tyrannus Maximus* into the crater-base. They were making for the gantries and engine-houses of the construction site and the foreboding creation situated there.

As the superhuman warriors and the alien greenskins fought their way across the factory complex, Ekhardt found himself pondering what the original purpose of this hidden base might have been, built so far out into the inhospitable ash wastes. Did it date from the time of Ghazghkull Thraka's last invasion fifty years before or from the darker, more distant days of the Chaos incursion into the Armageddon system, five hundred years ago? What had the Adeptus Mechanicus worked so secretly on here that it was kept hidden from the general populace and other Imperial agencies on Armageddon? Was it simply the case that five centuries ago there had been other settlements in this area of Armageddon Secundus, which had since been lost to the ash wastes? There was certainly no doubt as to what use it was being put to now. The malevolent expression on the face of the monstrous alien war machine gazed on them with blast shielded eyes. It somehow embodied the savage hatred and war-lust of the ork race, and it filled even this experienced princeps with some measure of trepidation.

This was, after all, the class of ork war machine that the Titan Legions had designated a mega-gargant, so appallingly huge it was. He had never encountered one of these monsters.

Alone in a fight with the machine he was sure that a god engine such as an Emperor-class titan could prevail, but one severely injured Warlord... Ekhardt caught himself.

'Have faith!' he chided himself.

His command crew looked round from scrying the consoles and vista-plates in front of them at the old man, startled by his outburst.

'Yes, princeps.' Moderati Orrek said hesitantly, thinking that some sort of reply was required. 'For "a warrior's faith in his commander is his best armour and his strongest weapon"', he quoted.

Ekhardt tried to think of something to say in response, but ended up growling in frustration. He was not losing his faith in the almighty Ommissiah, he told himself; he was merely being a pragmatist. It had been only a short time ago that he had felt re-energised at the prospect of going into battle against the greenskin horde.

Of course, *Tyrannus Maximus* did have one advantage over the ork idol-titan. The mega-gargant was still incomplete and not yet battle-ready. That status however had only served to spur the orks and gretchin working on the behemoth war-engine to do enough to make the gargant able to rid this upstart Warlord Titan from their sight.

Ekhardt suddenly felt a deep throbbing vibrating through the body of the titan all around him. This was something other than the powering turbines and seething of the plasma reactor. The vibrations were being caused by something beyond the adamantium hull of the great tyrant. A reading spiked on a data-slate hanging from the ceiling of the command deck and a throaty roar came over the loudspeakers.

'Tactical, what's going on?' the princeps demanded.

'It's the idol-machine,' Varne informed him, anxiously. 'It's powering up.'

'Golden Throne!' Ekhardt cursed.

This was it. This would be *Tyrannus Maximus*'s final battle. This was where they would make their last stand against the alien oppressors.

Varne, lock on to that monster. Target its power core and all main weapons systems. Moderati, charge Turbo Lasers and prepare to fire on my mark. Dvorad, give me everything you've got. If it is our day to die, then, by Mars, that bastard machine's coming with us!

THE AIR ITSELF shook as the huge lasers mounted on the titan's shoulders fired, jagged bolts of pulsing energy bombarding the monster-gargant on the other side of the compound. Explosions blossomed across the gargant's hull and a number of gantries and hoists came crashing down into the crater under the assault.

Castellan Adlar felt the sonic Shockwave of the firing laser cannons beat against the cracked ceramite surface of his power armour like a hurricane wind. But he stood firm.

He looked down the sweep of the crater bowl at the panicking, disorganised rabble that was the ork horde and smiled darkly behind the visor of his helmet. The alien vehicles bore banner-poles topped with chunky orkish icons in the image of a scarred ork face. These were the mechanically obsessed orks of the Blood Scar tribe: the warrior pack of their nemesis.

It was what they had all suspected and hoped for. The valiant battle-brothers of the Solemnus Crusade would be revenged upon the heretic-beast despoiler that was Morkrull Grimskar. Castellan Adlar and the brothers of his Fighting Company now had the privileged opportunity of reclaiming the honour that had been stolen from them twelve years ago. Was it possible that the

desecrator himself was here too? It was almost too much to hope for but it didn't stop Adlar praying to his primarch and Lord Sigismund that he was.

Today would be recorded in the histories of Armageddon and the Black Templars Chapter as a glorious day indeed. A day on which the despoiler of Solemnus and the forces of a mighty warboss of the alien plague, that was the ork race, were put down once and for all.

Shouting the battle cry of his Chapter in an unceasing mantra of fanatical devotion, Castellan Adlar led his men to glory on the fiery shores of Armageddon.

KICKING THE BULKHEAD door open, Brother Ansgar burst into the chamber beyond, the Black Sword raised high above his head ready to bring it down on the heads of his enemies.

Ugly, green, tusked faces moved towards him through the ruddy gloom of the gargant's belly. Ansgar struck once, twice, three times. The orks fell before him, blood spurting from the stumps of limbs, heads severed, bodies bifurcated by the molecule-sharp blade.

