



ISSUE 1:

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HAMMER AND BOLTER

ISSUE ONE

Introduction

LONG-TIME BLACK LIBRARY readers may remember a publication we put out a few years ago by the name of *Inferno!* – I certainly do as I was the editor of that august publication for several years – but even if you’ve never heard of *Inferno!* then you’re sure to have felt its influence in the years since it closed its doors.

New York Times bestselling author Graham McNeill made his fiction bow in *Inferno!* and at the same time unleashed Uriel Ventriss on the world at large. Ibram Gaunt and the Tanith First (and Only) were also introduced within its pages and, like the aforementioned Uriel Ventriss, also the subject of a special issue. As were Gotrek & Felix, whose current scribe, Nathan Long, made his Black Library debut in the pages of *Inferno!* along with such illustrious names as James Swallow, Ben Counter, Mike Lee, Gav Thorpe and C.L. Werner.

What you have on screen in front of you now is the heir apparent to *Inferno!*’s legacy. *Hammer and Bolter* is a monthly publication that will bring you the best in Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, Horus Heresy and Time of Legends fiction from a mix of established names and hot new talent in a download-only format. This first issue is a perfect snapshot of what you can expect in the months ahead.

Dan Abnett pens the return of an old friend from his Eisenhorn sequence in ‘The Strange Demise of Titus Endor’ and we’ve also snuck in a sneak preview of the first chapter of *Prospero Burns* to keep you ticking over until its release in January 2011. Anthony Reynolds once more ventures into the realm of Bretonia and the travels of noble Calard with a novella-length tale entitled ‘Questing Knight’. In a first for Black Library, Ben Counter and the Soul Drinkers return in the form of *Phalanx* – a novel serialised over the first year of *Hammer and Bolter*’s publication. Nick Kyme swings by to face The Inquisition and is interrogated about his current projects and future plans. The hot new talent angle is covered by Sarah Cawkwell and the first portrayal of the Silver Skulls chapter by a Black Library author in ‘Primary Instinct’.

And, something that we certainly won’t be able to repeat but had to include in the premier issue of such an exciting new venture, ‘A Place of Quiet Assembly’, a previously unpublished tale of Gotrek & Felix by genre legend John Brunner! Originally written back in the early nineties for the very first line of Warhammer fiction, the story has been sitting on various hard drives for the past two decades and, as far as we’re aware anyway, is the last remaining unpublished short story by the *Stand on Zanzibar* author who sadly died in 1995.

While I can’t promise long-lost short fiction from Hugo Award winning authors *every* issue, I can guarantee the top-notch tales of action and adventure that you’ve come to expect from Black Library in

each and every issue. Along with another eleven months' worth of *Phalanx*, forthcoming issues will see brand new fiction from familiar names such as C.L. Werner, Gav Thorpe, Aaron Dembski-Bowden and Steve Parker along with names that will soon become familiar like James Gilmer, Ben McCallum and John French.

Issue Two will be available from www.blacklibrary.com in early November where you can also find our full range of eBooks and audio downloads.

Christian Dunn

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The Strange Demise of Titus Endor

By Dan Abnett

THE CITY WAS a hollow, failing place that was trying to turn its fortunes around, so it was apt that Titus Endor should wash up there. He'd long since lost the lustre that had made him one of the ordo's rising stars. Like a counterfeit coin, his value had been exposed as short weight. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor took another drink, and reflected that life could be worse.

IT HAD SEEMED to have been winter for two or three years. Snow fell all the time, but the city streets were so warm and busy, nothing lay for long. Slush filled the gutters, and the edges of the kerbs were crusted with polished deposits of old grey ice. Tiny snowflakes freighted the air, caught in the streetlights. They drifted like random thoughts, or disconnected clues.

THE CITY'S NAME was Marisberg. Or perhaps it was Chericoberg, or Zsammstadd? They were all alike, the brute towns clinging to the oily edge of Karoscura's western continent. The drifting clues had dragged him from one conurbation to the next, from one drab residentiary to another, and they all blurred into one: the same streets, the same sallow faces in the street lights, the same bars and dining halls, the same smell of wet rockcrete, the same snow. He walked alone, after hours, ate alone in eating rooms where the other tables were stacked with chairs, made calls and asked questions, and reviewed the notes he'd scribbled in his copy books.

There were a lot of copy books. He disliked dataslates, and never threw his papers away. They formed the bulk of his luggage. He always made sure he had a spare crown or two to tip the next poor concierge confronted with the task of lugging his possessions from the street to a newly rented room.

Gonrad Maliko had been a professor of ethnic diversity at Sarum, specialising in taboos and stratified eating. Endor had a potted biography of him written out in one of the copy books. In another, a green-covered book marked 435, were the case notes of Maliko's crime, a shameless affront on Eustis Majoris involving eleven sub-adult males.

Endor had almost snared Maliko in the arctic city of Cazzad, but the timing had been out, and the tip-off too vague. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor had inherited the fondness for symphonic music from his first master, the late Hapshant. Hapshant had been a real character. Installed at a bar, in the late evening, a glass in his hand, Endor would riff tirelessly about Hapshant. 'Believe you me, a real character,' he would say to his conversation partner, usually the barman, or any solitary drinker with a spare seat beside him. 'Mad as a fiddle, in the end,' Endor always added, tapping his brow, 'worms in the head, you see.'

Endor remembered the days, a long time ago, when he would patiently wind up the old voxcordian Hapshant took with him wherever he went, to play some old wax disc of crackling symphonic music to help his master think. Endor had been Hapshant's pupil, Hapshant's brightest pupil. As an interrogator, he had served Hapshant right up to the end of the great man's life. There had been two of them, actually, two interrogators, Titus and his friend Gregor. Tight, they'd been, best friends in service and out. Titus, though, had always been the one with a luminous future, because Gregor was too serious and charmless. They had both become inquisitors, and stayed friends. Until, that is, an unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault,

just circumstances.

HIS FONDNESS FOR the classical repertoire had come from Hapshant. Attending the performances at Marisberg's Theatricala was therefore not a drudge for Titus Endor. He would arrive at the great, gilded palace, its high windows lit by a thousand yellow globes, brush the snow off his shoulders and take a drink in the bar before the start of the performance. The grandees would come and go, in their frock coats and silk scarves, their gowns and tires, and he'd watch them professionally. Sometimes his copy book would come out of his coat pocket, and he'd scribble a note or two.

The auditorium was painted crimson, with scarlet upholstery and gold woodwork. When the house lights came down, it was like being seated in the ventricle of a heart, a red cavity pumping with sound. He sat in the stalls, never in the same seat. His folded programme and his rented opera glasses lay in his lap.

Maliko's contact had the use of a private box, to the left of the stage. Endor watched it, night after night, seeing through his glasses the faint brass gleam of the inhabitant's own opera glasses in the dark balcony as they caught the stage light.

He identified the box: number 435. No matter how early he rose from his seat and went to the street door, he never managed to catch the occupants of 435 leaving the Theatricala. This rankled with him, though it was never his fault, just circumstances.

Liebstrum, his interrogator, had been missing for several days. Endor had sent Liebstrum to the palace of records in Zsammstadd to collate material on Maliko and his associates. The man was overdue, probably padding out his task so that he could waste time in the stews of Zsammstadd, on expenses. Endor had thought Liebstrum a promising candidate when he'd first met him, but lately he'd begun to fancy that Liebstrum was an idler, with no appetite for the hard work the ordo demanded. He wondered if he'd ever find himself signing the paperwork approving Liebstrum's advancement to full rosette. He doubted it.

The orchestra began the overture, a great swirl of busy strings and strident horns. Zoramer's *Oration*, one of Hapshant's favourite works. Endor settled back, and glanced from time to time at the private box, noting the occasional flash and glimmer of raised opera glasses, the only hint of habitation.

His head ached. The volume of the music didn't help. His head had ached a lot recently, and Endor put that down to the damnable climate he had been forced to endure in the prosecution of the Maliko case.

The stage was bathed in a limed light from directional lamps. As the red curtains spurred back, the dancers came out, performing in front of a hololithic drop of mountains and coppiced woods, in which dwelt a ruined temple or two, halcyon and timeless.

The woodwind section woke up with vigour, and the gauzy dancers swirled, soft and white as snow flakes. One took his attention immediately. Slender, she soared, faultless in her footwork, her arms expressive and immaculate. Her hair was drawn back tightly in a bun, and her face was as implacable as a death mask, powdered white like ivory, with cheek bones that aspired to the perfection of mathematical symmetry.

Endor moved his glasses away from her powerful, springing thighs, and watched the private box. Light on brass. Other eyes were watching her too.

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE, he took himself to a bar on Zeik Street, a bright, sparkling hall of mirrors and crystal chandeliers. It was bustling with patrons from the Theatricala.

'Your pleasure, master?' asked the uniformed barman.

'Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,' Endor requested. It had been his favourite tippie since the early days, since that place off Zansiple Street where he and Gregor had gone to wash away the

day's efforts. The Thirsty Eagle. Yes, that was it, The Thirsty Eagle. Ah, how the memories eroded.

His drink arrived, served on a paper mat. The joiliq was substandard, and too warm. The ice had melted prematurely, and left the citrus wind adrift in a disappointing floe.

He drank it anyway and ordered another. His headache had eased.

The room was full of loud voices and busy discussion. He thought about calling Liebstrum, but didn't want to endure the impotence of another recorded message.

He ordered a third drink, and sat back on his stool to survey the room. Almost everyone was male, dressed in dapper evening wear. There was something rambunctious and fraternal about the gathering, like a coterie of men drawn together in some exclusive club. They roared at one another's jokes, and slapped one another's backs. The few women present were wives or courtesans, and acted like magnets, pulling crowds of attentive males in around them.

Karoscura needs women, he had noted in his copy book. He had underlined it, and given the note two exclamation points. Like many colony worlds building their economies on mineral wealth, Karoscura had advertised for specialist workers, promising to pay travel costs and set up expenses, in order to attract a professional labour force. Men had flooded in from all parts of the sector, drawn by the attractive salary dividends. The womenfolk of Karoscura had been eclipsed. It was reckoned that males now outnumbered females ten to one in the cities of the oily coast.

Endor missed female company. He'd never had any trouble in that department. In the past, his charisma, his looks and his professional status had all combined to win him the attention of any woman that took his eye. Karoscura was like a siege. There weren't enough supplies to go around.

HE WENT BACK to his lodgings. Liebstrum was not there, and hadn't called. It seemed to Endor that his piles of copy books had been disturbed, and rearranged. He started to sort through them. Had someone been in his room?

He woke late, bathed and shaved. He saw his reflection in the mirror. We all grow older, he told himself. His face seemed drawn and lined, and there was a sickly pallor to it. Too much winter light, Titus Endor told himself.

His hair had been grey for a while now. He tied it back, out of convenience. There were distinguished scars on his face, the footnotes of a lifetime of battles. The biggest scar was on his leg, out of sight. Endor still wore the jagged saurapt tooth on a black cord around his neck. Gregor had dug it out of him, just after Endor had driven the beast off. Brontotaph, that had been the place, Brontotaph. How long ago now?

They'd been good friends, the best, close like brothers, until the unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault, just circumstances.

It was sad. Endor missed his old friend. He wondered what had become of Gregor. Nothing much, he doubted, Gregor had never promised to anything.

Looking in the mirror, Endor toyed with the tooth. According to the lore on Brontotaph, he was damned. Even after death, a saurapt continued to stalk its prey, so the legend went, especially a prey item that had escaped or evaded its jaws. The spirit of the saurapt was out there, tracking him. One day it would find him at last, and strike, and balance the books.

Titus Endor laughed out loud. He saw himself laughing back at him. Plenty of ghosts stalked him, and a bestial reptilian predator was the least of them.

An inquisitor had to be rational about such things.

He wondered where Liebstrum was.

The tooth hung around his neck like a penance.

TITUS ENDOR PAID a man to let him into the Theatricala during the day. He prowled the upper galleries, looking for the door to box 435. There was no box 435. The gallery halls were dressed in red velvet carpet and scarlet wallpaper, like aortal tubes. The air smelled of stale lho-sticks. There was a 434 and a 436. His lingering fingers traced the soft red wall, hunting for a secret or concealed door.

Liebstrum had not returned. Annoyed, his mood made worse by a nagging headache, Endor sent a damning report via courier to the ordos. In his lodgings, a glass of joiliq in his hand, he leafed back through his copy books, trying to build some kind of pattern.

435. Gonrad Maliko. The reflected flash of opera glasses in the shadows. The girl. The girl, the slender dancer.

HE THOUGHT ABOUT Gregor from time to time. Endor had always been the bright one, handsome, cunning, bound for glory. Gregor had been a dutiful type, a hard worker, stolid and solid.

‘I wonder where you are now, my old friend?’ Endor asked the empty room. ‘I was always Hapshant’s favourite, and look at the career I’ve built. What have you ever done?’

The unfortunate business still nagged at him. Endor had been put in a tough position, a damn tough position. Several of his prior cases had been placed in review. Details had been distorted and accusations trumped up, all of it so petty-minded and political. He’d had no choice, in the end. When the Ordo Malleus had suggested his transfer, he’d taken it. They’d told him Gregor had been up to no good, and that if Endor helped to set his old friend back on the straight and narrow, the case reviews would be dropped. Endor hadn’t been spying. He had just been keeping an eye on his old friend. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

HE WENT TO the next show at the Theatricala, and then to a club, and then became mixed up in a group of Navy noncoms on shore leave. He’d followed them to the next bar, an off-street den, a dance parlour. There were women there, in an abundance at odds with the global statistics, women a man could dance with.

The dance was called the *zendov*, and it was as erotic as it was formal. The dance had evolved, Endor was told, because of the imbalance of men and women, a street dance of the lower classes originally popular in bordellos. Zendov allowed a man the opportunity of spending five or ten minutes with a woman, intimately. Zendov clubs were the most popular dives on Karoscura.

He took another few drinks, and then he saw her, the girl, the slender dancer. She was standing at the mirror-plated bar, smoking a lho-stick and contemplating her dance card. He hadn’t recognised her at first, because she was wearing a leopardskin cloche and cape, and a gold dress, and had changed her makeup from the fierce white of the ballet. But her posture took his eye, the balance of her legs, the confidence in the set of her head, and he realised who he was looking at.

He introduced himself, and offered to buy her a drink. She regarded him distantly, and then asked his name. Her accent was thick.

‘Titus,’ he replied.

She marked it on her card. ‘The fifth tune from now, Master Titus,’ she said, adding, ‘amasec on ice.’ Then she walked away, and took the embrace of a noncom for the next dance.

He was perplexed, until he saw the way of it. Most of the women in the bar were dancers from the Theatricala. They supplemented their wages by partner-dancing at the zendov bars, efficiently exploiting Karoscura’s paucity of female companionship. No wonder the clubs were popular. No wonder the clubs paid the girls well for after-hours dancing. They brought the men in, men so hungry for a five-minute

intimacy with a woman while the music played, they'd stay all night, waiting their turn, and drink well in the meantime.

When his turn came, she found him at the bar.

'Master Titus?'

'What's your name?' he asked as she led him onto the dance floor.

She seemed surprised that he should care. 'Mira,' she replied.

The music began. Endor had watched the dancers closely, and had learned the steps. His mind worked that way. He took her in a close hold, and turned her about the floor, between other dancing couples. Glittering glow-globes rotated above them, casting down a blizzard of light like snowflakes.

She was close to him, taut, radiating heat. He felt how hard and sinewy her body was, how rigid. She was tiny, but all muscle. She smelled of cologne, but it did not mask the heat of her, or the residue of old ballet makeup, hastily removed, or the slight odour of sweat. She had come straight from the Theatricala, probably changing in a backroom in a hurry.

Sweat, hard limbs, the stale aroma of lho-sticks. He found it intoxicating. Pulled close to her, he noticed she had an old scar along the nape of her neck, just below the hairline.

The tune ended.

'Thank you, Mira,' he bowed. 'Your amasec awaits at the bar.'

'My card is full. I will come over later.'

He looked disappointed.

'Where did you learn to dance?' she asked.

'Tonight. Here.'

She scowled. 'I don't like liars. No one learns to zendov in an evening.'

'I'm not lying. I watched and learned.'

She narrowed her eyes. They were hard eyes, in a hard face. 'You're not very good,' she said, 'but you know the steps. Perfectly, in fact. You're too rigid, though. Your shoulders are too tight.'

He bowed again. 'I'll remember that. Perhaps you might educate me in the finer points of the dance?'

'Sorry, my card is full.'

'No room, not even at the end of the night?'

The music had begun again. A Navy officer was waiting for her, impatient anger in his face.

'Amasec,' she said. 'Perhaps, at the end of the night.'

IN THE ZENDOV clubs, the end of the night meant dawn. The queues of men danced the girls into exhaustion. Heading from the bar to find the washroom, Endor saw three or four shoeless girls in a back hall, smoking lho-sticks and dabbing at bleeding heels and swollen toes.

He went out into the snow, and searched for a public vox-station. He called Liebstrum's number, and got the message service.

'Where are you?' he shouted. 'Where are you?'

TWO GLASSES SAT on the bar. Joiliq in one, diluted with slowly melting ice, and amasec in the other. It was four-thirty.

'Master Titan?'

‘Titus,’ he corrected, looking around. What he saw made him forget the throbbing in his temples. ‘My name is Titus.’

The girl nodded. ‘Sorry. This for me?’

He smiled. She took up the amasec and sipped.

‘A last dance, then, yes?’ she asked.

‘I’ve been waiting.’

There was a look in her eyes that told him how much she despised the men who waited to dance with her.

She led him to the floor. Her body was as hard as before, but now she was cold. There was no heat in her. The fragrance of lho-smoke and sweat had dulled into a thin, unhealthy smell.

‘Loosen your shoulders,’ she said, as the music began. ‘Turn your head. No, too much. Turn it like this. And swing out. Yes. And back and back.’

‘Am I getting it?’ he asked. He felt like he was dancing with a corpse.

‘Your footwork is fine. Excellent, actually. Your back is still a little stiff. Turn out, turn out, that’s it.’

‘You’re a good teacher.’

‘I do what I’m paid to do, sir.’

‘You’re tired.’

‘Every day is a long day,’ she whispered, her head against his chest. She looked up at him sharply. ‘Please don’t tell the bosses I said that. They’ll dock my pay.’

‘I won’t,’ he smiled, rotating her neatly. ‘I know how long your day’s been. I was at the Theatricala. You are a fine dancer.’

‘This pays better than the classical shit,’ she said. She stared up at him as they spun and re-addressed. ‘Have you been following me?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I just came here and saw you.’

‘And learned the zendov.’

He chuckled. ‘Something like that. Men must follow women all the time on this world. There are so few of you.’

‘It does become a problem,’ she admitted.

‘So they follow you? Watch you?’

‘I suppose they do,’ said Mira.

‘Who watches you?’ he asked.

‘You do,’ she said, ‘and everyone else.’

They swung and re-addressed, then promenaded again.

‘How did you get the scar?’ he asked.

She flinched. ‘I hate it when men notice that.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Will you tell me how you got it?’

‘I got it years ago. That’s all I want to say about it.’

He nodded, spinning her. ‘I’m sorry I asked. We all have our scars.’

‘Isn’t that the truth?’ she agreed.

The number ended. He stepped back and looked at her.

‘Please, please don’t ask me for another,’ she said quietly.

‘A last drink, then?’

‘I’m dead on my feet, Master Titus.’

‘Might I be first on your card tomorrow, then?’

‘It doesn’t work that way. Come along tomorrow, and we’ll dance again.’

She walked away. The band was packing up. Endor went to the bar, where the barman was washing the last of the glasses.

‘Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,’ Endor requested.

The barman sighed, and fixed the drink. When Endor looked around, the girl had vanished.

IT WAS LIGHT when he got back to his residentiary. Snow was fluttering down out of a sky that was white and opaque. He tossed his copy book onto the desk, took off his jacket and fell down on his bed.

HE DREAMT OF Hapshant. There were worms coming out of his tear ducts. Endor tried to wipe them away. Gregor shouted at him, telling him he was a fool. Hapshant went into spasms, his heels kicking on the hardwood floor.

THE KNOCKING PERSISTED. It was suddenly late in the afternoon. Endor sat up, fully clothed. The knocking came again, not Hapshant’s heels at all.

He went to the door and opened it.

Liebstrum stared at him.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Well, hello to you too,’ replied Endor.

Liebstrum pushed past him into the room. ‘Throne of Terra, Titus. Why? Why do you keep doing this?’

‘Doing what, exactly?’

‘Calling me. Calling me with these messages and—’

‘Where have you been?’ Endor asked.

Liebstrum turned and looked at him. ‘You’ve forgotten again, haven’t you?’

‘Forgotten what? Interrogator, I believe you have been singularly derelict in your duties these last few weeks. I’m afraid I’ve been forced to send a report of admonition to the ordos and—’

‘Not again. Again with this,’ Liebstrum sighed.

‘Again with what, interrogator?’

Liebstrum pulled out his rosette. ‘It’s Inquisitor, Titus. *Inquisitor*.’

‘Since when?’

‘Four years ago, on Hesperus. You elected me yourself. Don’t you remember?’

Endor frowned. ‘No, I don’t.’

Liebstrum sat down on the bed. ‘Throne, Titus, you have to stop doing this to me.’

‘I don’t follow.’

Liebstrum looked up at him sadly. 'What are you doing here?'

'Hunting Gonrad Maliko. You know that. Keep up.'

'We captured Gonrad Maliko five years ago. He's serving life in the penal colony on Izzakos. Don't you remember?'

Endor paused. He wandered over to his desk and poured the last dregs of a bottle of joiliq into a dirty glass. 'No, no, I don't remember that. Not at all.'

'Oh, Titus,' Liebstrum muttered.

'Maliko is loose. He's here, and he's loose. I have a lead, a girl in the Theatricala, and box 435—'

'Stop it! Stop it now!'

'Liebstrum?'

Liebstrum rose from the bed and approached Endor. 'Show me your rosette,' he said.

Endor took a swig of his drink and pulled his wallet out of his pocket.

'Look. Do you see, Titus?' Liebstrum asked, opening the leather wallet. 'There's no rosette in there. You were disavowed, three years ago. They took your warrant away. You're not an inquisitor any more.'

'Of course I am,' said Titus Endor, ignoring the bald patch in the wallet where his rosette had once been sewn in. 'I'm operating under Special Circumstances.'

Liebstrum shook his head sadly. 'Titus, I've tried to help you, Throne knows, but you've got to stop calling me. You've got to stop pretending.'

'Pretending? How dare you!'

Liebstrum walked towards the door. 'This is the last time I come running, you understand? The very last time.'

'No, I don't understand. I am affronted by your manner, interrogator. Maliko is still out there.'

Liebstrum turned to look back one last time. 'No, Titus, he really isn't.'

ENDOR WENT TO the park in the last of the afternoon. Black trees and blacker ironwork benches stood up out of a skim of wet snow. He wondered how Maliko had got to Liebstrum. What did he have on him? He sat on a bench, and began to draft a report in his copy book, a report exposing Liebstrum's connections to the criminal, and recommending his immediate censure and suspension. But the bench was cold and damp, and it soaked his clothes and gave him a headache, so he walked to a local cafe and ordered a pot of chocolate and a thimble of amasec.

The light was going out of the sky. As the snow fell, it almost seemed as if the pale sky was shedding in little white flakes, leaving a dark undercoat behind.

ENDOR WENT BACK to the zendov club early, before the Theatricala turned out, and waited for the girl, but she never showed. He hung around until it was quite late, and then started asking questions. The other dancers, the girls, were reticent. They'd learned that you didn't give out personal details to men who loitered at the clubs.

Finally, Endor snagged a junior barman who, for rather too many crowns, said he was prepared to slip into the manager's office and take a look at the girl's contact address in the club ledger.

Endor met him out the back of the dance club just after one in the morning, and exchanged the cash for a slip of paper.

Mira Zaleed, 870 Arbogan.

He considered leaving it until the morning, but he was restless, so he bought a quart of amasec at a tavern on Oroshbyli Street, and rode the maglev to Corso Saint Helk in the north of the city. From the station, it was a long walk up the rockcrete walkways to the hab blocks: Solingen, Zarbos, Arbogan.

The stairwells were unlit, and choked with trash. A domestic quarrel was raging on the fifth floor, and the residents of other habs were yelling out protests at the noise. Just before he located 870, it occurred to him that 870 was twice 435.

Titus Endor stood in the gloomy hallway, listening to the racket of someone else's private life disintegrating, and wondered if the numbers were significant. Numbers could be dangerous. A life of study and an eventful career had shown him that. Certain numbers, usually abstract mathematical constructs, possessed power. He'd heard of several cases where cogitators had been corrupted by warped numbers, and he'd been party to another case, years ago, when some old fool had mistakenly believed he'd uncovered the Number of Ruin. He and Gregor had handled it, and it had come to nothing, but they'd taken it seriously. He couldn't remember the old fool's name now, some dusty scribe, but he remembered the case. They'd been interrogators then, him and Gregor, just starting out. They'd been friends.

An age ago, in another life.

His mind had wandered. He blinked, and wondered how long he had been standing in the dim passageway outside 870 Arbogan. The domestic had ended, and the night was still. From somewhere, he heard the frail sound of zendov music, playing on an old voxcordian.

He decided to steady his nerves with a sip of the quart of amasec, and discovered that the bottle was half-empty already.

He knocked on the door.

There was no answer. Someone in a neighbouring flat cried out, the half-awake mew of the nightmared.

He knocked again.

'Mira Zaleed?' he called.

The door was baffled shempwood in an iron frame, with double dead bolts and a triple-tumbler, Blaum et Cie safety lock. The lock had been retrofitted into the door, an expensive piece of kit for such a low-rent hab. He rummaged in his trouser pocket, and found his anykey. The slim blade extended from the grip, slipped into the lock and muttered as it explored the permutations.

He waited. One murmur more, and the anykey turned. The lock sprung with a clatter of rotating drums, and the deadbolts unlatched.

He put the anykey back in his pocket and pushed the door open with his toe.

'Mira?

The squalid apartment was cold and dark. The windows of the main room, overlooking the hab block's cinderblock courtyard, had been left open, and snow damp had blown in like wet breath. The drapes were lank and partly stiff with frost. He snapped on a pair of latex gloves and clicked the light switch. An overhead light bar woke up, lazy and slow. Frizzy purple mould had colonised the cups and plates left on the little dining table. A chair had been overturned on the bare floor. On the wall, faded picts of laughing friends and solemn family gatherings jostled with playbills and programmes from Theatricalas from a half-dozen worlds like Gudrun, Eustis Majoris, Brontotaph and Ligeria.

