



A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

# CAIN'S LAST STAND

Sandy Mitchell

*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.*

**Editorial Note:**

*I must confess to feeling a certain amount of relief in finally being able to present the latest extract from the Cain Archive to my fellow inquisitors for their perusal, this volume of his memoirs having turned out to be by far the most difficult editorial task I've tackled to date. Readers with sufficiently long memories may recall that in my preface to the third volume I mentioned that the material therein had formed an extended digression in Cain's account of his activities during the Thirteenth Black Crusade; suffice it to say that it was far from being the only one and several of these anecdotes were at least as long as his account of Adumbria campaign. In part, I suspect, his inability to stick to the point for very long was because the events he was attempting to recount were still relatively recent, and he simply felt more comfortable recalling more distant, less immediately painful memories.*

*At the risk of sounding a trifle self-congratulatory, however, I think I've succeeded in patching together a reasonably coherent account of Cain's activities during the Second Siege of Perlia, with no more visible signs of editorial interference than usual. Whether or not it was worth the effort, I leave to your judgement.*

*Attentive readers who have been following this little hobby of mine for some while should realise at once that this volume links thematically with both of the immediately preceding ones, finally resolving a number of matters which began to unfold almost at the onset of his career. Even more importantly, the finished document gives us the closest thing we're ever likely to have to a reliable first-hand account of what may well have been a decisive blow against the Black Crusade itself. Which is not to diminish the nobility and sacrifice of so many of the Emperor's faithful servants in those harsh and terrifying times; but if Cain is indeed accurate in his recollections (and despite his other faults, which he remains disarmingly candid about for the most part, he is at least consistent in reporting things pretty much as he experienced them), it can hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that had he not acted as he did, the Great Enemy would have had ultimate victory pretty much within their grasp. On the other hand, I can't quite shake the disquieting suspicion that the eventual consequences of the way matters were so unexpectedly resolved may turn out to be almost equally catastrophic. That particular shoe has still to drop, however, and at the very least Cain's resourcefulness has brought us additional time to prepare if the worst should come to pass.*

*But enough about my problems. Despite the considerable amount of work required to render it into a coherent form, I've been as scrupulous as ever in my attempts to remain as true as possible to both the spirit and the letter of Cain's reminiscences. Where necessary I have, as usual, added explanatory footnotes and material from other sources in order to provide a wider context to their author's perennially self-centered view of events; the rest is entirely Cain's own words.*

**Amberly Vail, Ordo Xenos**

# ONE

I CAN NEVER see Perlia from orbit without experiencing a peculiar mixture of emotions. On the one hand, the memories of my first sight of that world, and the narrowness with which I escaped making no more of a mark on it than a small crater shortly thereafter, thanks to an orkish fighter pilot using my lifepod for target practice, come back with startling vividness every time I look down on it from outside the atmosphere. On the other, I've grown tolerably fond of the place in the last few years; after almost a century of rattling around the galaxy, in mortal peril more often than not, it's still a refreshing novelty to have somewhere to call home. Thus it was, as our shuttle shrugged off the last of the atmosphere on that fateful day early in the last year of the old millennium<sup>1</sup>, I found myself gazing out of the viewport in something of a pensive mood.

'Tea, commissar?' a familiar voice enquired at my elbow, and Jurgen's face appeared in the reflective armourcrys, occulting the soothing panorama of blue, green, and umber mottling the void beyond an instant after my nose had forewarned me that he'd begun to lean in my direction.

To say that the years had been kind to my aide would be something of an exaggeration; it would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that they were distantly polite to him, when they could be bothered to acknowledge his presence at all. What was left of his hair had turned white decades before, although most of it had long since abandoned his head completely, revealing a scalp as mottled with psoriasis as his face had always been in the patches visible between his ragged eruptions of facial hair<sup>2</sup>. He was still as vigorous as I was, though, thanks to the juvenat treatments Amberley had discreetly provided for him.

Despite the number of life-threatening errands I'd run for her over the years, I was under no illusion about which of the two of us she regarded as the greater asset among her little stable of associates. Even heroes of the Imperium are two a credit compared to blanks, and having benefited from his inexplicable ability to nullify the powers of the warp on more occasions than I care to contemplate, I could well understand why she valued his assistance so highly.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, accepting the mug of tanna he held out to me with surprising ease, as, despite the confined space of the passenger compartment, my little knot of commissar cadets had chosen to sit as far away from the pair of us as they decently could. For that I could hardly blame them; my aide's bouquet was pungent enough at the best of times, and his propensity to airsickness tended to exacerbate it even more than usual. 'Most thoughtful.'

'You're welcome, sir.' An expression somewhat approximating a smile appeared briefly on his face before wandering away again, and he replaced the cap on the flask carefully before stowing it somewhere among the profusion of webbing his torso armour was habitually festooned with. 'I've got some sandwiches in here somewhere too, if you'd like one?'

'The tea will be fine,' I said hastily as he began to rummage through a couple of pouches, apparently at random. His relief at being outside the atmosphere at last was palpable, and I began to breathe a little less shallowly as I sipped the fragrant beverage, watching our adopted homeworld recede behind our reflected faces. I was beginning to show the weight of years myself, truth to tell, patches of white appearing at my own temples despite the periodic juvenats my seniority and supposedly heroic status had bestowed upon me. Well, I could hardly complain about that: after some of the things I'd seen and done it was a wonder the whole lot hadn't turned to snow decades ago.

By this point I'd been living on Perlia for around six years, off and on, enjoying what was supposed to be a peaceful retirement. From time to time it actually had been. To my vague surprise I'd quite taken to the role of pedagogue, and the young pups I'd been put in charge of at the schola progenium someone had seen fit to found there since my last eventful visit<sup>3</sup> were a great deal less troublesome than a Guard regiment. It probably didn't hurt that I was the first instructor they'd had with a relatively lax attitude to the standards of discipline usually enforced in such institutions. I'd found very early on in my own career that a subtle approach was far more effective in inspiring loyalty among the troops than simple intimidation, and it seemed to me that imparting this lesson by example would greatly increase their chances of future survival. (Not to mention the fact that it annoyed most of the Emperor-botherers who ran the place, which was always amusing from my point of view.)

Unfortunately, though, I hadn't been left to enjoy the relative tranquillity for long: the tyrannid hive fleets had chosen the year of my arrival to begin their onslaught against the Eastern Arm, and I'd been called back to the colours on several occasions since. Sometimes by the Commissariat, who seemed to believe that my presence too close to the firing line for comfort might make the scuttling horrors spit out the latest world they were attempting to devour, or at least make it unpleasantly indigestible, and almost as often by Amberley, who, like most of the Ordo Xenos in the Ultima Segmentum at the time, found her hands uncomfortably full, and seemed to find it necessary to delegate a good deal of the ensuing crisis management to those of us among her cadre of acolytes with a proven talent for survival<sup>4</sup>.

At any event, I'd been away from Perlia for quite some time when I returned home towards the end of 998, to find that quite a lot had been going on there in my absence. Luckily the main 'nid advance had bored on past the system, as I knew only too well,

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<sup>1</sup> M41, of course. Most of the material presented in this volume was recorded piecemeal between 002 and 005.M42, with scant regard for strict chronological order even by Cain's usual slapdash standards.

<sup>2</sup> Though Jurgen was ostensibly excused shaving on medical grounds, due to his interesting collection of skin diseases, I always suspected the real reason he was allowed to grow a beard was Cain's understandable apprehension about what might be revealed by the application of a razor.

<sup>3</sup> Following the repulsion of the ork invasion in 923.M41, and in response to the growing number of tau incursions into Imperial space at about that time, the military presence in the sectors around the Damocles Gulf was greatly increased. Perlia, being both strategically located and in need of considerable reconstruction, became an obvious staging post for these forces, and benefited from the introduction of a number of Imperial institutions, the schola among them.

<sup>4</sup> Cain's activities during the later tyrannic wars, though both valuable and fascinating, need not detain us at this juncture.



having been stuck right in its path, but it hadn't escaped entirely unscathed. A vanguard fleet had wandered in about eight months before, looking for an easy target to replenish their store of biomass, and our system defence squadrons had had their work cut out keeping them away from Perlia itself.

As it turned out they'd succeeded beyond all reasonable expectation, only a few warrior forms making it as far as the surface, and being swiftly dispatched by the PDF, but the price of victory had been a heavy one. All the outlying installations had been either overrun or abandoned to allow the fleet to concentrate on defending the planet itself; now the dust had settled, every void station and off-world habitat had to be cleansed of whatever chitinous horrors had gone to ground there before they could be got running again.

Which is why I found myself staring out of the viewport of the schola's battered old Aquila, which I strongly suspected only remained spaceworthy so the Navy cadets could get used to being void sick without inconveniencing the captains of the sector fleet, and the seminarians from the Adeptus Mechanicus shrine adjoining our grounds had something to practice their rituals of maintenance on.

'Time to rendezvous with the troop transport?' I asked, turning in my seat to regard the double row of cadets, most of whom made a hurried attempt to look as though they'd been sitting upright and paying attention instead of playing regicide on their data-slates or swapping salacious holo-picts. The obvious exception was Cadet Nelys, who was already bolt upright, and wouldn't know how to slouch if I ordered him to; Emperor's teeth, I sometimes thought the lad slept at attention.

'Seventeen minutes, commissar.' A clear contralto, clipped and precise, cut through the sheepish murmur of wild guesses and mumbled excuses, a fraction of a second before Nelys could get his reply out, and he flushed, no doubt irritated at being beaten to the punch by the only girl in the squad.<sup>1</sup>

'Well done, Kayla,' I said, despite not having a clue whether she was right or not; she'd put Nelys's nose out of joint, which was good enough for me. The lad had all the makings of an ideal commissar: pious, zealous, and apparently convinced that a sense of humour was something which only happened to other people. Which is the main reason I'd made it my mission in life to get him to lighten up a little before he graduated; with an attitude like that he was a friendly fire accident just waiting to happen as soon as he got assigned to a real regiment.

'Commissar,' Cadet Kayla acknowledged curtly, her cap wobbling slightly over the pad of glossy brown hair she'd stuffed under it. Her refusal to adopt the short crop of her fellow cadets was the one sign of femininity I'd so far seen her allow herself. Apart from that, she was almost as relentless as Nelys, although I strongly suspected that this was more because she felt the need to justify her presence in an otherwise all-male environment. Emperor knows, it can't have been easy for her; but she was more than making her mark. If I'm honest, I thought she was one of the most promising of the bunch, and would probably go far once she'd developed a little more confidence in her own judgement.

Which was the opposite of my concern about the lad sitting next to her. Donal worried me, although I couldn't have said why, exactly; not truthfully, anyway. His assessments were all satisfactory, and his combat skills a little above the average. He was bright, too, of that I had no doubt, although not as perceptive as Kayla, and had the rare ability to think on his feet and take immediate advantage of any unexpected circumstance that came up. The plain fact was, he reminded me of myself at that age, which meant that although I had no clearly discernable grounds for disquiet, I never felt entirely able to trust him.

He must have noticed my eyes resting on him for a moment, because he nodded at me with every outward sign of respect. 'Will you be going in with us yourself, sir?'

'Well, I had been planning to sit here with my feet up sipping tea,' I said, inflecting it like a joke, and everyone laughed dutifully except Nelys, who just looked confused. Fat chance of that now, though, and I couldn't help wondering if Donal had spoken up on purpose, intending to undermine my authority if I appeared to be shirking, which is precisely the sort of thing I used to pull on my own tutors. 'But if you feel you need your hand held, I'll tag along.'

'Thank you, sir,' he said. 'I'm sure we all feel better knowing you're watching our backs.' As usual, there was no overt trace of sarcasm in his voice, though I found myself searching for it nevertheless.

'If you'll all get your slates out, you'll find a schematic of the objective,' I said. What the hell, I had their attention now, so I might as well get on with the briefing. 'Asteroid 761 kappa. A mining hab we reclaimed from the bugs six months ago.'

'Then why are we going back?' Kayla asked.

Precisely my own question of three days before, as it happened, so I nodded judiciously.

'Good question. Unfortunately we won't know the answer until we get there. All we know at this stage is that the Administratum reported losing contact with the miners about a week ago, and requested the SDF to take a look. They haven't got the manpower aboard a system defence boat to muster a boarding party large enough, so they requested some backup from the PDF, who thoughtfully provided a platoon of flings<sup>2</sup> just out of basic. Which means they'll be jumpy, especially if it turns out the first sweep missed a few 'nids, and they've been snacking on the civvies. Which means in turn that you get some much-needed field experience.' Herding a bunch of PDF trolls shouldn't be all that taxing, and would be the perfect opportunity to see how well my cadets were able to perform away from the schola. 'Any questions?'

'How are we going to be deployed?' Kayla asked. She looked at the schematic of the mine again. 'Those tunnels seem far too narrow for any large concentration of troops.'

'Quite right, they are,' I agreed, my lifelong affinity for environments like that enabling me to picture them all too easily. 'The PDF will be splitting up into squads, and sweeping a sector each. That means a pair of you will be going in with each one. If your assigned squad splits down into fireteams, you'll have to decide for yourselves who goes with which.'

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<sup>1</sup> Though relatively rare among the ranks of the Commissariat, there are a surprising number of female commissars: presumably because none of the all-women regiments in the Imperial Guard would take too kindly to being bossed about by a mere man.

<sup>2</sup> Imperial Guard slang for raw recruits: apparently a phonetic rendering of FNG, or Frakking New Guys.

'That seems clear enough,' she agreed, looking thoughtful.

'I'm glad you think so,' I said. 'Any more questions?'

'Sir,' Nelys said. 'Are we to infer that we have full commissarial authority on this assignment?'

'Up to a point,' I said, with a distinct sinking feeling. 'You're there to encourage the troopers you're attached to, in any manner you see fit. But that doesn't mean you can execute anybody without asking me first, is that clear?' That would be all I needed, some over-zealous cadet landing me with a mountain of paperwork.

'Yes, sir,' Nelys said, looking faintly disappointed, and the others all nodded too.

'Good.' I resumed my seat, not entirely sure whether I was pleased or not that the attitude of our shuttle had changed during my brief talk with the cadets, and that Perlia was no longer visible through the viewport as our pilot boosted us further out into deep space. Instead, the stars were staring in at me, sharp pinpricks of light speckling the void like the dandruff on Jurgen's collar, and I found myself trying to spot the one that was moving; that would be the transport vessel we were rendezvousing with.

After a few moments of minor tedium it swam into view, resolving itself over the next ten minutes or so into a battered intra-system cargo hauler. Having had my first sight of it, I didn't envy the PDF squaddies, no doubt jammed into a hold more suited to chunks of ore than passengers.

'We've taken up formation,' our pilot's voice informed me through the comm-bead in my ear. 'Estimated time of arrival at the objective seven hours, thirty-two minutes.'

'Thank you,' I said, reclining the seat as far as it would go. Before settling, I glanced back at the cadets. 'I'd recommend catching some sleep. There's no telling how much you'll get later, if we do turn out to be heading into a combat zone.' Or how much any of us were likely to get now, since Jurgen, a seasoned campaigner if ever there was one, had pre-empted my advice, and was already snoring loudly enough to intimidate an ork.

Nevertheless, I managed to doze off reasonably quickly; certainly far more rapidly than I would have done if I'd had any idea of what was waiting for us on the nameless rock tumbling through the void ahead, let alone the nightmare that was already poised to sweep across the galaxy, engulfing us along with everybody else.

#### Editorial Note:

*In the light of later developments, and Cain's perennial tendency to skip over everything that didn't affect him personally, this seems like a good point at which to insert a brief note about the asteroid, which he and his charges had been sent to reconnoitre. It comes from the Concise Compendium Of Extraplanetary Resources, a two hundred and thirty-seven thousand page document maintained by the Perlian Bureau of Tithes, Mineralogical Assessment and fisheries, and is, unfortunately, as dry as most Administratum documents of that type. It does, however, point out one characteristic of the rock in question which, in the light of later events, is almost certainly highly significant: the italics highlighting this are, of course, mine.*

**Asteroid 761 kappa:** approximate dimensions 4.75 kilometres by 1.39.

**Primary extractable:** ferrous metals.

**Secondary extractables:** silicates, volatiles.

Mining station established 887.M41, reclaimed from orks 923.M41, reclaimed from tyrannids 998.M41, 999.M41.

**Other remarks:** Orbital path trailing Perlia by constant 2 degrees at equal distance from primary.

## TWO

I CAN'T SAY for certain how the cadets fared, but certainly I managed to get a reasonable amount of sleep myself as we drifted closer to our objective. When I woke at last, roused by the mingled aromas of tanna and Jurgen's halitosis, the asteroid was visible just beyond the viewport, resembling nothing so much as a diseased tuber, grey in colour, and roughly twice as long as it was thick around its widest point.

'Breakfast, sir?' my aide enquired, proffering another mug of the fragrant beverage, which I took with enthusiasm, and a standard-issue ration bar, which I accepted with rather less alacrity. 'Sorry it's a bit basic, but they haven't got a galley I can use.'

'This will do fine,' I assured him insincerely, chewing the pulpy mass, which, as usual, tasted of nothing either particularly identifiable or particularly palatable. At least the tanna was as invigorating as ever, washing the peculiar absence of flavour from my mouth as I finished the bar.

Jurgen slurped at his own drink. 'Maybe I can find a kitchen or something when we dock.'

'Let's hope that's the most pressing matter on our minds,' I said, mindful of the reason for our little expedition. To my complete lack of surprise none of the miners had resumed contact while I'd been asleep, and the palms of my hands began to itch in the disconcerting fashion which usually forewarned me of trouble to come. I turned to the gaggle of cadets, who, for the most part, were snacking lightly on their own ration bars, or ignoring them altogether. A few were looking distinctly queasy, which was hardly surprising given that they could find themselves in action against a genuine enemy for the first time in their lives within the hour. 'Everyone ready?'

'Yes, sir.' The chorus of assent was distinctly halfhearted, apart from Nelys, who looked as if he couldn't wait to get started, and Kayla, who still seemed to think she had something to prove. Donal didn't say anything, but nodded, with an easy insouciance, which left me distinctly uneasy.

'Glad to hear it,' I said, pretending not to notice the desultory nature of the response. 'Because I'm terrified.'

'Sir?' Nelys looked puzzled, as he always did when someone cracked a joke (or in this instance pretended to), but I was pleased to see a few wan smiles appearing on the faces of most of my charges.

'Well,' I said easily, 'perhaps terrified is overstating it a little.' (Though not as much as they thought, of course.) A few of them nodded gravely, as if they understood. 'But I don't mind admitting that I've got a bad feeling about this.'

'But you're a hero of the Imperium,' Kayla said, an element of surprise creeping into her voice. 'You've been in action hundreds of times. Why should this one be any different?'

'Who said it was?' I asked. I turned to the viewport behind me. 'I haven't a clue what's waiting for us on that rock over there,' I said, pointing to the asteroid, which had grown astonishingly large in the few minutes my back had been turned. Deeply shadowed cracks and fissures mottled its surface now, along with an indeterminate number of hummocks and ridges, interspersed with occasional man-made protrusions, which could have been anything from auspex arrays to washing lines for all I knew. 'But I do know that as soon as we dock we're going to have to convince the troopers that whatever it is, we can beat it.' I pointed to the troopship, which dwarfed the shuttle we were in, occulting part of the asteroid like a metal echo of the drifting rock beyond. 'And to do that, you have to allow yourself to feel a little of what they do.' The girl nodded, along with Donal and a couple of the others. Only Nelys seemed not to get it. 'So what you're saying is,' he said slowly, 'that to lead cowards we have to behave like cowards ourselves?'

'Of course not,' I said, trying to disguise my irritation at his obtuseness. From the expression on Kayla and Donal's faces, I suspected that I hadn't altogether succeeded. 'But caution and cowardice aren't the same thing at all. That fear is your friend; it sharpens your reactions, and it keeps you alive. Without it you'll take needless risks, putting your own life in danger along with the soldiers you're serving with. Casualties are inevitable on the battlefield, but we give the Emperor best by making sure that the majority of them are the enemy's, not ours. Every Imperial soldier killed by a bad call from us, or their own commanders, is a blow against our armies, and against the Golden Throne itself.'

There was an awestruck silence for a moment, and I began to wonder if perhaps I'd overdone it. But Nelys nodding slowly. 'That makes sense,' he said.

'I'm glad you agree,' I said, feeling it was time to lighten the mood. I smiled at the cadets. 'I'm afraid our job isn't easy. There's a lot more to it than a sash and a fancy hat. But you're here because you're the best and the brightest that the Imperium has to offer. If the responsibility feels heavy at times, then it should. But it's a burden I hope you'll be proud to shoulder when the time comes.' And, just like that, I had them. After almost a century of trotting out morale-boosting platitudes for all occasions I could have done it in my sleep. Trying not to wonder how many of them would make it back to the shuttle once we were done here, I turned from the dozen eager faces in front of me to stare out of the viewport again. By now we were drifting gently towards an open pair of thick iron gates set into the rocky surface of the asteroid, through which light was spilling, sparking highlights from the rim of the portal and what I could see of the Aquila's fuselage.

A moment later the view through the armourcrys altered abruptly from the cold, hard stars of open space and the looming bulk of the commandeered freighter accompanying us to a rough-hewn cavern about the size of a scrumball pitch. Luminators dangled from the ceiling, almost twenty metres above the more-or-less level floor, which, like the walls themselves, looked as though it had been hacked straight from the rock with mining tools as quickly as possible.

A couple of utility shuttles from which a variety of tools protruded, mounted on flexible metal tubes which strongly resembled the mechadendrites often sported by tech-priests, were parked on launch cradles in one corner; no doubt they were intended to service the surface-mounted ironmongery I'd noticed on the way in, although judging by the number of wires and prayer scrolls spilling from the open inspection hatches these were in no fit state to leave their makeshift hangar. As our pilot brought us gently to rest next to them, and the doors behind us began to close, I found myself staring at the tiny spacecraft next to our own with a sense of

foreboding: I'd never known a cogboy<sup>1</sup> leave a job half-finished, at least not voluntarily, and if whatever rites of maintenance had been underway here had been interrupted, the chances were it had been by nothing good. The palms of my hands began to itch in earnest.

'We're down, sir,' Jurgen reported unnecessarily, as the whine of our engines died away, and the narrow door to the cockpit banged open, just missing my knees.

A redheaded youth in the uniform of a naval cadet popped out of it as abruptly as one of the figures on the ridiculous ornamental dock in Liberation Square<sup>2</sup>, and saluted in my general direction. The name tape on the left breast of his flight suit read "Sprie", presumably in case he forgot who he was, and the unit patch on his upper arm showed the entwined crests of the sector fleet and the schola progenium, to make sure he remembered where he lived, and which branch of the service he was in training for. 'Any further instructions, sir?' he asked.

'Yes.' I thought rapidly. 'Take off again as soon as we're clear, and loiter just outside the main airlock.'

'Understood.' He saluted again, and popped back inside the narrow flight deck, allowing me to see the brace of cadets manning the other lecterns, and the instructor overseeing the pack of them. I had a lot of time for Hubert Visiter, the grey-haired commodore in charge of the naval cadets, and was far less surprised to find him along for the ride than I would have done most of our colleagues among the faculty.

'Expectin' trouble, Cain?' he asked, without preamble, his neatly dipped moustache vibrating on his upper lip. 'Always,' I replied, truthfully enough. 'And if it gets this close, I want to make sure you're still around to pick us up.' Well, me, anyway, and Jurgen if possible. As for the rest, it was Horus take the hindmost so far as I was concerned.

'It'll take about three minutes to re-pressurise the cavern once we're back inside,' Sprie volunteered, earning an approving nod from his instructor. 'That's a long time if you need a quick dust-off.' I began to warm to the lad as well at that point; in my experience it's always a good sign when the pilot's thinking about the fastest way to extract you if it all goes ploid-shaped.

'Good point,' Visiter agreed. 'Do you think you'll be able to hold that long on the other side of the pressure door if you have to?'

'We shouldn't have to,' I countered. 'If we need to make a run for it that badly we'll head straight for the freighter. You can take us off from one of their personnel locks if necessary.'

'That could work,' Visiter conceded. The makeshift troopship was far too large to dock internally, and, according to the vox chatter in my comm-bead, which I was listening to with a small corner of my mind out of long habit, had just made a hard seal with one of the cargo locks on the next level.

'Then we'll be seeing you when we want a ride home,' I concluded.

Something went *ping!* inside the cockpit, and a rune on one of the lecterns turned green. 'The cavern's pressurised,' a female cadet informed us.

'Then let's go,' I said, turning to my motley collection of would-be commissars. They certainly looked the part, although they hadn't got their sashes yet, of course<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, after much internal debate, I'd decided to issue them with a sidearm and a chainsword apiece. If we really were about to start playing hunt the 'nid in a labyrinth of narrow passageways, sending them in unarmed would be tantamount to a death sentence. Most of them were at least familiar enough with the weapons not to shoot themselves in the foot or lop their own heads off (with the possible exception of young Stebbins, who was the worst shot with a laspistol I'd ever encountered, and considering the number of gretchin and Chaos cultists who've taken a pot at me over the years, that's really saying something).

'Yes sir!' This time the chorus of assent sounded a little more robust, so drawing my laspistol and loosening my trusty chainsword in its scabbard (I've always found a dramatic gesture goes down well at a time like this), I led the way towards the exit ramp.

'At least the gravity's still on,' Jurgen remarked as we disembarked, glancing around suspiciously, the melta he insisted on carrying whenever we were expecting serious trouble a reassuring presence in his hands.

'That's something,' I agreed, getting the measure of our surroundings. Despite the suffocating sense of imminent danger, there was something almost homelike about it, and for a moment I wondered at that, before realising that the warren of tunnels we'd found ourselves in wasn't very different from pretty much any underhive you care to point at<sup>4</sup>. My bootsoles crunched on the gritty surface as I left the boarding ramp, the harsh scent of mineral dust tickling my nostrils for a moment before Jurgen's earthier bouquet nudged it out of the way. 'Doing this in free fall wouldn't have been much fun at all.'

'It's hardly going to be a stroll round the gardens as it is,' Donal remarked, checking the power pack of his laspistol before stowing it back in its holster. More or less convinced that a pack of slaving hormagaunts wasn't about to leap out from behind the eviscerated shuttles, I followed suit. No point alarming the PDF troops by waving weapons in their direction, at least unless I had to.

'No, it's not,' I agreed levelly. 'I've fought 'nids before, and the best piece of advice I can give you is never underestimate them. They might seem like mindless animals, and individually they are, but the intelligence directing them is anything but.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' Donal told me, looking far too confident for my liking. No point in fretting about it, though, so I led the way towards the thick airtight door set into the cavern wall a score or so metres away. It squealed on its hinges as Nelys

<sup>1</sup> A mildly disparaging nickname for tech-priests, common among the Imperial Guard, apparently a reference to the cogwheel symbol of their calling.

<sup>2</sup> A truly hideous timepiece, which was supposed to commemorate Cain's victory over the greenskin invaders a couple of generations before. Every hour, on the hour, a clockwork commissar decapitated however many clockwork orks corresponded to the time, their falling heads chiming the hours as they fell into a resonant metal bin. Cain, not surprisingly, loathed it.

<sup>3</sup> The crimson sash of the Commissariat, the mark of their authority, would be formally presented to them at their graduation ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> Though Cain's origins remain something of a mystery, he makes frequent allusions throughout his memoirs to having been native to a hive world. Which one, however, he never specifies: perhaps he never knew himself.



shouldered it open and disappeared though it; no screaming ensued, and his head didn't bounce back at us, so I concluded it was safe to proceed.

The chamber beyond was pretty much what I was expecting, and once Stebbins and Frister, the last two cadets to follow us through, had dogged the door closed again to allow the shuttle to depart, I paused for a moment to glance at the schematic of the station displayed on the screen of my data-slate.

The internal layout was just as much of a jumbled mess as I remembered from my previous looks at it, the tangle of passageways wandering through the rock apparently at random, their direction dictated more by the presence of something extractable than any overall plan. Here and there larger chambers marked the points where significant deposits of something or other had been gouged out, several of them since converted into utility areas of one sort or another, while others had simply been abandoned, showing as nothing more than the nodes from which more questing corridors had been drilled.

This, judging by a quick visual inspection, had been one of the latter. We stood in a wide rocky chamber, its rough walls pitted with shaft entrances, and its undulating floor bare apart from a few scattered pieces of mining equipment I didn't recognise. Portable luminators had been erected close to the door we'd entered the cavern by, and also by a similar door in the far wall, the cables trailing from both disappearing up one of the tunnels in between, but apart from that there wasn't a due which way to go. After a moment, though, I slipped the slate back into my greatcoat pocket, grateful for the insulation the thick garment afforded me against the clammy chill in the air, confident that my innate affinity for environments like this had kicked in, and that I'd be able to find my way back here if I needed to.

'Which way, sir?' Stebbins asked diffidently, no doubt wondering if I was going to put him on point, although his marksmanship was so bad, being behind him would hardly be any safer than in front if we got into a fire-fight. (Not that tyranids use firearms, of course, but the ranged weapons they do have at their disposal are no less lethal, not to say considerably more revolting.)

'A good question,' I said, feeling that the familiar routine of instruction would allay their nervousness, at least for a while. 'Anyone got an answer?'

'Through there,' Nelys said, pointing to the doorway in the opposite wall. 'Where else?'

'We could follow the cables,' Kayla suggested. 'They must lead to a hab area.'

Donal shrugged. 'At least that way's lit,' he pointed out. Which was true. Most of the other tunnels were dark and uninviting, and I tried not to read the stealthy footfalls of a lictor into every stray sound echoing through the chamber. If there really were 'nids here, it was credits to carrots they'd be lurking in the unlit passageways, and I wasn't about to venture down any of those without a squad or two of the PDF in front of me to find any unpleasant surprises first.

'Well done, Donal,' I said. 'You too, Kayla. That service passage connects with the external docking ports, where the troopers we're here to supervise are currently disembarking.' At least it did if the map in my data-slate could be trusted, which was by no means certain; these mining habs had an unnerving tendency to change their internal layout faster than a noblewoman's wardrobe. Fortunately it turned out to be reliable in this instance, as my internal compass had already assured me, and within a few moments we were making our way up a gradual slope towards the unmistakable sound of a lot of people jammed into a confined space and not at all happy about it.

'This way,' Donal said decisively, leading the way down a cross corridor we'd come to after a minute or two of climbing, and I found it hard to disagree. There were more cables here, and electrocones attached to the walls at regular intervals, not to mention more of the metal doorways set into the rock: clearly we were entering one of the more frequently-used utility zones. Frequently used when the three hundred or so miners we'd come here to look for were going about their normal business, that was, and the sudden reminder of their absence set my palms tingling again. Almost without realising it, my hands fell to the weapons on my belt.

The cavern we entered was the largest we'd come to yet, which was just as well, as the PDF had done us proud: they'd promised a full platoon, and that's what we got, five full squads and a command team, supplemented by a gaggle of heavy support troopers apparently attached at command level. They were forming up reasonably efficiently as we arrived, and I made a quick mental note of which of the ubiquitous metal doors led to the docking port, and the mineral barge beyond: a reasonably easy deduction, as the portal had been left open, and the dingy metal walls of a cargo airlock were clearly visible on the other side, their angular metal a stark and unmistakable contrast to the unfinished rock surrounding us.

'Commissar.' The young officer leading the rabble trotted across to me, his vox operator at his shoulder, and a trio of hard-faced troopers double-timing it behind, their lasguns already held ready for use. I'd have felt a lot happier with proper Guardsmen on the job, of course, but I have to admit that the Perlian PDF weren't too bad for a local militia; they'd learned a lot the hard way from the orkish invasion less than a century ago, and were determined to make sure the greenskins wouldn't get a second chance if they ever turned up again. (Which the occasional warband did from time to time, of course, as they so often do on worlds once sullied by their presence, despite the campaign to eradicate them apparently having been completely successful at the time.)<sup>1</sup> As a result they were more battle-ready than most PDFs in the sector, a fact I suspected a good many of them had come to regret in the last few years, as they'd been comprehensively tithed for the Guard in order to make up the losses caused by the first onslaught of the tyranid assault. 'Lieutenant Vorlens, officer commanding.'

'Lieutenant.' I returned the salute, trying to get a reasonable picture of the man as I did so. He was young, like most of the troopers surrounding us, but he seemed clear and decisive enough despite his inexperience. At least he didn't gawp at me, like most Perlians catching sight of me for the first time tended to do, so it appeared he was capable of keeping his mind on the job, which was an encouraging sign. If the best of the PDF had been sent off to fight the hive fleets (or, more likely, end up as fodder for them), Vorlens at least seemed like one of the best of the rest. Which, under the circumstances, was probably the best I could hope for. 'You have a battle plan?'

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<sup>1</sup> A phenomenon which seems to be related to their peculiar biology: for a short and relatively accessible précis of the current theory of spore dissemination, see *The Fungoid Menace: Orkish Physiology And Its Implications* by Migo Yuggoth.

'Not much of one,' he admitted, which, paradoxically, I found distinctly encouraging; overconfidence kills more soldiers than las-bolts do. 'Anything complicated would just fall apart in a place like this anyway.'

'You're right about that,' I agreed, to the young officer's manifest surprise and relief. 'I've been on sweeps like this before, and any kind of large-scale deployment is right out.'

'That's just what I thought,' Vorlens said. He produced a data-slate of his own, and brought up a copy of the map I'd been looking at a few moments before. 'So I'm dividing the platoon up into squads, and assigning them each a sector, fanning out from here along the main access tunnels.' Several of the principal corridors turned blue, indicating the main line of the planned advance. 'As they reach the side passages they can detach a fireteam to reconnoitre along them, while the other half of the squad remains at the junction to cover their backs.'<sup>1</sup> He glanced sideways at me, clearly prepared for my disapproval, and hoping I wouldn't overrule the unorthodox tactic.

'Just what I'd do,' I assured him. I turned to the cadets behind me. 'You'll be assigned as we discussed in the shuttle. One per fireteam.' I noticed a hand twitching, before the impulse to raise it was suppressed. Good. They might not be fully-fledged commissars yet, but drawing attention to the fact would hardly help morale. 'Kayla, you have a question?'

'Yes, commissar.' Vorlens blinked, suddenly registering the fact of her gender. 'Two of us per squad leaves two over. What will they be doing?'

'Well, someone needs to keep an eye on the heavy weapons teams,' I said. I glanced at Vorlens. 'I assume you have some idea of how you want to deploy them?' Two sets of autocannon crews were setting up their weapon mounts as we spoke, flanking the doorway leading to the airlock and the docked freighter beyond, and the young lieutenant nodded.

'Right here,' he said. 'They can't lug that kit around in the main tunnel complex without getting in everyone's way.' Picturing the clumsy heavy weapons in such a confined space, I certainly couldn't argue with that.

'And that rust bucket's our only way off this rock. If there really are tyranids running around loose up here, I want it defended.'

'Me too,' I agreed. I picked a cadet at random. 'Garvie, that's your assignment.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied, looking both serious and resigned, and I favoured him with a smile.

'Don't think you're missing out on the fun,' I assured him. 'If the 'nids realise how vital this chamber is, you'll see plenty of action.' Garvie nodded again, his face set, and trotted off to get in the way of the gunners guarding the airlock.

'You think they're definitely here, then?' Vorlens asked.

'I'd put money on it,' I said. 'Three hundred miners don't just vanish.' For a moment a chill fragment of memory flitted across my synapses, and I shuddered at the recollection of a similar conversation some seventy years earlier. I'd gone looking for a few missing miners on Simia Orichalcae, and ended up blundering into a necron tomb, managing to survive only by the narrowest of margins and a ridiculous amount of luck. Recalling myself to the present with an effort, I chided myself for allowing the thought to spook me. Compared to the necrons, even the prospect of facing a genestealer brood seemed positively welcome.

'Then where are they?' Donal asked, looking around with a faintly theatrical air.

'You'll see them soon enough,' I assured him, more presciently than I knew, and returned my attention to Vorlens. 'They're stealthy. They'll hide in the shadows, and they'll attack on sight. Your men should keep their luminators on at all times, and check every nook and cranny they come across. Even ones which seem far too small to hide in; believe me, they can squeeze in anywhere.'

'Thanks for the advice,' the young lieutenant said. 'Anything else we should bear in mind?'

'Yes.' I nodded. 'Keep an eye on the ceilings, too. Some of them can cling on up there, and drop on you when you're passing.' I glanced at Nelys, whose expression was one of incredulous disbelief, and felt a flare of irritation in response. 'I've seen them take out an entire squad of Astartes that way.' No point mentioning that the luckless Space Marines in question had been wearing Terminator armour, and the genestealer swarm had ripped them apart regardless; the troops surrounding us were keyed up enough already, without me scaring them half to death before we even got started.

'Your best tactic is to make sure you've got clear fire-lanes, and as much distance as possible between you and any possible concealment. They'll bunch up nice and tightly in these narrow tunnels, and they generally charge in a swarm, so you should be able to gun most of them down before they get close enough to do any harm.' Assuming we weren't facing 'nids with ranged weapons, of course, and even then most close-combat forms were hellishly fast and agile, but it wouldn't be tactful to mention that either, so I didn't. The troopers around us, who were all conspicuously failing to look as though they weren't listening avidly to the conversation, were at least starting to take heart from my carefully-phrased pose of confidence, so it looked as if we were about as ready as we were ever going to get.

'Then we may as well get started,' Vorlens said, gesturing to his vox man. 'Move them out, following the assigned routes.' He glanced in my direction. 'As soon as you've got your people deployed, of course.'

'Of course,' I said, pleased to note that he'd fallen quite naturally into the ideal relationship between soldier and commissar; he was prepared to listen to any advice I had to offer, and make use of any he felt valuable, but wasn't going to let my presence undermine his own authority with the troopers under his command. Quite right too; we were there to boost morale, not give orders<sup>2</sup>. I just hoped Nelys would realise that, and stay on the right side of the line.

Well, that, at least, I could do something about. I beckoned him over. 'Nelys,' I said, 'you take First Squad. Liaise with the platoon sergeant.' I had no doubt that the most senior NCO present would be more than capable of reining him in if he got too cocky; in my experience they didn't get to that position by suffering fools gladly. And just in case that wasn't enough... 'Kayla, go with

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<sup>1</sup> Splitting a standard ten-man squad into two five-man fireteams is common practice among Imperial Guard regiments experienced in urban combat and counter-insurgency, but far rarer among Planetary Defence Forces.

<sup>2</sup> Though their authority and responsibilities in the field are wide-ranging, members of the Commissariat are outside the chain of command. If they weren't, there wouldn't be much point in having them.

him.' She had enough common sense for the pair of them, I hoped.

'Commissar.' She gave me a thanks-for-nothing look as she saluted, no doubt divining my purpose in pairing them off, which fortunately Nelys missed, being too busy preening at being assigned to what he no doubt thought was a prime position. The two of them peeled off to join their squad, which promptly moved out of the cavern, their feet raising echoes from the enclosed walls of the tunnel they were searching. I was pleased to note that the soldiers comprising it were covering each other even at this stage, taking nothing for granted, and began to feel a little easier about the assignment. Vorlens' boys might have been wet behind the ears, but they'd clearly been paying attention in basic training.

'Stebbins, Frister, you've got Second Squad,' I said. The two of them were friends, and worked reasonably well together. 'Maklin and Dallory, you take Third. Heskin and Klarch, Fourth. Tilar and Briel, Fifth.' One by one, the remaining squads, reinforced by the pairs of commissar cadets, moved out, until only Jorgen, myself, and the command team was left. And Donal, of course. I turned to him. 'You're with the lieutenant,' I told him, unnecessarily.

'I'm flattered by your confidence in me,' he replied, which was uncomfortably close to the sort of answer I would have given at his age, and which confirmed my judgement in not letting him out of my sight. He turned to Vorlens. 'Are you intending to monitor the operation from here?'

'No.' To my well-concealed horror, the young lieutenant was shaking his head. Up until then I'd been taking it for granted that staying put and co-ordinating the sweep a stone's throw from the safety of the airlock had been part of his plan; it certainly would have been in any of the Guard regiments I'd served with. But of course there wasn't a nice cosy command Chimera to sit in here, full of vox gear and auspex arrays to make that work; just a data-slate and his vox operator. In fact I was probably more on top of things myself, thanks to the network of comm-beads linking me to Jorgen and the cadets. 'We'll be pushing on to the main habitation area. If there are any survivors, that's where we're most likely to find them.'

'Sounds good to me,' Donal said, drawing his laspistol, and glancing in my direction. 'Will you be accompanying us, commissar?' 'Of course,' I said, drawing my own. As usual, my completely undeserved reputation for extravagant heroics was about to drag me into mortal danger, and there wasn't a thing I could do to back out of it without fatally undermining my authority with the cadets. 'Then, if you're ready,' Vorlens said, 'let's go hunt some 'nids.'

## THREE

I DON'T KNOW if Vorlens ever realised how ironic his words were but I was all too aware, as we set off into the labyrinth of tunnels, that if there was any hunting to be done, it was going to be done by the tyranids. I'd been in similar situations to this far too many times to count, and none of them had ended well, beyond the faintly surprising fact of my continued survival. At least we were heading along one of the primary access tunnels, which was relatively wide and brightly lit, so we'd have plenty of warning of any lurking organisms up ahead. Or so I hoped.

'Sector twelve clear,' Stebbins reported, his voice a little attenuated in my comm-bead by scores of metres of intervening rock, a moment before Vorlens's vox man began to relay an identical report from the sergeant in charge of Second Squad. 'Moving on to sixteen.'

'Acknowledged,' I said, keeping my voice steady with an effort. None of the other teams had found anything yet either, and the longer we went without contacting the enemy the less I liked it. Which, if you've read much of these ramblings of mine, will probably surprise you but I don't mind admitting I was getting thoroughly spooked by this time. I was all too aware that to have taken out over three hundred people before someone managed to get to a vox and yell for help would have required a significant number of attackers, so we should have stumbled across a few of them by now. The fact that we hadn't meant that they were probably concentrated somewhere up ahead, perhaps even waiting in ambush, which was far from a comforting reflection.

'Perhaps they're dormant again,' Jurgen suggested. 'Like the nest we found on Utoxita.'

'That's possible,' I said, hoping he was right, but privately doubting that we'd be that lucky. I turned to Vorlens. 'If they are, they'll be concentrated in a cavern somewhere, digesting what's left of the miners and waiting for dessert to turn up.'

'How big a cavern?' Donal asked, taking out his data-slate.

I shrugged. 'That depends on how many there are. My guess would be somewhere between thirty and sixty, but with 'nids you can never be sure of anything.'

'That's a lot of tyranids,' Vorlens said. 'How could that many stay hidden for so long?' He looked dubious. 'One or two might have been able to evade the search teams, but I don't see how a swarm that size could possibly have managed it.'

'The fighting to cleanse this place was pretty intense,' Donal said, showing that he'd at least skimmed through the briefing materials at some point on the shuttle trip, or wanted me to think that he had. 'If one of the galleries collapsed, I suppose an entire brood might have been overlooked behind the rockfall.'

'Just waiting for some frothead to come along and dig them out,' Vorlens said. He glanced at me, briefly, before returning his attention to the shadows between the luminators spaced along the tunnel. 'When we get to the main administration section we can look for a work schedule. That ought to tell us if anyone's reopened a sealed-off shaft recently.'

'Good idea,' I responded, taking a slightly tighter grip on the butt of my laspistol. My palms were itching again, and I couldn't account for it consciously, but something about the corridor up ahead seemed subtly wrong. Then it struck me. All the doors we'd passed so far had been closed, delaying us for several minutes while we checked a plethora of storerooms and side shafts, most of them dead ends, before resuming our march towards the heart of this tumbling death trap; but the portal a dozen or so metres ahead of us was ajar. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck begin to bristle, and dropped back a pace or two, ensuring that Vorlens and a couple of his troopers were ahead of me.

'There are two hundred and seven caverns large enough to hold a swarm of the size you suggested,' Donal said, glancing up from his data-slate. 'None of them are recorded as having been sealed off, but this is an old map...' His voice trailed away, and he stowed the slate hastily in a pocket of his greatcoat. 'What's wrong?'

'That doorway,' I said, drawing my chainsword, and indicating the portal ahead of us. To his credit, the lad was quick on the uptake; he drew his own weapons at once. Vorlens gestured to his troopers with the barrel of his laspistol, and two of them took up position on either side of the hinged metal slab, while the third covered it with his lasgun. That left the rest of us hanging back a little, which was fine by me, although I must confess to glancing up and down the echoing tunnel, straining my ears for the telltale skittering of claws on rock that would warn us of the approach of a pack of gaunts.

'On three,' Vorlens said, raising his hand to count down by folding one finger at a time into his clenched fist. As the last digit disappeared, one of the troopers kicked the door open, and the other dived through the gap, his lasgun ready, just the way they must have rehearsed it in basic training.<sup>1</sup> A moment later his two squad mates followed.

'Clear!' one of the troopers called, and the rest of us filed in after them, apart from Jurgen, who continued to hover just outside, keeping an eye on the tunnel in case we were being outflanked. Just as well, really, as the melta would have been as dangerous to us as to the enemy in such a confined space, and the prolonged tension hadn't been doing a lot for his personal freshness either. Like the rest of the rooms we'd checked so far on our erratic progress towards the heart of the asteroid, the chamber had been hacked out of the rock with scant regard for regularity of line or smoothness of finish. It was evidently used for storage, as a series of metal shelving units had been erected, dividing the space into narrow lanes just wide enough to walk along, stacked for most of their length with boxes, on which serial numbers which meant nothing to me had been scrawled in penstick.

'Rock samples,' Donal said, peering into the nearest, and extracting a lump of something which looked like quartz. As he rattled it back into place, I held up my hand for silence.

'Quiet!' I said, straining my ears. Something about the echoes sounded wrong, unmistakably so to anyone familiar with the ambient sounds of the underhive, and I turned my head, trying to pinpoint the source of the anomaly. 'There's another way in here!'

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<sup>1</sup> Following their experiences during the ork invasion, the Perlian PDF paid particular attention to guerrilla and urban combat techniques; something which was to stand them in good stead during the Second Siege.



'There can't be.' Donal had returned his weapons to his belt by now, and was messing about with the data-slate again. 'This is just a room. See, it's quite clearly marked as having only one door.'

'Then the map's wrong!' I snapped, heading down a narrow aisle between two of the metal shelves. Right then I'd have given just about anything to step back through the door and seal it, but I knew from long and bitter experience that what you didn't know could kill you in situations like this. One quick look, I thought, just enough to let me know what we were facing, that was all. At least Vorlens was quick on the uptake; as I started to move, he gestured to a couple of the troopers accompanying us, and they began to flank me, a couple of paces behind, intermittently visible between the racked boxes on the intervening shelves.

Something scraped against rock, a few metres ahead of me, but I couldn't see it, and wished I'd taken my own advice about carrying a luminator. The luxplates set into the ceiling cast too many conflicting shadows for my liking, the labyrinth of boxed rocks scattering their illumination, and crazing it with too many pockets of darkness where anything might be lurking. I strained my ears, trying to pinpoint the sound, and disentangle it from the echoes of the troopers' footfalls.

There! I twisted, bringing my laspistol round to bear as the noise echoed again, the unmistakable scrabbling of something as large as I was within a handful of metres, my finger tightening on the trigger.

'Don't shoot!' a voice cried, shrill with an edge of hysteria, and I checked the motion in the nick of time. An emaciated figure in the robes of an Administratum functionary, so stained with rock dust and other, less identifiable substances as to be almost unrecognisable, lunged away from me, and appeared to be trying to burrow into the rock with his bare hands. 'I'm not one of them!'

'So I see,' I responded, trying to sound as soothing as possible, and holding up a hand to keep the troopers back. No point in spooking the fellow even more than he already was. I holstered my pistol, and resheathed the chainsword, which seemed to reassure him to some extent, and held out a hand to help him up. 'I'm Commissar Cain, by the way, here with a PDF relief force.' As I'd expected, my name and reputation seemed to calm him at least as effectively as a sedative from the medi-kit would have done, and left him in a much fitter state to answer questions.

'Vallen Clode, Scrivener to the Master of Mines.' His voice was hoarse, so I handed him my canteen; he took it in trembling fingers and drank deeply, spilling much of the water, which etched clean rivulets through the grime encrusted on his face before pattering onto the floor around his boots.

'What happened here?' Donal appeared at my shoulder, making Clode twitch like a startled sump rat, before he registered that the cadet was relatively harmless, and calmed down again.

'We found a chamber in the rock,' Clode said, relinquishing the canteen at last, which was almost empty. 'Sometimes it happens, you just break through and find a fissure. No one thought anything of it at the time. Then they started appearing, all over the hab.' His voice was quivering with suppressed hysteria. 'They came through the walls!'

'What did?' I asked, feeling an old familiar terror welling up in me at the sound of his words. I'd heard them in the tombs of Interims Prime, seen shining metal killers ghosting through solid walls there, as insubstantial as smoke, and I couldn't shake the fear, irrational as it seemed, that I was about to relive a never-forgotten nightmare. I felt my augmetic fingers flexing involuntarily, as though remembering their flesh and blood predecessors, torn away by a glancing hit from a necron gauss flayer. Before he could answer, though, Donal spoke almost as I did, cutting across me and drowning me out.

'How did you survive?' he asked.

'I hid in the air ducts,' the scrivener said, gesturing towards a hole in the wall, less than a metre across, from which a metal grille was hanging, clearly recently dislodged. A faint current of air was wafting from it, and I peered suspiciously at the dark patch of shadow inside. It could have been my imagination, but I was certain I could hear a faint, all-too-familiar skittering sound echoing along the narrow shaft.

'Everyone out,' I said, drawing my laspistol again, and beginning to back away. Just as well I did, too; no sooner had I started moving than something with too many limbs, and far too many claws and teeth to go with them, erupted from the hole in the wall, and flung itself at me. I squeezed the trigger more by reflex than anything, blowing a hole through its thorax, which at least checked its advance; clearly looking for easier meat it turned, slashing at Clode in a flurry of talon strokes. The luckless scrivener shrieked, once, before the genestealer's jaws closed around his neck, almost severing his head from his body.

'Throne on Earth!' Donal yelled, backing off too, while the troopers opened up with their lasguns. The 'stealer fell, blown to bloody chunks, and dropping Clode's spasming body as it collapsed. He was well past any help we could give by now, expiring even before we made it to the door.

'Cover the vent!' I shouted, knowing all too well that 'stealers come in packs, and it was lucky I did, because more of the nightmarish shapes were emerging from the darkened shaft beyond, their eldritch keening freezing the blood almost as much as the sight of their razor-edged talons, reaching out to rend flesh. Our las weapons strobed and flashed, the crack of ionised air deafening us as every shot echoed and reverberated in the confined space, but they came on anyway after only the briefest of pauses, bounding over the tottering shelves. One of the troopers went down, torn to pieces in front of my eyes, his blood hanging in the air for a moment like fine, crimson mist, and then we were back in the corridor, scattering as we came, trying to keep our weapons trained on the leaping, scything monstrosities bearing down on us.

'Commissar!' Jurgen shouted, stepping in with his melta raised, and, forewarned, I closed my eyes momentarily against the retina-searing flash as he pulled the trigger. The ravaging cone of white-hot energy which burst from the muzzle vaporised the torso of a 'stealer reaching out for me as it bounded across the threshold, setting fire to the nearest stack of boxes with the thermal backwash. Alarms inside the storeroom began to whoop.

'Close the damned door!' I bellowed, and Donal reached out to grab the handle. A 'stealer seized his arm just as his fingers closed around it, and he would surely have been dragged to his death in its jaws had I not swung my chainsword almost as it struck, shearing through the creature's arm, and decapitating it on the backswing as I turned to plant another las-bolt in the face of the monstrosity behind it.

'Thanks!' Donal gasped, his face ashen, and yanked on the handle. The door began to close, then stopped, blocked by another

taloned arm, which began to flail wildly as the vox op<sup>1</sup> and the surviving troopers stepped in to assist the struggling cadet, adding their strength to his.

After an agonising second the door began to swing open again regardless, as the frenzied creatures in the room beyond began to force their way through the aperture created by the wedge of their own bodies.

'Fire in the hole!' Vorlens yelled, lobbing a grenade through the widening gap around the jamb, just as I severed the obstructing limb in a spray of foul-smelling ichor, and the door slammed to at last. The muffled *crump!* of the frag charge going off shook the slab of metal, which became pitted by a thousand tiny indentations as the hail of shrapnel pattered against its far side, and everything went quiet.

'Did we get them all?' Vorlens asked, sounding shaken.

'I doubt it,' I said, jamming the mechanism as best I could from this side, and putting a las-bolt through the locking plate just to make sure. 'And if those shafts are as extensive as they usually are in a place like this, they could have gone anywhere.'

'They were pink,' Donal said, an expression of stupefied astonishment on his face. 'No one ever said they were pink.'

'They come in all sorts of colours,' I told him. I'd seen enough of the damned things over the years to be certain of that. 'Emperor knows why, though<sup>2</sup>.' I tapped my comm-bead. 'Cain to all units,' I said. 'We've made contact. Genestealers definitely present, no other organisms sighted yet.' A chorus of acknowledgement assured me that the cadets were as ready as they'd ever be, and there was nothing more I could do to warn them.

'Commissar.' I barely had time to get my breath back before Heskin's voice echoed in my comm-bead, gabbling a little with suppressed excitement. 'We've found a fresh tunnel. It's not on our map.'

'Show me,' I said, fishing out the data-slate, and expanding the image as much as I could around the runes that marked the position of his and Klarch's comm-beads. According to the display, they were in the middle of one of the main tunnels, still a score of metres from any intervening passageways.

'Just a second,' Heskin said. 'I need to get my slate out.' A moment later the pict screen flickered, and the map was replaced by a grainy image of his face, which looked as though he was standing in the middle of a snowstorm. 'Are you getting any of this?'

'Just barely,' I told him. If the dense rock surrounding us was attenuating the vox signals, it was playing merry hell with the more complex pict transmissions. Heskin began to turn the slate, giving me as wide a view as possible of his surroundings.

'Looks like a new shaft,' Vorlens said, craning his neck to peer over my shoulder. Donal had his own slate out again, studying the transmitted pict with every sign of attention, but he still had his laspistol clutched in his other hand, and I had no doubt that under his glove his knuckles would be white. The lad was definitely learning. Jurgen and the surviving troopers were looking warily up and down the tunnels, their weapons at the ready; certain that we'd get plenty of warning of any nasty surprises heading in our direction, I gave most of my attention to the blurry images on the slate in front of me.

'It does,' I agreed. The opening in the rock wall Heskin was showing us was ragged, even more so than the tunnel mouths I'd seen earlier, and a litter of equipment was scattered about in front of it, cluttering the floor of the main passageway the troopers and cadets had been following. This turned out to be surprisingly wide, much more so than the one we were in, and I remarked on the fact.

'That's one of the extraction shafts,' Vorlens confirmed. 'They took out a major vein there about sixty years ago.' Well, he should know, he'd studied pretty much every centimetre of this Emperor-forsaken pebble while planning his search patterns, so I just took his word for it. That would account for the tram tracks I could see in the background, a couple of mining carts still sitting forlornly on them, waiting to be filled with spoil from the fresh excavation.

'What's that equipment?' I asked, as the view panned past a half-score of milling troopers, all doing their best to look alert, and Klarch, sitting on a crate of something, eating another ration bar. Strange metallic shapes, about the size of a lascannon, too indistinct to be seen clearly through the haze of static, cast twisted shadows across the tunnel floor.

'Rock drills,' Heskin said, kicking the nearest one. 'They look like they were just dropped and abandoned.' I felt the palms of my hands beginning to itch again. Somehow I doubted that the miners would have been quite so casual about the means of their livelihoods.

'And mining charges,' Klarch added, standing up, and gesturing towards the crate which had up until then been supporting his buttocks. 'This is full of the things. Det cord too.' My sense of unease intensified. Even if they had been willing to leave their tools lying about, no one would have been that cavalier about a significant quantity of explosives. He raised his voice a little, letting it carry to the troopers surrounding him. 'So we'd all better be careful what we shoot at.' No one seemed inclined to dispute the point, so he stuffed the rest of the bar into his mouth, and chewed energetically.

'Proceed with caution,' I advised. 'Our latest information is that a new shaft was being opened when the 'nids first appeared. If it was that one, you could be heading straight for the main swarm.'

'We haven't seen any sign of them yet,' Klarch said, a trifle indistinctly, and drew his laspistol. He must have swallowed, because when he spoke again his voice was clearer. 'First team with me. Second, stay here and cover our backs.'

'Maybe we should all go,' Heskin suggested. 'If it really is the main brood down there, we'll need all the firepower we can get.'

'First squad here,' Nelys's voice cut in eagerly, almost at once. 'We can move up and reinforce.'

'Or we could stay where we are and complete our assignment,' Kayla suggested, with a hint of impatience.

'This isn't up for debate,' I snapped. 'Everyone stay focussed on your current objective until you get orders to the contrary. We're

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<sup>1</sup> Vox operator, a common Imperial Guard abbreviation.

<sup>2</sup> Opinion among the Ordo Xenos is still divided on that point. The prevailing theory is that the astonishing amount of variation in colour and patterning observed in the field in some way identifies the hiveship or digestion pool which spawned the organism in question, and some considerable effort has gone into attempting to codify them accordingly. Under this system, the genestealers Cain encountered here would appear to have originated in one of the splinter fleets currently infesting the Lambshead Nebula; which would indeed have put them in easy striking distance of Perlia.

here to advise and support, not take over.' Which covered my own arse nicely if things got as messy as I suspected they were about to. I turned to Vorlens. 'Your call, I'm afraid, lieutenant.'

He didn't look too happy about it, but he didn't shirk the responsibility either, simply turning to the vox op and taking the microphone the specialist was holding out towards him. 'Sergeant Freel,' he said. 'Send one of the teams in. Leave the other to hold the tunnel mouth.' He turned back to me. 'We don't know what's down there, or how wide the shaft is at the end. There's no point putting the whole squad in danger if they're just going to get in each other's way when the shooting starts.'

'I agree,' I said, deactivating my comm-bead for a moment. 'Besides, it'll remind my lot that they're technically only here as observers.' Vorlens nodded, reassured that the cadets would follow his plans without further argument, and I switched it back on again. 'Keep the pict transmission going if you can,' I told Heskin. 'The more we can see, the more the rest of us will know about what we're facing.'

'Will do,' he assured me. The blizzard-obscured cavern on my slate screen seemed to be shaken by a small, brief hivequake as he handed his own data-slate to Klarch. It seemed Sergeant Freel was the kind of NCO who wouldn't ask his men to do anything he wouldn't do himself (more fool him, too, as things turned out), so First Team would indeed be making the recon. After a moment the image steadied a little, and I could just make out March's other hand, holding his laspistol at the ready.

'All set,' he said, his voice a little breathless, and Freel made some kind of acknowledgement that the comm-bead failed to pick up. Shadows were moving in the blizzard on the tiny screen in front of me, and I blinked, my eyes already feeling sore from the effort of trying to disentangle a coherent image from it. After a moment I identified them as the troopers given the dubious honour of going down the hole to poke at whatever might be lurking in its depths with a metaphorical stick. From what little I could make out, none of them were terribly happy about it, which I could hardly blame them for, and I made a mental note to keep an eye on Klarch to see that he kept up morale like he was supposed to.

Strangely enough, given the number of times I've been in a similar situation, I found the unaccustomed sensation of being a spectator rather than a participant peculiarly uncomfortable. I suppose, if I'm honest, there was a certain sense of relief at not being in imminent physical danger myself for once, but the blurred, static-hazed images on my slate screen had a curious, nightmarish tinge to them; at least if I'd been there in person I'd have felt able to affect things in some way. (Of course I'd probably have been dead too, shortly thereafter, but that's beside the point.)

'We're coming to another cavern,' Klarch reported after a few moments. He was near the front of the group, sticking close to the sergeant, as I'd advised all my cadets to do early on in their training; when all else failed, following the lead of the senior NCO present in a crisis would generally be their best chance of getting out in one piece. The point man vanished into the gloom ahead of them, his luminator flickering, until it got so faint I couldn't distinguish it from any of the flares of interference still mottling the pict display.

'Can you see any lights?' I asked. 'Other than your own, I mean.'

'No, commissar.' Klarch sounded puzzled, as well he might, but then he had no idea of the old terrors Clode's words had so unexpectedly kindled in me. Ridiculous, of course, my rational mind kept insisting, but all the same, now the memories of that ghastly tomb world had been raised, they couldn't be that lightly dismissed. 'Should we?'

'Emperor's bowels, I hope not,' I said, without thinking, and Vorlens glanced in my direction, his expression curious. Then, because I couldn't help myself, I added 'if you see anything that looks like a green glow up ahead, just turn back.' If there really were necrons here, the only sensible option would be to run for the ship, call a couple of SDF gunboats to pound the place to gravel, and get a message to Amberley as quickly as possible.

'Acknowledged,' Klarch said, in a tone which left me in no doubt that he was wondering if I'd been at the amasec (chance would have been a fine thing under the circumstances), and I looked up to find Vorlens looking at me speculatively.

'A green glow?' he asked.

I nodded. 'Something I ran into in a place like this, once,' I said. 'Just discounting the possibility, that's all.'

'I see.' Vorlens nodded too, thoughtfully. 'And if I asked what it was?'

'I'd rather not tell you,' I said truthfully. 'An inquisitor I know wouldn't be pleased.' Amberley's line on the necrons seemed to be that the general population was better off not knowing about them, and since pretty much everyone they'd ever come into contact with was dead, that was a surprisingly easy secret to keep. 'Just take my word for it, if they're around, we'll know about it soon enough.' Which was true so far as it went, although, had we but known, we would soon be engulfed in events so cataclysmic I would almost have welcomed an enemy as straightforwardly uncomplicated as the necrons.

Vorlens was clearly about to make some kind of remark in response, but before he could do so the recon detail entered the cavern, and our attention was taken up entirely by the events unfolding there.

'It's big,' Klarch reported. 'Our luminators can barely reach the far wall.' He waved the slate in his off-hand, showing a brief glimpse of what might have been smooth chamber walls, the first I'd seen since we'd arrived on this benighted rock, although the pict quality was so poor it was hard to be sure. Nevertheless, I felt a knot of apprehension tightening itself in the pit of my stomach. I might have asked Klarch to put my mind at rest, by getting some close-ups and proving definitively that the walls were as pitted as the rest of the caverns, but I never got the chance.

'Incoming!' somebody screamed, opening up on full auto, and within seconds the tiny transceiver in my ear was full of the sounds of battle. I had a momentary sight of a heaving mass of chitin bearing down on Klarch, three or four genestealers and what looked like a couple of gaunts, before he dropped the slate and it abruptly stopped transmitting. I could still hear the progress of the one-sided battle, though, as his comm-bead continued to work, the crack of las weapons mingling with the shrieks of the soldiery, the ululation of the 'nids, and the unmistakable retching sound of firing fleshborers.

'Fall back! Fire and movement!' Sergeant Freel bellowed, but the sound of las weapons was already growing sporadic.

'They're already in the tunnel!' Klarch yelled desperately. 'Heskin, defensive positions!' The lad would have made a good commissar, probably, still thinking of the bigger picture even as his own life hung by a thread, but he wasn't going to get the chance now. His last scream was still echoing in my ear as I turned to Vorlens.