They were in. They had successfully boarded the mega-gargant and penetrated its heart.

The Emperor's Champion looked around him. The squad had followed him through the bulkhead door, the Marines ranging themselves either side of him. Counting the sword-wielding Brother Ansgar, there were six of them: Initiate Hebron, of the chaplain's own command squad; the veteran Brothers Benat and Kemen, of Squad Agravain; Brother Clust, one of Sergeant's Lir's men, and a heavy bolter specialist; and Brother-Techmarine Isendur, who was vital to the crack squad completing its mission.

Chaplain Wolfram's words instilled them with the wrath of the Emperor himself. The secondary insertion force had used the confusion consuming the greenskins in the crater to attack the mega-gargant's construction site directly. They had breached the compound's defences incredibly quickly, and this merely proved to them that the Emperor and his saintly primarchs were looking down on them and granting them divine protection. The Emperor was looking beneficently upon his champion.

As the rest of the squads under Wolfram's command continued to engage the orks and gretchin within the compound, Ansgar's squad penetrated the mega-gargant itself. They had cut their way past the massive belly-kannon jutting from the machine's swollen abdomen. The gargant did not have its full complement of orks by any means. As a result the greenskins on board put up a poor defence in the face of the Templars' assault.

Chaplain Wolfram's squad had notified Ansgar's infiltrators of the arrival of the Emperor's glorious battle-titan, but as yet they had not heard from the titan's princeps or crew. Ansgar knew that his team wouldn't have much time before the titan engaged the gargant but precisely how long he couldn't be certain. They had to move quickly.

The air inside the chamber was hot and thick with the stink of promethium, rust and orks. There was a dull boom from somewhere that Ansgar judged to be outside the gargant. Then an abrupt lurch and a rippling Shockwave passed through the grilled walkway beneath their feet, throwing Hebron, Benat and Kemen to the floor.

'This blasphemy is under attack at last, thank Dorn.' Ansgar said as the floored Marines picked themselves up. 'We need to hurry things up. Let's set the charges and get out of here! Just pray to the Emperor to grant us enough time.'

TROOPER VERHOEF SWUNG the battlewagon round, crushing three fleeing gretchin beneath its massive steamroller-wheel.

Ramming the accelerator pedal to the floor, he pushed the engine up towards its top speed and ploughed into the rear of another missile-launcher carrying ork truck. The spiked drum of the front roller tore a piece from the back of the ork-driven vehicle and shredded the tyres of both back wheels.

The truck was jerked around out of the way and men right into the rattling belt of the wagon's caterpillar tracks. Ork screams rose over the chugging of the machine's engine as its passengers were caught within the workings and subsequently crushed.

Vox-Trooper Strevicz had put out an all-channel alert to the Imperial forces attacking the caldera-factory – using accepted command codes. He told them that the crew of the newly-arrived battlewagon was fighting for the Emperor as well. The legionaries had barged through the milling confusion at the gate, running down all manner of greenskins before them and smashing aside other ork vehicles that got in their way.

There was a rattling roar and an ork kannon emplacement, hidden within the other construction barns and storage sheds littering the crater, opened up on the battlewagon, its orkish gunners having at last realised that it was not fighting on their side. Trooper Manro Kayvan died at the controls of the twin-linked shoota he was manning, his body blown apart by heavy-calibre fire.

Hauling on its pivot mount, Sergeant Bane swung the battlewagon's own huge kannon round on the gun emplacement and screaming curses at the greenskins, blasted the bunker position. The emplacement disappeared beneath a welter of kannon fire and strobing beams of laser energy.

Behind him, still locked into the rear section of the ork fortress-tank, Brother Jarold pounded the orks with fire from his new lascannon arm.

The kannon emplacement destroyed, Jarold turned his Sentinel arm-weapon on the barrel-store of a fuel dump. The barrels rocketed into the air as the lasfire ignited their contents, provoking yet more howls and screams from the desperate greenskins. The Imperials would make this day theirs yet.

'NO PITY! NO REMORSE! NO fear!' Castellan Adlar bellowed as he vaulted over the barricade of barrels and sheets of adamantium that had been constructed around the base of the ork kannon position. The factory was littered with them. Some looked like they were actually gargant weapons platforms that hadn't yet been fixed into position on the idol-monster.

The Black Templars' commander fell on the hulking brutes manning the kannon as his squad engaged close slugger boyz massed around it who had retreated to what they had foolishly supposed to be a secure position.

Adlar's thunder hammer hit home, splintering the skull of one of the big gun's loaders and turning its small alien brain to pulp. His hammer struck again and this time the kannon's chief operator had his back broken along with half the other thick bones in his body.

The Castellán was aware of a high-pitched snickering and, looking down at his feet he saw a large-eared, hysterical grot standing amidst a pile of sand bags. Bellowing, Adlar raised his weapon, ready to crash the gretchin beneath its huge head.