The bedroom was vacant. A single bed, crumpled with use, had been pushed against the wall, and yellow markings, made in chalk, had been scribed on the exposed floor space. The marks were arrows, circling and crossing, and numbers. 4, 3, 5 and then an 8, a 7, a 0. To the left, 87, the digits stacked as a column. 5, Endor thought, went into 435 87 times.

He stepped over the marks, and took out his little chrome picter. He took four or five shots of the markings.

He felt cold on his back, a shiver. In the little closet, packed tight, were dozens of dance costumes, all gauze and lace. They smelled, very faintly, of sweat and lho-smoke. He reached in and rifled through shoes and hats at the back of the closet space. His hand closed on something: a book.

He drew it out.

It was an unauthorised edition of *Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star Sub-Races*, by Soloman Tarsh. Tarsh was a pen name Maliko had used to publish his most scandalous theories. Endor smiled. Like the tumbling mechanism of a Blaum et Cie safety lock, things were falling into place. He bagged the book in a plastek evidence sheath, and put it in his pocket. Then, he rootled some more, and found a string of cultured pearls, a small jewellery box and a fetish made of bent wire and feathers.

He bagged them all.

The kitchen was a dank mess of grime and grease, stacked with culture-bearing crockery. He went to the bathroom.

Violent death marked the small, tiled room. Blood had extravagantly stippled the walls and dried into black scabs, and it had pooled in the enamel tub, separating into dark sediment and glassy surface plasma. From the spray travel and the splash vectors, Endor approximated a frenzied attack, multiple stabs with a short, double-edged blade. There was no shower curtain, and the rings on the rail were broken and buckled. *The perp wrapped the body in the curtain*, he deduced.

'Are you dead, Mira?' he asked out loud. It was unlikely. The kill scene was a week old, and he'd danced with her just the night before.

'Who's in there?' a voice called. Endor stiffened.

'Come on out, unless it's you, Mira.'

The voice was sixty years old, and carrying twenty or thirty kilos too much weight. Endor unclipped his shoulder holster so his weapon was in grab range, and came out of the bathroom. A torch beam shone in his face.

'This had better be good,' said the sixty-year-old, overweight voice.

'Get the light out of my eyes, please,' said Endor.

The beam swung away, revealing a fat old man aiming a combat shotgun. The barrels of the weapon were pointing directly at Endor. The old man was wearing pyjama bottoms and unlaced, scuffed army boots. His belly stretched his stained vest. Old Guard insignia, the stitching worn, decorated his fatigue jacket.

'Who are you?' Endor asked.

'This says I get to ask the questions,' the old man replied, settling his shotgun. 'Who are you?'

'A friend of Mira's.'

The old man snorted. 'That's what they all say. They don't all get in, though.'

'She gave me a key.'

'Why would she do that?' the old man asked.

'We're friends,' said Endor.

'Round and round we go,' said the old man. 'Give me a good reason not to blast your lungs out through your spine.'

Endor nodded. 'I'm going to reach into my jacket, all right? I'm going to show you my credentials.'

'Slow as you like,' the old man replied.

Endor reached into his coat, forced himself to ignore the invitation of his gun, and flipped out his wallet.

‘Titus Endor, Ordo Malleus. I’m an inquisitor operating under Special Circumstances.’

The old man’s eyes widened. He lifted the shotgun away from Endor.

‘I beg your forgiveness, sir!’ he stammered.

Endor flipped the wallet away.

‘It’s no trouble. You are?’

‘Nute Jerimo, from 868, just down the hall. I...’ the old man cleared his throat, ‘... I’m kind of the unofficial super on this floor. The residents like me to keep an eye on things, keep the place safe, you understand?’

‘You’re ex-mil?’

‘Karoscura Seventh, and proud of it. Mustered out eighteen years ago.’

‘You got a licence for that riot gun, Jerimo?’ Endor asked.

The old man shrugged. ‘It kind of followed me home from the wars, sir,’ he replied.

‘You keep the peace here, and watch over your neighbours. I’m not going to report you,’ said Endor.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Tell me about Mira.’

Jerimo shook his head. ‘Lovely girl, she is. A dancer. Moved in nine months back, keeps herself to herself. Always polite. Last spring, on my wife’s birthday, she gave us tickets to a performance at the Theatricala. A present, you see? What a night! I’d never have been able to treat my wife so well, not on my pension.’

‘She’s a good girl.’

‘She is that. Is she in trouble, sir? Is Mira in some sort of trouble?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out,’ Endor replied. ‘When did you last see her?’

The old man thought about that. ‘A week ago, maybe nine days. It was early. She was just coming in when I was going out to tend the boiler. It won’t fire the heating for this block unless someone cranks it, and so me, being me, goes downstairs and—’

‘She was just coming in?’

‘She always comes in late, sometimes with gentleman callers. Dawn or after.’

‘That was the last time you saw her?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jerimo replied.

‘Go home, go to bed,’ said Endor. ‘I’ll lock up here.’

The old man shuffled off, taking his shotgun with him.

Endor took a last look around the apartment and switched off the light.

He could smell Maliko.

BACK IN HIS room in the residentiary, in the small hours, Endor poured himself the last of the amasec. Sipping, he took the items he’d retrieved from Mira’s hab and laid them out on his desk. The book, the fetish, the jewellery box, the pearls.

He unbagged the jewellery box and opened it with his anykey. The trays inside were dusty and empty. The only thing in it was a pendant, a gold chain fastened to a small, curved tooth. Titus Endor

fingered the jagged tooth that hung around his neck.

Then he printed out the pics he'd taken of the markings on the floor, and studied them.

When he woke up, the prints were scattered across his chest.

HE HAD SLEPT badly. A recurring dream of death had stalked him. A supple ballet dancer with worms coming out of her eyes. A lizard carnivore, snuffling through the dark.

'Wake up,' he told himself.

He felt vile. He washed and dressed, and went to a dining house that was fifteen minutes away from the end of breakfast service. He ordered caffeine, poached eggs, black bread and a slice of the local sausage. He took the book out of his pocket and flipped through it as he waited for his order to arrive.

Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star Sub-Races, by Soloman Tarsh. It had been vanity-printed on low-quality paper. Someone had annotated the well-thumbed pages. Passages were underlined, and notes dotted the margins. Why would a dancer like Mira Zaleed own a copy of a specialist tract like this?

One section of the book had been especially heavily annotated. It was titled 'The Eaters and the Eaten' and it dealt with primitive customs relating to human communities and their local predators. Some hunter clans in the wilderness worlds of the Halo Stars ritually ate the flesh of apex predators in the belief that this would both proof them against predation and invest them with the traits of the killer creatures. On Salique, tribesmen drank the blood of local crocodilians so as to share their cunning. On Gudrun, in ages past, the powdered teeth and genitals of the giant carnodon were believed to imbue the ingester with feral potency. It was a recurring theme. Wherever man inhabited a world where he was in competition with a significant apex predator, rituals of devouring evolved. Eat what would otherwise eat you, and you would be magically protected. Hunt and consume what you fear will hunt and consume you, and you would be proofed against its fanged jaws.

This was nothing new to Titus Endor. His painful experiences on Brontotaph as an interrogator had taught him much about these curious beliefs. After his clash with the saurapt, an encounter he'd never care to repeat, the local tribes had treated him with the utmost respect. He had been 'in the jaws' and he had survived. This made him special in their eyes, as if some curious supernatural relationship had been forged between man and predator. They were bound together, both eaters, both eaten. The tribesmen had urged Endor to hunt down the saurapt, kill it and ingest its flesh, so as to become master of the compact.

Endor had laughed this off and refused. The old superstitions were ridiculous. 'But the saurapt will now stalk you forever,' the tribesmen had warned, 'to the end of your days, when it will claim you at last and finish its bite.'

Finish its bite. Quite a phrase. It had made Hapshant laugh. Endor had relished the notion of a predator's bite that took years, decades perhaps, to close entirely.

Many notes, most of them hard to decipher, appended the passages dealing with such traditions. Brontotaph was mentioned. Certain charms and prophylactic rituals were described, whereby sacrifices could be made to ward off the stalking killer. Fresh blood and surrogate victims could be offered up to stall the attentions of invisible beasts.

Endor wondered about the tooth he'd found in Mira Zaleed's jewellery box.

'Are you Endor?'

Titus looked up from his eggs. It took him a moment to recognise the barman from the zendov club.

'What can I do for you?' he asked.

'May I?' the barman asked, indicating the other chair.

‘Please.’

The barman sat down. He was in casual clothes, a white shirt under a striped coat. Endor imagined the man’s formal wear was being pressed somewhere in a backstreet laundry.

‘Master Endor,’ the barman began, ‘Mira wants you to know that—’

Endor held up his fork. ‘I don’t talk to men unless I know their names. Especially over breakfast.’

The barman cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. ‘My name is Jeg Stannis, sir,’ he said.

‘And I’m Titus Endor. See, that wasn’t so hard. You were saying?’

‘Mira wants you to know that you can’t follow her any more.’

‘Does she?’

‘You went to her hab last night.’

‘Maybe I did.’

‘She knows you were there.’

‘And where is she?’

Stannis shrugged. ‘She wants to stay well away from you. She asked me to come and deliver this message, as a favour to her.’

‘I’ll go where I like, Master Stannis.’

‘The club has rules, sir,’ Stannis said. ‘The girls have to be protected from—’

‘From what?’

‘Predators,’ said Stannis.

Endor bit the corner off a slice of black bread. ‘I’m no predator, I assure you.’

‘You went to her home, uninvited, and let yourself in.’

Endor sighed.

‘The club has rules,’ the barman repeated. ‘Fraternisation with guests is strictly—’

‘It happens all the time, Master Stannis,’ said Endor. ‘Please, we’re both adults. Most of the dancers at your club are already supplementing their income from day jobs and Theatricala work. Let’s not be naive. They add to their wages in other ways too. Women are a rare commodity on Karoscura.’

The barman’s face darkened. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Or what?’ Endor smiled.

‘Or things will go badly for you.’

Endor nodded. ‘We’ll see. Tell me this, Master Stannis...’ He pulled a print from his coat and set it on the white cloth. ‘What does this mean?’

Stannis looked down at the print. It was a shot of the yellow chalk marks on the floor of Mira Zaleed’s bedroom.

‘They’re practice marks,’ he said. ‘Dance steps. The girls often draw out the turns and steps.’

Endor picked up the print and looked at it. ‘Are they really? I’m not convinced. The numbers—’

‘Beat counts.’

‘Who did she kill in her bathroom, Master Stannis?’

The barman got up. ‘Kill? I think there must be something wrong with your head, mister. You leave her alone, you hear me?’

‘I hear what you’re saying,’ Endor nodded.

AFTER BREAKFAST, ENDOR stopped at a street bar on Kalyope and took an amasec against the cold. Sleet was coming down, brittle and wet. He read some more of the book. Maliko, Throne damn him, had a way with words.

Endor looked up. Across the street, through the veil of sleet, he saw a man watching him, a tall, thin man, dressed in sober black, with a high black hat.

Endor looked away to pay the bill. When he got up, the thin man in the tall black hat had vanished.

‘HOW MUCH?’ ENDOR asked.

‘Four crowns,’ the adept replied.

‘To turn it round by tonight?’

‘Twenty crowns,’ the adept replied.

Endor showed him his rosette, but the adept didn’t seem all that impressed.

‘Twenty crowns,’ he repeated.

Endor paid him the money, and handed him Mira’s tooth. ‘Typed, by tonight, no excuses.’

The adept nodded.

Endor left the backstreet alchemist’s, and trudged up into the cold. The sleet had stiffened into snow, and it was belting along the thoroughfare in waves. He pulled up the collar of his coat, and walked into it, head down.

HIS ROUTE TOOK him back past the Theatricala, unlit and drab in the daylight. He went in. Cleaners were mopping the marble floors, and turning out the waste bins.

‘We’re closed,’ a man said, coming forwards to meet Endor. ‘The box office opens at six.’

Endor looked the man up and down. ‘My name is Endor, and I’m an inquisitor of the holy ordos,’ he said. He didn’t bother with his badge this time. It seemed to have lost its impact.

‘My pardon, sir,’ the man said.

‘Do I know you?’ asked Endor.

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

The man was tall and skinny. ‘Do you own a very tall black hat?’ Endor asked.

‘No, I don’t, sir.’

‘You have a dancer here, by the name of Mira Zaleed. I would like to inspect her dressing room.’

‘We don’t do that, sir,’ said the man.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ smiled Endor. ‘I thought I’d explained that I was an inquisitor.’

‘THIS IS WHERE they all change,’ the man said. Endor stepped into the room and turned on the light. The man waited by the door.

The room was long and low, flanked with grubby mirrors. Piles of dirty laundry heaped the baskets behind the door. Floaty white dresses hung on a rail. On the work surfaces, pins and reels of thread and thimbles lay beside pots of greasepaint and waxy sticks of rouge and base white. The room stank of greasy makeup, sweat and smoke.

‘Her station?’ asked Endor.

‘I have no idea, inquisitor,’ the man said.

‘None at all?’

‘Maybe to the left there, third mirror along. It’s very busy in here at night.’

Endor sat down in the seat indicated and looked at himself in the smeared mirror. He was overpowered by the smell of stale perfume. Spent lho-sticks choked a glass near his left hand. The words 'Good luck Mira XXX Lilo' were written in lip rouge in the lower right-hand corner of the mirror.

Endor opened the small drawer under the mirror. It was full of blood. He shut it again, hastily, trying not to slosh anything out onto his lap.

'Could I have a moment?' he asked.

'I'm not really allowed—' the man began.

'Inquisitor, inquisitor,' Endor snarled.

'I'll be outside,' the man said, and closed the door behind him.

Gently, Endor slid the drawer open again. It wasn't full of blood at all. It was full of dark rose petals. He laughed at himself. The rose petals were as black and red as the halls of the Theatricala. He dipped his hand in and slid it around. The petals were as soft and cold as snow flakes or random clues.

He took out the knife. It was double-sided and stained. He sniffed it. Blood. From the bathroom in 870 Arbogan, no doubt. He leant back into the seat, and took out the pict. Dance steps? Practice marks? Surely nothing so innocent.

Endor decided he had to get Liebstrum working on the Number of Ruin. He needed proper information. The Number of Ruin wasn't something one took lightly. There had been a case, years back, an old fool...

Endor wondered where Liebstrum was. He hadn't seen his interrogator in days.

He put his hand back into the petals and found a card, a business card. On one side, it read 'Cloten and Sons, Funerary Needs and Final Rituals'. There was a vox number and a street address.

On the other side, handwritten, was 'Master Titus, you need to conclude your business with these men. Order number 87.' 435, Endor thought, was divisible by 87 5 times.

'Hello?' Endor called out.

The man poked his head around the dressing room door. 'Sir?'

'What are the chances of a man getting a drink?' Endor asked.

CLOTEN AND SONS occupied a grim ouslite building at the end of Limnal Street. Polished long-bodied hearses sat in the snowy yard. A brass bell tinkled as Endor went in.

'Can I be of assistance to you, sir?' asked a young, pudgy man in mourning weeds.

'No, you can't,' Endor replied, 'but he can.' He pointed at the tall, slender man at the back of the musty little shop, a place of dark velvet drapes and samphorwood.

'Master Cloten?' the young man called. 'For you, sir.'

Master Cloten walked over the Endor. He was no longer wearing the tall back hat, but he was unmistakeable. His face was hard and pale and sinewy, the face a man wore when he had spent his life dealing with grief.

'How may I help you, sir?' he asked.

'Order number 87,' Endor replied.

The man went to his heavy ledger, and heaved it open, but Endor knew he already knew the details.

'Ah, indeed. Already fully paid. A nalwood coffin, and a confirmed site in the municipal yard. Headstone already inscribed. Eighteen paid mourners. We have two of our most saddest-faced boys ready, sir, a horse-drawn carriage. Full wreathes. Two hymns already chosen and applied. The choir of the Theatricala will attend and sing them. Well, everything looks in order.'

‘Good,’ said Endor, ‘and it’s all paid for?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘I saw you in the street this morning,’ said Endor.

‘Quite probably, sir,’ the slender man agreed. ‘Death visits all the time. It stalks us, so to say.’

‘I’ve heard that,’ Endor smiled.

‘And it’s never subtle,’ the slender man said. ‘It strikes where it wants. Such is the way of the cosmos.’

‘Indeed. Well, the ceremony seems well catered, and I am thankful for that. I knew him well.’ Endor looked at the slender man for a reaction. None came. ‘A splendid send-off. These are the hymns?’

‘They are.’

Endor studied the sheets. ‘I had wanted to make a contribution towards costs,’ he said. ‘As I told you, I knew him well.’

‘Mistress Zaleed has already paid for everything,’ the slender man said.

‘Has she? Has she?’ Endor murmured. ‘May I see the inscription?’

The slender man passed him a pict of the headstone.

‘Such a lamentable loss,’ the slender man said. ‘To be killed by a monster like that. Throne, I didn’t know there were any predators left on Karoscura, not like that. Imagine.’

‘Indeed,’ said Endor.

He looked at the pict. His own name was on the headstone.

THE BACKSTREET ALCHEMIST’S had shut up for the night. In the swirling snow, he hammered on the door until the adept unlocked it.

‘Tonight!’ Endor spat. ‘Tonight, you said!’

‘You’re late,’ the adept replied.

‘Just tell me what you found,’ Endor snapped. He felt peculiar, and in no mood for nonsense.

‘I ground it down. It’s a saurapt tooth, just as you thought, from Brontotaph.’

ENDOR JOINED THE queue at the doors of the Theatricala. The overture was pumping out already, the windows glowing with gold light.

‘Anywhere in the circle,’ he told the girl in the box office, pushing crowns at her as he waited for his ticket.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ she asked.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied.

He hired glasses, bought a programme and a glass of joiliq, and hurried to his seat.

The ruddy auditorium pulsed like a box of flesh, red and dark, pumping with movement. He took his seat after a few thank you’s and excuse me’s.

He swung his glasses up. Yes, there in 435, the glint of other opera glasses. I have you now, Maliko, he thought.

The overture ended. The curtains drew back and the dancers mounted the stage. There she was, perfect and poised. Where had she been hiding?

Endor’s body started to twist and turn, dancing the zendov in his seat.

‘Will you stop that?’ complained the woman beside him.

‘Sorry,’ said Endor, sitting still and sipping his drink.

He looked up at the box, and saw the glint of brass and glass again. 435. 435.

Of course, there was no box 435.

Liebstrum sat down beside him.

‘Ah, there you are,’ Endor smiled. ‘Just in time.’

Liebstrum looked at him strangely.

‘I’ve been calling you, you know?’ said Endor.

‘I know,’ Liebstrum sighed.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Busy. Look, sir—’

‘Oh, hush! You can’t talk through this. It’s beautiful. Watch them dance. Watch her.’

‘Sir, I... sir... the ordos sent me, sir,’ said Liebstrum. ‘I was concerned, sir. Your calls, and everything. I had them run some tests on your last routine clinical. They wanted you to know. I’m so sorry, I would never wish this on you, sir.’

‘Wish what? For Throne’s sake, watch her!’ Endor craned forwards and looked through his opera glasses. They caught the light.

‘Sir?’

‘What?’

‘Sir, the worms, sir, the cerebral worms. They think you may have been infected years ago, perhaps by Hapshant.’

‘He was a real character.’

‘Sir, your mind is being eaten up. Dementia, sir.’

‘Don’t be silly, Liebstrum. By the way, where the hell have you been?’

‘Sir, I think it would be best if you came with me now. I have summoned doctors. They can make your last weeks comfortable.’

Endor lowered his opera glasses. ‘Is this some kind of trick?’ he asked.

‘No, sir,’ replied Liebstrum.

‘Listen to me, Liebstrum, she’s got me. It was very canny of her. There’s a saurapt stalking her too.’

‘A what, sir?’

‘A saurapt. She fended it off, made the rituals. She transplanted her curse onto me, you see?’

‘No, not really, sir.’

‘Oh yes, you do!’ cried Endor. He reached for his glass, but it was empty. ‘I smelt the same, don’t you see? I was *already* a target. She performed the rituals and switched her predator after me. I’m her blood sacrifice. I suppose it was easy, given that I’d already got the curse on me.’

‘Sir, the doctors are waiting. They will look after you.’

‘LIEBSTRUM? LIEBSTRUM?’ ENDOR called. He dropped his opera glasses. Liebstrum had vanished. Below him, the performance was continuing. He was in a box. He turned around, and saw the number on the door.

435.

But there was no box 435.

He felt peculiar. His head ached worse than ever. He wanted a drink, something to dull the pain. Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus. His hands were numb. Where was Liebstrum? Hadn't he just been talking to Liebstrum?

The performance ended with a flourish, and the Theatricala exploded with applause.

It was all over now. Endor smiled. He realised it wasn't his fault. Just circumstances.

Out of the red darkness behind him, something loomed and finished its bite.

THE HORUS HERESY

PROSPERO BURNS

EXTRACT

By Dan Abnett

CHAPTER ONE

At the Turning of Spring

DEATH HAD THEM surrounded.

It had come to cut threads, and today it wore four faces.

A burning death for those too hurt or too afraid to flee the settlement as the firestorm swept through it. A freezing death for those who ran away up the scarp to escape the murder-make. Even in spring, the wind came in off the ice flats with a death-edge that sucked an exposed man's life-heat out through his lungs, and rotted his hands and feet into black twigs, and left him as a stiff, stone-hard bundle covered in rime.

For others, a drowning death, if they attempted to flee across the blue-ice around the spit. Spring's touch was already working the sea ice loose against the shore, like a tooth in a gum. The ice would no longer take a man's weight, not reliably. If the ice broke under you, down you went: fast and straight if you plunged through, slow and screaming if an ice plate tipped and slid you in. Either way, the water was oil black, and so cold it would freeze the thoughts in your brain before your lungs were even empty.

For the rest, for those who had remained to fight, a bloody death, the death of the murder-make. This was the death that knocked you down hard onto the ice with an axe or a maul, so you felt nothing except the cold burn of the ice, and the hot burn of your own blood, and the pain-scream of your crippling wound. This was the death that stood over you and knocked you again, and again, and as many times as necessary until you would not rise again, or until you were so disfigured that death could no longer bear to look at you, and moved off in disgust to find another soul to knock.

Any of those four faces would cut your thread as soon as look at you. And those were the faces the Balt were wearing.

The Balt. The Balt had brought the murder-make down on the Ascommani aett. Twenty boat. It was early in the season for a raid. A man had to be desperate to go out making red snow when he could wait for the first grasses and milder weather.

Twenty boat, and all of them still rigged for ice-running under their sea-sails.

If there had been time, the Ascomanni might have wondered why their doom had come so early. Ironland, where the Balt had settled, had persisted twenty great years, but many now said its roots were soft. Many now said it would only be one more summer, two at the most, before the ocean sucked it down again into the world-forge.

Ascomanni land ran from the spithead to the ice shelf, and was poor for farming and lacked natural defences, but it was yet just one great year old, and the dowers had proclaimed it strong land, with many years left in it.

So land-thirst. Perhaps it was that.

Fith knew better. Nothing got the murder-urge pumping like fear, and nothing stoked up fear like a

bad omen. A broom star. A day star. Colour in the ice. Bloom in the sea. Smoke out on the ice shelf where no settlement was. Some dead thing washed up that should not be. Something born to livestock or to a woman that should not be. Something with birth defects.

Sometimes a bad dream would be enough to do it, a bad dream that told you the tribe down the coast or around the headland was *maleficarum*. You let land-thirst be your excuse as you reached for your shirt and your blade, but you made sure the gothi marked your face in soot-glue with good cast-out marks like the sun-disc and the warding eye before you opened out your sails.

And there had been a bad omen, all right. Fith had seen it.

Fith had seen the make coming too. He'd seen the sails approaching along the in-shore early enough to blow the scream-horn, but too late for it to do any good. He had merely enabled his kinfolk to die awake.

The Balt main force had come up around the spit in their wrymboats in the sightless pre-dawn grey, sailing black sails straight out of the water and onto the shore-ice on their rigs, translating from water-craft to ice-craft with barely a jolt. Their skirmishers had put ashore on the far side of the headland, and come romping in over the high back of the snow dunes to fall on the Ascommani settlement from the hind side.

After that, it had been fire and knocking. The Balt were mongrel-big, men with long faces and beards waxed into sun rays under their spectacle-face helms. They were horribly able with axe and maul, and the occasional high-status sword that some carried.

But they brought with them none of the screaming vigour of a normal Balt raid or murder-make. They were silent, terrified of what they had come to kill, terrified of its sky magic. They were silent and grim, and set to murder everything to wipe the magic away. Men, women, the young, livestock, nothing was spared a knock. There was not a shred of mercy. There was not a moment's thought to claim prisoners or take slaves. Ascommani girls were famously fine-looking, and there were plenty of healthy girl-children too, who would make valuable breeding slaves in time, but the Balt had put away all appetites except for a fierce desire to be cleansed of fear.

The sound of an axe knocking-in is a wet smack of slicing meat and shattering bone, like sap-wood being cut. A maul makes a fat, bruising sound like a mattock driving pegs into marsh loam or wet ice. Worse than both are the after-sounds. The screaming of the agonised, the ruined and the dying. The begging shrieks of the hurt and maimed. The hacking impacts of death knocking until the fallen stop being alive, or stop trying to rise, or stop screaming, or stop being in once piece.

Fith had just enough time to get his shirt on and loft his axe. Several other hersirs fell to arms with him, and they met the first skirmishers coming in through the walls and window-slits of the settlement head on. The panic was up already. It was blind blundering in the dark, a reek of urine, the first noseful of smoke.

Fith's axe was balanced for a single hand. It was a piece of proper craft, with a high-carbon head that weighed as much as a decent newborn boy. From the toe of the blade to the heel of the beard, it had a smile on it wider than a man's hand-span, and it had kissed a whetstone just the night before.

The axe is a simple machine, a lever that multiplies the force from your arm into the force delivered by the blade. The rudiments apply whether you're splitting wood or men.

Fith's axe was a bone-cutter, a shield-breaker, a helm-cleaver, a death-edge, a cutter of threads. He was a hersir of the Ascommani aett, and he knew how to stand his ground.

It was a throttle-fight in the settlement itself. Fith knocked two Balts back out of the tent wall, but the tight confines were choking his swing. He knew he needed to get out. He yelled to the hersirs with him and they pulled back.

They got out of the tents into the settlement yard, wrapped in swirling black smoke, and went eye to

eye with the Balts in their spectacle-helms. It was mayhem. A free-for-all. Blades swung like windmills in a storm.

Fenk went down as a Balt axe split his left calf lengthwise. He bawled in rage as his leg gave out, useless. Seconds later, a maul knocked his head sidelong, and snapped his neck and his thread. He flopped down on the earth, his shattered skull-bag leaking blood.

Fith drove off a Balt with a mattock, scared him back with the whistling circles of his swinging axe.