'We have to keep them contained!' I said. 'If they get out into the tunnels now, they can pick us off at their leisure.'

He nodded grimly, already reaching for the vox. 'Blaine, Torven, sector nineteen. Reinforce fourth squad.' He looked at me, and shrugged. 'What's left of it.'

I nodded, having recognised one of the names as the platoon sergeant accompanying Nelys and Kayla. 'Nelys, report,' I said.

Under the circumstances, I wanted to hear what was going on from one of my own people.

'We're moving to reinforce,' Nelys told me, his words overlaid by the echo of hurrying footsteps.

'Us too,' Stebbins volunteered, his voice tense.

'Heskin, sit tight,' I ordered. He would have overheard the exchanges, as I'd intended him to, so right now with any luck he'd be digging in, secure in the knowledge that help was on its way. 'Hold your position and wait for backup.'

'What about Klarch and the others?' Heskin asked. 'If we move fast enough we might...'

'They're beyond help,' I told him shortly. 'You heard what Klarch said, the 'nids are already in the tunnel. Your only hope is to sit tight and pick them off as they emerge.'

'Acknowledged,' he said, sounding far from happy about it.

'If we take this access tunnel, we can be there ourselves in a couple of minutes,' Donal said, glancing up from his slate, which was displaying the map again. Sure enough, a narrow conduit was marked, barely wide enough to move along in single file, but the moment I saw it I knew he was right. So much for staying on the sidelines, I thought.

'Come on!' Vorlens said, gesturing to his men, and double-timing it in the direction Donal had indicated. As usual, I felt I had no option but to follow; maintaining my reputation, and my authority over the cadets, demanded it.

'Right behind you!' I replied, turning to follow, and making sure Donal went into the tunnel ahead of me. If he really thought it was a good idea to go charging into the middle of a 'nids swarm, he was welcome to go first.



## FOUR

DONAL WAS RIGHT: a few metres further on we found a narrow passageway, lined with pipes and cabling, heading in the direction we wanted. (Or at least in the direction of the battle, which in my case was far from being the same thing.) It was even more cramped than I'd feared, barely wide enough to walk down, our shoulders brushing the ironmongery bolted to the walls and occasional protrusions in the rock as we passed. Fortunately Vorlens was still leading from the front, disappearing down the fissure like a homing ferret, and his men followed without hesitation. Donal was hard on their heels, which left Jurgen and me standing alone in the main passageway for a moment.

'There's something I don't understand,' my aide said, lowering his voice conspiratorially, and leaning a little closer to give me the full benefit of his halitosis. Which was hardly a novelty, but under the circumstances I was inclined to listen. Despite his unprepossessing appearance, and body odour which would have made an ork blench, he was pretty much the only man I ever trusted. Which was hardly surprising, given the number of times he'd saved my miserable hide over the years.

'Which is?' I asked.

Jurgen's forehead furrowed under its usual patina of grime, which by now had been richly supplemented by the dust drifting everywhere in the crudely chiselled labyrinth. 'If that quill-pusher really had been hiding in the air vents,' he said slowly, 'how come the 'stealers didn't get him?'

'I've been wondering that too,' I admitted. Even though I'd hardly had much time to mull over Clode's abruptly truncated story, parts of it still bothered me. In my experience, air vents and service ducts were precisely the kind of places the invading organisms would go to ground, as evidenced by their presence in the shaft leading to the storage room in which we'd encountered them. Anyone hoping to find refuge in one would be abruptly and fatally disappointed, in pretty short order. 'Perhaps he just wasn't down there for very long.' In any case, there wasn't much point in worrying about it. As you'll readily appreciate, I was a lot more concerned about where the rest of them had gone, especially as I was about to squeeze into a narrow passageway myself.

All I can say for the few moments it took us to reach the main shaft where Heskin was doing his best to stem the tide is that they were over mercifully quickly. As I've already remarked, the service tunnel was claustrophobically narrow, so much so that it was all but impossible to turn round in it, and my shoulder blades tingled the whole time we were down there, anticipating the sudden impact of a genestealer's talons. Only Jurgen's presence behind me, which I could smell even if I couldn't see him, went some way towards assuaging my fears; he was clearly having some difficulty with the bulky melta in such a confined space, judging by the leitmotif of *sotto voce* profanity which accompanied our progress, but I was still grateful that he'd kept it in his hands. Judging by the voices in my comm-bead, we were going to need all the firepower we could get in a moment or two.

Heskin and the quintet of troopers with him were apparently giving a pretty good account of themselves, at least so far, having caught the emerging 'nids in a withering crossfire the moment they emerged from the tunnel mouth. Being 'nids, of course, this hadn't particularly bothered them, but it had slowed them down a bit, just long enough for First Squad to arrive and pitch in, which seemed to be evening up the odds a little. Once Second Squad and ourselves arrived, we might actually be able to contain them after all. I hoped...

'This way!' Vorlens called, from somewhere up ahead, and after a moment the looming bulk of Donal's greatcoat and cap in front of me moved aside too, to reveal a wide tunnel carved through the rock.

As I stepped out of the narrow passageway behind the cadet, I glanced around, orientating myself from long habit, and getting my first glimpse of the disputed shaft in the process. It was even bigger than it had appeared on the data-slate screen, fully wide enough to have driven a Chimera down, with plenty of room to spare on either side. The tram tracks I'd noted before ran away into the distance, presumably to a spoil heap or a processing area, and I almost tripped on the nearest rail as I turned towards the sounds of combat.

To my mingled surprise and relief, the combined force of cadets and PDF troopers looked as though they were still holding the line, although the 'nids seemed perilously close to gaining the upper hand. None of the 'stealers or hormagaunts had succeeded in closing the distance enough to get into close combat range before being shot to bits yet, which was a minor miracle in itself, but a small brood of gaunts was poised in the entrance to the narrow side tunnel, raking the main cavern with fleshborer fire. Several of the troopers were down too by now, thrashing and screaming, or ominously inert, but the survivors were still pouring las-bolts into the chitinous horde with undiminished enthusiasm.

'Commissar!' Heskin looked up and saw me, relief etched on his face for a moment, before all traces of expression vanished, along with most of his head. His corpse flew backwards, propelled by an impact far greater than the deadly clouds of beetles disgorged by the fleshborers could possibly have delivered. I turned to the tunnel mouth, horrified realisation curdling my guts, and saw what I most dreaded. One of the larger warrior forms had joined the gaunts, imbuing them with malign purpose, the unmistakable bulk of a venom cannon hanging from its lower limbs.

'Shoot the big one!' I shouted, hoping to disrupt the influence of the hive mind, if only for a moment or two, but all I succeeded in doing was attracting its attention, and to my horror the monstrous weapon began to swing in my direction. I dived for cover behind the nearest ore cart, hearing the wood explode above me, and the hiss of the hail of deadly poison crystals passing just over my head. A moment later an unmistakable odour of unwashed socks informed me that Jurgen had made it to our improvised refuge as well.

'Commissar.' Kayla popped up on the other side of me, and loosed off a couple of las-bolts at the hulking abomination, before ducking back. 'We're getting our arses handed to us here.' As a formal sitrep<sup>1</sup>, I suppose it left. Something to be desired, but I'd come to pretty much the same conclusion myself, so I couldn't really fault her analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Situation report. One of the many abbreviations common among the Imperial Guard.

'I've got a shot,' Jurgen informed us, as casually as if he was asking whether I'd like some more tanna. The warrior staggered back a pace as Vorlens and his three remaining troopers gave it five rapid rounds apiece, and Jurgen squeezed the trigger of the melta. The results were gratifying, to say the least. The towering creature shrieked, staggered, and went down, steaming like a grox roast (although smelling a great deal less pleasant), its heavy weapon seared into uselessness. It scrambled against the stone floor for a moment, gouging parallel grooves in the rock, attempting to rise, before another barrage of lasgun fire put it out of the fight for good. Deprived of its influence, the gaunts milled uncertainly for a moment, before retreating deeper into the tunnel, though they still kept up their barrage of fleshborer rounds.

'They're pulling back!' Nelys cried, and actually began to stand, flourishing his chainsword like the hero of a holodrama. 'Follow up and finish them!'

'Get your frakking head down before they finish you!' I bellowed, quite unnecessarily in retrospect, as he still had his comm-bead in. I swear he winced as he followed my instructions. 'If you set foot in that tunnel you're a dead man!' He complied with ill grace, but at least he ducked back behind a handy heap of rubble, perhaps encouraged by the noisy demise of another of the PDF troopers who happened to be standing nearby.

'Can we seal the shaft with those mining charges?' Vorlens asked, indicating the crate Klarch had been enjoying his last meal on such a short time before.

'Haven't a due,' I admitted. 'For all I know it'll bring the whole roof down on top of us.' That seemed the most likely result to me, although, of course, I couldn't tell from there how much was in the box. I did know what an explosion in a confined space could do, though, and under most circumstances I'd be disinclined to risk it. Right now, however, we didn't seem to have a lot of options left. The scuttling in the tunnel was beginning to sound more purposeful again, which meant that another of the synapse creatures was beginning to restore order, and that we could expect another co-ordinated assault at any time. I indicated the box with a tilt of my head. The real problem's going to be getting our hands on it,' I added.

'Not a problem,' Nelys assured me, and before I could protest he was up and running, head down, as though the hail of fleshborer rounds was nothing more deadly than a rain shower.

'Frakhead,' Kayla said, a tinge of admiration elbowing its way past the disapproval in her voice, and she began to pop off las-rounds in the general direction of the tunnel mouth.

'Give him covering fire!' I ordered, although Donal and most of the troopers were already doing so. Jurgen triggered the melta again, and a ravening blast of superheated air belched down the tunnel, eliciting a shriek which set my teeth on edge. It sounded as though the synapse beastie was having problems of its own, and I began to hope that the main assault might just be delayed another moment or two. It was a vain hope, however. Nelys had almost made it to the box of explosives when another warrior form, its body scorched and leaking ichor, but still functioning far too well for my peace of mind, emerged from the tunnel mouth, and aimed another tube of flesh in his direction.

'Nelys, two o'clock!' Donal shouted, just in time, and the impetuous cadet checked his rush, diving sideways to take refuge behind an ore cart which had apparently been removed from the rails for some reason. Powerful acids seared their way through the stone where he'd been standing an instant before, as the devourer rounds burst, spattering their lethal payload, and a few stray drops began to eat their way through the wooden slats making up the mobile ore bin he was hiding behind.

'Now what's he up to?' Kayla muttered, shooting at the hulking creature again, and for a moment I thought she meant the 'nid, until she added, 'Hasn't got the sense he was born with.' Nelys peered cautiously round the obstruction, clearly wondering if he dared make another run for it, and she tapped the comm-bead in her ear impatiently. 'It's got wheels, orkbrain.'

'Oh, right.' Nelys divined her meaning almost at once, and began to move cautiously towards the box of explosives, pushing the makeshift barrier in front of him. It was too flimsy to stop more than another round or two, but with any luck the 'nid wouldn't have enough time to get that many shots off in any case.

'Keep firing,' I encouraged everyone. 'We've got them on the run.' This wasn't exactly true, but at least we were holding them, which was more than I'd expected when we got into this mess in the first place. Jurgen nodded, and fired the melta again, barbecuing the 'nid neat as you please. 'Well done, Jurgen.'

'You're welcome, sir.' My aide nodded, as though I'd just thanked him for bringing me a mug of tanna and a florn cake, and resumed his watchful posture as the warrior form flailed and expired in a cloud of rank-smelling steam, its now flaccid limbs trailing down the gentle slope behind it.

'Will they send out another one?' Vorlens asked, and I shook my head.

'Probably not.' I took in the scattered corpses of the tyrannid organisms, interspersed with too many casualties of our own for my liking, and performed a quick mental calculation. 'They can't have too many synapse creatures left by now. Maybe only one, if we're lucky. That means they'll try to protect it in the tunnel.'

'They'll have to do a lot better than that, sir,' Nelys said in my comm-bead, the overconfident tone I'd learned to dread creeping back into his voice. He'd reached the box by now, and had levered the top off, before rummaging in it eagerly. 'There's enough fyceline in here to bring the whole tunnel down.' He emerged again, holding something up to the light. 'And det cord. You reckon two minutes will be enough?'

'Nothing like enough!' I snapped, but I was too late. Even before I spoke, he'd clipped off a length, and heaved the whole box full of explosive nastiness into the ore truck.

'He's insane!' Kayla said, the tone of grudging admiration even more pronounced than before. It was clear now what Nelys had in mind, and I have to admit that, for once, he seemed to have had the germ of a decent idea; apart from the appalling risk of entombing us along with the 'nids, of course.

'Clearly,' I agreed, and turned to Donal. 'Don't just stand there, help him!'

'Yes, commissar.' Donal leapt to his feet and sprinted over to his fellow cadet, while everyone else kept wasting las-bolts down the darkness of the tunnel. There didn't seem anything much to shoot at any more, but that didn't mean a thing where tyrannids were concerned, so I let them get on with it. At least it gave the troopers something to do, which would be good for morale, and with

any luck it would divert the swarm's attention from what was going on above their heads. Nelys and Donal got their shoulders to the ore cart and heaved; within seconds they'd got it up to a fair turn of speed, sprinting along behind it while its deadly cargo bounced around in a fashion I found far from comforting.

'Cease firing!' I shouted, just as they got close enough to the tunnel mouth to seem in imminent danger of being felled by their own comrades. But I needn't have worried; Vorlens' men were pretty disciplined for PDF, and had seen the danger for themselves. With a final heave, the two cadets rounded the corpse of the warrior Jurgen had felled, and started the cart rattling down the gentle slope beyond. The moment it was moving they flung themselves aside, no doubt anticipating a further hail of bioengineered lethality, but it seemed my guess was correct; the 'nids were retrenching at the bottom of their hole.

Not that it did them much good, of course. Donal and Nelys were already running for cover as the cart disappeared into the darkness, the echoes of its passage reverberating back as it bounced into the depths of the shaft. The noise and movement evidently distracted our abominable adversaries, as I distinctly heard another barrage of fleshborer fire, no doubt an instinctive response to the intrusion. Then I was flinging myself flat behind the dubious refuge of the ore cart, certain that Nelys's two minutes must surely be up.

I wasn't wrong. With a roar like an ammunition dump exploding, a plume of smoke and rock dust, probably mixed with fragments of tyranid if I'd cared enough to look, erupted from the tunnel mouth ahead of us, turning it into a miniature fume role. Choking, like everyone else present, I clambered to my feet, blinking my eyes clear of the stinging residue of the detonation, and tried to distinguish the babble of voices around me from the ringing in my ears. 'Donal! Nelys! Report!' I demanded, still by no means certain that either would be in a fit state to respond.

'Still here, commissar,' Donal assured me laconically. 'Both of us.'

'Did we get them?' Nelys asked, coughing loudly as he inhaled a little too much of the results of his handiwork.

'You could say that,' I agreed. The entire tunnel was collapsing, chunks of rock as big as I was thundering down from the ceiling to crack and craze against the uneven floor, while innumerable smaller pieces clattered and rolled about them. It looked to me as if it was blocked from end to end, and that any 'nids which had escaped the conflagration would have been mashed to pulp before they could flee.

'Yes!' Nelys crowed, grinning from ear to ear, and I fought down the impulse to chide him. Better to let him have his moment of triumph; at least the bang seemed to have knocked a little of the starch out of his underwear, which was no bad thing.

'Well done,' I said, making sure I included Donal in the general backslapping. 'If a trifle reckless.' I turned, hearing the clatter of running feet, to find Frister, Stebbins, and Second Squad double-timing it into the battlezone.

Stebbins gaped at the mess for a moment, then recollected himself and saluted. 'Commissar. What happened?'

'Nelys squished the bugs,' Kayla told him.

'Oh.' He looked vaguely disappointed. 'Anything we can do, now we're here?'

'Help the wounded,' I said, conscious of having an image to maintain, and turned to Vorlens. 'Then I suggest we resume the sweep. There could still be some stragglers roaming around.'

'Right.' The lieutenant nodded, and went into a huddle with his NCOs, leaving me to gaze thoughtfully at the mound of debris.

There would be no chance now of allaying my nagging sense of disquiet by inspecting the chamber at the far end, or better still, sending someone else to do it, even if it hadn't collapsed along with the tunnel.

Once again, I told myself that Clode's words had just been a figure of speech: no one knew better than I did that if there really were necrons here, none of us would have made it out of the docking bay, let alone this deep into the asteroid. And they would have slaughtered the tyranids too, I had no doubt of that. But something about the whole situation still struck me as fundamentally wrong, and if I've learned one thing in my century or more of attempting to evade all the trouble the galaxy keeps throwing at me, it's to trust that nagging sense of paranoia.

'Good news, sir.' A familiar voice, and equally familiar odour, broke into my reverie. Jurgen was standing at my shoulder, the melta slung across his back next to his las-gun, now that he had no further pressing need of either. He was holding a data-slate, his brow furrowed in concentration as he studied the tangled mess of the mining hab's internal layout. 'I think I've just found a kitchen.'

Well, he had, and I must admit that a couple of salt grox buns and a mug of fresh recaff went a long way towards improving my mood. But I didn't feel really comfortable again until we were back aboard the Aquila, our sweep finally completed, and the last few genestealers hunted down and dispatched.

'It sounds like you did a good job,' Visiter greeted me on our return, while the subdued cadets filed back to their seats, trying not to look at the empty ones which had been occupied by Heskin and Klarch on our flight here. I'd been careful to find them all plenty of make-work, to keep them from brooding on our losses, but now, on the long journey back, I'd have to keep an eye on them; sooner or later the reaction would set in. With any luck, most of them would sleep for the next few hours, but after that I'd need to handle them carefully until they'd had time to come to terms with what had happened. They'd all known intellectually that casualties happen on a battlefield, but it was the first time they'd actually experienced it, and the first time any of them had lost a fellow cadet.

'Good enough,' I conceded wearily. He already knew about our losses, of course, so there was no point in going into that now.

'You said you had something to show me?'

'I do.' The commodore nodded, apparently amused at some private joke. 'Keep your eye on the viewport.' He settled into the seat next to me, apparently unconcerned by Jurgen's proximity, and tapped his comm-bead. 'Take us out, Mister Sprie.'

We'd boarded the shuttle in the cavern we'd disembarked in, little less than a day ago, and the dull grey walls beyond the armourcrys, and the disembowelled utility craft, still looked exactly the same as they had when we arrived. The great iron doors leading to open space had been ponderously retracting while we took our seats, and now the mottled rock began to slip past the viewport as Sprie fed power to the engines, lifting the Aquila from the floor and nudging it gently back towards its natural element.

'The funny thing is,' Visiter told me, 'we'd never have noticed the thing if you hadn't told us to loiter off-station. It's not exactly visible, unless you get close to it.'

'What isn't?' I asked, as Sprie boosted us out of the hangar bay in a neat parabola. We were skimming the surface, it seemed to me, swooping low over the cracked and desolate terrain, so close that a few of the surface-mounted pylons I'd noticed on the way in seemed even higher than our flight path.

'Luckily I thought of gettin' the young shavers to practise some low-altitude attack runs while we were waitin',' Visiter continued, as if he hadn't heard the question. Fair enough, then, I thought, if he wanted to be all mysterious about it, I wouldn't spoil his fun. 'Orks use rocks like this for transport, you know, as well as proper ships.'

I did know, as it happened, having been aboard a couple in my time, so I nodded. 'Usually for large-scale planetary assaults,' I said. From an orkish point of view, they were perfect for the job; either whatever braking system their meks had been able to cobble together worked, delivering a far greater number of warriors to the surface than a conventional drop-ship could ever have done, or they failed, resulting in a titanic explosion and widespread destruction, which they seemed to think was almost as good... 'Quite,' Visiter said, his moustache quivering. After a moment he pointed. 'There it is.'

It took me a moment to make out what he was indicating, then my jaw dropped. It was a tyranid bio-construct, wedged deep in a fissure on the asteroid's surface, almost hidden by the shadows surrounding it. 'That's a mycetic spore!' I said, not bothering to conceal my surprise.

'Certainly looks like one,' the commodore agreed, clearly pleased with my reaction. 'Probably been driftin' around ever since the SDF took out the hive ships last year, and just made for this place once it got into range.'

'Any idea how long it's been there?' I asked.

Visiter shrugged. 'Not long, by the look of it. But I'd bet half my pension that's how your swarm arrived.'

'Not a bet I'd take,' I agreed. As Sprie brought us around in a wide, slow circle, I could clearly see the split in the side through which the organisms had disembarked, the interior lit by the external floodlights of our Aquila. The flesh inside had been desiccated by exposure to vacuum, of course, but still seemed to retain a little resilience, in contrast to the hard outer shell. That meant that it had arrived relatively recently, I was sure, but it would take a Magos Biologis to narrow it down any more than that. 'Did you find any others?'

'Others?' Now it was Visiter's turn to look surprised. 'No. Should we have done?'

'I don't know,' I admitted, my sense of unease returning even more strongly than before. The pod could only have held about a score of tyranids, and we'd accounted for more or less that many in our face-to-face encounters aboard the asteroid. Up until then I'd been assuming that a significant number of them had been trapped and exterminated in the tunnel collapse as well; but if not, and the chamber Klarch had discovered was all but empty when Nelys's bomb went off, that brought me right back to my original question. What had killed all the miners so swiftly and efficiently? Why hadn't we discovered any bodies? And if someone or something else had been responsible, had the tyranids simply arrived after the dust had settled and taken advantage of the abandoned installation to set up home?

Even more unsettling was the thought that, if some other force had indeed attacked the mining hab, where were they now?

Eventually I succeeded in dozing off, more from sheer physical fatigue than anything else, but my dreams were far from restful, full of blank-faced metal killers, and their scuttling, spider-like servitors.

Had I but known, of course, all my questions would be answered soon enough; but if I'd had even the merest inkling of what form those answers would take, you can be sure, my dreams would have been infinitely worse than they were.

## Editorial Note:

*I had considered placing this extract at the very beginning of Cain's narrative; although, on reflection, this seems like the proper place to insert it.*

## From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127.M42.

*THE FORTY-FIRST MILLENNIUM ended, like so many of its predecessors, in widespread conflict; although it's probably fair to say that seldom in the history of the Imperium has humanity found itself beset by so many enemies, on so many sides. The broad brush strokes of most popular accounts have tended to parcel up the various war zones with unjustified neatness, however, blurring the manner in which successive crises interacted with one another, and in some cases overlapped.*

*Nowhere is this misconception more egregious than in the popular image of the two principal battlefronts of the time: the so-called Black Crusade, and the Tyrannic wars. In the minds of most interested laymen, the Black Crusade was largely confined to the aptly named Segmentum Obscurus, while the tyranid hive fleets constituted a threat solely to the systems of the Eastern Arm. In reality, the picture was a great deal more confused, with the raiding fleets of the Great Enemy striking far from the main battleground around the Cadian Gate and its adjacent sectors. At least one such flotilla is reliably recorded as being active as far to the East as the Damocles Gulf, close to what was then the border of the Tau Empire, although why it should have been there, and the circumstances of its eventual defeat, remain shrouded in conjecture and debate.*

*I propose to devote a modest chapter to the affair, however, since one thing about it that is beyond dispute is the involvement of the near-legendary hero Ciaphas Cain, whose stalwart defence of the planet Perlia remains justifiably celebrated even today.*



## FIVE

'THEY TELL ME you were recommending a full quarantine of the place,' Brasker said, his dry, papery voice, as always, managing to sound both condescending and mildly incredulous. With one or two exceptions (Commodore Visiter and Rorkins, the retired colonel in charge of the stormtrooper cadets, chief among them), I found my colleagues on the faculty tedious company at best, and the schola's bursar irked me more than most. Almost a parody of an Administratum functionary, his grey skin and creased robes invariably spattered with ink, he had an opinion on every subject, which he generously shared with everyone in the vicinity whether they were interested in it or not. Apart from the progeni, of course, who he preferred to ignore, expressing the view at every opportunity that their presence was the only thing preventing the schola from running as efficiently as he would have liked. Unfortunately, his society was the tariff the rest of us had to bear if we wanted to dine in the buttery, which the kitchen staff were skilled enough to make seem worth the irritation. I'd arrived in the hall a little late, thanks to some administrative work that, for once, I'd been unable to delegate to Jurgen, and my heart had sunk as I'd approached the high table through the usual gaggle of face-stuffing cadets to find that the only vacant seat left was next to Brasker. (Something I had anticipated, of course, since the rest of us had long since divined that our best chance of avoiding his company was to arrive early for meals, but I'd clung to the hope that someone else would be later than I was.)

'They tell you correctly,' I replied as I seated myself, maintaining a veneer of politeness despite my irritation. All those years of attending tedious diplomatic functions while I was attached to the Lord General's staff had made the pose of courteous attention second nature to me, and I was too seasoned a campaigner to make needless enemies. Particularly of the man who controlled the schola's budget, and who, so far, had been almost preternaturally trusting about my departmental accounts.

'But you were overruled, of course,' Brasker went on, as though he already knew, rather than transparently fishing for gossip.

'I'm afraid so,' I said, digging into my poached ploid. Throwing him a couple of conversational titbits now and again never hurt, I'd found; he might have been an opinionated bore with all the charisma of a servitor, but like most bureaucrats above a certain rank he was well connected among the Administratum, and blithely indiscreet. The little crumbs of rumour I'd allowed to fall in his vicinity before had been amply repaid in far more interesting kind, and I'd been stringing for Amberley for too long not to cultivate so potentially useful a source. 'I'm still not entirely satisfied that it was safe to resume mining.'

That piqued his interest nicely, of course. 'And why would that be so?' he asked, as one of the servants removed the remains of his starter, and deposited a platter of gently-steaming fish in front of him, garnished with thinly sliced sticks of fried tuber.

I shrugged. 'That's just it,' I admitted, vaguely surprised to find myself confiding in the fellow. I can only account for it by admitting that my formless forebodings hadn't diminished at all in the week since our return, and that it was a relief to finally be able to verbalise them. Not to mention the sure and certain knowledge that, thanks to his incurable tendency to gossip, it would soon be all round the Administratum that Cain had doubts about the whole enterprise. That should cover my own back very nicely, and enhance my reputation into the bargain, if, Emperor forbid, things did go wrong up there again. 'There was nothing concrete I could put my finger on. Just an old soldier's instinct, I suppose.'

'Hmm.' Brasker masticated thoughtfully for a moment. 'I can see why you didn't get very far. The Administratum is built on a firm foundation of solid and verifiable fact. One man's instinct, however finely honed, wouldn't carry an awful lot of weight.'

'That's because you put more faith in your data-slates than in matters of the soul,' Sister Julien, the battle-scarred Celestian veteran in charge of the Sororitas novitiates, put in<sup>1</sup>. 'You wouldn't even listen to the word of the Emperor unless it was in triplicate.' The two of them were old sparring partners, bickering more-or-less amiably whenever they came into contact, although their respective world views seemed so much at variance, and so deeply entrenched, I never really understood why they bothered.

'I'm afraid the word of Cain is regarded rather more lightly,' I told her, taking refuge behind the facade of modesty I'd erected so carefully over the years. As Emperor-botherers go she was tolerable enough company, I suppose, and we'd even spent a few surprisingly pleasant evenings reminiscing over some old campaigns together. That said, I'd been in the field with the Sororitas too often to consider them reliable when things got messy, far too apt to go looking for martyrdom or heretics to cleanse instead of following the battle plan, even if it left the real soldiers flapping in the breeze while they did so. Which, along with the risk of getting dragged off to chapel whenever the conversation flagged, had got in the way of any real friendship developing between us. 'More fool them, then,' she said decisively. Her irises were hazel, and regarded me over the lump of a repeatedly broken nose with faint amusement. 'If ever a man had the Emperor at his back, it must have been you.'

'I've heard it said,' I admitted, more than a little uncomfortable with the way the conversation was heading, 'but I'm sure He's no more interested in me than in anyone else.'

That seemed to satisfy her.

'If anything,' Brasker said, 'I'd expect His attention to be directed primarily at the Cadian Gate at the moment.'

'Oh?' I seized on the apparent change of topic with alacrity. 'And why would that be?' My own fish arrived, and I began plying my cutlery, slicing through the thin coating of batter to flake the succulent flesh from the bones.

'You mean you haven't heard?' Brasker feigned surprise. 'There's been a massive incursion from the Eye of Terror. The Traitor Legions are massing for a full assault, they tell me, and the fighting's already engulfed most of the Segmentum Obscurus.'

I suppose, in retrospect, it seems astonishing that we were able to discuss such cataclysmic events in so casual a manner, but in our defence I have to point out that they were transpiring on the far side of the galaxy, and that from where we were sitting the

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<sup>1</sup> Although most recruits to the Adepta Sororitas are, of course, trained in their own convents, it's by no means unusual to have a Battle Sister or two attached to a schola progenium, since many of the girls taken in by them are likely to feel a calling to join their ranks. Sister Julien would see to their initial induction, assessing which of the aspirants were best suited to the Ordos Militant, Hospitaller, Famulous, or what have you, and which were better redirected along other paths altogether.

tyranids seemed far more of a clear and present danger. At the time, we had no reason to believe that Abaddon's latest rampage would have any more of an impact on the Eastern Arm than the previous ones had, which amounted to little more than vague rumours and unsubstantiated battle reports trickling down the astropathic network long after the dust had settled.

'Well, whoever "they" are, you can tell them they're wrong,' Rorkins put in from the opposite end of the table. 'And if they know what's good for them, they'd better stop spreading heretical twaddle like that.'

We exchanged a look. I couldn't prove it, of course, but I was pretty sure he'd served his time as an active stormtrooper in the ranks of the Inquisition's private army, rather than the Imperial Guard, and kept in touch at least sporadically with his former employers, and I had no doubt at all that he harboured similar suspicions about my connection with Amberley.

Brasker, of course, was too dense, or naive, to realise that he was perilously close to getting his name on a list that would be very bad for his health, and positively inflated with self-importance. 'I have it from a very reliable source,' he said, 'among the codiciers at the legation of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.' At which point I pricked up my ears, thinking that although they were undoubtedly exaggerated (I've yet to meet an astropath without a flair for the dramatic), there might be some truth to the stories after all. 'They're already calling it the thirteenth Black Crusade, apparently.'

'Stuff and nonsense,' Julien remarked, snorting derisively, and holding out a metal cup for one of the hovering servants to fill with recaff. 'Abaddon was finished after the Gothic War, everyone knows that. He wouldn't dare show his face in the Emperor's realm again.'

'Well, let's hope you're right,' I said, finding my appetite somewhat diminished. I'd faced the servants of the Great Enemy more often than I cared to contemplate, and in my experience it was never wise to underestimate them. Particularly a ten thousand year old madman, who'd been marinating himself in the raw stuff of Chaos for most of that time.

Abandoning my supper for the moment, I surveyed the crowded dining room from our slightly elevated position, picking out my now diminished band of commissar cadets, who were tucking into their somewhat plainer fare heartily enough. They seemed to have adjusted to the loss of their comrades about as well as I could have hoped, although Briel was still causing me some mild concern, seeming a little less focussed than he had done before our encounter with the tyranids. He and Klarch had been friends, and he'd clearly been shaken by the two deaths. After all, none of the cadets had any family, or ties of any kind beyond the ones they'd forged for themselves here. I remembered well enough how that felt.

My eye fell on Kayla and Stebbins, hunched over a data-slate as they ate, comparing notes on the assignment I'd given them that afternoon (something about the degree of proof required before summarily executing a trooper in the field, if I remember rightly), and Nelys, chewing thoughtfully as he listened to the conversation, occasionally interjecting something they were clearly finding far from helpful. Donal was laughing with Frister and Dallory, sharing some kind of joke, and I determined then and there that I'd at least take Brasker's nonsense seriously enough to prepare them for the worst if it should come. And for that, if nothing else, I suppose I should thank the ridiculous little man.

'HERETICAL INFILTRATION?' Donal asked, a tone of surprise in his voice. As the weather was unseasonably warm for these latitudes<sup>1</sup>, I'd decided to take the next morning's tutorial outdoors, commandeering the roof of one of the outer towers for the purpose. I'd done so often enough before for no one to consider it out of the ordinary, and there was less chance of being overheard away from the main building. The last thing I wanted was word of what I was doing getting back to Brasker, and thence to half the planet before the week was out. Rorkins had been right, the important thing now was to calm everybody's fears, not make them worse by vox-casting to all and sundry that Cain the Hero was taking the rumours of impending doom seriously. I nodded, after a quick glance over the parapet to make sure there was no one else within earshot. From up here we were afforded a breathtaking view across the valley to the peaks beyond, many of which were permanently shrouded in snow. The distant roofs of Salubria glittered in the warm autumn sunshine, huddled around the river a couple of kilometres away and a few hundred metres below the crag on which our citadel stood, while the constant background noise of the schola echoed up to surround us, a barely-perceived buzz of human activity. A party of youths was down on the firing range, blowing cardboard targets to confetti under the watchful eye of one of the drill abbots, while over to our left a squad of early adolescents was embarking on a run up one of the nearby mountains, urged on by their proctors.<sup>2</sup> Narrowing my eyes, I was just able to make out the familiar shape of the black-painted truck from the judiciary in Havendown, making its way up the winding track which led to our gates, with its weekly delivery of condemned criminals for the interrogation, execution, and live fire exercises. Sure that everything was peaceful and orderly, and that there was no chance of being overheard, I nodded.

'Heretical infiltration,' I confirmed.

Nelys stuck up a hand. 'I thought we were supposed to be studying interrogation and intelligence retrieval this morning,' he said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

'We were, and we will,' I reassured him. 'But this topic is related, and in my experience there are few more pressing pieces of intelligence than the existence of a heretic cell attempting to subvert our forces from within.' As I'd expected, the casual reference to my colourful history hooked them at once, and even Nelys perked up, looking even more attentive than usual. Briel seemed to be with us as well, which was something of a relief. I nodded sombrely, and glanced around again, this time for dramatic effect rather than the fear of unseen listeners. 'I need hardly tell you that whatever you hear in these tutorials should be kept to yourselves. Some of my more academically-minded colleagues might not approve of me modifying the syllabus.'

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<sup>1</sup> The schola was sited on the outskirts of Salubria Parva, a mountain village conveniently close to Havendown, the planetary capital.

<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the education provided at a schola progenium is the same whichever branch of Imperial service the student eventually enters; after this was determined in their early teens, the specialised training provided by Cain and his colleagues would begin. Although he's never specific about the matter, the cadets under his tutelage would have been between thirteen and seventeen standard years of age, the younger ones still spending part of their time following a more general academic curriculum.

That was an understatement if ever I'd uttered one. Our principal, Cuthbert Cathcart, a minor ecclesiarch who'd spent his entire life hindering the education of the youth of the Imperium in one capacity or another, thanks to a mind so narrow I was amazed he could balance a hat on it, would probably have an embolism on the spot if he ever found out. Fortunately, once his unfortunate charges passed into the hands of whatever service branch they'd been directed to, Visiter, Rorkins and I (and a few of the others, I suppose) were able to straighten out most of them reasonably satisfactorily.<sup>1</sup>

I glanced at the cadet appearing to pay the least amount of attention to me, and most to the Sororitas novices who had begun running through some unarmed combat drills on the parade ground below. 'Cadet Maklin. What do you know of the Ruinous Powers?'

I swear the sudden silence was so profound, as ten pairs of eyes stared at me in horrified astonishment, that I found myself wondering if they'd stopped breathing.

Maklin's mouth worked like a freshly landed fish for a moment. 'They're really, really bad?' he hazarded at length.

'Correct,' told him. 'But it's their human acolytes you have to look out for.' I hesitated for a moment, then decided not to burden them with any more knowledge about the Powers themselves. Emperor knows, it's hardly the most comfortable thing to be scratching around in your head, and it would hardly help matters to give them all nightmares. 'They form cults, and try to attract the attention of one of the Powers by furthering whatever they imagine its ends to be. The lucky ones generally just muck about enacting rituals they don't understand, and start worming their way into positions of influence, where they can disrupt the proper functioning of the Imperium.'

'What about the unlucky ones?' Kayla asked.

'They succeed,' I told her seriously. 'Their patron power really does take an interest. Bad news for them, and far worse for everyone else.'

'But they can be beaten, can't they?' Stebbins asked, sounding a little uncertain. 'You've fought them, and won.'

'A few times,' I said, deciding to gloss over my encounters with daemons and wyrds. I'd got out in one piece every time, it was true, but a lot of other folk hadn't, and I'd probably have gone the same way if it wasn't for Jurgen's peculiar talent for disrupting any warp-spawned powers in the vicinity. 'But I've always had help, and it was never easy. They can place their people anywhere, even inside the Imperial Guard. I don't have to tell you how serious that can be.'

'The Guard?' Donal, of course. 'Surely that can't happen very often.'

'Hardly ever,' I said. 'But I've seen entire regiments turn to Chaos before now, fighting for their new masters with just as much tenacity and devotion as they used to do for the Emperor.' Donal still looked sceptical, but from the expressions of horror and disgust on most of the other faces I could see that they were digesting this new and unwelcome idea.

'What about their commissars?' Nelys asked indignantly. 'Why didn't they stop them?'

'They seemed to be a bit too busy being dead,' I told him. 'One of the more dubious benefits of our calling is being top of the target list in a mutiny.' I smiled, bleakly. 'Which is a very good reason for making sure no one foments one in a regiment you're attached to.'

Most of them nodded, taking the answer at face value, although I was far from sure it had been the right one in every case. I'd known at least one commissar defect to the Great Enemy, and was morbidly certain that there must have been others.

'So how can we tell if there are Chaos cultists among the soldiers we've been assigned to?' Kayla asked, coming to the point before any of the others as usual.

'There are a number of signs,' I said, 'which might indicate cultist infiltration. In particular, look out for any groups forming around veteran warriors which claim to be some kind of battlefield brotherhood, especially if they start showing signs of wanting to get into close combat instead of using their guns...'

By the time lunch rolled around, and almost away again, I'd run my charges through the most obvious scenarios I could think of, and felt it prudent to add a caveat. 'There are no hard and fast rules where this is concerned,' I cautioned them. 'You'll just have to rely on your instincts.'

'I don't think I've got any,' Nelys said seriously, allowing everyone to break the tension with a laugh, which left him looking faintly bewildered.

'You followed your instincts on the asteroid,' Kayla reminded him. 'That seemed to work out all right.'

'Yes, I suppose it did,' Nelys conceded, his expression so serious that even I couldn't quite suppress a smile.

Donal frowned, thoughtfully. 'It's all very well telling us what to look out for in a compromised Guard regiment,' he said. 'But surely they're one of the least likely institutions to be infiltrated.'

'Quite right,' I conceded. 'Normally you'll find Chaos cults active among the civilian population. Where they can, they'll try and subvert PDF units and the local arbites<sup>2</sup>, too. For obvious reasons.'

'Well, I suppose they'll be someone else's problem in any case,' Donal said, shrugging. 'We won't be mixing too much with civilians.'

'Apart from R&R,' Frister said, watching a couple of kitchen maids not much older than he was undulating past below us, with a faintly wistful expression on his face. For a moment I considered counselling caution there too, mindful of the bordello I'd stumbled across on Keffia, which had turned out to be staffed with genestealer hybrids, then decided against it. I'd probably give

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<sup>1</sup> This is, perhaps, a little unfair to Cathcart, who, though plodding and unimaginative, did manage to provide a satisfactory basic education for most of his charges. As so often in his memoirs, Cain's disdain for most of the ecclesiarchs he came into contact with may be colouring his view of their characters and abilities.

<sup>2</sup> It seems fairly clear here that by "arbitres" Cain means law enforcers in general rather than the Adeptus Arbitres itself. Like many seasoned travellers he often uses the word generically, rather than attempting to keep track of the bewildering variety of local nomenclature as it varies from planet to planet, although he is usually precise about the distinction when discussing occasions on which actual arbitrators were present.

the poor lad a complex or something. Kinder to let him dream; after all, it was the closest he was ever likely to get.

'WHAT DO YOU make of it, Cain?' Rorkins asked, narrowing his slate-grey eyes over the fan of cards in his hand, as he tried to work out whether I was really holding the pair of Inquisitors, which would give me the pot.

Too seasoned a tarot player to let my expression betray me, I simply shrugged, and lobbed another couple of coins onto the heap in the middle of the table. 'Frakked if I know,' I admitted, honestly enough. 'I'm sure the rumours are exaggerated, but they don't seem to be going away.'

I reached for the glass of the well-matured amasec the colonel kept for his more favoured guests, which I'd left within easy reach, and sipped at it. The room was a pleasant one; Rorkins's quarters were neat, and comfortably furnished, with a view across the darkening valley to the far distant peaks, where the setting sun was tinting the snow-shrouded tips a shade of red which reminded me rather too uncomfortably of clotting blood.

'Were you expectin' 'em to?' Visiter asked, permitting a faintly knowing smirk to twitch his moustache as he called my bluff, and matched the fresh wager.

'Not really,' I admitted. 'Not this quickly anyway.' Less than a month had gone by since Brasker had first brought the rumours of a new Black Crusade to my attention. 'But I'd have expected some kind of official rebuttal by now. The longer these stories are permitted to circulate, the more wild and exaggerated they'll become, and the more stirred up the civilians will get.' I shrugged again. 'I've seen it all before. If the Governor doesn't do something about it soon, they'll be rioting in the streets.'

'They already are,' Sister Julien said, glancing up from her cards just long enough to raise the stakes again. I'd been surprised to see her when I'd arrived in Rorkins's rooms for our regular tarot evening: she'd never attended one before, and I'd always assumed she'd disapprove of gambling on principle, but she certainly didn't play like a novice. If anything, she was as good as I was, which was an interesting challenge, to say the least; I'd got so used to having things my own way over the card table that the novelty of having to really work at winning was rather an enjoyable one. 'Or at least they're about to. I was in Havendown yesterday, for mass at the cathedral, and the tribunes<sup>1</sup> had rapid response teams deployed all over the capital.'

'Sounds like a reasonable precaution,' Rorkins said, deciding to fold after all.

'It was more than a precaution, if you ask me,' Julien said, knocking back her tumbler of amasec rather more briskly than such a fine example of the distiller's art deserved, and looking pointedly at the decanter. Taking the hint, Rorkins stood, and refreshed her glass. 'The confessor preached a sermon about the need for faith in hard times, and the sin of sedition.'

'Sounds like business as usual to me,' Visiter said, his hand hesitating over the pile of coins in front of him, and then withdrawing. Perfect. My pot, then, I thought.

'The salient point being the part about sedition,' Julien pointed out. 'He wouldn't have pulled that topic out of thin air. That sermon was a direct response to the popular mood, believe me.' She sounded pretty convinced about it, which I found particularly disturbing. She knew the way the Ecclesiarchy worked about as well as I understood the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Munitorium, and if the Sisters were concerned about the effect the rumours were having on civilian morale, that meant things were getting dire indeed. She glanced at me, an implicit challenge, and stretched out a hand towards the pile of currency in the middle of the table. 'Planning to match that, Cain, or shall I just pick it up here and now?'

'I think I can do a little better than match it,' I said easily, raising the stakes again, and she nodded approvingly.

'I thought you must have picked up that last Inquisitor,' she said casually, trying to fake me into some kind of tell, but I wasn't about to be read that easily, so I just smiled in return.

'I suppose you'll have to pay to find out,' I said. I didn't just have two Inquisitors, there was a Primarch in there as well. It was a strong hand, one of the best I'd had all evening, and I'd won a couple of pots with far weaker.

'The trouble is,' Visiter said, 'no one really knows anythin'. Astropathic communication's in a hell of a state, with the shadow the hive fleets are castin' in the warp, and the sector fleet's pretty much isolated out here. Whatever news is comin' in by courier boat's out of date before it even gets to this side of the galaxy.'

'Well, don't look at me,' Julien said. 'I haven't heard a thing from the preceptory in months.' This didn't seem to strike her as much of a deprivation. 'Well, trust the Emperor and take a chance, as my old abbess used to say.' She matched my bet, and turned her cards over. 'Emperor ascendant. Still think you can beat that, commissar?'

'Not unless I've got another Emperor up my sleeve,' I said lightly, staring in what I hoped was well-concealed perplexity at the strongest and rarest hand in the game.

Rorkins and Visiter laughed, and the colonel refilled my glass for me. 'I'm not sure praying for a miracle is quite within the spirit of the game,' he said, as Julien scooped up the pot.

'No need to,' the Celestian assured him. 'Sometimes He just provides them regardless.' She shuffled the deck with a dexterity the owner of a downhive gambling den would have envied, and began to deal again. 'I take it you're all still in?'

'Absolutely,' Visiter assured her. 'I'm hopin' to get a bit of that back before you drop it in the poor box.'

'Actually, I was planning, to squander it on riotous living,' Julien said, pausing just long enough for the rest of us to start wondering if she was actually being serious before she laughed raucously at our resulting expressions. 'But you're right, it can do a lot more good in the collection plate.' Personally, I disagreed quite strongly with that opinion, and determined to divert as much of it as I could towards her first suggestion before the evening was out, with myself as the main beneficiary.

'Whatever's going on in the Segmentum Obscurus, I don't suppose it's going to affect us directly,' Rorkins said thoughtfully, arranging the cards he'd been dealt, and opening the bidding with a low denomination coin or two. 'Not for a while, anyway.' Which, as things were to turn out, was about as wide of the mark as it was possible to get, although we had no way of knowing that at the time. 'But there's no doubt that we are vulnerable here, particularly if the civilian authorities continue to vacillate.'

'I agree,' I said. I turned my head, taking in the three other faces around the table. 'The four of us are probably the most

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<sup>1</sup> The Perlian name for local law enforcers.



experienced military personnel on the planet.' All right, I had my reservations about Julien, of course, but I couldn't deny that she'd seen her fair share of action over the years, and it seemed polite to include her.

Visiter nodded sombrely. 'In the entire subsector, more like.' He made another token bet, and glanced speculatively at Rorkins. 'Which means, I take it, that you didn't just invite us here tonight for the tarot.'

'It seemed a reasonable pretext,' the colonel admitted. 'We've got together like this often enough for no one to remark on it.' He nodded cordially at Julien. 'Most of us, anyway. And I'm bound to say that if we'd known you were that good a player, we'd have invited you to join us long ago.'

'A sucker as well as a gentleman,' Julien said, with some amusement. She glanced in my direction. 'Are you in or out, Cain?' With a sense of mounting trepidation, I threw some more coins in the pot. The palms of my hands were tingling again, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was standing on the brink of a precipice. 'I'm in,' I said easily, masking my true feelings with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling. 'The real question is, into what?' I looked directly at Rorkins as I spoke. 'Because I'd rather not find myself having to choose between friendship and duty.' Not that I'd ever given the proverbial flying one for either, of course, but it was the sort of thing they'd expect me to say, so I thought I ought to say it.

'I would have thought that's obvious,' Rorkins said. 'Contingency planning. If things really do go ploid-shaped in the next few months, we're going to have to be the ones to sort it out.' Well, he was right about that too, although none of us had any idea at the time just how catastrophic a situation we'd find ourselves dealing with.

'That sounds reasonable,' I agreed. At least the schola was reasonably isolated, so in the event of widespread civil unrest we should escape the worst of it. 'It shouldn't be too difficult to defend this place if we have to.' Not against a rabble of rioters, anyway, which at the time was the worst-case scenario I could envisage.

Julien nodded, and made her own bet. 'I've already started teaching my novitiates a few counter-insurgency drills, just to be on the safe side.' She glanced up, and stared at us, trying to read our expressions. 'Oh, come on. Like you three haven't considered something similar.'

'Already doing it,' Rorkins admitted. 'Street fighting and house clearance.' He discarded a couple of cards, considered their replacements, and made another token bet.

'Optimum fleet deployment for the SDF assets we've got,' Visiter said, looking faintly relieved. 'Purely a theoretical exercise, of course.' He replaced a single card, with a studied deliberation, which looked like a bluff to me, and raised the stakes. Everyone looked at me.

'Heretic spotting for beginners,' I said, throwing in five cards of no immediate value, and mildly surprised to find myself receiving the Emperor, an Inquisitor, and another Primarch to reinforce the one I'd decided to hold on to. Emboldened, I made a substantial bet, which left everyone else looking worried, and only Julien decided to match it.

'You think that's the main threat we'll be facing?' she asked seriously, holding on to the cards she already held, which was a faintly ominous sign.

'It's the most obvious one,' I said cautiously, deciding not to mention my paranoid fancies about the chamber in the asteroid. By now I'd managed to convince myself that my fears of a necron tomb up there were no more than that, the simple result of old memories being disturbed in a stressful situation, and that whatever we'd be facing in the weeks to come would be far less terrible. 'If there are any heretical cults active on Perlia, they'll be doing all they can to take advantage of the confusion.'

Sure enough, I had the strongest hand, and since no one else seemed inclined to bet, I scooped the somewhat meagre pot.

'That's their style, all right,' Rorkins conceded, pretty much confirming my suspicions about his service record. He looked at me narrowly, as I began to deal the next hand. 'You think there might be other threats too?'

'Always,' I told him, folding the fingers of my right hand down to enumerate them, and trying not to remember the circumstances under which I'd acquired the augmetic ones. 'The 'nids are all over the sector. The main front may be parsecs away, but Emperor alone knows how many splinter fleets are still out there, and there could still be other pockets of survivors of the last infestation lurking somewhere in system.' Visiter nodded thoughtfully, so I continued. 'Not to mention the orks. It's been a while since any more popped up, but we can't discount the possibility of another warband emerging somewhere over the isthmus.' Most of the outbreaks still occurred on the other side of the narrow land bridge connecting us to the eastern continent, where I'd spent such a fraught few months on my first visit to Perlia, and which I'd been careful to travel to as infrequently as possible since taking up residence here. I folded a third finger down. 'And while we're considering all the possibilities, what about an opportunistic raid by the tau? They've never been slow to take advantage of any instability in the Imperium to expand their own borders.'

'All possible,' Rorkins conceded, any pretence of interest in the game completely forgotten. 'But from what I hear, the tau have as much of a problem with the tyranids as we do.'

Visiter nodded. 'Accordin' to some old friends in fleet intelligence, that's true. Couple of their major septs are under siege, and they're divertin' a lot of their resources to dealin' with that.' He shrugged. 'Or they were six months ago. For all I know they've been eaten by now, and the little blue blighters are lookin' around for new worlds to replace 'em.'

'It still sounds to me as though the heretics are the main problem,' Julien said, predictably. This time, though, I found it hard to disagree.

'The main problem,' I said, 'is that right now Perlia couldn't defend itself against a couple of hrud using harsh language. The PDF has been stripped to the bone replacing the Guard losses against the tyranids.' It occurred to me, belatedly, that under the circumstances I could have chosen a less graphic metaphor, but there was no point in worrying about that now. Then, in the interests of maintaining a united front, I nodded at Julien. 'But the sister's right, the most immediate threat is clearly the one of subversion.'

After that, the conversation got a good deal more general, as we thrashed out a few reasonably practical things we could do, and agreed to meet again the following week to compare progress.

'The trouble is,' Rorkins complained, as we said our farewells, 'we're going in blind. We need hard information about what we're facing.'

Well, that wasn't going to be too long in coming, and when it arrived, it was far from comforting. Certainly, if I'd known then what I was going to learn in the next few days, I'd have returned to my quarters in a far less sanguine state than I did. As it was, though, the evening's discussion had buoyed my spirits considerably, and I retired for the night still embracing the cosy delusion that disaster might yet be averted.

#### Editorial Note:

*Although Cain has been a little more forthcoming than usual about the under situation then prevailing on Perlia, he has, as always, concentrated on those aspects of it which he experienced personally. Accordingly, I've appended the following, which may prove enlightening, despite the excessively hagiographic tone of most of the work it's extracted from.*

#### **From *The Return of the Liberator: Ciaphas Cain and the Second Siege of Perlia* by Orten Bassit, 037.M42.**

THE WIDER COURSE of the later Tyrannic Wars is far too widely known to require elucidation here, but it's no exaggeration to say that those momentous events had a profound effect on Perlia, despite its good fortune in being so well removed from the main areas of conflict. Surely no citizen of our Emperor-blessed globe can feel anything but pride in the celerity with which its people answered the Imperium's call to arms, and the speed and efficiency with which regiment after regiment of the Planetary Defence Force was inducted into the Imperial Guard and dispatched to the front.

Inevitably, those forces left behind were stretched to the limit, but managed to prevail regardless when the fearsome foe so unexpectedly arrived in our own fair stellar system. Nevertheless, repulsing them cost Perlia dear, in the thousands of lives of PDF troopers and SDF crewmen, leaving her ramshackle defences weakened still further.

Serious as these events were, however, the real crisis had yet to become apparent; and, to be fair, there was no real reason why it should, since it had its roots in events that were occurring almost the entire galaxy away. Even so, had it not been for the fortuitous return of Ciaphas Cain, the hero of the first siege, at just the right time, things would undoubtedly have gone very badly indeed for Perlia in the next few months.

As so often where the machinations of the Great Enemy are concerned, the first intimations of the onslaught to come were not the cannonades of the Traitor Legions, but the insidious rumour-mongering which so sapped public morale, and must surely have been the work of a cabal of traitors lurking within our midst.

Initial word of the Black Crusade spread across the galaxy as fast as the warp could carry it, first arriving on Perlia some time around 400.999.M41. At this point, those appointed to carry out the Emperor's wishes in His holy name could still have reined in the wild and uninformed speculation which did so much to erode the spirits of the populace, but to the surprise and growing dismay of His most loyal subjects, the Governor and his staff remained silent on the matter, along with the most senior adepts of the Administratum and the general staff of the PDF. The most charitable interpretation of this almost inexplicable dereliction of duty is that they were so concerned with the course of the Tyrannic War that they barely noticed what must have seemed a minor distraction at home, although subsequent events were to prove just how wrong they were if that was indeed the case. Given how things unfolded over the next few months, however, it's far more probable that some, at least, had their own, more sinister reasons for allowing the unrest to continue, if not actively encouraging it behind the scenes.

Fortunately for Perlia, Commissar Cain had been far from idle, already anticipating the crisis bearing down on us all, and had taken the first steps towards dealing with the situation on his own, more honourable terms. Indeed it was he who obtained the first reliable information about what was facing us, and lost no time in acting on it.

## SIX

THERE'S AN OLD Valhallan proverb, which I first heard back in my days with the 12th Field Artillery<sup>1</sup>, which quite accurately states that "things can always get worse". Indeed, I sometimes feel that my entire career has been little more than a practical demonstration of the adage, although it's seldom proven quite so comprehensively true as it was about to on this occasion. Almost a week had gone by since our first clandestine council of war, and although none of us was sufficiently indiscreet to mention it, or any of the matters we'd discussed, when we encountered one another around the schola, it was more than evident that my co-conspirators were becoming as edgy as I was. The rumours continued to fly, the general populace was getting steadily more restive, and beyond trying to ensure that a relative handful of callow youths were a little more prepared for the gathering storm, there still seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

That may seem a little strange, I suppose, given my ridiculously inflated reputation among the Perlans; I could certainly have marched into the Governor's palace and demanded an audience, or descended on the high command of the PDF like the wrath of the Emperor, and started trying to get the imbeciles there to take the matter more seriously, but caution held me back. If the unrest really was being orchestrated by a secretive cabal of Chaos sympathisers among the ruling oligarchy, then letting them know we suspected their existence would be unwise in the extreme. At the very least they'd try to hinder what little good we'd be able to do by exerting their influence against us, and at the worst they'd resort to more direct methods; I'd already survived enough assassination attempts for one lifetime, and had no wish to fend off any more.

'Ah, Sister,' Rorkins said, nodding courteously to Julien as she walked past the table we were occupying together in the faculty lounge, Brasker at her heels, droning on about the dismal decline in the standard of third level aspirants in his usual pedantic monotone. 'We were just wondering if you'd care to join us for another card game tomorrow evening.'

'Why not?' She nudged the bundle of data-slates under her arm to a more comfortable position, pausing to talk to us, while Brasker shifted from foot to foot like a servitor caught between conflicting instructions. After a moment he inclined his head politely and greeted us by name, before subsiding into uncharacteristic silence. 'Your quarters again?'

'I believe it's my turn to be the host,' I said. We generally took it in turns, and Jurgen's almost preternatural talent for scrounging meant that we'd be tolerably well fed during our deliberations, however futile they might turn out to be.

'Sounds fine to me,' Julien agreed. 'I'd offer to have you round myself, but tongues might wag.' She grinned at Brasker, who seemed completely unaware of the joke at his expense. 'Same time as last week?'

'If it suits you,' I said. After a few more pleasantries the two of them moved away, and left Rorkins and I to our mid-morning recaff. We continued to converse for a while in a desultory fashion, our thoughts on far more weighty matters than the ones we discussed for appearances' sake, until a small and odoriferous altercation by the door informed me that Jurgen was in no mood to abide by the general convention that only tutors and the housekeeping staff were admitted to these chambers.

'It's all right,' I soothed the small comet tail of agitated timewasters jabbering and gesticulating in his wake, 'he's with me.'

Something they were all no doubt aware of in any case, since he was never exactly inconspicuous, however hard you tried, and had been infesting the schola for as long as I had. Satisfied that if they couldn't ignore his presence, even with the window open, at least he was someone else's responsibility now, they scuttled back to their own concerns, while Jurgen handed me a data-slate, his expression sour.

'Message for you, sir. Marked personal.' He glared around the room, as though anyone else who stood between him and his duty was little better than an ork, and just about as expendable. 'And urgent.'

'I see. Thank you.' I took the slate and scanned the contents. After a moment I looked up, catching Rorkins's eye, and nodded almost imperceptibly. 'I think this might go some way towards clearing up that little difficulty you mentioned after the last tarot game.' Which was about as explicit as I wanted to get, surrounded as we were by listening ears.

Astute enough to have come to the same conclusion, Rorkins simply nodded in response. 'I'm glad to hear it,' he said. 'Not bad news, I hope.'

'Far from it,' I told him, feeling the first faint stirrings of optimism in several days. 'It's a dinner invitation.'

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES I felt able to prevail upon Visiter to provide me with the use of the Aquila, and a pilot to go with it. To my pleasant surprise the pilot he'd assigned turned out to be Sprie, who confirmed the favourable impression I'd formed of him on our eventful foray to the mining hab with a swift and thorough cockpit check, which left him sufficiently occupied for the commodore and I to hold a quick conversation on the landing pad without the risk of being overheard.

'He's a good lad,' Visiter confirmed. 'Best pilot in the whole bunch. More to the point, though, he's bright enough to keep his mouth shut about anythin' you ask him to.' Which might prove necessary at that. I hadn't been entirely honest with my fellow conspirators, you see, telling them only that I was dining with a rogue trader of my acquaintance. As you can imagine, that little titbit of news swept the campus from end to end (thanks in no small part to Brasker, who I'd made sure was close enough to overhear the end of my conversation with Rorkins); only Jurgen, Visiter, and now Sprie, knew that I was meeting him aboard his ship.

What no one else apart from Jurgen knew, and I was quite determined to keep it that way, was that Orelus was far more than a simple merchant; he was another of Amberley's agents, gathering information from across half the segmentum on her behalf. If anyone in the sector knew what was really going on, it would undoubtedly be him. Of course his arrival here was hardly likely to be a coincidence, which was also an encouraging sign; slapping down heretics wasn't exactly Amberley's speciality, but I was sure

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<sup>1</sup> Cain's first assignment as a fully-fledged commissar, some eighty years prior to the events he's describing here.

she had a few contacts among the Ordo Hereticus in whose laps she could drop the problem once I'd made her aware of it.<sup>1</sup> His checks complete, Sprie boosted us smoothly from the ground, lifting us into orbit with an ease even Jurgen would have had little to complain about had I decided to bring him along. I have to admit to a sense of pleasurable anticipation as the familiar gilded pinnacles of the *Lucre Foedus* rolled past the viewport, and the welcoming maw of the mighty vessel's main hangar bay loomed ahead. Amberley, I knew, was unlikely to be aboard, generally preferring to make use of her own yacht, the *Externus Exterminatus*, to flit around the galaxy, but even the remote possibility that she might be was enough to trigger some pleasant reveries, which occupied my mind to the exclusion of practically everything else. I was only recalled to business as we passed through the main hangar doors, vast slabs of orichalcum chased with gold filigree, and Sprie cut in the retros, settling us as gently as a piece of windblown thistledown in the middle of the landing area marked out by a score or so of deckhands waving hand-held luminators.

'My dear Cain. A pleasure to see you again,' Orelius greeted me as I stepped off the boarding ramp, his cadaverous appearance and aquiline nose as prominent as they had been the first time we'd met, although, like myself, he was sporting a touch of grey in the hair these days, and he'd acquired an impressive scar on his right cheek since I'd last set eyes on him. He was still just as enamoured of gaudy clothing as he'd ever been, however, a pair of crimson hose visible beneath a bright yellow tunic, over which an open mesh cape of spun gold had been casually thrown.

'Orelius. I could say the same,' I replied, trying not to feel too let down by Amberley's obvious absence. That aside, I was perfectly sincere in the compliment, as his company was always pleasurable, and his hospitality generous. Although it had been some considerable time since we'd seen each other, we fell easily and naturally into a companionable gait, strolling side by side across the echoing plain of metal, chatting amiably about our respective adventures in the interim, both being careful from long habit not to say too much before we reached the seclusion of his quarters.

As we passed a line of heavy cargo shuttles, which dwarfed the Aquila now parked at the end of the row, I raised an eyebrow in polite enquiry. All were armed, and several showed the scars of recent combat. 'Someone ask for their money back?' I asked. 'Not this time,' Orelius replied, any further remarks he might have been about to make drowned out by the rapping of boot-heels against the deck plates as an honour guard of his household troops came smartly to attention. Having been in action alongside them more than once, I knew better than to let the gaudy livery they wore fool me into underestimating them. Most were Imperial Guard veterans, and many possessed special skills of quite staggering lethality. I nodded to a couple of faces I recognised, who were too well disciplined to return the greeting, but who no doubt appreciated the courtesy, and spoke their names as I passed. As I tell the young pups I've been trying to lick into shape, it always helps to let the troopers think you care about them as individuals, not just a faceless mass: believe me, when the las-bolts start flying, that sense of connection is going to save your neck. We passed from the hangar bay into a carpeted corridor, where little knots of people scurried to and fro on the mysterious errands ship crew always seem to be engaged in, and marble busts of people I didn't recognise lined the tapestried walls on waist-high plinths.

'Your man not with you?' Orelius enquired, no doubt surprised at Jurgen's absence.

'Not this time,' I said. 'Under the circumstances, I thought it best to leave him in place.'

With the situation on Perlia still so unstable, I wanted him where he could keep his ear to the ground, and notify me at once if anything happened. Rorkins and the others were good enough allies, of course, but I couldn't bring myself to trust any of them to the extent I would Jurgen, or rely on them to cover my back in quite the same way. After almost a century of soldiering together, the rapport we shared was second to none. Besides which, I knew that Orelius occasionally made use of sanctioned psykers, and if any of them were likely to be around, the secret of my aide's abilities would prove almost impossible to keep.