The wartrukk hit Adlar at full speed. He was smashed into the kannon, that shifted physically behind him, and pinioned there by the thick lance-head spikes welded to the truck's front bumper. What had caused the three-tonne vehicle to jump the barricade – whether it was the pilot's design or the result of something the Space Marines did – Adlar would never know.

ANOTHER TREMOR SHOOK the gargant and this time the caged bulbs illuminating the steam-filled passageway flickered on and off. One of the lights exploded. Ansgar stumbled forward, impaling the ork that wriggled on the end of his power sword more fully. The crackling tip of his blade punctured the flesh of the greenskin's back. He pulled the weapon free of the alien's carcass as the shaking subsided.

'Brother Isendur, are we ready?' Ansgar asked.

'The last of the charges have been set,' replied the techmarine in his unchanging dull dour tone.

'Then, brothers, let us be gone from this foul place.'

Ansgar led the way back through the twisting passages that riddled the core of the massive ork war machine, bringing down any orks foolish enough to get in his way with dazzling strikes from his sword that left searing trails of sparks on the retina.

'Valiant brothers!' The Marines all heard the voice booming through their comm-links. 'This is Princeps Ekhardt of the titan *Tyrannus Maximus*!' The princeps's tech-adepts had managed to patch him through to the Templars' comms-channel.

'Greetings, brother princeps.' Ansgar responded, as did all the other Black Templars fighting in the gargant-factory.

'This is a general communiqué for all brethren of the Black Templars fighting at our side in this battle.' Ekhardt said.

To Ansgar it sounded as if the princeps might not have heard the replies of him or his battle-brothers. This suspicion was confirmed with Ekhardt's very next sentence.

'I don't know if you can hear me – I can only pray to the Ommissiah that you can – but you must get out of here. You have only a little time to save yourselves.'

Ansgar's squad pounded on, gunning down orks and gretchin wielding over-sized engineer's tools over their heads, the Emperor's Champion hacking the aliens limb from limb, his Armour of Faith enduring against their ceaseless assaults. As they did so they listened to the titan princeps's words, their curiosity aroused.

This will be our last battle. Noble *Tyrannus Maximus* cannot hope to survive the confrontation we are about to commit ourselves to. But if we are to die this day then we can but condemn the greenskins' god to death with us.

'We're going in. Save yourselves to fight another day and clear this Emperor-blessed world of its foul alien infestation. And tell the people of this world the sacrifice we made for them.'

The princeps's words ringing in his ears, Brother Ansgar ran on. Almost immediately he felt the impacts of the Warlord Titan's fusillade. Time was running out for all of them. They couldn't leave it any longer and they couldn't rely on the titan succeeding in Princeps Ekhardt self-appointed task. Ansgar's Emperor-sent visions had led the Black Templars to this place and they had a mission to complete, and that was what they were going to do.

'Isendur, blow the charges!'

CASTELLAN ADLAR LOOKED up from the terrible wound in his stomach; where the armour was torn away his flesh was like a red rain. He turned to the glowing eyes of the truck's driver. It looked to Adlar like the brute was laughing, even though, judging by the way the front of the truck was buckled and crushed, the alien's legs had likely been severed in the crash.

So many brave warriors had died in the Fighting Company's assault on the gargant-factory. He had seen Brother Bladud fall to an ork stikkbombz attack. Brother Padarn was gone too, as were Daman, Johfrit, Halwn and Initiate Kalan of his own elite command squad. However, Adlar thanked Sigismund when he caught sight of Brother Murtagh's banner still waving over the heads of the Templars a hundred metres away to his right. At least the standard would rally his men even if he was gone.

Despite his predicament, Adlar still gripped both his humming thunder hammer and his plasma pistol in his gauntleted hands. The pistol had recharged since the last time he had used it, scant minutes before. That now seemed to him like a lifetime away. With slow deliberation, the Marine commander raised the plasma weapon and blew the ork's head off. It gave him little satisfaction for he knew that he was already dead. Then his greying vision was filled with emerald faces as orks swarmed over the emplacement in the wake of the smashed truck. And Adlar knew what he had to do.

His only regret was that he would not be there to witness the destruction of the gargant for himself. Delivering his soul into the Emperor's keeping, with one last mighty effort Castellán Adlar brought the crackling head of his hammer down on top of a kannon shell that had been dropped, so that it rested point up, by the ork loader. The Templar dispatched it to whatever alien hell awaited it.

Seeing what Adlar was doing the gretchin barely had time to scream before the shell exploded, incinerating the tiny greenskin in the ground zero blast. A split second later, the shell lying ready in the breach of the huge gun and the other munitions casually placed around it went off. The explosion left a crater fifteen metres across in the middle of the gargant-factory. It was a fitting memorial to a man such as Castellán Adlar of the Black Templars' Solemnus Crusade.