Ghejj tried to cover Fith's flank, using the basics of shield-wall tactics. But Ghejj had not had time to collect a decent shield from the stack, just a tattered practice square from the training field. A Balt spear punctured him right through, and tore him open so thoroughly, his guts spilled out onto the snow like ropes of sausage. Ghejj tried to catch them, as though he could gather them up and put them back inside himself and everything would be all right again. They steamed in the spring air. He squealed in dismayed pain. He couldn't help himself. He knew he was ruined unto death.

He looked at Fith as he squealed again. It wasn't the pain. He was so angry that he was irreparably dead.

Fith put mercy into his stroke.

FITH TURNED AWAY from his last picture of Ghejj and saw that there were fingers scattered on the snow, on the snow that had been churned up by scrambling and sliding feet, along with blood by the bowl-full. They were the fingers of women and children, from hands held up to protect themselves. Defensive wounds.

There on the snow, a complete hand, the tiny hand of a child, perfect and whole. Fith recognised the mark on the ring. He knew the child the hand had once belonged to. He knew the father the child had once belonged to.

Fith felt the red smoke blow up in his head.

A Balt came at him, silent and intent. Fith flexed the lever of his axe, hooked it in, and made a ravine of the Balt's face.

Four hersirs left. Fith, Guthox, Lern and Brom. No sign of the aett-chief. The chief was probably dead and face down in the red snow with his huscarls.

Fith could smell blood. It was overpoweringly strong, a hot copper reek spicing the freezing dawn air. He could smell Ghejj's insides too. He could smell the inner parts of him, the ruptured stomach, the yellow fat of his belly meat, the heat of his life.

Fith knew it was time to go.

The Upplander was in the furthest shelter. Even the Ascommani knew to keep him away from people.

The Upplander was propped up against cushions.

'Listen to me,' Fith hissed. 'Do you understand me?'

'I understand you. My translator is working,' the Upplander replied, looking pale.

'The Balt are here. Twenty boat. They will knock you dead. Tell me, do you want the mercy of my axe now?'

'No, I want to live.'

'Then can you walk?'

'Perhaps,' the Upplander replied. 'Just don't leave me here. I am afraid of wolves.'

THERE ARE NO wolves on Fenris.

When the Upplander had been told this, years before, he'd laughed.

He had heard it from a venerated scholar and conservator, later celebrated iterator, called Kyril Sindermann. The Upplander, not long graduated with distinction from the Universitatie of Sardis, had won a coveted place on an eight-month field mission to audit and preserve some of the arcane datacores of NeoAleksandrya, before sandstorms and scorching radiation squalls erased the precious ruins into the melancholy emptiness of the Nordafrik zone forever. This was many decades before the Upplander decided to go to Fenris, or call himself Ahmad Ibn Rustah. Back then he was twenty-five years old, and known to his friends as Kasper.

Sindermann learned his name early on. Sindermann wasn't the project head. He had been sent in for a three-week consult, but he was not afraid to get his hands dirty or to mix with the junior team members. He had an easy way with people. Names were important.

One evening, the team had fallen, according to their habit, into discussion over supper in the project's base, a modular station overlooking the library ruins.

They were all exhausted. Everyone had been working inadvisably long shifts to get the mission accomplished. No one wanted to see the precious digital memories that lingered in the ruins lost for all time.

So, everybody was sand-burned, and everybody was sleep deprived, and everybody had lost significant body mass to water debt. The nights should have been time for restorative rest, but they had found their dreams populated by the data-ghosts of NeoAleksandrya, talkative phantoms that would not let the living slumber undisturbed. So they stayed up to keep the phantoms out, and the nights became time for tired companionship and reflection as the ablative winds howled in over the radgrave of NeoAleksandrya and assaulted the station's bolted storm shutters.

They talked about everything, just to stay awake. Sindermann, perhaps the greatest polymath the Upplander would ever have the honour of knowing in his long life, had a tireless tongue.

The older team members talked about the various places they had visited in the courses of their careers, and the younger members talked of places they still wanted or hoped to visit. This led, inevitably, to the concoction of an ultimate wish list, a dream itinerary of the places in creation that any scholar, historian or remembrancer would give great wealth or a body part just to glimpse. It was a list of the universe's secret places, its remote wonders, its enigmatic corners, its rumoured sites and mythical locales. Fenris was one such. Ironically, given what the Upplander would witness towards the end of one of his lives, Tizca was another.

Sindermann, though even then a man of great age and experience, had not been to Fenris himself. The number of outsiders who had ever gone to Fenris was alarmingly small. But then, as Sindermann put it, Fenris did not welcome visitors, nor was it a gracious host. Thanks to its extreme conditions, even a well prepared man might be lucky to survive a few hours on its open surface.

'Still,' he had said to them, 'think of all that ice.'

It had sometimes reached forty degrees in the station at night, at least that when the climate control centre packed up. They had all groaned at Sindermann's tormenting words.

Then, apropos of nothing in particular, Sindermann made the remark about the wolves, a remark that had been passed to him down such a long relay of other travellers and historians, its provenance was obscure.

'There are no wolves on Fenris,' he had said.

The Upplander had smiled, expecting some droll witticism to follow. His smile had covered the shiver he had felt.

'Except, of course... for the wolves, ser?' he had replied.

'Exactly, Kasper,' the old man said.

Shortly afterwards, the subject had changed, and the remark had been forgotten.

FITH DIDN'T MUCH want to touch the Upplander, but he wasn't going to walk far without an arm around his ribs. He hoisted the man up, and the Upplander groaned at the jolt.

'What are you doing?' Brom yelled. 'Leave him!'

Fith scowled. Brom knew better than that. It wasn't that Fith wanted to drag the Upplander around, but that was the thing with omens. You didn't invite them into your aett, but once they were in, you couldn't ignore them.

Fith could no more leave the Upplander lying there than the Balt could have refused to set out on the murder-make that midnight.

Lern stepped up and helped Fith handle the injured man. The shelters of the aett were ablaze, and choking the pale dawn sky with fat rivers of black smoke. The Balt hadn't finished cutting threads. Sharp screams of anguish and pain split the air like arrows.

They ran along the edge of the scarp, stumbling with the burden of the injured man. Guthox and Brom followed them, snow-running with wide, splayed steps. Brom had got a spear from somewhere. A gang of Balt took off after them, chasing like hunting dogs across the snow, hunched and loping.

Guthox and Brom turned to meet them. Guthox's axe knocked the first one onto his back, and a jet of blood squirted out in a five-metre arc across the snow. Brom's spear-tip found the cheek of another Balt, and tore it like cloth, digging out teeth that popped free like kernels of corn. Brom clubbed his victim dead with the butt of his spear-shaft as the man fell down holding his face.

The Balt circled and danced away from Brom's jabbing spear. Fith left Lern with the Upplander's weight and turned back. He came past Brom in a screaming charge, and lopped off the top of a Balt's skull with his circling axe. That shook things up. Spear or no spear, the Balt went for them. They tried to use their shields to get the spear out of their faces. One of them immediately took the spear in the breastbone. It made a dry-branch crack as the iron head went in, and the man puked blood. But the spear was wedged, and the Balt's dead weight wrenched it out of Brom's hands. He scrambled back with nothing but a long knife to guard himself.

Guthox used his axe to break a shield, and the arm holding it, then felled the Balt with a neck wound. He turned to fend off a bearded Balt axe with the cheek of his own, but the Balt was big and strong, and drove Guthox onto his heels with a series of relentless knocks.

Fith still had momentum. His charge ran down two more Balt, one of which he left bleeding to death, the other dazed, and he turned in time to rescue Guthox by burying the toe-point of his axe through the spine of the big Balt hacking at him.

Fith jerked the axe out with a snarl, and the Balt collapsed on his face. Brom was finishing another with angry, repeated stabs. The Balt had wounded Brom on his first pass, but had then made the mistake of getting too close to the hersir's long knife.

They ran back to where Lern was toiling with the Upplander. Brom had recovered his spear, but he was leaving red snow behind him.

The Upplander was panting with effort. Heat was steaming out of his loose, gasping mouth. Under his storm cloak, the Upplander wore garments made from fabrics unfamiliar to Fith or his kinsmen. The sky-fall had hurt the Upplander, broken some bones was Fith's guess, though Fith had never seen an Upplander opened up to know if they worked the same way inside as Ascommani, or Balt, or any other aettkind.

Fith had never seen an Upplander before. He'd never been tied up in an omen this bad. He wondered what had become of the aett's gothi. The gothi was supposed to be wise, and he was supposed to use that wisdom to steer and safeguard the wyrd of the aett.

Fine job he'd done. The gothi had not known what to make of the Upplander when the hersirs had first brought him in from the crash site, and he hadn't known what to do after that, except shake his bone jangles and his rattle full of fish teeth, and beseech the spirits with the same old tired chants, pleading with them to come down from Uppland and take back their lost kinsman.

Fith believed in the spirits. He firmly believed. He believed in Uppland above where the spirits lived, and the Underverse below, where the wights went. They were the only thing a man had to cling to in the changing landscape of the mortal world. But he was also a pragmatist. He knew there were times, especially when a man's thread was pulled so thin it might snap, that you had to make your own wyrd.

Three bow shots away from the aett, the Ascommanni kept a basin for their boats. It was a little ice crater open to the sea on the north head, and they had better than ten boat in it. Most were up on blocks, hoisted from the ice, so the men could labour in daylight hours to remove the rigs ready for the spring waters. But one was the aett-chief's boat, ready to run at a moment's nod. It was called 'keeping it knocked'. You knocked the cleft of an arrow against a bowstring ready for tension, ready to fly. The chief's wyrmboat stood on its runners on the hard ice, its sails ready to drop and fill, checked only by the anchor lines.

'Into the boat!' Fith ordered as they scrambled down the slope to the basin edge.

'Which boat?' asked Lern.

'The chief's boat!' Fith snapped.

'But it's the chief's boat...' Guthox said, wary.

'He's not going to be needing it,' said Fith. 'Not as much as we do, anyway.'

Guthox looked at him blankly.

'The chief's sleeping on the red snow, you arsehole,' said Fith. 'Now get in the boat.'

They got into the boat, and laid the Upplander down in the bow. The Balt began to appear at the crest of the slope. The hersirs heard the air-buzz of the first arrows.

Fith dropped the sea sails, and they filled in an instant. The canvas cracked like thunder as it took the world's breath. There was a hard snow-wind that morning, and he'd barely noticed it. The anchor lines creaked and strained as the wyrmboat mithered on the ice, impatient to slip.

'Cut the lines!' Fith yelled out.

Guthox looked at him from the stern, where the wind-pull was chaffing the taut lines against the rail.

'He's really not coming?' he asked.

'Who?'

'The chief. You saw his thread cut?'

'He'd be here if he was coming,' said Fith.

They heard cracking sounds like green wood spitting in a fire. The iron heads of arrows were smacking into the ice around them, drilling up puffs of ice dust or cracking punctures into the blue-black glass of the crust. Two arrows hit the boat. One went into the main mast as deep as the length of a man's forearm.

'Cut the lines!' Fith yelled.

Guthox and Lern cut the lines with their axes. The wyrmboat took off like an escaping animal, its sails bellied out full and as rigid as iron. The lurch shook them on their feet. The bladed runners of the ice rig shrieked as they scratched across the marble ice of the basin.

Lern took the helm. He was the best steersman of them. He draped his armpit over the tiller, loading it with his weight to drive the blade of the sternpost rudder into the ice, and balanced the tension of the ropes coming from the quarter rudders, one in each fist. Steering a rigger was a battle of muscle and wit.

One bad judgement, one over-light feathering of the quarters, one heavy-handed dig of the main blade, and the combination of polished ice and raw wind shear could tumble even the biggest wyrmboat, and knock it into kindling.

They left the basin. They went through the sea-cut in the granite lip that let out onto the open water. But it wasn't water. It was long past the great year's glacial maximum, and time was turning, but this stretch of sea along the shadowed inlet remained the sky's looking glass. In some places it was grey-green like an old mirror, in others blue like uncut sapphire, in others bright and clear like fine crystal, but everywhere it was thick to a depth two or three times the height of a man.

As soon as they were clear of the basin, and the boat's runners were shrieking across the surface of the mirror sea like the baleful voices of the wights of the Underverse, the cold hit them. It was the open cold, the cold of the dull, iron-hard end of winter, the blunt cold of the open ice range. All of them gasped at the shock of it, and immediately laced up their collars or wrapped up scarf bindings to protect their mouths and noses.

Fith looked at the Upplander sprawled in the bow. He was panting from a combination of pain and exertion, and the breath heat was steaming out of him in great spectral clouds that the wind was stripping away.

Fith moved down the vibrating wyrmboat towards him, walking with the practised, rolling gait of an experienced ice-mariner.

'Cover up your mouth!' he shouted.

The Upplander looked up at him blankly.

'Cover up your mouth! Breathe through your nose!'

'What?'

Fith knelt down beside him.

'The heat'll bleed right out of you, with your mouth open like that. Breathe through your nose. Conserve it.'

He opened one of the woven-grass coffers tucked in under the boat's rail, and pulled out a blanket and some furs. They were all stiff with cold, but he shook them out and swaddled the Upplander in them.

'Through your nose,' he reminded. 'Don't you know that? Don't you know the cold?'

'No.'

'Then why the hell would you come to this land, if you didn't know all the ways it would try to kill you?'

THE UPPLANDER HAD no answer. He couldn't summon the effort. Renewed pain was gripping him, and it was extraordinarily comprehensive. It pinned his thoughts, and refused to allow him even a small reserve of mental power to use for other things. He'd never known pain like it, except perhaps once.

He could hear a clavier playing. The keys were ringing out a cheerful music hall melody that he could just pick out above the screaming of the runners and the roaring of the brutish crew.

He could hear a clavier playing, and he knew he ought to know why.

THE BALT CAME after them. Lern shouted out as soon as he spotted them, and pointed astern. Wyrmbots were skating out from around the spithead. They were black-sail boats, rigged for a murder-make by night. The Balt were resolved to see the make through to its bloody end. Fith had hoped the Balt might give up once the main raid on the aett was over.

But no. The Balt had to be terrified to keep up the pursuit. They weren't going to rest until everyone was dead.

What had their gothi told them, Fith wondered? What interpretation had he spouted that night when the broom star had sliced the sky, a ribbon of light that had left an accusatory glowing scar directly over Ascommanni territory. How had he explained the land fall, the noise-shock of the star hitting ice?

What had he told his wide-eyed hersirs, his chief, the Balt womenfolk, the children woken up and crying because of the noise?

Fith had seen the Balt gothi once, three great years back, at a time when the Balt and the Ascommanni had been on trading terms, when they could visit aett to aett for a barter-make with cargoes of pelts and grass-weave and smoked meat, and exchange them for preserved herbs, lamp-oil, whale-fat candles and ingots of pig iron.

There had been a formal meeting of the chiefs, with an exchange of gifts, a lot of bowing, a lot of long-winded rehearsal of lineage and bloodline from the skjalds, and a lot of blowing of the Balt's bronze horns, which made a sound half like a sea-cave echo and half like a muffled fart.

The Balt gothi had been skinny, 'taller than a warbow and twice as thin' as the saying went, with a heavy jaw like that of a mule-horse or a simpleton. There were so many metal piercings in his lips and nose and ears, he looked as if he had been plagued with boils and cold sores.

He had a wand made of a bear's arm blade, and a silver torc. Someone had braided seabird feathers into his long, lank hair, so that they made a white mantle around his bony shoulders. His voice was thin and reedy.

His name was Hunur.

He spoke sense, though. During the barter-make, Fith had come to the gothi's shelter, joined the listeners sharing the fire, and listened to him talk. The Balt gothi knew how the world worked. He talked plainly about the Verse and the Underverse, as if he had been told their secrets by the wights themselves.

The Ascommanni gothi was a crazy brute. He had fits, and he smelled like a sea-cow, both of which factors had probably led to his election as gothi. He was good with stars, Fith had to give him that. It was as if he could hear the noise their rigs made as they skated around the glass of the sky. But the rest of the time he was foul-tempered and raving.

His name was Iolo.

At the barter-make, Iolo and Hunur had squared up to one another, sniffed and growled like rutting bull seals, and then spent the whole time trying to steal one another's secrets.

But it had also been as if they were afraid of one another. It was as if, in trying to steal one another's secrets, they were afraid that they were risking infection.

That was how it went with magic. Magic had an underside. Magic could transform a man's life, but it could corrupt it too, especially if you weren't careful, if you didn't watch it and soothe it and keep it sweet. Magic had a nasty undercurrent that could infect a man if he wasn't paying attention.

Magic could turn nasty. Magic could turn on you, even if you were the most exact and painstaking practitioner or gothi.

The worst magic of all, that was sky magic, and it was sky magic that was riding in the bow of their wyrmboat.

Fith wondered what the Balt gothi had said to his people to get them so fired up.

LERN SWUNG THEM west, down the mirror-throat of the inlet, under the shadows of the spithead cliffs and out onto the ice field, the apron of the great glacier.

Ice was better than water: the same area of sail could invest you with ten times the speed. But the effort was mighty. Fith knew they'd have to change steersman in another hour, or stop to let Lern rest, because the concentration was so intense. Already, Lern's eyes looked drawn, what Fith could see of them over the lip of his collar.

They cut up across a long *strayke* of ice field the colour of grey fish-scales, and passed through the collar ridges where glacial moraines of broken rock pushed up through the ice of the glass like extrusions of deformed bone.

The Balt boats were steadily falling behind. A good Balt boat was one thing, axe-carved from ocean-wood and whale bones, but a good Ascommuni boat was quite another, especially a fine rig built for an aett's chief.

They might live yet.

It was a fragile thought, and Fith hated himself for even thinking it and thus jinxing it. But it was real. They might yet outrun the Balts' murder-make and find sanctuary.

The Hradcana, they were the best hope. The Hradcana were a major power in the west, with several aetts along the jagged backbone of the ice field, less than a day away. More important, a peace-make understanding had endured between the Hradcana and the Ascommuni for the lifetimes of the last six chiefs. Most important of all, the Hradcana and the Balt had quarrelled and made red snow on and off for ten generations.

When Guthox saw the first Hradcana sails ahead, Fith's spirit lifted. Some beacon lookout had seen them raking in across the ice field and sent a horn-blast down the chain, and the Hradcana chief had ordered out his wyrmbots to greet and assist the Ascommuni visitor.

Then he realised, with a sinking feeling, that the explanation didn't fit the facts.

'We're too far out,' he murmured.

'What?' Brom asked. He was trying to sew his cut up with fishing wire and a bone needle. The work was too fussy for gloves, but the windchill was too severe for bare hands to function with any finesse. He was making a mess of himself.

'We're too far out for any Hradcana look-out to have spotted us yet,' Fith said. 'They're coming out because they knew we were coming.'

'Crap!' Brom snorted.

Fith looked at the sails of the Hradcana boats. Sails were the most distance-visible aspect of a boat, so they were often used to declare intention. A straw-yellow sail invited trade and barter. A purple sail indicated aett-mourning, the cut thread of a chief or a queen. A white sail, like the one dragging Fith's wyrmbot, proclaimed open approach and embassy. A black sail, like the ones the Balt had come in under, was a treacherous sail, because it hid its declaration in the night, and thus defied the convention.

A red sail was an open announcement of the intention to murder.

The Hradcana sails were red.

FITH SETTLED DOWN in the rattling bow of the wyrmbot beside the Upplander.

'What are you?' he asked.

'What?'

'What have you done? Why have you brought this on us?'

'I did nothing.'

Fith shook his head. 'Red sails. Red sails. Gothi has spoken to gothi through the Underverse. The Balt came at us, now the Hradcana come at us too. Who else? Have you turned the whole Verse against

us, or just against you?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ the Upplander said.

‘Did you make it your destiny to die here?’ asked Fith.

‘No!’

‘Well,’ the hersir replied, ‘you certainly seem to have put some effort into making it happen.’

It was an exalted place.

Even on that pestilential day, with the tail-end of the six-week campaign to take the Boeotian citadel chattering and booming in the distance, there was an odd stillness in the shrine.

Kasper Hawser had felt it before, in other places where mankind had focussed its worship for unnumbered generations. A cathedral in Silesia, just the shell of it, brittle as paper, rising above the fuming, white rubble and slag of the atomic dustbowl. The deep, painted caves in Baluchistan where a closed priesthood had concealed precious cellulose scrolls inscribed with their sacred mysteries, and thus preserved the essence of their faith through the Age of Strife. The high, monastic refuges in the Caucasus where scholars and savants fleeing Narthan Dume’s pogroms had hidden in exile, forlorn, ascetic outposts perched at such an altitude, you could see the expanding hive zones of the Caspian Bloc to the east and the nano-toxic waters of the Pontus Euxinus to the west, and the voice of some forgotten god lingered in the wind and the thin air and the bright sky.

The scholars had come out of Dume’s Panpacific realm with a priceless cargo of data that they had painstakingly liberated from the Tyrant’s library prior to one of his data purges. Some of that material, rumour suggested, dated from before the Golden Age of Technology.

When Hawser and his fellow conservators finally located the refuges, they found them long-since extinct. The cargo of data, the books and digital records, had degraded to powder.

The more man masters, the more man finds there is to be mastered; the more man learns, the more he remembers he has forgotten.

Navid Murza had said that. Hawser had never seen eye to eye with Navid Murza, and the various associations they’d been forced to make during their careers had fostered a sour and immotile disdain between them.

But there was no faulting Murza’s passionate intent. The strength of his calling matched Hawser’s.

‘We have lost more than we know,’ he said, ‘and we are losing more all the time. How can we take any pride in our development as a species when we excel at annihilation and fail to maintain even the most rudimentary continuity of knowledge with our ancestors?’

Murza had been with him that day, in Boeotia. Both of them had been awarded places on the conservator team by the Unification Council. Neither of them had yet seen their thirtieth birthday. They were both still young and idealistic in the most vacuous and misguided ways. It rankled with both of them that they had tied in the appointment rather than one winning and one losing.

Nevertheless, they were professionals.

The vast refinery eight kilometres away had been mined by the retreating Yeselti forces, and the resulting fires had blanketed that corner of Terra in lethal black smoke, a roiling, carcinogenic soup of soot-black petrocarbon filth as thick as oceanic fog and as noxious as a plague pit. The conservators wore sealed bodygloves and masks to go in, shambling through the murk with their heavy, wheezing aug-lung packs in their hands, like suitcases. The packs were linked to the snouts of their masks by wrinkled, pachydermic tubes.

The grave gods loomed to meet them through the smoke. The gods wore masks too.

They stood for a while, looking up at the grave gods, as immobile as the ancient statues. Divine masks of jade and gold, and staring moonstone eyes looked down on haz-guard masks of plastek and

ceramite, and lidless photo-mech goggles.

Murza said something, just a wet sputter behind his visor.

Hawser had never seen anything like the gods in the Boeotian shrine. None of them had. He could hear the visor displays of several team members clicking and humming as they accessed the memories of their data-packs for comparative images.

You won't find anything, Hawser thought. He could barely breathe, and it wasn't the tightness of the mask or the spit-stale taste of the aug-lung's air flow. He'd scanned the grapheme inscriptions on the shrine wall, and even that quick glance had told him there was nothing there that they'd expected to find. No Altaic root forms; no Turkic or Tungusic or Mongolic.

The picters they carried were beginning to gum up in the sooty air, and battery packs were failing left and right. Hawser told two of the juniors to take rubbings of the inscriptions instead. They turned their goggles towards him, blank. He had to show them. He cut sheets of wrapping plastek into small squares and used the side of the wax marker-brick to scrub over the faint relief of the mural marks.

'Like at school,' one of the juniors said.

'Get on with it,' Hawser snapped.

He began an examination of his own, adjusting the macular intensity of his goggles. Without laboratory testing, it was impossible to know how long the shrine had stood there. A thousand years? Ten thousand? Exposed to the air, it was degrading fast, and the pervasive petrochemical smog was destroying surface detail before his very eyes.

He had a desire to be alone for a minute.

He went outside, back up the throat of the entranceway. The Boeotian Conflict had uncovered this treasure. The site had been exposed by a parcel of wayward submunitions rather than the diligent hand of an archaeologist. But for the war, this treasure would never have been found, and because of the war, it was perishing.

Hawser stood at the entrance and put his aug-lung on the ground beside him. He took a sip of nutrient drink from his mask feeder, and cleaned his fogging goggles with hand spray.

To the north of his position, the conflict in the Boeotian citadel underlit the horrendous black roof of the sky, a bonfire shaped like a city. The blackness of the vast smoke canopy was all around, as dense as Old Night itself. Gusting pillars of bright flame came and went in the distance as the smoke shifted.

This, he remarked to himself with leaden irony, was what the great era of Unification looked like.

According to history tracts that were already published and in circulation, that were already *being taught in scholams*, for goodness sake, the glorious Unification Wars had brought the Age of Strife to an end over a century and a half earlier. Since then, there had been more than one hundred and fifty years of peace and renewal as the Emperor led the Great Crusade outwards from Terra, and courageously reconnected the lost and scattered diaspora of mankind.

That's what the history tracts said. Reality was far less tidy. History only recorded broad strokes and general phases of development, and assigned almost arbitrary dates to human accomplishments that had been made in far less definitive instalments. The aftershocks of the Unification War still rolled across the face of the planet. Unification had been triumphantly declared at a point when no power or potentate could hope to vanquish the awesome Imperial machine, but that hadn't prevented various feudal states, religious adherents, remote nations or stubborn autocrats from holding out and trying to ring-fence and preserve their own little pockets of independence. Many, like the Boeotian Yeselti family, had held out for decades, negotiating and conniving their way around treaties and rapprochements and every other diplomatic effort designed to bring them under Imperial sway.

Their story demonstrated that the Emperor, or his advisors at least, possessed extraordinary patience. In the wake of the Unification War, there had been a strenuous and high-profile effort to

resolve conflicts through non-violent means, and the Yeselti were not tyrants or despots. They were simply an ancient royal house eager to maintain their autonomous existence. The Emperor allowed them a twilight grace of a century and a half to come to terms, longer than the lifespan of many Terran empires.

The story also demonstrated that the Emperor's patience was finite, and that when it was exhausted, so was his mercy and restraint.

The Imperial Army had advanced into Boeotia to arrest the Yeselti and annex the territory. Hawser's accredited conservator team was one of hundreds assigned to follow the army in, along with flocks of medicae, aid workers, renovators, engineers and iterators.

To pick up the pieces .

Hawser's mask-mic clicked.

'Yes?'

It was one of the juniors. 'Come inside, Hawser. Murza's got a theory.'

In the shrine, Murza was shining his lamp pack up angled stone flues cut in the walls. Motes of soot tumbled in the beam, revealing, by their motion, a flow of circulation.

'Airways. This is in use,' he said.

'What?'