'Probably just as well,' Orelius agreed, standing aside to usher me into his personal apartments. They were just as richly decorated as I recalled from previous visits, scarlet hangings ornamented with his family crest obscuring most of the metal bulkheads, which had been gilded and polished to a rich lustre, making the room feel curiously as though it had been flooded with honey. I'd always found the display of ostentation rather vulgar, to be honest, and was quietly relieved when the trader carried on through the formal reception rooms to the cosier environs of the parlour beyond, where he liked to relax when he wasn't trying to impress some chinless piece of backwater nobility. 'You might want to talk to the Navigator a bit later on.'

That, I rather doubted, as I've yet to meet a member of the Navis Nobilite I didn't have an almost irresistible urge to shoot on sight. I know they're a necessary evil, and the Imperium could barely function without them, but anyone who is more at home in the warp than the real world is a bit too close to the Great Enemy for my liking. Besides, they're arrogant, condescending snobs, and those are the ones who are making an effort to get along with you. Nevertheless I let the matter go, and merely nodded in reply. Orelius's inner sanctum was surprisingly cosy, with wood panelling on the walls, and a dark blue carpet, almost the same colour as the oceans of Perlia, which could be glimpsed through the wide viewport at one end of the room. Without that somewhat vertiginous reminder, it would have been easy to forget we were aboard a starship at all.

'You've heard the rumours, I take it?' I asked him as we sat, and my host lifted the lids from a battery of chafing dishes cluttering the table. That alone told me how sensitive he expected our conversation to become: even his most trusted servants were being excluded from the room while we talked.

'Which ones?' Orelius asked, helping himself to some cottleston pie, while I poured a large goblet of whichever wine he'd chosen to accompany our meal, and found it as excellent as I'd expected.

'The whole planet's buzzing with them,' I told him. 'About a new Black Crusade. Absurdly exaggerated, of course, but the local authorities are just sitting on their hands instead of issuing a denial, which just makes things worse. If somebody doesn't do something soon, there's going to be so much civil unrest the Governor will need to call in the sector fleet to restore order.'

'The sector fleet's got its hands full already,' Orelius told me, to my complete lack of surprise. 'The main thrust of the tyrand

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<sup>1</sup> I did, and I did. Unfortunately, by the time Inquisitor Kuryakin and his entourage arrived, most of the dust had already settled, but that was hardly his fault.



advance has diverted towards ork-held space for some reason<sup>1</sup>, but there are enough of them left on the fringes to keep most of our assets pinned down for the foreseeable future.' He shrugged, accepting a goblet of wine, which I handed to him as he spoke. 'But right now that looks like the least of your worries.'

'The rumours are true, then,' I said, a statement rather than a question, and Orelus nodded.

'I'm afraid so,' he confirmed, a trifle indistinctly around a mouthful of pie. 'The Traitor Legions attacked in force some months ago, trying to force passage through the Cadian Gate. Enough of them are getting through to make things very difficult in the Segmentum Obscurus.'

'But that's half the galaxy away,' I said, tucking in to the tempting array of viands on offer in front of me, although my appetite was considerably less keen than it had been a moment ago. 'I don't see how that can affect us here.' Actually I could, because it was precisely the topic I'd been discussing with Rorkins and the others, but I was still hoping desperately that Orelus was about to reassure me that the situation was being contained. 'Other than the resources being diverted to deal with it weakening our defences against the tyranids, of course.'

'Most of the fighting's been confined to the Obscurus so far,' Orelus confirmed, idly dismissing about a quarter of the galaxy as though it were a single cohesive lump, 'but the enemy raiding fleets are getting bolder. Several have been ranging farther afield.' He paused, picking at a palovine pastry, waiting for me to draw the obvious conclusion.

'Ranging in this direction,' I said, taking his meaning at once.

Orelus nodded. 'There's a whole flotilla heading this way, as fast as the warp can carry them. And that's pretty fast at the moment; according to our Navigator, there are currents flowing out of the Eye stronger than any he's ever seen.'

'Even so,' I said, feeling the old familiar chill of foreboding, 'there must be plenty of other easy targets between them and us.'

'You'd think so,' Orelus agreed. 'But they don't seem to be slowing down much.' He touched a large emerald on the thick bracelet around his wrist, and a hidden hololith hummed into life, projecting a flickering image of the galaxy into the empty space above the table. A line appeared, originating in the Eye of Terror, and heading unmistakably in our direction. Orelus waved a hand through the insubstantial projection, indicating several stellar systems close to the crimson smear. 'They've bypassed these systems entirely, even though they were obviously sitting ducks, with little or no effective defences.'

'That doesn't sound like any Chaos raiders I've ever seen,' I said. Normally the weaker the targets the better from their point of view, just like the cowardly scum they are. I pointed to a couple of contact icons along the line of the enemy's progress. 'But they fought here and here.'

'They did.' Orelus nodded, looking grave. 'Fought and won. Which simply shouldn't have happened.' He expanded the image, overlaying the contested systems with battlefield data I found myself reluctant to believe. 'They were outnumbered and outgunned on each occasion. At Madasa they were even faced with an entire convent of Adepta Sororitas, which fell within the hour.'

'That's impossible,' I said. Emperor knows, I had little enough time for the psalm-singing harpies in the normal course of events, but I'd seen them hold their ground tenaciously against almost impossible odds on several occasions. 'They'd have fought to the last woman.'

'They seem to have fought, all right.' Orelus's voice was grim. 'They fought for the enemy.' Then, as if realising how absurd the accusation sounded, a faintly defensive tone entered his voice. 'So far as I've been able to determine, anyway. There were sporadic reports of what sounded like a formation of battle sisters engaging one of the last PDF units to fall.'

'Misdirection and propaganda,' I said decisively.

Orelus nodded slowly. 'I hope you're right,' he said, sounding far from convinced. 'At any event, the Madasa system is now firmly under enemy control, and resisting all the attempts of the Astartes to reclaim it.' He returned the hololith to its original view, and extended the red line from its final position. As I'd expected, it intersected the Perlia system, before disappearing somewhere into the blank space chewed into the heart of the Imperium by the advance of the hive fleets.

'Maybe they want something from the tyranids,' I suggested, failing to convince even myself.

'Maybe they do,' Orelus said, throwing me that small crumb of comfort, before adding, 'but I doubt it.'

'So do I,' I agreed. 'In which case, it's pretty obvious what they're coming after.' Being an agent of the Ordo Xenos, I was sure Orelus was well aware of the clandestine Inquisition research facility in the Valley of Daemons, somewhere under the wisps of cloud trailing over the eastern continent of the gently rotating globe beyond the viewport.

'The Shadowlight,' he confirmed. 'Inquisitor Vail is of the opinion that Abaddon, or, more likely, one of his lackeys wanting to curry favour with him, has somehow learned of its existence. If that's the case, then its removal from Perlia before the enemy arrives becomes of paramount importance.' Which was a major understatement. I hadn't set eyes on the cursed thing for more than sixty-five years, but the memory of it was still enough to send a shiver down my spine.

I nodded. 'I take it that's why you're here,' I said.

'Quite.' Orelus echoed the gesture. 'We still don't know where it came from, or what it's really supposed to do, but we do know from Killian's researches that it can turn latent psykers into powerful active ones.'

'Not something I'm likely to forget,' I said, suppressing a shudder at the memory. The rogue inquisitor had intended using the thing in an insane attempt to mass produce psykers, hoping to beat the forces of Chaos at their own game, which still seemed like burning down the house to get rid of the termites to me. Luckily he'd ended up messily dead in the nick of time, allowing Amberley to snaffle the thing, and send it back to where it came from, which was now roughly a hundred kilometres below my feet and a bit to the left. If the forces of Chaos succeeded in getting hold of it, though, I had no doubt that they'd carry on where the late and unlamented Killian had left off, leaving us up to our ears in wyrds. That simply couldn't be allowed to happen.

'I take it you've got the blasted thing safely stowed away in your most secure hold by now?' I asked, and Orelus shook his head.

'I wish we did. But there's a problem.'

'There always is,' I said, trying not to sound bitter about it. I nibbled at one of the delicacies on my plate, but for all the pleasure I

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<sup>1</sup> The result of what has since become known as the Kryptmann gambit, although they would have had no way of knowing that at the time.

was able to take in it, it might as well have been a standard ration bar. 'What kind of a problem?'

'The magi staffing the facility have recovered several more artefacts in the last few decades,' Orelus told me soberly. 'They're now working on the assumption that the Shadowlight is part of a more complex mechanism, which they've spent a number of years attempting to assemble. Apparently, dismantling it now would be an affront to the Omnissiah, or some such foolery. I've been trying to impress upon them that letting Abaddon stroll off with it would be a damn sight worse, but you know what tech-priests are like. It's going to take a while to persuade them to let me pack the thing up and go.'

I nodded again, and sipped at the wine, letting its heady fragrance calm the alarm bells shrilling in my head. This was a complication I suppose I should have foreseen; the research facility in the Valley of Daemons was a joint operation between the Ordo Xenos and the Adeptus Mechanicus, and I'd gathered from Amberley that the partnership was sometimes a strained one. The tech-priests manning the plate eighty years ago had told Killian to go frot himself when he tried to pull rank on them, despite his Inquisitorial status<sup>1</sup>, unfortunately for them he wasn't the kind to take no for an answer, came back with an army, and grabbed the thing over their gently steaming corpses. 'Are you making any headway at all?' I asked.

'A little,' Orelus said. 'I've been able to persuade them to let me have copies of all their data, at least. But that's not going to be a whole lot of use if Abaddon's got the device itself.'

'I suppose not.' I shook my head sympathetically. 'Which reminds me.' I took a data-slate from my pocket, and laid it on the table.

'This is all the intelligence I've been able to collate since the last time I saw Amberley.'

'I'll see that she gets it,' Orelus promised, not quite managing to mask his unease at my casual use of Amberley's given name. It was hardly news to him, or anyone else among her associates, that we shared a personal relationship beyond the merely professional, but for some reason none of them liked to be reminded of it.

'Thank you,' I said. After some deliberation I'd decided to mention my feelings of disquiet about the mining station in the report, despite the near certainty that Amberley would simply dismiss them as the paranoid imaginings I'd almost succeeded in convincing myself they actually were. Necrons weren't exactly subtle, in my experience, and if they really were taking an interest in Perlia, I was morbidly certain that we'd have known about it by now. With an effort, I returned my attention to the main topic of conversation. 'How long do you think it will take to convince them?'

'Not too long, I hope,' Orelus said, smiling mirthlessly. It never occurred to either of us that he wouldn't get his own way in the end; rogue traders are notoriously tough negotiators. Neither of us was crass enough to verbalise the obvious thought that, if push came to shove, he probably had enough firepower aboard to repeat Killian's solution to the problem. That might get the Shadowlight to safety, but wouldn't do a lot to keep the Mechanicus on side once the immediate crisis was past. 'I imagine they'll see sense once the enemy gets close enough.'

'Any idea how long that'll take?' I asked, a small knot of tension winding itself around my gut as I spoke.

Orelus shrugged. 'About a week, I think, at least so far as the main fleet goes.' He pulled a data-slate from the pocket of his tunic, and handed it to me. 'This contains the best estimate I can give you of their strength and numbers, but I should warn you, it's highly conjectural.'

'It's better than nothing,' I replied grimly, stowing it in the pocket of my greatcoat. I'd show it to Rorkins and the others, and with any luck we'd be able to devise a strategy or two we could take to the PDF. Potentially compromised or not, they were the only thing standing between Perlia and annihilation now, and the sooner this information got to them, the better our chances of holding the planet.

There was also the distinctly tempting possibility that, since Orelus was here to retrieve the Shadowlight, I could come up with a plausible-sounding reason in the next day or two for leaving along with it. As far as I knew, Jurgen was still the only man capable of handling the thing without extensive precautions, and our previous experience was bound to prove valuable in keeping it safe.

'I hope it helps,' Orelus might have said more, but before he got the chance, the picture in the hololith flickered and changed. The slash across the galaxy, like a bloody claw mark, vanished, to be replaced by a view of the Perlia system. I quickly identified the runes marking our own position in orbit, and, with a vertiginous lurch to my stomach, a scatter of icons marking an enemy contact.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your supper, my lord,' the voice of the vessel's captain said, issuing from some artfully concealed vox unit, 'but we have warp portals forming throughout the system. The enemy seem to have been less tardy than we hoped.'

#### Editorial Note:

*Cain's account of what happened next is, quite understandably, somewhat incomplete. Accordingly, another brief extract from a more dispassionate and authoritative source seems appropriate at this juncture.*

#### From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127.M42.

*BY THE MEREST good fortune, the first incursion by the heretical fleet met much stiffer resistance than it expected. The trading vessel Lucre Foedus had put into Perlia shortly before their arrival, and was riding at anchor in the skies above Havendown as the scouting flotilla emerged from the warp. How they reacted to this unwelcome surprise, we can only conjecture, for the ships of our Rogue Traders are formidable indeed, designed as they are for venturing beyond the bounds of the Imperium, and the Emperor's unflinching protection.*

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<sup>1</sup> Which they were well within their rights to do; as a member of the Ordo Hereticus, he had no official jurisdiction over the operation anyway.

### **Sandy Mitchell «Cain's Last Stand»**

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*No doubt those in command of the raiding force felt that a handful of destroyers would be sufficient to sweep the remaining system defence boats from the skies, and had that been all that stood between them and the helpless world below, they might even have been right. But the Lucre Foedus was made of sterner stuff, destroying or crippling most of the incoming fleet, before sustaining so much damage herself that she was forced to withdraw.*

*A persistent local legend, that Ciaphas Cain himself was aboard the ship during the engagement, can safely be discounted, although he was certainly prominent in the ground action which followed, as the surviving forces of Chaos arrived on the surface of Perlia, to face whatever defences could be mobilised against them.*

## SEVEN

'I'M AFRAID WE'RE going to have to cut our meal a little short,' Orelius said, standing as he spoke, and leading the way out of the parlour. Not for the first time I found myself marvelling at his self-possession. I've no doubt most men in his position would have been gibbering with panic at this point, or running round in little circles waving their arms in the air. I probably would have been myself, if I hadn't had so much practice at appearing calm in a crisis, which pretty much goes with the job, of course.

'Rather a shame,' I responded instead, determined to seem no less phlegmatic than my host. 'Your chef seems as skilful as ever.' I tapped the comm-bead in my ear. 'Sprie, we're leaving early. The enemy has been rather inconsiderate in the timing of their arrival.'

'We'll be sure to convey your displeasure,' Orelius assured me, as we regained the corridor leading back towards the hangar, and, in the other direction, the bridge. 'Our gun crews can generally be relied on to get the message across.'

'I'll leave you to it, then,' I said, as we halted in preparation for going our separate ways. I've been involved in space battles before, of course, one particularly memorable example preceding my first arrival on Perlia, but I've always felt they're no place for a soldier. I'd far rather face the enemy with solid ground under my feet, and preferably a lot of solid cover to hide behind as well. 'That would be best,' Orelius agreed. 'If we can't get the Shadowlight to safety, you're the only hope we have of keeping it out of Abaddon's hands.'

'I'll do my best,' I said, hoping the stark terror twisting my bowels wasn't visible on my face, and taking automatic refuge in the kind of understated resolve he'd expect me to respond with. 'But I'm sure you'll see this rabble off without too much trouble.'

'I hope so,' he said, sounding far from certain. 'We've as much firepower as a cruiser, and most of the contacts seemed small for warships. But if we take too much damage we'll have to run for it.'

I nodded grimly, having come to the same conclusion myself. If Orelius couldn't recover the Shadowlight, it was vital that he get the information he'd picked up from the Valley of Daemons to Amberley; that way, if the worst came to the worst, at least the Inquisition would have some idea of what it was facing. Of course in the meantime I'd be stuck in the firing line, trying to stop an army of Chaos fanatics from getting their hands on the blasted thing, but that was a problem for later; right now I just wanted to get back to Perlia before the shooting started. 'Emperor be with you,' I said simply, actually meaning it for once, and turned towards the hangar bay with a wave of farewell, trying not to wonder if I'd ever see him again.

Sprie, I was pleased to discover, was just as on top of things as Visiter had led me to expect, waiting in the cockpit with the boarding ramp down and the Aquila's engines already fired up, ready to leave. Indeed, the ramp had begun to rise even before I'd reached the top of it, and the rugged little shuttle had risen from the deck before the atmosphere seals had finished hissing into place behind me.

'Good work, Sprie,' I encouraged him, as I entered the cockpit and dropped into the seat Visiter had occupied during the eventful training run to the asteroid station. If he was surprised to see me there, rather than riding in the back like passengers were supposed to, he was too polite or busy to mention the fact; but if we were about to be shot at, I wanted to be able to see what was trying to kill me. 'A textbook dust-off.'

'Except nobody's shooting at us,' Sprie replied, sounding a little disappointed about it. Well, there was plenty of time for that to change. He fed a little more power to the engines, and we began to glide smoothly towards the huge brazen portal ahead, through which a widening strip of eternal night, speckled with stars, was beginning to show. As we passed through it, and into open space, I noticed shadows on the hull plates, moving parallel to our own, and glanced up to see a squadron of the heavy shuttles I'd noticed before flitting around the enormous bulk of the trading vessel like flies around a grox, forming an unmistakable defensive screen. They'd be no match for real fighters, of course, but they'd be able to pick off incoming ordnance and boarding pods neat as you please, and I nodded thoughtfully, pleased to see that none of Orelius's people seemed to have lost their edge.

'Goodbye, and good luck,' Orelius's voice said in my comm-bead, echoing slightly, and the mighty vessel's main engines ignited, powering her up and out of the gravity well of Perlia with the casual ease of a man shrugging off a soggy rain cape.

'The Emperor protects,' I responded automatically, hoping that in this instance it would turn out to be true.

'They're engaging,' Sprie said, a moment or two later.

I glanced at the auspex screen, trying to make sense of the overall tactical picture. As always when fighting in space was concerned, I found myself momentarily disorientated, until my brain added the third dimension missing from battles on the surface of a planet. Three of the enemy vessels seemed to be closing on the *Lucre Foedus*, or perhaps it was the other way round, while two more bored in towards the planet below. At any event, Orelius must have fired first, as the leading Chaos vessel abruptly vanished from the screen.

'First blood to us, then,' I said. I was distracted from observing the rest of the fight by a rising babble of panicked voices on just about every frequency my earpiece was capable of picking up, as the shambolic remnants of the PDF finally noticed we were under attack.<sup>1</sup>

'Back to the schola, sir?' Sprie asked, and I shook my head.

'No,' I instructed him. 'Head for Havendown.' If someone didn't do something to get the rabble down there organised, the enemy would simply stroll in and take the place, which would make my life intensely difficult, not to say short, probably.

'Aye aye, sir.' The flame-haired cadet bent over his instrumentation for a moment, plotting the optimum flight path, then looked up, grinning. 'This should be interesting, anyway.'

'Interesting how?' I asked.

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<sup>1</sup> This isn't entirely fair, as Orelius's bridge crew transmitted a warning as soon as the traitor fleet emerged from the warp. They were undeniably slow to respond, however.



A cluster of tiny dots was closing on the pair of enemy vessels, which had slipped past Orelus, and Sprie nodded at the auspex screen with an expression of tolerant amusement. 'There go our fighters,' he said. 'Swallowing the bait, just like they were supposed to.'

'What bait?' I asked, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck begin to prickle. The hull of our shuttle shook, almost imperceptibly, as if sensing my unease, although the rational part of my mind recognised the sensation as simply the first kiss of the thickening atmosphere against the fuselage.

'The system defence boats are all on the outer picket lines,' Sprie reminded me, 'in case the 'nids come back. These ships emerged well within the defensive perimeter.' He shook his head. 'Way too close to our gravity well for safety: they must be mad.'

'Of course they are,' I replied testily, 'they're Chaos-worshipping loonies. So far as they're concerned, self-preservation's something that only happens to other people. What did you mean about the fighters?'

'They were the only defensive assets we had capable of engaging them,' Sprie said. 'So of course they went rushing off to do just that. Leaving nothing inside the atmosphere to intercept the landing craft.'

'What landing craft?' I asked, already beginning to make sense of the approaching vessels' trajectory.

Sprie shrugged. 'The ones they'll be launching any moment now, just as soon as the flyboys start their attack runs against the carriers. They'll break off when they realise they've been suckered, of course, but by that time the barges will be well into the atmosphere, and they'll never catch up before they hit the deck. Pretty slick, when you come to think about it.'

I nodded. The lad may still only have been a cadet, but he clearly had a sound grasp of three-dimensional tactics, and I wasn't too proud to defer to his greater expertise. Not with my neck on the line. 'What about the ships?' I asked. The thought of a pair of uncontested warships in orbit, able to take pot-shots at anything that took their fancy, was far from comforting.

'They're not going anywhere,' Sprie said, sounding pleased at the thought. 'This is a suicide run.' Glancing at the auspex again, I could see he was right. They should have been braking by now, preparing to enter orbit, but they simply continued to descend, following us into the outer reaches of the atmosphere. They were probably hoping to slingshot round the planet, but the fighters must have inflicted some damage to their engines. 'They'd be the obvious targets.'

I nodded again, having gathered as much from the chatter in my comm-bead. 'They have,' I confirmed, and Sprie grinned with vindictive satisfaction.

'Then they'll burn or they'll bounce,' he said. In the event, it seemed, they did both; hardly had a duster of smaller dots broken from the nearer contact than both ships hit the denser air above us, dipping within it to blaze across the sky like twin meteors, trailing a shower of lesser sparks as hull plates and external mounts tore loose and vaporised. 'Hang on, this is going to get rough.'

Forewarned, I gripped the crash webbing in the nick of time, an instant before the shockwave hit, crashing through the boiling air like a tsunami. Our gallant little shuttle bounced like a pea in a drum, and I found myself blessing Visiter for his foresight in assigning this particular pilot to me. Remaining methodical and calm, he worked the controls like a concert meister at a clavichord, gradually restoring our flight path to something reasonably straight and level. As he levelled off, I glanced out of the windshield ahead of us, and winced involuntarily; we were far closer to the ground than we had been, purple moorland and cultivated fields flicking past almost too fast to be seen as anything other than a parti-coloured blur, and the memory of my first arrival on this world rose up to haunt me.

'Good piloting,' I commended him, and Sprie shook his head grimly.

'We're not down yet, sir. Some of the flight systems took an awful battering.' He started paging down a cogitator screen, muttering the litany of fault diagnosis, and I glanced at the auspex again. Both Chaos vessels had re-emerged from the atmosphere, and were now spinning away on an uncontrolled trajectory, no doubt melted to slag by their fiery passage through the superheated air<sup>1</sup>.

More to distract myself from the implications of his ominous words than anything else, I tried to contact Orelus again, and much to my surprise I succeeded.

'How are you doing?' I asked, as the second of the enemy ships he was engaging vanished from the auspex screen.

'Holding our own, but that's about all,' Orelus said. 'We've lost the starboard batteries and the main fire control systems. We're down to sending the shuttles in, and they're barely making a dent in the last one.'

'Better get out while you can,' I advised reluctantly. According to the chatter in my comm-bead, the system defence boats were inbound, and should be able to deal with the sole surviving intruder. They'd take some time to do it though, and if the *Lucre Foedus* was destroyed in the interim, the intelligence she was carrying back to Amberley would be lost. On the other hand, if Orelus followed my suggestion, my last chance of getting off Perlia before the enemy arrived in force would go with him.

'I intend to.' The rogue trader's tone was grim. 'We're preparing to make the transit right now. Take care of the Shadowlight, whatever happens.'

'You can count on it,' I assured him insincerely, wondering how in the Emperor's name I was supposed to do that. Oh well, time enough to worry about it when the time came. A few moments later the blip marking the position of his ship wavered and vanished, leaving his sole surviving opponent in uncontested control of the battlefield. Shortly thereafter it too flickered out of existence, no doubt returning to wherever it had come from, to report that their first attempt to probe our defences hadn't been an entirely unqualified success.

'We're approaching Havendown,' Sprie informed me a moment or two later, the faint tremors I'd already noticed in the Aquila's fuselage beginning to feel a little more pronounced. 'Where do you want to put down?' Despite the increasingly severe problems he was obviously having keeping us in the air at all, his tone was still casual, and I found his obvious confidence reasonably reassuring.

'Head for the PDF headquarters,' I told him. 'We're going to need to organise a reception committee for those shuttles coming in

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, starships are a lot tougher than that; although both were now lifeless, and their outer hulls little more than featureless blobs of congealed metal, much of their internal structures remained intact. Both were boarded and inspected by Ordo Hereticus investigation teams after hostilities ceased, although I'm assured nothing of particular interest was found on either.

behind us, and we won't have a lot of time to spare.'

'Aye aye, sir,' he said again, and busied himself at the controls. Reluctantly, the Aquila gained a little height, wallowing as it did so, and I got my first glimpse of the planetary capital in the distance, the marble domes of the cathedral tinted blood red by the rays of the setting sun. I hoped that wouldn't turn out to be an omen.

'This is Commissar Cain,' I voxed, 'inbound aboard the schola progenium shuttle *Sanguis Iuvenis*, estimated time of arrival at Rytepat...'<sup>1</sup> I paused momentarily, and glanced at Sprie.

'About seven minutes,' he assured me.

'Four minutes,' I said crisply. 'Have a vehicle waiting on the pad, ready to take me to the operations room.' I glanced at the pilot again, noting his faintly puzzled expression. 'Never hurts to keep them on the hop. And this way there's a remote possibility they might actually be able to get something organised before we arrive.'

He nodded, and returned his attention to the controls. 'We could do with an enginseer to take a look at these systems,' he said speculatively.

'Good point.' I activated the comm-bead again. 'Get a cogboy out there too,' I added. 'We got a bit too close to those heretic barges for comfort.' I didn't elaborate, of course, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to give the impression that we'd been in combat already.

'Yes sir!' the vox op replied, sounding faintly breathless, and the link went dead.

'I can see the field,' Sprie said calmly, heading straight for it across the middle of the city, showing a fine disregard for civilian air traffic restrictions in the process. By the time we were on the final approach we were actually skimming between the spires of the taller buildings, no doubt leaving a trail of shattered windows in our wake, and I could quite clearly see the pale blobs of upturned faces turning to stare at us as we descended.<sup>2</sup> 'Crossing the threshold.'

I made sure my crash webbing was tight again, just to be on the safe side, anticipating the impact of our struggling Aquila against the apron at any moment, but to my relieved surprise it never came. Sprie kicked in the landing thrusters, bringing the nose up and round as he did so, and there ahead of us was a landing pad, its perimeter marked by winking lights which seemed all the brighter in the gathering gloom, a utility truck just drawing up next to it to disgorge a faintly panic-stricken honour guard.

We did hit the rockcrete with a noticeable thump, which made Sprie wince, but in all honesty I've been in fully controlled landings heavier than that, and I was up and out of my seat even before he'd finished powering down. 'Thank you,' I said sincerely.

'Not one of my better touchdowns,' he replied, a touch ruefully, 'but it's done the job.' He hit the control for the boarding ramp, and the smell of burned fuel and suppressed panic hissed in from outside, along with the growling of engines and a babble of voices.

'And it's time I got on with mine,' I said.

'You'd better make it quick, sir.' Sprie indicated the auspex screen, on which a small cluster of fast-moving dots had just appeared. 'We're about to have company.'

#### Editorial Note:

*This seems as good a time as any to append the following, which gives a slightly wider overview of the subsequent action than Cain is able to supply from his own position in the thick of things.*

#### **From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127.M42.**

*THOUGH THE FIRST incursion was driven off by the combined efforts of the Lucre Foedus and a concerted assault by the tactical fighter wing based at Rytepat aerodrome on the outskirts of Havendown, the fleeing heretics left a poisonous legacy behind them. Assault shuttles began to land in several places, where their occupants were able to wreak considerable havoc before the local PDF garrisons brought them to heel; none more so than in the planetary capital itself, which bore the brunt of the attack. It was in this action that Commissar Cain was first involved in the unfolding drama, having hastened to offer his services to the gallant defenders, who were, no doubt, suitably grateful.*

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<sup>1</sup> The main PDF airbase defending the capital, apparently named for some hotshot fighter pilot who downed an unfeasible number of ork planes during the First Siege. It was adjacent to the main PDF command centre and barracks, so would be the obvious place for Cain to set down.

<sup>2</sup> I suspect he's exaggerating here, as none of the buildings around the aerodrome are high enough to impede the passage of incoming aircraft, for obvious reasons. On the other, hand, Sprie was clearly having some difficulty in remaining airborne at all, so I suppose there might be a grain of truth in it.

## EIGHT

'WHO'S IN CHARGE here?' I asked, hurrying down the ramp with a carefully assumed air of purposeful energy. If I'd read the auspex right, we had only a handful of minutes before the enemy arrived, and I wanted to be comfortably ensconced in a nice cosy command bunker before that happened.

The sergeant in charge of the group of troops lined up beside the truck I'd noticed before saluted, a little nervously. 'That would be me, sir. Sergeant Benten.'

'Commissar Cain,' I said, as though he wouldn't already know. 'Good of you to come and meet me.' I nodded at the nine troopers accompanying him. 'Although I wasn't really expecting an escort.' That was the sort of thing a modest hero was supposed to say, of course, so I supposed I ought to say it. I never like to disappoint people, especially if there's a chance that they're going to live long enough to hold a grudge. I can't deny I was pleased to see them, though; if I was about to be caught out in the open when the enemy arrived, it wasn't going to hurt to have half a score of lasgun-toting troopers standing between me and a horde of Chaos-worshipping psychopaths. On the other hand, it would take precious moments to get them all embarked again. I returned the salute, trying to conceal my impatience, and took a step towards the cab of the truck. 'Perhaps we'd better get going. I'm afraid we don't have much time.'

'No, sir.' Benten clambered up after me, while the driver swung into his seat and gunned the engine, which, thank the Emperor, he'd had the sense to leave running. 'We've got incoming contacts. But I'm sure you already know that.'

'It was kind of hard to miss,' I told him, wishing I was as relaxed as I was trying to appear. At least the dolts in the command post appeared to realise what was going on, though, and were reacting to it with some semblance of efficiency. A squadron of Hydras roared past us as we got underway, deploying around the landing pads and the runways used by the heavier cargo lifters<sup>1</sup>, their quad barrels sweeping the sky for the first sign of the approaching enemy. Over by the perimeter, more troopers were running to man fixed weapon emplacements, and as we began to pick up speed towards the PDF compound adjacent to the aerodrome I could see similar efforts under way around the complex of stores and barrack blocks beyond the chain link fence separating the two installations.

'Get those luminators doused,' I voxed the command centre. There were no more friendly aircraft behind us, and the bright lights around the runway and the landing pads would only serve to guide the enemy to their target. After a moment they went dark, along with the external floodlights dotted around the PDF compound, and a few seconds later the lights in the buildings began to flicker out too. As the gathering night overtook the military sites, the distant lights of the city seemed to shine clearer and stronger by contrast, and I began to wonder if perhaps there was a flaw in my strategy; if the enemy pilots overlooked us entirely, and aimed for the most visible target instead, they'd be coming down smack in the middle of the planetary capital.

Oh well, too late to worry about that now, and I didn't suppose it would make much difference in any case; in my experience the forces of Chaos would far rather slaughter unarmed civilians than get into a stand-up fight with real soldiers. (Or, in this case, the dregs of the PDF, but they were all we had, so I'd just have to make the best of it.) Our driver reached out a hand to the headlight switch on the dashboard, then hesitated before flicking it.

'Wait,' Benten told him. 'Let your eyes adjust.' We'd have the advantage in the initial exchange of fire now, our night vision already working, whereas the enemy would still be trying to get orientated as they stumbled out of the landing craft.

Relieved that the sergeant understood, I nodded. 'It's not as if there's much out here to hit,' I told the driver encouragingly, just as another Hydra loomed up out of nowhere, forcing us to swerve. In a moment or two, though, our driver's confidence returned, and he accelerated through the thickening evening twilight. The gate in the chain link fence was growing closer, seeming to glow faintly in the yellowish radiance of the city in the distance, and I began to think we might just make it to safety before the attack began.

Of course I was wrong. Something big and dark howled overhead, shrieking like a daemon getting its first whiff of Jurgens, and ploughed into the rockcrete ahead of us, gouging a trench as it went, bouncing our hurtling truck on its springs. The driver swung the wheel frantically as the crippled shuttle slithered towards the fence in a shower of pulverised 'crete, sparks and flames spewing all around it as though it had just been vomited up by hell itself, demolishing the fragile barrier before finally coming to rest. We clipped the edge of the furrow it had left and began to roll, bouncing back upright again by a miracle, and roared through a pool of blazing promethium. A second or two later our burning tyres burst, unable to sustain the pressure of the expanding air inside them. 'Everyone out!' I commanded, as we slewed to a halt. We'd be sitting ducks in an immobilised vehicle. Time to leg it, and find some more solid cover.

I glanced around. The Hydras were engaging the incoming shuttles in earnest now, their guns hammering, lighting up the darkness with vivid orange flashes, and ripping most of the enemy drop-ships to shreds. Hardly surprising, too; as one exploded in midair a few hundred metres away, raining fire, debris, and body parts onto the apron below, I could see by the light of its destruction that most of the formation was made up of unarmoured civilian craft, apparently pressed into service, rather than the more robust military ships I might have expected. That meant that this little expedition had been dispatched ahead of the main fleet in a hurry, although there wasn't time to ponder the full implications of that at the moment.

'This way, sir!' Benten gestured towards a blockhouse standing off to one side, the kind of thing you see scattered around starports and aerodromes all the time without ever stopping to wonder what might be in them, and we began to run towards it. This particular example, once the door had been persuaded open by a couple of las-bolts and a swipe from my chainsword, proved to house firefighting equipment. (Rather ironically, I found myself thinking at the time.) We piled inside, grateful for the thick walls,

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the atmosphere craft in use by the PDF were simple aerofoil designs, which required runways to take off and land, and even some of the ones capable of lifting or landing vertically would still use them in order to maximise their payloads.

and I set the troopers to rolling the most solid pieces of kit we could find across the entrance to set up a tolerable firing position. 'This seems defensible enough,' Benten said, and I nodded grimly.

'It's going to have to be,' I said. Despite the best efforts of the Hydra gunners, several of the shuttles were down more or less in one piece, and dim figures were piling out of them, silhouetted nicely by the flames of their arrival for the most part, looking for a target to engage. They were finding them too; local troopers were hurrying to intercept them, trucks and light utility vehicles hurtling across the runways, pintel-mounted stubbers blazing away as they came, while slower-moving Chimera troop carriers followed in their wake, the multi-lasers in their turrets seeking out the largest concentrations of enemy soldiers.

They weren't getting it all their own way, though; some of the intruders were armed with rocket launchers, engaging the oncoming armour as smoothly and efficiently as Imperial Guardsmen, working in cohesive heavy weapons teams. I felt a prickling sensation in the palms of my hands, and flinched as one of the Chimeras exploded; instead of wasting time in hysterical jubilation, like the Chaotic rabbles I'd generally faced before, the enemy troopers simply prepared to fire again.

'Aim for the heavy weapon teams,' I told Benten, who relayed the instruction to the rest of the squad with undisguised enthusiasm. The enemy hadn't seen us yet, although it could only be a matter of time, and I didn't want to squander the advantage of surprise. If we could take out the rocketeers, and let the Chimeras advance unmolested, I'd be able to complete my interrupted journey surrounded by armour plate, which ought to be proof against whatever small arms the invaders carried.

Our first volley took them in the flank, dropping a couple of the gunners and a brace of loaders, and attracting the attention of their small-arms toting squad mates. To my surprise the answering fire which began to patter off the reassuringly solid rockcrete surrounding us was a hail of las-bolts, rather than the odd mixture of rounds from obsolete firearms and whatever else they'd been able to scavenge which I'd expected, and my palms began to itch even more strongly than before. Something about this situation definitely wasn't right.

'We're getting reports from the tribunals in Havendown,' a voice in my comm-bead told me, tense with stress. 'Three enemy shuttles are down inside the city. The enemy's deploying, and firing on the civilian population. The tribunals are mobilising riot squads, but they're unable to contain them.'

'Get a platoon or two in there to back them up,' I instructed, wishing I'd made it to the bunker, where I'd have a nice big hololith to help me keep track of which units were where, not to mention a distinct lack of heretics trying to part my hair with a las-bolt. Then inspiration struck, and I fished my data-slate out of my greatcoat pocket. 'Patch a tactical update to my slate.'

Fortunately their tech-priests were quick off the mark with the correct incantations, and my commissarial override codes got me into the core of the PDF datanet without any problems, so I was able to run a quick eye over the troop dispositions while Benten and his men<sup>1</sup> played pot the heretic with every sign of enjoyment. The walls of our makeshift redoubt were strong, and so far we hadn't sustained any casualties, to my carefully concealed surprise.

'Third company, first, fourth and sixth platoons,' I said. 'They're mounted up and unengaged.' At least according to the data I had they were, sitting in their Chimeras ready to lead a death or glory charge down the main road to Havendown the minute a non-existent heretic horde showed their faces.

'But that would leave the southern perimeter virtually undefended,' my unseen interlocutor objected.

'There's nothing to defend it from, until the enemy in the city gets tired of murdering civilians,' I snapped, hoping I was right.

'Take the fight to them, and put a stop to it.' Right then, of course, I was more interested in saving my own neck, but I knew that if we wanted to have even a prayer of holding on to this world in the long term we needed to convince the proles that we could defend them. Otherwise morale would go through the floor, and we wouldn't have a hope in hell of maintaining order.

'Yes, sir.' Whoever it was in command clearly didn't like my call, but that wasn't my concern; mindful that I'd been left with a distinctly unwelcome errand for the Inquisition, I was keeping the bigger picture in mind, as well as the more pressing matter of staying alive long enough to say "I told you so".

'They're advancing,' Benten told me, abruptly shattering the illusion that I'd found a reasonably safe bolt hole from which to observe things until the noise stopped. 'By fire and movement.'

'Are you sure?' I asked. In my experience the forces of Chaos advanced in a single, uncoordinated rush, screaming blasphemous gibberish, and obligingly dying in droves without displaying anything remotely like sensible tactics.

Benten nodded, clearly piqued by what must have sounded like a lack of confidence in his abilities, and gestured towards the doorway. 'See for yourself,' he said.

'I've no doubt you're right,' I said, repairing the damage as best I could, 'but that's extremely unusual.' I peered out at the twilight battlefield, unable for a moment to distinguish friend from foe in the deepening gloom, which in itself was disturbing. The Chimeras and the fast-moving light vehicles were rolling up the enemy flanks, now we'd put a dent in their anti-armour capability, and the main bulk of the Chaotic force was pulling back in our direction. Not good. I ducked back reflexively as a volley of las-rounds gouged little craters from the rockcrete walls defending us, and sent a couple of shots back from my laspistol in reply, with no noticeable effect. As the sergeant had said, while half the group facing us fired, forcing us to keep our heads down, the rest of the shadowy figures hurried forward, racing for the refuge of the next piece of cover or patch of darkness.

'Is it?' Benten asked, and I nodded, beginning to feel seriously concerned. It would only be a matter of time before one of those figures got close enough to lob a grenade in here, at which point all bets would be off.

'It is. I've seldom seen Chaotic troops so disciplined,' I said, paging through the datafiles in search of the call-sign I wanted. I could always have gone through the command centre, of course, but as you've no doubt deduced, I didn't have a lot of confidence in them, and where saving my skin is concerned I prefer not to delegate. Finding the one I wanted, I cut into the comnet with my commissarial clearance. '*Vacca Ferreus*, this is Commissar Cain, requesting pickup for my escort detail.' As always, I was careful to phrase things so that my primary concern would seem to be the welfare of the troopers I was with, rather than my own miserable skin. 'We're pinned down, and about to be overrun.'

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<sup>1</sup> No doubt the one he gave Orelus had been taken aboard purely for that purpose.



'*Vacca Ferreus* responding,' a faintly overawed voice replied, and the nearest Chimera accelerated in our direction, spitting incandescent death from the multi-laser in its main turret, while the forward-mounted heavy bolter chewed away at the heretics advancing on our position. A volley of small-arms fire greeted it, peppering its armour plate with scorch marks, and surrounding it with a nimbus of sparks from the flecks of paint which vaporised with every hit, but nothing vital seemed to be damaged, and within moments it was slewing to a halt next to where we were holed up. The driver rotated the heavy vehicle on its tracks, keeping the hull-mounted anti-personnel weapon and the heaviest armour pointing at the enemy troopers, and the rear boarding ramp clanged to the rockcrete ahead of us.

'This way!' The vehicle's commander was waiting inside, a laspistol in his hand, and gestured us forward. 'We'll cover you!' 'Much obliged,' I told him, hanging back a little to make sure none of the troopers got shot by an unsuspected flanking unit on the short but nerve-racking journey across the open space in between. No one did, so I followed a moment later, secure in the knowledge that, by being the last to leave our refuge, I'd just consolidated my undeserved reputation for being concerned for the welfare of the common troopers yet again.

I was halfway across the open space when I caught sight of a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye, and the coin finally dropped. Of course the enemy had outflanked us, just as I'd feared: they just weren't stupid enough to betray their position by potting a few expendable troopers when there was a Hero of the Imperium there to gun down instead. I raised my pistol, then hesitated; the figures in the gloom seemed to be wearing standard Munitorum issue flak armour after all.

'Commissar! Wait!' The leader of the soldiers running towards me called out as he came. 'I've got a message from the command bunker!'

I shot him, all doubts abruptly dispelled, and he fell, but his fellow troopers came on, bringing up their las-guns to fire. Fortunately, in order to perpetrate their little masquerade, they'd held the barrels down, and had to bring them back on aim before they could shoot at me; that gave me a split second to act, and I took it, diving for the open hatch of the Chimera, from which warm, yellow light was spilling. A volley of las-bolts followed me, but fortunately it's almost impossible to shoot accurately and run at the same time, so I hit the deck and rolled to my feet with little more to show for the experience than a thick smear of grime on my greatcoat, and a few scorched holes around the hem where the heretic scum had got almost, but not quite, lucky enough. 'Commissar! How did you know?' the Chimera commander, a Sergeant Blease according to the name stencilled on his torso armour, asked, looking stunned.

'If the bunker had a message, they would have voxed it,' I replied, as the heavy armour plate rose to shield us from the blizzard of shots. Just in the nick of time, too; even on the run you can put enough las-bolts into the air to make things extremely unhealthy, if you switch to full auto, which most of the heretic squad seemed to have done. The turret above us rotated rapidly, with a whine of servos, the multi-laser barked once, and it all went quiet outside again. I turned to Benten. 'Back outside,' I said. 'Let's mop them up before they can regroup.'

'Very good, sir,' he said, clearly wishing I'd make my mind up and stick to it. More than anything at that point I'd have liked to have followed my original plan, making a run for the bunker, and leaving the mopping up to the PDF, but something about the heretic squad continued to worry me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to rest unless I made sure of it. More to the point, I knew Amberley would be very unhappy if I didn't either confirm or discount the unsettling thought I'd just had.

'Kindle the spotlights,' I told Blease. By this time there would be little advantage to fighting in the dark, and I wanted to be absolutely sure of what I suspected I'd find. If he was surprised he didn't show it, simply nodding in confirmation, and hitting the external luminator controls as he dropped the ramp again.

Outside was just as confused as most of the firefights I'd ever been in, with people running, falling, screaming, and shooting at each other, the darkness pierced with flickering orange beacons where vehicles and pieces of debris continued to burn. The clear white light of our Chimera's spotlight seemed dazzling by contrast, and I squinted for a moment until my eyes adjusted, acutely aware that the moment I stepped into the cone of radiance I'd become a fire magnet for every heretic still standing. I turned to Benten.

'Fire for suppression,' I ordered, and the squad complied with a will, unleashing a barrage of fully automatic las-bolts at the nearest concentration of Chaos troopers. The *Vacca Ferreus*'s gunner responded too, and they scattered like a flock of widgeon surprised by a hunting party.

Good enough: I wasn't going to get a better chance. I hurried forward, fastidiously skirting the rank-smelling scorch marks and lumps of carbonised gristle that marked the last resting place of the group which had tried to ambush me, and reached their erstwhile leader. To my surprise he was still twitching, my las-bolt having been partially stopped by his armour, and he tried to raise his gun the moment he saw me.

'Death to the lackeys of the corpse god!' he gasped, the light of madness in his eyes, and I kicked the lasgun away before his finger could tighten on the trigger.

'Good evening to you too,' I responded, aiming my laspistol at his head. He wasn't going to last much longer in any case, but I'd waste the bolt in a heartbeat if he tried anything like that again.

A quick glance at his uniform told me all I needed to know, and a cold chill of pure horror worked its way down my spine. My initial impression had been correct: it was standard Munitorum issue. The Imperial aquila embossed on the helmet and chest plate had been crudely defaced, probably by some sort of power tool, and the eight-pointed symbol of Chaos daubed on in their stead. His lasgun had received the same treatment, and I made a mental note to order all recovered equipment destroyed: if the spirits of the weapons had been corrupted along with the souls of their owners, they could never be safely returned to Imperial service.

'What happened at Madasa?' I asked, recognising the unit patch of one of their PDF regiments on the shoulder of his fatigues.<sup>1</sup> The man struggled for breath for a moment, then, to my astonishment, he smiled. 'Varan,' he said.

'Varan?' I asked, baffled, as, at the time, the name meant nothing to me. 'Who's Varan?'

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<sup>1</sup> Largely, I suspect, because they all included the word "Madasa" in large red letters; he would hardly have had time to look it up.

'He showed us the truth. He set us free.' Wonderful, a whole airfield full of dying heretics I could have chosen to interrogate, and I get the one who's already delirious. 'He'll do the same for you when he arrives.'

'Not if I can help it,' I said, a strange sense of foreboding settling across me as I spoke. 'The word of the Emperor's always been good enough for me.'

'Then you're surely damned, along with your rotting master.' Emperor help me, I swear, he actually sounded sorry for me.

Completely wrong-footed, I barely noticed the stealthy movement of his hand until it was almost too late. 'Death to the servants of...'

'You've already done that bit,' I snapped, pulling the trigger. His head exploded into crimson mist, and he slumped back onto the rockcrete, the grenade he'd been trying to prime inside his equipment pouch rolling out of his slackening hand to come to rest against the toe of my boot.

'Sir! Are you all right?' Benten asked, and I became abruptly aware that the firing around us had all but died away. I listened to the voices in my comm-bead for a moment, which confirmed that the battle had been won, and shook my head.

'No,' I told the sergeant. 'I'm worried. And I'm not at all happy about it.' I turned, and led the way back towards the Chimera I'd commandeered, the palms of my hands itching furiously. Things were very wrong indeed, and if my lifetime of experience was anything to go by, they were about to get a whole lot worse.

## NINE

FORTUNATELY, BY THE time I made it to the command bunker it really was all over bar the shouting, at least in the immediate vicinity of Rytepat: so instead of getting caught up in any more firefights I got to sit and drink recaff and watch the reports coming in from around the globe, which I found infinitely preferable, despite the grim tidings they contained. The enemy had struck hard in over a dozen places, although by the grace of the Emperor it seemed that the vast majority of them had been involved in the attack on the PDF headquarters instead of the apparently random scattering of civilian targets. Outnumbered, if not exactly overmatched, the ones who'd assaulted the aerodrome and the barracks attached to it had ended up annihilated almost to a man: something I seemed to be receiving a great deal of undeserved credit for, simply because I'd happened to be on the spot at the time.<sup>1</sup>

It had been a very different story in Havendown, though, not to mention the other towns and cities they'd hit. There the civilians had borne the brunt of the invasion effectively unprotected for far too long, until the PDF had finally got their collective fingers out and mounted a vigorous counter-attack, which, for the most part, seemed to have inflicted as much collateral damage as the wanton destruction of the enemy.

'A very grave business,' the planetary Governor said, shaking his head sadly, so we all knew how seriously he was taking it. 'Have you any idea what they were hoping to achieve?'

'Simply to sow as much panic as they could before the main invasion fleet arrives,' Rorkins told him. We were meeting the Governor, Lio Trevellyan, in the gardens of his residence, a wide vista of carefully landscaped gardens near the centre of the city; only the spires of hab blocks and manufactoria protruding over the perimeter wall broke the illusion of a rural retreat. From our seats in a fragrant hegantha bower, which acted as a windbreak, and effectively shielded us from both the prying eyes and overactive ears which would have been all too ubiquitous inside the palace, I could see detachments of the household guard patrolling the top of the wall. Thin spires of smoke still rose in the distance, marking the sites of last night's battles, which the troopers I'd dispatched seemed to have won without too much difficulty, thank the Throne.

'That seems to be the case,' I agreed, trying to ignore the scent of the hegantha blossoms surrounding us. They were Amberley's favourite flower, and, pleasant as it always was to be reminded of her, it was hardly helping my concentration. Not only that, of course, by extension they were a reminder of the seemingly impossible commission Orelus had dumped in my lap on her behalf before scuttling out of the system with his tail between his legs, which was something of a distraction to say the least. 'The main objective was clearly a decapitation strike against the high command of the PDF, but there were no military targets at any of the other sites they hit.' Although from what I'd seen, the senior commanders left behind after the Guard tithes had scooped up anyone halfway competent could hardly have performed any worse if they'd been literally deprived of their heads. 'We'll analyse all the intelligence we can gather, of course; that may point to some underlying motive we've so far overlooked.'

Most of the heads around the makeshift conference table, which had been hastily erected on a couple of trestles by no doubt disgruntled gardeners, nodded in agreement. Apart from Rorkins, myself, and Governor Trevellyan, Visiter and Julien were also present, together with a handful of senior PDF staffers whose names I hadn't caught, or particularly cared to. Their apparent willingness to leave the citizens of Havendown to fend for themselves rather than depart from some standard battle plan still incensed me: not that I cared particularly about a bunch of civilians I'd never even met, of course, but protecting them was what the PDF was supposed to be for, and if they were derelict in this duty, there was no telling what else they'd let slide. Not only that, it betrayed a rigidity of thinking that was potentially disastrous on the battlefield, where circumstances are in a constant state of flux, and failing to adapt to them means people dying, possibly even me.

The Governor's summons had come shortly after dawn, catching up with me just as I was on the verge of returning to the schola so, seizing the moment, I'd made a few excuses and sent Sprie back in the Aquila<sup>2</sup> to collect my fellow conspirators. If we were really going to seize control of the war effort, and cut out the dead wood at the heart of the defenders, we'd never have a better opportunity than this.

'We're also considering the possibility that you might have been the target of the group which came down in the capital,' Julien said. She'd donned her power armour for the occasion, the first time I'd ever seen her wear it, the bright red sheen of its ceramite carapace contrasting with the black surcoat embroidered with the sigil of her order.<sup>3</sup> It certainly seemed to have impressed Trevellyan, anyway; he'd barely glanced at the rest of us since we'd arrived, with the obvious exception of myself, of course. 'You're the Emperor's anointed guardian of this world, so your assassination would certainly have impeded our efforts to defend it.'

'I'd like to think so, Sister, but I rather doubt that,' Trevellyan said. 'If I'd died, my niece would simply have taken over precisely where I left off.' He smiled, in a self-deprecating manner I was unused to seeing on the faces of the aristocracy, and, to my surprise, I found myself quite liking him. 'In fact, she'd probably do a damn sight better job. But by the Emperor's grace, it seems, I'm going to keep the throne warm for her for a while longer.' My first impression had been that he was startlingly young to be in such an exalted position, but, as we continued to converse, I began to realise he was a great deal older than he seemed. No doubt he'd undergone a juvenat treatment or two, but it wasn't so much that which made him appear younger than his years as his

<sup>1</sup> Typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to him that his presence there had greatly increased the morale of the defenders, thus making a substantial contribution to the victory.

<sup>2</sup> Which implies that he got the tech-priest he'd requested after all, even though he doesn't bother to mention it.

<sup>3</sup> The Bloody Rose, from the description of her vestments, although Cain is never specific about this.

evident relish for life. A relish tempered with a bit of hard-won wisdom, too, if I was any judge.

'Nevertheless, I trust you won't object too strongly if we endeavour to keep your niece waitin' for as long as we can,' Visiter put in. We'd all agreed to present the most united front possible, backing each other up wherever the conversation led, in order to underline our experience of such matters, and the fact that we could function smoothly as a team. Of course even if we succeeded in freezing out the PDF commanders everything we did would still be under the Governor's nominal jurisdiction, but he seemed sensible enough to just let us get on with the business of saving his world with minimal interference.

'I won't object at all,' Trevellyan assured him, with the hint of a smile.

'Good.' I adopted my most commissarial expression, the one that had been known to make generals break wind with apprehension, and leaned across the table to emphasise how serious I was being. 'Then we need to get down to business. Last night's raid was a wake-up call, and if we're going to still have a planet to stand on by the end of the month, we'd better listen to it.'

'All our units are on high alert,' the PDF representative with the greatest amount of gold braid and the highest number of chins assured me blandly. 'Ready to respond to any repeat of the incursion.'

'I'm sure the citizens of Havendown you were ready to leave flapping in the breeze last night for your administrative convenience will be relieved to hear it,' I said sarcastically. 'I, on the other hand, am far from confident that that will be enough.' I half expected him to argue, but either my absurdly inflated reputation on this planet, or a proper appreciation of what a commissar was, and was able to do if sufficiently provoked, made him hold his tongue. I turned to the Governor. 'I would like to suggest that you appoint Colonel Rorkins commander in chief of the defence forces for the duration of the emergency. He's had extensive experience of fighting the Great Enemy, and if anyone on Perlia is capable of holding the line against them, it's him.'

'And you, commissar,' Trevellyan said, eyeing me narrowly. 'I would have thought you were the natural choice for the job.'

'A commissar's role is purely an advisory one,' I explained carefully, conscious that to most civilians we're just Imperial Guard officers in fancy hats. 'We're outside the chain of command.' Of course most Guard officers listen quite carefully to whatever advice a commissar cares to offer despite that, as we're allowed to shoot them if they don't, but that was beside the point.

'Quite so,' Visiter agreed. 'And even if Cain was willin' to take direct command, he'd still be far better employed elsewhere, boostin' morale and sniffin' out any traitors or slackers already in our midst.' His gaze rested momentarily on the array of dress uniforms across the table, just long enough to make his point, and make a few of the less cautious bridle indignantly.

'I most certainly would,' I agreed. Apart from anything else, there was still the Shadowlight to consider; my chances of sneaking off to try and fulfil my commission from the Inquisition without anyone noticing would be all but impossible if I was stuck somewhere surrounded by frakwits expecting me to save the damn planet for them. Not to mention the fact that if, as my itching palms insisted, it was all going to go horribly wrong, I had no objection to Rorkins taking the blame. After all, if things were to turn out right after all, despite my misgivings, I was sure there'd be plenty of credit to go around.

'Very well then, colonel,' Trevellyan inclined his head. 'Consider yourself our Warmaster for the duration of the emergency.' His gaze swept the PDF end of the table. 'I trust no one has any objections?'

'No, of course not,' the chin collector said, without even a token attempt to hide his resentment. He was hardly going to argue with the Governor about it, though, not with a commissar sitting there too with a hand resting casually on the holster of his laspistol, so he turned to Rorkins and nodded. 'By your command, Warmaster.'

'Sir will do,' Rorkins said mildly. 'I've never liked that particular title. It seems to foster unhealthy ambitions.'

The implicit reference to the most notorious follower of the Ruinous Powers wasn't lost on anyone, and Trevellyan looked at him thoughtfully. 'We can hardly stick with colonel,' he pointed out. 'That would leave most of your immediate subordinates outranking you, at least on paper.'

Rorkins shrugged, with a hint of impatience. 'Commander in chief, then. We've got rather more pressing things to discuss than what goes on the office door plate.'

'Quite so,' another of the PDF drones put in, managing to sound both condescending and unctuous at the same time. 'We need to devise an effective strategy against the invaders as quickly as possible.'

'First sensible thing I've heard out of any of you,' Rorkins said. He swept his gaze along them. 'Strategy meeting in my office then. I expect you'll have found a suitable one for me by the time I get to the bunker. Ninety minutes ought to be long enough for you to get a complete inventory of our assets together, so I'll see you then.' He waited a fraction of a second. 'Hop to it. That wasn't a request.'

'Yes, sir.' Visibly swallowing their resentment at being so summarily dismissed, the dead wood left the table, and we were able to begin planning the defence of Perlia in earnest.

'So.' Trevellyan waited until they were all out of earshot. 'I'll be interested to hear what you've got in mind.'

'At the moment,' I confessed, 'we're just winging it. But in all honesty, the situation doesn't look too good.'

'No, it doesn't.' Trevellyan nodded thoughtfully, and favoured us with a wintry smile. 'But it's looking a good deal more hopeful now than it did last night.'

'Which doesn't alter the fact that the PDF has been bled white by the Guard tithes,' Julien put in. 'There are fewer than a quarter of the number of men under arms that there ought to be for a population of this size, the individual troopers lack combat experience, and the higher command levels are barely capable of tying their own shoelaces.' She glanced in my direction. 'Do you see any potential morale problems?'

'Hardly anything but,' I agreed. 'Although they'll be fighting for their homes and families; that means they'll be motivated, at least.' I shrugged. 'I started out with far less promising material than that the last time I was here.'

'And ended up throwing the orks off the planet,' Trevellyan agreed. 'Let's hope you have as much luck with this heretic fleet.'

'It won't be easy,' Visiter said, looking thoughtful, 'but we might be able to do somethin' with the SDF boats to even the odds a bit.' He pulled out a data-slate, and began sketching complicated diagrams with the tip of a luxpen. 'Your rogue trader friend give you any idea of the number of ships we'll be facin'?''

'Not as such,' I admitted. 'But it's high. High enough to have rolled up two heavily-defended systems along the way. Even if they



took some serious losses at Madasa, the handful of boats you've got left won't hold them up for long.'

'Not in a battle line, no,' Visiter agreed, seeming unperturbed at the prospect. 'But there's another way.'

He held up his scribblings, which I'm bound to admit meant nothing to me. 'If we station them out in the halo<sup>1</sup>, or one of the asteroid fields, powered down, they'll be almost impossible to detect. Once the enemy start movin' in towards the planet from the outer system we can mount hit and run raids against their flanks, pickin' off their transport vessels; Emperor willin', that should keep a lot of their troops from makin' it down to the surface.'

'That sounds suicidal to me,' Rorkins said. 'The transporters will be protected by warships. I can't ask you to sacrifice your crews on a desperate gamble like that.' No one challenged the implicit assumption that the commodore was now in charge of all our spaceborne assets, and I didn't expect them to.

Visiter shook his head, looking faintly amused. 'No one's gettin' sacrificed on my watch,' he assured us. 'Leave the fleet tactics to me.'

'Fine, then!' Rorkins smiled bleakly. 'Now all we have to worry about is getting the PDF to function like they're supposed to.' He glanced in my direction. 'Are any of your cadets up to the job?'

'They'll have to be,' I told him. 'They stood up well enough to the tyranids, which augers well. But we'll need a lot more than ten to keep the rabble you've inherited up to the mark.' Maybe Nelys would get to shoot someone for cowardice after all, I thought grimly.

'I was hoping you'd attach them to the headquarters staff,' Rorkins said, to my quiet relief. The thought of scattering them around the planet, to take care of themselves as best they could, had been mildly disturbing to say the least.

'That shouldn't be a problem,' I agreed. 'I was planning to get them started on the intelligence analysis.' That was part of their training, and should keep them out of trouble while I sneaked off to the Valley of Daemons to try and secure the Shadowlight. Of course, what I did with it then, assuming I could persuade the Mechanicus to part with the wretched thing where Orelus had already failed, Emperor alone knew; but I'd worry about that when the time came.

'Good,' Rorkins nodded again, and turned to Julien. 'I trust I can rely on you to help co-ordinate some battlefield strategies?'

'You can,' the Celestian assured him. 'And once we get back to the schola, I'll get some of my senior novitiates to form a mobile reserve. They're raw, but they can still heft a bolter.'

'Good,' Rorkins said, considering it. The Sororitas novices had half a dozen suits of antiquated power armour between them, rather more battered and utilitarian than Julien's set, which they used for practice drills; poor as they undoubtedly were as such things went, they would still be quite formidable against lasguns and flesh. 'Any other suggestions?'

'We could try calling for help,' the Governor suggested dryly. In all honesty, I'd forgotten he was there for a moment, engrossed as we had been in trying to find a way of defending the planet. We all looked at him blankly. 'We do have astropaths on Perlia, you know.'

Remembering the source of Brasker's rumour mongering, I nodded slowly. 'Of course we do. But it may not be much of a help.' That was a considerable understatement. Astropathic communication was somewhat hit or miss at the best of times, and with the warp currents stirred up by the malevolent forces haemorrhaging from the Eye of Terror, and the vast shadow cast across them by the tyranid hive mind, we'd have about as much chance of getting through to the sector fleet as if we'd scribbled a note to them and flung it out of the airlock of an Aquila. Nevertheless, as I'd found on many previous occasions, a slim chance is infinitely better than no chance at all, so I shrugged, and spread my hands. 'Worth a try, though. Someone out there might be listening.' Of course, as it turned out, something was listening, very carefully, for some very specific signals, but fortunately for my peace of mind I remained in blissful ignorance of the fact.

'I'll give the instructions,' Trevellyan said, leaning back in his chair. 'Is there anything else I should know?'

'Not at this stage, your excellency,' Rorkins said tactfully. We still couldn't rule out a hidden cabal of Chaotic sympathisers gnawing away at the roots of government, don't forget, which was why we'd decided to take over the defence of Perlia ourselves: unlikely as it seemed that the Governor was a member of such a conspiracy, there was no telling who he might talk to. 'I'll send you a full report at the earliest opportunity.'

'Of course you will,' Trevellyan said, with a faint smile, no doubt divining that such an opportunity was unlikely to arise in the foreseeable future. 'Then if you'll excuse me Sister, gentlemen, I've a rather pressing appointment at the sanitorium in Havendown. Rather too many of our citizens found the war arriving a little early last night, and it wouldn't do to neglect my pastoral duties to the survivors.'

'With a pictcaster crew in tow, no doubt,' Rorkins said sourly, once he was sure the Governor was out of earshot.

'I hope so,' I said. 'We need something to boost morale among the civilians, and if he's willing to take on the job, good luck to him.'

'Fine,' Rorkins nodded, his mind already returning to business. 'Then let's concentrate on the military situation.' He glanced around again, making sure that we weren't being overheard. 'I'll be making a big show of moving into the main command bunker at Rytepat, but I'll be spending as little time there as possible. For all intents, and purposes, I want to run things from the schola progenium; if there really is a heretic cell in the high command, I want it insulated from any sensitive tactical information.'

'That makes sense,' I agreed, while Visiter and Julien nodded quietly. 'And since the enemy clearly knows where the main defence headquarters is in any case, let's not make it easy for them by being in the middle of a target zone when they arrive.' One quick orbital bombardment would be all that it took to succeed where last night's commando raid had failed. Reflecting that if it hadn't been for the fortuitous circumstance of Orelus's presence in the skies over Perlia, and the damage he'd been able to inflict on the incoming fleet, we'd probably have a flotilla of gunboats over our heads raining death and destruction from the skies right at this moment, I shuddered inwardly.