BROTHER ANSGAR SPRINTED for the opening in the belly kannon hold, after the other men in his squad, as the first of Techmarine Isendur's carefully placed charges went off. The way to safety lay only another ten metres ahead. Beyond, in the gloomy, wide-

arched mouth of the kannon-room was the shape of the advancing Warlord Titan, silhouetted against the backdrop of the daylight-illuminated crater.

The whole gargant shook around him and the chamber filled with roiling smoke and blistering shards of flying metal, as the chain reaction consumed the war engine's systems.

Ansgar flung himself forward in a superhuman leap that would carry him out of the belly of the beast and to safety.

A claw as big as he was swung out of the shadows at the edge of the hangar-mouth and halted his leap, smashing him to the floor with the force of a collapsing mountainside. Ansgar skidded back across the floor of the belly-chamber, sparks flying from where the ceramite plates of his ancient armour scraped against the bare metal floor.

Something huge stepped out of the gloom, a low rumbling growl emanating from deep within its barrel chest. Iron-shod feet clanked on the grilled metal floor. The thing was at least three metres tall and just as wide, the bulk of its already massive green body enhanced by the metal exoskeleton armour it wore. Piercing red eyes fixed Ansgar, from beneath the brow of a long-horned helmet. A trophy-hung banner pole rose from its back, topped with a sheet-metal cut ork-face image. Ansgar could pick out the blood-red scar even in the dim light.

The Space Marine felt an adrenalin-rush of excitement pass through his whole body and, in one deft movement, he leapt to his feet. This was why he was the Emperor's Champion, and why he had been sent his prophetic visions. Everything had been to prepare him for this moment. Everything in his life had been designed to bring him to this one, crucial moment. It was his duty and honour and to fight this battle for the Emperor.

Brother Ansgar hefted the shimmering Black Sword in both hands. He could almost believe that the energy field generated by the ancient piece of wargear had begun to hum more loudly and glow more brightly in the presence of the brute-beast.

The ork growled again, and the growl became an animalistic roar. With heavy clumping steps the warboss pounded towards him.

Raising the Black Sword above his head, the Emperor's Champion prepared to meet the alien's charge.

For this was his nemesis, the nemesis of all the brothers of the Solemnus Crusade. This was the beast that would had condemned a hundred brothers and a thousand other innocent souls to a savage, brutal death.

This was the Warboss of the Blood Scar tribe.

This was Morkrull Grimskar.

SEVENTEEN

DEICIDE

METAL RANG ON metal as the Templar's sword struck the warboss's oversized, crackling power claw. There was a sparking flash and momentarily the two energy fields shorted out. Brother Ansgar was hurled backwards by the dazzling blast, skidding to a halt at the lip of the hangar mouth of the belly chamber. The ork hardly recoiled from the blast. Bellowing in fury, in the incomprehensible alien tongue, Morkrull Grimskar thumped towards the Emperor's Champion.

Ansgar could feel the war machine shaking all around him as a result of the tremors of the Imperial Titan's massive footfalls as it powered towards the idol-engine.

The other Templars were gone now, having escaped from their sabotage mission against the mega-gargant. Ansgar himself had made sure that they all got out before he concerned himself with his own safety. So the Emperor's chosen champion was left to engage the nemesis of their whole crusade in a fight to the death, alone.

The Black Sword still firmly in his hand, the Space Marine rose and prepared to meet the monster's charge once again. The blue force field surrounding his ancient weapon hummed. The ork warboss was shaking his claw furiously, as if hoping that in doing so he too could return his own force field to operation. No such thing happened.

This time, as Grimskar charged, his great metal left arm windmilled towards the Space Marine's armoured head. Ansgar swung in low with the sword, ducking and sidestepping the warboss's attack in one fluid motion. The three talons of the claw closed on air and sliced through the grilled deck, ripping great gouges in the metal floor. Even without its customised energy field, the claw was still a savagely sharp and dangerously powerful weapon, especially when backed by the monster's sheer physical strength.

Ansgar's own blade made contact, scoring a deep groove through the bolted armoured plates covering the front of the great creature's body.

Orks, Ansgar knew, were notoriously hierarchical and to survive the battle for supremacy among their own kind, to become the leader of an entire greenskin horde, an individual had to be the biggest, hardest, toughest, most cunning, most ruthless bastard of the lot. And here he was facing a warboss who not only commanded troops, alien armour units and the might of a gargant – and a mega-gargant at that – but one who also had a whole fleet of warships at his command and a hundred kilometre-long space hulk as his flagship!

The warboss was certainly a formidable sight. Morkrull Grimskar was clad from head to toe in thick, heavy power armour of orkish design, a cumbersome parody of Ansgar's own intricately wrought suit of artificer armour. The ork's creaking exoskeleton enhanced its own already awesome strength and shielded the more vulnerable flesh beneath.