'This isn't a relic. It's old, yes, but it's been in use until very recently.'

Hawser watched Murza as he prowled around the shrine. 'Evidence?'

Murza gestured to the faience bowls of various sizes dotted along the lip of the altar step.

'There are offerings of fish and grain here, also copal resins, myrrh I believe. Scanners show carbon counts that indicate they're no more than a week old.'

'Any carbon count is compromised in this atmosphere,' Hawser replied. 'The machine's wrong. Besides, look at the state of them. Calcified.'

'The samples have degraded because of the atmosphere,' Murza insisted.

'Oh, have it both ways, why not?' said Hawser.

'Just look at this place!' Murza shot back, gesturing with his gloved hands in exasperation.

'Exactly what are you proposing, then?' asked Hawser. 'An occulted religious observance conducted outside the fringe of Boeotian society, or a private order of tradition sanctioned by the Yeselti?'

'I don't know,' Murza replied, 'but this whole site is guarding something, isn't it? We need to get an excavator in here. We need to get into the recess behind the statues.'

'We need to examine, record and remove the statues methodically,' Hawser said. 'It will take weeks just to begin the preservation treatments before we can lift them, piece by—'

'I can't wait that long.'

'Well, sorry, Navid, but that's the way it is,' said Hawser. 'The statues are priceless. They're our first concern for conservation.'

'Yes, they are priceless,' Murza said. He stepped towards the solemn, silent grave gods. The juniors were watching him. A few took sharp breaths as he actually stepped up onto the base of the altar, gingerly placing his foot so as not to dislodge any of the offertory bowls.

'Get down, Murza,' said one of the seniors.

Murza edged up onto the second step, so he was almost at eye level with some of the gazing gods.

'They are priceless,' he repeated. He raised his right hand and gently indicated the blazing moonstone

eyes of the nearest effigy. 'Look at the eyes. The eyes are so important, don't you think? So telling?'

He glanced over his shoulder at his anxious audience. Hawser could tell Murza was smiling, despite the haz-mask.

'Get down, Navid,' he said.

'Look at the eyes,' Murza said, ignoring the instruction. 'Down through time, they've always meant the same thing to us, haven't they? Come on, it's basic! Someone!'

'Protection,' mumbled one of the juniors awkwardly.

'I can't hear you, Jena. Speak up!'

'The eye is the oldest and most culturally diverse apotropaic symbol,' said Hawser, hoping to cut to the chase and end Murza's showboating.

'Yes, it is,' said Murza. 'Kas knows. Thank you, Kas. The eye *guards* things. You put it up for protection. You put it up to ward off evil and harm, and to keep safe the things you hold most precious.' His fingertip traced the outline of the unblinking eye again. 'We've seen this so many times, just variations of the same design. Look at the proportional values! The eye shape, the brow line, this could have been stylised from a *nazar boncugu* or a *wedjat*, and it's not a million kilometres away from the Eye of Providence that is so proudly displayed in such places as the Great Seal of the Unification Council. These are gods of aversion, there's no doubt about it.'

He jumped down from the steps. Some of the party gasped in alarm, but Murza did not disturb or break any of the precariously placed bowls.

'Gods of aversion,' he said. 'Keep out. Stay away.'

'Have you finished?' Hawser asked.

'The pupils are pieces of obsidian, Kas,' Murza said eagerly as he came towards Hawser. 'You get as close as I did, get your photo-mech to decent resolution, you can see that they're carved. A circle around the edge, a dot in the middle. And you know what that is.'

'The circumpunct,' Hawser replied quietly.

'Which represents?' Murza pressed.

'Just about anything you want it to,' said Hawser. 'The solar disc. Gold. Circumference. Monad. A diacritical mark. The hydrogen atom.'

'Oh, help him out, Jena, please,' Murza cried, 'he's just being awkward!'

'The eye of god,' said the female junior nervously. 'The all-seeing singularity.'

'Thank you,' Murza said. He looked directly at Hawser. His eyes, behind the tinted lenses of the goggles, were fierce. 'It says keep out. Stay away. I can see you. I can see right into your soul. I can reflect your harm back at you, and I can know what you know. I can read your heart. I can keep you at bay, because I am power and I am knowledge, and I am protection. The statues are priceless, Hawser, but they are gods of aversion. They're guarding something. How valuable is something, do you suppose, that someone would protect with *priceless statues* ?'

There was silence for a moment. Most of the team shifted uncomfortably.

'They're a family group,' said Hawser quietly. 'They are a representation of a dynastic line. A portrait in statue form. You can see the gender dimorphism, the height differentials, and the placements, thus determining familial relationships, hierarchies and obligations. The tallest figures on the highest step, a man and a woman, lofty and most exalted. Below them, children, perhaps two generations, with their own extended families and retainers. The first son and first daughter have prominence. It's a record of lineage and descent. They're a family group.'

'But the eyes, Kas! So help me!'

‘They are apotropaic, I agree,’ said Hawser. ‘What could they be guarding? What could be more priceless than a gold and jade effigy of a god-king, and his queen, and his divine sons and daughters?’

Hawser stepped past Murza and faced the altar.

‘I’ll tell you. The *physical remains* of a god-king, and his queen, and his divine sons and daughters. It’s a tomb. That’s what’s in the recess. A tomb.’

Murza sighed, as if deflated.

‘Oh, Kas,’ he said. ‘You think so small.’

Hawser sighed, knowing they were about to go around again, but they turned as they heard noises from the entrance.

Five soldiers clattered into the shrine, spearing the gloom with the lamps strapped to their weapons. They were Imperial Army, hussars from the Tupelov Lancers, one of the very oldest regiments. They had left their cybernetic steeds outside the shrine and dismounted to enter.

‘Clear this site,’ one of them said. They were in full war-armour, combat visors down, frosty green photo-mech cursors bouncing to and fro along their optical slits.

‘We’ve got permission to be here,’ said one of the seniors.

‘Like crap you have,’ said the hussar. ‘Gather your stuff and get out.’

‘Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?’ Murza exclaimed, pushing forwards. ‘Who’s your commander?’

‘The Emperor of Mankind,’ replied the hussar. ‘Who’s yours, arsewipe?’

‘There’s been a mistake,’ said Hawser. He reached for his belt pack. Five saddle carbines slapped up to target him. Five lamp beams pinned him like a specimen.

‘Whoa! Whoa!’ Hawser cried. ‘I’m just reaching for my accreditation!’

He took out the pass-pad and flicked it on. The holographic credentials issued by the Unification Council Office of Conservation billowed up into the smoky air, slightly blurred and malformed by the edges of the smoke. Hawser couldn’t help but notice the Eye of Providence on the Council seal that flashed up before the data unfurled.

‘That’s all very well,’ said one of the hussars.

‘This is all current. It’s valid,’ said Hawser.

‘Things change,’ said the hussar.

‘This was personally ratified by Commander Selud,’ said one of the seniors. ‘He is primary commander and—’

‘At oh-six thirty-five today, Commander Selud was relieved of command by Imperial decree. All permits and authorities are therefore rescinded. Get your stuff, get moving, and live with your disappointment.’

‘Why was Selud removed?’ asked Murza.

‘Are you High Command? Do you need to know?’ sneered one of the hussars.

‘Just unofficially?’ Murza pleaded.

‘Unofficially, Selud’s made a total clusterfug of the whole show,’ said the hussar. ‘Six weeks, and he still manages to let the refinery fields catch fire? The Emperor’s sent someone in to tidy the whole mess up and draw a line under it.’

‘Who?’ asked Hawser.

‘Why are these civilians still here?’ a voice asked. It was deep and penetrating, and it had the hard

edges of vox amplification. A figure had entered the chamber behind the Tupelov Lancers. Hawser wasn't sure how it could have possibly walked in without anyone noticing.

It was an Astartes warrior.

By the pillars of Earth, an Astartes! The Emperor has sent the Astartes to finish this!

Hawser felt his chest tighten and his pulse sprint. He had never seen an Astartes in the flesh before. He hadn't realised they were so big. The curvature of the armour plating was immense, oversized like the grave god statues behind him. The combination of the gloom and his goggles made it hard to resolve colour properly. The armour looked red: a bright, almost pale red, the colour of watered wine or oxygenated blood. A cloak of fine metal mesh shrouded the warrior's left shoulder and torso. The helmet had a snout like a raven's beak.

Hawser wondered what Legion the warrior belonged to. He couldn't see any insignia properly. What was it that people were calling them these days, now that the bulk of all Astartes forces had deployed off Terra to spearhead the Great Crusade?

Space Marines. That was it. Space Marines. Like the square-jawed heroes of ha'penny picture books.

This was no square-jawed hero. This wasn't even human. It was just an implacable thing, a giant twice the size of anybody else in the chamber. Hawser felt he ought to have been able to smell it: the soot on its plating, the machine oil in its complex joints, the perspiration trickling between its skin and its suit-liner.

But there was nothing. No trace, not even a hint of body heat. It was like the cold but immense blank of the void.

Hawser could not imagine anything that could stop it, let alone kill it.

'I asked a question,' the Astartes said.

'We're clearing them now, ser,' stammered one of the Lancers.

'Hurry,' the Astartes replied.

The hussars started to herd the team towards the entrance. There were a few mumbles of protest, but nothing defiant. Everyone was too cowed by the appearance of the Astartes. The aug-lungs were wheezing and pumping more rapidly than before.

'Please,' said Hawser. He took a step towards the Astartes and held out the pass-pad. 'Please, we're licensed conservators. See?'

The hologram re-lit. The Astartes didn't move.

'Ser, this is a profound discovery. It is beyond value. It should be preserved for the benefit of future generations. My team has the expertise. The right equipment too. Please, ser.'

'This area is not safe,' said the Astartes. 'You will remove yourselves.'

'But ser—'

'I have given you an order, civilian.'

'Ser, which Legion do I have the honour of being protected by?'

'The Fifteenth.'

The Fifteenth. So, the Thousand Sons.

'What is your name?'

Hawser turned. The Tupelov Lancers had led most of the team out of the shrine, leaving only him behind. Two more Astartes, each as immense as the first, had manifested behind him. *How could something that big move so stealthily?*

‘What is your name?’ the new arrival repeated.

‘Hawser, ser. Kasper Hawser, conservator, assigned to—’

‘Is that a joke?’

‘What?’ asked Hawser. The other Astartes had spoken.

‘Is that supposed to be a joke?’

‘I don’t understand, ser.’

‘You told us your name. Was it supposed to be a joke? Is it some nickname?’

‘I don’t understand. That’s my name. Why would you think it’s a joke?’

‘Kasper Hawser? You don’t understand the reference?’

Hawser shook his head. ‘No one’s ever...’

The Astartes turned his beaked visor and glanced at his companions. Then he looked back down at Hawser.

‘Clear the area.’

Hawser nodded.

‘Once the security of this area can be guaranteed,’ said the Astartes, ‘your team may be permitted to resume its duties. You will evacuate to the safe zone and await notification.’

NO NOTIFICATION EVER came. Boeotia fell, and the Yeselti line came to an end. Sixteen months later, by then working on another project in Transcyberia, Hawser heard that conservator teams had finally been let into the Boeotian Lowlands.

There was no trace that any shrine had ever existed.

FITH WONDERED WHAT kind of wight he would come back as. The kind that flashed and flickered under the pack ice? The kind you could sometimes see from a boat’s rail, running along in the shadow of the hull? The kind that mumbled and jittered outside an aett’s walls at night, lonely and friendless in the dark? The kind that sang a wailing windsong between the high ice peaks of a scarp on a late winter day?

Fith hoped it would be the darkest kind. The kind with the oil-black eyes and the slack-hanging mouth, the kind with rust and mould clogging the links of its shirt. The kind that clawed its way up from the Underverse using its fleshless hands as shovels, gnawed its way through the rock waste and permafrost, and then went walking at night.

Yes.

Walking until it reached Ironland and the hearth-aetts of the shit-breath Balt. Walking with a special axe in its hand, an axe forged in the Underverse from the bitter wrath of the restless and murdered, hammered out on god’s own anvil, and quenched in the bile and blood of the wronged and the unavenged. It would have a smile on it, a smile sparked on wyrd’s grindstone to a death-edge so keen it would slice a man’s soul from his flesh.

Then threads would be cut. Balt threads.

Fith hoped that would be the way. He wouldn’t mind leaving the Verse so much if there was an expectation of returning. He hoped the wights would let him do that. They could carry him away to the Underverse for all he cared, knocked down by a Balt maul or a Balt arrow, his own cut thread flapping after him in the gales of Hel, just so long as they let him return. Once he reached that unfamiliar shore, they had to remake him, build him back up out of his own raw pain, until he looked like a man, but was nothing more than an instrument, like an axe or a good blade, forged for one pure, singular purpose.

It wouldn't be long before he found out.

Guthox had taken the tiller so that Lern could bind his rope-sawn fingers. The red sails were gaining on them, faster than the black sails of the Balt.

They had one chance left, in Fith's opinion. A half-chance. One last arrow in wyrd's quiver. If they cut north slightly, and ran through the top of Hradcana territory, they might make it to the ice desert beyond. The desert, well, that was death too, because it was a fatal place that no man or beast could live in, but that was a worry for later. They would make their own wyrd.

If they went to the desert, neither the Hradcana nor the Balt would follow. If they could get through a cut in the rock rampart the Hradcana called *The Devil's Tail*, they'd be free and clear, free to die on their own terms, not hounded and knocked to Hel by a pack of soul-cursed murder-makers.

But it was a long run to The Devil's Tail. Brom was too messed up to take a turn at the tiller, and even in rotation, the rest of them would be hard pressed to keep going. It was a run you'd break into four or five shorter runs, maybe sleeping out on the ice and cooking some food to rebuild your strength. To make it non-stop, that would be a feat of endurance, a labour so mighty the skjalds should sing about it.

If there were any Ascommanni skjalds left alive.

Braced against the rail, Fith talked it over with Lern and Brom. All three of them were hoarse from the fight, from yelling hate back into the Balts' faces.

Brom was in poor shape. There was no blood in his face, and his eyes had gone dim like dirty ice, as if his thread was fraying.

'Do it,' he said. 'The Devil's Tail. Do it. Let's not give these bastards the satisfaction.'

Fith made his way to the bow, and knelt down beside the swaddled Upplander.

The Upplander was speaking.

'What?' asked Fith, leaning close. 'What are you saying?'

'Then he said,' the Upplander hissed, 'then he said I can see you. I can see right into your soul. That's what he said. I can reflect your harm back at you and I can know what you know. Oh god, he was so arrogant. Typical Murza. Typical. The statues are priceless, Hawser, he said, but how valuable is something, do you suppose, that someone would protect with *priceless statues*?'

'I don't know what you're telling me,' said Fith. 'Is it a story? Is it something that happened in the past?'

Fith was afraid. He was afraid he was hearing sky magic, and he didn't want any part of it.

The Upplander suddenly started and opened his eyes. He stared up at Fith in sheer terror for a second.

'I was dreaming!' he cried. 'I was dreaming, and they were standing looking down at me.'

He blinked, and the reality of his situation flooded back and washed the nonsense of his fever dream away, and he sank and groaned.

'It was so real,' he whispered, mainly to himself. 'Fifty fugging years ago if it was a day, and it felt like I was right back there. Do you ever have dreams like that? Dreams that unwrap fresh memories of things you'd forgotten you'd ever done? I was really there.'

Fith grunted.

'And not here,' the Upplander added dismally.

'I've come to ask you, one last time, do you want the mercy of my axe?' asked Fith.

'What? No! I don't want to die.'

‘Well, first thing, we all die. Second thing, you’re not going to get much say in the matter.’

‘Help me up,’ said the Upplander. Fith got him to his feet and propped him against the bow rail. The first pricking gobs of sleet were hitting their faces. Up ahead, the sky had risen up in a great, dark summit of cloud, a bruised stain like the colour of a throttled man’s face, and it was rolling in on the ice field.

It was a storm, coming in hard, flinging ice around the sky. Late in the winter for a storm that dark. Bad news, whichever way you looked at it. The rate it was coming, they weren’t going to get anywhere much before it blew in across them.

‘Where are we?’ the Upplander asked, squinting into the dazzle of the ice field rushing by.

‘We’re somewhere near the middle of shit-goes-our-luck,’ said Fith.

The Upplander clung onto the rail as the wrymboat quaked across a rough strayke.

‘What’s that?’ he asked, pointing.

They were coming up fast on one of the Hradcana’s remote northern aetts. It was just an outpost, a few shelters built on some crags that rose above the ice plain. The Hradcana used it to resupply and safe-harbour their fisher boats when the sea thawed out. It was uninhabited for months at a time.

A row of spears had been set tip-down in the sheet ice in front of the aett. They stood like a row of fence posts, six or seven of them. On the raised end of each spear haft, a human head had been impaled.

The heads were turned to look out onto the ice field at them. Their eyes had been pinned open.

They were most likely the heads of criminals, or enemy captives, ritually decapitated for the purpose, but it was possible they were Hradcana, sacrificed in desperation because of the extremity of the maleficarum. Their eyes were open so they could see the evil coming and ward it off.

Fith spat and cursed. He dearly wished Iolo had been able to badge their faces with cast-out marks, to bounce the warding magic back. The wrymboat had eyes on its prow, of course: the all-seeing sun-disc eyes of the sky god, painted bold and bright, and decorated with precious stones. All wrymboats had them, so they could find their way, see off danger, and reflect an enemy’s magic.

Fith hoped it would be enough. The boat was a strong boat, an aett-chief’s boat, but it had run hard and it was tired, and Fith was worried that its eyes might not be powerful enough to turn the magic back anymore.

‘Gods of Aversion,’ the Upplander murmured, gazing at the staked heads. ‘Keep out. Stay away. I can see you.’

Fith wasn’t listening to him. He yelled back down the long, narrow deck at Guthox, signalling him to turn wide. The aett was inhabited. A second later, the spiked heads flashed by, and they were skating the inshore ice under the shadow of the crag.

Guthox cried out. They were still two or three decent bow shots from the islet, but someone was either gifted or favoured by the Underverse. An arrow had gone into him.

Now more struck, *thakking* into the hull or falling short and skipping across the ice. Fith could see archers on the rim of the islet crag, and others on the beach.

He raced back down the boat to Guthox. Lern and Brom were moving too.

It was a monstrously lucky shot, except for Guthox. The arrow had gone through the tight-ringed sleeve of his shirt, the meat of his left tricep, shaving the bone, and then through the sleeve again, and then the shirt proper, before punching into the hersir’s side between his ribs, effectively pinning his arm against his body. Guthox had immediately lost control of one of the quarter rudder ropes. The pain was immense. He had bitten through his tongue in an effort not to scream.

Two arrows were embedded in the deck boards beside them. Fith saw they had fish-scale tips: each head shaped and finished from a single, iron-hard scale from a deep water monster. They were barbed,

like a backwards-slanted comb.

That was what had gone into Guthox. It would never come out.

Guthox spat blood and tried to turn the tiller. Brom and Lern were shouting at him, trying to take over, trying to snap the arrow shaft so they could free Guthox's arm. Guthox was slipping away.

Another wave of arrows hit. One, perhaps, came straight from the same gifted or favoured archer. It hit Guthox in the side of the head, and ended his pain by cutting his thread.

Blood droplets and sleet stung their faces. Guthox fell away from the tiller and, though Brom and Lern sprang in, the wind became their steersman for a split-second.

That was all the time the wind needed, and it had no interest in sparing their lives.

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A PLACE OF QUIET ASSEMBLY

By John Brunner

‘YOU’LL HAVE A comfortable trip,’ the landlord of the coaching inn assured Henkin Warsch. ‘There are only two other passengers booked for today’s stage.’

Which sounded promising enough. However, before they were even out of sight of the inn Henkin was sincerely regretting the maggot that had made him turn aside from his intended route and visit a place he had last seen twenty years before. One of his fellow-travellers was tolerably presentable, albeit gloomy of mien – a young, bookish type in much-worn clothes, with a Sudenland cloak over all – and Henkin might have quite enjoyed chatting with him. But the third member of the party was a dwarf, reeking of ale and burdened with a monstrous axe, who thanks to his huge muscle-knotted arms took up far more room than might have been estimated from his stature. Worst of all, his crest of hair and multiple tattoos marked him out as a Slayer, self-condemned to seek out death in combat against Chaos – a most discomforting fellow-traveller!

If only I could pretend I don’t speak Reikspiel, he thought.

The inn’s bootboy, however, had put paid to any chance of that. While hoisting Henkin’s travelling bag to the roof of the coach, he had announced for the world to hear, ‘This here gentleman hails from Marienburg! I’ll wager he can report much news to help you pass away the miles!’

Presumably he hoped the flattery would earn him an extra tip. It failed. Scowling, Henkin handed him the least coin in his pocket and scrambled aboard.

Whereupon the ordeal commenced.

It wasn’t just that the road was hilly and potholed. He was expecting that. But somehow the dwarf – fortunately in a jovial mood – had taken it into his head that no one from the Wasteland had a proper sense of humour. Accordingly he launched into a string of what he thought of as hilarious jokes. They began as merely scatological; they degenerated to filthy; and at last became downright disgusting.

‘... and there he was, over ears in the privy! Haw-haw!’ Naturally, Henkin’s disinclination to laugh served, in his view, to prove his original point. So he tried again, and again, and yet again. Mercifully, at long last he ran out of new – one should rather, Henkin thought, say ancient – stories to tell, and with a contemptuous scowl leaned back and shut his eyes, though keeping a firm grip on the haft of his axe. Within moments he began to snore.

At which point his companion murmured. ‘I must apologise for my friend, mein herr. He has had – ah – a difficult life. Felix Jaegar, by the way, at your service.’

Reluctantly Henkin offered his own name.

‘Well, at least the weather is fine,’ the other went on after a pause. Glancing out of the window, he added, ‘We must be approaching Hohlenkreis, I suppose’.

Against his will Henkin corrected him. ‘No, we haven’t passed Schatzenheim yet.’

‘You know this part of the world?’ Felix countered, his eyebrows ascending as though to join his hair.

Henkin, in his turn, started at the landscape. The road, cut from the hillside like a ledge, was barely wide enough for the coach. Here it wound between sullen grey rocks and patches of grassy earth. Higher up the slope were birches, beeches and alders, last outposts of the army of trees that occupied the valley

they were leaving. Towards the crest of the pass they would cede place to spruce and larch. That was a haunt of wolves...

‘There was a time,’ Henkin said at length, ‘when I knew this area better than my own home.’

‘Really? How so?’

Henkin shrugged. ‘I was sent to school near here. To be precise, at Schrammel Monastery.’

‘That name sounds familiar...’ Felix frowned with the effort of recollection, then brightened. ‘Ah, of course! Schrammel is where we’re due to put up for the night. So we shall enjoy your company at the inn also?’

Henkin shook his head. ‘No, by the time we arrive there should be an hour of daylight left. I’ll walk on to the monastery – it isn’t far – and invoke an ex-pupil’s traditional right to a meal and a bed. Yesterday, on impulse, I decided that being so close I shouldn’t miss the chance.’

‘Hmm! Your teachers must have left quite an impression!’

‘They did, they did indeed. Inasmuch as I’ve succeeded at all in life, I owe it to their influence. I don’t mind admitting it now, but I was an unruly youth’ – as he spoke, he thought how oddly the words must strike this stranger’s ears, for today he was portly, well dressed and altogether respectable – ‘to the point where our family priest feared there might be some spark of Chaos in my nature. It was his counsel that led to my being sent to a monastery run by followers of Solkan to continue my studies. At Schrammel I was rescued from danger that I didn’t realise I was in. I often wish I’d been able to complete my education there.’

‘You were withdrawn early?’ Felix inquired.

Henkin spread his hands. ‘My father died. I was called home to take over the family business. But – well, to be candid, I wasn’t cut out for it. Last year I decided to sell up, even though I didn’t get anything like a fair price.’ An embarrassed cough. ‘My wife had left me, you see... If only my teachers had had time to re-form my character completely, cure me of my excessive capacity for boredom... At first I hated the place, I admit, because the regime was very strict. How I remember being roused in winter before dawn, having to break the ice in my washbowl before morning prayers! And the sound of a hundred empty bellies grumbling in the refectory as they brought in the bread and milk – why, I can almost hear it now! As we boys used to say, it made nonsense of the monastery’s watchword – “A Place of Quiet Assembly”!’

He gave a chuckle, and Felix politely echoed it. ‘Of course, they had to be strict. Unvarying adherence to routine: that was their chief weapon against the threat of Chaos – that, and memorising. Memorising! Goodness yes! They stocked my head with lines I’ll carry to my dying day. “Let loose the forces of disorder – I’ll not quail! Against my steely heart Chaos will ne’er prevail!”’

‘Why!’ Felix exclaimed. ‘That’s from Tarradasch’s *Barbenoire*, isn’t it!?’

Henkin smiled wryly. ‘Yes indeed. They made me learn the whole thing, word-perfect, as a warning against arrogance. I forget what I’d done, but I’m sure I deserved it... I’m impressed that you recognise it, though. I thought Tarradasch was out of fashion.’

‘Oh, I can claim nodding acquaintance with most of the great works of the past. To be candid, I have ambitions in that direction myself. Oddly enough, that’s partly why I’m travelling in such – ah – unlikely company.’

‘Really? Do explain!’

Felix obliged. After detailing the agreement whereby he was to immortalise his associate’s valiant deeds in a poem, he described a few of the said deeds – thereby causing Henkin to cringe nervously away from the slumbering dwarf – and eventually turned to a general discussion of literature. Thus the time passed pleasantly enough until with a grating of iron tyres on cobblestones the coach drew up outside Schrammel’s only inn, the Mead and Mazer.

‘I’d advise you,’ Felix murmured, ‘to get out first. Gotrek may resent being woken up... Will you return from the monastery to join us for the rest of the journey?’

‘That’s my intention, yes,’ he said with a grimace. ‘I shall be roused in plenty of time, I’m sure.’

‘I look forward to seeing you then. Enjoy your – ah – sentimental visit.’

HAVING ARRANGED FOR his heavy luggage to be looked after at the inn, Henkin set off cheerfully enough with a satchel containing bare necessities. The weather at this hour was still clement, though ahead he could see wisps of drifting mist. He remembered how clammy it used to feel on his fair skin when he and other malefactors were sent on a punishment run. The prospect of being enshrouded in it dampened his spirits. Moreover the passage of time seemed to have made the path steeper than it used to be, and he often had to pause for breath.

Nonetheless, the sight of old landmarks encouraged him. Here, for example, was the gnarled stump of an oak which his school-friends had nicknamed the *Hexengalgen* – witches’ gallows. Its crown was gone, felled no doubt in a winter gale, but there was no mistaking its rugose bark, patched now with fungi that he recognised as edible. Sight of them reminded him how hungry he was, hungry enough to be looking forward even to the meagre victuals on which the pupils at the monastery survived: coarse bread, watery bone-broth and a few sad vegetables. But the teachers ate the same, and they’d seemed hale enough.