'The ground's more defensible there too,' Julien added. That was a worrying thought, in its way; she was right, but the

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<sup>1</sup> The cloud of cometary debris marking the nominal boundary of a stellar system.

mountainous terrain which would work so well to our advantage in staving off an assault would also leave us with nowhere to go if the enemy did succeed in breaking through.

I pointed this out. 'Maybe we should be factoring in some contingency plans for an evacuation too,' I added. 'Glorious last stands are a lot more fun in the history books than in the flesh.'

'I'll work somethin' out,' Visiter promised, leaving me feeling a little bit more encouraged.

'Well then,' Rorkins said, with what seemed to my uneasy mind rather too much relish, 'if no one's got anything else to add, let's go and save the planet.'

As things turned out, of course, it wasn't going to be quite as simple as that.

#### **Editorial Note:**

*Despite Colonel Rorkins's cynicism, governor Trevellyan's pictcast did prove remarkably effective in soothing the understandable degree of alarm among the civilian population following the first enemy attack. The following is a partial transcript of the address he made from the main medicae facility in Havendown that morning, after visiting a few of the more photogenic casualties, and it seems to have succeeded in bolstering civilian morale, at least in the short term.*

*THE COWARDS WHO carried out this unforgivable atrocity, and others like it around the globe, have severely underestimated the citizens of Perlia if they think such acts of barbarity will sap our resolve. On the contrary, it only serves to increase it, as the last invaders who dared to set foot on our Emperor-blessed world found to their cost. Scarcely two generations have gone by since the Liberator's army swept the greenskins from Perlia; an army made up not primarily of professional soldiers, but of ordinary citizens, like you and I, caught up in extraordinary times.*

*I know I can rely on you all to display the same fortitude as our illustrious forebears did; and with Cain the Liberator once more poised to take up arms, I have no doubt that we will prevail once again.*

*The Emperor's blessing be upon you all.*

## TEN

I SPENT THE rest of that day, and the following night, in a fever of carefully-concealed impatience. I could hardly turn round to Rorkins and the others and say "See you later, I've got a little errand to run for the Inquisition, best of luck with the invasion while I'm gone", so I threw myself into the preparations as energetically as I could, and waited for an opportunity to sneak away on some plausible-seeming pretext. To say that I chafed at the delay would be something of an understatement: I was acutely aware that we had no idea how long it was going to be before the enemy fleet arrived, and however much time we had, it wasn't going to be nearly enough.

'We need more bodies,' Julien said, 'it's as simple as that.' We'd run into each other in the refectory, grabbing some long-overdue food and recaff on the fly, and talking as we ate. She'd discarded her power armour for the time being, although she kept her bolt pistol handy, and carried a chainsword almost as battered and ill-used as my own wherever she went. Most of the other instructors were going about the place armed, too, generally favouring the hammers and shock mauls which seem to appeal to the Emperor-botherers<sup>1</sup>, while the administrative staff opted, more sensibly, for firearms. Even Brasker was sporting an autopistol, somewhat surprisingly engraved with icons of the saints in gold filigree, which he kept stashed in a pocket of his robe, where it deformed the material with a noticeable bulge.

'You're right,' I agreed. The report she'd just shown me made depressing reading. Her original estimate, that the PDF was down to a quarter of its usual strength, had turned out to be a little on the pessimistic side, but not by much. 'The question is, where do we find them?'

'You seemed to manage all right during the ork invasion,' the Celestian said dryly.

'That was different,' I said. 'The entire continent was overrun, and occupied. Anyone who'd survived that had already gone through hell: it was just a question of giving them guns, pointing them at the greenskins, and telling them it was payback time.' I smiled grimly. 'And despite what you might have seen in the holos, the core of the force was always PDF veterans; the civilian militia just get most of the attention because they're seen as more romantic for some reason.'

'Of course they are,' Julien said. 'Everyone wants to think they could be a hero too, if the chips were down.' She smiled at me, and shook her head. 'You don't really understand the civilian mindset very well, do you?'

'It's not my job to,' I told her, trying not to sound too defensive. I'd met a few civvies over the years, of course, even one or two I quite liked, but I'd been in a military environment ever since a schola like this one had spat me out in the direction of the Commissariat, and most of the ones I'd come into contact with had seemed almost as strange as the tau. (Although at least none of them were grey.)

'Well, trust me, it's something we can use,' Julien said. I shrugged, willing to take her word for it. Her sisterhood moved among the proles as a matter of course, at least the non-militant parts of it did, so it seemed reasonable to assume she knew what she was talking about. 'Or you can, at any rate.'

'I might seem dense,' I said, draining the dregs of my recaff, which had sublimed to bitter sludge in the bottom of the mug, and making a mental note to send Jurgen to fetch me some tanna, 'but I don't see how.' Despite my best efforts I failed to suppress a yawn. Dawn was already tinting the sky beyond the windows a rich, smoky blue, like Amberley's eyes, and I hadn't had any sleep since the previous night. I'd been far more exhausted on countless campaigns before, of course, but I was beginning to think I was getting too old for all this.

'It's easy,' Julien said, with a faint smile of sympathy, but then she was half my age, and no doubt all fired up with holy zeal into the bargain. 'You just make a pictcast or two, asking for volunteers to form a new militia. They'll turn out in droves.'

'And get slaughtered,' I pointed out. 'We won't have time to train them, that's for sure.'

'They'll get slaughtered anyway, as soon as the heretics arrive,' Julien said. 'You know that as well as I do.'

I nodded soberly, conceding her point. I'd seen the aftermath of Chaotic incursions before, many times, and if there was one thing I was certain of, it was that the concept of non-combatants didn't even exist for the degenerate pawns of the Ruinous Powers. If some of their victims took a few of the invaders with them, it would buy us a little more time, if nothing else, and I've never been averse to a bit more cannon fodder standing in harm's way ahead of me.

'It's worth a try,' I said. 'I'll get Jurgen to make the arrangements.'

'Good man.' Julien smiled encouragingly. 'Then you might want to start putting the fear of the Throne into some of these regimental commanders while you're waiting.' She brought up some more reports about the PDFs state of readiness on the screen of her data-slate, and I groaned inwardly. Even from a quick skim, which was all I had time for before she shut off the power and stowed it in a pouch at her belt, alongside her holstered bolt pistol and several spare clips for it, things looked pretty bad.

'I'll get one of my cadets to prepare a summary,' I said. I'd already thrown most of the intelligence analysis their way in any case, as it was a useful exercise for them, and was far too tedious to bother with myself even if I had been able to find the time to deal with it.

'Good idea. And while they're doing that, try and get some sleep,' Julien advised. 'You're going to have to look like a hero, not some starport dreg on a bender.'

TACTLESS AS HER advice may have been, it was undoubtedly sound, and I decided to follow it. In the event, of course, I was only able to grab a couple of hours sleep, but I'd spent long enough in the field over the years to be well aware of how much difference even a cat nap could make, so, assisted by the large bowl of tanna and the plateful of salt grox and eggs Jurgen had thoughtfully provided on rousing me, I was feeling reasonably *compos mentis* when Kayla and Donal turned up in my study with the first

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<sup>1</sup> Like most such institutions, the schola progenium would have been endowed by the Ecclesiarchy, and most of the non-specialist staff drawn from their ranks.

summary they'd managed to distil from the raw intelligence I'd turned over to them the afternoon before.

'It seems the colonel was right,' Donal said. 'Apart from the attack on RYTEPAT, the landings seemed pretty much at random.' He passed me a slate, on which he'd helpfully marked the positions of the ensuing engagements. 'The red ones are the confirmed contacts, and the yellow ones unconfirmed.'

'Unconfirmed?' I asked. 'I thought we'd tracked all their trajectories before they hit.'

'The PDF claim they did,' Kayla said, a tone of scepticism clear in her voice. 'But these two landing sites were deserted when they finally arrived to contain them.' She indicated the pair of yellow icons, which, I noted with a shiver of unease, were both on the eastern continent, although far too distant from the Valley of Daemons for the hidden Inquisition facility to have been their targets. 'The reports of the officers in charge are as comprehensive as you might expect.' Again, from the tone of her voice, she clearly hadn't expected very much.

'Let me see,' I said, paging through the datafiles until I'd found them. They were every bit as waffling and self-justificatory as I'd anticipated, and I dropped the slate on to my desk after no more than a moment of desultory skimming. 'What's left after you strip out the buck-passing and arse-covering?'

'Very little,' Donal said, somehow managing to convey a degree of world-weariness astonishing in a lad of his years. 'There were signs of a heavy landing in both locations, but the shuttles were substantially intact, even if they weren't particularly airworthy any more. There were no bodies found at either LZ, which implies that the occupants disembarked normally, despite the impact. The lieutenant in charge of the platoon which responded to the landing in the Barrens claims to have found a lot of trampled ground and expended power packs: he ventures to suggest this might indicate that the intruders got into a firefight with someone. The platoon which went to the other site doesn't even report that.'

'They wouldn't,' I said. The second site marked in yellow was in the middle of the desert which sliced across the continent, and I remembered all too vividly how the constant wind would erase any traces of a human presence with drifts of sand within moments when the conditions were right. 'But we'd better warn any settlements close to those areas that they might be about to get visitors.' That would be all we needed, wandering guerrilla bands of Chaotic infiltrators coming and going more or less as they pleased.

'Who could they have got into a firefight with, in any case?' Kayla asked, and Donal shrugged.

'The lieutenant suggests orks,' he said, as though delivering the punch line of a joke he didn't think was all that funny. 'They do have occasional outbreaks in the region, apparently, and he's certain that none of our people were around to engage the enemy.'

'They sound like remarkably tidy orks,' I said, trying to suppress a sudden mental image of blank-faced metal killers. 'If they'd jumped the heretics, the place would have been littered with bolter shells.' Not to mention bits of heretic.

Trying to ignore the tingling in my palms, I paged through the report again, a little more carefully. This lieutenant, Tyso by name, had been quite thorough, it seemed, if only to deflect the possibility of being blamed for letting Throne alone know how many heavily armed raiders loose on the province. He'd even attached a few pics, and a diagram pinpointing the precise locations of the dropped powerpacks, which, to my resigned lack of surprise, all seemed to be from standard-issue lasguns. More Madasan defectors, then, in all likelihood, which was hardly a prospect to relish. Instead of obvious cult warriors sprouting horns and hideous limbs, we'd apparently lost track of trained soldiers who could pass unremarked among our own people, wreaking Emperor knew what havoc along the way.

Then something about the way the power packs had been scattered suddenly struck me. They'd been discarded in a rough perimeter around the downed shuttle, precisely where, given the terrain, I would have posted pickets to secure the dropzone while the troopers deployed. It didn't take much imagination to fill in the rest: an inexorable enemy advance, the defenders falling back, letting their depleted magazines fall where they stood as they reloaded, pouring round after ineffectual round into the tightening noose of silent warriors, the rising sun glittering from their metal bodies as they advanced unhindered through the barrage of lasbolts...

Enough, I chided myself. Lack of sleep, and my understandable concern about the Shadowlight, were raising old phantoms.

Despite my continuing to fret about the possibility, there was still no actual evidence that the necrons were even anywhere in the sector, let alone running around on Perlia.

But, my paranoia insisted, ignoring my best efforts to silence it, the Shadowlight was unimaginably ancient, wasn't it? True, there were stories about mysterious precursor races, aeons dead, which even the eldar barely believed, but the only ones from the dawn of time still unequivocally alive and kicking now were the necrons.<sup>1</sup> What if the Shadowlight belonged to them, and they wanted it back?

'Sir? Are you all right?' Kayla asked, a note of concern evident in her voice/

Recalled to the present, I shook my head, dispelling the ghosts my fearful and exhausted mind had conjured up. 'Not a lot of sleep last night,' I said, contriving to look as though I was suppressing a yawn, to plausibly cover my momentary lack of attention.

'Another dubious perk of the job.' I returned my attention to the data-slate. 'Is there any indication at all of what their objective might have been?' If there was, it would simplify things enormously. Instead of having to comb the countryside for an unknown number of infiltrators, we'd just have to post a guard at their target and wait for them to turn up and be shot.

'None at all,' Donal said, sounding personally affronted by the fact. 'The whole area's just wilderness. Nothing for kilometres in any direction.' He winced visibly as Jurgen appeared behind him, a tray in his hands, and seemed to be trying not to breathe for a moment.

'Thought you might like a bit of tanna, sir,' my aide said, depositing a tea bowl on the table in front of me, and pouring a generous measure from the pot accompanying it.

'Thank you, Jurgen. Very welcome,' I assured him, sipping the fragrant liquid gratefully. 'Nothing in the desert either,' I mused aloud.

'Not unless they were looking for sand devils,' Kayla said, surprising me. I'd spoken more to clarify my own thoughts than

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, "alive" is somewhat debatable where the necrons are concerned. "Animate" would probably be a better description.



anything else, and I hadn't expected to elicit a reply.

'Sand devils?' I asked, belatedly remembering that she was a native of Perlia, like a lot of the schola students; with so many Perlians serving in the Imperial Guard against the tyrannids, a steady trickle of their dependants had been arriving throughout the war.

'Just a local legend,' she said dismissively. 'A few of the sandsiders claim to have seen things out there from time to time, and of course whenever anyone goes missing the devils get the blame.' She paused for a moment. 'Well, they used to before the orks arrived, anyway.'

'What do these devils look like?' I asked, trying to keep my voice casual.

Kayla looked at me a trifle oddly, then shrugged. 'I think that rather depends on who's telling the story,' she said, 'and how much they've had to drink. It's not as if they actually exist.'

'Of course not,' I said, faintly relieved by her obvious scepticism. But I'd seen a lot of strange stuff over the years, and wasn't about to dismiss an apparent coincidence that lightly. The Valley of Daemons had a sinister reputation among the Perlians too, as its name implied, and the Shadowlight had been dug up there.

It wasn't too much of a stretch to assume that who or whatever had built it had left other traces of their presence scattered around the planet, equally deeply buried, and that similar traces of psychic miasma still clung to them. The forces of Chaos had wyrds with them, as surely as hounds had fleas; perhaps some of them could sense this aura, guiding the raiders to sites the Inquisition and the Adeptus Mechanicus hadn't been able to identify yet. But that didn't quite make sense to me: if they really could pull a trick like that, why hadn't the raiders homed in on the Valley of Daemons straight away, instead of the arse end of nowhere<sup>1</sup>? Without any kind of hard evidence, of course, further speculation along these lines would have been particularly fruitless, so I returned my attention to the matters we were able to verify.

'Have you been able to identify any enemy objectives among the confirmed contacts?' I asked. I'd had almost the whole group working on the problem, of course, not just these two, but I'd picked Kayla and Donal to deliver the report because, in their own ways, they were the most intuitive of the bunch, and would be the most likely to make any new connections as we discussed the distilled intelligence.

Donal shook his head. 'Entirely random, so far as we can see,' he said. 'They generally came down in or near a local population centre, moved in, and started trashing the place until the PDF turned up. Then they fought to the death in most cases.'

Remembering the trick the trooper I'd tried to interrogate had almost succeeded in pulling with the concealed grenade, I didn't doubt that.

'It was pure wanton destruction,' Kayla concurred. 'No pattern to any of it.' She started paging down a list. 'Markets, museums, hab blocks, Mechanicus shrines, agricultural stores, and a couple of Tribune sector houses.' She shrugged. 'Which is about as close as you'll find to any strategic objectives.'

'What about temples?' I asked, feeling a sudden shiver of unease. The two cadets looked at me curiously for a moment, then glanced back at their slates.

'Just one,' Donal said, after paging through the data for a moment. 'In Mistfall. Took some collateral damage when the enemy fell back towards it.'

'That's definitely not right,' I said. I'd seen plenty of Chaotic raids in my time, and the aftermath of many more, and in every case the first thing they'd done was desecrate all the temples and symbols of the Emperor they could find, even melting down the coinage if they had the time. Every settlement on the planet had at least a chapel dedicated to Him on Earth, and most a full-sized temple, preferably larger and gaudier than the one in the village down the road. For Chaos reavers to simply ignore these shrines to their most hated enemy in favour of apparently aimless pillaging was completely unprecedented. 'If they ignored the temples, they were after something specific, believe me.' What that might be, though, I couldn't begin to speculate. Not in front of the cadets, anyway.

'That does seem odd, now you mention it,' Donal said, looking faintly surprised. 'I'll take another look at the intel.'

'Do that.' I nodded. 'There might be a pattern there we haven't uncovered yet.' I turned to Kayla. 'Can I reassure the Governor that he wasn't the intended target of a kill team yet, or do the AARs<sup>2</sup> from Havendown still support Sister Julien's hypothesis?'

'None of the enemy units seemed to be making directly for the palace,' Kayla assured me. 'Although I suppose it's possible that they were hoping to lure enough of the defenders out of position to allow a specialist or two to sneak through.'

'Not that likely, though,' Donal added, bringing up a map of the planetary capital on his slate as he spoke. 'The shuttles came down here, here, and here, in Riverside, the Grand Piazza, and Liberation Square.'

'Was that bloody clock damaged at all?' I asked hopefully, and Donal shook his head.

'Completely intact,' he assured me, enlarging the image. 'If the Governor was the primary target, they could have come down easily in the palace gardens.'

'I see.' That much was obvious. 'So we're back to thinking they were just trying to cause panic.'

'Looks that way,' Kayla agreed. 'The ones in Riverside deployed across the university campus, and got wiped out trying to cross the freefire zone between the drama studio, the history department, and the faculty of Gothic literature. The Tribunes kept the group from the square bottled up until the PDF arrived, so they didn't go anywhere, but tried to make a stand in the Administratum records office. And the ones from the Piazza set off suicide charges when the Museum of Colonisation was surrounded.' She shrugged. 'Nothing much there in any case, just a few models and displays about the early settlements.'

'I see,' I said levelly. In my experience, the minions of the Great Enemy generally had some kind of reason for everything they did, even if you had to be as barmy as they were to understand it. In this case, though, it seemed obvious to me that they were after

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<sup>1</sup> Because neither we nor the Mechanicus are particularly stupid, and had made very sure that our installation there was well shielded from psychic detection.

<sup>2</sup> After Action Reports, passed up the chain of command from the units engaged in combat for later evaluation.

information about ancient Perlia, although what kind I had no idea. Almost certainly something they'd hoped would lead them to the Shadowlight, I strongly suspected. I could hardly tell the cadets that, though. 'Perhaps it was meant to distract our attention from the attack on the PDF command structure.' Which sounded reasonably plausible, so I was sure Rorkins and the others would buy it. Donal and Kayla nodded, apparently happy to believe it too, so I leaned back in my chair, on the verge of dismissing them. At that point someone knocked on the door, and a gradually rising babble beyond the slab of wood told me that Jurgen was guarding my privacy as zealously as he'd always done.

'This won't wait!' Nelys's voice insisted, and I sighed.

'Let him in, Jurgen!' I called, hoping I wasn't going to regret this. I'd assigned Nelys to the team overseeing the interrogation of the handful of enemy survivors, and I hadn't expected him to get any concrete results nearly so soon. After a moment the door swung open, and Nelys came into the room, trying hard not to look excited.

'Commissar. We've found something,' he said, without preamble, and the merest glance at his fellow cadets. He dropped a data-slate on my desk, looking so absurdly pleased with himself I felt a momentary urge to throw him a biscuit. 'I thought you should see this right away.'

'WHAT IS IT, exactly?' Visiter asked, frowning at the tiny screen.

'That,' I said dramatically, 'is our enemy.' I nodded at the tech-priest in the corner, who did something arcane to the conference room's projection equipment, and the little pict was abruptly reproduced on the hololith built into the tabletop. A man appeared, flickering slightly, clad in an austere uniform of military cut, the eight-pointed symbol of Chaos worked into the breast pocket of his greatcoat and the badge on his hat. 'Warmaster Varan. Apparently known to his followers as the Conqueror, the Undefeatable, the Great Leader, and a plethora of other sycophantic epithets.'

'Where did it come from?' Rorkins asked.

'One of my cadets found it among the personal effects of a prisoner he'd been processing,' I told him. 'The survivors of the raid haven't been exactly forthcoming about the reasons for their mission or the resources the main fleet's got, but according to the interrogation transcripts they can hardly be persuaded to shut up about him. According to them, Varan's the greatest leader the galaxy's ever seen.'

'Looks a bit short to me,' Julien said, snorting impatiently at the implied blasphemy. 'And that ridiculous little moustache makes him look like a clown.'

'He seems to be quite a charismatic orator, though,' I said. The pict-clip showed Varan standing on a podium, ranting away about the supposed perfidy of the Emperor and all who followed him, in front of a rapturous crowd that must have numbered in the thousands. Many of his audience were still wearing Imperial uniforms, I noted with a shudder, but their enthusiasm for the drive he was spouting seemed just as genuine as everyone else's.

'Can't see it myself,' Visiter commented, and I was forced to agree. Even allowing for the deficiencies of the slate's rather basic audio feed, Varan's voice had an unctuous, whiny timbre which set my teeth on edge, and his theatrical hand gestures were overdone to the point of self-parody. Instead of interrupting periodically with rapturous applause, I was amazed his audience hadn't started to throw fruit by now.

'I don't think we need to hear any more of this,' Rorkins said, and the tech-priest in the corner obligingly switched off the ranting demagogue. 'It's palpable nonsense.'

'Heard it all before,' I agreed. In fact I had: for a supposed genius, Varan had a pretty restricted vocabulary, and his grasp of analogy and metaphor seemed tenuous at best. His rabble-rousing speech, which had seemed to so impress the new converts in front of him, was little more than a vapid compendium of the kind of slogans the usual degenerate foot soldiers of Chaos would yell while throwing themselves obligingly down the barrels of our guns.

'Clearly staged for propaganda purposes,' Julien agreed. 'No one could really stand listening to that.'

'Nevertheless, the enemy soldier Nelys confiscated it from seemed genuinely distressed to have lost it,' I said, referring back to the cadet's report. 'He claims to have carried it for inspiration in the field, and as visible proof of Varan's invincibility.' I read on.

'According to Nelys, the fellow seemed quite astonished that he didn't immediately convert to the cause of Chaos the moment he saw the pict.'

'Clearly delusional,' Rorkins said, then shrugged. 'I suppose it's only to be expected.'

'Got that right,' Julien agreed. 'No one in their right mind would ever turn their back on His Majesty, especially on the say-so of a pathetic little runt like that.' The rest of the heads around the table nodded, my own among them, and we went back to the business of preparing for war.

In retrospect, of course, it seems astonishing that we dismissed our antagonist so lightly, especially knowing that he'd already conquered two systems far more heavily defended than our own; all that I can say in our defence is that, in the pict at least, he didn't look like so much of a threat. And once it became clear just how badly we'd underestimated him, it was already far too late.

## Editorial Note:

*The following transcript is appended without further comment, as, quite frankly, words fail me.*

### CITIZENS OF PERLIA!

*Some of you may have heard of me; a few of you may even recognise me. My name is Ciaphas Cain, and almost two generations ago I fought to defend this world from the greenskin invaders who had dared to desecrate it, standing shoulder to shoulder with*

ordinary men and women like yourselves. Your ancestors' courage and resourcefulness has rightfully gone down in history, celebrated even today.

Now, their noble legacy is under threat from an even greater foe. We've all heard the rumours that the Great Enemy has unleashed one of their so-called crusades against the Imperium, and I regret to inform you that there is an element of truth to these stories. Though our forces are holding back the tide on the far side of the galaxy, keeping them penned in their own foul realm, a few scattered survivors of the enemy fleet have fled in terror from the righteous retribution being visited upon them. One such flotilla has already made the mistake of thinking Perlia undefended, and paid the price for their arrogance in blood, and we have reason to suspect that a second, possibly larger, group is following in their footsteps.

The PDF and their spaceborne comrades in arms are well prepared for any further incursions, but the war against the tyrannids has left them in dire need of further support. Accordingly, Commander Rorkins has decided to re-establish the civilian militia, which performed so ably during the dark days of the invasion, in order to free more of the professional soldiers for front-line duties. I'm therefore appealing to any able-bodied citizens who feel able to assist, to join us in this heroic endeavour. Recruiting stations are being set up somewhere in your local community, at Tribune sector houses, temple halls, and other such centres; your regional pictcasts and printsheets will carry the details.

The days and weeks ahead will undoubtedly be trying for all of us, but if we stand together, we will surely prevail in the name of His Divine Majesty.

*The Emperor Protects.*

## ELEVEN

WELL, I HAVE to admit that, despite my scepticism, it seemed as though Julien had known what she was talking about after all. Within a day of me making the pictcast, the recruiting stations were practically besieged. Citizens were signing up in droves, eager to lay down their lives for the Emperor, or, more likely, fondly imagining that someone else would lay down theirs instead, leaving them to bore future generations with their war stories.

'Not that I'm complaining,' Rorkins said dryly, 'but you seem to have landed us with quite another problem. Emperor alone knows how we're going to feed and accommodate them all.'

'We don't have to,' I assured him as we skirted the parade ground of the schola, the chiselled aquilae set into the flagstones still glistening with the morning dew, and sidestepping a couple of progenii paying for some minor infraction in the time-honoured way by scouring them free of lichen with toothbrushes as we did so. 'Sister Julien and I have made other arrangements.' Quite clearly we couldn't induct so many raw recruits into the PDF without sinking its already ramshackle command structure entirely, so we'd decided to leave the militia recruits where they were in the first place, living in their own homes and generally fending for themselves. Whatever moderately competent troopers could be found to instruct them would assemble the motley collection of volunteers once a day, usually in the evenings, to run them through the basics of how to fire a lasgun and keep their heads down when someone started firing back. If it turned out that we had a little more time before the enemy got here once they'd grasped that, the professional troopers could impart any other skills they thought might be useful at their discretion.

'Sounds a bit risky to me,' Rorkins said, his breath misting slightly as he spoke, almost matching the pearlescent haze of the pre-dawn light surrounding us. 'What happens if the enemy turns up while they're not on duty?'

'They assemble in their training areas as soon as the alert comes,' I said. I shrugged, tacitly admitting to a few doubts of my own. 'Emperor knows how many will actually turn up when they know the shooting's about to start, though.'

Rorkins favoured me with a bleak smile. 'I thought that was your area of expertise, commissar. Keeping the cannon fodder up to the mark.'

'Easier said than done, commander,' I replied. 'Soldiers are trained and disciplined, even the PDF rabble. The militia are just civilians with guns.'

'All the more reason they shouldn't be left to run around on their own most of the time,' Rorkins said.

'On the contrary,' I demurred. 'Being able to carry on their usual occupations gives them the illusion of normality. That'll be a vital psychological prop for them when the reality of what they're getting into finally hits home.'

'If you say so,' Rorkins said, sounding far from convinced.

Seizing the opportunity I'd so carefully contrived, I nodded thoughtfully. 'That's why I'm planning to make some personal inspections,' I remarked casually. 'It'll be good for morale to put in an appearance at a few of the militia platoons, and I can harass the PDF field commanders at the same time.' I glanced round the schola as I spoke, watching the freezing mist curl around the buildings as though the nearest towers were lurking in ambush. 'I must admit I'm getting a bit twitchy hanging around here waiting for the noise to start.'

Rorkins smiled sympathetically, one old warrior to another, and nodded his agreement.

'I know what you mean,' he conceded. 'If I have to sit through one more meeting with those frakwits from Rytepat I'm going to shoot somebody. Probably myself.' He sighed, a little enviously. 'Neither of us take too kindly to sitting on our hands.'

'I know it's just makework really,' I said, gauging his reaction carefully, 'but at least it'll feel like doing something. And if it gives us a few more effectives in the field when it all goes ploin-shaped, that's no bad thing.'

'No, I suppose not.' Rorkins shook his head. 'When are you leaving?'

'This morning,' I said. Sprie had the Aquila fired up and ready, Jurgen was stuffing things into my kitbag even as I spoke, and I couldn't see any reason to delay. 'I just want a quick word with Brasker before I go.'

'Brasker?' Rorkins looked astonished. 'What in Terra's name for?'

'Just some administrative stuff,' I said blandly. Despite rechecking the intelligence data, as he'd promised, Donal had completely failed to find any plausible objectives for the enemy raiders, and it was time for a change of tack. If anyone of my acquaintance would be able to find the records I needed among the billions of pieces of superfluous verbiage the Administratum had filed away and forgotten over the years, it would be the bursar, and he was unimaginative enough not to wonder why I wanted a look at them. I hoped. 'Any idea where he is?'

'His quarters I suppose,' Rorkins said, wrapping his cloak around himself as though the pre-dawn chill was intended as a personal insult. 'At least if he's got any sense.'

'I'll try there, then,' I said. Perfect. I doubted that he'd be any too pleased to be roused this early, but that wasn't my problem, and at least there'd be no other ears around to overhear our conversation. Of course, on the downside, I was about to confide a little of my business to the most indiscreet man in the segmentum, but I was sure a few choice phrases about martial law and the need for secrecy would persuade him to hold his tongue. After all, it wasn't as though the source of any leak about the commission I gave him wouldn't be obvious.

After a few more words with Rorkins we parted, him towards the lecture halls he'd commandeered as a makeshift headquarters, and me to the lodgings across the main quadrangle where Brasker and the other senior administrators had their rooms. As you'd expect, the pecking order was pretty well established when it came to the perceived desirability of the faculty accommodation, with the Ecclesiarchy taking what were generally thought of as the best rooms, affording them a view of the chapel and only a few metres to walk to get to the services. The Administratum adepts came next, in the heart of the schola complex, where, in theory, they could keep an eye on the smooth functioning of the institution with the minimum of effort, and out on the fringes were the pensioned-off veterans like me, Rorkins and Visiter. (Julien, of course, was in with the Emperor-botherers.) The only bunch even



further removed from the centre of things was the small staff of Adeptus Mechanicus drones, who kept themselves to themselves most of the time in any case, to everyone's relief, including their own.<sup>1</sup>

Given my absurdly inflated status on Perlia, I could no doubt have had myself reassigned to one of the prime suites if I'd chosen to make an issue of it, but of course I did nothing of the sort. For one thing, it wouldn't sit well with the image of modesty about my supposed achievements that I generally liked to cultivate, and for another it suited me very well to be able to sneak off on business of my own from time to time without it being too obvious that I was skiving. Most of all, though, I liked the rooms I'd been assigned; the view of the mountains was a pleasant one, the company of the ageing veterans around me congenial, and I didn't have to put up with the bells and smells<sup>2</sup> from the chapel disturbing me every five minutes. Not to mention that it was close to both the shuttle pad and the transport pool, which I found a definite plus point. I've always slept more soundly for knowing there was an escape route close to hand if things turned bad. (Which in my experience was only a matter of time in most cases.)

This early in the morning there were few people around, apart from the schola servants trotting about the place on errands of their own, so I was able to make my way into the main lobby of the Adeptus lodgings without exciting much notice<sup>3</sup>. It was only as I paused at the bottom of the carved wooden staircase that I realised I had no idea where in the rambling building Brasker's rooms were located. Fortunately a few moments' reconnaissance was sufficient to locate a porter's office tucked away under the rising treads, unoccupied of course at this hour of the day, along with a board of polished thornburr, into which the names of the various residents had been meticulously chased and inlaid in some lighter-coloured wood. According to the little sliding panel next to Brasker's, which could be moved to alternately obscure two different sets of letters, the bursar was IN, so I made a careful note of the number of his suite and climbed the stairs to find it.

Out of habit I moved somewhat stealthily, since, more often than not, whenever I've found myself in an unfamiliar building there's been a better than even chance that someone was lurking in ambush up ahead intending to shoot me if they got the chance.

Perhaps because of that I was listening out for any change to the ambient sound a little more intently than usual, so as I raised my hand to knock, I fancied I heard movement inside Brasker's quarters. Well, that was no bad thing; at least if he was up already he couldn't resent me waking him.

Just before my knuckles hit the wood panels, though, I was sure I'd heard something more, a murmur of muted conversation.

Before I could still the gesture I'd already rapped twice, however, so my immediate impulse, to wait and see if I'd been right, was no longer an option.

'Yes?' Brasker opened the door just wide enough to peer out at me, and we goggled at one another for a moment of stunned mutual astonishment. 'Commissar Cain.' He enunciated my name carefully, surprise making his voice seem a little bit louder than usual, before recalling his manners and dropping his tone to a more normal conversational level. 'I thought you were one of the servants.' 'I don't believe so,' I said, still reeling from the sight of his night attire. He was wearing a nightshirt of purple silk, a monogram of some sort worked in gold thread on the breast pocket. 'I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, but I'm about to leave the schola for a day or two, and I needed an urgent word.'

'I see.' He clearly didn't, but wasn't going to be impolite enough to admit the fact. 'Then I suppose you'd better come in.' He made no move to stand aside, though, just glancing at something inside the chambers, then seemed to recollect himself with an effort and pulled the door open.

I wasn't sure what I expected to find inside; piles of paper and data-slates, probably. The reality was a small hall, leading to a neatly appointed living room roughly the size of my own, the closed doors leading off the lobby presumably those of bathroom and bedroom, although which was which I had no idea, since my own suite of rooms was laid out on a more linear pattern. The blinds were still drawn, and Brasker kindled a luminator as we entered the lounge area.

'Sorry about the mess,' he said apologetically. 'I had a visitor last night.' In actual fact the room seemed perfectly tidy to me, apart from a pair of abandoned goblets which, judging by the smell, still contained a few sticky dregs of amasec, standing next to a decanter on an occasional table in the corner, and a neatly stacked tarot deck on a dining table in the middle of the room, next to a couple of stained plates.

'Sure they didn't stay?' I asked, unable to resist teasing him a little. 'I thought I heard voices just before I knocked.'

'I was watching the newspicts,' Brasker said, colouring slightly, which clashed hideously with his nightgown. There was no sign of a pict set anywhere in the room I could see, but I let it go; whatever he was hiding (and I didn't need much imagination to work it out) was his own affair, quite literally if I was any judge. I'd have bet half my pension his guest was still in the bedroom, waiting for me to frak off so she could get back to work in the kitchens or wherever she belonged, so out of common politeness I got straight down to business, keeping my voice as low as possible.

'I need some old records run down,' I said, without preamble. 'It's not going to be easy, but it's important for the defence of the planet, so it has to be done by someone reliable, with wide-ranging contacts in the Administratum. You were the first man I thought of.'

'Really.' Brasker looked at me, an odd expression on his face. 'I'm surprised you think I'm sufficiently trustworthy. I'm well aware I have something of a reputation for being both frivolous and indiscreet.'

'Reputations can be misleading,' I said. 'And in this case yours will be a positive asset. No one will think it odd if you seem to be asking questions, and no one will suspect that you've been entrusted with something which has to be kept confidential.'

To my relief, the bursar was nodding slowly. I'm pretty good at reading people, it goes with the job, and I began to feel that

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<sup>1</sup> *Hardly surprising, since relations between the Ecclesiarchy and the acolytes of the Ommissiah are generally somewhat strained at best.*

<sup>2</sup> *Of incense, presumably.*

<sup>3</sup> *An understandable assumption in a man who'd never had much to do with domestics; although, given how useful they generally are as informants, I've no doubt that his presence was both noted and discussed at length by them.*

perhaps coming to him with my little problem wasn't such a huge gamble after all. 'You can rely on me,' he said after a moment. 'But I can swear it on the aquila if you like.'

'I'm sure that won't be necessary,' I said, surprised in my turn. 'Your word's good enough for me. After all, if you accept the commission, you'll be acting in the name of the Commissariat.' In other words, if he let me down I'd be entitled to shoot him, although I didn't have to spell it out; the quick glance he gave to the weapons at my belt was enough to tell me that he'd got that particular message well enough.

'If I can help defend this world in any way, I'm at your disposal, of course,' Brasker said. He leaned a little closer to me. 'Which records do you want me to research?'

'They're all in here,' I said, handing him a data-slate. 'There's something about these locations that's significant to the enemy, although in the name of the Throne I've got no idea what. I suspect that it's something very old, though, perhaps dating back to the first colonisation. And I want to know if there are any folk tales about these places too.'

'Folk tales?' Brasker looked puzzled for a moment. 'I'll do my best. But it sounds as though the records you're after will be fragmentary at the very least.'

'That's why I need someone of your calibre to make the search,' I said, thinking a little bit of flattery wouldn't come amiss at that stage.

'I won't let you down,' Brasker assured me, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him. 'If there's anything there, I'll find it.'

'I appreciate that,' I told him, preparing to leave. On the verge of exiting the lounge, I paused, struck by a new and unwelcome thought. 'If I don't make it back, or the enemy attacks before I return, take whatever you've managed to uncover to Colonel Rorkins or Sister Julien, and tell them I sent you. They'll know what to do with the information.' I hoped. Well, I wasn't planning to get killed any time soon, so with any luck our little arrangement would just remain between the two of us. And if it all worked out, and we somehow managed to keep Perlia out of the clutches of this Varan, whoever he was, I could make good use of Brasker's connections in the future, upgrading him from an occasional source of gossip to a prime intelligence source for Amberley. She always appreciated little surprises, and would certainly be grateful for some of the nuggets of information I could get the bursar to mine on her behalf.

Of course I wouldn't dream of telling him who I was acting for, but even if he worked it out, that might not be too much of a problem. He'd already surprised me once today by apparently having successfully concealed an illicit affair for Emperor knew how long, so he was obviously capable of discretion if it were needed.

As I left, I couldn't help glancing at the closed doors in the hallway, wondering which concealed his inamorata, and what she could possibly have seen in him in the first place but such speculation was fruitless, and I had a shuttle to catch.

As the dawn chill was still acute, I paused in the entrance hall of the lodgings for a few moments to vox Jurgen, and make sure that the arrangements for our departure were still proceeding as planned. He assured me that all was well, and that he was on his way to the shuttle pad, so I voxed Sprie too, to let him know I'd be with him almost at once.

'Ready when you are, commissar,' he assured me cheerfully.

I'd just cut the link when I became aware of footsteps descending the stairs, and, impelled by my habitual sense of discretion, I stepped into the shadows of the porter's cubby hole. I didn't want anyone asking awkward questions about my business in the Administratum block, especially after impressing on Brasker just how important it was that no one think anything of his enquiries on my behalf. Besides, if I'm honest, it had also occurred to me that this might be Brasker's lady friend leaving the premises, and I couldn't resist trying to get a glimpse of her.

Well, I did, and it was a shock, I can tell you that. After a few more echoing footfalls the unmistakable figure of Sister Julien came into view, swathed in a dark cloak which almost succeeded in blurring the outline of her scabbarded chainsword, and hurried out into the gathering brightness of the courtyard. For a moment I simply stared after her in stunned astonishment: no wonder Brasker had been so evasive. But then, I already knew that she drank and played cards, so I suppose it wasn't too much of a stretch to find that she harboured a taste for more basic diversions as well.<sup>1</sup>

Grinning quietly to myself, I went off to meet Jurgen and Sprie, and despite the magnitude of the task in front of me, my heart was almost light as our shuttle lifted from the pad. Just as well, too as it turned out: there'd be precious little to smile about in the days that followed.

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<sup>1</sup> None at all: contrary to popular belief, the Adepta Sororitas doesn't actually require its members to remain celibate, although few find the time to take advantage of the fact.

## TWELVE

DESPITE MY IMPATIENCE to get to the Valley of Daemons as quickly as possible, caution and the demands of my cover story meant that we took a roundabout route, dropping in on several different communities on the way. Everywhere we landed, whether in a city or a village, our reception was the same: a brass band, horribly under-rehearsed, mangling some suitably martial piece of music, a local dignitary making a platitudinous speech about how pleased they were to see me, and a muster of the new militia recruits. They all seemed keen enough, but at the moment they were still comfortably insulated from the bloody realities of combat by the imagined romanticism of it all.

Eventually, on the second day, we pitched up in Chilinvale, the closest town to my real objective, and paused for a bite of lunch before resuming my ostensible tour of inspection. It was a pleasant enough little community, nestling in the foothills of the mountain range which separated the interior of the eastern continent from its coastal plains and the narrow isthmus leading to the more populous and industrialised western one. Much of it seemed new, the architecture of its southern side surprisingly uniform, and of a style less than a century old. I remarked on the fact to our guide, a Corporal Manrin, detached from the nearest PDF garrison to take charge of the local militia recruits, and he nodded around a mouthful of bread and cheese.

'Rebuilding work,' he told me, swallowing hastily. 'After the liberation.'

'The orks made a bit of a mess of things, I take it,' I said, having seen more than enough of the wanton destruction left in their wake on my eventful journey across the continent eight decades before.

Manrin shook his head. 'Actually, it was you,' he said. 'The flood waters came through here after you blew the dam. There wasn't a lot of the town left after that.' Then, perhaps conscious of an implied criticism in his choice of words, he shrugged. 'Luckily the place was full of greenies at the time, so it was a good thing if you ask me.'

'I'm glad you approve,' I told him dryly. The militia group he led was fairly typical of the ones I'd seen so far, a couple of dozen men and women ranging in age from their late teens to their dotage, more than making up in enthusiasm what they lacked in expertise. Unfortunately, once the las-bolts started flying, enthusiasm wasn't going to be enough, and I didn't envy Manrin the job of trying to keep them alive and facing forward. They were slouching around on the touchline of a scrumball pitch, which had been requisitioned as a makeshift firing range, trying to look as though they weren't staring at me, which was difficult, and failing to manage even the pretence where Jurgen was concerned. For this I could hardly blame them, however, as he wasn't exactly recruiting poster material to begin with, and, as I've previously remarked, the passage of years had more than made their mark on him.

'More recaff, commissar?' My aide approached us, brandishing the pot, and Manrin flinched a little, but held his ground.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, holding out my cup, although I didn't really need another drink at the moment, and framing my next remark for Manrin's benefit. 'Perhaps we could take a little time out to visit our old battleground before we leave. I hadn't realised we were quite so close to the dam here.' That should avoid any awkward questions about what we were doing if anyone noticed we were missing, or became aware of our destination; paying tribute to my fallen comrades was the sort of thing people expected me to do. In my experience, if you want to keep something secret, it's never a good idea to look furtive.

'I'll see what I can arrange,' Jurgen said. 'I'm sure I can find some transport once you've finished eating.' He wandered away, after scooping a handful of sandwiches from a nearby trestle table into one of his webbing pouches.

'You could just fly,' Manrin suggested, nodding towards Sprie, whose red hair stood out like a landing flare among the crowd, making him hard to miss. He was chatting to a couple of the younger female recruits, who seemed fascinated by his naval uniform, to his evident bemusement; being away from the circumscribed world of the schola, if only for a short time, was clearly a novel experience he had every intention of making the most of.

'We could,' I said, as though it were of little consequence. 'But I'm sure our pilot would appreciate a break.' That much was true, the lad had been hopping us around the globe for a day and a half by that point.

Rather more saliently, though, he had no idea of the real purpose of the trip, and it seemed best to prolong that state of ignorance indefinitely if I could. I hadn't realised at first that the town council were going to lay on a buffet lunch outside the pavilion at the edge of the sports field, and once I had it would have been churlish not to have invited Sprie to join us: while he was busy stuffing his face, and trying to work out what girls were for, Jurgen and I could slip away on our own errand.

'How are the recruits shaping up?' I asked the corporal, and Manrin shrugged.

'About as well as you'd expect,' he said. 'They're keen, but they don't think like soldiers. Most of them might as well be walking around with targets on their shirts.' He sighed. 'But they'll take a few of the reamers with them, I can promise you.'

'I'd expect nothing else,' I told him, hoping it wouldn't come to that. 'How are you off for supplies?'

'Adequate,' Manrin told me, after a moment's thought. 'We've enough lasguns to go around, and about three spare power packs apiece. If they remember their fire discipline and don't just spray it, that ought to be enough to hold until reinforcements arrive.' He didn't need to add that many of the amateur soldiers would be able to supplement their supplies with power packs issued to the casualties once the shooting started; that much was depressingly obvious. 'The thing that worries me is...' He broke off, clearly wondering if he'd overstepped the mark.

'Go on,' I said, in an encouraging tone. 'In my experience, the concerns of the troopers on the ground are never to be taken lightly.'

'Well sir,' Manrin said, apparently reassured, 'all these guns and ammo packs have to come from somewhere. Thousands of them, all over the planet.'

'It's a logistical nightmare,' I admitted. 'Half the recruits are still drilling with broom handles. But we will get weapons out to everyone before the enemy arrives, you can be sure of that.'

'Oh, I am,' he said, with every appearance of sincerity. 'But the only place they could all be coming from this quickly is the emergency caches.'

'That's right,' I agreed. Generations before, the Perlian PDF had established a network of supply dumps all over the planet, so that in the event of an invasion local units would be able to keep on fighting even after the chain of command was severed, a policy I'd been more than grateful for during my adventures in the occupied zone during the first siege. If it hadn't been for those scattered caches of food and ammunition, my makeshift army would have starved or been cut to pieces long before we'd made it to safety. 'Then we really will be fighting in the last ditch,' Manrin said.

I nodded, soberly. That hoard of supplies was being pillaged even as we spoke, to enable the volunteers to engage the enemy with something marginally more deadly than harsh language, and that would leave almost nothing to nourish a nascent resistance movement with if things got so bad we needed to establish one. 'I'm afraid so,' I agreed. 'But we can beat them, and we will.'

'Quite right, sir.' A man so elderly that he seemed at first sight to be barely capable of standing unsupported snapped me a parade-ground salute. 'Heretics is all cowards, I've seen it before. They don't like the straight silver, sir, they'll turn and run the minute you fix bayonets.' He chuckled phlegmatically. 'Then you can shoot 'em in the back.'

'Admirably put,' I said, keeping my face as straight as I could. He might have looked almost as unprepossessing as Jurgen, but his shoulders were back, and his eyes still keen. 'I can see by your bearing you're a military man.'

'Trooper Jaq, sir, 361st Coranian. Twenty years a Guardsman. Mustered out on Perlia in 943, been here ever since.' He nodded vehemently. 'Still not too old to rally to the colours, though.' He indicated his armband proudly<sup>1</sup>. 'We'll have those scallywags on the run before you can say "The Emperor protects".'

'I'm sure we will,' I said, with every sign of sincerity I could fake. The truth was, if the enemy decided to attack Chilinvale, for whatever reason, these eager idiots were going to be slaughtered. Their only purpose was to buy time for the regular PDF to get organised enough for a counterattack, and from what I'd seen so far that was a faint hope at best.

'Fall the men in, Jaq,' Manrin said, then corrected himself. 'Volunteers, that is.' Like most of the PDF babysitters I'd met so far, he was unused to the idea of having women among his command.<sup>2</sup>

'Very good, sir.' Jaq saluted again, and shuffled off, in a remarkably sprightly fashion for a man of his years, bawling 'Get fell in for the officer, quick as you can, we haven't got all day!'

'He's a good man,' Manrin said, a faintly apologetic tone entering his voice. 'And at least he remembers how to hold a weapon.' Something most of the others seemed to have at least a tenuous grasp of by now; they coalesced into an inchoate clump, shuffled into a couple of roughly parallel lines, and held out their lasguns for inspection.

'Eyes front!' Manrin bellowed. 'Franka, that means you!' One of the teenage girls who'd been attempting to flirt with Sprie tore her gaze away from the naval cadet with obvious reluctance.

'My mum says it's not polite to ignore visitors, Mr Manrin.'

'He's not a visitor, he's an inspecting officer!' Manrin said, keeping his voice down with a considerable effort. Clearly some of the militia recruits had an exceptionally feeble grasp of military protocol. 'Ten press-ups, now!'

The young woman sighed, but began to puff her way through the press-ups nevertheless.

'I can see you have a lot to contend with,' I said, sympathetically.

Manrin nodded. 'Discipline's a major problem,' he admitted. 'They're only volunteers, so I can't be too hard on them, or they'll just walk out.'

'It was a lot easier for me, the first time round,' I said. 'I could just threaten to shoot them if they got out of line, and they had nowhere else to go in any case.'

'So I've heard.' Manrin nodded, a trace of envy suffusing his voice, and waited while Franka scrambled to her feet again, picked up her lasgun, and held it out like the others. I strolled down the line, trying not to wince at how sloppy they were, apart from Jaq, who might still have been in uniform, so smart was his bearing.

'A fine body of troops,' I told Manrin, pitching my voice so that it would carry just far enough to reach them. Most of them smirked in a distinctly unmilitary fashion, and Franka simpered at Sprie again as soon as the corporal's back was turned. 'I'm sure they'll acquit themselves well.'

'By the Emperor's grace,' Manrin said, astute enough to realise I was more interested in boosting morale than strict adherence to the facts.

The Emperor was going to have his work cut out with this lot, I thought, and made my farewells as quickly as I decently could. Jurgen, meanwhile, had been true to his word, obtaining the use of a civilian groundcar from somewhere while I was being quietly appalled by the state of readiness of Manrin's rabble, and he drove us out of Chilinvale with his usual disregard for anything else which might be sharing the carriageway with us. Normally that wouldn't have worried me too much, as my preferred mode of transport was a scout Salamander, the armour plate of which would be sufficiently robust to withstand any minor impacts we sustained on the way, but in this case all that stood between me and severe injury was the fragile bodywork of a light utility vehicle. Well, that, and my aide's phenomenal reflexes. Suffice it to say that we eventually made it out of the town unscathed, unless you count a few more grey hairs to add to my ever-growing collection, and as the traffic thinned I began to relax and enjoy the journey.

Spring was a little further advanced in this part of the world, so I cranked the window down (always a wise move when inside an enclosed space with Jurgen in any case), and savoured the fresh air spilling down the sides of the distant mountains. They seemed like a solid wall, purple against the horizon like a looming thunderhead, enclosing the world, just as they had done all those years ago when I'd led my ragtag army towards them. This time, however, they appeared far less ominous. Back then they'd seemed like a death trap, funnelling us into an inescapable ambush, with nothing beyond except the bulk of the orkish armies even if we had

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, given the time constraints, there was no question of being able to issue proper uniforms to the newly-formed militia. Instead they were given armbands, bearing the letters PDV, which stood for Planetary Defence Volunteers.

<sup>2</sup> There were women serving in the PDF, but, like the Imperial Guard regiments the organisation was modelled on, most were attached to single-sex formations.



managed to break through. As it was, we'd managed to outflank the invaders, more by luck than judgement if I'm honest, and inflict a telling blow against them in the process.

'Up here, I think, Sir,' Jurgen said, swinging the wheel violently, slewing across two lanes of oncoming vehicles, and blithely ignoring the blaring of horns, squealing of tyres, and paint-blistering profanity which echoed in our wake. Our suspension began to bounce and rumble over a badly-maintained mountain road, until I started to fear for the structural integrity of my fillings.

'It doesn't look all that familiar,' I said, as steadily as I could under the circumstances, and Jurgen nodded.

'It's changed a bit,' he agreed. 'And we're approaching it from a different direction as well.'

'Of course.' I nodded, conceding his point, and only then realising that, subconsciously at least, I'd expected the Valley of Daemons to look pretty much as it had done the last time I'd driven up it. But that was before we'd let Emperor know how many megatonnes of water loose to scour its way through the declivities of the region, rearranging the topography quite comprehensively along the way. In fact, so different did everything appear from the images in my mind, that it was only as we crested a ridge and I caught sight of a glint of reflected sunlight from a large body of water in the distance below us that I realised we had already entered the valley.

Where once a narrow trickle of water had hugged the bed of a winding river, flowing out though the neck of a steep-sided gorge purple with heather and green with scrub, dotted with the occasional tenacious tree, foaming rapids bounced along a defile of grey bedrock, scoured clean of topsoil. On either side, the sheer rock walls were speckled with mosses and lichen, which softened the starkness of their outline, but did little to lessen the impression of bleakness. Higher, beyond the level the solid wall of water had reached, the moorland resumed, the point of transition as sharply delineated as if etched with a knife.

There was no mistaking the vast lake that filled the head of the valley, however, or the solid bulk of the Adeptus Mechanicus shrine nestling into the hillside next to it; that part of the terrain hadn't altered at all, and as I caught sight of it I was able to orientate myself at last. Instead of following our old route up from the mouth of the valley and across the dam, we'd entered it higher up, and on the opposite side.

I scanned the distant slope, looking for some sign of the old road which had wound its way up and across the top of the dam to reach the shrine, but there was no sign of it at all, every last trace of it having been swept away in the flood. The route we were coming in by had obviously been constructed later, as a replacement, while the dam was being rebuilt; it swept down to the piazza outside the main doors of the shrine without skirting the lake at all, or, to my unspoken relief given the way Jurgen was driving, taking us anywhere near the vertiginous drop before the vast grey wall spanning the cleft and holding back the waters.

The new dam was more or less identical to its predecessor, or so it seemed to me, although I thought there was an extra sluice gate at the bottom, and an extra buttress or two, no doubt to add a bit more structural integrity in case someone else decided to take a pot-shot at it with an artillery piece. In spite of these obvious precautions, and, no doubt, the existence of others I couldn't see, I still felt uneasy looking at the huge edifice, being able to picture the tidal wave which would be unleashed if the rockcrete gave way all too readily. The memory of the one we'd sent roaring down the valley on our previous visit was still vivid, the huge ork army which had sought to destroy us being swept away like flecks of foam in a mountain torrent.

'They put it back up, then,' Jurgen said, sounding far from impressed, and bouncing us down the track towards the shrine.

'Hence our little problem,' I agreed, scanning the bedrock walls for any sign of the fresh xenos artefacts the flood had apparently revealed, but without success.<sup>1</sup> In fact, so engrossed was I in this pursuit that I hadn't noticed how close we were getting to our destination until the shuddering of our suspension against the pitted roadbed abruptly ceased, and I found us hurtling across the intricate mosaic of the piazza in front of the shrine itself. 'Perhaps you'd better slow down,' I suggested. 'We don't want to alarm anyone.'

That was a considerable understatement. The first time we'd stumbled across this place, and the secret it concealed, the only thing left moving in the aftermath of Killian's assault had been a badly damaged combat servitor, which had almost done for me before a militia kill team had finally managed to finish it off. I had no doubt that similar, fully functional, systems still protected the site, and I had no wish to provoke them.

'Very good, sir,' Jurgen slammed on the brakes, leaving streaks of residue from our abused tyres marring the mosaic, and bringing us to a halt a few dozen metres from the main doors. They were just as big and impressive as I remembered: twin slabs of polished bronze, fully eight metres high, and embossed with the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

I clambered out, adjusting my cap, weapons belt, and dignity as best I could, and waited for Jurgen to join me.

As he fell in at my side, his lasgun slung from his shoulder as usual, the doors began to swing open.

'It looks as though our arrival has been noticed,' I said, beginning to walk towards them, then hesitated. The figures moving beyond the portal seemed too large to be human, bulky as an ogryn at least, and as they stepped into the sunshine my knees went weak. The guardians I'd most dreaded were indeed protecting the site; three hulking slabs of meat and metal, their flesh and augmetics so closely melded it was almost impossible to tell where the dividing line came, fanned out ahead of us, barring our way.

'Looks like they mended those too,' Jurgen remarked, as casually as if he was commenting on the weather.

'So it seems,' I replied, determined to seem no less imperturbable than my aide, and began to walk towards them. I was by no means sure he was correct, these all seemed to be different from the one I'd encountered before. That had been a hybrid, mounting an autocannon on one arm and a chainfist on the other: two of these carried ranged weapons, a plasma gun and a heavy bolter, while the third was clearly built to specialise in close combat, its paired chain-blades whining unnervingly as they powered up. A second or so later a familiar, and surprisingly welcome, odour of old socks and armpits told me that Jurgen was watching my back as always. Emboldened, I raised a hand. 'I'm Commissar...' I just had time to begin, before the leading construct drowned me out, its voice emanating from a voxcoder of remarkable resonance.

'Scan completed. Intruders armed. Terminate.'

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<sup>1</sup> Hardly surprising, as we'd gone to considerable trouble to conceal the real reason for the shrine's existence.

'Now wait just a minute,' I began, as the barrels of the weapons the things carried rotated towards me, and the close combat model started moving forwards. But of course I might just as well have saved my breath.

'Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum,' the first one grated, the exact same phrase I'd heard some eighty years before, and the others echoed it. 'Terminate... Terminate...'

Then, almost at the same instant, the two gun servitors fired.

## THIRTEEN

OF COURSE I hadn't just been standing around waiting to be shot: even as the hulking automata brought their weapons to bear I'd been moving, sprinting towards the most solid piece of cover I could see, a remarkably ugly obelisk of polished steel which someone had apparently dumped at the edge of the paved area since the last time I'd been there. Running back to the car would have been pointless; the heavy weapons the things carried would have shredded and vaporised the thin metal within seconds, along with anyone foolish enough to be crouching behind it. Of course that might be true of the lump of ironmongery I was heading towards as well, but I didn't know for certain that it wouldn't protect me, unlike the vehicle, so all things considered it seemed worth taking a chance. Especially as the alternative seemed to be standing around in the open waiting for the advancing servitors to make a mess on the mosaic with my entrails.

Fortunately they seemed as slow to react as such constructs generally are, wasting their first volley on the spot I'd occupied before I started running; the image of some kind of machine part exploded in a hail of bolter fire, the thin tiles transmogrifying instantaneously into flying shards which tugged at my greatcoat and stung my ears and the back of my neck, before the plasma round arrived an instant later, obliterating even more of the picture in a cloud of ravening incandescence. Knowing that the cumbersome energy weapon would take precious seconds to recharge, I drew my laspistol and snapped off a couple of shots at the one armed with the bolter; not that I had any real hope of incapacitating the thing, of course, but at least I might make it hesitate while it assessed the new threat.

Fat chance: it fired again almost at once, but, anticipating this, I'd jinked to the side just in time, and it missed me again, by an even narrower margin. I dived behind the obelisk just as the plasma cannon recharged, and a searing bolt of star-stuff roared past the glittering lump of ironmongery, finally expending itself in the lake beyond. A thousand litres of water flashed instantly into steam, wreathing the whole scene in a chilling mist, which blocked out the sunlight as abruptly as a slamming door, and I began to think we might have a chance after all. It was a slim hope, but the artificial fog might just confuse the constructs' sensoria long enough for me to get the drop on them somehow, or at least get to safety.

I looked up, searching for some sign of Jurgen, but he'd vanished in the murk; it looked as if I was on my own.

'Cease fire!' I snapped, broadcasting on every frequency of which my comm-bead was capable. 'This is Commissar Cain, here on the authority of Inquisitor Vail!' I wasn't sure how Amberley was likely to take me using her name so casually, but under the circumstances I was prepared to risk her ire. I listened for a response, but no answer came, so I peered cautiously round the lump of metal and drew my chainsword.

'Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum,' a synthetic voice grated somewhere behind me and, warned in the nick of time by the constructs' annoying habit of repeating their instructions ad nauseum, I ducked just fast enough to prevent a swinging chainblade from taking my head off. I parried the follow-up strike by reflex, instinctively recognising the combination move as a standard one from the Munitorum manual on paired blade techniques, and, reasoning that the flesh and metal monstrosity had undoubtedly been programmed to counter all the conventional responses, shot it in the left knee with my laspistol instead. The joint was armoured, of course, so it didn't fall like a man would have done, but it staggered, and when it struck at me again, raising sparks from the lump of metal behind me, its mobility was clearly impaired.

Even though its attacks were now easier to evade, I wasn't about to write it off just yet, though; it was still blindingly fast, and only reflexes honed in innumerable practice sessions, and more desperate scuffles for my miserable life than I care to count, enabled me to continue parrying the flurry of strokes it kept aiming in my direction. 'Jurgen!' I snouted, the muffling mist swallowing my voice. 'Where the frak are you?'

'Be with you in a moment, sir,' my aide's voice assured me, sounding as calm as ever in the tiny speaker of my comm-bead. 'I just had to go back for something.' If he was about to elaborate, he never got the chance: the ripping sound of the heavy-calibre bolter firing echoed flatly across the valley again, its muzzle flash sparking through the grey haze like lightning playing around a distant hill, and a moment later the muffled detonation of an explosion followed. Orange light flickered through the blanketing mist, and my heart seemed to stop for a moment. Surely my aide hadn't been foolish enough to return to the car, even under the cover of the artificial fog...

I began to realise that the murk was beginning to lift now, the faint disc of the sun slowly becoming visible again, and resolved to finish this fast, while the unexpected advantage remained. Something was moving in the haze behind me, and for a moment I dared to hope that it was Jurgen, before the familiar voxcoder voice grated "Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum" for the umpteenth time. Well, perhaps one of my problems could solve the other. Pivoting out of the way of another swipe from a chainblade, I snapped off a shot at the newcomer, which seemed to expend itself harmlessly against its heavily armoured torso. It reacted precisely as I'd hoped it would. I flung myself aside, seeking whatever refuge I could find behind the next face of the metal obelisk, just as another bolt of plasma hissed past, missing me by millimetres<sup>1</sup>, and impacting against the chest of the construct I'd been fighting, with a satisfactory sizzle of vaporising metal and flesh. To my astonishment, however, the thing remained standing, although it was severely damaged. No matter, its internal systems were now clearly visible, and I drew back my chainsword, ready to strike at some vital component. To my astonishment, however, before I could administer the coup de grace it turned away from me, and took a few faltering steps towards the servitor which had injured it so grievously.

'Higher priority target identified. Engaging,' it grated, and my heart leapt. Unable to tell a friendly fire accident from an intentional attack, its rudimentary cognition systems had misidentified the other construct as an enemy, and it was forgetting about me to take on what it perceived as the greater threat.

Before the gun unit could assess the sudden change in circumstances, it had already taken a couple of swipes from the humming

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly an exaggeration, as a plasma bolt passing that closely would have inflicted severe flash burns.

blades, which severed the power cables leading to its plasma weapon. With its primary armament disabled, the beleaguered construct defaulted to whatever protocols commanded it under such circumstances, closing with its erstwhile comrade in an unseemly brawl, which reminded me of nothing so much as a couple of ogryns on R&R.

I glanced round at the battlefield. The mist had almost lifted by now, but a pall of thick black smoke from the burning car had more than made up for that, laying an impenetrable screen across half the piazza, obscuring everything which lay beyond. There was no sign of Jurgen, or the bolter-wielding servitor, but the bronze doors of the Mechanicus shrine still stood invitingly ajar only a few score metres away. Of course they merely offered an illusion of safety, particularly if there were other security systems inside the building and I couldn't find someone in authority to call off the watchdogs, but if I stayed out here it was only a matter of time before I took rather more bolter rounds than would be good for my health. Putting my trust in the Emperor, I started to run. Of course I should have remembered that, as I've remarked before, He has a nasty sense of humour; I'd barely gone a dozen paces before the third servitor stepped out of the curtain of smoke and levelled the heavy bolter at me. I glanced round, but there was nowhere to go: the obelisk was too far away now to return to, and if I tried, I'd just end up taking the rounds in the back. Not for the first time I began to regret leaving my precious, and by now rather shabby, set of carapace armour<sup>1</sup> back at the schola; whatever protection it might have afforded would have been minimal at best, but in my experience every little helps under circumstances like this. Knowing that the gesture was futile I raised my laspistol, determined to at least dent the bloody thing before it killed me, but before I could pull the trigger it staggered, most of its cortex disappearing in a gout of superheated air. 'Thank you, sir.' Jurgen appeared through the smoke, nodding in satisfaction as though he'd just turned out a perfectly-cooked omelette, his melta still aimed at the toppling servitor in case it showed any further signs of belligerence. So that was what he'd risked going back to the car for. 'You distracted it just long enough for me to line up a head shot.'