Where the craftsmen and artisans who had created Ansgar's armour had wrought into its very fabric the insignia of his Chapter, or created laurel leaves with fluted veins of metal, with all the skills of a metallurgist and sculptor combined, Grimskar's ugly armour had been daubed with the much more simplistic symbols of ork-kind. This included painting a black and white check onto the chin of the massively oversized mandible of the ork's huge iron maw and daubing the triangular teeth with red paint to make them appear bloodied. Strings of teeth, bones and even shell casings also clattered and rattled against the ceramite plates. It was so

crude as to be almost laughable except that the mega armour turned an already fearsome opponent into a virtually unstoppable killing machine.

Two huge horns – or possibly tusks, Ansgar couldn't tell – had been attached to the helmet-portion of the ork's battle suit. Over a metre-long, the Space Marine now saw that they were hung with Grimskar's war trophies: the wizened, slack-jawed heads of guardsmen, that of another ork who must have challenged the warboss, or displeased him in some way. There was even the still-helmeted head of a Space Marine, its green and yellow markings denoting that the battle-brother had belonged to the Salamanders Chapter. Seeing this, Ansgar felt his already seething blood boil.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' he roared.

The swiping, snapping claw struck again. Raising the Black Sword he parried the descending exoskeleton limb, but had to take a step backwards at the force of the blow. The shearing hydraulic pincers of the claw were pulled back and the Templar found himself looking up into the balefully glowing eyes of the horn-helmeted alien warboss. Up close now he saw that Grimskar's face was marked in the same way as the totem-symbol of the Blood Scar tribe.

Hydraulic pistons hissing and worn servos grinding, the brute hammered home the advantage, kicking out with an iron-shod foot. Ansgar's consecrated suit of biomechanically linked armour was less cumbersome than his aggressor's and he was able to react swiftly, side-stepping the kick. The Space Marine brought the crackling power sword around in a deft arc, the blade singing as its sheathing energy field cut through the molecules of the air.

There was a bright flash as Ansgar's weapon connected with the ork's armoured arm, slicing cleanly through a bundle of power cables. The snapping callipers of the claw closed. The ork lunged. Its snarling face was mere centimetres from the Space Marine's, strings of saliva flapping from yellowed tusks, and the foul abattoir-stink of its breath washed over him.

Ansgar pulled back and prepared his next strike. It appeared that the Astartes champion and the alien warboss were equally matched. When one landed a blow against the other, it was returned in kind. The two combatants continued trading blows. Chips flew from Ansgar's Armour of Faith as Grimskar's claw clubbed the Space Marine aside again while deft cutting strokes from the Black Sword sliced into the cables and hydraulics of the ork's mega armour, causing oily fluid to spray from ruptured hoses and severed feed pipes.

His glittering blade described a figure-of-eight pattern in the air before him, and the Emperor's Champion struck at the monstrous ork once more.

Grimskar must have hoped that he could have the satisfaction of finishing Brother Ansgar, the Emperor's Champion no less, in a hand-to-hand fight. He had been looking forward to savouring the moment when he was able to tear the crusading Marine limb from limb. However, despite his greater size and strength, he was already losing the advantage to the swifter, power sword-wielding Black Templar.

Grunting, the savage brute dropped his head and charged in to meet Ansgar's attack, the tips of its helmet horns lowered, ready to gore the Space Marine. The blue-fire wreathed Black Sword sliced the tip cleanly from one of the horns before the full weight of the warboss and his armoured exoskeleton rammed into Ansgar. The other horn tip smashed into the join between his right auto-reactive shoulder plate and his aquila-inscribed breastplate.

Ansgar howled in pain as the warboss lifted him off the ground, skewered on the end of the horn. Grimskar charged at the wall of the belly hangar-mouth. Ansgar's body hit the bulkhead and he cried out again as he felt the horn shatter the bones beneath his armour. Despite the pain, Ansgar refused to relinquish his grip on the Black Sword. His right arm now hung limply at his side, and his shoulder felt like molten magma was flooding through it.

Ansgar pulled out his bolt pistol with his left hand, just as the warboss turned his own twin-linked shoota arm on the pinioned Marine. Ansgar could only suppose the brute hadn't used this against him before, either because he wanted to avoid damaging the gargant, or he wanted the satisfaction of killing him with its bare hands. The master-crafted gun fired first, bolter shells rattling from the sickle clip and knocking aside the orks aimed weapon. The shoota fired a moment later, its own deadly ammunition alternately ripping through the chamber wall or ricocheting from the reinforcing struts of the bulkhead.

Screaming in pain now, Ansgar hefted the Black Sword up in his right hand, and, placed its tip against the armoured plating sheathing the warboss's torso. He pushed down hard. Blue sparks flew from the metal as the sword's field sliced through the thick shielding armour and into Grimskar's chest.

The ork bellowed in animal pain, the guttural noise merging with Ansgar's own cries. There was the flash of an electrical discharge and the hulking ork suddenly jerked backwards. The Space Marine dropped to the floor and lay there, momentarily stunned by the shock and debilitating pain. The warboss continued to spasm and stagger backwards, bolts of electricity leaping from his damaged suit to the grilled metal floor. Acrid black smoke began to rise from the fissures in the exoskeleton.