Of course, he was accustomed to finer fare these days. He hoped his digestion would cope...

The way was definitely steeper than he had allowed for. The distance from the oak-stump to the next landmark – a moss-covered rock known as Frozen Dwarf because it bore a faint resemblance to one of that quarrelsome and obnoxious race – seemed to have doubled. How different it had been when he was seventeen!

Nonetheless he plodded on, and the sun was still up when he breasted the final rise. Thence he could survey a peaceful view he once had hated, yet now had power to bring tears to his eyes.

Yes, it was unchanged. There were the buildings he recalled so clearly, ringed with a forbidding grey stone wall. Some were veiled by gathering mist, but he could identify them all. There was the dormitorium, with its infirmary wing that fronted on neat square plots planted with medicinal herbs as well as vegetables for the pot. The kitchen where the latter were cooked was a separate building, separate even from the refectory, for its smoke and, in summer, the hordes of flies it attracted to the scent of meat, made it a noisome neighbour. Over there was the schola, which as well as study-rooms contained the library... He wondered who now had charge of the great iron keys that used to swing from the cord of Frater Jurgen’s brown robe, keys that granted access to the locked section where only the best and most pious students were admitted, there to confront revolting but accurate accounts of what evil the forces of Chaos had accomplished in the world. Jurgen, of course, must be long dead; he had been already stooped and greying in Henkin’s day.

Then there were the byres, the stables, the sheds where wandering beggars were granted overnight shelter – and finally, drawing the eye as though by some trick of perspective every line of sight must climax with it, the temple, where worship was accorded to the God of Law and none other, the most dedicated and vindictive of Chaos’s opponents. Unbidden, lines from a familiar hymn rose to Henkin’s lips:

‘Help us to serve thee, God of Right and Law! Whene’er we pray to Thee for recompense, Avenge our wrongs, O—’

That’s odd! The name was on the tip of his tongue, yet he could not recall it. Surely it would come back if he recited the lines again? He did so, and there was still an infuriating blankness. Yet he’d known it when talking to Felix in the coach!

‘Oh, that’s absurd!’ he crossly told the air. ‘I must be getting senile before my time!’

Annoyed, he slung his satchel more comfortably and descended the path that led to the tall oak gate, surmounted by a little watchtower, which constituted the sole means of passage through the encircling wall. Darkness deepened around him at each step. On the hilltop the sun had not quite set, but before he reached the valley floor night had definitely fallen, and chilly shrouds of mist engulfed him even as he tugged the rusty bell-chain.

The dull clang was still resounding when there was a scraping noise from above – a wooden shutter being slid back in the watchtower – and a cracked voice demanded who was there.

Remarkable, he thought. That sounds exactly like Frater Knoblauch who kept the gate in my day! Oh, I suppose each gatekeeper must copy the mannerisms of his forerunner...

Stepping back, tilting his head, unable to make out a fact but discerning the glimmer of a lantern, he called out an answer.

‘Henkin Warsch! I used to be a pupil here! I claim by right a meal and a bed!’

‘Henkin Warsch!’ the gatekeeper echoed in astonishment. ‘Well, well! That’s amazing! I’ll unlock in a trice!’

And he was as good as his word, for the heavy panels swung wide before Henkin had drawn two more breaths. There in front of him, unmistakable in the faint yellow gleam of his lamp, was Frater Knoblauch in person, wheezing with the effort of hurrying down the narrow stairs.

‘But – no, it can’t be!’ Henkin exclaimed. ‘You can’t possibly be Frater Knoblauch!’

‘And why not?’ the old man riposted.

‘I thought... I mean: I left here twenty years ago!’

‘So you expected me to be dead, is that it?’ the other said caustically. ‘Well, I suppose to a boy anyone over fifty seems an ancient. No, here I am, as hale and hearty as anyone may hope at my age. Our way of life is a healthy one, you know – we don’t rot our bodies with drink or waste our vitality by wenching! Come in, come in so I can shut the gate. A bed you can certainly have, but if you want food you’ll have to make haste. It’s after sunset, you know, and we still keep the same hours.’

Henkin’s stomach uttered a grumble at the prospect of going supperless to sleep, bringing back to mind the joke he had repeated to his travelling-companion.

‘But I don’t think they’ll have started yet,’ Frater Knoblauch added reassuringly, and set off at a clumsy scuttle towards the refectory.

He led Henkin through an entrance reserved for teaching staff, which as a boy he had been forbidden to use, and time rolled back as he found himself on the great dais where he had never before set foot save to sweep it free of crumbs, looking down on the dim-lit hall. There, just as in the old days, ninety or a hundred drawn, pale boys sat unspeakingly before bowls of stew and lumps of coarse black bread. Those whose turn it was to dish out this exiguous repast were returning tureens and ladles to shelves along the wall and darting back to their places on wooden benches the sight of which brought recollected aches to Henkin’s buttocks.

‘You’re in luck,’ Knoblauch murmured. ‘Grace has not been spoken. Wait here. I’ll inform the prior.’

Henkin followed Knoblauch with his gaze. Even if the gatekeeper was the same, the prior certainly couldn’t be: Alberich had been over seventy. But it was the custom for the staff to eat with their cowls raised, to discourage even an exchange of glances that might infringe the spirit of the absolute rule against conversation at table, so the man’s features were invisible. Listening to Knoblauch, he nodded gravely, indicated with a finger that the visitor was to be shown to a seat and food brought for him – in precisely the way Alberich would have.

No, that is impossible, he thought. He must simply have schooled himself into a perfect imitation of

the former prior!

One of the senior boys was signalled and came at a fast walk, never of course a run. Having received instructions, he approached Henkin, looking dazed, as though he could not believe anyone would voluntarily return to this place once released. He ushered him to the last unoccupied chair at the high table, and delivered the same stew and bread as served all the company. Then he made for a lectern halfway along the left-hand wall, whereon reposed a large leather-bound book, and stood waiting, eyes on the prior.

Ah! It's all coming back, all coming back! During the main course there was always a reading, some kind of homily or moral tale! How I used to hate my turn for duty, not just because I read so badly but because it meant going hungry for still a while longer, until I was allowed to wolf down cold leftovers before rushing to catch up with the others...

The prior rose and spoke in a reedy but resonant voice, as much like Alberich's as were his movements – and, as Henkin now perceived, his stature, too: Alberich had been unusually tall. Instead of reciting the expected grace, however, he made an announcement.

'Fraters! Boys! Today we witness a singular event. We share our repast with a former pupil. Fleeing the hurly-burly of the world he has rejoined us in our place of quiet assembly. I bid you all to welcome Henkin Warsch.'

He turned his head towards Henkin, but the cowl so shadowed his face that no expression was discernible. At a loss, Henkin did what he would have done at home: rose from his chair, bowed awkwardly first to the prior and then to the body of the hall, and resumed his seat.

Apparently nothing more was expected, for the prior proceeded to intone the grace. At once there was a susurrus of gulping and chewing and swallowing, as though the great room were full of ravenous hogs incapable of squealing. To his own surprise – for the stew looked and smelled even less appetising than he had expected – Henkin found himself tucking in just as eagerly. Bland and flavourless the food might be, not to mention half-cold, but it was filling, and his long trudge from Schrammel town had bequeathed him a ferocious appetite.

Having waited until the first frantic mouthfuls had been consumed, the boy at the lectern raised his voice. Henkin failed to catch his introductory words because he was chomping down on another hunk of bread–

And, speaking of missed words: that grace. It includes the name I couldn't remember just now: the name of – of...

He shook his head, confused. He hadn't heard it.

At least, however, it didn't matter that he had missed the title of the reading. He recognised the opening line, having heard it countless times, and read it too.

'The Hate Child,' he whispered soundlessly. 'Yes, of course.'

He composed himself to listen to the familiar tale, not certain whether he was actually hearing it, or whether it as well was emerging from memory.

'In the distant past, in a province of Bretonnia, there ruled a noble count named Benoist, surnamed Orgueilleux for his great vanity. It was his ambition to have his own way in all things, and for that he was a mighty man, of body large and of nature determined, rare were the times when he was disappointed. None, though, may stand against death, and it came to pass that his wife, whom after his fashion he may have loved, died in confinement with their first child, and the baby also shortly after.

'Distracted by fury and sorrow, he went forth among the villages and hamlets of that land, begging or stealing his food, sleeping in barns and ditches, until he looked to a passer's glance like a common vagrant.

'It so fell out one evening that he crossed a woman of surpassing fairness, feeding geese beside a

river when the moons were full. Smitten by her countenance, he made himself known, saying, "I am Count Benoist, your lord and master. My wife is dead. It is you I choose to be my new consort, and to seal the bargain I shall take you now." Though he had seen himself reflected in the pools he drank from, and so knew that he was dirty and unkempt, he was used to his own way in everything.

'Now the beauteous woman, who was called Yvette, was versed in arcane lore. She understood he made no empty boast. Curtseying, she said, "My lord, this is an honour to me and my family. But you must not take me now. It is the Night of Savage Moons, a time when the forces of Chaos are drawn tidewise from the Northern Wastes, and warpstone dust, it's said, blows in the wind. Come for me tomorrow instead, and I shall willingly consent to be your bride."

'Enraged, Count Benoist threw her to the ground and used her as he would, despite her warnings. So cruelly did he overwhelm her that she fainted, and after he was done he slung her on his shoulder and bore her unaided to his castle, where he commanded servants to attend her.

'On the morrow when she woke, she said to him, "I keep my word. Summon priests that they may marry us." He did, for she was very beautiful. But he did not know she married him for punishment. Perhaps she too was unaware. It had happened on the Night of Savage Moons.

'In the fullness of time she bore a son and called him Estephe. He grew up tall and comely, a fit heir. But there was in him a certain moody wildness, so that now and then he and his youthful companions fell to riotous carousing, while at other times black misery held him in thrall and he would speak to none, but walked alone and muttered curses.

'It chanced that on the day he turned eighteen, by when he overtopped his father and was nimbler with a sword, he was in the grip of such despair. That day his mother told him how he had been got on her against her will. So presently he sought the count and ran him through, and on the battlements he played at kickball with his father's head, wherefore all held him for accursed, and rightly so.

'Thus may it be seen how we must always be on guard, for the subtlety of Chaos knows no bounds.'

The reader closed the book. The slowest eaters among the boys gobbled their last frantic scraps of food. All rose as the prior pronounced concluding grace – and once again Henkin missed being reminded of the name of the God of Law, for a frightening idea distracted him.

Why, he thought, there was something of that boy in me, and traces still remain! Thank goodness Father sent me here, for otherwise... I had just such bouts of depression, and I too ran amok and thought it funny to break windows or rob peasants on their way to market! Besides, my mother never welcomed her husband's physical attentions, which is why I was and am an only child... Was Estephe, too? The story doesn't say.

But there was no time to wonder. The boys were filing, quickly but silently, towards the dormitorium, bar those whose task it was to clear away the bowls and sweep up crumbs. He was expecting the prior and the rest of the staff to approach, ask questions, find out why he had decided to pay this visit, allow him to express the gratitude that had suddenly filled his heart as the moral of Count Benoist's fate sank home. But nothing of the sort happened. Nodding to him solemnly in turn, they too left the hall, and in a moment he found himself alone but for another of the older boys, this one carrying a candlestick, who confided in a whisper that he was to guide Henkin to his room. So at least he was permitted to sleep alone, instead of on one of a hundred hard platforms covered with bracken-filled bags by way of mattress, no pillow, and just a single threadbare blanket such as he had shivered under in the old days. However, the staff's quarters he was shown to were only marginally more luxurious...

He hadn't retired at such an early hour in years. At first he was sure he wouldn't be able to sleep. In a way he welcomed the prospect. As though some vestige of his youthful self had returned, he looked forward to brooding over his annoyance at this cold reception. Then, even as he closed the wooden shutters against the now-dense mist, he was overcome by a vast surge of weariness. Yawning so hard he

felt his head might split, he tossed aside his boots and outer clothing, rinsed his mouth and splashed his face with water from a cracked ewer, blew out his candle and lay down. He was asleep before he could draw the blanket over him.

HE WOKE TO midnight darkness. But not silence. The stones enclosing him, the very air, were resonating, to the boom of a vast and brazen gong...

Even as he prepared to be angry at this premature arousal, a thrill of anticipation permeated his entire body. With it came a clear and penetrating thought, more naked feeling than mere words. Yet it might be glossed as:

I forgot this! Only now do I remember it! How could it have escaped my memory, this which offered compensation for the cold and hunger, this which made it worth my while to spend so many agonising months in quarters barely better than a prison? This is the summons to the Quiet Assembly!

He was on his feet, feverishly snatching at his boots and cloak, aware of stirrings beyond the walls on either side, in the dormitorium below, even above the roof where owls were circling, and doubtless bats, the soft pat of their wings adding to the wonderful reverberation of the gong. Fingers a-tangle with excitement, he finally contrived to tie his laces, and rushed to the landing.

He instantly checked his pace. Of course. It must be slow and solemn, like everything here. Recollection seized him as he saw the pupils emerging one by one onto the stairs ahead of him, moving as though they were still lost to sleep, but surely, and with implacable intent.

At their rear he fell in, and found as he would not have expected when he arrived, but now thought was perfectly natural, the prior himself standing beside an open door admitting curls of mist. Hood thrown back, he was flanked by two attendants handing lit torches to the boys. Still cowed, they bore remarkable likeness to Frater Jurgen the librarian, iron keys and all, and Frater Wildgans who had been Henkin's chief instructor. But he was of no mind to let such matters trouble him.

Yes: the prior was Alberich. And seemingly no older. And now confronting Henkin as he descended the last cold tread of the stone flight, and bowing to him. Bowing! Saying nothing – yet his action was more eloquent than words.

Henkin's heart began to pound in perfect unison with the gong, while his paces, and the pupils', likewise kept time to it. Conscious that this ceremony was the honour due him for his decision to return, he followed the triple line of torch-bearing boys. Jurgen (?) and Wildgans (?) fell in beside him, and the prior himself took up the rear.

They were, of course, being summoned to the temple.

Ah! This is how it was, he thought. This is the way we used to be brought face to face with the elemental essence of Law and Right! Not by dull rote learning, not by memorising moral tales and masterworks, not through obedience to the discipline impressed on us with bread and broth – and, occasionally, necessary stripes – but by being brought from slumber at the dead hour when the random fretful forces of the body are most sluggish, least subject to the whims and wilfulness of daylight, and shown the unbearable fact of the god whom otherwise we knew as nothing more than words...! This is what saved me, thanks to the selfless dedication of the teaching fraters. How could I never have thought of it from then till now? How could I have overlooked for twenty years this sensation of the marvellous, this drunken joy?

He felt himself swaying, so tremendous was the charge of expectation that imbued his being. No other prospect of high events had matched it: not his wedding, not the birth of his children, not his first coup in the trade he had inherited from his father, then in the others he had turned to as his early interest waned; nor this first (of many) undetected love-affairs – nor even the last which had been detected and cost him his marriage and his former livelihood. This had no parallel. This was what had made life here endurable, and now he was to experience it again.

He wanted to cry out in gratitude, although his tongue seemed tied, exactly as it had been when he strove to recall that thought-to-be familiar hymn.

Ah, it didn't matter. Within the hour, within minutes perhaps, a name would spring to his lips and set the seal on his destiny. He needed only to utter it aloud, and he would be accepted, in some way he did not yet comprehend, but he would. Oh yes: he would, when it was time.

Here at last was the entrance to the temple. Knoblauch stood on guard. Passing him, the boys drew up in serried ranks to either side, facing a high and distant idol. The torches they bore cast but wan illumination on the rich hangings that lined the walls, for mist had gathered within the temple, too, as though wafted indoors by the wings of the circling bats and owls. The idol itself, so tall that its raised arms reached the roof, was scarcely visible. It didn't matter, though. Henkin knew with comfortable assurance what god was honoured in this fane: the one whose law upheld not only roof but sky, to whom he was already dedicated, and who had drawn him hither after two decades.

Ah! How few among all humankind can boast they have held steadfast for so long to a pledge undertaken in youth!

Henkin started. He was curiously uncertain whether the thought had sprung unbidden to his mind, or whether Prior Alberich had uttered the words – which, oddly, had been followed by what sounded like a chuckle. He made to ask, but was forestalled. Knoblauch swung the heavy doors shut with a thud, and in the same instant the gong – which had become almost deafening – ceased to boom.

Amid an air of total expectation, Henkin found himself advancing along the central aisle of the temple, the boys on either side as still as rocks, even when a splatter of wax dripped from a torch and landed scalding on the back of a bare hand, staring with indescribable longing towards the mist-veiled idol. Henkin remembered that longing now, how it ached, how it festered, how it could only be assuaged by such a ceremony as was now in progress.

Yet there was no chanting of anthems, no procession of gorgeously attired acolytes, no incense, no heaps of offerings, none of the trivia to be found in almost any other temple. Of course not. This rite was unique.

It was, after all, the Place of Quiet Assembly.

Of their own accord, his feet ceased to move. He stood before the statue. If he glanced up, he would be able to recognise it, and the name that hovered on his tongue would be spoken. The fruit of his education would ripen on the instant. He would become a perfect servant of the god's cause – which, ever since his schooldays, had been what he wanted most.

Wondering why he had not returned here long ago, to join Alberich and Knoblauch, Jurgen and Wildgans and the rest, he glanced from side to side seeking approval. He met an encouraging smile from the prior.

At least, he forced himself to believe it was a smile. It involved lips parted over a set of teeth remarkable for so elderly a man, and there was a glint of expectation in his eyes, so...

Deciding not to look too long, Henkin clung to the remnants of the delight he had felt on the way hither – now, for some strange reason, it had begun to dissipate – and boldly threw his head to stare directly at the image of the god.

And froze, caught between adoration and astonishment.

For those were not arms that reached to the roof. Arms there were, ending in monstrous hands, and legs with vast broad feet. Towering above them, though, sprouted by a hideous head, were – horns? No, tentacles! They flexed! And each one ended, as it curved towards him, in a gaping pseudopod-coronaed face...

It spoke – from which of its three mouths, Henkin could not tell. It said, in a voice like the grating of rocks against rocks when spring floods undermine a hillside and presage landslides in a valley:

'Speak my name. You only need to speak my name and life indefinite awaits you. Live forever!

Almost, the name emerged. Yet, somewhere in the inmost depths of Henkin's awareness, something rebelled. Some part of him complained, its mental tone no better than peevish – like his mother's when his father had offended her by winning an argument – a sense, one might say, of obstinate conviction.

That's not the God of Law, he thought. It looks more like the one I've striven against throughout my life!

For what felt like half eternity, Henkin stood transfixed with puzzlement. He knew the name he was supposed to speak. He was quite unable to recall the other one. It followed, by the twisted logic that held him in its grip, that he should utter the one he could.

On the other hand, if he did, there was some kind of penalty... or something... or... Raising his hands to his temples, he swayed giddily, gathered his forces, licked his lips, prepared to make a once-and-for-all commitment–

And there came a thunderous crash at the oaken door, as of a monstrous axe shattering its timbers like the flimsy partitions of a peasant's cot.

Which turned out to be exactly what it was.

Slow, like a fly trapped by the resin that in a thousand years would be more profitably sold as amber for embalming it, Henkin turned. At the far end of the aisle something was moving so fast he could barely follow it. Also his ears were more assaulted than they had been by the gong.

The moving thing was the axe. He could not see its wielder. But it was the wielder he was hearing. He had been told, he had read, how terrible was the war-cry of a dwarf in berserk state. Not until it blasted back in echo from the arched roof of the temple was he able to believe its force. Gotrek's first victim, after the door, had been Frater Knoblauch, whose head, staring at his body on the stone flags, bore an expression suggesting it felt it should, but couldn't quite, recognise the nearby carcass.

At that sight the boys, screaming at the pitch of their lungs, broke and ran, trampling the fraters who tried to stop them, hurling their torches aside, headless of whether they landed at the foot of the hangings. Flames leapt up. Smoke mingled with the mist. Alberich and his companions, cowls thrown back, turned snarling to confront the intruder, Henkin for the moment forgotten.

'Hurry! Warsch, run! This way, you fool!'

Still bemused by the grip of enchantment, Henkin stared towards the speaker, waving frantically from near the door. He ventured muzzily, 'Is that you, Felix Jaegar?'

'Of course it's me!' Felix shouted. He had a sword in his hand, but such work was better left to his companion. 'This way! *Move!* Before Gotrek brings the roof down on our heads!'

Sluggishly, Henkin sought mute permission from the prior – he felt he had to. Or from Jurgen, or Wildgans. But the attention of all three was on the dwarf. Drawing themselves up within their cowed robes, they seemed tree-tall compared with him. Magical auras flashed as they mustered for a counterattack. 'Poor fool!' Henkin heard distinctly, in Alberich's voice. 'To think he imagines a mere axe can slay one who has lived a thousand years!'

They stretched out their arms. Horrors indescribable assembled at their conjunct fingertips.

Ignoring the other fraters and the fleeing boys, Gotrek ceased his bellowing. Poised on the balls of his feet, brandishing his axe, he looked far more terrifying than before: no longer dancing with the ecstasy of blood-lust, but gathering himself into himself, eyes gleaming with mad joy... Shaking from head to toe, Henkin realised what he was watching: a Slayer on the brink of conviction that here might be the end of his quest.

As if to confirm it, the dwarf began to sing – not shout his war-cry, not utter threats, nor curses, but

to chant in dwarfish. Surely, thought Henkin in wonder, it was the ballad of his family's deeds: that family who must all be dead, for else he'd not have taken to his lonely road.

Sneering contempt, Prior Alberich and his companions mustered all their magic force, prepared to cast—

And in exactly that brief moment when they had no power save what was being drawn into their spell, Gotrek hurled his axe.

He threw so hard it carried him with it, for he did not let go. Was it a throw or a leap? Or was it both? Dazed, Henkin could not decide. All he could tell was this: such was its violence, the flying blade *mowed* Alberich and his companions like corn beneath the harvest-scythe. The dwarf, who had spun clear around, landed on his feet before the idol. Panting, but still gasping out his song, he raised the blade anew, this time menacing the statue itself.

Where had the spell-power gone? Into the axe, Henkin abruptly realised. It must have! For what he had taken for arms upholding the temple roof — what turned out to be half-horn, half-tentacle — they were descending, their hideous fanged mouths like flesh-eroding lampreys closing on the stubby form of Gotrek. His singing, now the boys' screams had faded, was not the only noise to be heard. Suddenly there were menacing creaks and grinds as, its support removed, the building began to sag and sway...

'*Move*, you fool!' thundered Felix, seizing Henkin's arm, and dragged him away on quaking ground to the music of snapping timbers, tumbling stones and crackling flames, amid the destined downfall of Schrammel Monastery.

Abruptly it was bitterly cold, and they were very weak, and time seemed to grind to a stop.

Henkin wished the moving earth would do the same.

It was dawn. Dew-sodden, Henkin forced his eyes open and drank in his sights revealed by the returning sun. He saw mounds of rubble, the line of the fallen wall, smoke drifting from what had been the temple and now looked more like a tent propped up by broken poles — but no other movement save seekers of carrion come cautiously to glean the ruins. Plus a stir amid the smouldering wreckage, as though a trace of Chaos lurked there still, shifting and wriggling.

Of neither fraters nor pupils was there any sign.

Nor, come to that, of Gotrek.

Wrapped in his red wool cloak, Felix sat brooding on a nearby rock. Without preamble Henkin demanded, 'Where's the dwarf? He saved my life!'

Felix gave a dour shrug. 'It looks as though he's achieved his ambition. The temple collapsed with him inside. I only just dragged you out in time... Well, it's what he's always wanted. And I suppose I should be glad to be released from my pledge at last.'

'But how did it all happen?' Henkin sat up gingerly. 'Perhaps warpstone dust? In the air, the food, our very blood?'

'That, or some like manifestation. At any rate, for centuries this monastery has functioned as a tool for—'

'Tzeentch!' Henkin blurted. That was the word he had been tempted to utter, the name of the power his family's priest had feared already held him in his grip. And the name of the God of Right and Law came back to him, too.

Soberly, Felix nodded.

'Indeed. How better might the servants of the Changer of the Ways disguise their work than by pretending to serve Solkan? It must have cost them dear to adopt such a static guise, but in the long term I suppose they felt it worth the effort to plant so many converts in staid, respectable families.'

Scrambling to his feet, Henkin said bitterly, 'If only my father and our priest could have known what

a fate they were condemning me to! I did want to follow in my father's footsteps – I swear it! I wanted to build up our business, make it the wealthiest in Marienburg, and instead my life has been a *mess*! Here I am entering middle age without a wife, without a career, without anything my family hoped I would enjoy! And all because my father was duped into sending me here because I was so unruly and the monastery was called "A Place of Quiet Assembly"!

'Quiet it wasn't!' roared a distant voice. 'Not last night, anyway!'

Startled, Felix and Henkin glanced around. Gotrek was emerging from the wrecked temple, axe over shoulder. He must, Henkin reasoned, have been the cause of what he'd mistaken for simple subsidence.

And the dwarf did not look pleased in the least.

Faintly Henkin caught a whisper from Felix: 'Oh, *no*...'

But there were things he still needed to know. Urgently he demanded, 'How did you find out? And why did you come after me? You too could have been ensnared!'

Resignedly, Felix explained.

'We discovered over dinner that everyone at the inn knew about the monastery – 'the Monstery', as they call it. With that, we forgot all thought of food.'

'You mean the landlord could have warned me?' Rage boiled up in Henkin's throat.

'Sure he could! But he looked forward to inheriting your luggage.' Brushing dust from crest and eyebrows, the dwarf sat down beside Felix and inspected his axe, cursing under his breath.

'Why, the—'

'Save your breath,' Felix cut in. 'Gotrek made him a promise. He knows what's going to happen to him if when we get back he's so much as laid a finger on your belongings.'

'When...?' Henkin had to swallow hard. 'But, herr dwarf, were you expecting to return?'

Felix drew a hissing breath, as in alarm.

There was a long silence. Eventually Gotrek shrugged. In a tone so different from the one Henkin had heard during yesterday's coach-ride that it was hard to credit the same person was speaking, he said gruffly, 'Last night didn't pay off, but it was one of the likeliest chances to have come my way. For that, I'd even forgive someone who lacks a sense of humour! If I hadn't picked up such a charge of magic... In the upshot, though,' he said, glowering, 'all it's landed me with is another verse for Felix's poem and another doom cheated from me!' He lifted his axe as though to strike Henkin out of his way.