'Happy to be of help,' I said, as casually as I could, turning towards the door again. I could see movement in the shadows, and brought the laspistol up, prepared for whatever further surprises might be about to emerge: or so I thought.

'Stop that right this minute!' a strong female voice rang out, sounding understandably testy. 'I think you've done more than enough damage for one day.' A woman in the white robes of a tech-priest bustled out into the sunlight, which glinted on the augmetic enhancements fused to her face, and strode towards us. For a moment I thought she was addressing me, but her gaze, so far as I could tell, was directed at the squabbling constructs behind us, which, by now, had done a pretty good job of rendering one another into their component parts. 'Omniissiah's cogs, deactivate, you stupid pieces of resyk!'

To my relief, the two surviving servitors, or what was left of them at least, complied, subsiding to the tiles with a rather unpleasant mixture of clanks and squelching noises. With a faint sigh of exasperation the tech-priest turned towards me, her robe flapping in the breeze.

'Honestly, Ciaphas,' she said, 'what is the matter with you? Every time you set foot in the place you break something!'

From the first moment I'd caught sight of the woman I'd been struggling with a vague sense of familiarity, but of course where tech-priests are concerned, all that ironmongery they're festooned with tends to make recognising them rather difficult; even one you're on intimate terms with might have a completely different head the next time you meet. Certainly there was little about her features which struck me as familiar. The top of her head had been replaced by a metallic skull, from which augmetic sensors glittered roughly where her eyes would have been, and specialised mechadendrites of some sort waved above her shoulders, flanking a rather battered-looking general-purpose one. Her original mouth and jaw remained in place though, the skin furrowed with age, and her voice raised the echo of old memories, which in itself was unusual.

If I was reading the iconography woven into her robe correctly, which I was by no means sure I was, she was pretty high up in the Mechanicus hierarchy, and tech-priests of that status had usually traded in their larynxes for vocoders decades before.

Then the coin suddenly dropped. Who else among the Mechanicus would be using my given name, particularly on Perlia, or, for that matter, be behaving in a manner so completely untypical of most of her kind?

'Felicia?' I hazarded, hardly daring to believe I was right. 'What in the name of the Throne are you doing here?'

'My job,' she replied, the faintly mocking tone I remembered so well infusing her voice. 'Although I suppose that's about to be disrupted again.'

'It will be when the enemy gets here,' I said. I glanced at her sharply. 'You do know about the invasion fleet about to descend on us all?'

'We've heard the rumours,' she said, in a faintly offhand manner, 'and there was a rogue trader round here peddling scare stories a while back.'

'I'm afraid they're a bit more than just scare stories,' I said. I cleared my throat. 'I assume he told you who he was here on behalf of?'

'Some over-officious inquisitor, he said.'

Felicia looked at me, and, despite the blank metal visage that had replaced the face I remembered, I thought I could detect a spark of the old sense of mischief she'd so often displayed in the course of our long and eventful march towards safety so many decades before. 'The same one you're working for, if that transmission of yours was true.'

'I'm afraid it is,' I said heavily. There was no point in trying to conceal my connection with Amberley, everyone in the building would be in on the secret of the Shadowlight in any case, and well aware of who they reported to. Which didn't in the least diminish my astonishment at finding Felicia here. 'I see you've progressed a bit in the priesthood after all.'

'Yes, I have.' Felicia smirked a bit, before appearing to recall that the Omniissiah frowned upon such displays of emotion. 'Which is one in the eye for all those rust-brains in the seminary who told me I wouldn't amount to anything.'

I nodded, having gathered in the course of our earlier acquaintance that her somewhat exuberant personality hadn't gone down at all well with the senior tech-priests, who'd told her in no uncertain terms that she'd never be anything other than a humble

<sup>1</sup> Which he'd "forgotten" to return to stores after our eventful foray into the undercity on Gravalax, some seventy years before; by this time it was somewhat battered, to say the least.



engineer: a prognostication which had singly failed to dismay her, as she'd always been more interested in getting her hands grubby than the theological side of her vocation in any case. Clearly her unexpected promotion hadn't done much to change that, which was something of a relief to me; I'd always found her atypical ebullience a great deal easier to deal with than the emotionless intellect of most of the tech-priests I'd come into contact with over the years.

'So what happened?' I asked, angling my path to intersect Jurgen's.

To my surprise Felicia fell in at my shoulder, as naturally and companionably as if we'd last seen each other a few days ago, rather than the best part of a century.

'We stumbled across this place,' she reminded me, pausing next to the metal column behind which I'd sought refuge such a short time before. 'None of the rest of you could possibly have known what it was, or cared, but once they realised a tech-priest had been inside, the project leaders got a little nervous.' I tried to picture a cabal of nervous inquisitors, and failed miserably. 'They thought I might have seen enough to work out what was going on here, so when the facility re-opened, they recruited me.'

'How very far-sighted of them,' I commented, my eye suddenly catching sight of a name engraved on the nearest face of the obelisk. It was a familiar one, Kolfax, the guide who'd led us out of the desert, only to be felled by the orks during our desperate battle here, and with a shiver I finally realised what it was which had saved my life: a memorial to the fallen of that decisive and bloody action. With a faint pang, I found I couldn't recall his face at all, or any of the others whose names had been so carefully etched into the smooth metal surface.

'Yes, it was,' Felicia agreed. 'Although they didn't realise it at first, they just had me fetching and carrying for the magi. Then they started to appreciate that what a job like this really needs is an unconventional approach.'

'Which you would most certainly have provided,' I agreed dryly.

'I did.' Felicia nodded, producing a ration bar from a pocket of her robes, and began to chew thoughtfully; clearly her habit of snacking at odd moments had remained with her, even after all these years, another character quirk most tech-priests would have regarded as eccentric at best. 'Of course some of the more conventionally-minded ones resisted giving me more responsibility at first, but they couldn't argue with the results I was getting.'

'So now you're in charge here,' I said.

Felicia chuckled, which surprised me; I'd forgotten how rich and good-humoured her laugh was, another trait which I had no doubt had failed to impress her superiors. 'Omniassiah's cogs, no. Who wants all that paperwork? I just supervise the project team.' 'Good afternoon, miss,' Jurgen said, apparently completely unsurprised to see her. But then I'd seldom seen him express surprise about anything.

'Hello, Jurgen.' Felicia wiped her hand on her robe, and proffered it in greeting. After a moment of perplexity, my aide rubbed the worst of the grime off his own, and shook it gingerly. 'You're looking well.' Which had hardly been true even the first time she'd known him, but the sentiment was a kindly one, so I couldn't really take issue with it.

'It's a pleasure to see you too, miss,' Jurgen said, with every sign of sincerity, retrieving his hand as soon as he decently could.

'Well, this is all very nice,' Felicia said, taking in the wreckage of our car, and the scattered remnants of the servitors, with a regretful sigh, 'but I suppose we'd better get down to the business which brought you here.' She began to lead the way towards the shrine, fastidiously sidestepping a few fragments of mangled flesh and metal. 'I'm sure you're anxious to get back to your war.'

The main hall of the shrine had hardly changed at all since the last time I'd seen it, the same high, airy ceiling suspended above a scattering of metallic objects I couldn't identify, arranged on plinths placed around the floor in some regular but complex pattern. As before, the lighting was diffuse, emanating from no obvious source, but somehow managing to impart an air of serenity and quiet contemplation. Nevertheless, I remained wary; the last time I'd set foot in here we'd stumbled across a messily-murdered tech-priest, then a malfunctioning killing machine had tried to take my head off.

'This way,' Felicia said, as though I might have forgotten, leading us towards the moving staircase that gave access to the control chapel on the upper level.

I glanced briefly in its direction, but the door was closed. I had no doubt that nothing had altered at all while I'd been away, though, the banks of control lecterns still flickering with arcane information as they monitored the state of the generators buried at the base of the dam, and the view of the lake and the valley beyond through the wide picture window just as spectacular as ever. That wasn't our destination, however; as we approached the foot of the escalator, Felicia raised her hand imperiously, and a section of wall moved smoothly aside, squeaking slightly on its metal runners.

'You mended that, then,' Jurgen said, nodding sagely at his own statement of the obvious. The last time we'd been here, the concealed door had been blasted open by something not dissimilar to the melta he carried, and the staircase beyond had been visible to anyone who might have wandered in out of the rain.

'We thought it best,' Felicia said evenly, 'given that what we're doing here's supposed to be a secret.' Most men would probably have taken offence at the barely-concealed amusement in her tone, but, as ever, Jurgen remained constitutionally immune to sarcasm, and simply nodded judiciously.

I must confess to hesitating for a fraction of a second before beginning my descent, but it was hard to forget the sight of all the wanton carnage I'd discovered in the complex buried beneath the shrine the last time I'd ventured down those stairs. On this occasion, however, all the white-robed acolytes of the Omniassiah that I passed were alive and well, if that phrase can be properly applied to anyone more machine than human, and the red uniformed skitarii seemed as alert as I might have expected. A couple of them were stationed at the bottom of the flight, their hellguns ready, and if Felicia hadn't been with us I'm sure they would have issued a challenge. As it was, they simply saluted as soon as they caught sight of her, receiving a friendly nod of the head in return, which seemed to disconcert them even more than a party of Chaotic raiders brandishing lasguns would have done.

'You seem reasonably well protected,' I admitted. I'd fought alongside the Mechanicus's private army on a number of occasions, and in most cases they'd acquitted themselves well. The most glaring exception being the disastrous expedition to Interitus Prime, which I'd tagged along on completely by accident, and which had been wiped out to a man by the necrons. That thought brought scant comfort, and for a moment all my paranoid imaginings about the chamber I thought I'd glimpsed on the asteroid came

rushing to the forefront of my mind again, before the more urgent demands of the here and now pushed them firmly away. We had Varan and his horde about to descend on us, that was an incontrovertible fact, and panicking about nonexistent necron tombs was hardly going to help matters.

'That's probably what the last lot thought,' Jurgen opined gloomily, and I nodded, grateful that someone else had voiced the thought before I could.

'I think you'll find we're a bit better prepared this time,' Felicia said, in a voice that was neither a threat nor a warning, but somehow managed to convey overtones of both. Clearly the Killian solution wasn't going to be an option if diplomacy failed. She paused for a moment before a wide bronze door, did something to a locking plate with the old mehadendrite which still grew from the base of her spine, and stood aside as the portal swung open. 'After you.'

'Ladies first,' I riposted; there was no telling what might be waiting inside.

Felicia laughed. 'You haven't changed a bit,' she said, more accurately than she knew, and led the way into the room beyond. After taking a couple of paces, she glanced back at me, a challenging smile on her lips. 'Come on then. As you've come all this way, you might as well see what we've managed to put together.'

'Wait here, Jurgen,' I said quietly. For one thing, I'd feel a lot happier with him watching my back, and for another, the Shadowlight had always lost its power whenever he'd got close to it. So far as I was aware, no one here knew he was a blank, and that was a secret I was determined to keep, partly because Amberley would get seriously snitty if her most precious asset became public knowledge<sup>1</sup>, and partly because if I did end up having to steal the bloody thing to keep it safe, I didn't want to blow the main advantage we had, which was that no one here knew Jurgen could handle it safely without taking all kinds of special precautions.

'Coming,' I replied, entering the chamber behind her, then stopped still, staring in wonderment. For the first time in sixty years I was close enough to the Shadowlight to have reached out and touched it, but I was so astonished by what else was in the room that I barely noticed.

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<sup>1</sup> Annoyed, most certainly: I do not, nor ever have, become "snitty"!

## FOURTEEN

'WELL?' Felicia asked, stepping aside to afford me a better view. 'What do you think?'

'I'm not sure,' I admitted cautiously, taking another step forward to stand beside her. Mindful of the nausea which had assailed me whenever I'd got too close to the Shadowlight before, not to mention the mess that was left of Killian after he'd fallen under its baleful influence, I still kept a fair amount of distance between me and it, though, you can be sure of that. To my faint surprise I still felt no ill effects, but, determined not to push my luck, advanced no further. 'What's that thing it's standing on?'

'We're still not entirely sure,' Felicia acknowledged cheerfully, 'but it's impressive, isn't it?'

'Impressive is hardly the word,' I agreed, as levelly as I could. Terrifying would be closer to the mark, if you asked me. The whole thing seemed utterly unnatural, and I could practically feel the presence of the warp in the room with us, coiling about the artefact like a serpent preparing to strike.

But I'm getting ahead of myself; I suppose I should have started out by describing the thing. Without setting down the unsettling effect that the sight of it had on me first, however, it would be difficult to convey how profoundly disconcerting it was to look upon; something no mere description of its physical form could possibly hope to do.

The first thing I recognised was the Shadowlight, of course, still looking like a slab of polished stone, roughly the size of a data-slate, into which light seemed to fall like water into a sponge. This time, however, it was resting in a narrow slot cut into the top of a pedestal of shining crystal, which held it upright, more or less level with my belt buckle, surrounded by three polished spheres of some strange blue mineral which looked uncannily like solid water, roughly the size of my fist. These all rested in circular depressions in the glowing surface of the crystal pillar; other holes, identical in size and shape, were left vacant, and I pointed them out, more to show I was paying attention than because I expected to understand what they meant. 'Looks like you've got a few more of those ball things to find before you can complete the set,' I said.

'Hm,' Felicia replied. 'We thought that too, at first, but then we realised the spheres are controls of some kind. Look.'

Before I could protest, she'd reached out with a mechadendrite, and plucked one from its resting place, depositing it in another depression close to its original position. I couldn't have said why, exactly, but my skin prickled, as though there was a static charge in the air, and for a moment I felt a faint throbbing against the inside of my temples, like the ghostly presentiment of a forthcoming headache.

'What did you do?' I asked, fighting the impulse to draw my weapons again in response to the air of untrammelled sorcery which had suddenly permeated the room.

Felicia shrugged. 'I haven't the faintest idea,' she said. 'But it's interesting, don't you think?' The soft refulgence of the crystal pillar had changed, faint bands of colour rippling in the whiteness of it, like the patterns on a large body of water at sunset. The effect was almost hypnotic, and I dragged my eyes away with an effort, feeling the baleful influence of the warp reaching out for me through the strange device. It seemed incredible that Felicia hadn't felt it too, but she seemed completely unconcerned: probably because by now she was more machine than human, and accordingly less sensitive to the presence of the abnatural.

'We know that the Shadowlight could boost psychic powers all on its own,' I said, conscious that I was prattling to try and calm my own nerves, and uncomfortably aware that the tech-priest knew me well enough to have probably noticed the fact.

'That's right, we do.' She nodded in agreement. 'So far as we've been able to determine, it collects and focuses energy directly from the empyrean, presumably for the rest of the system to make use of.'

'Which makes it dangerous enough just on its own,' I said. 'Believe me, I've seen what that lump of rock can do, and it isn't pretty.'

'I don't doubt that,' Felicia replied dryly. 'I've read the report of how you helped recover it<sup>1</sup>.'

'Then you'll know I've got valid grounds for concern,' I shot back, taking in the rest of our surroundings for the first time. The peculiar xenos device had naturally attracted the bulk of my attention, but now I became aware that the walls were covered with flat shards of stone, polished almost as smooth as the Shadowlight, but, thank the Emperor, without any sign of its more unsettling properties. Each was covered in angular scratches, which I felt vaguely repelled by, without ever quite being able to put my finger on why that might be. I walked across to examine the nearest, not because I was particularly interested, but because it gave me a reasonable excuse to put a bit of distance between myself and the Shadowlight. 'What are these?'

'The instruction manual, we think,' Felicia said, staring at them with a peculiar expression I can only describe as "hungry" on her face. (At least, as much of her face as was still capable of expression, of course.) 'But it's not been that easy to translate.'

'I imagine not,' I replied, remembering the comments that Mott, Amberley's savant, had made about the enigmatic records during our pursuit of the artefact on Peririmunda. A few similar finds had been made on worlds across the entire breadth of the galaxy, I recalled vaguely, left by a civilisation which had been gone for aeons even before humanity first evolved back on the primeval plains of Holy Terra, but without any common frame of reference very little progress had been made in translating them<sup>2</sup>. Struck by my earlier thought, that the only surviving presence from those days which we still knew about was the necrons, I looked at the slab a little more closely, finding to my inexpressible relief no trace of the peculiar tracery of circles and lines which seems to serve those hellspawned machine creatures as some kind of script.<sup>3</sup>

'So you still haven't got a clue what this thing's for,' I concluded, and Felicia shrugged.

<sup>1</sup> A somewhat abridged version, anyway - there were certain aspects of our activities on Peririmunda which our Adeptus Mechanicus partners in the project most definitely didn't need to know.

<sup>2</sup> And what meaning has been assigned to some of the symbols is conjectural at best.

<sup>3</sup> Although, given their fixity of purpose, and apparent lack of free will, why they would bother writing anything down is beyond me.

'I wouldn't say that, exactly,' she replied, in a manner which in most people I would have found distinctly evasive, 'but I think you need to talk to the rest of the team before I tell you any more. The situation here's a bit complicated.'

'Of course it is,' I said, sighing. For a moment I was almost nostalgic for my youthful days of dodging orks across the landscape of Perlia, which, though unpleasant enough at the time, had at least been straightforward; all I'd had to worry about then was going as fast as possible, and shooting everything green I came across along the way.

'Well then, I suppose we'd better get to it,' Felicia said, turning away from the infernal device at last, and leading the way towards the door. I followed as quickly as I decently could, inhaling the familiar odour of festering socks and unwashed hair almost gratefully as I gained the corridor, and the closing portal finally cut off the sight of that balefully glowing pedestal.

'Commissar.' Jurgen greeted me, his melta still held ready for action, to my mingled relief and amusement. Clearly, despite the unexpected appearance of an old friend, he was unwilling to discount the possibility of further trouble before we left. Quite wisely, too, in my opinion; everyone here would be well aware of what had happened the last time an inquisitor had demanded access to the Shadowlight, and would no doubt be on their guard for the slightest sign of treachery from either of us. Not that we had any intention of trying to seize the wretched thing by force, of course, particularly after seeing how bulky the assembled mechanism was now, but it's what I'd be thinking in their position, so I could hardly blame them if they were as paranoid as I am. 'Everything all right?'

'Up to a point,' I told him carefully. 'Moving it would no longer appear to be a realistic option.' Not now that Orelus and his ship, along with the heavy lifting servitors from the cargo holds we'd have needed to lug the wretched thing about in the first place, were well out of the system, and high-tailing it along the warp currents to wherever he was due to meet Amberley.<sup>1</sup>

Overhearing the exchange, Felicia looked smug. 'I've set up a meeting in the conference room,' she said, although how she'd managed that while we'd been together I had no idea; presumably she had some kind of internal vox unit which she'd been able to use during our conversation, in spite of the distraction that must have afforded. (When I asked her later, she said it was something to do with her cerebral implants, which let her think about a multitude of things at the same time; a sacrament she referred to as "multitasking".)<sup>2</sup>

'Good,' I replied, masking my surprise as best I could. 'The sooner we get things sorted out here the better.'

'Do you want me to accompany you, sir?' Jurgen asked, and I shook my head.

'Best to stay outside and watch the door,' I told him tactfully. I was going to have to work hard enough to bring the people here inside as it was, and having my aide at my shoulder brandishing a melta was hardly going to help win their confidence. 'We won't want to be disturbed while we're discussing things.'

'Quite so,' Felicia agreed, keeping the fleshly part of her face completely deadpan.

After a few more words of little consequence she led me along a corridor I didn't recognise (but then I hadn't explored much of the underground complex when we first discovered it, and I was certain that it had been considerably enlarged in the eighty years or so since my last visit; something about the echoes and the circulation of the air felt different to my hiver's instincts), eventually fetching up in front of a polished wooden door. This alone was enough to tell me that we'd crossed over into the Inquisition side of the complex, as cogboys prefer the all-metal look when it comes to matters of interior design, and I began to breathe a little more easily. I might not be about to find allies here, but at least they should be willing to listen to what I had to say.

I left Jurgen outside, accompanied by a couple of hellgun-toting skitarii (who were probably wishing they had augmetic noses by now, to go with the ocular implants they both sported), which left me in little doubt that at least the Mechanicus side of the partnership still harboured misgivings about the purity of our intentions. Felicia barely glanced at the scarlet-uniformed troopers before pushing the doors open and inviting me inside, though, so perhaps the guards were simply meant as a courtesy after all.<sup>3</sup>

My first impression was a mixed one, of both familiarity and oddness. The basic layout of the room was conventional enough, with a long table down the centre, flanked by chairs, and a crimson carpet on the floor, into which the familiar barred I of the inquisition had been worked in grey, surrounded by the cogwheel of the Adeptus Mechanicus in white. Instead of wood, however, the table was of burnished bronze, with the interlinked sigils engraved into its upper surface, chased in gold. The only wooden furniture in the room was a small side table, containing a silver tray on which a couple of decanters and a handful of crystal goblets stood invitingly, and a lacquered cabinet, in which the mingled symbols of the two institutions had been incorporated, and which long experience of such places led me to believe was the normal resting place of the drinks. The seats around the table were of metal, but those on one side had been provided with cushions, so even if the room were empty, I would have been able to deduce quite easily that these were the ones generally used by the Inquisition delegates to the partnership.

In fact, though, it was pretty obvious which parties habitually sat where, since most of the seats were occupied. As Felicia and I entered the chamber, a dozen faces glanced up in our direction; those on the left showing clear signs of augmetic enhancement, those on the right generally unmodified, but almost as unreadable. All but one of the Mechanicus delegation were wearing the white robes of their calling, of course, but none that I could see were as elaborately ornamented as Felicia's, so it hardly surprised me when they nodded in unison, with a respectful murmur of "Magos", and she took her place at the head of the table. There wasn't a chair there, but it didn't seem to bother her; another habit she seemed to have retained from the days when I'd known her rather better was to perch on the mechadendrite attached to the bottom of her spine, using it as a makeshift seat.

'You told me you weren't in charge here,' I said easily, circling the table to get to the drinks. For one thing I needed one, after all the excitement since our arrival, and for another it gave me a chance to study the other people in the room without appearing to stall for time. I wouldn't be able to tell much about most of them, of course, but if I could pick out a few individuals I could read

<sup>1</sup> Void station Delta Sigma Novem, if anybody cares.

<sup>2</sup> Something most women have been perfectly able to do since the dawn of history in any case, much to the bemusement of men.

<sup>3</sup> Somehow, I doubt that.



easily, it would help me to get a feel for how well the meeting was going. Or, knowing my luck, how badly.

'I'm not,' Felicia said. 'I'm supervising the technothological side of the enterprise, but this concilium sets matters of policy, and the Inquisition scribes take care of the paperwork.'

The tech-priests were all looking at me blankly, with about as much expression as a necron, but the single exception on that side of the table I'd noticed before, a dark-haired man in the crimson uniform of a skitarii officer, was gazing in my direction with an air of wary respect, no doubt aware of my reputation. I nodded an affable greeting, which, after a moment, he returned; that was a good sign, so I made a show of pouring myself a measure of the rather indifferent amasec the decanter had disappointingly turned out to contain (after all my years as an occasional associate of Amberley's entourage, I'd got used to the idea that Inquisition operatives tended to make the most of life's little luxuries)<sup>1</sup>, and smiled at the assembled company in the open and friendly fashion I was so good at feigning. 'Anyone else like one while I'm up?' I asked.

No one did, so I made for one of the vacant seats on the Inquisition side of the line. I'd already as good as declared my covert allegiance to the organisation in any case, so there was no point in dissembling further, and there was no seat on the only neutral table edge, opposite Felicia, anyhow. I took the closest empty chair to where she was sitting, partly because it was obvious that her opinion would have a great deal of influence on the assembled tech-priests, and partly because that placed me as far as possible from the young man with the glassy expression and the unruly thatch of brown hair sitting almost opposite the skitarii captain. I'd met enough psykers in my life to be wary of them, even a sanctionite, as he clearly was. Just as well I'd left Jurgen outside, I thought.

'In case you don't know,' Felicia said, with just enough seriousness for me to be sure that she was treating my presence here as a bit of a joke again, 'this is my old friend Ciaphas Cain. Hero of the Imperium, Liberator of Perlia, all that stuff you see on the statue plinths.' She cocked her head quizzically. 'And, apparently, a covert acolyte, working for Inquisitor Vail. Care to clarify that, commissar?'

'As much as I can,' I said, doing the open honest face again. I was well aware of how much the Inquisition group would enjoy their little cloak and dagger games, and how fiercely they'd jockey for position in their shadowy hierarchy, so it would be as well to hint that I knew stuff they weren't privy to. 'Though I'm not really an acolyte as such. Inquisitor Vail's a personal friend, and I've occasionally been in a position to help her out a bit, that's all.' The hard-faced man on my left nodded thoughtfully, clearly convinced that I was far deeper into the inner mysteries of the Ordo Xenos than he was. 'Knowing this, her last emissary asked me to pick up where he left off, when he was forced to leave the system during the first incursion.'

'I've read the report,' Hard-face said evenly. After a moment he stuck out a hand. 'As we seem to be skipping the introductions, I'm Terie Makan, head of project security.' He exchanged an awkward look with the skitarii officer. 'On the Inquisition side, obviously. Captain Yaitz handles things for the Mechanicus.'

'Sieur Makan.' I shook his hand, adjusting the smile a little. The look that passed between the two men had told me a good deal, mainly that they were willing to co-operate with each other, but with a certain degree of reservation on both sides. To everyone's surprise, I then nodded to Yaitz, down the length of the table. 'Captain Yaitz. I look forward to working more closely with the two of you.' Their almost identical expressions of surprise told me that this was an equally unexpected development for both men.

'Are we to infer from that remark that the ridiculous idea your rogue trader friend proposed has been shelved?' one of the tech-priests asked.

I nodded. 'Magos Tayber has been good enough to show me the assembled artefact,' I said, Felicia's formal title sounding slightly strange issuing from my own mouth. 'It's quite clear to me that there's no realistic prospect of removing it to a safer location now, at least in the time we have available.' A mingled air of relief and smugness began to radiate from the cogboy side of the table, and a faint tingle of alarm began to manifest over in the Inquisition section.

'Then we need to take steps to ensure its security,' Makan said, looking uncomfortably like a man who's just bitten his own tongue. 'Precisely why I'm here,' I assured him. 'Whatever happens, we must keep the Shadowlight out of Varan's hands. Even if that means destroying it ourselves.'

I half expected the room to erupt at that point, but instead all I could hear was the faint hiss of indrawn breath from around the table. (Well, most of the table. I suspect some of the tech-priests were beyond such human frailties as breathing.)

'That would be very much our last resort, of course,' I said, after a moment, and everyone relaxed again.

'I'm not entirely sure that we could destroy it, even if we wanted to,' one of the tech-priests ventured after a moment. 'It's already survived aeons of geological upheaval, without so much as a scratch. I hardly think a conventional explosion would do it much harm.'

'Killian seemed to think a plasma bolt might hurt it,' I ventured hopefully.

'Killian was an imbecile,' Makan said, which seemed to be something everyone agreed on, Inquisition and Mechanicus alike. 'He didn't have the faintest conception of what he was dealing with.'

'Lunatics seldom do,' I pointed out evenly. 'Which brings us back to the Chaos horde about to descend on this planet. They're about as mad as you can get, by definition, and you can be sure Varan won't hesitate to muck about with the thing if he manages to get his hands on it.' I paused. 'And even if, by some miracle, he does resist the temptation, Abaddon most certainly won't.'

'The Despoiler?' The young psyker spoke for the first time, his voice faintly reedy, as though listening to some distant music in his head. 'You think he has a direct hand in this?'

'Who knows?' I shrugged, trying to seem bluff and businesslike, and mask the terror which had almost overwhelmed me at the thought of attracting the attention of the worst piece of walking malevolence to hit the galaxy since Horus's day. 'Varan undoubtedly answers to him, at any rate. All the warmasters do.'

'True.' Yaitz nodded in agreement. 'The one advantage we still have is that they're presumably unaware of the device's existence.'

'Unfortunately, that might not be the case,' I said, provoking another windstorm of wordless consternation around the table. 'Our

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<sup>1</sup> And why not, since life turns out to be depressingly short for so many of them.

best intelligence would indicate that Perlia has been deliberately targeted by Varan's flotilla. No one in the defence force has any idea why, but I think we all know what there is here which would tempt a raiding force to cross almost the entire galaxy in an attempt to reach it.'

'But how could they know about the Shadowlight?' Yaitz asked, with a pointed look at Makan. 'It's supposed to be one of the most securely kept secrets in the segmentum.'

'It is.' The security man nodded briskly. 'But secrets have an uncomfortable habit of getting out. Innumerable people have rotated through here in the last few hundred years, from both our institutions. It would only take one to let something slip, or fall into the hands of the enemy.'

'I can assure you, no servant of the Ommissiah would ever be so indiscreet,' Yaitz said frostily.

'My money's on Killian,' I said, stepping in quickly to defuse the incipient argument. In fact I had no idea how the secret had got out, nor did I particularly care, but I'd been a commissar long enough to know that division in our own ranks would be worth an extra company of traitor marines to the enemy. 'He was sponsoring a Chaos cult on Pererimunda, to recruit potential psykers for his lunatic scheme. If any of them survived the purges, they could have spread the word.'

To my relief, everyone around the table seemed to be buying it, accepting Killian as the designated scapegoat without further argument. 'What really worries me is the prospect of Varan, or Abaddon, or anyone else for that matter, picking up where he left off. They wouldn't hesitate to turn out wyrds in industrial quantities if they could, and Emperor alone knows how much harm that could do.'

'It would destroy the galaxy,' the young psyker said quietly, his voice somehow resonating all the more for its lack of volume.

'Master Sparsen may be exaggerating,' Makan began, 'but...'

'I'm not exaggerating in the least,' the pale young man I assured him. 'The power of the warp would flow through them, untrammelled by the wards the blessing of the Emperor places in the minds of his true servants. Aside from the harm they'd do directly, many would become possessed by daemons and worse, allowing the full horrors of the empyrean to rampage unchecked among the stars. Within two generations, the Eye of Terror would grow to swallow us all.' His voice was no louder than before, but it was the expression of absolute horror on his face that convinced me. Here was a man who gazed into the depths of the warp on a daily basis, and wouldn't be lightly moved by what he saw there, and he was clearly convinced that he spoke no more than the literal truth.

'Then let's make sure it doesn't come to that,' Felicia said calmly, and the young psyker nodded.

'That would be best,' he said quietly.

'If we can't remove the Shadowlight, and we can't destroy it, we'll just have to make sure the enemy can't get their hands on it,' I said evenly. 'Captain Yaitz, perhaps we could confer afterwards about our options for defending this installation. I'm sure you have some ideas in that regard.'

'I do.' Yaitz nodded. 'And I'm sure your own experience of engaging the enemy here would prove invaluable in assessing them. You probably have some suggestions of your own, too.'

'Well, I suppose we could blow up the dam again,' I said, being careful to inflect the remark like a joke, 'but I suspect they'll be ready for that.' I know I would be, if I'd heard about the earlier battle on this site, and if Varan and his confederates hadn't already, they certainly would do almost as soon as they set foot on Perlia. Cain's Last Stand, as the locals both flatteringly and erroneously insist on calling the engagement, is a legend on this generally rather dull little world, and has spawned innumerable books, pict dramas, holos and picturestrips, each one more exaggerated and inaccurate than the last.

'We'll set some demo charges anyway,' Felicia said decisively, taking me aback rather, given how stropky she'd been the first time I'd breached the dam. It seemed that time, and greater responsibility, had grafted a stronger streak of pragmatism into her, along with all the augmetic junk. 'If they're dumb enough to fall for it again, we might as well be prepared to take advantage of the fact.' She gazed levelly at the assembled tech-priests, as if waiting for a challenge to her authority. None of them spoke, but most of them were clearly far from happy at the prospect. 'We can always build another dam, but there's only one Shadowlight.'

'Thank the Emperor,' I muttered, rather more loudly than I'd intended, and turned to Makan. 'I'd like you to sit in on the discussion too,' I added. 'I'm sure you've done a thorough threat assessment, which ought to cover most of the likely scenarios.'

'Everything from the orks coming back to a hrud migration,' he assured me, 'or a coup d'etat by tau-backed secessionists. Lines of approach, infiltration of the staff by enemy sympathisers, you name it.' Aware of the hard stares being directed at him from all quarters of the room, he shrugged defiantly. 'I'm not saying anyone is a traitor, just that I've drawn up contingency plans for dealing with that possibility, along with anything else I could think of. It's my job.'

'Which we should all thank the Emperor you take as seriously as you so clearly do,' I put in, smoothing over the awkward moment as effortlessly as my training and lifetime of experience allowed me to. 'Does anyone else have anything to add that might be useful?'

'Only that the completed device is far more than a psychic amplifier,' Felicia put in. She glanced around the table, waiting for a challenge again, and relaxed almost imperceptibly when one failed to materialise. The next time she spoke it was directly to me.

'We're still far from understanding its true purpose, but we are beginning to form some tentative conclusions.'

'That's right,' another of the tech-priests chimed in. 'As Magos Tayber might have explained already, the Shadowlight component draws directly on the power of the warp, which appears to be why it can boost or activate latent psychic abilities.'

'She has,' I confirmed. 'Go on.'

'The rest of the device seems to be a system for focussing that energy,' Felicia said, giving her talkative underling the sort of look I used to reserve for Gunner Ehrlsen, my most regular disciplinary problem back in the relatively carefree days I'd spent in the 12th Field Artillery. 'What it was originally intended to achieve we're still not entirely sure, but if we're right, it can alter the very fabric of reality.'

'Holy Throne!' I said involuntarily, seeing Sparsen's horrifying vision of the future suddenly transformed into a relatively optimistic picture by comparison. Instead of taking the better part of a century to annihilate the galaxy, it seemed the Shadowlight

could do the job in little more than an eye blink if it fell into the wrong hands. Whatever Felicia might have to say about it, or Amberley too, come to that, I determined then and there to find some way of destroying the cursed thing before it was too late. 'Why would anyone build a monstrosity like that?'

'Out of fear,' another Inquisitorial delegate chimed in. She was a sharp-featured young woman in the habit of a sister of the Ordo Dialogus, presumably charged with the thankless task of making some kind of sense of the chicken scratches I'd observed on the tablets lining the walls of the chamber in which the Shadowlight now resided. 'We know from some of the fragments recovered at other sites across the galaxy that the Ancients were at war. Who or what with we have no idea, although some scholars have speculated that the character most frequently associated with the enemy can be transliterated into Gothic as *Katarn* or *C'tan*.'

'Never heard of them,' I said, with some relief: at least it wasn't the damned necrons.

'Both sides appear to have been wiped out in the war,' the sister said. 'Complete mutual annihilation. Only the occasional relic of the Ancients survives, and nothing at all of the *C'tan*<sup>1</sup>. But there are legends among the eldar which might possibly have their roots in that conflict. Of course the pointy-eared limpwrists are too far up their own fundamentals to share any useful knowledge with us lesser breeds, but we have managed to find a few bits of information which might be relevant through some rather unorthodox channels.'

Meaning Inquisition assets, presumably. It wasn't entirely unknown for individual eldar to co-operate with members of the Ordo Xenos on very rare occasions: Amberley spoke their tongue tolerably well, and I recalled her mentioning that she'd learned it on one such enterprise, the details of which she never confided in me<sup>2</sup>, so I assumed that the forthright sister had been able to make use of some similar line of contact. She'd probably get on well with Julien, I thought fleetingly, before returning my mind to more pressing concerns.

'Information about the Shadowlight?' I hazarded, more to give the impression that I was still on top of things than because I expected to be able to understand the answer.

'Possibly,' the sharp-featured sister said. 'According to some rather obscure passages in the *Lay of Kelce*, the Ancients may have attempted to tap into the power of the warp directly, in an attempt to defend themselves against their enemies. Some eldar scholars even believe that it was this which first unleashed the curse of Chaos on the galaxy.'

'A far-fetched piece of speculation, which Sister Rosetta seems to take considerably more seriously than it warrants,' Felicia said firmly, receiving a most unbeatific glare in return.

'Given how old and powerful the artefact undoubtedly is, it would be unwise in the extreme to ignore the possibility, that's all I'm saying,' Rosetta said, with the air of someone who said it quite often.

As I considered the full import of her words, I felt my bowels turn to water, and had to muster all my willpower not to let my consternation show on my face. Just when I'd been thinking the situation couldn't possibly get any worse, too. 'It seems to me that whether it's true or not, you should be proceeding with the utmost caution,' I said carefully.

'Don't worry, we are,' Felicia assured me breezily, which signally failed to make me feel any better. I knew her headstrong streak of old, and had little doubt that if all seemed lost, she'd take a chance on activating the thing just to see what happened. Worse still, Emperor help me, I'd probably let her, if there seemed to be the slightest chance that it might work.

Well, that was a problem for another day. Right now, as Felicia had pointed out back on the piazza, so soon after our arrival, Jurgan and I had a war to get back to.

I nodded thoughtfully. 'It seems to me, then, that we'd best leave you to your researches.' After all, they hadn't managed to blow up the galaxy so far, despite decades of doing their best, and if there was even the remotest chance that Felicia and her people could find a way of using the device reasonably safely against our enemies, we might still be desperate enough to try it once the invasion started. Even if there wasn't, it would keep them occupied, and out from under my feet. I glanced at Makan and Yaitz as I rose. 'I presume there's somewhere we can thrash out our defensive strategies without bothering everyone else, gentlemen?' And get Jurgan out of the corridor before Sparsen encountered him, more to the point.

'My office is nearest,' Makan said, clearly prepared for an objection from his opposite number, but Yaitz simply nodded his agreement.

'It would save a little time,' he conceded, evidently prepared to co-operate to the best of his ability.

'Good,' I said, in my best Cain the Hero manner. 'Then let's get to it.' I nodded at Felicia. 'No doubt I'll see you again before we leave.'

'You will if you don't want to walk back to Chilinvale,' she agreed cheerfully. 'That car of yours looks as though it's going to be difficult to start.'

## Editorial Note:

*Evidently Cain, or, more likely, Jurgan, did manage to find some form of transport, because by the time his narrative resumes his ostensible tour of inspection has concluded. Typically, he is as vague as ever about the passage of time, but from other references in the text we can infer that roughly three days have passed in the interim.*

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, in the light of more recent events, this no longer appears to be the case.

<sup>2</sup> With very good reason; anyone with sufficiently high clearance may find the details in the restricted archives of the Damocles Conclave, filed as *The Stanvind Affair*.

## FIFTEEN

'LET ME GET this straight,' Visiter said, with an air of vague bafflement. We were standing on the schola's shuttle pad, our voices sufficiently muffled by the roar of the Aquila's engines as Sprie powered them up in preparation for take-off to render the conversation as proof against eavesdropping as I felt able to contrive, which was why I'd gone to see the Commodore off in the first place. At our last strategy meeting he'd argued quite forcefully that there was no point in him attempting to co-ordinate a war in space from down here on the ground, and, accordingly, was preparing to take up residence aboard one of the SDF gunboats, which had put in for supplies just in time to find itself unexpectedly promoted to the flagship of Visiter's makeshift space fleet. 'You're plannin' to evacuate the schola to some Mechanicus shrine in the middle of nowhere?'

'I'm hoping it won't come to that,' I told him, truthfully enough. 'But if we do have to cut and run, there won't be a lot of choice about where to go. It's remote enough for the enemy to have trouble catching up, and it's ground I've fought over before, which gives us as much of an advantage as we're likely to get.' I could hardly tell him the real reason I wanted to concentrate as many of our forces in the Valley of Daemons as I could was to defend a secret Inquisition facility, so had decided that this was a reasonable excuse for making it our fallback position. Certainly the battle plan I'd managed to cook up with Yaitz and Makan's help made it seem readily defensible, which went some way towards casting a sheen of verisimilitude over our necessary deception.

'Fair point,' Visiter conceded. He put down the kitbag that, up until that point, he'd been carrying over his shoulder, and rummaged inside it for a data-slate. 'I've managed to put an evacuation plan together in case you do have to pull out.' He kicked a couple of files across to my own slate, which I resolved to peruse at the earliest opportunity, and glanced at the Aquila's cockpit, behind the armourcrys windshield of which the redheaded naval cadet could be discerned, still working methodically through his pre-flight checks. 'Good luck to you all.'

'And to you,' I replied sincerely. Preparing to go into battle inside a thin shell of metal surrounded by an almost infinite amount of nothing at all has always struck me as a really bad idea, but it was obvious from his body language that Visiter couldn't wait to get back aboard a ship, even one as fragile and undergunned as a system defence boat; but then I suppose he'd got used to shipboard life during his long and illustrious career with the Navy, and settling down on a planet somewhere had given him itchy feet.<sup>1</sup> 'The Emperor protects.'

I trotted out the tired old formula by rote, without even thinking, then found myself hoping that in this particular instance it would turn out to be true.

Visiter saluted, shouldered his ditty bag<sup>2</sup> again, and walked up the ramp as I returned the gesture. Once he was inside and out of sight I turned away, retreating to a safe distance while the Aquila lifted, and watched it rise until it was little more than a fast-moving dot against the clear mountain sky.

'One down,' I told myself, and went to look for Rorkins. The schola had become even more infused with militant purposefulness than usual in my absence, and if it hadn't been for the youthfulness of most of the faces I passed, I might almost have been back on an Imperial Guard post somewhere. Even the youngest residents were preparing as best they could, learning to fold bandages and recharge ammo packs, although several of them seemed distinctly disappointed that they wouldn't be allowed to carry guns; desperate as we were, we hadn't quite reached the stage where arming five-year-olds seemed like a particularly good idea.

'Commissar.' Maklin was approaching me, a data-slate in his hand, and an air of eager expectation hovering about him. 'I've got the tactical updates you asked for.'

'Good.' I took the slate without looking at it, as there would be time to wade through the details later, and gestured for the cadet to walk with me. 'What's the bottom line?' I took it for granted that he'd have skimmed through the files before bringing them to me, in the expectation that I'd ask for a summary, and I wasn't disappointed; like all of them, he was learning fast.

'Our state of readiness has improved,' he said cautiously, with the air of someone refraining from adding 'but...'

I nodded, and did it for him. 'But that's not saying a lot,' I said.

'I'm afraid so,' Maklin agreed. 'Most of the PDF are as prepared as they're ever going to be in the time we've got, but the vast majority are still undertrained and underequipped. And they look like stormtroopers compared to the militia.'

'I don't doubt that,' I said, then sensing that his mood had darkened, I clapped him on the back. 'Luckily they've got us to keep them up to the mark. You'll have more than earned your sash by the time this is over, I'm sure.' For a moment I thought the faintly goofy grin on his face meant that I'd successfully boosted his morale, then I followed the direction of his gaze.

'Cain. Seen the commodore off yet?' Sister Julien asked. She was in full powered armour again, leading a group of her most senior novices in the battered practice sets towards the firing range. The contrast between the scarred and pitted ceramite, on which votive icons were still visible, despite decades of being bashed about, and the fresh complexions of the teenage girls wearing them was marked, and rather poignant; I found myself thinking they should have been worrying about acne and scrumball at that age, not how to field strip a bolter and the best way of disembowelling a heretic with their sarissas.

'Just now,' I said, glancing up at the faint contrail marking the shuttle's passage towards orbit.

'Well, good luck to him,' Julien said, making the sign of the aquila.

'He's going to need every bit of it,' I agreed. I'd had Kayla analysing the intelligence Orelus had supplied about the size and disposition of the enemy fleet, which had proven to be every bit as vague as he'd intimated, but which was at least better than nothing, and even her most optimistic estimate of the forces now ranged against us was far larger than anything Visiter might be

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Visiter was void born, which might have accounted for his eagerness to get back into space.

<sup>2</sup> A naval term for a kitbag; it's not in use among the Imperial Guard, so presumably Cain picked it up from Visiter.



able to bring to battle. We'd just have to hope that the hit and run tactics he'd advocated would turn out to be effective. 'I see you haven't been idle while I've been away either.'

'We've done our best,' Julien said. 'The schola was designed to be defensible, of course, but not against a full-scale planetary assault.' To Maklin's evident delight she fell in at my shoulder, continuing to talk on the move, and her gaggle of charges followed, with a clattering of armoured boots and a whining of servos that echoed from the walls surrounding us.

'Visiter's given us an exit strategy,' I said, 'in case we need it.' No point yet in saying that I thought we would, as filling the Valley of Daemons with troops too early would be tantamount to holding up a sign saying "It's Over Here!" when the enemy arrived.

'Good.' Julien nodded, and bounded over a sandbagged autocannon emplacement, which had narrowed the entrance to one of the inner courtyards to a choke point, landing with a clatter like someone dropping a plateful of rivets. Probably never having seen an expert in power armour using the enhanced strength and agility it gave them, and certainly not with such casual ease, Maklin's jaw dropped, though not nearly as much as those of the arbiters cadets manning the thing, as the Celestian soared over their heads. To my relief, and evidently that of the arbitrator cadets manqué, her charges declined to follow, filing through the gap in good order. 'We can hold out here indefinitely against civil disorder or an unruly mob, but a determined assault by disciplined troops would be another matter entirely.'

'Quite so,' I said, as we reached the archway on the far side of the quadrangle. Our paths diverged here, but she hesitated, clearly intent on prolonging the conversation.

'Monyka,' Julien called.

One of the novitiates, her face lightly dusted with freckles, broke off from a conversation with Maklin, and glanced in the sister's direction, manifestly unsure of whether her drifting attention merited a rebuke. 'You're in charge. Twice round the assault course, then on to the firing range. I'll join you in a moment.'

'Yes, sister.' Clearly unable to believe her luck in being presented with a chance to show off in front of Maklin, Monyka beckoned the rest of the group forward. With a chorus of shrieks and yells, which wouldn't have disgraced an ork mob, though in a much higher register, the whole pack of them bounded away towards the butts.

'Well, I don't know how the enemy will react to a charge like that,' I said eventually, 'but they terrify me.'

'Me too,' Julien said, but the bantering tone in her voice sounded a lot more forced than mine did. (Then again, I'd had a lot more practice at pretending to an ease I didn't feel.) She glanced around, making sure we wouldn't be overheard. 'But I hope you've got a good fallback position in mind. If the raiders you faced in Havendown are typical of what's going to be thrown at us, we can't hold this place for long.'

'That's the big question,' I agreed. 'They were clearly recent converts to the enemy cause, but I'm still not sure if they were assigned to the attack because they hadn't had time to degenerate into the sort of mindless horde we usually face, or because they were considered more expendable than the long-serving acolytes.'

'Probably both,' Julien said sourly. 'They were obviously as deranged as the rest of them in any case.'

'Quite so,' I agreed. 'I'll check with Nelys, see if the interrogations of the survivors have yielded anything I useful yet.' Not that I expected it to, but even the slimmest piece of information might give us an edge at I this stage. After making our farewells to one another, Julien went off to round up her shrieking charges, and Maklin and I resumed our progress towards the main classrooms, which had been requisitioned by Rorkins as a command centre, much to the displeasure of the non-military teaching staff.

'Ah, commissar.' As we skirted the main Administratum block, Brasker popped out of a shadowed doorway, with an abruptness which reminded me uncomfortably of the genestealers we'd encountered aboard the mining station (though of course he didn't rip anybody's head off.) 'I wonder if I might have a quick word? Your budget sheet for the sowingtide semester is considerably overdue, and you're somewhat elusive these days to say the least.'

'I'm sorry, Bursar,' I said, injecting what I thought was the right amount of irritation into my voice for Maklin's benefit, 'but I've been rather busy with defending the planet.' Then I hesitated, apparently on the verge of pushing past him. 'Oh, very well, let's sort it out now by all means. I'm sure the enemy will delay their assault while I fill out a few forms.'

'That might be the best course of action,' Brasker agreed, apparently as impervious to sarcasm as Jurgen, and stood aside to admit me. 'If we are to undergo a period of upheaval in the near future, it would be as well to make sure the files are all in order beforehand. Perhaps we could discuss it in my office, rather than conducting our business out here; I'm sure you'd feel more comfortable.' If I still harboured any doubts that his real reason for accosting me was in connection with the delicate commission I'd entrusted him with, they evaporated at that point.

I turned to the cadet accompanying me. 'This may take a few minutes,' I said. 'Could you go and find Col... Commander Rorkins, and let him know I'd like a quick word whenever it's convenient?' Of course I could just barge in on the former stormtrooper at any time I liked, but I preferred to observe the proprieties, and it got Maklin out of the way. He went trotting off happily enough, no doubt grateful for the chance to moon over Monyka for a few uninterrupted minutes, and I followed Brasker into his den.

Like his living quarters, they were surprisingly tidy, and I made myself comfortable in the visitor's chair in front of his desk while I looked around, vaguely surprised that in all my years attached to this institution I'd never set foot in here before. The walls were lined with bookshelves, of course, and racks of data-slates, but the personal cogitator on his desk was well-used, and there was no sign of the fusty ledgers I'd expected to see scattered about. I looked more closely at his desk, and found my innate sense of paranoia nudging me again.

'Something wrong, commissar?' Brasker asked blandly.

I shook my head, and checked the impulse to let my hands move towards my weapons. 'Not really,' I said, as lightly as I could. 'I was just wondering where the ink pot was.'

'Ink pot?' For a moment Brasker looked confused, then smiled, with the first genuine warmth I could recall having seen on his face. 'Oh, you mean these.' He gestured to the flecks of ink staining his robe, as always. 'Purely for effect, I'm afraid. It's what people expect.' He sighed. 'The Administratum is a very conservative body, and in order to prosper there, it's sometimes wise to conform to other people's expectations; or at least give the impression of doing so. I'm sure you find the same thing in your

profession.'

'From time to time,' I admitted, surprised to have found something of a kindred spirit in a realm so very far removed from my own. 'I take it that this display of conformity has borne fruit?'

'To some extent. It certainly helped with the commission you asked me to undertake.' The bursar selected a data-slate from the pile in front of him, and pushed it across the desk towards me. 'The results are all there, although what possible use this information might be to you is quite frankly beyond me.' He coughed, discreetly. 'It goes without saying that it's the only copy.'

'Thank you.' I activated the tiny screen, and paged through it. As I'd feared, there were a lot of files to wade through, and I certainly couldn't palm this job off on any of my cadets. At best they'd think I'd gone off the deep end, and at worst they might begin to ask awkward questions, and start digging around for themselves. 'Might I trouble you for a quick verbal summary?'

'Of course.' Brasker nodded, leaned back in his chair, and steepled his fingers, reminding me for a moment of Mott about to get started on some concatenation of conjecture. 'In short, you appear to be right. All the places the enemy landed troops have legends associated with them, generally concerning malevolent abnatural entities.'

'Like the sand devils,' I said, and Brasker nodded.

'Like the sand devils, the woodhaunts, the metal men, the...'

'Metal men?' I echoed, feeling as though I'd just stepped into a Valhallan shower. (Which is not an experience I'd recommend to the unwary.)

'It's an old story, dating back to the first colonisation,' Brasker said, clearly surprised by the strength of my reaction. 'The legend goes that one of the explorator teams came across some ruins in the wilderness, round about here.' He took the slate for a moment, and brought up a map, before handing it back to me. Sure enough, it matched one of the enemy landing sites, though not either of the ones where the Chaos troopers had unaccountably vanished; I wasn't entirely sure if that was a good sign or not.

'What happened?' I asked.

Brasker shrugged. 'No one really knows, or even if there was ever a basis of truth to the story. The most common version has it that the explorators found a cache of archeotech in the ruins, and somehow managed to activate something they found in it. A short while later they voxed the landing site at what's now Havendown, reporting that they were under attack by metal men, and that's the last anyone saw or heard of them, the ruins, or the golems.'

'It would be,' I said without thinking, then, reflecting that Brasker was far from being the fool I'd taken him for for so long, added 'that's how these campfire stories usually end.' I asked a few more questions, rounding out my picture of the enemy operation, and parted from the Bursar on terms so cordial that I quite surprised myself.

As I regained the fresh air and sunlight of the quadrangle, however, any lingering pleasure I might have been able to take in the balmy spring weather had completely evaporated, driven away by a cold knot of dread in the pit of my stomach. Brasker's researches had confirmed my worst imaginings; at the very least, it seemed, necrons had been active on Perlia as recently as ten thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries, and all my suspicions about the chamber the miners had apparently breached on the asteroid came flooding back. It was also too much of a coincidence for my liking that the metal marauders had apparently popped up at what, if my suspicions about the true objectives of Varan's raiders were correct, had probably been the site of some Ancient artefacts. If they really were the Ancients after all, or the mysterious *Katarns* Sister Rosetta had talked about, a Chaos war fleet might still turn out to be the least of our worries.

In the meantime, though, that remained the most immediate threat, so I took a deep breath, quieted my fears as best I could, and went to see Rorkins.

'IT SEEMS DEFENSIBLE enough,' Rorkins conceded, after glancing over the battle plan I'd presented him with. 'And, as you say, you do know the terrain there, which will be an advantage.' To my relief, he'd accepted the Valley of Daemons as a viable fallback position without argument, so readily, in fact, that I found myself wondering if he knew about the installation there already. After all, if he'd been in the Inquisition's private army, as I suspected, he must have served at a number of such hidden facilities over the years, perhaps even that one. 'Are you sure you can get us there?' Like Julien, he was under no illusions about our ability to hold the schola against a determined assault by an enemy who knew what they were doing.

'Visiter's plan seems feasible,' I told him. 'Though I wouldn't want to be the pilot who has to carry it out.'

'What about the alternative?' Rorkins asked. The commodore had thoughtfully provided a backup plan, in case the planned extraction fell through, but it looked a lot riskier to me. I'd spent a fair chunk of the morning going through the files he'd sent to my slate, and, true to my nature, anticipating everything which could go wrong, and my best chances of getting out in one piece if it did.

'Fine in theory,' I said, unable to keep a faint tone of scepticism from my voice. 'If the roads are still open, and if Rytepat hasn't been taken by the enemy, or flattened by orbital bombardment.' The thought of getting everyone mounted up on vehicles and down to the aerodrome in good order, undoubtedly fighting our way through an invading army to get there, was a sobering one, and I found myself fervently hoping that the main plan would work.

'And when we get there?' Rorkins asked.

I shrugged. 'We fight. We'll have no choice.' Even less of one than Rorkins knew; if the enemy got their hands on the Shadowlight, the only consolation that I could see was that I'd be comfortably dead before the warp swallowed everything.

'Cain's Last Stand all over again, eh?' Rorkins said, with a hint of smile, although his voice was devoid of any real humour. Well, that was fair enough, I didn't feel much like laughing either. 'You're unusually privileged. Most people only get one.'

'I'm not most people,' I told him, accurately enough, and stood. 'If you'll excuse me, Commander, I have a few more matters to attend to before things get a little noisy around here.'

'By all means,' Rorkins said, already reaching for one of the data-slates cluttering his desk.

I FOUND NELYS in the buttery, apparently trying to stuff an entire salt grox bun into his mouth in one go, a cooling mug of recaff

on the table next to him, and his head bent over a data-slate. Donal was with him, regarding the spectacle with his habitual expression of sardonic amusement, and nursing a mug of his own.

'You won't get that finished any faster if you choke,' he admonished, then looked up and saw me. 'Commissar.'

Nelys shot to his feet in a shower of crumbs, and snapped me a salute, his jaw still working frantically, while Donal slouched a little more slowly to attention.

'At ease, for the love of the Emperor,' I told them, slipping into a vacant seat. 'We can't afford any casualties at this stage.'

'That's what I've been telling him,' Donal said, sipping his recaff with an air of amusement. 'Twenty-third principle<sup>1</sup>, right?'

'Quite so,' I said dryly. 'Perhaps you wouldn't mind whetting my edge with one of those buns and a recaff? It's been a long morning.'

'Of course.' Donal stood, and glanced at Nelys. 'Want a refill while I'm up? Don't want to get too much blood in your recaff stream.'

'I'm fine,' Nelys said, managing to reduce the plug of bread and meat in his mouth to a manageable size at last, and with a faintly dubious shake of the head, Donal ambled off to get my snack.

'You don't look it,' I told Nelys. 'When did you last get some sleep? Or a proper meal?'

'Yesterday, I think.' The cadet frowned thoughtfully. 'But I have been eating.'

'I know.' I nodded. 'I was the same in my younger days. Practically lived on stuff like this.' I accepted the mug and plate Donal put down in front of me with a nod. It was true, too, up to a point, but my attention had been rather more focussed on tarot games and feminine company than military matters, and I'd never been too busy for a good meal if there was one to be had. The salient point, though, was that Nelys now felt that I identified with him, and would be more inclined to listen to my advice. Of course I could simply have ordered him to rest, and he would have complied without question, but he needed to develop a bit of common sense about these things for himself. I quirked just enough of a self-deprecating smile for the cadets to pick up. 'It's a miracle I survived, really.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but there's just so much of this material to go through,' Nelys said. 'I know it's urgent, but every time I start to get on top of it, the interrogators pass on another bundle of statements.'

'Then get Stebbins and Garvie to help,' I said. 'They're almost done chasing up the supply of weapons to the militia. And after you've dumped the files on them, I suggest you get a proper meal and some sleep. Too much of this stuff will keep you going,' and I took a swallow of my recaff for emphasis, 'but it'll give you a blinding headache when it wears off.'

'It's keeping him going all right,' Donal said. 'He's practically worn a groove between here and the latrines.'

'On the other hand,' I said, switching my attention to him, 'you can also place too much emphasis on grabbing some downtime. Haven't you got someone to happen to?'

'Routine background checks,' Donal confirmed, draining his mug and standing again. One thing I can say for him is that he could always take a hint, even if he chose not to act on it. 'I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that Deacon Cathcart doesn't seem to have been sacrificing any of the progeni to the Ruinous Powers in the last semester or two. Or if he has, he's been very discreet about it.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' I said dryly, waiting for him to move out of earshot before returning my attention to Nelys. Emperor knew, he needed his leg pulled as much as anyone I ever met, but right now I needed him as focussed as he could be through a fog of exhaustion and caffeine abuse. 'Forget about writing up a formal report, at least for now. Is there anything new or unusual in the latest batch of transcripts?'

'There's one thing I think might be important.' Nelys suppressed a yawn. 'I just came across it a minute ago, and I was going to come and tell you as soon as I finished eating. Most of the prisoners are still blathering on about Varan, and not a lot else, but one of the survivors was a civilian, and he's been a bit more co-operative.'

'Has he?' I reached out for the slate, and glanced at the screen. 'One of the shuttle pilots? Why wasn't he interrogated first?'

'Because the idiots at Rytapat thought they ought to process the troopers,' Nelys said, 'in case Varan had been kind enough to give any of them a copy of his battle plan.' It was probably just the fatigue, or too much recaff, but the burst of sarcasm made him seem a lot more likable than usual. Perhaps there was more to him than a clockwork soldier after all.

'My fault,' I assured him. 'They're PDF, don't forget. I should have had someone breathing down their necks full time.' Then, in case he inferred any criticism of his own performance, I added 'You've done remarkably well keeping them as focussed as you have.'

'Thank you, sir.' He looked a little nonplussed at the compliment, and sought refuge in the minutiae of the report. 'Anyhow, they got round to this fellow eventually. He claims to be a shuttle pilot aboard the merchantman *Meggie Moon*, which was boarded by hostile forces shortly after putting in to Madasa and requisitioned as a troopship. He's got no idea who this Varan is, other than the leader of the enemy, what their plans are, or the composition of the raider fleet. All he claims to know for sure is that he was forced to fly one of the assault teams to the surface at gunpoint, and seems genuinely pleased to be back in Imperial hands.' Well, that probably wouldn't last; he'd been exposed to the forces of Chaos, even if he hadn't joined them, so he wouldn't exactly be welcomed back with open arms. Nelys paged down a few paragraphs. 'This is the really interesting bit, though.'

I craned my neck to see, and for the second time that day felt my blood freeze. 'A psyker? Is he sure?'

'He seems to be,' Nelys said. 'He says he met a sanctionite who was travelling as a passenger some years ago, and recognised the signs.'

'But why would a psyker have given him the landing co-ordinates?' I wondered aloud, before recalling my earlier speculation as to how the enemy had managed to pinpoint what were now clearly sites associated with the Ancients. They must still retain some residual connection to the warp, which a wyrd with the right talent would be able to recognise, and which no doubt accounted for

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<sup>1</sup> "A trooper is a weapon in the hand of the Emperor, and should keep his edge keen." One of the so-called Forty Principles of Melkirk, a much venerated commissar of the 37th Millennium, whose writings are still popular among his successors even today.

their evil reputations even to this day. The real question was whether this mysterious psyker would be able to pinpoint the Valley of Daemons, and the galaxy-shaking secret it concealed. 'What happened to the witch?'

'Dead, presumably,' Nelys said. 'The ships burned almost as soon as the shuttles were launched, don't forget.'

I nodded. In my experience it was never safe to presume anything where psykers were concerned, but we had no evidence to the contrary, at least for the moment. 'Thank you, Nelys,' I said. 'You've given me a great deal to think about.'

Which I continued to do, while my recaff and bun went cold beside me. In fact, I was still sitting there when the invasion began.

#### **Editorial Note:**

*Despite Cain's propensity to exaggerate on occasion for dramatic effect, this appears from his following remark to be no more than the literal truth. However, the invasion of an entire star system, even a lightly defended and underprepared one, which the enemy almost certainly expected to find, is no simple matter, and the time taken by the preliminary engagements in space gave the defenders on the ground rather more warning than Cain intimates.*

*The following extract sets out the Basics of this preliminary phase with reasonable succinctness.*

#### **From *Just Visitin': The Life of a Naval Hero* by Nelson Lawford, 087.M42.**

*THE SPIRITED DEFENCE of Perlia during the second siege was to prove that the redoubtable Commodore had lost none of his tactical skill, despite his enforced retirement. As he'd expected, the first wave of enemy vessels emerged from the warp within almost suicidal proximity to the mass of the planet itself, no doubt intending to repeat the tactic which had almost proven so successful during the first incursion: and which, indeed, would have done so, had it not been for the fortuitous presence of the Lucre Foedas in orbit when they emerged. Aware that the trading vessel had been forced to flee, the invaders could have anticipated little resistance, and would have had no fear of sharing the fate of their compatriots. Opinion is still divided as to whether they had taken effective precautions against the ground-based fighters which had accounted for the transport vessels in the earlier attack, since, if they had, they never got the chance to deploy them.*

*Visiter was to confess later that, given the size of the Perlia system and the limited number of resources at his disposal, the mining of the most likely emergence points had been more a matter of best guess than judgement, but luck or the Emperor had smiled on him in that regard; the first wave left the warp precisely where his decades of experience had led him to believe, only to find themselves coasting inexorably into the heart of the minefields the SDF had been frantically laying since the day he took command.*

*Although it would be some exaggeration to claim that the entire fleet was wiped out, the number of vessels crippled or destroyed outright was gratifyingly high, and the few survivors easy meat for the fighter wings launched to intercept them. Although almost a hundred assault shuttles did eventually survive to desecrate the sacred soil of Perlia, for the most part their landings were uncontrolled, and the PDF and their civilian counterparts in the PDV were quick to respond, inflicting heavy casualties on the heretics.*

*The second wave, however, had emerged further out, and despite continual harassment from the system fence boats and a few hastily-armed freighters, fared rather better.*



## SIXTEEN

THE FIRST INTIMATION I had of the storm about to engulf us all was a wave of agitation among the progeni at a few of the other tables, followed shortly thereafter by a familiar odour which jerked me from my reverie.