Slowly, Brother Ansgar got to his feet. Holstering his pistol, he changed the humming power sword to his left hand and strode purposefully towards the Templars' nemesis. The gargant shook as the titan pounded it with laser fire and a sustained blast from its Gatling arm. Ansgar raised the sword above his head once more. The inscribed scrollwork and the words *Imperator Rex* glowed with divine white star fire.

With a yell both of pain, anger and vehemence Ansgar swung the sword round in almost a complete circle, bringing it down towards the warboss's partially exposed head. At the last second the malfunctioning suit threw Grimskar around. The buzzing power blade struck the right shoulder of the ork's armour, slicing cleanly through armour plate, alien flesh and thick bone, and smoothly out the other side. Morkrall Grimskar's right arm fell to the floor with a resounding clang.

At that moment, an explosion, far greater and more devastating than anything Ansgar had experienced onboard the gargant so far, took out the back wall of the kannon chamber. Munitions stored within the belly of the beast were touched off by the chain reaction begun by the detonation of Techmarine Isendur's charges. The swollen chamber was filled with roiling flames as the blast took out the lower portion of the gargant.

The warboss disappeared, consumed by the swelling, mushrooming fires.

The shockwave picked up the wounded champion and hurled him out of the mouth of the stomach gun emplacement in an incendiary hurricane blast.

THE MEGA-GARGANT'S savage cutting claws sheared through the metal limb-bones, hydraulic cables and power conduits of the Imperial titan. Lightning arcing around the Warlord's severed cannon-limb ignited the hydraulic oil bleeding from the cut feeds, as the monstrous ork machine clamped a dreadful claw, the size of a starship docking clamp, onto the smaller *Tyrannus Maximus*. Lights flared inside the gargant's eyes denoting its now operational status. With a great tearing of metal it lurched away from the scaffolding surrounding it, sending dozens of greenskin construction workers plunging to their deaths amidst an avalanche of steel beams and rent gantries. The Warlord Titan was pushed backwards as it did so.

The ground shook as the two warring battle-engines clashed and wrestled with one another, the tremors of the war machines' footfalls shaking structures free from the sides of the crater, unsteady gantries and rusted bolted walkways crashing down into the pit of the volcanic crater in a cacophony of dying metal.

'Is everything set?' Princeps Magnus Ekhardt asked his senior staff, as the god engine reeled at another resounding blow from the gargant.

'Aye, sir.'

'All is ready, my lord.'

'The reactor will overload in a matter of minutes,' Chief Engineer Dvorad confirmed.

'Then it is time I addressed the crew, one last time,' the old man stated, his cracked voice heavy with fatality.

As his officers made sure that the titan fought back against the lumbering gargant, the princeps took a moment to compose himself, and then flicked the switch on his command console.

'Men of *Tyrannus Maximus*, this is your princeps. When we set out on patrol with our brother titan *Dominus Exitio*, scant days ago, we undertook the beginning of a great journey: a journey to war, to victory and to glory. And today we come to the end of that journey. We stand now, in the face of the alien menace and the only ones able to stop it. The price will be high but the rewards that await us all will be beyond measure. Those who are about to lay down their lives in the service of the Emperor and the Great Machine, I salute you.'

Ekhardt flicked the switch off again.

Tyrannus Maximus shook as the warring titans clashed again. The two leviathans were now as close together as they could be.

They were locked in a deadly embrace, the ugly, grimacing face of the mega-gargant met the steely mask of the Imperial Warlord Titan.

They had gone in all guns blazing, cutting a bloody swathe through the greenskins to their god-idol, flattening fuel-guzzling bikes, buggies and even larger trucks beneath splayed metal feet. Shells had whistled and roared down at the titan from yet more gun emplacements around the construction sight – it seemed that the orks mounted guns on everything – but they did little real harm to the striding colossus. They had certainly done nothing to temper Ekhardt's determination to make this, *Tyrannus Maximus*'s last stand, count.

Now the giant war machine faced its greatest battle in thousands of years, and never had the outcome been more certain.

'This is it, men,' Ekhardt said, addressing his command crew alone now. 'I just wanted to say... I just wanted to say...' But he couldn't find the words.

'We know,' Orrek said calmly. 'We're the best bloody crew you've ever gone into battle with.'

'I'll see you again, sir,' Dvorad said, turning to salute his princeps, 'in the hall of heroes of the Emperor!'

Kasl Varne stood and turned his pupil-less eyes on Ekhardt. 'Sir, it's been an honour.'

'And for me as well,' the old man said, the grit and grim-ness gone from his voice now. 'I'll dine with you all again in the halls of the Machine back on Mars! Now let us make our peace with the Emperor of Mankind.'