Henkin hesitated. Within him, he now knew, Tzeentch the Changer of the Ways held sway but had not yet conquered. Very well! If Tzeentch's disciples could control their mutable nature long enough to delude the world into imagining they served the rigid Solkan, could he not govern himself at least for one brief moment, do and say the right and necessary thing? One did after all know a little about Slayers...

Resolved, he drew himself to his full height.

'Gotrek,' he said, daringly. 'I heard you sing as you confronted them!'

The huge-knuckled fists tightened on the axe; the muscles of the shoulders tensed; the glare intensified.

'Herr dwarf! I'm aware how rare a privilege that is! I'll treasure it!'

The massive hands relaxed, just a trifle.

'Of course, I shall never, so long as I live, mention the fact to another living soul! Not until your companion has completed his poem – the great work that will immortalise your deeds.'

From the corner of his eye Henkin noticed that Felix, visibly surprised, was nodding.

'I'm only sorry, *herr dwarf*, that my unworthy self could not after all be the means of your attaining

your ambition!’

Had that gone too far? By now he was practically gabbling.

‘If you’ll accompany me back to the inn, although we must have missed the morning coach, I promise you we shall pass the time until the next most pleasantly, with abundance of food and ale at my expense, and you may tell me all the jokes you wish and I’ll applaud the verses Felix makes about your deeds here today!’

For a moment Henkin imagined he might have won Gotrek over. But then the dwarf shrugged again, rising. Words could not portray the mask of misery he wore.

‘What’s the use? You humans care only about your own miserable lives. When Felix composes his account of what happened here, he’ll miss the point, as usual... Ah, never mind. It was a good fight, at least. So I’ll take you up on the ale. It does beat water. All right, let’s get on back to Schrammel.’

Felix failed to suppress a groan.

But, since there was no better bargain to be had – and since last night not merely a life had been saved, but a soul – Henkin and he fell in behind the dwarf and duly trudged back to the Mead and Mazer.

The Inquisition

+++Coded Message – Vermillion Level+++

MYLORD,

After a lengthy pursuit across the Segmentum Tempestus, my retinue and I finally captured the arch-heretic Kyme. His interrogation and torture were lengthy but eventually we broke him and he gave up the information we required.

What are you working on at the moment?

RIGHT NOW I'M writing *Fall of Damnos*, which is a Space Marine Battles novel featuring the Ultramarines. Together with the great heroes of the Chapter, like Sicarius and Tigurius, the story describes the conflict to liberate Damnos from the necrons. It's a great opportunity to write a full length novel with Scipio, Iulus and Praxor – the characters I created in *Assault on Black Reach* – and develop them, as well as exploring the inner machinations of the necrons. It's going to be quite a dark tale as anyone who's read the background will know that Damnos's fate is a bleak one.

What will you be working on next?

AFTER I GET done with *Fall of Damnos* it's time to complete my Salamander odyssey and write *Nocturne*. This will be the third and final book in the Tome of Fire trilogy, and I'm hugely excited, if a little sad, to be reaching the finale. For fans of the series, all the threads (well, most of them...) from *Salamander* and *Firedrake* will get tied up in what I'm hoping is going to be a barn-storming finish. As you can probably deduce from the title, this one is set completely on Nocturne and sees the Dragon Warriors finally enacting vengeance against the Sons of Vulkan. There's a pretty big cast list for the Salamanders now – let's just say not everyone is going to make it out of this one alive.

Are there any areas of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 that you haven't yet explored that you'd like to in the future?

I'M SURE MOST 40k authors would say this: but I'd love to write a novel in the 31st millennium. I actually have a synopsis in with my editor at the moment for the Horus Heresy series all about Vulkan. In fact, that's its working title. Because of my 40k affiliation with the Salamanders, this is a subject very close to my heart and if I only ever get to write one Heresy book this would be it. There's still a couple of novels to write and some other projects in the pipe before I can, hopefully, get to this one.

What are you reading at the moment? Who are your favourite authors?

THE FIRST RULE – it's by a US crime author called Robert Crais. I actually bought one of his books a few years ago in an airport (a classic place to pick some holiday literature, right?). It was called *Demolition Angel* and, if you'll excuse the pun, it blew me away. I've been a fan ever since and have all of his novels to date. I'm a big reader of crime fiction – oddly, it's my favourite genre. Amongst my favourites are Lee Child (whose Jack Reacher novels are fantastic) and John Connolly (a very nice chap who writes some of the darkest and most engaging crime fiction I've ever come across). I also like the classics, such as Ross MacDonald, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and some of the non-English speaking writers like Haruki Murakami.

Which book (either BL or non-BL) do you wish you'd written and why?

OOH, THAT'S A tricky one. I could be mercenary here and say something like 'any of the Harry Potter books' – I'd be minted! J That's not really my bag, though. Possibly *Red Harvest*, by Dashiell Hammett. This was his debut and it's freakin' awesome, emulated and referenced in some of my favourite fiction and movies – yeah, it'd be pretty cool to have done that. I wonder, though (as we writers are our worst critics), if I actually want to have written (in some parallel universe) anything that I love/respect/revere for fear of it losing some of its lustre.

+++Message ends+++



PRIMARY INSTINCT

By Sarah Cawkwell

Victory does not always rest with the big guns.

But if we rest in front of them, we shall be lost.

– Lord Commander Argentius
Chapter Master, Silver Skulls

THE SOARING FORESTS of Ancerios III steamed gently in the relentless heat of the tropical sun. Condensation beaded and rose, shimmering in a constant haze from the emerald-green and deep mauve of the leaves. This was a cruel, merciless place where the sultry twin suns raised the surface temperature to inhospitable levels. The atmosphere was stifling and barely tolerable for human physiology.

However, the party making their way through the jungle were not fully human.

The dark Anceriosan jungle had more than just shape, it had oppressive, heavy form. There was an eerie silence, which might once have been broken by the chattering of primate-like creatures or the call of exotic birds. In this remote part of the jungle, there was no sign of the supposed native fauna. What plant life that did exist had long since evolved at a tangent, adapting necessarily to the living conditions. Everything that grew reached desperately upwards, yearning towards the suns. Perhaps there was a dearth of animal life, but these immense plants thrived and provided a home for a countless variety of insects.

There was a faint stirring of wind, a shift in the muggy air, and a cloud of insects lifted on the breeze. They twisted lazily, their varicoloured forms catching and reflecting what little smattering of dappled sunlight managed to penetrate this far down. They twirled with joyful abandon on the zephyr that held them in its gentle grasp, riding the updraft through to a clearing.

The cloud abruptly dissipated as a hand clad in a steel-grey gauntlet scythed neatly through it. Startled, the insects scattered as though someone had thrown a frag grenade amongst them. The moment of confusion passed swiftly, and they gradually drifted back together in an almost palpably indignant clump. They lingered briefly, caught another thermal and were gone.

Sergeant Gileas Ur'ten, squad commander of the Silver Skulls Eighth Company Assault squad 'The Reckoners', swatted with a vague sense of irritation at the insects. They flew constantly into the breathing grille of his helmet and whilst the armour was advanced enough and sensibly designed in order not to allow them to get inside, the near-constant *pit-pit-pit* of the bugs flying against him was starting to become a nuisance.

He swore colourfully and hefted the weight of the combat knife in his hand. It had taken a great deal more work than anticipated to carve a path through to the clearing, and the blade was noticeably dulled by the experience.

Behind him, the other members of his squad were similarly surveying the damage to their weapons caused by the apparently innocent plant life. Gileas stretched out his shoulders, stiff from being hunched in the same position for so long, and spun on his heel to face his battle-brothers.

'As far as I can make out, the worst threats are these accursed insects,' he said in a sonorous rumble. His voice was deep and thickly accented. 'Not to mention these prevailing plant stalks and the weather.'

The Assault squad had discovered very quickly that the moisture in the air, coupled with spores from

the vegetation that they had hacked down, was causing a variety of malfunctions within their jump packs. Like so much of the rediscovered technology that the Adeptus Astartes employed, the jump packs had once been things of beauty, things that offered great majesty and advantage to the Emperor's warriors. Now, however, they were starting to show signs of their age. Fortunately, the expert and occasionally lengthy ministrations of the Chapter's Techmarines kept the machine-spirits satisfied and ensured that even if the devices were not always perfect, they were always functional.

Gileas sheathed his combat knife and reached up to snap open the catch that released his helmet. There was an audible *hiss* of escaping air as the seals unlocked. Removing the helmet, an untidy tumble of dark hair fell to his shoulders, framing a weather-tanned, handsome face that was devoid of the tattoos that covered the rest of his body beneath the armour. Like all of the Silver Skulls, Gileas took great pride in his honour markings. He had not yet earned the right to mark his face. It would not be long, it was strongly hinted, for the ambitious Gileas was reputedly earmarked for promotion to captain. It was a rumour which had stemmed from his own squad and had been met with mixed reactions from others within the Chapter. Gileas repeatedly dismissed such talk as hearsay.

He cast dark, intelligent eyes cautiously around the clearing, clipping his helmet to his belt and loosening his chainsword in the scabbard worn down the line of his armoured thigh. The twisted, broken wreckage of what had once been a space-going vessel lay swaddled amidst fractured trees and branches. Whatever it was, it was mostly destroyed and it most certainly didn't look native to the surroundings. This was the first thing they had encountered in the jungle which was clearly not indigenous.

Reuben, his second-in-command, came up to Gileas's side and disengaged his own helmet. Unlike his wild-haired commanding officer, he wore his hair neat and closely cropped to his head. He considered the destroyed vessel, sifting through the catalogue of data in his mind. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. Any markings on its surface were long gone with the ravages of time, and it was nearly impossible to filter out any sort of shape. Any form it may have once taken had been eradicated by the force of impact.

'It doesn't look like a wraithship, brother,' he said.

'No,' grunted Gileas in agreement. 'It certainly bears no resemblance to that thing we were pursuing.' He growled softly and ran a hand through his thick mane of hair. 'I suspect, brother, that our quarry got away from us in the webway. Unfortunate that they escaped the Emperor's justice. For now, at least.' His hand clenched briefly into a fist and he swore again. He considered the vessel for a few silent moments. Finally, he shook his head.

'This has been guesswork from the start,' he acknowledged with reluctance. 'We all knew that there was a risk we would end up chasing phantoms. Still...' He indicated the wreck. 'At least we have something to investigate. Perhaps this is what the eldar were seeking. There's no sign of them in the atmosphere. We may as well press our advantage.'

'You think we're ahead of them?'

'I would suggest that there's a good chance.' Gileas shrugged lightly. 'Or maybe we're behind them. They could already have been and gone. Who knows, with the vagaries of the warp? The *Silver Arrow's* Navigator hadn't unscrambled her head enough to get a fix on chronological data when we left. Either way, it's worth checking for any sign of passage. Any lead is a good lead. Even when it leads nowhere.'

'Is that you or Captain Kulle speaking?' Reuben smiled as he mentioned Gileas's long-dead mentor.

The sergeant did not reply. Instead, he grinned, exposing ritualistically sharpened canines that were a remnant of his childhood amongst the tribes of the southern steppes. 'It matters little. Whatever this thing is, it's been here for a long time. This surely can't be the ship we followed into the warp. It isn't one of ours and that's all we need to know. You are all fully aware of your orders, brothers. Assess, evaluate, exterminate. In that order.'

He squinted at the ship carefully. Like Reuben, he was unable to match it to anything in his memory. ‘I feel that the last instruction might well be something of a formality though. I doubt that anything could have survived an impact like that.’

The ship was practically embedded in the planet’s surface, much of its prow no longer visible, buried beneath a churned pile of dirt and tree roots. Hardy vegetation, some kind of lichen or moss, clung to the side of the vessel with grim determination.

The sergeant glanced sideways at the only member of the squad not clad head-to-foot in steel-grey armour and made a gesture with his hand, inviting him forwards.

Resplendent in the blue armour of a psychic battle-brother, Prognosticator Bhehan inclined his head in affirmation before reaching his hand into a pouch worn on his belt. He stepped forwards until he was beside the sergeant, hunkered down into a crouch and cast a handful of silver-carved rune stones to the ground. As Prognosticator, it was important for him to read the auguries, to commune with the will of the Emperor before the squad committed themselves. To a man, the Silver Skulls were deeply superstitious. It had been known for entire companies to refuse to go into battle if the auguries were poor. Even the Chapter Master, Lord Commander Argentius, had once refused to enter the fray on the advice of the *Vashiro*, the Chief Prognosticator.

This was more, so much more than ancient superstition. The Silver Skulls believed without question that the Emperor projected His will and His desire through His psychic children. These readings were no simple divinations of chance and happenstance. They were messages from the God-Emperor of Mankind, sent through the fathomless depths of space to His distant loyal servants.

The Silver Skulls, loyal to the core, never denied His will.

Prognosticators served a dual purpose in the Chapter. Where other ranks of Adeptus Astartes had Librarians and Chaplains, the Silver Skulls saw the universe in a different way. Those battle-brothers who underwent training at the hands of the Chief Prognosticator offered both psychic and spiritual guidance to their brethren. Their numbers were not great: Varsavia did not seem to produce many psykers. As a consequence, those who did ascend to the ranks of the Astartes were both highly prized and revered amongst the Chapter.

Gileas knew that the squad were deeply honoured to have Bhehan assigned to them. He was young, certainly; but his powers, particularly those of foresight, were widely acknowledged as being amongst the most veracious and trustworthy in the entire Chapter.

‘I’m feeling nothing from the wreck,’ said Bhehan in his soft, whispering voice. The young Prognosticator hesitated and frowned at the runes, passing his hand across them once again. He considered for a moment or two, his posture stiff and unyielding. Finally, he relaxed. ‘If it were a wraithship, if it were the one we were pursuing, its psychic field would still be active. This one is assuredly dead. Stone-cold dead.’ He frowned, pausing just long enough for Gileas to quirk an eyebrow.

‘Is that doubt I’m detecting there?’ The Prognosticator looked up at Gileas, his unseen face, hidden as it was behind his helmet, giving nothing away. He glanced back down at the runes thoughtfully. The scratched designs on their surfaces were a great mystery to Gileas. However, the Prognosticators understood them, and that was all that mattered. An eminently pragmatic warrior, Gileas never let things he didn’t understand worry him. He would never have vocalised the thought, but it was an approach he privately felt many others in the Chapter should adopt.

Bhehan shifted some of the runes with a practiced hand, turning some around, lining others up, making apparently random patterns on the ground with them. A pulsing red glow briefly animated the Space Marine’s psychic hood as he brought his concentration to bear on the matter at hand.

Finally, after some consideration, he shook his head.

‘An echo, perhaps,’ he mused, ‘nothing more, nothing less.’ He nodded firmly, assertiveness

colouring his tone. 'No, Brother-Sergeant Ur'ten,' he said, 'no doubt. The Fates suggest to me that there was perhaps something alive on board this ship when it crashed. Any sentience within its shell has long since passed on. Subsumed, perhaps, into the jungle. Eaten by predators, or simply died in the collision.'

He gathered up the runes, dropping them with quiet confidence back into his pouch, and stood up. 'The Fates,' he said, 'and the evidence lying around us.' He nodded once more and removed his helmet. The face beneath was surprisingly youthful, almost cherubic in appearance, and reflected Bhehan's relative inexperience. For all that, he was a field-proven warrior of considerable ferocity. Combined with the powers of a Prognosticator, he was a formidable opponent, something the sergeant had already tested in the training cages.

Gileas nodded, satisfied with the outcome. 'Very well. Reuben, take Wulfric and Jalonis with you and search the perimeter for any sign of passage. All of this...' He swept his hand around the clearing to indicate the crash site. 'All of this may simply be an eldar ruse. I have no idea of the extent of their capabilities, but they are xenos and are not to be trusted. Not even in death. Tikaye, you and Bhehan are with me. Seeing as we're here anyway, let's get this ship and the surrounding area checked out. The sooner it's done, the sooner we can move on to the next location.' He grinned his wicked grin again and rattled his chainsword slightly.

The entire group moved onwards, aware of a shift in the weather. A storm front was rolling in. It told in the increased ozone in the air, the faint tingle of electricity that heralded thunder. Following his unit commander, Bhehan absently dipped a hand into the pouch at his side and randomly selected a rune. The tides of Fate were lapping against his psyche strongly, and the closer they got to the craft, the more intense that sensation became.

He briefly surfaced from his light trance to stare with greater intensity at the rune he had withdrawn and he stiffened, his eyes wide. He considered the stone in his hand again and tried to wind the rapidly unravelling thoughts in his mind back together. As though a physical action could somehow help him achieve this, he raised a hand and grabbed at his fair hair.

Noticing the sudden movement, Gileas moved to the Prognosticator's side immediately. 'Talk to me, brother. What do you see?'

A faint hint of wildness came into the psyker's eyes as he turned to look up at the sergeant. 'I see death,' he said, his voice notably more high-pitched than normal. 'I see death, I smell corruption, I taste blood, I feel the touch of damnation. Above all, above all, above all, I *hear* it. Don't you hear it? I hear it. The screams, brothers. The screaming. They will be devoured!'

He pulled wretchedly at his hair, releasing the rune which fell to the floor. A thin trail of drool appeared at the side of the psyker's mouth and he repeatedly drummed his fist against his temple. Gileas, despite the respect he had for the Prognosticator, reached out and caught his battle-brother's arm in his hand.

'Keep your focus, Brother-Prognosticator Bhehan,' he rebuked, his tone mild, but his manner stern. 'We need you.' He'd seen this before; seen psykers lose themselves to the Sight in this way. Disconcertingly, where Bhehan was concerned, the Sight had never been wrong.

It did not bode well.

'We are not welcome here,' the psyker said, his voice still edged with that same slightly unearthly, eerie, high-pitched tone. 'We are not welcome here and if we set one foot outside of the ship, it will spell our doom.'

'We *are* outside the ship...' Tikaye began. Gileas cast a brief, silencing glance in his direction. The young psyker was making little sense, but such were the ways of the Emperor and not for those not chosen to receive His grace to question. The sergeant patted Bhehan's shoulder gruffly and gave a grim nod. 'The faster this task is completed, the better. Double-time, brothers.'

He leaned down and picked up the rune that Bhehan had dropped, offering it back to the psyker

without comment.

THE OTHER PARTY, led by Reuben, had skirted the perimeter of the clearing. At first there had been nothing to suggest anything untoward had occurred. Closer investigations by Wulfric, a fine tracker even by the Chapter's high standards, had eventually revealed recently trampled undergrowth.

Reuben took stock of what little intelligence they had gathered on this planet, far out on the Eastern Fringe of the galaxy. There had been suggestions of some native creatures, but as of yet, they had encountered none. Worthless and of little value, the planet had been passed over as unimportant and uninhabited with no obviously valuable resources or human life.

Just because there were no previous sightings of any of the indigenous life forms, of course, did not mean that there were none to actually *be* seen.

Reuben waved his bolter to indicate that Wulfric should lead on and the three Space Marines plunged back into the jungle, following what was a fairly obvious trail. They did not have to travel far before they located their quarry, a few feet ahead of them, in a natural glade formed by a break in the trees.

The creature seemed totally ignorant of their presence, affording them a brief opportunity to assess it. An overall shade of dark, almost midnight-blue, the alien was completely unfamiliar. Without any frame of visual reference, the thing could easily be one of the presumably indigenous life forms. Muted conversations amongst the group drew agreement.

A slight adjustment to his optical sensors allowed Reuben a closer inspection. The thing had neither fur, nor scales or even insectoid chitin covering its body. It was smooth and unblemished with the same pearlescent sheen to its form that the insects seemed to have. Its limbs were long and sinewy; the musculature of the legs suggesting to Reuben's understanding of xenobiology that it could very probably run and jump exceptionally well. The arms ended in oddly human-like five-fingered hands. Frankly, Reuben didn't care about its lineage or whether it had ever displayed any intelligence. In accordance with every belief he held, with every hypno-doctrination he had undergone, he found it utterly repulsive.

He reacted in accordance with those beliefs and teachings at the exact moment the alien turned its head in their direction, emitting a bone-chilling screech that tore through the jungle. It was so piercing as to be almost unbearable. Reuben's enhanced auditory senses protected him from the worst of it, but it was the sort of noise that he genuinely suspected could shatter crystal. Unearthly. Inhuman.

Alien .

Acting with the intrinsic response of a thousand or more engagements, Reuben flicked his bolter to semi-automatic and squeezed the trigger. Staccato fire roared as every projectile found its target. It was joined, seconds later, by the mimicking echo of the weapons in his fellow Space Marines' hands.

At full stretch, the xenos was easily the size of any of the Space Marines shooting at it. It showed no reaction to the wounds that were being ripped open in its body by the hail of bolter fire. It was locked in a berserk rage, uncaring and indifferent to the relentless attack. As the explosive bolts lacerated its body, dark fluid sprayed onto the leaves, onto the ground, onto the Silver Skulls.

Still it kept coming.

Reuben switched to full-automatic and unloaded the remainder of the weapon's magazine. Wulfric and Jalonis followed his example. Eventually, mortally wounded and repelled by the continuous gunfire, the abomination emitted a strangled scream of outrage. It crumpled to the ground just short of their position, spasms wracking its hideous form, and then all movement ceased.

Smoke curled from the ends of three bolters and the moment was broken only by the crackle of the vox-bead in Reuben's ear.

'Report, Reuben.'

‘Sergeant, we found something. Xenos life form. Dead now.’

Reuben could hear the scowl in his sergeant’s voice. ‘Remove its head to be sure it *is* dead, brother.’ Reuben smiled. ‘We’re coming to your position. Hold there.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

Not wishing to take any chances, Reuben swiftly reloaded his weapon and stepped forwards to examine the xenos. It had just taken delivery of a payload of several rounds of bolter fire and had resisted death for a preternaturally long time. As such, he was not prepared to trust to it being completely deceased. His misgivings proved unfounded.

Moving towards the alien, any doubt of its state was dismissed: thick, purple-hued blood oozed stickily from multiple wounds in its body, pooling in the dust of the forest floor, settling on the surface and refusing to soak into the ground. It was as though the planet itself, despite being parched, rejected the fluid. The pungent, acrid scent of its essential vitae was almost sweet, sickly and cloying in the thick, humid air around them. Wrinkling his nose slightly against its stench, Reuben moved closer.

Lying on the ground, the thing had attempted to curl into an animalistic, defensive position, but was now rapidly stiffening as rigor mortis took hold. Reuben could see its eyes, amethyst-purple, staring glassily up at him. Even in death, sheer hatred shone through. The Astartes felt sickened to the stomach at its effrontery to all that was right.

Just to be on the safe side, he placed the still-hot muzzle of his bolter against its head and fired a solitary shot at point-blank range into it. Grey matter and still more of the purplish blood burst forth like the contents of an over-ripe fruit.

Reuben crouched down and considered the xenos more carefully. The head was curiously elongated, with no visible ears. The purple eyes were over-large in a comparatively small face. A closer look, despite the odour that roiled up from it, suggested that they may well have been multi-faceted. The head was triangular, coming to a small point at the end of which were two slits that Reuben could only presume were nostrils.

Anatomically, even by xenos standards it seemed *wrong*. In a harsh environment like the jungle, any animal would need to adapt just in order to survive. This thing, however, seemed as though it was a vague idea of what was right rather than a practical evolution of the species. It was a complex chain of thought, and the more Reuben considered it, the more the explanation eluded him. It was as though the answer was there, but kept just out of his mental grasp.

For countless centuries, the Silver Skulls had claimed the heads of their victims as trophies of battle, carefully extracting the skulls and coating them in silver. Thus preserved, the heads of their enemies decorated the ships and vaults of the Chapter proudly. However, the longer Reuben stared at the dead alien, any urge he may have had to make a prize of it ebbed away. Forcing himself not to think on the matter any further, he turned back to the others.

Wulfric had resumed his search of the surrounding area and even now was gesturing. ‘It wasn’t alone. Look.’ He indicated a series of tracks leading off in scattered directions, mostly deeper into the jungle.

Reuben gave a sudden, involuntary growl. It had taken three of them with bolters on full-automatic to bring just one of these things to a halt, and even then he had half-suspected that if he hadn’t blasted its brains out, it would have got back up again.

‘Can you make out how many?’

‘Difficult, brother.’ Wulfric crouched down and examined the ground. ‘There’s a lot of scuffing, plus with our passage through, it’s obscured the more obvious prints. Immediate thoughts are perhaps half a dozen, maybe more.’ He looked up at Reuben expectantly, awaiting orders from the squad’s second-in-command. ‘Of course, that’s just in the local area. Who knows how many more of those

things are out there?’

‘They probably hunt in packs.’ Reuben fingered the hilt of his combat knife.

Unspoken, the thoughts passed between them. If one was that hard to put down, imagine what half a dozen of them or more would be like to keep at bay. Reuben made a decision and nodded firmly.

‘Good work, Wulfric. See if you can determine any sort of theoretical routes that these things may have taken. Do a short-range perimeter check. Try to remain in visual range if you can. Report anything unusual.’

‘Consider it done,’ replied Wulfric, getting to his feet and reloading his bolter. Without a backwards glance, the Space Marine began to trace the footprints.

The snapping of undergrowth announced the impending arrival of the other three Astartes. Straightening, Reuben turned to face his commanding officer. He punched his left fist to his right shoulder in the Chapter’s salute and Gileas returned the gesture.

All eyes were immediately drawn to the dead creature on the floor.

‘Now that,’ said Gileas after a few moments of assessing the look and, particularly, the stench of the alien, ‘is unlike anything I have ever seen before. And to be blunt, I would be perfectly happy if I never see one again.’

Reuben dutifully reported the incident to his sergeant. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, but Wulfric believes there could be anything up to a half-dozen other creatures similar to this one in the vicinity. I sent him to track them.’

Gileas frowned as he listened, his expression darkening thunderously. ‘Any obvious weaknesses or vulnerable spots?’

‘None that were obvious, no.’

Gileas glanced at Reuben. They had been brothers-in-arms for over one hundred years and were as close as brothers born. He had never once heard uncertainty in Reuben’s tone and he didn’t like what he heard now. He raised a hand to scratch at his jaw thoughtfully.

‘These things are technically incidental to our mission,’ he said coolly, ‘but we should complete what we have started. It may retain some memory, some thought or knowledge about those we seek.’ He turned to the Prognosticator, who was standing slightly apart from the others. ‘Brother-Prognosticator, much as it pains me to ask you, would you divine what you can from this thing?’

‘As you command.’ Bhehan lowered his head in acquiescence and moved to kneel beside the dead alien. The sight of its bloodied and mangled body turned his stomach – not because of the gore, but because of its very inhuman nature. He took a few deep, steadying breaths and laid a hand on what remained of the creature’s head.

‘I sense nothing easily recognisable,’ he said, after a time. He glanced up at Reuben. ‘The damage to its cerebral cortex is too great. Virtually all of its residual psychic energies are gone.’ His voice held the slightest hint of reproach.