'Jurgen,' I said, turning to look at him, already aware that something must have gone terribly wrong; I could think of no other reason why he'd be carrying the melta again, instead of leaving it behind in his quarters. 'I take it things aren't going too well.'

'No, sir, they're not,' he confirmed. 'Heretic vessels are popping out of the warp all over the system.' This was something of an exaggeration, as things turned out, but not as much of one as I would have liked. I stood, my cold recaff and uneaten bun forgotten (but not wasted; as I turned, I was sure I saw the sandwich vanish into one of Jurgen's tangle of pouches, and made a mental note not to accept the offer of refreshment during the next few days unless I was desperate.) 'Come on,' I said, 'we need to see Rorkins.'

Inevitably the rumour was already sweeping the schola, cadets running to man their positions, and the progeni as yet too young to have been directed into any of the service branches milling around uncertainly, or being swept up by their tutors to keep them out of the way. I was pleased to note, though, that no one seemed to be panicking, at least not yet. In fact some of them, particularly the younger ones, seemed more excited than apprehensive, positively eager to get stuck into the fray. Well, they might as well enjoy themselves while they could; the brutal reality of combat would be impressing itself upon them before too much longer. I found Rorkins and Julien in the makeshift command centre, which I must admit I found reassuringly familiar, despite the callowness of most of the staffers running errands and manning the vox and auspex lecterns. I'd spent so much time in the improvised headquarters of Imperial Guard regiments deployed on whichever world had most recently been swept up in the ceaseless current of conflict which swirled about the Imperium that the more permanent facilities I'd seen at Rytepat had seemed more like a recruiting tableau than a functioning installation. The air of disorder here, by contrast, seemed purposeful and directed, paradoxical as that may seem to anyone without personal experience of military matters.

'What's going on?' I asked, and Rorkins glanced up at me from the screen of an auspex, his face grave.

'Please pass my congratulations to the young lady you assigned to do the threat assessment,' he said. 'Her worst case scenario was right on the money.'

'Not good, then,' I said, masking the horror I felt as best I could. I'd seen Kayla's figures for myself, and the worst case she'd put forward was very bad indeed. Enough invasion barges to swamp our defenders, even if the militia reinforcements turned out to be effective, which, after my inspection tour, I was under no illusion would turn out to be the case, backed up by a squadron of warships, many in the cruiser class, if not heavier.

'Luckily the Commodore got away in time,' Julien put in, the servos of her power armour whining slightly as she gestured me over to the hololith looted from the Administratum offices; every time she moved, it sounded as though she was surrounded by a swarm of insects. I gazed into it, trying to make sense of the inchoate cloud of contact icons swirling around Perlia. 'He seems to have given the first wave a bloody nose at any rate.'

'What happened?' I asked, having been a bit too busy over the last few days to have taken much notice of whatever else might be going on.

The Celestian chuckled. 'They tried the same trick of emerging inside our defensive perimeter that let them get a few shuttles down before, except there were dozens of carriers this time, and Visiter had mined the approaches. Even the ones that didn't take a hit got pasted by the debris. Our fighters are mopping up the ones still kicking.'

I began to understand why so many of the contacts were moving erratically, or apparently drifting, inert in space.

'Bloody PDF,' Rorkins said, grabbing a vox mike from I an awestruck youth in the uniform of a stormtrooper cadet. 'They never learn. Taupe leader, break off and I pursue the shuttles!'

'Yes, sir,' an incongruously cheerful voice assured him. The pilot, whoever he was, must have left his vox channel open for a moment as he switched to his squadron command net, as we heard him relaying the order with a breezy enthusiasm that chilled my blood. 'Right, you all heard that. Tally ho!'

'Emperor give me strength,' Rorkins said, with every sign of sincerity, and I looked at the hololith with renewed attention. 'How could they fall for the same trick twice?'

'Flyboys get over-excited in a target rich environment,' I told him, having once shared a glass of amasec and some cathartic grumbling about the people under our jurisdiction with one of my counterparts from the Navy.<sup>1</sup>

'Not much of an excuse if they let those shuttles through,' Rorkins said, reining in his temper with an effort. He turned to the auspex operators. 'As soon as you've got a reasonable estimate of their landing zones, alert the nearest garrisons. We might not be able to stop them all from getting down, but we should be able to bottle them in once they hit.'

'Very good, sir,' the nearest cadet responded. In truth, there wouldn't have been a heretic's chance in hell of the fighters stopping all of the shuttles from getting through, even if they'd set out to intercept them in the first place, so the fighter jocks' enthusiasm probably wouldn't cost us all that dear in the long run. I tried to picture how many more would have been descending on us now if it hadn't been for Visiter's gambit with the mines, and shuddered at the image that evoked; we'd have been swamped, the planet taken within hours, and; that would have been the end of everything. As it was, it seemed, thanks to the commodore's tactical acumen we had a fighting chance after all, at least until the second wave arrived.

'We seem to have accounted for most of their transports, anyway,' I said, trying to make sense of the blizzard of icons. As I've mentioned before, unravelling the intricacies of space combat has never really been my forte.

Rorkins nodded. 'It looks that way,' he said, enlarging the corner of the display where the second wave had emerged, much further out. 'These are warships, for the most part. One or two merchantmen accompanying them, though. Emperor knows what they'll be

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<sup>1</sup> The Commissariat oversees all branches of the Imperial military, with the obvious exceptions of the Astartes and the Adepta Sororitas.

carrying.'

'Their elites,' I said. 'The first wave will have been their expendable troops, like last time, intended to soften us up and take the ground where they can. The ones kept back will be the real warriors, waiting for their chance to seize...' I corrected myself just in time, 'whatever objectives are continuing to resist.'

'That's how I read it,' Rorkins agreed.

'By elites,' Julien said, 'you mean the Traitor Legions?' Only a man as skilled as I am at reading the subtle cues by which we all betray our feelings would have noticed the faint overtone of repugnance and unease that entered her voice at that point.

'It's possible,' I said, quailing inwardly at the thought myself. I'd faced the tainted parodies of the Emperor's own Astartes on a number of occasions, emerging in one piece each time more by luck than judgement. 'But if there are any among Varan's retinue they'll be few and far between.' I hoped. In my experience, only a few advisors would be attached to a raiding fleet like this, the main bulk of the Chaos Space Marines preferring to fight their own battles under their own commands: against one another if there were no other foes available. I smiled, reassuringly. 'And they're tough, no doubt about that, but they can be beaten; I've done it before.'

'Any foe can be beaten if the Emperor stands at your back,' Julien said, sounding more like most of the other battle sisters I'd ever met than she usually did, but mainly for her own benefit, I suspected.

'Quite so,' Rorkins said, still staring at the blips in the hololith as if he could somehow reach into it, haul Varan out of his flagship by the scruff of the neck, and finish him off here and now. He glanced across to me. 'I think you're right, this is his personal entourage. Household troops, if you will. Throne alone knows what that'll mean in practice.'

'Nothing good,' I said, from long and bitter experience.

For the next few hours the three of us watched the reports trickling in, trying to gain a picture of the overall disposition of the enemy, now that the first few shuttles were grounding, and disgorging their cargoes of fanatical heretics. As before, whatever co-ordinated strikes they'd been hoping to make had clearly been massively disrupted, but enough survivors were getting through to make a considerable nuisance of themselves.

'Their first assault's been blunted,' Rorkins said at last, 'but that doesn't mean a lot by itself. They're still tying up far too many of our own people in keeping them contained.'

That much was obvious. The PDF were responding a lot more effectively than they had done to the first incursion, but then they had far fewer excuses for being taken by surprise this time round, so I'd have expected nothing less, and a few vox calls to the obvious slackers were sufficient to put the fear of the Emperor into them; I've often found the casual mention of firing squads can be quite effective in focussing the attention.

The militia were getting stuck in as well, in a few places, but in just as disorganised a fashion as I'd expected, so the results of their assistance were mixed, to say the least. Few, if any, units were bothering to co-ordinate with the local PDF (who, in most cases, had their hands rather too full to spare them much attention in any case), so the ones which saw combat tended to be the ones which had just happened to be in the vicinity of a shuttle landing, grabbed their new weapons, and rushed off to defend their homes. Some fought tenaciously, as, if nothing else, they were strongly motivated, but more often than not they either fled as soon as they took a few casualties, or were simply wiped out to a man by the superior weaponry and tactics of the heretics. The one thing they did do well, however, was buy time, like they were supposed to, and by nightfall<sup>1</sup> nearly all the enemy beachheads were at least surrounded, and being prevented from spreading any further.

The downside, though, as Rorkins had pointed out some hours before, was that simply doing this much had left the resources at our disposal pretty much at full stretch. Emperor alone knew how we'd manage to deal with the Chaotic reinforcements when they arrived.

'My guess is they'll try to bolster the largest pockets of resistance,' Rorkins said, accepting the mug of recaff Jurgen handed to him without wincing, which alone was enough to tell me how exhausted he was. Julien had left by this time, to harry the engineers from the Mechanicus shrine who were doing their best to bring the power armour her novitiates had been training in to something approaching battle readiness, although from what I'd seen they were going to have to burn an awful lot of incense to do that.

'Thank you, Jurgen.' I accepted my own mug gratefully, found myself briefly wondering if the sandwich accompanying it had come from the buffet in Chilinvale, then decided I was too hungry to care. 'Better grab something yourself. It's going to be a long night.'

'Very good, sir.' Jurgen retreated to a convenient corner, from which slurping and chewing noises shortly began to emanate, and I returned my attention to the hololith. The surface of Perlia was scattered with contact icons, like the rash of some virulent disease, and I studied the runes accompanying them for tactical data, trying to find the largest infestation. It didn't take long, of course.

'The primary target seems to be the capital again,' I said, and Rorkins nodded wearily, zooming the image to enlarge the area around Havendown. Almost a dozen individual battles were continuing, some in the heart of the city itself, while a significant concentration of the enemy was clustered around the perimeter of Rytapat, clearly determined to take it as quickly as possible. Well, I could hardly fault them for that, the fighters based there were the single biggest threat to the secondary flotilla, and neutralising them would be high on Varan's to do list.

'Makes sense,' he agreed. 'If they take Havendown, and the Governor's palace, it'll be a tremendous blow to civilian morale. Even the orks couldn't manage it during the first siege.'

'Then we need to make sure the heretics don't either,' I said. The PDF were still holding the line, but it was going to be a close-run thing either way.

With a growing sense of foreboding, I saw Rorkins nod thoughtfully, and braced myself for the inevitable. 'Looks to me as if our people could do with a commissar breathing down their necks,' he said.

'It probably couldn't hurt,' I replied, as evenly as I could contrive, cursing my reputation for derring-do just as fervently as I always

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<sup>1</sup> By which he presumably means nightfall in Salubria Parva, as, of course, the fighting was going on all over the planet.

did when it backed me into some corner where I either had to risk my neck facing the enemy or lose the trust and respect of people I needed to impress in order to stand any chance of surviving at all. 'I'll see what Jurgen can find in the way of transport.'

#### Editorial Note:

*As is his habit, Cain is less than forthcoming about the more general course of the siege, preferring, as usual, to concentrate on those aspects of it that inconvenienced him personally. Accordingly, I've appended the following brief extract, which gives a little of the wider picture.*

#### **From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127.M42.**

THE LANDING OF the first wave of enemy troops was accomplished in the teeth of far fiercer resistance than the heretics would have expected, and the losses they sustained were considerable. Thanks to the astute placing of minefields by the SDF, the majority of the assault ships were severely damaged, and were unable to get their full complement of troopers deployed, but enough made it down to engage the defenders in pitched battles around strategic installations and centres of population across the entire globe. The regional command centres in Midvale and Follendyke were both taken after fierce fighting, the last defenders of the latter setting demolition charges as they retreated to deny any useful intelligence to the enemy, while over a dozen towns defended by no more than the citizen's militia which Commissar Cain had somewhat vaingloriously founded in imitation of his erstwhile compatriots of the First Siege were taken with barely a shot fired. To the amazement of the surviving civilians, instead of embarking on the expected orgy of looting and bloodshed, the occupying forces remained disciplined and in good order, merely imposing a curfew and awaiting the arrival of their leader.

They didn't have long to wait. The second wave of the flotilla arrived in orbit within hours, having been harassed the entire way by the surviving SDF boats, whose commander had adopted the unorthodox tactic of approaching at high speed, unleashing a barrage of ordnance at point-blank range, and continuing past the enemy convoy before it could bring its own weapons to bear. In the main this had little result beyond annoyance, but only one gunboat fell to return fire, the rest managing to retreat beyond effective range again before they could be targeted. Though Varan's heavy cruiser, the *Undeatable*, was, naturally, the primary target of these forays, the lighter escorts accompanying it took the brunt of the damage, a couple of them apparently suffering minor degradation of their engines and auspex arrays, which may have rendered them a little less capable of defending themselves subsequently.

Despite these heroic endeavours, however, the *Undeatable* took up its station above Havendown with no visible difficulty, and Varan joined the battle for the heart and soul of Perlia in person. Once again, persistent local legend puts Commissar Cain at the centre of this conflict, insisting that he and the warmaster fought one another hand to hand, although there is no reliable evidence to back up so fanciful a story.

## SEVENTEEN

AS WE BOUNCED and raided along the highway to Havendown, Jurgen's driving as erratic as ever, I took advantage of the relative solitude and the clear night air to order my thoughts as best I could. I'd done everything possible to ensure the safety of the Shadowlight, although in all honesty that was looking tenuous at best, so now my highest priority should be getting through the rest of the night with my head still attached to my shoulders.

As we left the last few lights of the village behind us I glanced up, the open top of our Salamander affording me an excellent view of the night sky, and felt the breath still for a moment in my chest. The old familiar stars were still there, of course, even a few of the constellations I'd learned to pick out since taking up residence on Perlia: within moments I'd spotted the Slith<sup>1</sup> and the Adze, just as I'd expected to. Now, however, there was something new, a faint band of luminescence that stretched across the sky, like a narrower, dimmer echo of the milky way itself.

For a moment, I don't mind admitting, my heart hammered in my chest, as the panic-stricken thought that it was some kind of warp manifestation conjured up by Varan's sorcerers (or Felicia's merry meddlers in the Valley of Daemons poking away at things man was not meant to know) took hold of me, until reason reasserted itself, and I recognised the phenomenon for what it was. Even then, it was a thought to chill the blood: Perlia had a new ring system, made up of debris from the first wave of enemy ships that had blundered into Visiter's minefield. I was looking at a cloud of detritus, ranging in size from crippled starships over a kilometre in length down to chips of metal smaller than a fingernail paring, and I had little doubt that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of corpses floating about up there too. Of course it would be a relatively short-lived spectacle, as the tenuous fringes of the atmosphere brushed at the tumbling debris, slowing the pieces enough to snare, and dragging them down to a final cremation; even now the sky was being streaked with lines of light, as the first brands entered the bonfire.<sup>2</sup>

'We'll be there in about an hour,' Jurgen informed me, his voice unexpectedly loud in my earpiece, and I nodded, before remembering that he couldn't see me.

'Very good, Jurgen,' I responded, and propped myself up against the pintel mount of the heavy bolter I always like to have installed on any vehicle assigned to me. The Salamander's built-in weapons are mounted facing forwards, which is seldom my direction of choice in the presence of the enemy, and the ability to throw some grief their way while retreating has saved my neck on more than one occasion. Besides, it lets me do something myself when things get sticky, which is always comforting, even when it's not particularly effective, and it looks appropriately heroic, which never hurts when you've got a fraudulent reputation to maintain.

'Better slow down a bit, we don't want the cadets getting lost.'

'No, commissar,' my aide replied, with the faintest air of disappointment. 'I suppose not.' He'd opened up an impressive lead over the Salamander behind us on the twisting mountain road, but then Kayla still retained a residue of caution, despite the tendency of the young to believe that they're immortal, and Jurgen had been honing his ability to push vehicles to the limit for the best part of a century. I'd been a little dubious about bringing the cadets along, to be honest, but they'd proven their mettle on the asteroid, and the situation in Havendown seemed so finely balanced that any extra edge we could gain seemed worth taking a chance on.

'Are you all right back there?' I voxed, keeping my voice casual, and peering down the road for the dark bulk of the trailing vehicle. There was no point in looking for lights, of course, as we had no intention of betraying our position to the enemy any more than we could help, and were proceeding entirely by the faint blue glow of the stars above our heads.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately our eyes had adjusted to the tenebrous glimmering by now, and I was able to discern the boundaries of the carriageway, as well as a mottling of darker shapes which showed the presence of something in the gloom beyond. What these silhouettes might be I had no idea, trees, rocks and field boundaries for the most part I suppose, interspersed with the occasional building, and I fought the tendency of my imagination to populate them with unseen ambushers. I'd seen too many troopers spook themselves enough to open fire on innocuous shadows, only to be felled as soon as the muzzle flash betrayed their position to the enemy.

'We're fine,' Nelys assured me, with rather too much confidence for my liking. After a little thought, I'd selected him, Kayla and Donal to accompany me on this little expedition: Nelys because I knew he'd follow orders, Kayla because she'd keep him in line if we had to split the party, and I trusted her streak of common sense (which is all too rare, despite its name), and Donal because he still reminded me a little too closely of myself at that age, and Rorkins had enough trouble to worry about at the moment. That had left a fourth seat free in the sturdy little vehicle, which I'd filled with Briel, on the entirely reasonable grounds that he'd been the first of the remaining cadets to cross my path after selecting the other three.

'What's our primary target?' Kayla asked, as Jurgen slowed our breakneck progress to something on the order of merely alarming, and I began to make out the squared-off silhouette of the Salamander behind us.

To be honest, up until that point I'd still been debating the matter with myself, wondering where we were most likely to make a difference. The battle for Rytepat had pretty much stalemated by this point, and I'd been tempted to stick my nose in there, if only to maintain the fiction that the command bunkers at the heart of the PDF garrison were still the hub of the war effort. On the other hand, the heretics weren't actually gaining any ground, the runways were still clear enough to launch fighter sorties from, and I didn't think I could put up with the pompous idiots from the PDF high command for very long. (I suppose I could just have shot

<sup>1</sup> A Perlian rodent, most notable for a number of disgusting personal habits.

<sup>2</sup> In fact Perlia was to be treated to an almost continuous display of cosmic fireworks for the next three years, before the majority of the debris was finally consumed. Long before that, however, the largest pieces, and those constituting a danger to navigation, had been either salvaged or blown to bits by the SDK.

<sup>3</sup> Perlia had no moon: hence the significance of the orbital peculiarity of the mining asteroid, which I drew attention to earlier.



them all if they got too irritating, but that would have upset the junior officers who were actually doing some useful work, and, in any case, I thought I might need some of them around later to pin the blame on if things kept going north the way they had been.)<sup>1</sup> As so often, I've found, it's the little things that sway your judgement, and although I was to have no inkling of the fact at the time, my antipathy to the PDF grandees was shortly to save my life.

'The Governor's palace,' I said, after a moment spent trying to focus on the screen of my data-slate despite Jurgen's best efforts to send both it and me bouncing into the corner of the passenger compartment. The glow of the tiny pict was almost invisible, and would have been masked by the slabs of armour plate surrounding me in any case, so I felt any additional risk incurred by consulting it would be minimal. That was the next most obvious target for the enemy to take, and the situation there seemed balanced on a knife edge, so that's where we'd intervene. I suppose I could have split the cadets up, and scattered them around the city to make nuisances of themselves with different units, but I wasn't entirely sure they were ready for that yet. The defence of the palace was crucial for morale, if nothing else, and if we lost it, the planet could very well follow.

After acknowledging my instructions the cadets went silent again, too disciplined for idle vox chatter, and I resumed brooding for a while as the road rolled by under the treads of our vehicles. In fact we'd almost reached our destination before I heard another voice in my comm-bead.

'Is it sunrise already?' Briel asked, sounding a little confused. I hauled myself up on the pintel mount again, leaning against the heavy stock of the bolter as I peered over the rim of the armour plate. Sure enough, the sky ahead was tinted red and orange, the brighter colours seeping through the pre-dawn grey like ink on wet paper.

Surprised, I glanced at my chronograph, finding that it was at least an hour before Perlia's primary was due to poke its head over the horizon. A moment later we crested a ridge, our tracks seeming to part company with the carriageway for a moment before we jolted back onto the hardtop, and my forebodings were confirmed.

'That's not sunrise,' I told him, 'it's Havendown. The whole city's ablaze.'

By the time we got into the city itself, however, it had become obvious that my initial impression had been somewhat exaggerated, though not nearly as much so as I would have liked. Fires were indeed raging in several districts, replacing the sullen furnace glow which had brightened the night sky with lowering thunderheads of dense black smoke as daylight began to seep slowly through the curdled air, but most of the streets we roared along showed little or no evidence of the fighting, beyond the usual litter left behind by fleeing civilians. Now and again we passed more obvious signs of conflict, like hastily-erected barricades, subsequently breached (although which sides had taken which part in the brief sieges these lines commemorated was usually anybody's guess), or shops and hab blocks showing the unmistakable stigmata of heavy ordnance. More rarely, we passed the site of a pitched battle, with a gutted AFV or two still burning, and the occasional structure reduced to rubble; when this happened, Jurgen slowed, allowing the cadets to catch up, while we scanned the scene for survivors. All the combatants we saw were dead, though, some in the uniforms of the Perlian PDF, the rest in the desecrated Imperial kit of the traitors from Madasa.

'Don't like the look of that, sir,' Jurgen commented sourly, as we skirted the blazing wreck of a Leman Russ. The eight-pointed sigil of Chaos had been crudely daubed on the turret, still visible as the paint beneath it began to blister, and my aide spat in its general direction, almost managing to get the gobbet of phlegm over the lip of the armour plate protecting his driving compartment. 'It was bad enough when the turncoats just had lasguns.'

'It was only to be expected,' I said, trying to sound more casual than I felt. 'The Madasans must have had an armoured regiment or two on the books. Most PDFs do.' Nevertheless, I'd been hoping that they'd been left behind to defend their homeworld against the inevitable Imperial counterattack, or lost in the general rush to abandon the stricken carriers.<sup>2</sup>

'We'll see them off anyway,' Nelys assured me, his zeal once again appearing to override his common sense.

Kayla muttered something that sounded like "frak-head" in my earpiece, but before I could say anything to forestall an incipient argument, a new voice cut in on the command frequency.

'Commissar, can you hear me?' Rorkins asked.

'Yes, commander,' I responded, observing the protocols for the benefit of the listening cadets. Donal had become visible in the Salamander behind us shortly after we entered the city limits, manning the heavy flamer; now he was glancing warily around as we proceeded up the street, away from the remnants of the engagement. For a moment I found myself thinking it was lucky I'd chosen him to join the party instead of Stebbins. The thought of the havoc that young man might wreak with an incendiary weapon was a sobering one indeed. 'What's happening?' Something serious clearly, or he'd never have bothered contacting me directly.

'The enemy's here,' Rorkins said, his voice tense. 'The second wave is moving into orbit.'

'Any further casualties?' I asked hopefully, not that I expected any, but after the damage he'd done to the first wave, I was prepared to credit Visiter with the ability to work miracles.

'No, they all made it,' Rorkins said, his voice unusually clear for a comm-bead signal from so distant a source. It was being relayed through the vox set in the Salamander, of course, but that alone wouldn't account for such exceptionally good reception. Then I realised it must have been relayed through the command bunker at Rytepat as well, a mere handful of kilometres away.

Before I could reply, though, the sky turned white, all colour leached from it by a flare of harsh, actinic energy of almost inconceivable magnitude. Fortunately the buildings of the city blocked any direct line of sight we might have had, or we would all have been struck blind in an instant. A moment later the ground trembled, windows shattered, and a rain of debris pattered down

<sup>1</sup> A Valhallan colloquialism, one of the many Cain picked up from his years of association with the natives of that planet. Suffice it to say that the polar regions of an ice world are pretty unpleasant, even by the normal standards of such places, and people only venture north (or south) of their nominal boundaries under the most desperate of circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> Luckily for the defenders of Perlia, the majority of the tanks in the invasion fleet do indeed seem to have been lost, either during the orbital engagement, or in the disorganised landings which followed. Enough appear to have survived to have been a considerable nuisance, however.

around us, dislodged from the structures we drove between. Jurgen jammed on his brakes, but decades of familiarity with his driving had left me prepared for this, and I kept my feet with relative ease.

'What the hell was that?' Kayla asked, slewing the second Salamander sideways, and crushing a parked groundcar under its tracks before coming to a halt with its nose embedded in the plinth of a remarkably ugly statue of a remarkably ugly man, which disfigured the middle of the square we'd been passing through.

'Orbital strike,' I said, having seen something similar on a few occasions before. 'Probably the lance batteries of a warship.' An uncomfortable itching sensation began to grow between my shoulder blades as we waited for the next one. In my experience, once Chaos commanders started popping off heavy ordnance from space, they wouldn't be happy until they'd levelled anything in the vicinity taller than an anthill. I began to think about the fastest way out of the city, concentrating so hard on the map-slate that it took a moment for me to register that the bombardment hadn't been repeated, and that Rorkins's voice in my comm-bead was far more attenuated than before.

'Rytepat's been obliterated,' he told me soberly. 'Better get out of the city while you can.' The familiar hissing of static in my ear was supplemented for a moment by a quartet of indrawn breaths from the stunned cadets.

'Well, we expected them to try and neutralise it,' I said, trying to sound as calm as I could, despite the shock which still had me trembling. That was true enough, but the number of troops they'd committed to besieging the place had led us to expect a conventional assault. The only positive side to this surprising development was that they'd undoubtedly polished off a company or two of their own people along with our own. 'Varan must be in a hurry.' Which was a disquieting thought in its own right, of course, although I couldn't explain why to Rorkins, especially over a comnet that might be monitored. The only reason I could see for the warmaster to casually overkill a strategic installation he could probably have taken intact in a few more days, and made good use of during the subsequent occupation, was because he was impatient to pacify the planet and start looking for the Shadowlight as quickly as possible.

'Well, it confirms his insanity,' Rorkins said bluntly. 'I suggest you pull out the way you went in; they'll probably start hitting the city close to RYTEPAT, and work their way across.'

'I don't think they're going to,' I said, having managed to orientate myself at last. 'If they were going to fire again, they would have done so by now.' We'd had plenty of time to confirm the make-up of the enemy fleet as they coasted in, and Visiter had sent us what pict and auspex records he'd been able to grab on his attack runs to supplement our existing intelligence, so I was certain that they could have unleashed at least half a dozen lance blasts by now, not to mention the widespread devastation which would have been inflicted by the less accurate primary batteries of the warships in orbit. 'If Varan wanted to level the city, he'd already have done it.'

'Then why's he holding off?' Donal asked, reasonably enough under the circumstances.

'Because he's planning an assault,' I said, 'and he wanted our defences weakened as much as possible. He obviously doesn't know we shifted our command centre after the first attack.' I glanced at the map-slate again, confirming my impression of our whereabouts. 'We're heading on to the Governor's palace.' If nothing else, the wide gardens would offer our best chance of evading another orbital strike if I turned out to be wrong, as they were a long way from any tempting targets.

'Makes sense,' Rorkins said. 'Extract his excellency and drag him back here, before Varan gets his hands on him. If you can locate the heir as well, even better; we'll need symbols of resistance once Havendown falls.'

'If Havendown falls,' I corrected him, more to play the part of the dutiful commissar than because I thought there was the remotest chance of him being wrong.

'If. Of course,' Rorkins said, with heavy irony, and cut the link.

'The palace, then,' I said, while Jurgen gunned our engine, and Kayla reversed gingerly out from under the tottering statue. If I'd had any lingering doubts about the right direction they were soon dispelled, as the familiar sounds of combat soon became apparent, even over the roaring of our engines. The enemy were still surrounding the palace, at least according to the latest tactical information I had available, but I thought I'd identified a weak spot in their lines near one of the side gates. The main concentration of heretics was busy trying to force an entrance at the front, where the buildings of the city came closest to the wall, affording the best cover, while only a relatively small detachment had been left to guard a remote postern, generally used only by gardeners maintaining the grounds. A squad or two of the PDF had been dug in on the other side, to discourage any attempt at breaching it, and the two factions were amusing themselves by taking largely ineffectual pot-shots at one another over the wall. It was hard to tell which of them was the most surprised by our sudden appearance, heretics or loyalists, although on balance it was probably the enemy. We roared into the street behind them, bearing down on their position from behind, opening fire as we came. Jurgen triggered our hull-mounted bolter, chewing the barricade they'd erected across the end of the street facing the gateway to pieces, along with a sandbagged autocannon and its crew, while I swung the pintel mount, gouging a line of holes along the row of windows overlooking the thoroughfare, certain that I must have bagged a sharpshooter or two hoping to get a line of sight on the defenders from an elevated position. The spark of a las-bolt impacting on the armour close to my head informed me that, though the idea was sound, I might have picked the wrong side of the street to put it into practice, but before I could swing the heavy weapon round to retaliate a blast of heat and the stink of burning promethium forestalled me. Donal had triggered the heavy flamer on the second Salamander, hosing down the hostelry from which the shot had come, and leaving it blazing merrily.

'Thank you,' I voxed, and he waved cheerfully.

'You're welcome, sir.' He glanced down. 'Come on, Nel, find a traitor to shoot. You're missing all the fun.'

Nelys was manning the forward-facing bolter, but just about all he'd see through the sights from that angle was the back of our Salamander, so I hoped he'd be able to resist the temptation to open up at random. No sooner had I completed the thought than he triggered the heavy weapon, and I flinched, anticipating a rain of armour-piercing projectiles against our rear plating, but he'd judged it to a nicety, taking out another sandbagged weapon emplacement just barely visible at the corner of the street. He whooped as the gunner's torso erupted in a crimson mist. 'Yes!'

'Boys,' Kayla muttered, a trifle enviously I thought, and tucked in behind us as Jurgen bounced our tracks over the remains of the

barricade he'd shredded. A few desultory las-bolts were still spanging off the hull armour, so I sprayed a few suppressive rounds to keep the survivors' heads down, and Donal swept the nearest storefronts with another burst from the flamer for good measure. Luckily the defenders were alert; a few heads appeared at the top of the wall, popping up like startled snowhens, and began to lay down some more suppressive fire, while someone began to pull the gates open. I flinched, anticipating a collision, but Jurgen cut our speed just enough for them to finish the job, and we shot through the widening gap with centimetres to spare. Kayla followed, a little more sedately, and leaving a layer of paint on the thick stone gatepost, then the slab of timber slammed back into place behind us.

'Sir.' The sergeant in charge of the PDF detachment snapped a salute, trying not to gawp at me, while the men under his command didn't even bother making the attempt.

I returned the salute crisply. 'Good morning, sergeant. Sorry to barge in unannounced, but we're in a bit of a hurry. Could you present Commissar Cain's compliments to the Governor, and inform him I'd like a word at his earliest convenience?' I could have done it myself, of course, over the comm-bead, but I had no desire to work my way through innumerable flunkies demanding proof of my identity.

'Of course, sir.' The sergeant beckoned his vox operator over, and began to speak urgently in an undertone, with several covert glances in our direction.

'Very good,' I said, and leaned over to talk to Jurgen. 'The palace, Jurgen, quick as you can.'

'Right you are, sir,' my aide replied cheerfully, revving the engine to a pitch which would have had a tech-priest howling almost as much in protest had there been one in the vicinity, and slipping in the ditch. True to form he took my words literally, accelerating across a wide formal lawn and crashing through a hedge, leaving twin furrows of gouged earth in our wake. By the time we'd arrived at our destination, a handful of minutes later, he'd also accounted for several flower beds, a scattering of shrubs, and a small statue of a young woman wearing rather too little for the time of year. Kayla followed, compounding the damage, but not by much.<sup>1</sup>

'Commissar.' Trevellyan himself was waiting at the bottom of the steps leading up to a wide formal terrace, and greeted us affably as we drew up beneath the balustrade, our engines idling. 'What can I do for you?'

'You can come with us, sir,' told him, dismounting in order to shake hands. It might seem an odd time to be observing the proprieties quite so punctiliously, but if I read the man right, on our brief earlier acquaintance, he'd find at least the appearance of adhering to protocol reassuring. 'Your safety is vital to the security of Perlia.' Which might have been overstating the case a little, but I've yet to meet an aristo without an inflated sense of their own importance, and playing up to it can often persuade them to co-operate.

Trevellyan looked confused. 'I can't just leave,' he said. 'This building is the centre of Imperial power. What sort of message does it send to the populace if I just cut and run?'

'That you're still alive?' I suggested, trying to keep an edge of irritation from my voice. 'The enemy has already destroyed the PDF command centre by orbital bombardment, and they could just as easily obliterate the palace.'

'Then why haven't they?' Trevellyan asked, reasonably enough, and I tried to keep my own voice conversational as I replied.

'I have no idea,' I admitted. 'But we're dealing with Chaos worshipping loonies, don't forget. Their strategies don't always make sense to anyone else, at least to begin with.'

'Then it seems to me that I'm as safe here as anywhere else,' the Governor said.

'With respect, sir,' I began, 'that is no longer your decision to make.' I became aware that my voice was rising, and made an effort to sound calmer; only then did I realise that I'd been speaking more loudly because the ambient noise had risen about us.

'Incoming!' Briel shouted, glancing up from the miniature auspex in the back of the second Salamander<sup>2</sup>, and gesturing towards the east. I raised my hand, shielding my eyes against the glare, and was just able to make out a trio of fast-moving dots, closing on our position.

'Assault shuttles,' Nelys reported, a pair of amplivisors to his eyes. 'Three of them, descending fast.'

'Inside!' I snapped. 'We're sitting waterfowl out here!' I half expected Trevellyan to argue, but he simply nodded, bolting up the steps to the terrace and disappearing through the wide glass doors leading into the conservatory beyond. I began to follow, then glanced back. 'That means everyone!'

The cadets piled out of the Salamander, and pelted after us. A moment later Jurgen's distinctive odour joined me, followed almost at once by the man himself, his precious melta cradled in his arms.

'Looks like they're coming down in the grounds,' he said, and I held out my hand for the amplivisor Nelys was still carrying.

'They are,' I confirmed, focussing the device, as the quartet of cadets scurried past me into the building, drawing their weapons as they ran. Confident that the enemy wouldn't be down and deployed for several minutes yet I lingered a little longer, partly to play up to my undeserved reputation for coolness under fire, but mainly because the more you know about the enemy, the better prepared you are to deal with them.

Unlike the commandeered civilian vessels, which had delivered most of the first wave and the preliminary raiders, the three shuttles were military drop-ships, heavily armoured, and carrying enough weaponry for close air support. The PDF guarding the palace opened up with commendable promptness as soon as they came into range, but the barrage of autocannon rounds and sporadic rockets from hand-held launchers barely scratched the paintwork as the menacing formation continued to descend. All the defenders really succeeded in doing was pinpointing their positions, the ones bracketing the shuttles' flight path falling silent almost at once as the drop-ships' nose-mounted lascannons retaliated to deadly effect. I half expected the pilots to break off and go looking for fresh targets once those were eliminated, but, once again, they seemed remarkably focussed for minions of Chaos,

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<sup>1</sup> *Relatively speaking. Despite the best efforts of the ground staff, the marks of their passage are still visible if you know where to look.*

<sup>2</sup> *Which must therefore have been the command variant, rather than the scout pattern favoured by Cain.*

continuing their descent as smoothly and efficiently as Imperial Navy veterans would have done.

'That's it, we're leaving,' I said, as the first landing skids sank into the lawn, which browned and then blackened under the fierce heat of the landing thrusters. Nevertheless, despite the urgent demands of my sense of self-preservation, something held me there a moment longer. I've never liked facing an unknown enemy, and preferred not to take to my heels without finding out what was most likely to be following.

They'd chosen their landing site well, I was forced to concede; with the nearest defenders swept away by the strafing run I'd witnessed, the fall of the ground would enable them to disembark without facing much in the way of incoming fire. Of course that would also give us time to redeploy our own people to meet them, which wouldn't do them a lot of good in the long run, I hoped. I focussed the amplivisor again, grateful for the augmetic fingers on my right hand, which let me hold the device perfectly steady, despite the distance; the only faint trembling of the image I could see was due to my heartbeat, which was a little faster than usual, but no more than you'd expect under the circumstances.

As I watched, the boarding ramps descended, and figures began to move inside the shadowed bellies of the shuttles. It was hard to make anything out yet, but the bulk of them was unmistakable: power armour. A thrill of sheer terror shot through me at the thought of facing what looked suspiciously like at least three full squads of Traitor Marines, and I swung the amplivisor back and forth, hoping to find some clue as to who they were. Then someone else stepped out onto the ramp, and, if anything, my apprehension increased. Dwarfed by the hulking figures that flanked him, the unmistakable figure of Varan himself strolled down the metal incline, and finally set foot on Perlia.



## EIGHTEEN

'THE SITUATION'S WORSE than I thought,' I told Trevellyan, with what I felt to be commendable understatement. The conservatory beyond the terrace had led us into the palace itself, and now we were hurrying along a corridor lined with wooden panels and works of art, which none of us had either the time or the inclination to pause and admire. The one thing I'd been pleased to see was a burly PDF sergeant and a full squad of troopers lugging a large bookcase and a dining table from an adjacent room to form a reassuringly solid-looking barricade in the middle of the passageway, which ought to hold the enemy for a short time: a very short time if I was right about the identities of our unwelcome visitors, but any respite would be useful in getting the Governor, and, more importantly, myself, to safety. 'The enemy obviously means to occupy the palace, and no doubt assassinate you in the process.'

'Thus spreading alarm and despondency among the populace, I take it,' Trevellyan said, sounding remarkably calm about the whole thing, but then I suppose he was as used to hiding his true feelings as I was.

'Whereas we'd rather have you alive and kicking, to boost morale and stiffen their resistance,' I said. 'So where's your escape route?'

'Escape route?' Trevellyan said, with studied ingenuousness.

I nodded tightly. 'I've never known a Governor without a contingency plan for saving his hide if the peasants revolt,' I said, 'even on the most well-ordered worlds.' I hardened my voice a little. 'And believe me, your excellency, we don't have time for diplomatic games.' For a moment my paranoia threw up the alarming possibility that this man was the unique exception, and that I'd run straight into a trap, my blithe assumption that there was bound to be a way out of here completely wrong. (Of course it had been this belief that had persuaded me to chance running for the palace in the first place, instead of following Rorkins's original suggestion and heading straight back to the schola while we'd had the chance.)

After a moment, though, Trevellyan nodded. 'There's a passageway down to the undercity,' he conceded, 'in my private chambers.' A faintly defensive tone entered his voice. 'Built by one of my predecessors, centuries ago. I've never been down there myself, of course.'

'Of course,' I echoed, not really caring much either way. (Although I was to be grateful enough for the snippet of information later on.) 'Which way?' The sound of gunfire was audible in the distance now, and the cadets exchanged apprehensive looks. Another squad of PDF troopers doubled past us, their faces set obviously intending to reinforce their comrades at the barricade further down the corridor; an unmistakably expensive-sounding crash informed me that another solid antique had just been thrown on to the pile, and the Governor winced a little.

'Through here,' Trevellyan said, leading us into a surprisingly tasteful suite of rooms. Bright sunlight slanted in through windows giving what, under most circumstances, would have been a pleasant view of the grounds, which had now been disfigured by the scattered bodies of a dozen or so PDF troopers. In the distance, power-armoured figures were advancing inexorably on a detachment of dug-in defenders, shrugging off most of the lasgun fire directed at them, although one staggered and fell before drifting smoke obscured the rest of the engagement. Despite the fact that they were too far away to see clearly, something about them struck me as unnervingly familiar, but the nagging sense of recognition wouldn't quite gel, and I had more pressing matters to attend to at the moment in any case.

We hurried through a drawing room full of sofas and armchairs, ranged about a fireplace which looked as though it would have been mortally offended by the merest particle of ash, and a dining room which would comfortably have seated a dozen people, before ducking down another wide, well-carpeted corridor. I picked up my pace as the crackle of small arms fire suddenly sounded close at hand, the distinctive *crack!* of ionising air made by lasguns overlaid with the ripping sound of bolters, telling me that the enemy had already made it as far as the barricade in the hall we'd so recently vacated.

The palms of my hands began to itch, a sure sign that something was deeply wrong; Traitor Marines were formidable, I knew, from bitter personal experience, but even they should have been held up a little longer by our outer defences. Then the firing from the corridor went silent too, as completely and suddenly as if someone had just thrown a switch.

'That's not right,' Donal said. 'I'll go and see what's happening.'

'You'll stay right where you are!' I snapped back. The whole thing had the stink of sorcery about it if you asked me, and mindful of the conversation I'd had with Julien and Rorkins, I was suddenly convinced that the only logical explanation for the sudden and total collapse of resistance was the presence of a remarkably powerful psyker among Varan's entourage. Which meant in turn that the only chance we had of getting out of here with whole skins was for everyone to stick close enough to Jorgen to gain the benefit of his remarkable gift. I turned to the Governor. 'Now would be a good time to show off your ancestor's handiwork,' I suggested, as mildly as I could under the circumstances.

Trevellyan nodded, his face paling. 'Of course,' he said. 'This way.' As I'd expected, the entrance to the bolt hole was in his bedroom; for some reason that's where the majority of them seem to be located, either in the expectation that the peasants would be inconsiderate enough to revolt out of office hours, or so that whoever built them could sneak off the premises on personal business without any of their staff noticing their absence.<sup>1</sup>

'Better make it fast,' I suggested, following him through the door. I glanced back at Jorgen and the cadets. 'Cover the end of the corridor. That's where they'll come from.'

'Very good, sir,' Jorgen said, already directing the melta down the passageway, while the quartet of cadets took what cover they could behind convenient doorways, or the occasional tables scattered along the length of the hall.

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<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, given his habitual cynicism, Cain neglects the most obvious possibility; that, as well as egress, the passageways were intended to provide discreet access for certain favoured courtesans.

'Is your niece on the premises too?' I asked Trevellyan, as he began to shoulder aside an over-ornamented wardrobe, which looked as though it had been standing there since the Emperor was in short trousers. If she was, she was on her own so far as I was concerned, but there was no harm in making a show of interest in our secondary objective. The huge lump of timber seemed in no hurry to budge, so I put my shoulder to it as well, and between us we managed to shift the blasted thing just far enough to reveal a genecode scanner and the faint outline of a narrow doorway set into the wall.

'Illyria?' Trevellyan shook his head. 'No, she's gone hunting. She's staying at the lodge on the Marksell estate.' I hadn't a clue where that was, but no doubt Rorkins could send someone to pick her up or look after her, as soon as I got the chance to tell him; I wasn't about to trust information that sensitive to the vox.

'Well, that's something, anyway,' I said, while Trevellyan slapped his hand to the reader plate. For an agonising moment nothing seemed to be happening, then the panel in the wall swung back, releasing a cloud of dust and the faintly cloacal smell which told me beyond all reasonable doubt that somewhere the passageway behind it connected to the sewers.

'Commissar, they're here!' Kayla called, her voice tightly controlled, and echoing a fraction of a second later in my comm-bead. Cursing, I drew my laspistol, and hurried across to the door. Running footsteps could be heard approaching along the corridor, and I aimed carefully at the intersection, around which our pursuers would be coming. To my relief, though, the tread was of booted feet, not the ponderous thudding of power armour, and I began to relax a little.

'Hold your fire until you're certain of a target,' I said, holding my weapon on aim regardless. My caution seemed justified a moment later, when the PDF troopers we'd last seen manning the barricade behind us pelted into view. Disconcerting that they'd apparently turned and fled so precipitously, but under the circumstances I was prepared to make allowances: even Imperial Guard troopers would have thought twice about standing their ground in front of the Traitor Legions, although I'd have hoped that they'd have retreated in rather better order. Still, if I could bring them to heel and take them along with us, that would be no bad thing: I've never been averse to a bit more cannon fodder standing between me and harm's way.

Even so, I kept my pistol up, the palms of my hands itching more strongly than ever, although, as so often, I couldn't have pinpointed the exact reason for my disquiet.

'It's all right, they're ours!' Briel said, his voice ringing with relief, and moving out into the corridor just as the running troopers brought their lasguns up. That was what had been bothering me, I suddenly realised, they'd been holding them like men advancing to contact, not running from an enemy behind them. Before I could shout a warning, however, they'd opened fire. Briel took four or five las-bolts in the chest, which practically cut him in half, and staggered back, an almost comical expression of astonishment on his face. No point in risking anyone's neck dragging him back into cover, he was quite clearly on his way to the Golden Throne even before he hit the carpet, which was now considerably messier.

'Death to the servants of the corpse god!' the sergeant shouted, and we returned fire with a will, eager to avenge our own. At least the surviving cadets were; Jurgen and I were too seasoned a pair of campaigners to take Briel's loss personally, at least while the more pressing matter of our own survival was taking up most of our attention. The front rank of onrushing traitors faltered under the barrage of las-bolts we unleashed, a couple in the front rank falling, where they tripped the charging troopers most closely behind, and Jurgen's melta accounted for a small group at the back.

'Disengage!' I shouted, beckoning our survivors into the Governor's bedroom. We'd slowed the enemy charge, but I was under no illusion that the next wave would be so easily dealt with, nor, for that matter, that our erstwhile allies were completely out of the fight either. Whatever had turned their minds seemed to have left them as fanatical as the Madasans I'd encountered before, and even as Jurgen and the others began to pull back to join me my worst forebodings were confirmed. The troopers who'd escaped injury, or had only suffered superficial wounds, opened fire again almost without pause.

Almost, but not quite. Kayla and Nelys had just had time to scurry to safety before the barrage resumed, and my nose told me that Jurgen was all right even before my eyes had registered his presence, but Donal hadn't been so lucky. He'd been halfway across the corridor from his refuge in the opposite doorway when the enemy had begun firing again, and a couple of rounds hit him in the chest and knee. He fell, dangerously exposed in the middle of the expanse of carpeting.

'Cover him!' I snapped, hoping he'd be able to crawl to safety, but the lad was twitching like a freshly-landed fish, unable to rise, and leaking like a colander. Bright red blood was staining the front of his greatcoat, turning the black fabric an unpleasant mushy rust colour before dripping to the floor, and his face was greying.

'Very good, sir.' Jurgen poked the melta round the doorframe, and sent a blast of ravaging heat down the hallway. This time his shot drifted a little high, setting fire to the wood panelling, but sending the turncoats attacking us scrambling back to the junction of the corridor, leaving their dead and wounded lying where they'd fallen.

I hesitated for a moment, but even as I overcame my reluctance to move, I knew I had no choice. If I just left the lad to bleed to death, or worse, fall into the hands of the enemy, I'd lose the respect of the surviving cadets, and I needed them to follow my lead without hesitation if I was going to get out of this with a whole skin. And then there was Trevellyan to consider. So far as he was concerned, I was the legendary Liberator, the warrior who'd saved his planet once before, and even the merest hint that I was just as fallible as anyone else would probably end any chance we had of using him to rally the populace against the invader. Taking a deep breath, I loosed a couple of las-bolts in the general direction of the enemy, and popped out of the doorway as abruptly as my mechanical replica on that ghastly timepiece in Liberation Square.

Time seemed to slow, as it so often does when I'm in imminent danger of death, and I had plenty of time to note my surroundings while I hoisted Donal to his feet and sent another couple of shots down the corridor for good measure. Satisfied that the only enemy still moving that I could see was a trooper who'd been too severely singed by Jurgen to last more than a few minutes in any case, I began to back away, keeping the wounded cadet between myself and any more incoming fire. After all, he'd already been shot twice, so another dent or two probably wouldn't make that much difference to him, whereas I was still up and running, and had every intention of keeping it that way.

It was only as I made it to the doorway that I realised the expiring trooper a handful of metres away wasn't just twitching at random, he was still moving with evident and malevolent purpose; something I should have expected after my encounter with the

Madasans at Rytepat. I shot him at once, but it was already too late, the grenade he'd been priming rolling along the carpet towards us.

'Grenade!' I yelled, rotating Donal and myself around the doorframe to seek sanctuary against the other side of the wall (and knocking a filigreed nightstand to the floor in the process, but I was past worrying about taking good care of the furniture by that time). Jurgen reacted instantly, flattening himself against the wall on the other side of the doorway, while Kayla and Nelys flung themselves to the floor behind the well-upholstered bed. (No doubt grateful for the thick carpeting.)

Only Trevellyan stood still in bemusement, trying to comprehend what was going on around him. Emperor only knows what he was still doing there, rather than scuttling down the escape hole like he was supposed to: perhaps he thought protocol demanded that he be the last to leave. If so, it was a gesture of good manners which was to cost him dear. He just had time to ask 'What did you...' before the frag charge exploded, fortunately for the rest of us in the corridor outside, rather than inside the room. Shards of shrapnel hissed through the air, and the luckless Governor, who folded like a sack of grain that's been used once too often for bayonet practice.

'He's in a bad way,' Nelys told me a moment later, quite unnecessarily. I'd seen enough battlefield trauma in my life to be quite certain that the Governor was well beyond any help we could give him in the time we had available.

I turned to Jurgen, who was applying a pressure bandage to an ugly hole in Donal's chest; by the greatest piece of bad luck, it seemed, one of the noncoms among the turncoats had a stubber for a sidearm, and had been using that in preference to the las weapons of his compatriots, las-bolts are nasty enough, it's true, incapacitating, often fatally, by thermal shock, but the upside is that if you survive a hit, they usually cauterise the wounds they inflict. Bullets, on the other hand, don't, leaving you to bleed, with fatal consequences if someone can't staunch it for you. 'How's Donal?' I asked.

'I've felt better,' Donal said, with a touch of his old insouciance, although it was obvious to me how hard he had to work at maintaining it.

Jurgen shook his head. 'He needs a surgeon,' he told me bluntly. Well he wasn't about to get one around here.

'Just do the best you can,' I said. 'Patch him up enough to get moving.'

Jurgen nodded, although his expression told me all I needed to know about what he thought of that idea.

Fortunately, Donal saved him the bother of putting his thoughts into words.

'I'm not going anywhere,' he said. 'I'm bleeding like a stuck grox, and even if I last long enough to get down the hole, I'll only hold you up.' It seemed I'd misjudged the lad after all. He hauled himself into a sitting position, a trifle woozily, and hefted his laspistol as though it weighed twice as much as it usually did. 'I'll buy you as much time as I can, but it won't be much. Make the best of it.'

'We will,' I promised him, and turned to Nelys. 'Can his excellency be moved yet?'

'Don't patronise me, young man,' Trevellyan said, looking and sounding his true age at last. 'I'm past help, and we both know it. The least I can do is follow the good example of your protege.' He coughed, spraying his immediate vicinity with a thin dusting of blood. 'You'll find a bolt pistol in that cabinet over there. If you'd be kind enough to load it for me, I'll be honoured to assist him.'

'Nelys,' I said, 'get the Governor his gun. I've something else to take care of before we leave.'

Moved by an impulse I couldn't quite explain, I unwound the crimson sash from around my waist, and handed it to Donal. 'I think you've more than earned this today,' I told him. 'Well done, commissar.'

'Thank you, sir.' Donal swallowed, his voice taking on an unfamiliar huskiness. 'I'll try to be worthy of it.' We stared at one another for a further moment of inarticulate embarrassment, then to our mutual relief Kayla called out from the doorway.

'Here they come!' She sent a volley of las-bolts down the corridor, and ducked back inside the room just ahead of a barrage of return fire.

With a tingle of apprehension I felt the floor flexing gently beneath my feet, in the rhythm of an unhurried stride, and knew we were out of time. A few seconds later the unmistakable thudding of power-armoured feet echoed down the passageway.

'Aim for the joints,' I advised Donal and the Governor, putting a las-bolt through the genocode reader by the hidden door as I spoke; it was all too easy to picture Trevellyan, or more likely his corpse, being hoisted up by augmented muscle to trigger it. Not that I expected so flimsy a barrier to delay a Traitor Marine for very long, but even that minor advantage would be worth having. 'It's the best chance of getting through their armour.' I turned to Kayla and Nelys. 'Go, now.'

For a moment I thought they might argue, but they complied straight away, disappearing through the gap into the darkness beyond. I followed, not needing to look to be certain that Jurgen was hard on my heels, and glanced back into the room. Enough light fell through the portal to illuminate the closing mechanism, which my aide triggered with the butt of his melta, keeping the weapon aimed through the narrowing gap as it started to swing shut behind us.

The last sight I had of the room beyond was Donal and Trevellyan levelling their weapons, and shadows moving in the doorway beyond them, too bulky to be anything other than what I'd feared. Then the hidden panel thudded into place, and darkness swallowed us completely.

## NINETEEN

FORTUNATELY, AS I'D expected, Jurgen had a luminator somewhere about his person, and a moment later, to my pleased surprise, Kayla produced another one from the pocket of her greatcoat, enabling us to get our first clear view of our surroundings. The hidden room adjacent to the Governor's chambers turned out to contain nothing but a spiral staircase, to my vast relief too narrow for anyone in power armour to negotiate, which descended vertically for a dozen metres or so, before opening out into a passageway just wide enough for us to hurry along in single file, our shoulders almost brushing the walls, and our footsteps echoing from the bare brick hemming us in.

Jurgen led the way at a rapid trot, the luminator he'd found among his profusion of webbing pouches attached to the bayonet lugs of his lasgun, and the butt of the hastily-shouldered melta thudding rhythmically against the crumbling masonry. Every time it struck the wall, a cloud of dust and powdered brickwork stung my eyes and scratched the back of my throat; clearly the Governor hadn't been exaggerating about the length of time that had passed since the passageway had last been used. I followed hard on my aide's heels, then Kayla, with Nelys bringing up the rear, the bulk of his body obscuring the lights we carried from any pursuers behind us. I strained my ears for any indication that the wall panel had been breached, but either Donal and the Governor were managing to hold off the enemy for longer than I'd expected, or the hidden portal had been strongly reinforced against just such a contingency as this.

After a few minutes we entered the undercity proper, a warren of service ducts, sewage tunnels, and built-over cellars from long-forgotten structures, which felt reassuringly like the lower hive levels I'd played in as a child. Once or twice we even found ourselves running along recognisable streets, the porticos of ancient buildings, now metres below the dwellings of their builders' descendants, crumbling around us.

'I never knew there was anything like this down here,' Kayla said, a tinge of awe entering her voice as she swept the beam of her luminator along the entablature of a sagging chapel, from which the dust-shrouded image of Him on Earth glowered down at us, as though cranky about being disturbed. Nelys bowed his head and made the sign of the aquila as we passed, but the rest of us just kept going as quickly as possible. I still hadn't heard any signs of pursuit, just the usual scufflings of rodents and the occasional human outcast, both equally startled and keen to avoid a group of people carrying weapons with evident purpose, but that didn't mean Varan hadn't dispatched a search party after us; just that they hadn't caught up yet.

'You'll find something like it under most Imperial cities,' I told her, more to keep my mind off the worrying possibility of potential pursuit than anything else, but if it gave her and Nelys something to think about other than the loss of Donal and Briel that would be no bad thing. At least her curiosity about the unfamiliar environment was an encouraging sign that she was staying focussed.

'As they grow and develop over the millennia, the lower levels get built on and forgotten about. Some of the places I've been have undercities more than a kilometre thick.'

'It's amazing to think no one ever goes down there,' Nelys said.

'But they do,' I told him. 'You'll find tech-priests and maintenance workers in the upper levels, of course, looking after the infrastructure of the city, and all sorts of lowlifes too: gangers, illegal gambling dens, crims on the run, anyone whose business is better carried on out of sight. Below that, you come to the deep levels, where things get really bad. That's where you'll find the mutants and heretic cults, fugitive psykers, and worse.'

'What could be worse than that?' Kayla asked, and I silently reproved myself for spooking her any more than she already was. Pushing away the sudden mental image of blank-faced metal killers, I shrugged.

'Plenty. But I doubt you'll find anything like that below Havendown, even at the bottom levels.' I tried to make my voice as reassuring as I could. 'Besides, I grew up in the deeps of my old hive before the schola took me in, down near the sump, and I survived. Got off-world, too, which is more than most tunnel rats can say.' I injected a note of slightly forced levity into my tone. 'This is all quite homely, really.' Then I broke off, suddenly aware of a change in the echoes around us. 'Down here, and douse the lights.'

I led the way into a narrow deft between two slabs of fallen rockcrete, which a faint draught had already informed me concealed a wider space behind, and the others followed at once, Jurgen and Kayla clicking off their luminators with commendable promptness. In the sudden darkness I heard the faint susurrations of sliding fabric as Jurgen unslung his melta, holding it ready for use, and I drew my laspistol.

'What is it?' Nelys whispered, then subsided as Kayla elbowed him in the ribs.

Even if I could have answered him, there was no need to; a faint glow was approaching, accompanied by a scuffling of footfalls, which sounded somehow wrong, as though the legs they were attached to weren't working properly, which in many cases they weren't. As the crowd came into view, both cadets gasped, audibly, but fortunately not loudly enough to give away our positions. Many of the individuals comprising it looked like people, more or less, but others didn't, too hideously deformed to even bother trying to conceal the way their flesh had revolted. Some carried weapons, a few firearms visible in the baleful glow that illuminated their progress, but most carried far cruder armaments; crossbows fashioned from scavenged fragments of metal and wood, serrated blades, and heavy clubs.

All told, they didn't look like much, and I had no doubt that we could have slaughtered the lot of them with little difficulty if we'd been so inclined, but I refrained from ordering the others to open fire. For one thing, if Varan really had dispatched a kill team after us, the gunfire would draw them to our position like flies to Jurgen on a warm summer morning, and, for another, there was that eerie blue glow lighting their way. It had no visible source, hovering over their heads as they shuffled along, and the only explanation I could think of for that was the obvious one; somewhere among the crowd of abominations was a psyker, with Emperor alone knew what other abilities. Of course, whatever they were, Jurgen would neutralise them, of that I had no doubt, but it would only take one mutant to escape and report what had happened to the enemy for Varan to know that there was a blank at



large somewhere on Perlia, and the longer I could keep that particular Emperor up my sleeve, the better I liked it. If the warmaster was really as reliant on psykers as I'd deduced, Jurgen's peculiar ability could turn out to be crucial. (In this I was right, but in a manner I couldn't possibly have predicted at the time.)

So we stayed put, hardly daring to breathe (which in a confined space with Jurgen was an activity best kept to a minimum in any case), while the eldritch glow and the arrhythmic shuffling faded away into the distance.

'I thought you said the mutants were confined to the lower levels,' Nelys said, in a faintly aggrieved tone, and I nodded, having determined that it was safe to kindle the luminators again.

'They usually are,' I said, grimly. 'They must have heard about the invasion, and come up to join in the fun.'

'Then we need to get that information to Commander Rorkins as soon as possible,' Nelys said, and I nodded again.

'My thoughts exactly. So let's get on with it.'

Despite my obvious anxiety about the matter, we didn't encounter any more warbands, emerging from the undercity on the outskirts of Havendown towards the end of the afternoon. Without the voxes in the Salamanders to relay a message, our comm-beads didn't have anything like enough range to get through to the schola, so we ended up commandeering a truck from an understandably nervous PDF squad who'd been left to man a roadblock the previous day, and who'd received no new orders since Rytepat was destroyed. Under the circumstances I told them that they might as well stand down, and go to ground in preparation for the guerrilla stage of the war, which I was certain was about to start; perhaps that saved their lives, or perhaps not, but as I never saw any of them again, I have no idea how they fared.<sup>1</sup>

The drive back was as uneventful as a trip with Jurgen at the wheel was ever likely to be, and as we approached Salubria Parva, and I caught my first glimpse of the schola standing proudly on the slopes above the rooftops of the village, I found myself beginning to hope that the worst was behind us. But in that, of course, I was woefully over-optimistic.

'You took your time,' Rorkins greeted me, as I entered the command post. I'd filled him in on the results of our attempt to rescue the Governor as soon as we'd got within vox range, so there was no need to go through it all again. Instead I shrugged, affecting nonchalance for the benefit of anyone who might be watching.

'We ran into a little hitch,' I said. 'As I've already explained.'

'Well, your friend the Governor's been making a lot of trouble for a dead man while you've been out enjoying the scenery,' Rorkins said shortly. 'You should have finished him off yourself while you had the chance.'

'Excuse me?' I asked, feeling the old, unpleasant sensation of events beginning to spiral out of control again. Julien glanced up from the other side of the hololith, and grinned at me sympathetically.

'Things have moved on a bit since your last message,' she said. That had been barely half an hour before, and I'd hurried straight to the command post as soon as Jurgen had parked the lorry we'd taken from the PDF troops. There had hardly been time for Varan to mount another major attack anywhere, but I couldn't think of anything else that would have left Rorkins so obviously out of sorts. 'This came in about five minutes ago.' While I was still on my way up from the vehicle pool, in other words. That went some way towards explaining the colonel's mood; the shock of whatever it was hadn't had time to wear off yet.

'What did?' I asked, but even before I'd finished speaking, the Celestian had activated the hololith. Trevellyan's face appeared, looking almost as gaunt as the last time I'd seen him, and I felt as though I'd been kicked hard in the stomach. Varan must have got a medicae to him in the nick of time, and there was only one reason why he would have bothered to do that.

Sure enough, when the Governor spoke, it was to confirm my worst fears. 'Citizens of Perlia,' he began, 'I speak to all of you, in the hope of preventing further unnecessary bloodshed. The forces of liberation recently arrived on our world are not our enemies, despite the lies and propaganda you've been fed to foster that impression. They bring freedom to all of you willing to embrace it; freedom from the stifling rule of the Imperium, which crushes any flowering of individual talent under the dull grey mantle of conformity, and which ripped so many of our loved ones from our embrace to feed the insatiable maw of the tyrannid juggernaut. Lay down your arms, and welcome our new friends, so that together we can go forward into a new and more glorious age.'

'Treasonous bastard,' Rorkins said, his jaw clenching. Trevellyan was still mouthing off, and I gestured to Julien to cut the recording; I'd seen and heard more than enough.

'That's on every pict and vox channel they can reach,' she said. 'Our tech-priest friends are jamming it wherever they can, of course, but it's still getting through.'

'Of course,' I echoed, still trying to take in the magnitude of this reversal. 'I'll make a broadcast myself, denouncing him as a traitor. I've still got my reputation as the Liberator to trade on; a lot of Perlans will respect that.' However hollow it was in actuality.

'Worth a try,' Rorkins said. 'Record something as soon as you can, and we'll get Visiter to transmit it from space. They're controlling most of the civilian vox and pict nets, but we should be able to bypass them with an orbital relay.'

'Better find that niece of his as well,' I added as an afterthought. 'Get her sworn in as the new Governor, and we'll undermine whatever's left of Trevellyan's authority.' Most Perlans would feel a sense of allegiance to the office, not the incumbent, so if we could mount a swift enough counter-coup with a plausible candidate of our own, we should be able to prevent a lot of them from going over to the enemy. I hoped.

'I've already got a shuttleful of stormtroopers on their way to her hunting lodge,' Rorkins said, nodding in agreement. 'She's at the arse end of nowhere, so we might as well leave her there for now. At least if Varan makes an attempt to grab her too, we'll have enough warning to do something about it.'