An atmosphere of solemnity hung over the command deck of the titan as the officers commended their souls to the Emperor's eternal care. And as he said his own prayers, Ekhardt could almost believe he could hear another voice, at the edge of his mind, communing with its maker. *Tyrannus Maximus* was making its peace with the Machine God of Mars.

For Magnus Ekhardt, now there was only peace. He knew he had made a difference in his lifetime. He was going to leave this life now. And what better way was there for a man to die than to give up his life in the service of the God-Emperor of all humanity? Ekhardt considered the fate of the orks. The vile greenskins had defiled a manufactory-temple of the Adeptus Mechanicus and now they would pay the ultimate price for such an act of sacrilege. They would soon learn that the Machine God was a vengeful deity and his wrath was terrible!

A terrible blaring sound filled the head of the titan and Ekhardt and his command crew were bathed in the ruddy glow of hazard lighting.

'Core failure in sixty seconds,' Dvorad announced and then began the countdown. 'Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven...'

'THERE!' THE DREADNOUGHT'S booming voice intoned, directing the legionaries to the armoured figure lying sprawled in the sand, with his lascannon arm. The Black Templar lay directly between the two towering colossi. At any moment he could be crushed beneath the hooves of one, or the caterpillar-tracked feet of the other. 'We must save him.'

Jelkus Bane wanted to scream that there wasn't time, that the titan's princeps had ordered the Imperial forces inside the crater to get out of there with all haste, that if they went to the aid of the injured Templar they too could be crushed by the warring titans. This was not a place for mere mortals any more. The crater had become the battleground of gods.

But what Bane said instead was, 'Very well.'

Verhoef swung the battlewagon round and, putting his foot to the floor again, sped towards the prone figure. The tank-trukk cleared the tall profile of one of the Warlord's metal toes and skidded to a halt next to the Space Marine.

The giant warrior was unconscious, his armour marked with battle-scars and scorch marks. The large red wax seals attached to his armour had melted and run, pieces of ashen parchment still locked in place were the fluid wax had then reset. The robe at his waist, which bore some heraldic device, was smouldering and fire-blackened. Locked in the immovable grasp of his left hand was a jewelled sword of black metal, the like of which the impoverished legionaries had never seen.

It took six of the surviving troopers to haul the Templar up against the side of the battlewagon so that Brother Jarold could then hoist him on board with his preternaturally strong, clamping power fist.

'Come on!' Bane screamed as Troopers Gynt and Ercal struggled back on board the battlewagon, aware of the darkening shadow over them.

As soon as the remaining two were clinging to the side of the wagon, Verhoef sped away again. The Warlord's foot stamped down behind them, sending a minor earthquake zigzagging their way. The vibrations threw the legionaries to the deck. Ercal and Gynt almost lost their grip on the rungs of the boarding ladder as the jolt flung them against the side of the battlewagon. Verhoef adroitly steered the massive machine clear of a fissure opening in the ground before them and then, the legionaries hollered for the sheer joy of being alive, and turned the battlewagon towards the gate.

'—TEN, NINE, EIGHT—'

'This is it men.' Magnus Ekhardt said, removing his princeps cap and holding it over his breast as he stood to attention.

'—five, four, three—'

'Goodbye, my friends.'

'—one.'

Tyrannus Maximus's plasma reactor exploded with the force of a small sun. The titan was consumed by a vaporising ball of white light that swelled to engulf the grappling gargant in annihilating radiance. Pieces exploded from the two war machines as the ork idol was utterly destroyed by a series of detonations that increased in devastating effect, until the mega-gargant's filthy atomic power core overloaded and blew.

The crater-factory was consumed by a raging storm of nuclear fire. What had begun with the detonation of an atomic device ended the same way. Tiny vehicles and burnt corpses were picked up and dashed against the quaking sides of the caldera cone.

Everything disappeared beneath the hellish inferno – cathedral spires, towering cranes, the titans – everything, as a swirling, swelling cloud mushroomed from the crater into the upper atmosphere of the planet, making it seem like the dormant volcanic crater was erupting again for the first time in a thousand years.

A blackened, head-like sphere, helmet eyes aflame, rocketed out of the heart of the hellish fires, trailing flames like some earthbound comet. It rose two kilometres above the desert, the ash wastes and the war-ravaged planet, before reaching the apex of its flight and descending again towards hungry gravity of the planet.

The entire manufactory-base had been destroyed, along with the noble titan and its ungodly antithesis. The Adeptus Mechanicus cathedral-factory, so foully desecrated by the orks and put to their own blasphemous use, had been cleansed by the Emperor's divine retribution.

EPILOGUE

THE HONoured DEAD

THE SUN SET red, like the baleful eye of the blasphemous Great Beast Ghazghkull Mag UrukThraka. It fell between the billowing clouds of petrochemical fires in a sky of orange flame. The walls of the rift valley were rich with purple shadows; the ash-sand covering the valley floor ochre streaked with rose. Five kilometres away the caldera stood stark against the horizon, smoke and roiling flames still rising from its crater cone.