Gileas glanced sideways at Reuben, who smiled a little ruefully. ‘It was you who suggested I remove its head to be sure it was dead, Gil,’ he said, the use of the diminutive form of his sergeant’s name reflecting the close friendship the two shared. ‘I merely used my initiative and modified your suggestion.’

The sergeant’s lips twitched slightly, but he said nothing. Bhehan moved his hand to the other side of the being’s head without much optimism.

A flash of something. Distant memories of hunting...

As swiftly as it had been there, the sensation dwindled and died. Instinctively, and with the training that had granted him the ability to understand such things, Bhehan knew all that was needed to be known.

‘An animal,’ said Bhehan. ‘Nothing more. Separated from the pack. Old, perhaps.’ He shook his head and looked up at Gileas. ‘I’m sorry, brother-sergeant. I cannot give you any more than that.’

‘No matter, Prognosticator,’ said Gileas, grimly. ‘It was worth a try.’ He surveyed the surrounding area a little more, looking vaguely disappointed. ‘This is a waste of time and resources,’ he said eventually. ‘I propose that we regroup, head back the way we came, destroy the ship in case it is, or contains, what the eldar were seeking, and get back to the landing site. We’ll have time to kill, but I’m sure I can think of something to keep us occupied.’

‘Not another one of your impromptu training sessions, Gileas,’ objected Reuben with good-natured humour. ‘Don’t you ever get tired of coming up with new and interesting ways to get us to fight each other?’

‘No,’ came the deadpan reply. ‘Never.’

Bhehan allowed the Reckoners to discuss their next course of action amongst themselves, waiting for the inevitable request to see what the runes said. He kept his attention half on their conversation, but the other half was caught by something in the dirt beside the dead alien’s head. From his kneeling position, he reached over and scooped it up in one blue-gauntleted hand.

Barely two inches across, the deep wine-red stone was attached to a sturdy length of vine: a crudely made necklace. Bhehan’s brow furrowed slightly as he glanced again at the corpse. It had felt feral and not even remotely intelligent, but then most of its synapses had been shredded by Reuben’s bolter. Putting a hand back against its head yielded nothing. He was feeling more psychic emanations from the trees themselves than from this once-living being. Of course, the charm may not have belonged to the animal; perhaps it had stolen it. It was impossible to know for sure without employing full regression techniques. For that option, however, the thing needed to be alive.

The young Prognosticator brought the stone closer to his face to study it more intently, and another flash of memory seared through his mind. This one, though, was not the primal force of nature that he had felt from the dead xenos. This was something else entirely. Sudden flashes emblazoned themselves across his mind. Shadowy images wavered in his mind’s eye, images that were intangible and hard to make out.

A shape. Male? Maybe. Human? Definitely not. Eldar. It was eldar. Wearing the garments of those known as warlocks. It was screaming, cowering.

It was dying. It was being attacked. A huge shape loomed over it, blocking out the sunlight...

‘Prognosticator!’

Gileas’s sudden bark brought the psyker out of the trance that he had not even realised he’d fallen into. He stared at the sergeant, the brief look of displacement on his face swiftly replaced by customary attentiveness.

‘My apologies, brother-sergeant,’ he said, shaking his mind clear of the visions. He got to his feet and stood straight-backed and alert, the images in his mind already faded. ‘Here, I found this. It might give us some clue to what happened here.’ He proffered the stone and Gileas stared at it with obvious distrust before taking it. He held it up at arm’s length and studied it as it spun, winking in the sunlight.

‘I’ve seen something like this before,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘The eldar wear them. Something to do with their religion, isn’t it?’

‘In honesty, I’m not completely sure,’ replied Bhehan. ‘I haven’t had an opportunity to study one this closely. We, I mean the company Prognosticators, have many theories...’ Seeing that the sergeant wasn’t even remotely interested in theories, the psyker tailed off and accepted the object back from Gileas, who seemed more than pleased to be rid of it.

‘If this is an eldar item,’ said Gileas, grimly, ‘then it’s not too much of a leap of faith to believe that they’ve been present, or *are* present, on this planet. Increases the odds of that wreck being eldar and also that this planet may well have been their ultimate destination.’

The others concurred. The sergeant nodded abruptly. 'Then we definitely return to the ship and we destroy the whole thing. We make damn sure that they find nothing when they get here. Are we in accord?'

He glanced around and all nodded agreement. They clasped their hands together, one atop the other. Gileas looked sideways at Bhehan who, surprised by this unspoken invitation into the brotherhood of the squad, laid his hand on the others.

'Brothers all,' said Gileas, and the squad responded in kind.

'Fetch Wulfric back,' commanded Gileas. Tikaye nodded and voxed through to his battle-brother.

There was no reply.

'Wulfric, report,' Tikaye said into the vox, even as they began heading in the direction he had taken, weapons at the ready.

THEY MOVED DEEPER still into the jungle.

It was rapidly becoming far more densely packed, the vibrant green of the trees and plants creating an arboreal tunnel through which the five giants marched. Despite the overriding concern at their companion's whereabouts, the Astartes welcomed the moment's relief from the constant squinting brought about by standing in the direct sunlight. As they made their way with expediency through the trees, light filtered through to mottle the dirt and scrub of the forest floor. Parched dust marked their passage, rising up in clouds around their feet.

'Brother Wulfric, report.' Tikaye continually tried the vox, but there was still nothing. Bhehan extended the range of his psychic powers, reaching for Wulfric's awareness, and instead received something far worse. His nostrils flared as a familiar coppery scent assailed him, and he turned slightly to the west.

'It's this way,' he said, with confidence.

'You are sure, brother?'

'Aye, brother-sergeant.'

'Jalonis, lead the way. I will bring up the rear.' Gileas, with the practical and seemingly effortless ease that he did everything, organised the squad. They had travelled a little further into the trees when a crack as loud as a whip caused them all to whirl on the spot, weapons readied and primed. The first fall of raindrops announced that it was nothing more than the arrival of the tropical storm. The thunder that had barely been audible in the distance was now directly above them.

The vox in Gileas's ear crackled with static and he tapped at it irritably. These atmospheric effects caused such frustrating communication problems. It had never failed to amaze Gileas, a man raised as a savage in a tribe for whom the pinnacle of technological advancement was the longbow, that a race who could genetically engineer super-warriors still couldn't successfully produce robust communications.

More static flared, then Jalonis's voice broke through. It was a scattered message, breaking up as the Space Marine spoke, but Gileas had no trouble extrapolating its meaning.

'... Jal... found Wulfric... t's left... him anyway. Dead ah... maybe... dred yards or so.'

Gileas acknowledged tersely and accelerated his pace.

Another crack of thunder reverberated so loudly that Gileas swore he could feel his teeth rattle in his jaw. The light drizzle gave way rapidly to huge, fat drops of rain. The canopy of the trees did its best to repel them, but ultimately the persisting rain triumphed. The bare heads of the Silver Skulls were soaked swiftly. Gileas's hair, wild and untamed at the best of times, soon turned to unruly curls that clung tightly around his face and eyes. He put his helmet back on, not so much to keep his head dry, but more to reduce the risk of his vision being impaired by his own damp hair getting in the way.

The moment he put his helmet back on, he knew what he would find when he reached Jalonis. The information feed scrolling in front of his eyes told him everything that he needed to know. A sense of foreboding stole over him, and he murmured a prayer to the Emperor under his breath.

The precipitation did nothing to dispel the steaming heat of the forest, but merely landed on the dusty floor where it was immediately swallowed into the ground as though it had never been.

‘Sergeant Ur’ten.’

Jalonis stood several yards ahead, a look of grim resignation on his face. ‘You should come and see this. I’m afraid it’s not pretty.’

Jalonis, a practical man by nature, had ever been the master of understatement. What Gileas witnessed as he looked down caused his choler to rise immediately. With the practice of decades, he carefully balanced his humours.

Wulfric’s armour had been torn away and discarded, scattered around the warrior’s corpse. The Space Marine’s throat had been ripped apart with speed and ferocity, which had prevented him from alerting his battle-brothers or calling for aid.

The thorax had been slit from neck to groin, exposing his innards. In this heat, even with the steady downpour of rain, the stink of death was strong. The fused ribcage had been shattered, leaving Wulfric’s vital organs clearly visible, slick with blood and mucus. Or at least, what remained of them.

Where Wulfric’s primary and secondary hearts should have been was instead a huge cavity. Gileas stared for long moments, his conditioning and training assisting his deductive capability. Whatever had attacked Wulfric had gone for the throat first, rendering his dead brother mute. It had torn through his armour like it was shoddy fabric rather than ceramite and plasteel. The assailant, or more likely the assailants, had then proceeded to shred the skin like parchment and defile Wulfric’s body.

The details were incidental. One of Gileas’s brothers was dead. More than that, one of his closest brothers was dead. For that, there would be hell to pay.

‘Take stock,’ he said to Tikaye, who whilst not an Apothecary was the squad’s primary field medic. ‘I want to know what has been taken.’ His voice was steady and controlled, but the rumble and pitch of the words hinted strongly at the anger bubbling just under the surface.

The stoic Tikaye moved to Wulfric and began to examine the body. He murmured litanies of death fervently under his breath as he did so.

‘You understand, of course,’ said Gileas, his voice low and menacing, ‘this means someone... or *something* is going to regret crossing my path this day.’

The falling rain, evaporating in the intense heat, caused steam to rise in ethereal tendrils from the ground. It loaned even more of a macabre aspect to the scene, and the coils partially swathed Wulfric’s body as they rose. It was a cheap mockery of the tradition of lighting memorial pyres on the Silver Skulls’ burial world and it did little to ease their collective grief and rage.

Staring down at their fallen brother, each murmuring his own personal litany, the remaining Silver Skulls were fierce of countenance, ready for a fight in response to this atrocity.

‘Several of his implants are gone,’ came Tikaye’s voice from the ground. There was barely masked outrage in his tone.

‘Gone? What does *gone* mean?’

‘Taken, brother-sergeant. The biscopea, Larraman’s organ, the secondary and primary hearts, and from what I can make out, his progenoid is gone, too. I’d suggest that whoever or whatever did this knew what they wanted and took it. It’s too clean to be an arbitrary or random coincidence.’

‘You said they were animals, Prognosticator.’ Gileas couldn’t keep the accusation out of his tone. ‘That conflicts directly with what Brother Tikaye suggests. One of you is wrong.’ Bhehan shook his head.

‘The creature we found *was* an animal,’ he countered. ‘That was before I found the stone, however. It’s possible that it had been wearing it as some sort of decoration. I acknowledge that may potentially suggest intelligence. I—’

‘I did not ask for excuses, neither did I ask for a lecture. The runes, Prognosticator.’ Gileas’s voice was barbed. The sergeant had a reputation amongst the Silver Skulls as a great warrior, a man who would charge headlong into the fray without hesitation and also as a man who did not suffer fools gladly, particularly when his wrath was tested. Da’chamoren, the name he had brought with him from his tribe, translated literally as ‘Son of the Waxing Moon’. Gileas’s power and resilience had always seemed to grow proportionately to his rising fury.

It was a fitting name.

‘Yes, sir,’ Bhehan replied, suitably chastened by the change in the sergeant’s attitude. Without further comment, he commenced another Sighting. He felt a moment’s uncertainty, but didn’t dwell on it. At first, nothing came to him and he could not help but wonder if he was going to experience what his psychic brethren termed the ‘Deep Dark’, a moment of complete psychic blindness. Prognosticators considered this to be a sign that they had somehow fallen from the Emperor’s grace. Bhehan had tasted the sensation once before and it had left a bitter flavour of ash in his mouth. He firmly set aside all thoughts of failure and closed his eyes. The Emperor was with them, he asserted firmly. Had He not already communicated His will through His loyal servant?

Reassured, his mental equilibrium ceased its churning and settled again. Bhehan allowed the reading of the runes to draw him. The stones served well as a focus for his powers, helping him to draw in all the psychic echoes that flitted around this charnel house like ghosts. Each Prognosticator found their own focus; some, like Bhehan, chose runes whilst others divined the Emperor’s will through a tarot.

‘The perpetrators of this butchery... I sense that they want something from us. To learn, perhaps? To understand how we are put together.’ The Prognosticator’s eyes were still closed, his voice barely more than a whisper. ‘Why? If they were animals, they would have just torn the flesh from his bones. They have not. They have intelligence, yes, great intelligence... or at least... no. Not all of them. Just one, perhaps? A leader of sorts?’ The questioning was entirely rhetorical and nobody answered or interrupted him during the stream of consciousness. The rain drummed on their armour, creating a background rhythm of its own.

Bhehan’s hand closed around the eldar stone still in his hand. To his relief, a flood of warmth suffused him, a sensation he had long equated as the prelude to a vision. No Deep Dark for him, then. His powers were intact. The feeling of relief was quickly replaced by one of intense dislike as he sensed a new presence in his mind.

They know what you are because of us. Because of what we know. The gift unintentionally given.

The words were perfectly sharp and audible, but the image of the being who spoke them was not. Tall and willowy, the apparition shimmered before his closed eyelids like an imprint of the sun burned onto his retina.

They absorbed what we were, what we are. They seek to do the same to you through nothing more than a primitive urge to survive, to evolve. To change. Is this not the instinct that drives us all? Aspiration to greatness? A need to be better than we were?

Bhehan, made rational and steady through years of training, concentrated on the image.

You are eldar. He did not speak the words aloud. There was no need to.

I was eldar. Now I am nothing more than a ghost, a faint remnant of what once was.

I will not speak to you, xenos.

Such arrogance as this brought my own brothers and our glorious sister to their end. It will be

your undoing, mon-keigh.

Bhehan sensed a great sigh, like the last exhalation of a dying man, and as rapidly as the spectre had materialised inside his mind, it was gone. With a sharp intake of breath, Bhehan's eyes snapped open.

'We should not linger,' he said, slightly unfocussed. 'We should take our brother and we should go.'

'Is this what the Fates suggest?'

'No,' said Bhehan, hesitating only momentarily. 'It is what *I* feel we should do.'

Gileas practically revered the majesty of the Prognosticators. Divine will or not, he would never question a Prognosticator's intuition. He nodded.

'The will of a Prognosticator and the will of the Fates are entwined as one. We will do as you say.'

Reuben stepped forwards. 'Perhaps...' he began. 'Perhaps we should not. Not yet.'

'Explain.' Gileas shot a glance at Reuben.

'We interrupted them. The aliens. We could lure them back out in the open.'

'Reuben, are you suggesting that we use our dead brother as *bait*?' Gileas didn't even bother keeping the disgust out of his tone. 'I can't believe you would even entertain such a thought.'

'Bait,' echoed Bhehan, his eyes widening. 'Bait. Yes, that's it. Bait!' He drew the force axe he wore across his back. 'That's exactly what he is.'

'Prognosticator? You surely aren't agreeing to this ridiculous scheme?'

'No! For *us*, sergeant. He's been left here to lure *us* out.'

Another echo of thunder rolled around the skies overhead in accompaniment to this grim pronouncement. The rain had slowed once again to a steady *drip-drip-drip*. It pooled briefly in the vast, scoop-like leaves of the trees and splashed to the ground, throwing up billows of dust before evaporating permanently.

None of the Reckoners other than Bhehan had psychic capability, but all of them could sense the sudden shift in the air, sense the threat hiding somewhere.

Just waiting.

'Keep your weapons primed,' snapped Gileas, his thumb hovering over the activation stud of his chainsword. 'Be ready for anything.'

'I sense three psychic patterns,' offered the Prognosticator, his hands tight around the hilt of the force axe. 'Different directions, all approaching.'

'Only three?' Gileas said. 'You are sure of this?'

'Yes.'

'Three of them, five of us. It will be a hard fight, my brothers, but we will prevail. We are the Silver Skulls.' Gileas's voice swelled with fierce pride. 'We *will* prevail.' Jalonis and Bhehan pulled their helmets back on at the sergeant's words.

With the squad at full battle readiness, Gileas turned his attentions to the reams of data which began scrolling in front of his eyes. He blink-clicked rapidly, filtering out anything not pertinent to the moment of battle, including the winking iconograph that had previously represented Wulfric's lifesigns. The brief glimpse of that particular image served as a visible reminder of the desire for requital, however, and fire-stoked battle lust raced through the sergeant's veins.

'They are coming,' Bhehan breathed through the vox.

Gileas made a point to double-check the functionality of his jump pack at the Prognosticator's warning. He diverted his attention to the relevant streams of data that fed the device's information into his power armour, and was satisfied to note that it was at approximately seventy per cent. Certainly not

representative of its full, deadly performance, but good enough for a battle of this size. He ordered the rest of the squad to do the same. If these animals were seeking a fight, then the Reckoners would willingly deliver. They would deliver a fight and they would deliver what they gave best and what had earned them their name.

A reckoning.

For most Space Marines, engaging an enemy was all about honour to the Chapter, pride in the company or loyalty to the Imperium. Sometimes, like now, it was about righteous vengeance. Occasionally, it was simple self-defence. For Sergeant Gileas Ur'ten it was about all of these things. Above and beyond all else, however, it was the thrill that came with the anticipation of a fight. The burst of adrenaline and increased blood flow as his genetically enhanced body geared up to beget the hand of retribution that was the rightful role of all the Adeptus Astartes.

Another moment of silence followed and then a tumult of screaming voices rose as one. It preceded the charge of a slew of enemies from the undergrowth, each as massive as the one they had already encountered. Gileas thumbed the activation stud of his chainsword and it roared into deadly life, the weapon's fangs eager to feast.

The sudden appearance of so many of the xenos caused a moment's pandemonium, but that was all it was: a single moment during which the Assault squad formed a tight-knit, ceramite-clad wall of stoic defence. There was vengeance to be taken and they were ready to take it.

Each of the xenos radiated a palpable desire to kill. They walked upright, although with a certain stumbling gait that implied they may not always have done so. It seemed probable that their hind legs hadn't been used in this way for long. As though confirming these suspicions, three of them dropped to all fours.

As they prowled closer to the Astartes, their movements became snake-like, a sinuous flow that allowed them to undulate across the uneven ground with hypnotic ease and disconcerting speed.

The skin of one creature's mouth drew back to reveal a double set of razor-sharp teeth. It didn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to work out how it was that the xenos had removed internal organs so swiftly and efficiently. Every single one of those teeth looked capable of tearing through flesh and muscle with ease. The attackers moved as a unit, almost as though they were as tightly trained and drilled as the Astartes themselves.

A rapid headcount told the Silver Skulls that there were nine of them, and with determination every last one of the Assault squad entered the fray. Bhehan, his force axe at the ready in his right hand, raised the other, palm outstretched in front of him, ready to cast a psychic shield around his battle-brothers. The crystals in the psychic hood attached to the gorget of his armour began to pulsate as he channelled the deadly power of the warp, ready to unleash it at a moment's notice.

Gileas and Tikaye both charged the alien on the far right with their chainswords shrieking bloody murder. Jalonis and Reuben levelled their bolters and began firing.

Fury descended on the previously silent jungle. Orders were shouted, and the cries of alien life and the indignant, defensive answering retorts of the squad's weapons flooded the surrounding area in a cacophony of sound.

Gileas drove his chainsword deeper into the flesh of the alien he was fighting, putting all his strength into the blow. The thing lashed out at him, howling and chittering. Talons flashed like deadly knives before his helmet, but he ducked and weaved with easy agility, avoiding its blows. As far as he was concerned, as long as it remained affixed to the end of his chainsword, it was a suitable distance away from him and was dying at the same time. An additional bonus.

Reuben coaxed his weapon into life, discharging a hail of bolter shells at the onslaught. Beside him, Bhehan swept his hand forwards and round in a semi-circular arc, almost as though he were simply thrusting the xenos away from him. The one directly facing him stumbled backwards and howled its

displeasure.

With a grunt of effort, Gileas yanked the chainsword out of the alien's flesh and swung it round, almost severing one of the wicked, scythe-like talons from its hand. He moved in harmony with the weapon as though it was merely an extension of his own body. Watching Gileas Ur'ten fight was aesthetically pleasing; even in the heavy power armour of the Adeptus Astartes he was agile, lithe and, more than that, he was a master at what he did. He enacted his deadly dance of death with practiced aplomb.

Tikaye, engaged as he was with his own opponent, did not immediately notice that another was prowling towards him. It reached out with a clawed hand and swept it towards the Space Marine. It caught him between his helmet and breast plate, and with a sudden display of strength sent him flying backwards. He landed heavily with an audible crunch of ceramite at Bhehan's feet. The Prognosticator, briefly distracted from gathering force for his next attack, glanced down at his battle-brother.

Within seconds, Tikaye was back on his feet, his weapon back in his hand, and he tore into the nearest enemy with a vengeance, letting his chainsword do the talking.

One of the three beasts that had been slithering towards the psyker leapt suddenly with a yowl of triumph. Instinctively, Bhehan trusted to the power of his force axe rather than his psychic ability and channelled his rage and righteousness into its exquisitely forged blade. The hidden runes carved deep into its metal heart kindled and throbbed with an otherworldly glow.

Years of training and dedication to the arts of war at the hands of the masters on Varsavia automatically took over and Bhehan planted his feet firmly on the ground, prepared for the moment of impact. The axe sang through the air towards its target, a low whine audibly marking its trajectory as it swept towards the enemy.

To his consternation, the force axe passed right through the alien's body. The unexpected follow-through of his own swing unbalanced him and he fell to one knee. He scrambled immediately back to his feet, ready to resume combat, only to realise that the thing was gone, utterly vanished before his very eyes. All that remained was a strange psychic residue, streamers of barely visible non-corporeal form that were consigned fleetingly to the air, and then to nothing more than memory.

'Something isn't right here,' he voxed, puzzlement implicit in every syllable.

'Really, Prognosticator? You think so?' The pithy reply from Gileas was harsher than perhaps it might otherwise have been, but given that the sergeant was locked in a bloody battle to the death with a creature seemingly quite capable of slicing through him like he was made of mud, it was understandable. 'Any chance that you'd care to elaborate on this outstanding leap of logic?'

Clenching his force axe with an iron grip, Bhehan whirled to intercept another xenos which was catapulting itself at him. He swung the weapon again and once more his blow met with no resistance.

He had sensed three minds. No more, no less. With the two illusory attackers dispelled, they were now facing seven.

'They are not all real, my brothers,' he stated urgently. 'Only three of them present a real threat.'

'They feel real to me,' responded Jalonis, who had just been viciously swept into the trunk of one of the vast trees. The armour plating across his back was cracked. His helmet flashed loss-of-integrity warnings at him and, ignoring them, he resumed his fighting. One of Reuben's arms hung limp at his side as his body worked swiftly to fix the damage that had been caused to it.

Gileas and Tikaye had fallen into battle harmony with each other and were battering determinedly at one of the enemy. As one, they both fired their jump packs, performing a vertical aerial leap that caused the xenos to snap its head up sharply, its eyes fixed on the now-airborne targets. The range of the jump packs was severely limited due to the tree cover, but they remained aloft, well out of its reach.

It dropped its long body low, coiling like a spring and readying itself to launch. Bhehan, thinking

swiftly, took the opportunity to blast a psychic attack into the creature's mind.

It did not vanish.

'That one!' he shouted into the vox, gesticulating ferociously at the xenos and alerting his airborne brothers. 'That one, brother-sergeant! It's solid.'

The sergeant nodded brusquely. He had no desire to understand the whys or hows of the situation. Bhehan's words were little more than meaningless background noise to him at this moment. Only the solution was of importance at this stage. Only the battle mattered.

In full synchronicity, Gileas and Tikaye both bore their full weights downwards to land on the xenos beneath them. Close-quarters combat was one thing. During such a pitched battle, a being could fight back and stand a chance of being a danger. Being crushed beneath the full might of two power-armour-wearing Space Marines was something else entirely and not something so easily eluded.

The alien, anticipating its own demise, wailed in murderous rage for a few seconds before both Space Marines plummeted solidly onto it. Bones crunched and arterial blood spurted from puncture wounds caused by the creature's exoskeleton shredding through its flesh. Crude brutality, perhaps, but effective nonetheless.

Devoid of their source, two more of the psychic projections immediately melted into the ether. Gileas and Tikaye fired their jump packs again and blasted grimly towards the rest of the fray. Bhehan, witnessing the scene, paused momentarily as realisation bloomed.

It was suddenly so clear to the Prognosticator. So very, very simple.

'They are manipulating your minds! Brother-Sergeant Ur'ten, you must listen to me! They have extremely strong psychic capability. My mind should be awash with all these things, but it is not!' The Prognosticator bit down on the excitement and forced his mind to focus. He knew he was making little sense and that was no use to anybody.

He had removed two of the illusory aliens by passing his force axe through their psychically generated forms. With the death of one of the true alien forms, two more had dispersed.

From the nine who had attacked, the Silver Skulls now faced four. If Bhehan's theory proved correct, only two of them were real. Kill those, his theory suggested, and their intangible counterparts would vanish; eliminate the phantasms and only the real xenos would remain. It seemed that whatever trick they were playing with the squad's minds meant that they were unable to tell them apart. For them, the two decoy enemies were each as solid and real as the two who were weaving the illusion. They seemed immune to all but extrasensory attack. Only he could do anything about it.

His thought processes were lightning-fast and Bhehan began to gather his psychic might once more. The most decisive way he could think of to end this situation was to crush the opposing will of the xenos with a psychic flood of the Emperor's righteous fury. Whilst the melee had been tight and kept largely confined due to the jungle's enforced restrictions, it was still a reasonably large area. The desired result would be effective, but it would tax his constitution considerably.

It did not matter. His gift might temporarily be exhausted, but he was a fully trained battle-brother. He would never be totally defenceless. With an exultant cry, he flung both hands out in front of him. His voice carrying into the jungle with strident fervour, Bhehan called forth the powers of the warp.

With a fizzing crackle, a massive burst of energy lit his hood up in a flicker of blue sparks. The resultant shock wave not only targeted the xenos, but also caused the four battling Space Marines to pause briefly as their own minds were assailed from no longer one, but two directions. For them, a mental battle for supremacy took place as the will of the Prognosticator worked to force out the intruders.

Bhehan was trained, disciplined and strong. The aliens were clever, certainly, but they fought on instinct and did not truly know how to counter such a devastating blow to their defences. For a heartbeat,

Bhehan could feel his advantage slipping as the barb of the aliens' mental hooks worked in deeper. The silent struggle continued and then abruptly, he felt the fingers of deception release their hold and fall away.

Two of the attackers instantly disappeared. One screamed with fury and began to lope away into the undergrowth. Bhehan, staggering slightly from the sheer potency of his attack, automatically reached out for its mind. Instantly, he was filled with a sense of pain and, even better as far as he was concerned, of fear. It was injured, probably dying. It was unimportant. The final alien was also mortally wounded. It would be the work of but moments to end its foul existence.

Good work, Bhehan,' said Gileas, his breathing heavy through the vox channel.