'Well, that's something,' I said, the palms of my hands suddenly beginning to itch as though I'd inadvertently brushed against

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<sup>1</sup> Reasonably well, if I've managed to correctly identify the unit in question from the PDF roster and subsequent debriefing: as ever, Cain's propensity to gloss over matters which don't particularly concern him proved to be something of a handicap in this regard. They appear to have successfully raided an enemy supply dump, and ambushed traitor patrols on several occasions, sustaining no more than forty per cent casualties before being absorbed into a platoon again as order was eventually re-established.

Jurgen. For a moment the reason for this sudden rush of apprehension eluded me, and then the coin dropped. 'But we need to get the schola evacuated right away. If Trevellyan's told Varan he missed the real centre of resistance when he lanced RYTEPAT...' 'Strangely enough,' Rorkins said, with a slightly strained smile, 'you're not the only man around here able to draw the obvious conclusion. Visiter's people are inbound already, so you'd better get that pict made fast.'

'Luckily for us, the debris belt forced the enemy flotilla into a low polar orbit rather than a geostationary one over the capital,' Julien said. 'The warships won't be in position for an orbital strike on these co-ordinates for about an hour. More or less.'

'Then let's hope it's more,' I said, and hurried off to find Jurgen and a tech-priest capable of sorting out the pict recording. That took longer than I would have liked, of course, but I was pleased to see that the first phase of the evacuation was already going well as I emerged into the fading light of the main quadrangle, the youngest progeni marshalling under the nominal control of their instructors. All were carrying bedrolls and survival packs, which struck me as a little odd, and I was considerably surprised to see Brasker helping to round them up, a similar bundle slung over his own shoulder.

'Ah, commissar,' he said, glancing in my direction. 'Come to see us off?'

'Not quite,' I said, 'I'm looking for a cogboy with a functioning pict recorder, but I'm pleased to see you're getting to safety while there's still time.' To my vague astonishment, I found I meant it.

The bursar smiled affably, every inch the faintly absurd bureaucrat everyone else (apart, presumably, for Julien) still took him for, and shifted his burden in a vain attempt to carry it with some semblance of dignity.

'I'm afraid that's something of a relative term at the moment. But you'll hardly want our younger charges getting underfoot in a battlezone, I'm sure.' He had no idea of my reasons for choosing the Valley of Daemons for another last stand, of course, but he was astute enough to realise that wherever the bulk of our forces went, the enemy would be sure to follow.

I nodded, soberly. 'I'm sure they're in good hands,' I said, and Brasker smiled wanly.

'Apart from mine, you mean. I've always detested the outdoors, you know; it's draughty, damp, and damnably untidy. But needs must, as they say.' There could be no question of using our meagre stock of shuttles to evacuate the juvies by air. By the time they'd turned around and come back for the rest of us the schola could well be a hole in the ground, so Rorkins had fallen back on Visiter's contingency plan. Those of us in any condition to fight would be airlifted to the Valley of Daemons as soon as the shuttles arrived, while the non-combatants hiked up into the mountains surrounding Salubria, hoping to go to ground there until the noise stopped.

Nowhere on the planet was particularly safe, of course, but we were hoping the enemy would have better things to do with their troopers than chase children through an inhospitable wilderness. Of course we might very well be wrong about that, the forces of Chaos are never exactly rational even at the best of times, but if we were, at least it would divert some of their resources from an assault on the Shadowlight.

'The Emperor protects,' I said, doing my job by reflex, and hurried off to try and convince the rest of the planet not to surrender in droves.

BY THE TIME I'd got that little chore out of the way, and an earnest engineeer had hustled away with the pict recording to transmit it to Visiter, things were getting tight for time, so I made my way back to the command centre again, Jurgen at my heels. Somehow he'd managed to find me a mug of tanna, so I was feeling almost my old self again by the time I rejoined Julien and Rorkins.

Needless to say, my sense of revived wellbeing lasted just long enough for me to get a good look at the hololith, which was now showing an ominously detailed orbital track, counting down the time until Varan's flotilla was in a position to open fire on us. By my reckoning there could only be a handful of minutes to go, and I glanced nervously at the contact icons. There was still no sign of any incoming shuttles that I could see.

'The commodore's cutting it a bit fine,' I said, having expected the extraction to have begun some time ago.

Rorkins shrugged. 'The bulk of his fleet assets are hiding out in the halo,' he pointed out. 'Hardly somewhere he can just dispatch a shuttle from at the drop of a hat.'

'And they'll still have to get past the enemy,' Julien added.

'Then perhaps it might be prudent to follow the juvies,' I said. That would leave the Shadowlight undefended, of course, but that would hardly be my fault, and I certainly couldn't do anything to look after it if I'd been vaporised. Going to ground in the mountains, particularly with a crèche to look after, wouldn't be my idea of fun, but at least it would give us the chance to regroup. Rorkins shook his head. 'Visiter says he's on top of it, and I trust him. We stay put.'

Technically, of course, I could simply have overruled him, but if we didn't all end up dead in the next ten minutes or so, the consequences of that would have been dire; the inevitable resentment and recrimination would fester, and our fragile resistance to the invader would be fatally weakened. So I just nodded, and stared at the hololith, waiting for the commodore to surprise us again.

Well, I have to admit, he certainly did that. After a tense wait, which probably lasted no more than a minute or two, but which felt like the best part of a week, my eye was caught by a rapidly moving blip at the edge of the display.

'Single contact, inbound from deep space,' the auspex operator reported, presumably in case the rest of us had suddenly been struck blind.

I looked at the icons surrounding it, assimilating the information rapidly. 'That's way too large for a shuttle,' I said. 'And it doesn't have a hope of braking in time to avoid burning up at that speed.' If anything, it was approaching faster than the carrier ships that had been fried in the upper atmosphere during the first Chaos incursion, and I couldn't see how the pilot could possibly hope to survive re-entry, let alone get down to the surface in time to extract us.

'It's the *Trespacers William*,' the auspex operator told me helpfully, 'an ore freighter the commodore requisitioned.' Remembering the bulk transport that had carried Vorlens and his men to the asteroid, I found myself briefly wondering how the lieutenant was

faring.<sup>1</sup>

'Well they can't evacuate us in that,' I said. If it was anything like the vessel I'd seen before, it wasn't designed to land on a planet in any case.

'I don't think that's the idea,' Rorkins said mildly. For a moment I wondered what he meant, then the coin dropped at last. The ship was a missile, aimed squarely at the enemy flotilla. Even if it wasn't armed, its sheer mass and velocity would be enough to destroy any vessel it collided with, and Varan's flagship was right in its path.

The crews of the Chaos flotilla must have come to the same conclusion, as the formation began to drift apart, the ships comprising it scattering in a belated attempt at self-preservation. Presented with a rather more pressing target for their guns they began to open fire, but by now the *Trespassers William* was moving so fast that they barely had any chance at all of hitting it.

'Emperor on Earth,' Julien breathed, 'he's going to take out the *Undefeatable*!' For a moment, indeed, it seemed that she was right, but one of the lesser warships fired up its main drive in the nick of time, just managing to interpose itself. Both vessels disintegrated in a shower of debris, the largest pieces of which continued to register as blips in their own right. A collective sigh of disappointment swept round the command post.

'Well, it was worth a try,' Rorkins said. 'And at least they've missed their chance to take a shot at us.' With a sudden surge of relief I could see that he was right, the orbiting warships now being far too busy trying to avoid colliding with one another or the spreading debris cloud to have any attention to spare for anything as taxing as a precision ground strike. This time round, anyway. By the time they'd stabilised their orbits enough to bring their guns to bear on the site of the schola, the planet's rotation would have taken us out of reach. Of course they could swat us easily on the next pass, but we'd be long gone by then.

'Something's not quite right about that debris,' I said, staring at the hololith. Though most of it was expanding more or less as you'd expect, one chunk appeared to be slowing, moving into a parabolic curve around the planet. I pointed it out. 'That's under power.' The itching in my palms, which had begun to die away, flared up anew as I extrapolated its course, and found it ended almost exactly at our position.

'IFF confirmed,' the auspex operator said, his voice breaking for a moment in his excitement<sup>2</sup>. 'It's one of ours.'

'Two orks with one bolt,' Rorkins said with satisfaction. He shrugged. 'Well, I suppose that's one way of getting a shuttle through the blockade without the enemy noticing.'

Which was what worried me, of course. I hadn't been expecting a fleet of the things, but I'd been counting on Visiter sending enough to evacuate us all before the enemy arrived, or blew us to pieces from space. If this was the only transport available, neither looked like being a particularly realistic hope. My thoughts began to take a gloomy turn, which was only intensified by Julien's next words.

'I've had a report from my novitiates,' she broke in. 'I sent a few out as scouts this morning, and they've just made contact. There's an armoured column moving along the Salubria road. ETA about twenty minutes.'

Once again, I felt the peculiar sensation of being kicked in the gut. 'Well,' I said, putting everyone's thoughts into words, 'it looks as though Varan's decided to do this the hard way after all.'

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<sup>1</sup> Rather badly; he'd been killed, along with most of his command, in the defence of Follendyke.

<sup>2</sup> Given the lad's probable age, it's unclear here whether Cain is being literal or figurative.

## TWENTY

HAVING NOTHING MORE constructive to contribute in the command centre than standing around watching the contact icons of the shuttle and the enemy closing in on our position, and wondering which of them would get here first, I went outside to check on our state of readiness to resist an attack. At least the non-combatants had been cleared out of the way, which made things a bit easier; now we could engage the enemy freely, without worrying overmuch about collateral damage. We'd probably put a bit of a dent in the schola, of course, but that could be repaired once the dust had settled, and everyone left behind was old enough and sensible enough to keep their heads down, or so I hoped.

'We'll be ready for them, commissar,' Maklin promised, standing by the main gates with Frister and Dallory, staring into the distance through an amplivisor.

Stebbins was a few metres away, behind the gunnery shield of a sandbagged autocannon, making sure the ammunition belt was free of potentially fouling kinks, and gave an encouraging wave as he glanced up and saw me looking in his direction. 'We certainly will,' he agreed, his voice quietly conversational in my comm-bead.

'Any signs of movement?' I asked, and Dallory pointed towards the narrow access road winding down the mountainside to join the main highway to Salubria.

'Nothing yet,' he said. 'But we can hear them.' He was right, too, the growling of engines and the squealing of tracks echoing through the valley. Whoever the enemy were, they had AFVs with them, Chimeras by the sound of it. That didn't bode well. Perlman PDF models favoured multi-lasers as their primary armament, and a few of those would make short work of our fortifications.

'Then perhaps we ought to get the gates closed,' I suggested, trying not to sound too eager.

'That's what we're here for, sir,' Frister reassured me. 'Just as soon as the scouts get back.' Of course. We could hardly leave Julien's Sororitas novitiates outside the walls. I just hoped they'd get a move on.

'I can see them now,' Maklin said, the sudden burst of enthusiasm in his voice tipping me off as to who their leader might be even before the first silhouettes appeared, bounding towards us through the gathering dusk. For a moment my blood froze, the unmistakable bulk of the approaching power armour making me wonder if the Traitor Marines I'd glimpsed back in Havendown were spearheading the assault on the schola, then reason reasserted itself. This must be Julien's novitiates, making the most of the enhanced speed and agility their power armour bestowed to facilitate their scouting expedition.<sup>1</sup> A moment later I saw that I was right, and relaxed a little, barely conscious of the fact that my hand was falling away from the butt of my laspistol again.

'Commissar.' As I'd surmised, Monyka was leading the group, which accounted for Maklin's interest; he hovered nearby, trying to look both invisible and potentially useful, while Dallory and Frister closed the heavy gates, which thudded into place with a reassuringly solid sound. I'd been in far too many sieges to place much confidence in that, though, and listened to Monyka's report with great avidity. 'There are six Chimeras heading this way, with another four trucks behind them. No sign of any heavy weapons, though, apart from the ones on the APCs.'

'Thank you, Monyka,' I said, noting her pleased surprise that I'd remembered her name. 'Perhaps you'd better report in detail to Sister Julien. I believe she's waiting for you in the command centre.'

'All right.' A flicker of disappointment seemed to cross her face for a moment. 'Promise you'll save a few heretics for us?'

'There'll be more than enough to go round,' I reassured her, glancing up at the bruise-blue sky, in which the first few stars and the faint band of the debris disc were beginning to become visible. One of the pin-points of light appeared to be moving, and I permitted myself a brief moment of relief. The shuttle was on its final approach, and somehow, when it took off again, I was going to be aboard it. I had no idea how I was going to manage that without compromising my die-hard reputation, or how I'd be able to take enough of our people with me to defend the Shadowlight, but I'd make the best of it, just like I always did. When I looked back the novitiate and her squad mates were already gone, Maklin gazing after them with a faintly abstracted air.

'Go and help Stebbins,' I told him, raising my voice slightly over the rising scream of the shuttle's engines. Their note was lower than I'd expected, and I looked up again, feeling a sudden surge of hope as I did so. Instead of the Aquila I'd anticipated, the vast bulk of a heavy cargo lifter, like the ones I'd seen in Orelus's hangar bay, was descending slowly towards the schola's shuttle pad. It was huge, comparable in size to the company drop-ships I'd ridden in so often during my time with the Imperial Guard, and I began to breathe a little more easily. We should be able to get all our effectives on board after all, although it was hardly going to be a comfortable ride.

'I'm pulling everyone off the inner perimeter,' Rorkins voxed me a moment later. 'The sooner we can start boarding the better.' I couldn't fault the logic of that, although by default, it seemed, I was going to be left holding the outer defences with just Jurgen and a handful of cadets. If Monyka's estimate of the enemy numbers was anywhere near accurate, that meant we'd be facing about a hundred men, maybe two full platoons, although there was no guarantee that they'd be in anything like so cohesive a formation. Not to mention the AFVs, which were going to be a real problem...

'I thought you might like another tanna, sir,' Jurgen said, appearing at my shoulder like a small, odiferous daemon in a village mystery play.

'You thought right,' I assured him, taking heart from his presence as I always did. 'It's getting a little chilly out here now.'

'I can't say I'd noticed, sir,' Jurgen said, producing a flask of the fragrant liquid, though, being an iceworlder, that was hardly surprising. A Valhallan's idea of sultry was frost on the windows. He handed me a cup of the beverage, restowed the flask somewhere in his collection of pouches, and unslung the melta.

'Well, it'll be warm enough around here in a minute,' I said, as the grinding of tracks grew louder outside the walls, audible even

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas Astartes scouts, in general, find unpowered carapace armour better suited to the role.



over the shrieking of the shuttle's engines, and we took refuge behind the nearest line of sandbags.

Jurgen shrugged. 'As the Emperor wills,' he said, phlegmatic as ever.

'They're deploying,' Frister said, his voice sounding a little flat in my earpiece as he tried to suppress the surge of adrenaline no doubt slamming through his system. He was up on the walls with Dallory, peering through the amplivisor from the relative safety of the firing platform just below the crest, and I was pleased to note that they both kept their heads well down. No point in tempting a vigilant enemy to try for a shot. 'Bailing out of the vehicles. Looks as though they're planning to advance on foot behind the armour.'

'Thank you, Frister,' I said, trying to mask my own apprehension. I turned to Jurgen. 'We'll need to block the gate as soon as they breach it.'

'I'll do my best,' he said, almost casually, and I nodded, opening a channel to the command centre.

'How's the embarkation coming?' I asked.

'About as well as you'd expect,' Rorkins replied shortly.

Divining his meaning at once, I switched frequencies. 'Kayla, Nelys, get over to the pad and maintain order,' I said. 'People and weapons get priority, anything else can wait. Tilar, Game, the command post. Assist the commander in removing or erasing any sensitive information.' I waited for the chorus of assent to die away, and asked 'Will that help?'

'Greatly,' Rorkins said, a faint edge of relief in his voice. 'Anything we can do for you?'

'Get some more bodies down here,' I said. 'We're outnumbered about twenty to one, not counting the heavy kit.' Those were odds I didn't like the sound of at all, and I voxed the quartet of cadets with me on a secure net. 'Our job here is just to delay the enemy,' I cautioned them. 'When I call the retreat, I'll expect you to move as though Horus himself is after you, not frak around playing at heroes, or trying to pot just one more heretic before you leave. The shuttle won't wait, and neither will I. Clear?'

'Crystalline, commissar,' Stebbins assured me, and the others mumbled their assent.

'Good,' I said, drawing my weapons, and feeling the tension knotting in the pit of my stomach. We were out of time for discussion, that much was obvious. A second or so later the solid ceramite of the gates began to shiver, as the multi-lasers of the enemy Chimeras opened up, and the repeated thundercracks of their discharge echoed around the enclosed square. The acrid tang of ozone hung heavy in the air, ionised by the repeated bursts, and the armoured portal began to sag on its hinges.

'They've got three Chimeras positioned where they can target the gates,' Dallory reported, his voice in my comm-bead hazed by static from the burning air. 'Firing in rotation.' That wasn't good. Solid as the gates were, and the walls surrounding them for that matter, they were never intended to stand up to that kind of battering.

I turned to Jurgen. 'Any moment now,' I said, and my aide nodded, lining up his melta on the collapsing gate. It was glowing a deep ackenberry red by this time, the diamond hard composite softening like caramel, and the end must surely come soon.

'First one's moving!' Frister voxed, an instant before the weakened gate buckled on its hinges, rammed from the other side. It still held, though, and an engine revved, backing up; then the pitch increased again, and the portal shivered. Cracks appeared in the thick stone posts, and blocks of masonry tumbled from the archway above, dislodged by the impact.

'Look out!' I called, but Frister and Dallory were already moving, retreating further along the wall to a safer position. The third time was the charm: the abused gates burst from their hinges, crashing to the cobbles of the courtyard, and the first Chimera nosed through the gap, crushing them under its treads, its turreted multi-laser turning to look for a target. Its forward-mounted secondary weapon traversed too, the blunt nose of an autocannon seeming to point right at me for a heart-stopping instant.

'That's far enough,' Jurgen said, and squeezed the trigger of his melta. Knowing what to expect, I closed my eyes at the critical instant, seeing a bright flare beyond the lids, and blinked them clear again, faint afterimages still dancing on my retina.

'Good shot,' I said. He'd taken the nearest track as neat as you please, and the Chimera had swerved as it shredded, jamming itself all but irremovably in the gateway. Only a narrow gap remained, barely sufficient for one or two men to get through at a time, and I began to hope we could hold them after all, but the Chimera's heavy weapons were still in play. The hull-mounted autocannon didn't have much to shoot at any more, praise the Emperor, but the turret could still traverse, and seemed intent on repaying us in kind for the hurt we'd inflicted on it.

'Move!' I told Jurgen, and we started running for a fresh line of sandbags, an instant before the emplacement we'd been sheltering in erupted in smoke and vapour. There was no time to pause while Jurgen lined up another shot, we'd have been toasted for sure before he managed to get a bead on the turret, and we both dived over the lip of the makeshift fortification an instant before another blast of coherent light scythed over our heads, close enough to scorch the hessian sacks. The acrid odour of smouldering fabric tickled my nostrils as I hunkered down, waiting for the next one.

'We're on it,' Frister said, and I risked a brief glance upwards. He and Dallory were running along the top of the wall, their greatcoats billowing like storm clouds against the more diffuse darkness of the night sky; perhaps that saved their lives, as the heretics outside found them difficult to target, although a few of the more vigilant ones sent a flurry of las-bolts bursting around them. A second later they'd jumped, landing on top of the wedged Chimera with an audible *clang!* of boot-heels against metal, and the heretic vehicle commander made the classic mistake of popping the hatch to see what was going on. Dallory shot him with his laspistol the moment he emerged, sending him slumping back inside, and a split second later Frister dropped a grenade down the open hatch.

'Fire in the hole!' he bellowed, and the two cadets jumped, hitting the ground almost at the same instant the frag charge went off. The Chimera's turret stopped moving, and they trotted over to join Jurgen and me, grinning like squaddies on their first R&R who've just discovered what joygirls are for.

'That was reckless, irresponsible, and very well done,' I told them, as they hopped over the sandbags and peered hopefully at the gate, no doubt itching for more heretics to bag. 'But you got lucky. What do you think you'd have done if that idiot hadn't opened the hatch for you?'

'Used these,' Frister said, pulling a couple of krak grenades from his pocket. 'Jammed them under the barrel and run for it.'

'You're always telling us to have a backup plan,' Dallory added. That was true, and I couldn't really bring myself to chide them for

saving my neck, so I simply nodded.

'Commendably resourceful,' I said. 'Hang on to those, you may need them.' I could see movement around the back of the wrecked Chimera, a trooper in the uniform of the Perlian PDF peering cautiously into the courtyard, no doubt having drawn the short straw, or hacked off his sergeant in some way, to earn the privilege of going first.

'He's Perlian,' Maklin reported, the amplivisor to his eyes again. 'But I can't make out the unit insignia. They've been scribbled over with some sort of cartwheel design.'

Which told me all I needed to know. Clearly the guards at the Governor's palace hadn't been the only ones to turn their coats, although how widespread the mutiny had become, I had no way of telling. If I remembered rightly, however, the serial numbers on the wrecked Chimera identified it as belonging to one of the Havendown companies, which made sense; there were no other garrisons nearby that could have dispatched them so quickly.

'Hold your fire,' I told everyone. 'Let them commit. We'll only get the advantage of surprise once.' The turncoat trooper took another cautious step or two, glancing around the courtyard as warily as a sump-rat emerging from its burrow, manifestly astonished not to have been gunned down yet. A moment later he looked behind him and beckoned, relaxing a little, evidently prepared to believe that any further resistance had been effectively suppressed.

'We're almost finished boarding,' Kayla voxed, as a few more figures began to round the end of the crippled AFV. 'Can you give us another few minutes before pulling back?'

'We'll do our best,' I replied, as quietly as I could, not wanting to give the enemy troopers any warning that we were lurking in ambush. More of them were on the move now, slipping past the disabled Chimera, and spreading out, their guns held ready for use in an instant. The first squad was followed by another, their green and grey battledress marking them out as Madasans, in contrast to the Perlian khaki<sup>1</sup>, and I frowned at the implications of that. However deranged Varan was, it seemed, he was able to integrate any fresh defectors into his armies as effectively as though they'd been through basic training together. That was a trick a good number of Imperial commanders I'd known would have cheerfully sold their souls to acquire, although, from what I'd seen of the way the Powers worked, I had no doubt that that would have been the least of the price Varan had paid.

After a moment I judged that the time was right to strike; a few more enemy troopers in the bag would have been a welcome bonus, but if we waited any longer they'd be too spread out to be sure of, so I gave the word of command.

'Fire!' I shouted, and Stebbins opened up with the autocannon, no doubt hugely delighted to have finally found a weapon even he couldn't miss the target with, scything down the front row of enemy troopers before they had a chance to react. Jorgen, the other cadets, and I opened up too, my aide eschewing the melta for the nonce in favour of his lasgun, taking full advantage of the wider spread it afforded. Caught between the SAW<sup>2</sup> and the blizzard of las-bolts most of them went down very nicely, only a couple surviving to run for cover, from where they returned fire without any noticeable effect. 'Cover the gateway.'

'Doing our best, sir,' Maklin assured me. The autocannon went quiet for a moment, while he replaced the ammunition belt, then opened up again, just in time to force another traitor trooper to duck back behind the hull of the Chimera. Two or three other troopers hovered behind him, and another couple, a bit quicker off the mark, were already sprinting for the dubious cover afforded by the smoking ruin of the pile of sandbags Jorgen and I had abandoned a few moments before. One went down, felled by our las weapons, but his squad mate made it to safety, and began adding a little more to the hail of las-bolts aimed in our general direction. I started running the numbers in my head, not liking any of the conclusions I came to. The choke point we'd created was slowing them down, but unlike the usual Chaotic hordes I'd faced, the enemy wasn't about to charge obligingly down the barrels of our guns, dying in droves in the process. Instead, they continued to act like trained and motivated troopers, content to wait for an opportunity to advance, laying down suppressive fire as they did so, and taking full advantage of whatever cover was available. On the other hand, they seemed just as fanatical as the acolytes of the Ruinous Powers always did, indifferent to their own losses, and willing to take chances with their lives even Imperial Stormtroopers would probably balk at.

The worst of both worlds, in other words; I had no doubt that they'd continue to slip past the wreck in ones and twos, every time we paused to reload, until they had the weight of numbers on their side, and that if we tried to disengage before then, they'd just rush us before we'd gone a dozen metres. The thought of running for the shuttle with a horde of murderous fanatics at my heels, shooting as they came, was far from a pleasant one, I can assure you.

At that moment, Maklin and Stebbins stopped firing, and I glanced across at the autocannon emplacement. Maklin was working the feed mechanism frantically, trying to clear a jam, and a sudden hail of las-rounds against the metal shield protecting him and Stebbins told me that the enemy were about to take full advantage of the lull.

'It's no good, it's overheated,' Stebbins said, starting to draw his laspistol.

'Then I'll cool it!' Maklin said, practically shoving his fellow cadet back into the gunner's seat, and beginning to fumble with his trousers. 'Keep firing!' A moment later a cloud of rank-smelling steam told me that he'd picked up an old gunner's trick for cooling a weapon in an emergency, from Emperor knew where, and I found myself thanking the Throne that all our tech-priests were currently filing aboard the cargo ship, rather than being anywhere they could have witnessed so profane a desecration of the Omnissiah's bounty. We'd never have heard the last of it. 'Try it now!'

Stebbins squeezed the trigger again, and, to everyone's relief except the enemy's, the autocannon burst into life once more. By this point the damage had been done, however, almost a dozen of the turncoats making it through the gap despite the best efforts of the rest of us and, of course, the more of them who joined the fray, the more time we spent ducking behind our improvised ramparts,

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<sup>1</sup> From which we can infer that there was some source of artificial light in the vicinity which Cain doesn't bother to mention, as these colours would have been virtually indistinguishable in the dark.

<sup>2</sup> More Imperial Guard jargon, which, in this instance, stands for Support Automatic Weapon, at least according to Mott, my savant. The military mind is far too fond of TLAs, if you ask me. (Which Cain once assured me, with a perfectly straight face, was the preferred Guard terminology for Three Letter Abbreviations. I'm still not sure if he was pulling my leg or not.)

dodging the return fire, which allowed still more of their comrades to join them. Maklin's success in getting the autocannon working again had stemmed the tide, but only briefly; at the rate Stebbins was burning ammunition it could only be a matter of time before it seized up again, or they simply ran dry, and then the heretics would be on us like Jurgen's psoriasis.

Glancing round for a line of retreat, I noticed the deep cracks in the masonry around the gateway again, and the germ of an idea began to take root. It was a slender chance, I thought, but then I'd hazarded my life on a lot slimmer before now, and I was still breathing; as I've remarked on more than one occasion, even the narrowest of margins is better than no chance at all. I gestured to Jurgen. 'The archway,' I said. 'Can you do anything about it from here?'

Divining my meaning at once, my aide nodded. 'Piece of cake,' he assured me, abandoning the lasgun for the melta once again. His aim was as sure as always, the ravening burst of thermal energy impacting on the crumbling masonry above the abandoned Chimera, and a large block of stone teetered, before crashing to the ground, crushing another of the traitors who'd ducked back behind it to wait out the storm of autocannon rounds spanging off the abused armour plate. Expelling his breath in a sigh of frustration, Jurgen steadied his aim again, but before he could fire Frister and Dallory had flung their remaining krak grenades at the gateway: the anti-armour charges exploded with a satisfying roar, which was drowned out almost at once by the thunder of toppling stone.

'That's plugged the gap,' Dallory said, an unmistakable note of satisfaction in his voice, just as Kayla voxed again.

'Almost everyone's aboard, commissar,' she reported, sounding a little frazzled, but that was no more than I'd expected. When I spoke to her later, it seemed that a few of the tech-priests had got a little difficult about having to leave some cherished items of junk behind to fit everybody in, which Nelys had finally sorted out by asking which of them was offering to stay behind to make room for it. The lad was definitely coming on.

'We'll be right there,' I told her, privately wondering just how we were going to manage that without being overrun by the heretics already inside the walls, not to mention the dozens of others no doubt preparing at that moment to scramble up the pile of rubble we'd just thoughtfully provided for them to climb. I turned my attention to the others. 'Pull back, by fire and movement. Stebbins and Maklin go first.' No point in finding any hidden sharpshooters for myself.

The two cadets abandoned the autocannon, and scuttled for the safety of a buttress holding up one of the proctor's lodges, while the rest of us laid down what covering fire we could. By a miracle they made it, although the next stage would be even trickier; two laspistols could hardly be expected to suppress over a dozen armed, and by now probably very hacked-off, heretics with any degree of success. If we kept as low as we could, taking full advantage of the sandbags, we might just make it as far as one of the outbuildings, though, and hope we could find refuge there. Of course it was pretty obvious where we'd be heading for, so all the enemy had to do was take aim at the two points the sandbags ended and wait, but there was nothing we could do about that except hope that Stebbins and Maklin could keep their heads down long enough for Jurgen to get a quick shot off with the melta.

'I don't suppose you've got any of those frag grenades left?' I asked hopefully, and Dallory shook his head.

'Fraid not, sir,' he said regretfully. I poked my head above the sandbags as much as I dared (which wasn't much, believe me), and ducked back at once as puffs of vaporised hessian and kicked up dirt erupted around my position. This didn't look good, but there seemed no alternative to making a dash for it, putting my trust in Stebbins' dubious marksmanship, my battered set of carapace, and whatever attention the Emperor could spare from keeping the galaxy turning, which I didn't expect to be much.

'Need a hand there, Cain?' a familiar voice asked, and Julien trotted into the courtyard, her power armour gleaming like freshly-shed blood, her bolt pistol and chainsword already in her hands. Behind her came the troop of novitiate, bolters cradled, sinister highlights dancing along the edges of the sarissas locked to their barrels.<sup>1</sup>

'I wouldn't object to one,' I told her, never having been so pleased to see a gaggle of Sororitas in my life. The heretics opened up as soon as they saw them, of course, their las-rounds expending themselves harmlessly against the crimson ceramite of Julien's armour, and the freshly-painted white of her charges. With ear-splitting shrieks of "For the Throne!" the novitiate bounded into the attack, tearing apart troopers and the cover they hid behind with a hail of bolter fire, slashing at the demoralised survivors with their sarissas, and generally wreaking a most satisfying amount of carnage.

Leaving the novitiate to enjoy themselves, we hurried through the strangely-deserted schola, its courtyards and quadrangles seeming eerie and lifeless. Only then did it occur to me that I'd never seen them anything other than bustling, in all the time I'd spent here. Despite the sense of urgency, and the buzzing of adrenaline in my veins, I found the prospect curiously melancholy, like seeing an old friend in the sanitorium for what you both know is liable to be the last time, and I found myself trying to take in as many little details of the closest thing I'd ever known to a home as I could.

The sounds of battle had long since faded behind us as we reached the shuttle pad, and I glanced up at the huge cargo hauler, hardly surprised at all to see a familiar shock of ruddy hair through the visor of the cockpit. Glancing down, Sprie waved a cheerful greeting, and returned his attention to his instruments.

'Hurry up, commissar! No time for sightseeing!' Julien's voice was in my comm-bead again, and I turned, catching sight of her in the distance, flanked by her novitiate, whose white, blood-spattered armour made them look like vengeful ghosts in the half-light. None of them seemed to be missing, I noted with relief; we'd already suffered more than enough casualties, and when we arrived at our destination we'd need all the warriors we could muster. They were catching up fast, their augmented muscles allowing them to maintain a pace which would have had the cadets and I dropping with exhaustion by now, and their metal-shod feet clattered on the boarding ramp almost simultaneously with ours. 'We gave them a bloody nose back there, but they'll regroup in short order, and then they'll be all over us.'

'They won't have time,' I said, with heartfelt relief, as the ramp began to rise behind us. The cargo hold was just as crowded as I'd feared, and I resolved at once to go and annoy Sprie on the flight deck at the earliest opportunity. I glanced back through the narrowing gap, seeing a flicker of movement in the distance, which could possibly have been running men, but the thick metal slab thudded into place before I could be sure. A moment later the unmistakable surge of acceleration beneath my feet, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See my earlier comment about the ambient light levels.

familiar expression of nausea on the face of my aide, informed me that we were airborne. 'Thank you for your assistance, by the way. It was most timely.'

'My pleasure,' Julien said, with every sign of sincerity. Then she smiled, a trifle grimly. 'It gave the novitiates an easy bleeding, which was probably no bad thing.' She glanced at Monyka and Maklin, who were grinning at each other inanely, and lowered her voice a little, although between the babbling of overlapping conversations around us and the roaring of the shuttle's engines the danger of being overheard was minimal. 'I've no doubt the next battle we face won't be anything like as easy.'

In that, of course, she was perfectly correct, although I couldn't even begin to tell her quite how desperate things were about to become. When Varan became aware of the location of the Shadowlight, we'd no longer be fighting to save a world: the fate of the entire galaxy would be hanging in the balance, and I was by no means sure we'd be able to tip it in the right direction with the limited resources at our disposal.

#### Editorial Note:

*As will no doubt be obvious to most attentive readers, by this point the situation across the face of Perlia was confused to say the least. As Cain barely bothers to acknowledge the fact, I've appended another brief extract from a popular account, which, though far from comprehensive, at least touches on most of the salient points with commendable brevity.*

#### **From *The Return of the Liberator: Ciaphas Cain and the Second Siege of Perlia* by Orten Bassit, 037.M42.**

THOUGH COMMISSAR CAIN had been far from idle, rallying resistance to the detestable foe with single-minded diligence, unrest and sedition continued to erupt sporadically across the face of Perlia. The Liberator's pictcasts, relayed from space by his heroic compatriots in the SDF, did much to calm the situation, which would undoubtedly have been far worse after the unmasking of Governor Trevellyan as a secret worshipper of the Dark Powers, stiffening the resolve of those determined to defend the planet from the Great Enemy whatever the cost. The decisive actions of Illyria Trevellyan, the newly-appointed incumbent of the office, who had been hastily sworn in to replace her treacherous uncle, also boosted morale among the loyalists, her own pictcasts denouncing the turncoats and fainthearts doing at least as much damage to their cause as the hunting rifle she lost no time in turning on the traitors who had dared to attack her vacation lodge.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, although pockets of subversion continued to flare up, almost randomly, across the planet, usually in towns already held by the invaders, only a small proportion of the PDF heeded the call to surrender; most, instead, followed the example of their predecessors during the greenskin invasion, and scattered, commencing guerrilla strikes against the occupiers without recourse to any higher authority. In this they were greatly assisted by the newly-inducted members of the PDV, who, as civilians in all but name, were able to blend into the general populace far more easily, striking and vanishing again almost at will, creating disruption out of all proportion to their limited numbers.

The sole exception was in and around Havendown, where the taint of Chaotic corruption spread unbelievably fast, ensnaring most of the PDF units within the vicinity of the capital, who, to a man, began to swear unyielding fealty to Varan. Even the near destruction of his flagship, in a strike of breathtaking audacity by the SDF, failed to shake their faith in this supposedly invincible leader; and so the stage was set for the final confrontation between the embodiment of all that was foul, in the shape of the invading warmaster, and the incarnate compendium of the finest human virtues represented by Ciaphas Cain.

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<sup>1</sup> Popular accounts of the Second Siege generally devote at least a chapter to this incident, which has spawned a number of popular novels, holodramas, and pictcasts, usually depicting the newly appointed governor as a cool and decisive heroine. Curiously, the squad of stormtroopers Rorkins dispatched to bodyguard her, and who almost certainly saw off the insurgents without any help from enthusiastic amateurs, barely feature in these narratives.



## TWENTY-ONE

THE FLIGHT TO the Valley of Daemons was a remarkably short one, or so it seemed to me, although that may have been due at least in part to my foreknowledge of the fate that almost certainly awaited us there. I diverted myself from these morbid reflections as much as I could by conversing with Sprie, as the laden cargo shuttle rolled back the night, hurtling eastwards through almost half a day's worth of time zones, so that by the time we'd arrived at our destination the sun had shuffled back from the dusk of early evening to a point a little past noon.

The young pilot had greeted me cheerfully enough as I entered the flight deck, while the rest of his crew, a couple of naval cadets I didn't recognise, and who he didn't bother to introduce, busied themselves at their control lecterns. I had no idea what they were doing, but, assuming that it somehow involved getting us to our destination in one piece, determined not to bother them unnecessarily.

'I wasn't sure you were going to make it down in one piece,' I admitted to Sprie, and the young man grinned happily.

'To be honest, it was touch and go there for a moment,' he admitted cheerfully. 'But I managed it.'

'Only just,' one of the other cadets muttered resentfully, and Sprie's smile spread.

'We were well within hull tolerance.' He shrugged. 'Well, maybe a bit over the safety margins, but this old tub's as solid as a bulkhead, and I didn't want to give the enemy a decent crack at us on the way through.'

'From what I saw in the tactical displays,' I said, 'they had more than enough to think about at the time.'

'That was the commodore's idea,' Sprie told me, to my distinct lack of surprise. 'He'd been hoping to use the freighter as a Q ship<sup>1</sup>, but we didn't have enough munitions to fit it out, so he hit on the idea of a high-speed ram instead. We just hung on to one of the external docking ports, and disengaged at the last second, hoping they'd take us for a bit of debris until after we hit the atmosphere.'

'Well, it worked,' I said. 'Well done.' Then another thought struck me. 'What about the ship's crew? It wasn't a suicide run, was it?'

'Almost,' Sprie said, as cheerful as ever. 'The three of us volunteered to man the flight stations on the bridge, and just ran for the shuttle as soon as we'd locked off the helm.' I looked at the pair of cadets accompanying him with renewed respect. They'd put their lives on the line more than once today, it seemed. 'The tech-priests left us a couple of servitors to handle things down in the engine room, so we didn't have to wait for anyone else, which was just as well; it would have been a lot further to run, and I doubt they'd have made it.'

'You're all a credit to the Navy,' I said, sincerely enough, and settled into a vacant seat to try and grab a little sleep before we arrived at our destination.

I woke shortly before we reached it, which was useful; I'd never seen the valley from the air before, and found the unaccustomed view extremely helpful in settling the tactical picture more comfortably in my mind. The air was clear, with a faint haze of cloud, and the water in the lake shimmered like silver in the afternoon sun, reminding me for some reason of the scales of a recently-caught fish. The deep scar in the earth below the dam was as desolate as ever, and, to my relief, still devoid of any Chaotic forces, although how long that was likely to last I had no idea.

'Put us down near the building,' I said, spotting the scorched area where our car had so recently burned. To my distinct lack of surprise, red-uniformed skitarii were already fanning out across the piazza, and I reached for the handset of the vox on the console next to the pilot's station. There was no telling what deadly surprises the Adeptus Mechanicus may have rigged to defend the shrine against an air attack, and I didn't want to find out the hard way. 'Yaitz, it's Commissar Cain. I've brought a few friends, as I promised.' I glanced at Sprie as I spoke, but if he was surprised at my words, he never showed it, simply guiding us to the ground with his usual precision.

'Acknowledged, commissar,' Yaitz responded after a moment, but through the armourcrys I could see that none of the troopers was standing down. Not that I would in their place either, though, I have to admit.

Sprie cut the engines, and I stood, ready to lead the way down the descending cargo ramp.

As my boots hit the tiles making up the mosaic, and my face came fully into view from the shadows, the skitarii surrounding us finally relaxed a little, settling their hell-guns more comfortably into the crooks of their arms instead of holding them ready for use, and I felt a little of the tension draining out of me in response. I'd hardly have been the first commissar to be felled by friendly fire, but it would have been an ironic way to finish my career, particularly under the circumstances. After a moment Yaitz hurried forwards, and I nodded a quick greeting, before turning to indicate the motley collection of cadets and instructors disembarking behind me.

'Captain Yaitz, commanding the skitarii detachment here,' I said blandly, letting the others worry about the reason for the presence of armed guards in a supposedly harmless Mechanicus shrine if they cared to. With any luck they'd just assume Yaitz and his men had been assigned here as a result of the invasion, and not think too hard about it, although Rorkins was probably astute enough to suspect a hidden agenda. On the other hand, he had more than enough to worry about at the moment, without adding any more problems to the list. I turned, flapping my hand between the two men in the conventional gesture of hurried introduction.

'Commander Rorkins, C in C of the planetary defence effort.'

'Sir.' Yaitz had the good grace to salute, although, as a vassal of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he was no more under Rorkins's authority than I was. 'It's an honour. We heard you'd been killed in the orbital bombardment.'

'Then you heard wrong,' Rorkins said, softening the words with a smile. 'But we seem to have kept the enemy guessing.'

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<sup>1</sup> An innocuous-looking merchantman which has been heavily armed, often to the standards of a warship, these vessels are sometimes used as covert escorts for vulnerable convoys, or as bait to lure pirate vessels into an ambush; by the time a marauder discovers that their apparently helpless prey actually outguns them, it's usually too late.

'So long as they don't guess you've come here,' Yaitz said. 'That would make us a very tempting target indeed.' Very neatly done, I thought, my own skill at misdirection enabling me to appreciate how subtly the skitarii captain had planted the idea that Rorkins's presence alone might attract enemy attention. That would explain the attack we both expected before too long to most people's satisfaction, without compromising the secret hidden beneath the shrine. He gestured to a I nearby skitarii. 'Go with the commander, and see that he has everything he needs.' He turned back to Rorkins. 'I take it you'll need somewhere to set up your headquarters again?'

'That would be more than helpful,' Rorkins said, leading his gaggle of staffers away in the wake of the red uniform. My own cadets, I noted with quiet approval, had taken it upon themselves to organise the disembarkation of most of the people we'd brought, marshalling them into groups, and checking that everyone was adequately armed; apart from the engineers who'd accompanied us, who were simply gawking at the shrine and the dam beyond like skavvies from the sump getting their first glimpse of an uphive trading post. But then, the first time I'd been here, Felicia had I been equally awestruck, telling me that the shrine was considered one of the Ommissiah's greatest marvels on Perlia, studied at Mechanicus seminaries around the globe, and that precious few Perlian tech-priests ever got the chance to see its wonders for themselves, so I supposed I shouldn't be too hard on them.

The unmistakable ringing of armoured feet on the metal mesh of the boarding ramp informed me, without turning round, that Julien and her novitiates were disembarking, and the expressions on the faces of the skitarii surrounding us hardened, becoming distinctly less welcoming. Well, I could hardly blame them for that: the last time battle sisters had set foot on the premises they'd been working for Killian, slaughtering everyone apart from the renegade inquisitor's own agents among the staff, and stealing the Shadowlight on his behalf.

'May I present Sister Julien and her novitiates,' I said smoothly, determined to prevent any lingering awkwardness from hampering our efforts to co-operate. If the Celestian noticed any hesitation in Yaitz's manner she affected ignorance, simply greeting him with the sign of the aquila. After a moment Yaitz responded, fanning his fingers in the cogwheel gesture favoured by acolytes of the Ommissiah. 'I'm sure we'll find her assistance invaluable in keeping this installation safe,' I added.

'No doubt,' Yaitz said neutrally. Any remaining uneasiness was swiftly dispelled, however, as Makan appeared, the sleeve of his jacket somewhat unconvincingly embellished with a PVF armband (which I suppose was intended to account for the bolt pistol holstered at his waist, if any of our party cared to ask.) 'Sieur Makan here is our liaison with the Chilinvale militia.' Julien nodded a cursory greeting.

'We can have them here any time they're needed,' Makan told me, his tone adding that he doubted we'd ever be that desperate without having to put the thought into words. Then, as though belatedly remembering the role he was supposed to be playing, he glanced towards the shrine. 'Magos Tayber sent me out here to ask if you could meet her whenever it's convenient.'

Meaning now, obviously; if whatever Felicia wanted was too sensitive to risk voicing me about, it was probably a matter of life and death.

'I'll be right there,' I said, trying to ignore the sudden flare of apprehension twisting my gut.

'OH, THERE YOU are,' Felicia greeted me, as I descended the hidden staircase to the warren beneath the shrine. 'You're just in time.' Although she was trying to seem calm and unemotional, as befitted her status in the Mechanicus hierarchy, I knew her too well to be completely fooled; her intonation and body language were almost the same as they'd been on the day she'd discovered an abandoned power lifter at an ammunition cache in the desert, shortly after our journey across the continent had begun, barely able to contain her eagerness to start playing with her new toy.

'In time for what?' I asked, following her down the corridor at something approaching a trot. Makan was still with us, and with a thrill of renewed apprehension I began to realise we were approaching the chamber that held the Shadowlight.

'We think we've made a bit of a breakthrough,' Felicia told me. 'Sister Rosetta noticed that a couple of fragments of text which we thought belonged on separate slates appeared to relate to one another. If she's right, we might just have found a configuration of the spheres we can use.'

'Use to do what?' I asked, fighting the impulse to turn and run for the shuttle. If they were really planning to mess about with the enigmatic device, I wanted to be as far away as possible, preferably in the next segmentum, not offered a ringside seat.

'That's just it,' Felicia said. 'We're not entirely sure. But we're reasonably certain that it varies the amount of warp energy the Shadowlight channels into the main device.'

'Meaning what?' I asked, already regretting leaving Jurgen behind to sort out the matter of finding us a comfortable billet. The staff accommodation at the hydro station wasn't exactly commodious to begin with, not to mention having been designed with tech-priests in mind, which meant distinctly light on the essential amenities, and the sudden influx of people from the schola had the meagre facilities bursting at the seams. Under most circumstances my aide would still have been able to procure me somewhere at least tolerable to sleep, but right now that seemed far less urgent than it had done when we got off the shuttle. I activated my comm-bead. 'Jurgen, get down here at once,' I instructed, feeling a flicker of relief as he responded. If my fears turned out to be grounded, which they all too frequently were, his peculiar talent might be the only thing standing between us and disaster.

'Meaning we might be able to shut it down,' Felicia said. 'Or at least reduce its signature in the warp. This installation's well shielded, but if Varan's got enough powerful psykers with him, they might still be able to detect it if they get close enough.' Not just them, either, I thought, although I kept my paranoia to myself. Felicia had never even heard of the necrons, and I still didn't have any real evidence that they were up and about, hunting for the Shadowlight too, so I wasn't about to mention that terrifying possibility to anyone else.

'That would be good,' I admitted cautiously, still feeling that it would be even better to leave the blasted thing alone, or just bury it again and forget about it altogether for preference. But these people had been studying the strange xenos artefact for decades, and presumably wouldn't take too many chances with it, all too aware of what they might be meddling with. On the other hand, Makan

clearly shared my unease, his hand hovering over the butt of his bolt pistol in the manner of a man prepared to draw and use it in a heartbeat. Only then did I realise that my fingertips were resting lightly on my own weapons too.

We hustled into the Shadowlight chamber, which still seemed charged with abnatural energies to me, as though the malevolent power it contained was somehow leaking out into the very air, and the Inquisition agent and I exchanged apprehensive glances. There was I no one else here, which was something, I supposed. At least we'd be the only casualties if Felicia's guess about what she was supposed to do turned out to be wrong.

'Now, let's see,' she said cheerfully, approaching the dais, and reaching out with all three of her mechadendrites. 'That one there, this one here...' She plucked the three spheres from their resting places, and repositioned them, stepping back to admire her handiwork with a quizzically cocked head. 'That ought to do it.'

Makan and I both exhaled, unaware until then that we'd been holding our breath. We were still here, and presumably so was the rest of the galaxy. The ripples of light and colour chasing around the plinth stabilised into a fresh configuration, then began to move randomly, darkening, as though someone had just poured ink into an agitated fish tank.

'That's not right,' Felicia said, sounding no more than mildly curious.

'Get back!' I had both my weapons drawn by this time, and only Makan's solid bulk in the way prevented me from retreating towards the door. He'd drawn his bolt pistol too, although neither of us had anything to fire at yet. I had the distinct impression that if Felicia hadn't been standing in the way he'd have taken a speculative pot at the Shadowlight on general principle.

'In a minute,' Felicia said, her voice still curiously abstracted. 'I need to think about this...'

'Just put the damn balls back the way they were!' Makan said, looking as though he was on the verge of stepping forward and doing the job himself. Remembering the effect the Shadowlight had on unprotected flesh, I felt that would probably be a very bad idea, and reached out the hand holding my laspistol to forestall him.

'Wait,' I said. 'Something's happening.' I wasn't sure at first if I was imagining it or not, but the three blue spheres seemed to be trembling in their cradles, barely perceptibly; then, as I stared at them, the oscillations increased. 'Emperor's bowels!' Abruptly the balls began to levitate, rising above the crystalline surface into which they'd been slotted, and orbiting around the blank obsidian bulk of the Shadowlight.

'Most intriguing,' Felicia agreed. 'It's never done that before.'

'Out! Now!' I said, suddenly aware that, with a gun and a chainsword in my hands, I was in no position to hustle her into motion. Fortunately Makan was quick on the uptake, seizing her upper arm with his free hand, and tugging her towards the door.

'Stop it, you silly man,' Felicia said, fending him off with the mechadendrites. 'I need to observe this without any distractions.' Her voice became a little uncertain. 'That's the only way we'll understand what's going on.'

'I think I already do,' I said, a thrill of sheer terror coursing through me along with the realisation. The air was rippling, seeming to curdle into something solid, although I could still see the tablets on the wall beyond the area of disturbance. Abruptly it ripped, like a sheet of fabric, and something emerged through the gap, clawed feet gouging furrows in the floor as it shrugged free of the shroud of rippling air.

'What in the Emperor's name is that?' Felicia shouted, forgetting all about detached observation for the time being, which was probably just as well. Baleful eyes glared at us from a face which seemed to be inside out where it wasn't covered in needle-sharp quills, and I squeezed off a couple of las-bolts in the thing's general direction, which didn't seem to bother it at all.

'It's a daemon,' I yelled back, 'what the frak do you think it is?' Fortunately a minor one, if I was any judge, having encountered rather more denizens of the warp than I would have liked over the years, but I was still well aware that it was perfectly capable of killing all three of us without any effort at all. And the tear in the fabric of reality was still hanging in the air behind it, bathing the thing in warp energy so there was no hope of driving it back to the immaterium simply by inflicting physical damage on it, or waiting for it to destabilise in the usual manner of its kind.

'A dead one,' Makan said, emptying his clip at it. The explosive bolts detonated, gouging craters of flesh, or something like it, wherever they hit, and the daemon staggered. For a moment I dared to hope that it had been felled after all, but then it straightened, and bellowed something which no human larynx could ever have reproduced, words which echoed like razor-edged ice shards in my mind. Then, even more shockingly, it laughed, great barks of malign amusement, as its sundered flesh knitted seamlessly together.

'Get her out of here!' I said, all too aware that Makan was still blocking my path to the door, and that if I tried to push past him the thing would be on us in a heartbeat while we were distracted. Of course he thought I was being noble and heroic, my reputation for gallantry working to my advantage as it so often did, and to my relief he complied, dragging the no longer protesting tech-priest to safety.

As soon as the doorway was clear I started to follow, but the daemon had other ideas; with a bellow of thwarted rage it leapt to forestall me, swiping at my head with taloned hands. I ducked by reflex, parrying with the chainsword, and the whining teeth bit deep, drawing something that looked vaguely like blood, and smelled a great deal worse. As I'd expected the wound began to knit together instantly, so that within a heartbeat or two there was no trace remaining of the hurt I'd inflicted. I whirled, striking deep into its belly and driving it back a pace, though it rallied almost at once, aiming a flurry of blows which drove me back, but cost it a tracery of momentarily oozing wounds on its forearms as I continued to parry.

With a sudden thrill of horror I realised I was backing straight towards the hole in reality. I had no idea whether I could fall through it into the warp beyond, and had no intention of finding out. I dived to one side, rolling past the abomination's legs, and taking an opportunistic swipe at it in passing. Once again my blade bit deep, and the daemon stumbled, turning awkwardly to follow me. I cracked off a couple of shots from the laspistol in my other hand as I rose to my feet, and to my immeasurable relief I noticed that the las-bolt wounds seemed to be taking a little longer to heal than before.

That could only mean one thing. Sure enough, a familiar odour was wafting through the door, followed an instant later by an equally familiar voice.

'Hang on, commissar, I'm coming!' Jurgen came in at a run, his melta in his hands, and I don't mind admitting my heart leapt to

see him. The daemon hesitated, looking apprehensive, insofar as anything approximating a human expression could be said to exist on what passed for its face, and then charged in again. Fortunately I'd taken advantage of its momentary distraction to open the distance, and my aide was able to get off a shot with his melta.

The ravening beam of thermal energy took the thing full in the chest, blasting a hole clean through it, and the abomination fell heavily to the floor. I wasn't about to take its demise for granted, though, and struck out with my chainsword as it writhed at my feet, gouging fresh furrows in the floor as it tried to regain its footing. Its head came free of its body, blinking up at me in outraged astonishment.

Even a daemon generally finds decapitation something of a handicap; after a moment it stopped twitching and lay still.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, with heartfelt relief.

'You're welcome, sir.' My aide shouldered the melta again, and began to rummage through his collection of pouches. 'A drop of tanna? I've got a flask somewhere.'

'In a moment,' I said, indicating the xenos device behind us. The warp portal was still open, and I wanted it sealed at once, before anything else came through. 'Can you put those ball things back in the holes first?'

'Of course, sir.' If he was surprised, he didn't show it, simply stepping up to the crystal plinth. As I'd expected, the tear in the air began to seal itself as Jurgen approached it, and the trio of balls to move less slowly. He reached out a grime-encrusted hand to seize the nearest, and the others stopped moving, simply hovering in place where they were. 'Where would you like them?'

I indicated the holes they'd occupied the first time I'd seen the device, on the assumption that it had at least been relatively harmless then, and waited while Jurgen slotted the spheres home, one by one. As the last of the trio clicked into place the hole in reality sealed itself, the air returning to its normal consistency, and the corpse of the daemon flickered and vanished, back to wherever it had come from, with the same miniature thundercrack I always associated with the operation of Amberley's displacer field.<sup>1</sup>

'Well, that takes care of that,' I said, as a clatter of bootsoles in the corridor outside announced Makan's return, along with Yaitz and as many skitarii as they'd been able to round up. They came to a sudden halt in the doorway, registering the sudden absence of daemon with surprise and evident relief.

'What happened?' Makan asked, glancing warily around the room, as though expecting the abomination to suddenly jump up and shout 'Surprise!'

'It destabilised,' I said, knowing from long experience that a fragment of the truth is always better than a lie. 'Just in time, too.'

'And the portal?' Makan asked.

'Vanished at the same time the daemon did,' I told him, truthfully enough. I made my way into the corridor, eager to be out of that dreadful chamber, Jurgen at my shoulder. The skitarii stood aside to make room for us to pass, although whether out of respect for men who'd just bested a daemon or reluctance to get too close to my aide I couldn't rightly have said.

'Well, that didn't go quite as well as I'd hoped,' Felicia said, meeting us at the end of the passageway.

'I'd rather gathered that,' I agreed, gratefully taking the tanna which Jurgen had succeeded in locating by this time. 'Any idea what happened?'

'We seem to have increased the output of warp energy rather than damping it,' she told me, which I'd pretty much managed to work out for myself. 'Lucky you were there to deal with the immediate consequences.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed cautiously, before the full meaning of her words penetrated. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. 'What are the delayed ones likely to be?'

'Well, the energy readings were far in excess of any we've ever recorded,' Felicia admitted, a trifle reluctantly if I was any judge. 'It's quite likely that Varan has the pykers or the specialised equipment to have detected them. Which means he probably knows where we are now.'

'I see,' I said, all my old fears suddenly returning, and hoping that he was the only one.

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<sup>1</sup> Caused by the air rushing in to fill the sudden vacuum.



## TWENTY-TWO

I DIDN'T HAVE long to brood, however. No sooner had I emerged into the sunlight again, inhaling the clean air gratefully, despite the lingering aromas of Jurgen and the sun-baked algae lying around the shore of the lake diluting the effect somewhat, than Nelys accosted me.

'Commander Rorkins would like a word,' he said, 'about defending the place. He thought you might have some useful input, having fought here before.' His eyes I drifted towards the obelisk for a moment, squinting against the glare. It seemed none the worse for the skirmish with the servitors the last time I'd been here, so far as I could tell, although the westering sun glancing from it replaced any real detail with eye-watering dazzle.

I nodded. After all, that had been my ostensible reason for dragging us out here in the first place, so now we'd arrived I could hardly just tell Rorkins to get on with it, I had more pressing matters to attend to. 'I'll be right there,' I said. 'Can you show me where he's set up?'

Our new headquarters, it turned out, was very like the old one, in that whatever essential equipment we'd been able to jam into the shuttle with us had been ranged about a space never intended to house it, but with a few improvements. Felicia, or more probably Makan, given that the Inquisition apparently took most of the administrative decisions here, had turned over a storage bay used to house construction materials for running repairs to the buildings and infrastructure in more peaceful times, for our use as a makeshift command post. As I approached it, a utility servitor plodded past in the opposite direction, pushing a wheeled pallet of piping, apparently the last of the displaced stores. Being a Mechanicus facility, the cleared space was far cleaner and better equipped than most such warehouses would have been, however, and liberally equipped with power outlets; our communications and detection gear was already up and running when I walked through the door, the engineers from the schola having been supplemented by a tranche of Felicia's staff.

'Cain. Good.' Rorkins beckoned me over to the hololith as I entered, and I picked my way gingerly across the intervening expanse of floor, the tech-priests having been as cavalier as ever about the run of their cables. 'What do you make of this?' Despite being banged about in the cargo hold along with the rest of our kit, not to mention our people, the device was still functioning better than ever, in fact, which spoke volumes for the calibre of the tech-priests Felicia had assigned to assist us.

I glanced at the display, which showed a three-dimensional image of the valley, dotted with icons, recognising the basic troop deployments Yaitz and I had worked out between us on my previous visit almost at once. Rorkins had made a few minor amendments, shortening lines of communication and allowing more firelanes to overlap, and I nodded approvingly. 'Should work,' I conceded, after a long enough pause to give the impression that it was the first time I'd seen it. 'But we'd need more troops.' Yaitz and I had worked on the assumption that his skitarii and whatever help I could bring from the schola would be all the manpower we'd have available.

'That's what the skitarii captain said,' Rorkins informed me. 'But we should be able to get the extra bodies we need. Young Sprie's volunteered to pick up some PDF from the Cainstead garrison'.<sup>1</sup>

'Might as well,' I agreed, switching the image to the spinning globe of Perlia, bringing it into focus with a well-judged thump on the housing of the projection unit, which earned me a reproving look from the most senior tech-priest present, and taking in the scattering of icons marking the presence of hostile and friendly forces. 'There's nothing for them to guard in the middle of the desert in any case.'

For a moment I remembered the raiding force that had vanished without trace in the first assault, and Kayla's remark about sand devils, but forced the thought aside. Prosperity Wells (I never could take the new name seriously) was a long way from the landing site, and if there really were necrons roaming the desert there the local PDF wouldn't be able to do anything about it anyway, other than dying in droves. Far better for them to join us here, and possibly tip the balance in keeping the Shadowlight out of Varan's hands.

'Yaitz did a good job, all things considered,' Rorkins said, looking at me narrowly. 'Almost as if he was expecting to be reinforced by a group of about our size.'

'I'm sure he had contingency plans for all kinds of conditions,' I answered blandly. 'Probably just dusted off the one that best fitted the forces we brought with us.'

'Probably,' Rorkins said, in the tone of a man who doesn't believe a word of it, but has more pressing matters to take care of at the moment. 'Do you have any thoughts about how we should proceed?'

'I think this is the best plan anyone's likely to come up with,' I said, having already thrashed out the alternatives with Yaitz and Makan at considerable length. The weak point's going to be the new road. 'The old one funnelled everything through the mouth of the valley, and across the dam, which played into our hands very nicely, but the new route bypasses most of the choke points.' In order to compensate for that, Yaitz had mined the service road, and set up support weapon emplacements to bracket it from the brow of the ridge, but against a sufficiently determined assault that might not turn out to be enough.

'Yes, I noticed that.' Rorkins nodded judiciously. 'Not a lot we can do about it, though. Except put more troopers on the ground.' 'Maybe Sprie can ferry a few more in when he gets back from Prosperity Wells,' I said, glancing at the hololith again. 'There must be a few more garrisons some way from the fighting we can redeploy.' On this continent, anyway; everything we could spare on the western one was being thrown into a cordon around Havendown, trying to stop the inexorable spread of the stain in the hololith marking the limits of Varan's influence. It still seemed to be growing, although the fighting wasn't any more intense than

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<sup>1</sup> The town of Cainstead, formerly Prosperity Wells, was the site of Cain's first major victory over the ork invaders, and the birthplace of the ad hoc army he was to lead across the continent. The change of name marked the resettlement of the community, the original town having been all but destroyed in the fighting, a gesture Cain found both hilarious and mildly embarrassing.

before, and I was put in mind of a tumour, inexorably turning the cells of a healthy body against itself. My palms tingled, usually a reliable sign that my subconscious has spotted something the forebrain hasn't quite brought into focus yet, but the tenuous shiver of intuition didn't coalesce into anything concrete. Knowing better than to try to force it, I was on the verge of turning away when something about the enemy icons attracted my attention. A lot of them were moving, eastwards, in our direction.

Luckily Sprie returned before nightfall, bringing a full platoon of PDF regulars to join us, which boosted morale considerably. Even better, from my point of view, were the half dozen Chimeras that came with them. I could have done with a Lemman Russ or two as well, but in the absence of any actual tanks, the turreted multi-lasers of the APCs would give our collective firepower a very welcome shot in the arm. Not that it looked like making much of a difference against a force the size of the one I expected to be ranged against us, but right now I was prepared to accept every bit of help I could get.

'It doesn't look good,' I confided to Makan, who, in the interest of maintaining his cover, had been excluded from the tactical meetings. We were standing by the obelisk, in the vague hope that anyone seeing us talking would assume I was reliving old glories. I suppose I could have briefed him properly in the hidden facility beneath the shrine itself, but I didn't want anyone asking awkward questions about where I'd disappeared to, and, if I'm honest, my experiences down there earlier in the day had left me reluctant to return. 'There's a wave of shuttles inbound from Havendown, due within the hour, with another a short way behind them. Much larger, of course.'

'Sounds like the same strategy they used before,' Makan said speculatively. 'Send in a wave of expendables to wear us down, and follow up with the heavy stuff.'

'Pretty much how I read it,' I agreed, raising my voice a little over the snarling of the Chimera engines, as the first of our reinforcements lurched down the shuttle's boarding ramp. 'The big question is what the expendables have been briefed to do: locate the Shadowlight, or just cause as much trouble as possible. I think the first incursion we saw off was an attempt to find it, maybe even extract it, but the damage Orelus did to their ships put paid to that.' I pulled out my data-slate, and filled him in on the conclusions I'd drawn about some of the apparently random landings, and the connections Brasker had made to local legends which might point to the sites being connected to the ancients in some way.

'Interesting,' Makan said, having heard me out without interruption. 'I'll ask Sparsen to be on the alert for any sign of a psyker with them. If there is, they'll probably be trying to locate the Shadowlight. If not, it's just another commando raid.'

Leaving him to digest the information, I made my way back to the command centre, narrowing my eyes against the glare of the setting sun, which was making the wide expanse of water beside us look uncomfortably like a vast pool of blood. Rorkins and Julien were discussing the latest tactical updates with Yaitz as I entered the warehouse, any lingering animosity between skitarii and Sororitas apparently forgotten in the common cause of survival, and I lost no time in picking my way towards them through the tangle of cables, which, if anything, appeared to have thickened in my absence.