The surviving Imperial forces, from the battle of the crater, gathered together in the shelter of the looming cliffs. The Space Marines and Imperial guardsmen formed a rough semicircle around the towering form of a gigantic helmet – its eyes burnt and blackened holes – the head of *Tyrannus Maximus*. The titan's command deck had crashed to earth at this spot, putting out the last of the fires burning in it, and half burying it under the blackened, partially-vitrified ash-sand.

Standing on top of the wreckage, five metres above the parched plain, was a noble yet battle-damaged figure. He was clad in cracked and pitted black-painted armour. The bas-relief aquila and Chapter insignia were picked out in white and red. A charred cloth at his waist flapped in the breeze that heralded the coming chill desert night. The warrior was supporting himself on his black-bladed sword, its tip thrust into the skull of the titan. His gauntleted hands rested on its hilt. In the creeping dusk the sword glowed with a faint blue light, that glittered from the jewels set into the ancient artefact.

Brother Ansgar, champion of the Emperor, looked down on the assembled Imperial troops.

The Space Marines standing to attention before him numbered only two score. Fully one third of Fighting Company Adlar had been lost in the last two days, most of them in the battle for the crater. But, Ansgar believed, the lives lost had been worth it. The mega-gargant was dead.

Sitting on top of the orkish battlewagon were the surviving Armageddon Steel Legionaries of Sergeant Bane's platoon. Standing proudly beside them was the hulking form of the Dreadnought Brother Jarold, reunited with his Templar brethren at last.

'My brothers,' Ansgar declared, purposefully taking in each of the Imperial heroes ranged before him in turn. His voice was raised so that all might hear him. 'We have won a great victory this day. The holy sanctuary of the Adeptus Mechanicus has been cleansed of its alien infestation and purified in the name of the Emperor. But more than that, we have dealt the forces of the Great Beast a mighty blow. The idolatrous behemoth that would have led his hordes to victory after victory has been cast down and one

of the Beast's mightiest generals has been laid low. But let us now remember those who gave their lives that we might win this day. The honoured dead.'

The assembled soldiers, tired yet relieved, thoughtful yet exhilarated at their victory, bowed their heads in reverent prayer.

'Let us first remember the noble Castellan Adlar.' Ansgar said, 'who is an inspiration to all who would crusade against the enemies of mankind in the Emperor's name.'

A moment's silence passed around the gathering, the only sounds disturbing their quiet being the whispering of the desert wind and the distant crackling of the flames consuming the gargant-factory.

'Let us remember Princeps Magnus Ekhardt and the crew of the Imperial Warlord Titan *Tyrannus Maximus*, whose noble sacrifice put an end to the aliens' blasphemous deity. We remember also the men of the Armageddon Steel Legion. Their spirit will endure as long as the sun rises on this blessed world. And we remember Commander Conrad Straeker of His Imperial Majesty's Navy.

May his soul soar to the Emperor on wings of fire. And now we bring to mind our brothers who have gone on to fight the Emperor's battles in the world beyond: Brother Kalan, Initiate Lairnien, Brother-Pilot Horek and Brother-Gunner Tortain of the *Excalibur*, Brother Calles, Brother-Initiate Leorad, Brother Daman, Brother Celidon, Brother Escanor, Initiate Johfrit.'

Every warrior of the Chapter lost to them was a remembered face, a personality, to Ansgar. 'Brother Bladud, Brother-Sergeant Lir, Brother Meinrad, Initiate Fiamain, Brother Tage, Brother Carde, Neophyte Mabon, Brother-Sergeant Dynadin, Brother Padarn.'

He could see them all in his mind's eye. 'Blessings of the primarch be upon them.'

'May the Emperor keep their souls in peace,' the remaining Black Templars responded as one, the susurrations of their voices like the whispering of the desert breeze. But the voice of Brother Jarold was like a booming bass.

The Emperor's Champion looked into the helmeted and gas hooded faces of the valiant survivors – the victors of the day.

'Brothers, this is not the end. This victory is but the beginning of a new day for Armageddon and for the Black Templars of the Solemnus Crusade. For on this day we have taken the first step to reclaim our honour that was stolen from us on that dark day, twelve years ago.'

With his strong left hand, Brother Ansgar pulled the Black Sword free of its resting place and raised it high above his head. The tip of its blade pierced the burning sky.

'The battle goes on. For while the spawn of ork-kind live we will keep on fighting until the Crusade for Armageddon – our last crusade – is won at last.'

And behind Ansgar the fiery shores of Armageddon burned on into the darkening night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Green works as a full-time teacher in West London. By night he relates tales of Torben Badenov's Kislevite mercenaries and the adventures of the Underhive bounty hunter Nathan Creed for *Inferno!* magazine. He became one of the Emperor's scribes in 1994 and has since penned a number of articles for *White Dwarf* and an ever-growing number of short stories for the Black Library. *Crusade for Armageddon* is his second novel.

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