'Our latest information puts the first wave at five shuttles,' Rorkins was saying as I joined the group around the hololith. 'The auspex contacts are strong, and we've got a good estimate of their speed and time of arrival.'

'Which is when?' I asked, as levelly as I could.

'Thirty-five to forty minutes, if the headwinds remain constant,' Julien told me.

'Just before sunset, in other words,' Yaitz added. That wasn't good; approaching from the west, they'd be coming almost directly out of the sun, leaving our gunners dazzled by the glare.

I glanced at my chronograph. 'The Chimeras should be in position by then,' I said. 'At least that'll give us some air cover.' Not much, though. In theory the multi-lasers could inflict a lot of damage on an aircraft, especially one that hadn't been armoured and hardened to military specifications, but they'd need to be fired with considerable precision to do so. I found myself thinking nostalgically of the auspex-guided hydra batteries we'd relied on for air defence during my years with the Imperial Guard, or even the heavy bolters the Chimeras of the 597th had mounted, which could throw enough ordnance into the air to have at least a sporting chance of bringing a target down, but, as so often, we'd just have to make do with what we could get. I tapped my comm-bead. 'Kayla, how's the deployment coming?'

'We're on top of it,' the cadet reassured me. 'Just offloading the last of the Chimeras now, and Garvie's pointing the troops in the direction they're supposed to go-'

'Good. Carry on.' I nodded to the others. 'We'll be ready for them when they get here,' I said, with a confidence I was far from feeling.

'Glad to hear it,' Rorkins said, turning to Yaitz. 'Are the demo charges along the dam primed?'

'They are,' Yaitz nodded. 'Although it goes without saying they should only be detonated as a last resort. The blessings of the Ommissiah should be venerated, not casually cast aside.'

'Of course,' Rorkins said, although I knew he was practical enough to be more concerned about wasting a major tactical advantage than the tech-priests' sensibilities. 'Chances are they'll have more sense than to put down where we can flush them away anyhow.'

I nodded, finding it hard to disagree.

'How's morale holding up?' Julien asked, glancing in my direction.

'Reasonably well,' I assured her. I had most of the cadets wandering around our deployment area, spouting the usual platitudes and listening out for any signs of defeatism, but so far all our people seemed focussed and disciplined. Which was pretty much what I'd have expected, given that they'd been trained for this since childhood, and their instructors had already completed a lifetime of exemplary service to the Imperium. (Apart from me, of course, but nobody needed to know that.) The PDF reinforcements were liable to be jumpy, though, and I made a mental note to visit their command squad, and send the cadets round to have a word with the rest. That ought to settle them nicely.

'If anyone cares to participate, I'll be holding a brief service next to the memorial, to ask the Emperor for his blessing,' Julien said. 'In about ten minutes.'

'I'll pass the word along,' I promised her. I doubted that many would attend, most of our people and the PDF deployed too far away to make it there and back to their positions before the enemy arrived, but it would certainly help settle the waverers. As

always, I found myself suspecting that Him on Earth would have rather more important things to do than listen to us whining for special favours, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to ask, and if the fate of the galaxy really was at stake He might be a bit more inclined than usual to take an interest.

'Perhaps we could relay the prayers by vox, so the ones who can't leave their posts can join in if they wish.'

'Good idea,' Julien said, nodding in approval. She gestured to the nearest of the tech-priests, one of the group who'd accompanied us from the schola, and who I vaguely remembered seeing around the place from time to time, generally rigging wires from one room to another, or rolling them up again. 'Gray, can you set that up for me?'

'Yes, ma'am. Not a problem,' the engineeer assured her, and trotted away.

After a little more discussion, which all boiled down to us being as ready as we were ever going to be, I turned away, preparing to follow Julien from the command post. Not that I intended wasting any time at her little prayer meeting, of course, I had my cadets to chivvy up, and the PDF to motivate, but her departure seemed to mark a definite end to the conversation, which was in danger of becoming somewhat circular by that point in any case. We all knew we were about to have a hard fight on our hands, and that the weight of numbers was all with the enemy. Despite my usual cynicism, I began to hope that Julien would get her little miracle after all.

'Sir,' the vox operator said, turning to Rorkins, 'I'm getting a message from Commodore Visiter. He says it's urgent.'

'Of course it is,' Rorkins said heavily. 'With our luck, he's probably spotted the orks coming back for another go as well.' He sighed. 'Put him through.'

After a second or two the Commodore's head and shoulders appeared in the hololith, wavering slightly as such devices generally did.

'We've just had an interestin' development,' he reported, without preamble. 'As we can't get to the enemy ships in close orbit, we've started evacuatin' the void stations in the outer system.' A wise precaution, as the enemy fleet had bypassed them on the way in, heading for the more strategically important target of Perlia itself, but would almost certainly turn their attention to these pockets of potential resistance once they had the time, and until they did, the resources they contained would be a considerable help in maintaining Visiter's ramshackle fleet at battle readiness. 'When we got to the astropathic relay station in the halo, they'd just picked up a message. There's a Navy task force inbound from Keffia. No estimated time of arrival, but there's definitely help on the way.'

'Praise the Emperor!' Rorkins said, with considerable feeling, and I must admit that my heart suddenly felt considerably lighter. A spontaneous cheer erupted from several of the control lecterns, which Rorkins let go, despite the clear breach of discipline, a very sensible decision in my opinion. 'Relay the news on every channel you can, vox, pict, deft stick if you can manage it.' He turned to me, the light of renewed determination in his eyes. 'We're not alone any more. All we need to do now is hang on until they get here.'

'True,' I agreed. The news, though as welcome as it was unexpected, was a double-edged sword. It would put fresh heart into the beleaguered defenders, right enough, and prevent any more defections among the demoralised (no one was going to switch sides with the prospect of retribution both real and immediate), but the enemy would know they were running out of time to achieve their objective, and Varan would undoubtedly redouble his efforts to secure the Shadowlight. 'But they're not here yet.'

Keffia was close by, it was true, but there were no guarantees where warp travel was concerned, time having very little meaning in the conventional sense aboard a vessel in transit, and we had no idea when the relieving force had set out in the first place. I tried to remember how long it had taken my old regiment to make the same trip, back in the relatively carefree days of my long-forgotten youth, but the details remained fuzzy, overlaid with more pleasant memories of the shipboard romance I'd enjoyed with Karrie on the way, and the considerably less comfortable time I'd subsequently spent aboard the lifepod which had dropped me so precipitately into the middle of ork-held territory.

I glanced at the hololith, where a local tactical display had replaced the image of the commodore. The first wave of enemy transports were still inbound, closing fast, and we'd be fighting for our lives within moments.

As I left the command post, I heard Julien commencing her prayers in the earpiece of my comm-bead, and, for once in my life, felt the urge to join in.

## TWENTY-THREE

'HERE THEY COME,' Lieutenant Grouber said, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the setting sun. I'd made it to the PDF command Chimera with several minutes to spare before the attack commenced, finding the young officer in charge both reassuringly competent and gratifyingly awestruck by the presence of the hero he'd been brought up to venerate as the saviour of his planet. He'd had the good sense to station himself close to the ridge line, where he'd get a good view of the course of the battle without attracting too much incoming fire, which had been something of a consideration for me as well. From up here I could look down on the main building of the Mechanicus shrine, with a clear view of the piazza, our parked shuttle, and the dam beyond. The blue-grey mass of the lake seemed ominous and brooding in the fading light, its surface undulating gently under the influence of a moderate breeze, although the disc of the sun apparently balanced on the tops of the distant peaks was still painting the face of the vast rock-crete wall holding back the waters a rich, warm red, which reminded me incongruously of autumnal woodlands and log fires. The other Chimeras had been dispersed around the valley, rather than being massed in a single, easy target, and the rest of our people were dug in according to the battle plan; if I had any doubts about our strategy, now would be a bad time for them to occur to me. Fortunately I couldn't think of any last-minute revisions, so I held my tongue, and tried to focus on the distant dots skimming the surface of the surrounding slopes.

'Here you are, sir,' Jurgen said, handing me an amplivisor, and I raised it to my eyes cautiously, but he'd already set the polarisers to maximum, so despite my fears I remained undazzled by the glare.

'They're coming in just above the deck,' I said, impressed in spite of myself. Even a pilot of Sprie's calibre would probably think twice about attempting to fly nap of earth at high speed in mountainous terrain, let alone in tight formation and poor light conditions. Their recklessness was a weakness, I reminded myself, typical of the low value followers of Chaos placed on their own lives, as well as those of everyone else.

'Hold your fire,' Rorkins said, on the general command channel, his voice sounding calm and professional, and everyone complied, even the PDF, to my vague surprise. 'Let them get close enough to be sure of a target.' I could hear the howl of their engines now, a rising note which set the hairs on the back of my neck bristling, and drew my laspistol, although I wouldn't have the slightest chance of damaging any of the incoming shuttles with it. The turret of the Chimera next to me shifted a little, the motor of its traverser whining like the motivators of Julien's power armour, and I glanced up.

'Steady there, gunner,' I said. All we needed was for some trigger-happy idiot to open up prematurely, and what little advantage we had would be blown. If, on the other hand, everyone kept a cool head, with any luck the enemy wouldn't realise that we'd been reinforced, at least not until it was far too late for them to do anything about it.

'It isn't him, sir,' Grouber volunteered, a little diffidently. 'It's that thing the tech-priests put in.'

'What thing?' I asked, lowering the amplivisor for a moment. The young lieutenant peered down at me from the turret hatch, looking a little confused, as his perch continued to rotate, barely perceptibly, under him. 'I don't rightly know, sir,' he said at last.

'But the one with the metal face said you'd authorised it.'

'Oh, right, that thing,' I said, as though the matter was of little interest, and turned away, activating my comm-bead. 'Felicia. What have you done to my Chimeras?'

'Given them a little edge,' the familiar voice said cheerily. 'Tied an automatic targeter into the auspex array of the command one, with a vox link to the rest. It's an unholy lash-up, given the time we had available, but it'll just have to do until we can burn the incense properly and recalibrate. If it works at all.'

'Well it seems to be doing something,' I assured her, feeling the first faint stirrings of optimism for what felt like a very long time.

'Good.' Felicia sounded as pleased with herself as ever, and I found myself wondering if she was actually enjoying the chance to relive the adventures of her youth. 'If we managed to propitiate the machine spirits with the right prayers and programming, they should open fire as soon as they've got a lock. If not, you'll have to get the gunners to do it manually.'

'How will they know if they have to?' I asked, and Felicia chuckled, the warm sound I remembered so well from so many years ago.

'The pict screen will light up, and display the message "Fire Now",' she said. 'I remember how you always took the direct approach to things.'

'Lieutenant,' I said casually, glancing up, 'the magos tells me her people blessed the targeting systems so the Omnissiah itself can manifest through them, and strike down our enemies. Don't be alarmed if they...'

I never got the chance to complete the sentence, as the multi-laser in the turret fired, the miniature thundercrack drowning out everything, even the rising scream of the approaching shuttle engines. For a moment I thought the sound was echoing from the surrounding hills, then I realised that the vox relay had done its work despite the lack of incense, and the other five had fired too, almost simultaneously. Raising my amplivisor again I tried to focus on the approaching shuttles.

'A hit, by the Emperor!' I cried jubilantly, then corrected myself. 'No, two at least!' The outermost aircraft on either side of the formation were both losing speed and altitude, which made sense to me, as the Chimeras were ranged along each side of the valley, and the machine spirits, logical as ever, would simply have sought the nearest targets. The turret rotated rapidly, Grouber looking a little seasick, as the cogitators tried for another lock, but the pilots had reacted almost at once, diving for the floor of the valley, lower than the barrels could depress. The engine of the shuttle farthest from us was leaking smoke, and it seemed to be responding more sluggishly, but it followed its fellows nevertheless.

'That one's still coming,' Grouber said, and I focussed on the nearest ship. It seemed to be in a bad way, sideslipping as it came, with most of its control surfaces shot away. Flames were flickering along its underside, and I didn't envy its occupants in the slightest.

'See if you can take another crack at it,' I suggested, and the Chimera's turret rotated again, but too late; the crippled shuttle roared



over our heads, battering us for a moment with the downdraft of its passage, to vanish over the other side of the ridge. A moment later the engine noise ceased, with the unmistakable *crump!* of impact.

'Holy Emperor,' Grouber breathed. For a moment I thought he was reacting to the crash, but the direction of his gaze was in the other direction, towards the dam and the hydro station beside the vast reservoir. The attacking aircraft were rising now, a manoeuvre I recognised from having been in shuttles doing the same thing myself, intending to pop up over the lip of the dam, using its bulk to shield themselves from defensive fire for as long as possible. I started to vox a warning, but there was no need; from my elevated perspective I could see Yaitz's skitarii fanning out to meet the threat, the more ponderous figures of heavy weapon servitors plodding in their wake, and I found myself wondering just how many of the metal and flesh combat constructs they actually had stowed away beneath the shrine. (Not to mention how they intended explaining their presence to Rorkins.) 'I don't think that one's going to make it, sir,' Jurgen remarked conversationally, as though commenting on the weather, and I focussed the amplivisor again. My aide was right, I thought, the crippled shuttle was trying to maintain formation with its fellows, but it was clearly responding far too sluggishly. As the undamaged three rose over the lip of the dam, into a barrage of fire from the skitarii and a couple of squads of our stormtrooper cadets, the damaged one ploughed into the rockcrete a few metres below the rim, exploding into a fireball so bright it stabbed my retina. 'That's two down,' my aide said, in tones of unmistakable satisfaction.

'Let's just hope it doesn't-' I began to say, an instant before it did, and a secondary explosion ripped a ragged hole in the face of the dam. One of the explosive charges we'd placed to blow the structure if we needed to had been detonated by the impact. I held my breath, but none of the others went off, thank the Emperor. Even so, the damage had been done. A section of the retaining wall fell away, propelled by the force of the water behind it, to shatter against the turbine hall at the base of the structure, and a vast new waterfall jetted out through the gap, filling the old river bed beyond as neatly as though someone had turned on a tap.

'Any casualties?' I voxed, hoping that none of our people had been caught in the explosion or swept away. The wall of water rushing along the floor of the valley was modest enough compared to the tidal wave we'd unleashed against the orks, but it wouldn't do anyone down there any favours.

'Not yet,' Rorkins reassured me, 'but we've lost the chance of flushing them out if they land in the valley.' That much was true: I doubted that even Varan would be mad enough to put down there now, the breach in the dam being obvious to even the most cursory of glances. Even if he wasn't prepared for us to collapse it on purpose, the danger of it giving way of its own accord was now quite manifest.

Any further comment would have been superfluous, and we both had our attention on other matters by then anyway. The surviving shuttles were landing, somewhat heavily, and the first troops were disembarking, taking what cover they could from the withering fire the skitarii and Rorkins's cadets were pouring into them. They seemed to be giving as good as they got, though; our own people were being very nicely suppressed by the heretics' heavy weapon teams, and the beachhead might well have been consolidated in pretty short order if it hadn't been for the combat servitors, which continued to plod forwards, soaking it up and replying in kind.

'Cain.' Makan's voice cut into my comm-bead, on a frequency I was sure no one else had access to. 'Sparsen says he can sense psykers with them. Looks like your guess was right.'

'Then we'd better hope we can hold them,' I said, catching sight of some movement near the corner of the main shrine, which turned out to be a couple of squads of Grouber's PDF launching a flanking attack. The lieutenant was inside the command Chimera by now, co-ordinating things with the aid of the specialised vox and auspex kit it carried, and seemed to be doing a reasonable job, so I thought it best not to interrupt him. I was on the point of turning away, to check on the progress of the battle on the other flank, when I saw a couple of black greatcoats moving with the troopers, and steadied the amplivisor again. 'Nelys,' I voxed, 'what in the name of the Throne do you think you're playing at?'

'Supporting the troopers, sir.' The distance was too great for me to make out his facial expression, but I could picture the dogged set of his jaw all too easily. 'Like you asked us to.'

'We thought it wouldn't be too good for morale if we refused to go in alongside them,' Kayla cut in, backing him up, and I had to admit they were both thinking like commissars.

'Very good,' I said, trying not to sound too concerned. 'Watch your backs, and don't take too many chances.' At least Kayla's streak of common sense ought to keep them out of trouble, insofar as that was possible on the battlefield.

I wasn't able to observe much of what happened next, although I kept catching enough chatter in my comm-bead to keep roughly abreast of how the clash of arms was progressing, as my attention was suddenly grabbed by the unmistakable sound of lasguns firing on the other side of the ridge.

'There must have been some survivors of the shuttle crash,' Grouber said, looking up from his tactical display, an expectant look on his face. There were four other troopers with him, like any command squad, but most of them were busy manning the auspex and comms gear, working flat out to communicate with the other elements of the platoon, and for the first time I began to regret spreading them out so much. The Chimera crew might be dragooned into carrying lasguns and going off to investigate, but that would mean we wouldn't be able to move in a hurry if we needed to, always a strong possibility with gunfire in the immediate vicinity.

'But who are they firing at?' I asked, the palms of my hands beginning to prickle. All our people had been deployed inside the valley. I activated the comm-bead. 'If anyone's out of position, report now.'

No one replied, although I gathered from the other vox traffic that Julien and her novitiates were getting stuck in down at the shrine, their bolters and power armour proving more than adequate against the lasguns of the heretics.

'We'll have to go and take a look,' I concluded, trying to filter the reluctance out of my voice. There was no one else to do it, and I could hardly compromise my heroic reputation in front of Grouber, not if I needed him to go on trusting me, which I probably did for my continued wellbeing. Besides, as so often in my life, it seemed essential to know what we were facing, the risk of remaining in ignorance far greater than taking the chance of going to find out.

So Jurgen and I slipped away into the gathering dusk, the sun almost completely set by now, the weight of the laspistol a reassuring presence in my hand, and, if I'm honest, the olfactory reminder of Jurgen's proximity an even greater one, given the melta he carried. The sky was still light enough to see by, although it wouldn't be for long, the colours of everything leaching away as the lengthening shadows faded into shades of deep blue.

We crested the ridge cautiously, crouching in the lee of a clump of scrub so we wouldn't be skylined, and started down the other side. The site of the crash was obvious, vivid orange flames leaping into the purpling firmament, and I found myself grateful that the prevailing wind was at our backs. The bracken covering these hillsides would burn readily, I was sure, but any brush-fires started by the blazing wreckage would spread in the other direction.

As we got closer the crackle of las weapons intensified, and I began to make out a clearer picture of the skirmish taking place in front of us. The shuttle had hit hard, disintegrating on impact, but a few of the traitors within must have survived. They were bunched together behind a tangled lump of metal which looked as if it might once have been part of the engines, exchanging fire with a dispersed group of shadowy figures, who seemed to be using the deeper darkness around the circle of light cast by the flames to pick them off whenever they got a reasonable line of sight, relatively safe from retaliation. Dazzled by the light of the conflagration around them, the heretics would have been unable to make out their assailants, while being brightly illuminated themselves. As Jurgen and I approached the hellish tableau another of the survivors pitched forward, thrashed for a moment, and lay still. 'I got one!' a feminine voice cried.

'Shut up, Franka! They can hear you, even if they can't see!' a testy voice admonished in a hoarse whisper. A moment later, as if to emphasise the point, a las-bolt cracked through the darkness in the general direction the girl's voice had come from. A second squeal, and a sudden thrashing of undergrowth, told me that she'd belatedly dived for cover, but that the shot had predictably missed. 'Stupid girl!' the other voice added.

'Manrin?' I asked quietly, keeping my back to the fire to allow my eyes to adjust to the low light levels, confident that Jurgen would pick off anyone discourteous enough to take aim in our direction. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'Commissar?' the corporal asked, equally dumbfounded, coming gradually into focus as a block of thicker shadow a few metres away from me. 'I thought you'd gone back to Havendown.'

'Long story,' I told him, in a tone that effectively precluded any explanation at the time, then softened it, injecting just the right degree of friendliness. 'Besides, I asked first.'

'We saw the shuttle come down,' Manrin explained, 'and came to investigate. They opened fire as soon as we approached, so we knew they were heretics.' A reasonable inference, as any loyalists would know Chilinvale was still in Imperial hands. 'What's going on in the valley?' It was pointless to deny that something was, as the sounds of the battle were carrying clearly on the wind, and occasional flashes of light lit the sky like Conflagration Night fireworks.

'The enemy are trying to take the Mechanicus shrine,' I said, sticking to the highlights. 'It's imperative that they don't.' I listened to the chatter in my comm-bead for a moment, learning that two of the enemy shuttles appeared to be in our hands by this time, and that Julien's charge seemed to have broken the back of the enemy assault. 'Fortunately we seem to be winning.' Until the second wave got here, anyway. I glanced at the burning wreck behind us, and the dwindling band of heretics within its dubious shelter; the militia detachment were making up in enthusiasm what they lacked in accuracy, and I didn't imagine the beleaguered traitors would be able to hold out for much longer. 'Do you think we could take any of them alive?' Not that we'd get much useful intelligence, if our experience with the Madasans was anything to go by, but anything at all we could learn about the main battle force before it got here would be a bonus.

'Good idea, sir,' Jaq put in, materialising at my shoulder. 'There's only a couple of them left. Go in with the straight silver, sir, they don't like it, heretics don't. They'll surrender before you can say "The Emperor Protects".'

Well, it wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best we had, and I'd match my duelling skills against a heretic foot soldier any day, so after a few moments consultation the PDV contingent started laying down suppressive fire against the survivor's fragile refuge. It wasn't particularly well co-ordinated, but it did the job, and as soon as I was certain that our targets' attention was fully engaged, I charged forward into the burning wreck, Jurgen at my heels. (To be honest, I was more worried about taking a stray round from the militia by that point than any retaliation from the heretics.)

The heat was greater than I expected, slapping me in the face as we began dodging through pieces of debris, and those passengers who hadn't survived the initial impact. We took the traitors completely by surprise, a trooper in the uniform of a Perlian being reduced to a greasy stain by a blast from Jurgen's melta, while I accounted for a Madasan on the other flank with a single las-bolt. There was only one survivor left after that, clad in a grubby greatcoat, a scarlet sash knotted at his waist, aiming a laspistol in my direction.

Astonished, I faltered for a heartbeat, aware that the hesitation might be the death of me, but unable to override the impulse despite that. 'Donal?' I asked, still not managing to believe the evidence of my own eyes.

'Death to the servants of...' he began, then a look of confusion drifted across his face, and his aim wavered. A powerful burst of Jurgen's body odour, intensified as always by high temperatures, arrived at my shoulder an instant before the man himself.

'Commissar? What's happening?' His tormented expression, so different from the easy self-confidence I was used to seeing, intensified.

'I'm not entirely sure,' I said, walking forwards, Jurgen at my side, the melta ready for use again in his hands. The closer we got, the more distressed Donal seemed to become. 'I thought you were dead.'

'I wish I was!' Donal said, with unexpected vehemence, tearing his coat off and flinging it into the nearest concentration of flames. As it singed, then combusted, with an acrid tang of burning fibre, I was just able to see that the Imperial icons on it had been desecrated with Chaotic sigils, like the body armour of the defectors I'd fought before. 'I can still feel the taint, gnawing at my mind...' He seemed on the verge of losing it, so I took another step closer, Jurgen dogging my heels as always.

'Commissar Donal, report,' I said, injecting a little of the parade ground into my voice, wondering even as I did so if it was the right approach to take. Fortunately it was, old habits and learned responses kicking in, to override whatever it was which had

wrought so bizarre a change in him. 'What happened after we left the palace?'

'It was Varan,' Donal said, his voice sounding as though it was forcing its way past a blockade in his throat. 'He spoke to us.' His face contorted, mirroring the battle going on in his mind between two diametrically opposed viewpoints. 'He just told us the truth was lies, and the lies became truth.'

'He's gone barmy, sir,' Jurgen said, as constitutionally incapable as ever of reconciling a paradox.

'Not exactly,' I said, the mental image of a spreading tumour that had occurred to me back at the command post returning with renewed force. Up until now I'd been taking it for granted that Varan had psykers in his retinue, which he very likely did, but what if he was a psyker himself? One with a very specific, and very dangerous, talent... A cold thread of terror wrapped itself around my heart, and began to constrict. If I was right, and he was on his way to the Valley of Daemons in person, then there was nothing I could do to keep the Shadowlight out of his hands, every ally I'd been able to cozen and dragoon here another potential recruit to the enemy cause, furthering his chance of success. 'Oh frak.' With an effort, I turned my attention back to Donal. 'How close did he get before he affected your mind? Yours and the Governor's?'

'He was in the room,' Donal said, looking and sounding more like a fever patient in the grip of delirium by the minute.

'Quite close, then,' I probed, hoping for clarification. If he needed to be within a handful of metres to pull off his party trick, that wouldn't be too bad...

'Line of sight,' Donal gasped, the residue of the warmaster's influence evidently waning in the face of Jurgen's ability to nullify psychic phenomena. 'And earshot. Anyone who can see and hear him...' His face contorted again. 'They filled the scrumball stadium with prisoners: PDF, civilians, anyone they could round up. The minute he spoke, he had them all...'

Wonderful, I thought. All he has to do is step off the shuttle, grab an amplivox, and we all go over to the enemy. Even positioning sharpshooters wouldn't help; they'd have to see him clearly to get a shot, and unless they were deaf he'd have turned them into puppets before they could pull the trigger. Even earplugs probably wouldn't help, if the effect was psychic rather than physical. There was only one thing left to do, to evaluate just how grave the threat was, and I found myself reluctant to do it; Donal had suffered more than enough already. But he was a commissar, I'd made him one myself: he'd understand, if anyone would, the stern dictates of duty.

'Jurgen,' I said, 'take three steps directly away from Commissar Donal.' Most men, no doubt, would have at least expressed some measure of curiosity, but, true to form, my aide simply complied with the instruction.

Donal twitched, his arm coming up, and the laspistol wavering indecisively in my direction. 'Death to... the servants...' he gasped, then just as I was wondering if I'd found out what I needed to know too late, and at too high a price, a trace of his old character reasserted itself. 'Sorry, sir,' he said, with a hint of the self-assurance I remembered, 'it's just too strong to fight for long. Kick his arse for me.' Then he snuggled the muzzle of his laspistol under his chin, and pulled the trigger.

'WHAT HAPPENED?' MANRIN asked, as Jurgen and I re-emerged from the burning remains of the downed shuttle, my weapons once more hanging from my belt. 'Did you kill them all?'

'They're all dead,' I answered, keeping my voice as neutral as I could. There was no point in relieving my feelings by taking them out on the militia. 'But I got the information I needed.' I finished folding the sash I'd given to Donal, such a short time ago, and stuffed it into a convenient pocket. The sounds of firing from over the ridge had stopped, I noted, with a detached corner of my mind, and listened to the voices in my earpiece for a moment. Their general tone was self-congratulatory, and after checking that no more of my cadets were among the casualties, I turned back to Manrin. 'Send your people home.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but we'd like to volunteer to assist,' Jaq said. Before my conversation with Donal, I would probably have taken him up on it, but now I felt that every extra body standing between Varan and the Shadowlight was an extra opportunity for him to get his hands on the blasted thing. Not for the first time, I found myself wishing that whoever had dug it up in the first place had had the common sense to just bury it again.

'Your zeal is both noted and appreciated,' I said, 'but the battle is over. The war, however, goes on, and your place is in Chilinvale, defending your homes and loved ones.'

'Very good, sir,' Manrin said, with a faint trace of relief, and began rounding his people up. After a few moments they disappeared into the darkness, and I realised for the first time that night had now fallen in earnest. Shortly thereafter I heard the sound of a truck engine bursting into life, then fading away in the general direction, of the town, leaving me alone with my thoughts as Jurgen and I began to plod up the hillside.

The night was cloudless, thank the Emperor, and the faint glimmer of starlight, supplemented by the spectacular display of the debris belt, the fringes of which left streaks of fire across the sky every few seconds, was more than enough to see by. We moved cautiously nevertheless, as I had no wish to turn an ankle on the uneven ground, or catch my boot in the fibrous undergrowth. Our slow progress seemed frustrating at the time, although, looking back, I have no doubt that it saved our lives.

As we approached the crest of the ridge, a flicker of movement caught my eye, and I gestured my aide to stillness. Something was reflecting the starlight, a faint glimmer of blue-white against metal, and suspecting that it might be the barrel of a gun, perhaps being carried by an enemy fleeing the battle, or who had made their way to safety from the shuttle crash, I raised the amplivisor. The reality was a thousand times worse. Humanoid figures, sculpted in metal, but which moved with sinister purpose, and an inhuman, fluid grace that somehow made them even more terrifying. They walked, unhurried, along the ridge line, the leading one carrying a device of some kind, with which it swept the valley below. The others were armed, the unmistakable silhouettes of gauss flayers held ready for use, the sinister necrotic glow which would normally have revealed their presence masked by a shroud of some flexible metal fabric.

'Necrons,' I told Jurgen, in a barely audible whisper. The fears, which I'd sought to dismiss for so long, were grounded in reality after all. After an indeterminate time, which was probably no more than a few minutes, for all that it felt like a lifetime, the leading automaton stopped moving, consulted the device in its hand, then raised its other arm, pointing in the direction of the shrine. 'And they seem to have found the Shadowlight.' Hardly surprising, given their mastery of warp technology, and the amount

of energy we'd released that afternoon.

'That's not good, is it, sir?' Jurgen asked, with his usual flair for understatement.

'No, it's not,' I agreed. The necron scouting party remained as immobile as the statues they resembled for another instant, then vanished, with a faint crackle of energy and displaced air. So far as I could see, it was now a race between Varan and the metal horrors to reach the device first: leaving us squarely in the middle. Any way I looked at it, our chances of surviving the next few hours had just dropped from slim to negligible.



## TWENTY-FOUR

'IT SEEMS WE'RE out of options,' Rorkins said, with a glance at the hololith. I'd cleared the command centre of all but our most senior people, and those of us left were an ill-assorted group, for the most part staring at the contact runes marking the progress of Varan's airborne armada as though they could be diverted by willpower alone. Unfortunately they couldn't, and by my estimate would be right on top of us within the hour. Just before dawn, in fact, the warmaster being nothing if not predictable in his tactics. 'Evacuation is clearly impossible.'

'Nevertheless, I want everyone given clear instructions to fall back to the shuttles if the worst happens,' I said. We'd never manage to squeeze Grouber's troopers, Felicia's people, and the Inquisition contingent into the one we'd arrived in, along with our own schola cadets and instructors, but the enemy had thoughtfully provided us with a trio of reasonably intact spares, a couple of which Sprie's fellow naval cadets could pilot to safety if push came to shove.

'But what about the Shadowlight?' Felicia demanded. 'It must be protected at all costs!' I'd thought long and hard about revealing the secret of its existence to Rorkins and Julien on the nerve-shredding walk back to Grouber's Chimera, during which every stray sound had made me start nervously, wondering if the metal killers had returned, but on balance I felt that their previous connections to the Inquisition made them sufficiently trustworthy, and if they were going to die in the next few hours, at the very least they deserved to know why. Felicia and Makan had been less than thrilled by this decision, as you can imagine, but it seemed to me that if we were going to have even a prayer of keeping the Shadowlight out of Varan's hands, we all needed to be singing from the same psalter.

'I've got Yaitz rigging demo charges around the chamber it's in,' I said. 'If we have to pull out, we can collapse the whole shrine on top of it. Digging the thing out again after that's going to be a major operation, which should buy us enough time to organise a counterattack.'

'Blow up the shrine,' Felicia said, in a dangerous monotone. 'Perhaps you should just call in an orbital strike, and make really sure of the job.'

'Nothing Visiter has is accurate enough,' Rorkins said, apparently taking the remark at face value, and what was left of the tech-priest's face took on an expression which would have intimidated an ork. 'And even if it was, he couldn't get into position past the enemy warships.'

'Which the Navy can take care of as soon as they get here,' Julien put in impatiently. 'Let's just stick to the point, shall we?'

'It's a last resort, of course,' I reassured Felicia. Realistically, I didn't think any of us were likely to be around to press the button in any case, but that wouldn't stop me trying my hardest to be wrong.

'So was blowing up the dam,' she said pointedly, reining in her temper with an effort only I knew her well enough to recognise. Fortunately, at that point, the hololith flickered, and Visiter's face appeared. 'Sorry to interrupt,' he said, taking in the array of faces staring at his image with some surprise, 'but we've had another interestin' development.'

'Has the task force arrived?' Rorkins asked eagerly, and Visiter shook his head.

'No sign of 'em yet, but we're scannin' on all frequencies. We'll let you know as soon as they drop out of warp.' His image flickered for a moment, then steadied again. 'Which is how we spotted this. There's a ship hidin' in the debris belt. We only spotted 'em because they began powerin' up a few minutes ago.' The picture in the hololith flickered, then changed, to a shape I recognised all too well despite the passage of more than seventy years; if it wasn't the vessel which had obliterated the *Omnissiah's Blessing* in orbit around Interitus Prime with a single energy burst, stranding me on the desolate tomb world surrounded by necrons, it was certainly another of the same class. Visiter's voice continued behind the picture. 'Class unknown<sup>1</sup>, but it's only the size of an escort. We can take it easily enough.'

'Absolutely not!' I said in horror, picturing the result of such an attempt all too easily. The fragile SDF boats would be reduced to their component atoms in a single volley. 'Don't even think about engaging it.'

'Looks like we won't get the chance anyway,' Visiter said, with a trace of regret. 'The heretics have spotted it. A couple of their destroyers are moving to intercept.' He kept the pict feed running, the starfield behind the necron vessel moving slightly as the long-range imagifiers panned a little to keep it in view. A moment later it lashed out with the tendrils of flickering energy I remembered so vividly. 'Target destroyed,' Visiter said, his voice flat with shock. A moment later the raider fired again, and dispatched the other warship with equal ease. 'Now it's movin' towards the rest of the enemy flotilla. I don't know how it expects to take on the cruiser, though.'

'It won't have to,' I said. The necrons I'd seen teleport away must have gone somewhere, and that vessel was the obvious destination. And if it had a functioning warp portal, then everyone aboard the *Undefeatable* was as good as dead. 'They'll teleport boarders across.'

'They'll do what?' Visiter just had time to say, before his image vanished from the hololith, fragmenting in a shower of static. A moment later the display reset itself, reverting to the tactical summary we'd been looking at before the commodore contacted us, the icons of the enemy an ominous increment closer to our position.

'What happened?' Julien asked. 'Are they still there?'

'The transmission was disrupted,' Felicia told us, after listening to her internal vox for a moment. 'By a massive burst of warp energy.' She smiled thinly in my direction. 'Not our fault, this time.'

'Those ships have a warp portal aboard,' I said. 'The necrons must have activated it.'

'The who?' Felicia asked, sounding bewildered. Makan undoubtedly knew what I was talking about, he was Ordo Xenos after all, but Rorkins and Julien clearly didn't recognise the name either, which was hardly surprising.

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<sup>1</sup> From these recordings, almost certainly a Jackal raider.

'They're xenos,' I said, cutting the explanation as short as I could. 'I've had a few run-ins with them before, but there are precious few who can say the same and still draw breath. They make the 'nids look almost harmless by comparison, and they've been infesting the galaxy for long enough to have been around when the Shadowlight was made. I saw a scouting party of them up on the ridge last night, and I don't think they're here for the fishing.'

'Then how come I've never heard of them?' Rorkins asked, reasonably enough under the circumstances.

'Because most of the people who've encountered them are dead,' Makan said. 'They seem to exist purely to kill. There have been rumours about them for centuries, but the first hard evidence only emerged in 897, in the aftermath of an attack on a Sororitas facility.'

Julien's face paled. 'Sanctuary 101,' she said, and Makan nodded. The name meant nothing to me, but the Celestian's expression was now suffused with righteous anger. 'Then let them come, and meet their retribution.'

'You may or may not get the chance for that,' I pointed out, 'but Varan will most definitely be here before dawn.' I was far from casual about dismissing the necron threat, as you can imagine, particularly as I was the only one present with the faintest idea of just how formidable the metal warriors were, but from my point of view there was no point in even trying to make plans to deal with them: how can you defend against an enemy which can teleport at will, into the heart of your defences, and phase casually through the walls when they get there? In my experience, the only chance you had against them was to run and hide, or concentrate your fire against one unit at a time, in the hope of knocking enough of them down to buy the time to move on to the next one and repeat the trick, before half of the damned machine creatures got back up and came at you again. In either case, you just had to wait for them to make the first move. Varan, on the other hand, was a clear and present danger I could do something about, and I intended to do so.

'And you think you know how to see him off?' Felicia asked.

'I've got an idea,' I admitted. 'But I don't think you're going to like it.' Well, I was right about that, something the storm of protest from everyone present as soon as I'd voiced the thought made abundantly clear, but since the warmaster's horde would be on us within half an hour, and no one could think of a better alternative, despite my fervent wish that somebody would, I'd just have to go through with it. Sighing, I walked to the nearest vox unit, those damned cables catching at the toe of my boot as usual, and peered at the dials. 'Anyone know what frequency the enemy's using?' I asked.

'Here, let me.' Felicia bustled over, no doubt happy to have found some kind of displacement activity, and fiddled with the dials for a moment. 'Try it now.'

A voice floated into the room, sounding surprisingly calm and businesslike, calling for an update on the state of readiness of a unit which, according to the last Perlian PDF roster I'd seen, should have been guarding the Governor's palace, but which was now evidently inbound with the rest of Varan's bewitched army.

I picked up the microphone, and hesitated, a million doubts rising up to assail me, then fought them down with grim resolution. Feeling as though my tongue was coated in ash, I began to transmit. 'This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain,' I said, 'for Warmaster Varan, requesting a personal meeting to discuss terms of surrender.'

'HERE THEY COME, sir,' Jurgen said, standing close at my side, as Varan's personal shuttle circled the roof of the Mechanicus shrine like a raptor preparing to swoop. It looked like the same one I'd seen him disembark from on the lawns of the Governor's palace, and, knowing what I did now, I breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the Emperor for having kept me far enough away to have escaped the insidious influence of the warmaster's voice. Not that I expected His Divine Majesty to be listening, but you never knew, and given how likely it was that I'd be meeting Him in person before too much longer, it probably wouldn't hurt to suck up a bit while I had the chance.

I glanced down from our vertiginous perch, where the first few rays of the rising sun were beginning to lighten the leaden sky, fighting the childish impulse to wave to Rorkins and the others, who were still shrouded in shadow; in furtherance of the masquerade we were engaged in, our people were all standing out on the piazza at parade rest, Grouber's Chimeras drawn up neatly in front of the shuttles. My cadets were strutting about, appearing to chivy up the slackers, while unobtrusively pinpointing the landing sites of the enemy ships and noting the deployment of the disembarking troops.

Our pantomime of co-operation wasn't just designed to feed Varan's ego, which I'd calculated from the pict recordings I'd seen would be unable to resist the kudos of appearing to best a Hero of the Imperium in person, it rather neatly prevented the enemy from putting down too close to the shrine itself. Of course most Chaotics wouldn't have been too bothered by that, perfectly happy to land on top of the mass of troops, incinerating them with their landing thrusters in the process, and I had felt a few anxious moments as the airborne assault began, but I'd read my man well; true to my deductions about his methods, Varan wasn't about to deny himself another tranche of perfectly good meat puppets to swell his growing army.

'Shuttle eighteen just grounded,' Kayla murmured in my earpiece. 'Two hundred metres downslope, thirty degrees from marker.' In the absence of any other clear reference point, everything was being pinpointed by its angle and distance from the obelisk, which was pretty hard to miss. Her voice took on a tinge of revulsion. 'It's carrying more mutants, dozens of them.'

'Acknowledged,' I voxed back. That was the last of the shuttles, apart from the warmaster's personal transport, which circled us again, lazily, clearly intent on keeping us waiting to emphasise who was in charge. That was fine by me; let the pox-rotted son of a mutant enjoy his little gloat while he could. The more in control of the situation he thought he was, the more wrong-footed he was going to be when I pulled the rug out. 'Vox silence until I give the word.' One of the little black dots far below us nodded its head, and I turned to Jurgen. 'Are you ready for this?' I asked.

'Of course, sir,' he replied, although I'd never expected a different answer. He'd been ready and willing, in his own somewhat idiosyncratic fashion, since the day I'd met him on Desolatia, all those years before. I'd never known his gift to fail us, even against daemons, so I wasn't expecting too much trouble from a jumped-up little psyker with comedy facial hair, but you never knew: it was always the unexpected that killed you.

'Then I think we're on,' I said, envying him his calm conviction that everything would work out for the best because I had it all

under control. A conviction I wished to the Throne I was able to share. Nevertheless, a lifetime of expertise in the art of conniving and misdirection had been the perfect preparation for this moment, and my demeanour, at least, was calm as the warmaster's shuttle settled to the surface of the rock-crete roof of the vast structure we stood on. (A structure I tried not to remember could be reduced to a very large pile of rubble in an instant, if Yaitz had done his job properly.) I blinked my eyes clear of the stinging dust the landing thrusters had kicked up, and straightened my cap, trying to look as dignified as the ostensible occasion demanded.

After a moment the engines powered down, and the boarding ramp extended. Shadows moved in the compartment beyond, just as they had in Trevellyan's garden, and I found myself tensing as the warmaster appeared at the top of it. He'd clearly dressed up for the occasion, his sable cape ornamented with a ridiculous amount of gold braid, the crimson jacket beneath it almost equally encrusted and surmounting trousers of vermillion, piped in silver, the whole ensemble topped off with a wide-brimmed hat from which a pure white feather protruded at what he no doubt thought of as a jaunty angle.

It was my first sight of his companions which truly startled me, though. As the pair of bodyguards flanking him clanged down the ramp, in perfect lockstep, it was all I could do to restrain a gasp of astonishment. The hulking figures I'd taken for Traitor Marines when I'd seen them at a distance were clad in Sororitas pattern power armour, the *fleur de lys* decorating them crudely defaced with Chaotic runes, the blank visors of their helmets staring in my direction. Remembering my incredulity at Orelus's account of the convent on Madasa falling within the hour, it seemed I owed the rogue trader an apology when next we met. If Varan's power could overcome the faith of even the Emperor's most dedicated warriors, it seemed I was in serious danger of underestimating him.

As the little group reached the bottom of the ramp, Varan held up a hand, and the corrupted sisters both stopped dead, like servitors with their power lines cut. He smiled affably at me, and swept the cape from his shoulders, throwing it back behind himself without looking; one of the guards caught it, her armour servos whining as her arm moved, then froze again into watchful immobility, her bolter gripped easily in her other hand.

I didn't move or speak either. The theatrical gesture reinforced the opinion I'd formed on first seeing the pict files Nelys had confiscated from the Madasan prisoners, and which had led me to formulate this rather desperate strategy; that Varan was inordinately fond of dramatic flourishes, and never tired of hammering home the fact that he was in control. The classic behaviour pattern of someone riven with insecurities, in other words, which given the fickle nature of the boons the Dark Powers granted their followers, and the perpetual back-stabbing struggle for dominance among the countless factions which made up the armies of Chaos, was hardly surprising.

'Commissar. We meet at last,' Varan said, and I flinched, half expecting to feel my mind trickling out through my ears, but so far as I could tell I was still my old self, and my nose told me that Jurgen was most definitely his. Certain now that my aide's extraordinary talent was protecting us as I'd hoped, I began to relax. The warmaster waved at a cyberskull, which darted out from somewhere inside the shuttle, and began to circle us. For a moment I tensed again, fearing that he'd seen through our ruse and was anticipating some kind of attack, but as it swooped closer I could see that it was carrying nothing more deadly than a pictcaster.

'Do you mind if we record these proceedings? I think the citizens of Perlia will find them most illuminating.'

'By all means,' I agreed, as affably as I could. This was a real bonus, although I suppose I should have anticipated it. Someone like Varan wouldn't be able to really enjoy his triumph unless he'd spread it around enough for his sycophants to congratulate him about it, and the propaganda value of broadcasting pictures to the rest of the planet of the legendary Liberator kowtowing to him would have been incalculable. Morale among the loyalists would collapse like a pricked soap bubble. 'I'm sure they've had more than enough of the last pictcast I made.'

'No doubt,' Varan said, apparently nettled at me departing from the script in his head with a sally of my own. Well, he was going to be a lot more upset than that before too long. 'I'm sure your surrender will make far more congenial viewing.'

'My surrender?' I asked, then bellowed with laughter, which sounded genuine enough to turn his face puce with fury. 'I'm afraid there's been a bit of a misunderstanding. I summoned you here to accept your surrender.'

'Summoned *me*?' For a moment his outrage and incredulity was so overwhelming that it never even occurred to him to wonder why his power wasn't working. 'Who the hell do you think you are to be giving the orders?'

'My name is Ciaphas Cain,' I said levelly, not above hamming it up a bit for the benefit of the hovering pictcaster either, if I'm honest, 'and I'm a commissar. It's my job.' A flicker of doubt was beginning to show in Varan's eyes now, as it slowly dawned on him that I wasn't under his control. 'Surrender or die, as you please, it's all one to me.'

'Kill him!' Varan screamed, gesturing to his bodyguards, and I tensed as their bolters came up, aiming in my direction. I had only one chance of survival, and I took it, breaking into a run towards the little tableau at the bottom of the shuttle's boarding ramp, Jurgen at my heels as always.

'I'll take that as a no,' I said, drawing my weapons, and hoping we could close the distance in time. Fortunately we could, and the bolters aiming at us began to waver, just as Donal's laspistol had done when he'd come within the influence of Jurgen's talent.

'Stick close to the sisters,' I told my aide.

'Right you are, sir,' he agreed, slipping the strap of his lasgun from his shoulder. The melta would have been a great deal more useful if the Sororitas renegades turned on us after all, but its presence would have undermined the pretence of surrender, whereas a Guardsman would no more be parted from his lasgun than he would from his own arm; seeing Jurgen without it would have seemed equally incongruous, and perhaps forewarned Varan that he was walking into a trap.

As Jurgen reached them, the two women began to scream, the sound amplified horribly by the vox units built into their helmets, shuddering as though both their suits had suddenly become electrified. Donal had found the psychic shock of being suddenly released from Varan's thrall traumatic enough after being under it for no more than a couple of days, and he was young and flexible in his thinking; the sudden realisation of what had happened to them, and what they'd been doing for the last few months, must have driven the unfortunate sisters instantly insane.

To my astonishment, Varan ran forward to meet my charge, screaming almost as loudly as his victims with frustrated rage, and I reminded myself once again not to underestimate him. Talons appeared at the tips of his fingers, tearing their way out of his velvet

gloves, and I let him have a couple of las-bolts square in the chest as we closed. For a moment, as he staggered back, I dared to think that it was all over after all, but he came on again almost at once, a smile of pure malice spreading across his face.

'That was unexpected, wasn't it?' he gloated, leaping at me like an attacking hormagaunt. I pivoted out of the way just in time, his talons ripping the sleeve of my greatcoat, striking at his back with the edge of my chainsword. Instead of biting flesh, as I'd anticipated, the teeth whined, glancing off a surface harder than ceramite, and beneath the ruins of his shirt I glimpsed a layer of scales. Even if he owed his status among Abaddon's horde of the damned to his mind-control tricks rather than the brute strength and ferocity most warmasters of Chaos displayed, he clearly wasn't going to be the pushover his diminutive stature had led me to hope for either.

I just had time to get back on balance before he came at me again, and this time I aimed for his neck, hoping to separate his head from his shoulders, but he'd anticipated that, and blocked with his forearm, which proved to be as formidably armoured as his torso. He struck at me again, and I dodged, just in time, feeling his talons snag for a moment in the carapace armour concealed beneath my greatcoat. If I hadn't had the foresight to do it, he would almost certainly have disembowelled me with a single stroke. It began to dawn on me that I'd seldom faced so deadly an opponent in single combat, and unless I came up with something soon, he might very well win.

'I can't get a shot, sir!' Jurgen called, sighting down the barrel of his lasgun. 'You're too close!' Not that it would make much difference in any case, I thought, Varan would probably just shrug off Jurgen's las-bolts as easily as he had done the ones from my pistol. The bolters the corrupted Sororitas carried might be enough to do the job, but even if they could be wrested from the grasp of a power-armoured lunatic in the grip of a psychotic episode, they'd be too heavy and unwieldy for my aide to use.

Abruptly, that ceased to be an option in any case. Appearing to regain a vestige of self-awareness at last, the two women stopped ululating, as suddenly and completely as if their vox units had just burned out, and started to run. Before Jurgen or I could react, although Emperor alone knows what either of us could have done to stop them, they'd reached the edge of the roof and launched themselves into the void beyond, toppling over the lip and disappearing. A moment later a faint clatter, like someone dropping a handful of teaspoons, echoed up from the piazza.

As I continued to give ground before Varan's frenzied attacks, evading and parrying frantically, only my duellist's reflexes keeping me from being eviscerated, the germ of an idea began to form. Backing as close as I dared to the vertiginous drop, I let my guard down, for a fraction of a second, as though mistiming a counter-stroke, and Varan fell for it. Screaming in triumph, more animal than man, he bounded forward, intent on laying me open to the bone.

At the last instant I pivoted out of the way, letting his momentum carry him past. Suddenly realising the danger he was in, the rabid little mutant tried to throw his weight backwards, arresting his headlong rush, and almost made it; had I not been there, he undoubtedly would have succeeded.

'Commissar Donal sends his regards,' I snarled, and kicked out, taking him squarely in the fundament with an impact which jarred up the length of my leg. Arms flailing, the self-styled invincible warlord pitched over the edge of the roof, screaming in terror all the way down, until the noise abruptly ceased with a loud slap.

I peered out at the surrounding army, hoping against all logic that they'd stand down, released from the madness which gripped them by the demise of their leader, but this wasn't some comforting fairy tale where the spell gets broken by the death of the evil enchanter. Instead, a howl of rage echoed from the surrounding hills, and they began to charge towards us.

Well, that was pretty much what we'd expected, and we'd laid our plans accordingly. Grouber's Chimeras fired as one, Felicia's modifications continuing to work as though the Ommissiah itself was taking a personal interest, and the front rank of the onrushing horde disintegrated, the survivors scattering to take what cover they could. Our own people scattered too, taking up the defensive positions they'd been briefed to cover, and prepared to meet the enemy.

'Come on, Jurgen,' I said, with a final apprehensive glance at Varan's shuttle, but no one emerged to challenge us<sup>1</sup>, and we made for the stairs at a rapid trot. 'I think it's time we were somewhere else.'

We emerged from the tranquillity of the shrine into a scene of confusion and butchery, which reminded me all too strongly of the previous desperate battle I'd fought here, so much so that events from the past became intermingled with the deadly realities of the present, and I found myself on the verge of voxing Sautine to move her tanks into position before remembering that she'd died of old age years before.

'Commissar!' Nelys appeared at my shoulder, supporting Stebbins, who was bleeding profusely from a scalp wound, and whose left hand was a mangled ruin. 'They're breaking through in the south-west corner.'

'Then get back there and stop them!' I said. I listened for a moment to the confused vox chatter, isolated the information I wanted, and cut in. 'Frister, get the arbites cadets over to the south-west and hold there as long as you can. Nelys is on the way, with whoever he can round up.'

'Yes, sir.' Nelys hurried off, collecting a ragged comet tail of walking wounded who could still heft a lasgun, and I turned back to Stebbins.

'Get those wounds dressed, and report to Commander Rorkins.' Even if he couldn't fight, he could operate a vox or an auspex, freeing up another able body for the fray.

'At once, commissar.' He stumbled away, and despite the urge to follow, I made for the perimeter. We were all fighting for our lives now, and I needed to see for myself how bad things were getting.

The Chimeras were firing continuously, felling the enemy in droves, but it was like punching holes in water; the gaps in their lines would fill again almost at once, creeping forward from one scrap of cover to the next, each body that fell providing a little more protection for their comrades who survived. One of the APCs erupted in a fireball as I watched, hit by a rocket from a portable launcher, and Grouber's men retaliated at once, saturating the patch of scrub the missile had come from with small arms fire. That

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<sup>1</sup> When the clean-up teams arrived at the shrine, they found the body of the pilot still sitting in the cockpit; it seems Varan had instructed the unfortunate fellow to wait for his return, and he'd simply starved to death at the controls.



threat had been neutralised, but there were plenty more to come; a piercing whistle preceded a series of explosions behind me, close to the shrine itself.

'Someone take those mortars out!' I called, and a moment later Kayla's voice cut into my comm-bead.

'They're dug in behind shuttles nine and twelve, commissar. We've got nothing that can hit them.'

'Frak!' I said feelingly, and switched frequencies. 'Sprie, if you and your friends have finished looking over your new toys, now would be a good time to see if they fly.'

'Already on it, commissar,' the red-haired cadet assured me. 'Our shuttle's prepped and ready, and we'll have two of the ones we captured powered up in ten minutes.'

'Faster would be better,' I said, with considerable restraint. Ten minutes from now the enemy could well have broken through.

Yaitz and his skitarii, somewhat diminished in number it seemed to me, jogged past, a couple of servitors with them, and vanished again in the confusion. 'Rorkins, prepare to pull out.'

Felicia wouldn't be any too happy if we blew up the building, but it was beginning to look as though we weren't going to get the choice. The enemy were surging forward now, suppressing our defences with withering amounts of fire, and would be in a position to make a final assault at any minute. In fact, if these had been run-of-the-mill Chaotics instead of using their heads like proper soldiers, they'd probably have started already, which would at least have allowed us to whittle them down a bit as they charged into our guns.

'Acknowledged,' Rorkins said, sounding far from happy, but then he had the tactical display to look at, which would be telling him precisely how badly we were currently frakked, something I wasn't at all sure I wanted to know right now.

'Here they come,' Nelys said in my earpiece, and the firing intensified on our south-west perimeter.

'On our way,' Julien's voice responded, and I became aware of the clatter of armoured heels striking sparks from the ceramic tiles of the mosaic beneath our feet. I glanced round to see her and her novitiates double-timing it towards the thickest fighting, and she grinned at me, the light of holy fervour in her eyes. 'Coming to join the fun, Cain?'

Cursing inwardly, as there was no way I could refuse so public an appeal, I nodded, with affected nonchalance. 'Ladies first,' I said, waving her through and inflecting it like a joke.

If anything, the situation at the perimeter was even worse than I'd imagined. The enemy had already broken through, judging by the number of corpses in desecrated PDF uniforms scattered about, only to be thrown back by the defenders at some considerable cost; Stebbins had been one of the lucky ones, that was clear, far too many of his charges having failed to make it at all. Nelys and Frister looked up as I approached with Julien and her novitiates, identical expressions of relief on their faces, and the motley collection of arbites cadets, PDF regulars and skitarii with them seemed to perk up too, their sudden surge of unwarranted optimism undiminished by the continuing barrage of mortar fire erupting behind us.

Getting through it to the shuttles wasn't going to be easy, but that was a problem for later; right now we just had to live through the next few minutes, and throw back the next enemy assault decisively enough not to get cut down as soon as we tried to make a run for it.

'Here they come,' Yaitz said, his augmetic eyes giving him a clearer view than the rest of us, and gestured to the gun servitors.

They opened up at once, while the rest of us huddled behind the makeshift barricade which had evidently been constructed from the stores displaced to make room for Rorkins's command post.

A second or so later both constructs went silent, all but torn apart by a blizzard of bolter fire, and my heart turned to ice. I raised my head over the parapet as much as I dared, which wasn't much, let me tell you, praying I wouldn't see the sight I expected, and being just as disappointed as I knew I was going to be. A solid wave of corrupted Sororitas was advancing on our position, at least three full squads emerging from the early morning half-light, and I knew we didn't have a hope in hell of stopping them. Come to that, I doubted we'd even be able to slow them down.

'We're reading another flare of warp energy,' Felicia said in my earpiece, sounding puzzled rather than alarmed, and I looked over the barricade again, too terrified to tear my eyes away, despite the obvious risk of taking a bolt to the head.

'What's that?' Yaitz asked, as a trio of vast, tapering structures materialised out of nowhere, right in the middle of the enemy host. The Chaotic advance faltered, no doubt asking the same question, then splintered, as arcs of ravaging energy lashed out from the monoliths, blasting the nearest of the parked shuttles to smithereens. The onrushing sisterhood halted their charge, and turned to face the new threat, milling around uncertainly for a moment in a manner they most certainly wouldn't have done if they'd been in their right minds, then began shooting at something behind them.

'Something worse,' I said, activating my comm-bead, and transmitting on all frequencies. 'Cain to all units. Withdraw to the shuttles now.' Flashes of green necrotic light were strobing in the distance, sinister metal figures advancing unhurriedly towards us, scything down the power armoured figures which blocked the way.

'Our orders were to defend the Shadowlight,' Yaitz said.

'Against Varan,' I said. 'We can't stand against these creatures. If we try, we'll die, and they'll still get their hands on it.' The Sororitas renegades were breaking, trying to flee, and not getting very far; I pointed to one, caught in the beam of a gauss flayer, screaming as she evaporated like the smoke from a snuffed-out candle. 'Our only hope is to run for the shuttles, and bury it with the demo charges.'

Everywhere I looked beyond the perimeter, straining my eyes to make out the horrifying details through the gloom, the story was the same, gleaming metal killers striking down the enemy with a casual disdain all the more chilling for being completely without emotion.

Most sentient races enter combat with a mixture of fear and exultation, but necrons simply kill because that's what necrons do. At least they'd taken the mortars out for us, so we could get to the shuttles in one piece.

Yaitz and Julien looked at one another, an unspoken question hanging in the air between them; neither was subject to my authority, and if one elected to stay and make a fight of it, I was sure the other would too.

'You heard the commissar! Get moving!' Nelys shouted, and his charges complied eagerly, running for the shuttles as I'd

instructed, Frister and the arbites cadets hard on their heels. That broke the mood, I'm happy to say; when Jurgen and I followed, so did Julien and Yaitz, the skitarii and novitiates falling in around us.

My main fear as we lifted was that we'd left it too late, and that the levitating monoliths would strike us down as they floated inexorably towards the shrine, keeping pace with the walking abominations all about them, but either we were still out of range, or they were simply too fixated on their goal to bother about anyone not standing between them and it<sup>1</sup>. We circled the valley a couple of times, keeping well away from the monoliths, until the vanguard of the necron army had passed inside the shrine, and I gave the signal.

'Felicia,' I said, 'I'm sorry, but we have to blow it.'

'I know.' For a tech-priest she let a surprising amount of emotion leak into her voice. 'It's the only logical alternative.' A long pause ensued.

'Felicia,' I said, as tactfully as I could, 'push the frakking button!'

'I did,' she said bleakly. 'Several times. The signal's being jammed. We can't detonate.'

We orbited aimlessly for another few minutes, unable to intervene, but reluctant to depart; then, as I'd half expected, the entire necron army wavered like lifting mist, and vanished completely, the ravaged landscape below where Varan's invasion force had been obliterated the only trace of their passing.

'What happened?' Sprie asked, looking up from his console for a moment, an expression of stunned surprise on his face.

'They got what they came for,' I said.

#### **Editorial Note:**

*The official version of these events is well enough known to need little in the way of elucidation: the following extract sums it up as well as any other.*

#### **From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127.M42.**

COMMISSAR CAIN'S DUEL with Warmaster Varan, a turn of events so melodramatic that it would be hard to credit were it not for the famous pict recording, marked the effective end of the Chaos invasion of Perlia. Demoralised, the army Varan had built around himself disintegrated into internecine warfare as his subordinate commanders strove with one another to assume the overall leadership, succeeding only in depriving themselves of any force worth leading at all; the shattered remnants being easily overwhelmed and obliterated by the PDF, who lost no time in visiting the Emperor's vengeance on the traitors who'd survived. The fortuitous arrival of a naval task force, dispatched in response to a distress call sent out as the invasion commenced, accounted for the enemy vessels still in orbit, which were all destroyed in a single, well coordinated strike.

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<sup>1</sup> More probably the former, as, given what little we understand about necron motivation, they seem unlikely to let anyone live if they have the choice.

## TWENTY-FIVE

'AND THIS IS how you found the chamber when you returned?' Amberley asked. I nodded, while she walked round the dais on which the crystal plinth and the Shadowlight had once stood, narrowing her clear blue eyes as though if she looked at it from a different angle the ancient device might suddenly reappear.

'We thought it best to seal the room until your arrival,' I said, as calmly as I could. I'd certainly done my best to carry out the impossible commission Orelus had dumped in my lap, but I was by no means certain that Amberley would see it that way.

'Very prudent,' she said, brushing a stray strand of blonde hair away from her forehead. Then, to my relief, the familiar mischievous grin appeared on her face. 'Although horses and stable doors spring to mind.'

'At least Varan didn't get his hands on it,' I said.

'No, that's something,' Amberley agreed. 'Although I can't help wondering why the necrons wanted it too.' A faint moue of concern drifted across her face. 'All we can be certain of is that it's nothing good.'

'I think they were afraid of it,' I said. I'd had plenty of time to think about the matter in the weeks following the battle at the shrine, in between hunting down the last of Varan's converts, formally confirming the surviving cadets as fully-fledged commissars, and evading the Perlian media as much as I could, which wasn't nearly enough. 'They're as old as the xenos who built it; maybe they were allies of theirs, or the *Katarn* they were fighting, or maybe they just got caught in the middle. In any case, they were concerned enough to leave some observers in stasis, against the day the ancients might return, or someone else found out how to use their technology.'

'The chamber in the asteroid you thought might be a necron tomb,' Amberley nodded thoughtfully. 'In the absence of a moon, it's the most likely place for them to observe the planet from.'

'It was just the miners' bad luck to break into the chamber,' I went on, encouraged. 'The necrons revived, and detected the Shadowlight, but because it was shielded down here they couldn't pinpoint it. So they called in a ship for backup, and started combing all the sites they knew the ancients used to have an interest in.' I paused. 'The asteroid...'

'I've got a Deathwatch kill team going over it now,' Amberley reassured me. 'By the time they've finished, there won't be any traces of the necrons left.'

'I suppose, in a way, they did us a favour,' I said. 'They saw off Varan's army for us, and took out his warships into the bargain.' I smiled, savouring the irony. 'Luckily the general populace already thought there was a naval flotilla on the way, so it was easy to convince them an Imperial battlefleet had done the job.'

'You'll still have some explaining to do when the real fleet arrives in system,' Amberley said, looking uncharacteristically surprised when I laughed.

'It's not coming,' I said. 'It never was.' I took out my data-slate, and showed her the full text of the message, which I'd picked up from Visiter shortly after he'd returned to the schola. 'The communique's signed by Fleet Captain Leerie.'

'So?' Amberley was never overly fond of guessing games, so I concluded my explanation succinctly.

'Leerie retired in 954,' I told her, 'while I was serving on Zyvan's staff. Pretty good party, as I recall.' I restowed the slate. 'The message was just an echo, bouncing around in the warp. It happens.'

'But it arrived when you needed it,' Amberley said. 'Quite a coincidence.'

I shrugged. 'I've always been lucky,' I said.

Amberley grinned at me again, her expression appraising.

'Not always,' she said. 'But maybe tonight.'

*[On which cheerfully optimistic note, this volume of the Cain archive comes to a natural conclusion.]*