The remaining creature slunk around the Assault squad, fluidity implicit in its every movement. Before any of them could open fire or attack, the xenos reared back, a crest-like protrusion standing up on top of its head, and emitted a screech that was staggeringly high-pitched. Had the auto-senses in the warriors' helmets not instantly reacted, it would surely have ruptured eardrums. In the event, it achieved nothing.

The xenos clamped its jaws tightly shut and stared with renewed malevolence at its enemy as it realised the futility of its last defences. Without hesitation Gileas roared the final order, his voice like the crack of doom.

'Open fire! Suffer not the alien to live!'

With resounding cries that echoed those sentiments most emphatically, bolter fire razored through the air and tore into the alien's armour-hard exterior. Every last bolt was unloaded into it, spent shells rapidly littering the ground. Blood fountained out of the wounds in the xenos's body, the sheer force of it suggesting they had successfully hit something vital, and Gileas found renewed vigour in the scent of its imminent demise. A sudden, desperate desire to eliminate this foul abomination once and for all took hold.

With a roar of determination, he took out his bolt pistol and aimed it with deadly, pinpoint accuracy between the thing's eyes. Reuben discarded his spent weapon, taking his own pistol from its holster. Falling in beside his sergeant, he stepped forwards with him as they fired together.

Every bolt that burst against the alien's skull caused its head to snap back and drew further eardrum-splitting screeches.

Bhehan responded with a psychic blow, although due to his exhaustion, the effect was greatly diminished. Heedless of this fact, he focussed all of his fury, sense of retribution and hatred and flung it towards the xenos with a practiced heft of his mental acuity. He was drained, but it provided a useful diversion. The enemy hesitated, crouching low, ready to spring at Reuben. It moved with uncanny alacrity, propelling itself with deadly grace for something that should surely have been dead by now towards the Space Marine, bearing him to the ground. It reared up, blood and saliva flying from its jaws as it prepared to strike.

'No!'

Bhehan brandished his force axe. He urged a ripple of power across its surface and bounded the short distance to his fallen brother. With an easy, accurate swing, he buried the axe deep in the alien's chest.

It stumbled back, licks of warp-lightning crackling across its carapace. It writhed on the ground in agony for a few moments and then was still.

A silence fell, disturbed only by the heavy breathing of everyone present.

Gileas lowered his pistol and nodded in grim satisfaction. 'It is done,' he said. 'Status report.'

Apart from several light wounds and Jalonis's fractured backplate, the squad had escaped almost completely unscathed from the encounter. Bhehan's weariness showed in the Prognosticator's posture and in his voice as he communicated via the vox, but he had expended a remarkable amount of energy in

a very short space of time. The strength of will it must have taken for each of the xenos to maintain replicas had been quite the barrier for him to overcome. It gave him great satisfaction to acknowledge that not only had he overcome it but had also emerged triumphant.

‘Are you well, Bhehan?’ Gileas addressed the psyker directly, his tone brusque and formal. ‘Do you require time to gather yourself?’

‘No, brother! I do not “require time”. I am tired, but I am not some weakling straight out of his chamber. I am fine.’ The indignation in the young Prognosticator’s voice put a smile on Gileas’s face beneath the helmet. He may be young, but Bhehan already had the true fire of a Silver Skull with many more years of service behind him. The Emperor willing, the youth would undoubtedly go far.

‘Puts you in mind of yourself, does he, brother?’

At his side, Reuben murmured the words softly enough for only the sergeant to hear. The squad commander’s smile deepened.

‘Just a little, aye.’ Gileas leaned down slightly and wiped his bloodied chainsword on the ground. He stared up at the sky visible through the canopy. Daylight was beginning to give way to the navy-blue of what he had always known as the gloaming. The Thunderhawk would return just after dusk. For now, there was one thing only left to do.

‘Brother-Prognosticator,’ he said, turning to Bhehan. ‘Would you do us the great honour of claiming the squad’s trophy from this battle?’

Bhehan understood the largesse implicit in the gesture and was deeply flattered by the offer. He made the sign of the aquila and bowed his head in respect to the sergeant. He stepped up and raised his force axe above his head.

‘The honour would be mine, brother-sergeant. In the name of the Silver Skulls, for the glory of Chapter Master Argentius and for the memory of our fallen Brother Wulfric, I claim your head as my prize. Let those who walk the halls of our forefathers gaze upon your countenance and give thanks for your end.’ The axe flashed through the air and struck the neck of the dead xenos.

The moment the head and the body parted, there was a hazy shimmering and the unknown alien’s body was replaced by something entirely more recognisable. Bhehan realised it first, but the others were not very far behind him.

‘An illusion,’ the Prognosticator breathed. ‘It’s woven a psychic disguise around itself!’

‘No. No, that’s impossible,’ countered Jalonis, perturbation in his voice. ‘That can’t be correct. Kroot don’t have psychic abilities.’

Indeed, the headless body on the ground was most definitely that of a kroot. It had the same wiry, sinewy build and avian-like features that matched every image that had ever been pict-flashed at them through doctrination tapes and training sessions. Yet despite its instantly familiar form, there were subtle differences. It varied from what was presumably the norm in a number of ways, not least of which was the most obvious which Jalonis had just voiced.

It was imbued with psychic powers. Unheard of, at least in the Silver Skulls’ experience. Reports and research had never once suggested that the kroot, the fierce, mercenary warrior troops regularly employed by tau armies, were psychic. Moreover, this kroot wore no harness, carried no weapon. It was far more primitive than what they expected of such beings. An evolutionary throwback maybe, but one in possession of something perhaps far more deadly than a rifle or any other kind of physical weapon.

‘A feral colony home world?’ Jalonis made the suggestion first. ‘A breed of kroot who have taken a different genetic path to their brethren?’

Gileas frowned. ‘It is said that these things eat the flesh of their enemies, that they have the ability to assimilate their DNA. There have certainly been reports that this planet once sported animal life. It is

surely not unreasonable to guess that the kroot have systematically destroyed whatever may have existed on this planet.'

He considered the dead beasts. 'These things, at least... the things that look like they did before we exposed the truth... are all we have encountered.' A thought occurred to the sergeant. 'When Reuben shot that other one in the head, it did not change its shape or form, did it?'

'The cerebral connection remained intact,' Bhehan commented absently. 'Brother Reuben obliterated its brain, yes. However, he didn't disconnect the spinal cord. Nerve impulses continued to flow after death. The mental disguise it wove remained stable until full brain death. We didn't stay there long enough to witness it change back.'

'Aye,' said Reuben, remembering the unnatural need to ignore the alien. Bhehan would have been better equipped to avoid that psychic shielding.

Something was niggling at the back of Bhehan's mind, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It danced tantalisingly outside his grasp and he reached out for it.

'Psychic kroot... This is a vital discovery for us. They cannot be suffered to live. This planet must be cleansed.' Tikaye offered up his opinion.

Gileas glanced up at Bhehan and remembered the deep red stone that he had found. 'Bhehan, you have a theory, I suspect. Tell me.'

Bhehan nodded slowly. 'There are, to the best of our knowledge, no psychic kroot. Not any that we've met before,' he hypothesised. 'However, what if it were to assimilate a psychic species? Say... the eldar?' He held up the red stone so that all the battle-brothers could see it. 'What would stop it from killing and eating one of the eldar? What would prevent it from the freedom to filter out the required genetic strands that would give it the most useful result?'

'Surely it must take several generations for a kroot to assimilate such powers?' The query came from Tikaye, and the others considered his words.

'We don't know what constitutes a kroot generation. We have no idea how old that ship is. We don't even know if it *is* an eldar ship. Perhaps it is a kroot vessel. Maybe they arrived before the eldar, maybe after.' Gileas's voice was grim. His patience was already strained to breaking point. 'It is without question, brothers, that both those xenos races have tainted this planet one way or the other. There are far too many unknown variables, and I have little interest in philosophical postulation about which came first.'

He put his chainsword back into its scabbard and reloaded the chamber of his pistol.

'Brother Bhehan,' he said, without another glance, 'collect the trophy. We will take Wulfric's body to the predetermined extraction coordinates and we will leave. This must be reported to Captain Meyoran. I do not presume to second-guess his actions on hearing the news, but I would not want to be on this planet when he found out.'

The Prognosticator tucked the eldar stone into the pouch with his runes and moved to the dead kroot. The very thought of such a being filled him with passionate hatred: a foul crossbreed of two xenos races with the most lethal features of both. It was an atrocity of the highest order, an abomination that had no right to exist. Yet here it was, albeit not for much longer once the Silver Skulls returned to the *Silver Arrow*.

The sudden truth of what the murderer had wanted with Wulfric's body hit the Prognosticator head-on. A kroot, with the psychic abilities and memories of an eldar, would have had some knowledge of Astartes physiology, even if only as a basic, barely recalled memory. Imagine, then, a kroot, with the psychic abilities and memories of an eldar... and the strength and resilience of a Space Marine...

Bhehan straightened his shoulders and bent down to pick up the head of the kroot. Thanks to the Reckoners, such a thing would never come to pass.

What heat remained in the day began to sap steadily as the suns continued their slow descent towards the horizon. The air was thick with heat stored by the trees and the rocks. This, coupled with residual moisture from the rainstorm, left the air feeling thick and greasy.

The squad trampled through the trees for several more minutes, all senses on full alert. They had barely arrived at the extraction point when the general vox channel fizzed into life. The Thunderhawk would be in position in fifteen minutes.

Nocturnal life began to flood the jungle with a discordant symphony over which the approaching whine of the Thunderhawk could swiftly be heard. Once in situ, there was a hiss of servos and hydraulics and the front boarding ramp of the vessel opened, the light from within spilling out and bathing the jungle.

Gileas waited for the others to board before he joined them. He had always maintained that, as sergeant, it was his place to arrive first and leave last. He fired his jump pack, rose to the Thunderhawk and dropped to the floor with a clatter.

‘All on board, Correlan. Give us a few moments to ensure that our fallen battle-brother is secure.’

‘Understood. Good to have you back, sergeant.’

Gileas removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his hair. Already the words for his report to Captain Meyoran were forming clearly in his mind. They had been sent down to this planet for one thing and yet had found something entirely different and unexpected.

Bhehan remained standing at the edge of the landing ramp, staring down at the jungle. He reached into his pouch to draw a random rune and instead pulled out the eldar stone. Considering it thoughtfully, he indulged in a moment’s wild curiosity as to what sort of portent the Emperor was sending him.

As his hand closed around it, he became aware of a strong push against the wards he had set in place, wards that had no doubt gone a long way towards allowing him to see through the kroot’s duplicitous scheming. This mental touch was no wild and instinctual thing, though. This press against his defences was nearly as disciplined and practiced as his own. A sudden flicker of movement caught his eye.

At the jungle’s edge, barely visible in the dusk and what remained of the light cast by the Thunderhawk, Bhehan saw it. A solitary figure. Tall, seemingly all whipcord muscle and sinew, the huge kroot stood boldly in direct sight of the Thunderhawk. To all intents and purposes it was little different to its kin, but it was not difficult to surmise that it was a more powerful or at least a more evolved strain of these twisted xenos. A cloak of stitched animal hide was slung around its shoulders and in one hand it held a crudely fashioned staff, from which hung feathers and trinkets of decoration. A number of stones also dangled from the staff, stones that looked remarkably like the very one in the psyker’s hand.

He felt its vicious touch against his mind again and clamped the wards down tighter. The lesser kroot had been disorganised and fierce. This though, was a calculated, scheming mind. This was a mind that would gladly extract the very soul of you and leave you to crumble to dust in its wake. It was barbed and brutal and uncannily self-aware.

The crystals on his psychic hood flickered, attracting the sergeant’s attention.

‘Brother-Prognosticator?’ He moved to stand beside the younger Astartes and his sharp eyes quickly made out what the psyker had seen.

‘Throne of Terra!’ he exclaimed and drew his pistol, ready to fire it at the alien. But by the time the weapon was out of its holster and in his hand, the kroot had gone, vanished into the jungle. Gileas lowered his weapon, his disappointment obvious.

Bhehan turned to the sergeant. His young face showed nothing of the vile revulsion he had felt at the kroot’s mental challenge.

He felt one last, sickening touch on his mind and then the alpha, if indeed that had been what it was, let him go.

‘This place needs to be purified,’ said the psyker, fervently. ‘To be cleansed of this filth.’

‘It will be, brother,’ acknowledged Gileas with absolute sincerity. As the gaping maw of the landing ramp finally sealed off the last sight of the Anceriosan jungle, he turned to Bhehan. ‘It will be.’



Phalanx

By Ben Counter

Chapter 1

ITS LIKE HAD never been built before, and would never be built again. The secrets of its construction dated from before the foundation of the Imperium of Man, its immense golden form crafted by engineers dead long before the Emperor first united Holy Terra.

The hull of the ship was many kilometres long, triangular in cross-section with its upper surface bristling with weapons and sensorium domes. Two wings swept back from the hull, trailing directional vanes like long gilded feathers. Every surface was clad in solid armour plating and every angle was covered by more torpedo tubes and lance batteries than any Imperial battleship could muster. Countless smaller craft, repair craft and unmanned Scouts, orbited like supplicants jostling for attention, and the wake of the titanic engines seemed to churn the void itself with the force of its plasma fire.

The fist symbol emblazoned on the prow was taller than the length of most Imperial spacecraft, proudly claiming that the ship belonged to the Imperial Fists Chapter, one of the most storied Space Marine Chapters in the history of the Imperium. The pale light of the star Kravamesh, and the lesser glow of the Veiled Region's boiling nebulae, played across thousands of battle-honours and campaign markings all over the beak-like prow. The ship had carried the Imperial Fists since the Horus Heresy, and its eagle-shaped shadow had fallen across a hundred worlds that had later shuddered under the weight of a massed Fists assault.

This was the *Phalanx*. Bigger than any ship in the Imperial Navy, it was a mobile battle station the size of a city that dwarfed any Space Marine Chapter's mightiest battle-barge. It might have been the most powerful engine of destruction in the Imperium. It was a symbol of mankind's very right to live in the stars. Its most potent weapon was the sheer awe that the golden eagle inspired when it appeared in the night sky over a rebellious world.

The *Phalanx* at that moment was not at war, but it was there for a conflict just as bitter. It was to be the seat of a trial at which the soul of a Chapter would be weighed, a stain on the Imperial Fists' honour would be cleansed and retribution would fall as sternly as if it had rained down from the *Phalanx's* guns.

There was no doubt among the Imperial Fists that their mission was as vital to the Imperium as any crusade. For it was on the *Phalanx* that the Soul Drinkers would surely die.

'YOU WILL WISH,' said the Castellan of the Imperial Fists, 'that you still called us brother.'

The Castellan seemed to fill the cell, even though it had been built to accommodate a Space Marine's dimensions. Its walls were plated in gold, studded with diamonds and rubies in the shape of the constellations across which the *Phalanx* had carried its Chapter in countless crusades. The channels cut into the floor formed intricate scrollwork. Even the drain for bodily fluids was in the shape of an open hand, echoing the fist symbol that was everywhere on board.

The Castellan nodded to one of the Chapter functionaries through the small slit window. The functionary, a shaven-headed, drab man in a dark yellow uniform, activated a few controls on his side of the wall and the Pain Glove apparatus shuddered as power flowed into it.

Brother Kaiyon hung in the Pain Glove. He had been stripped of his armour, and the input ports set into the black carapace beneath the skin of his chest were hooked up to bundles of cables hanging from

the ceiling. The Pain Glove itself resembled some strange mollusc, a lumpy, phlegmy membrane that covered Kaiyon from neck to ankle. It writhed against his skin, as if trying to ascertain the shape of its captive by touch.

‘This one,’ he said, ‘was one of the flock.’ The Castellan’s words were no longer directed at Brother Kaiyon. ‘He was broken-minded even before we brought them here. I think, my lord, that he will either tell all, or be broken to gibberish.’

‘You take eagerly to your task, noble Castellan,’ came a voice in reply from the room’s vox-caster. It was an old and experienced voice, almost wearied with knowledge. ‘So ready a hand at the tormentor’s tools would be a sin in any but one of your responsibilities.’

The Castellan smiled. ‘That, my lord Chapter Master, is as high a compliment as I could hope to hear.’

The Castellan’s armour was crenellated like the battlements of a castle around its collar and the edges of its shoulder pads, and the vents around his torso echoed tall pointed windows or arrow slits. He looked like a walking fortress, even the greaves around his shins resembling the buttresses of two towers on which he walked. His face was branded with a grid pattern – a portcullis, a forbidding entrance to the fortification he represented.

Kaiyon’s face was scarred, too. The Space Marine seemed unconscious, but he proclaimed all his allegiances in the chalice symbols he had carved into himself. His scalp was red with raised channels of scar tissue. Though the rest of his body was hidden in the Pain Glove, the Castellan knew that the rest of Kaiyon told the same story. Kaiyon was a Soul Drinker. He had written that fact into his flesh.

‘I know,’ said the Castellan to Kaiyon, ‘that you are awake. You can hear me, Kaiyon. Know, then, that nothing you do here, no token effort of resistance, will gain you anything whatsoever. Not even the satisfaction of delaying me, or frustrating my intentions to break you. These things mean nothing to me. The mightiest of fortresses will fall, though we can chip away but a grain of sand at a time. The end result is the same. Your Chapter has secrets. The flock of Iktinos has secrets. I will have those secrets. This is a truth as inevitable as your own mortality.’

Kaiyon did not speak. The Castellan walked right up to Kaiyon, face to face.

The Soul Drinker’s eye was slitted. He was watching the Castellan, and even in that tiny sliver of an eye, the Castellan could see his hate.

‘What,’ said the Chapter Master over the vox, ‘if this one does not talk?’

‘There are others,’ replied the Castellan. ‘More than twenty of the Soul Drinkers’ surviving strength are members of this flock. I’ll wager you’ll have your answers with twenty renegades to break.’

‘So long as Chaplain Iktinos himself is not reduced thus,’ replied the Chapter Master. ‘I wish him in possession of all his faculties for the trial. Justice is a mockery when it is administered on one already forsaken by sanity.’

‘Of course, my lord,’ said the Castellan. ‘It will not come to that.’

‘Good,’ said the Chapter Master. ‘Then proceed, Brother Castellan.’

The vox-link went dead. The Chapter Master, as was traditional, need not witness this least delicate of the Castellan’s duties. The Castellan gestured to the crewman at the controls, and a metal panel slid shut over the slit window.

‘You have,’ said the Castellan, circling Kaiyon, ‘one final chance.’

Kaiyon’s hate did not falter.

‘You understand, I must make this offer. I know as well as you do, between us two Astartes, that it has no meaning. There are traditional forms that must be followed.’

The Castellan flicked a few switches on the control console mounted on the wall, one from which

snaked the wired now hooked up to the interfaces in Kaiyon's body. The Pain Glove slithered over him as if agitated.

The Pain Glove was a complex device. Controlling its many variables was akin to directing an orchestra, with great skill required in keeping every variable in harmony. Just a taste of the Pain Glove was enough to break normal men. A Space Marine required far more finesse – the Pain Glove was even used as a conditioning tool for the Chapter's novices in its less intense configurations.

The Castellan was a maestro with the device. The membrane excreted chemicals that laid open every nerve ending on every millimetre of skin. The pulses of power humming through the cables stimulated every one of them into extremity.

Brother Kaiyon, in that moment, discovered just how much it took to make a Space Marine scream.

WHAT WILL THE *universe remember of us?*, wrote Sarpedon.

What does it matter our deeds, the principles of our character, if it is the memory of the human race that matters? The future for us, when we are gone, is surely determined not by our deeds but by what is remembered of our deeds, by the lies told about us as much as by the truths of our actions.

Sarpedon put the quill down. The Imperial Fists had taken his armour and his weapons, and even the bionic which had replaced one of his eight arachnoid legs. But they had left him with the means to write. It was a matter of principle that this cell, even though it was windowless and cramped, and allowed him no communication with his fellow Soul Drinkers, had a quill, a desk and a pot of ink. He was to defend himself before a court of his peers. He was at least entitled to the means to prepare his defence. They had left him his copy of the *Catechisms Martial*, too, the manual of the Soul Drinkers' principles and tactics authored by the legendary philosopher-soldier Daenyathos.

Sarpedon thought for a few long minutes. The pages of parchment in front of him were supposed to hold every argument he might make to justify his actions. Instead, he had poured out every thought into them in the hope that at least he would understand what he thought.

The galaxy will not think well of us, he wrote. We are traitors and heretics. We are mutants. Should truth have any value in itself then it will do us no good, for these things are true. My own mutations are so grotesque that I wonder if there will be anything thought of me at all, for there is little room in any man's recollection for anything but this monstrous form.

What does it matter what the galaxy thinks of us when we are gone? It is the only thing that matters at all. For we will surely die here. There is only one sentence that our brethren can lay upon us, and that is death. I must take what solace I can from what we will leave behind, yet there can be no solace in the story the Imperium will tell of the Soul Drinkers. Those who can will forget us. Those who cannot will hate us. Though I seek some victory for myself and my battle-brothers even in this, I can find none.

Perhaps one of my brethren can draw something other than defeat from our situation. I cannot. I look deeper into my heart than I have ever done, and I find nothing but failure and desolation.

Sarpedon looked over what he had written. It disgusted him. He screwed up the parchment and threw it into a corner of the cell. A Space Marine did not succumb to self-pity, no matter how true his failure seemed to him. He would lie to himself if that was what it took.

A gauntleted hand boomed against the cell door. Sarpedon looked round to see a window being drawn back to reveal a face he had last seen on the surface of Selaaca, looming over him as he lost consciousness. It was the face of Captain Darnath Lysander of the Imperial Fists First Company, a legend of the Fists and the man who had bested Sarpedon to take the Soul Drinkers into custody.

‘I trust,’ said Sarpedon, ‘your captive is as wretched as you hoped.’

‘Bitterness becomes not an Astartes,’ replied Lysander. ‘I take no joy in the fall of another Space Marine. I have come not to gloat, if that is how low you think of me. I have come to give you the chance to confess.’

‘Confess?’ said Sarpedon. ‘With no thumbscrews? With my skin still on my frame?’

‘Do not play games,’ snapped Lysander. ‘We took those you call the flock, those who follow your Chaplain Iktinos. Their minds were broken before we ever took them in. Whatever influence your Chaplain had on them, it changed them. One of them has broken in the Pain Glove, and told us everything. Brother Kaiyon is his name. He thought the Lord Castellan was Rogal Dorn himself, and spoke your Chapter’s secrets to him as if the primarch had demanded it.’

‘I have heard of your Pain Glove,’ said Sarpedon.

‘Then you know it is a part of the initiations every Imperial Fist has undergone. I myself have been subject to it. It served no more than to shake Brother Kaiyon out of the fugue the flock have fallen into since their incarceration here. He is insane, Sarpedon. He spoke through madness, not pain, and that madness was not our doing.’

‘Then he could have spoken lies in his madness,’ retorted Sarpedon.

‘He could,’ replied Lysander. ‘My Chapter is even now ascertaining the truth of his words. This is why I have come here. If you confess, and that confession matches what Kaiyon had told us and can be proven true, then there may be some leniency won for your compliance.’

‘Leniency?’ Sarpedon rose up on his haunches. He had originally had eight legs, arranged like those of an arachnid, spreading from his waist. He had lost one on an unnamed world, ripped off by a champion of the Dark Gods. Another had been lost on Selaaca, mangled in his fight with the necron overlord of that dead world. He still had six, and when he rose to his full height he still towered over even Lysander. ‘You talk to me of leniency? There is not one Imperial Fist who will abide anything but our execution! Our death sentence was decided the moment we surrendered!’

‘Ours is a Chapter with honour!’ shouted Lysander. ‘Your trial is more than a mere formality. It is our intention to see every correct procedure and tradition adhered to, so that no man dare say we did not give you every chance to redeem yourselves. You will die, yes, I cannot lie to you about that. But there are many ways to die, and many matters of honour that can accompany your death. If you deserve a good death then you and your battle-brothers shall receive it. You can win a better death if you tell us now what we shall soon discover. Deceit, however, will win you nothing but suffering.’

Sarpedon sank back down to his haunches. He could not think what Kaiyon might have told the Imperial Fists interrogators. The Fists knew the Soul Drinkers were mutants – one glance at Sarpedon was enough to tell them that. The Fists had collected evidence of the Soul Drinkers’ deeds, including many that had pitted them against the forces of the Imperium from which the Soul Drinkers had rebelled. He could think of nothing more damaging than any of that.

But what had happened to the flock? They were the Soul Drinkers whose officers had died in the gradual erosion of the Chapter’s strength, and who had turned to Chaplain Iktinos for leadership. They had become intense and inspired under Iktinos, but insane? Sarpedon did not know what to make of it.

‘I don’t know what Kaiyon told you,’ he said to Lysander. ‘Good luck with confirming his words. I doubt whatever you find can make our fate any worse.’

‘So be it, Sarpedon,’ said Lysander. ‘The trials will begin soon. The fate of your Chapter rests in no little part on what you will have to say to yourself. I suggest you think on it, if you believe your brothers deserve more than a common heretic’s death.’

‘I have nothing to say,’ said Sarpedon. ‘Certainly nothing that will change any fate you have in mind for me.’

‘I could have executed you on Selaaca,’ said Lysander. ‘Remember that the next time you bemoan your fate.’

The window slammed shut. Lysander was correct. He had defeated Sarpedon face to face on Selaaca and few servants of the Imperium would have had any compunction about killing him out of hand.

Sarpedon turned back to the desk and took up the quill again.

I have seen, he wrote, that our present and future, the mark we will leave on the galaxy, depends on the insistence of one misguided honourable man to execute us in accordance with the word of law.

Is this a mockery by the galaxy, to condemn us by the virtues of another? I could decide it is so. I could curse the universe and rail against our lot. But I choose to see the Emperor has given us this – a stay of execution, a few moments to have our say before our peers – as a gift to those who served Him instead of the Imperium.

What can we make of this? What victory can we mine from such a thin seam? It is the way of the Astartes to see victory in the smallest hope. I shall seek it now. My brothers, I wish I could speak with you and bid you do the same, but I am isolated from you. I hope you, too, can see something other than despair, even if it is only a thought turned to hope and duty when the end comes.

Seek victory, my brethren. I pray that in your souls, at least, the Soul Drinkers cannot be defeated.

‘THRONE ALIVE,’ HISSED Scout Orfos. ‘Such death. Such foul xenos work.’

The surface of Selaaca rolled by beneath the Thunderhawk gunship. Through the open rear ramp the grey landscape rippled through ruined cities and expanses of tarnished metal, obsidian pillars rising from deep valleys choked with pollution and the shores of black, dead seas lapping against shores scattered with collapsed buildings.

The human presence on Selaaca was now no more than scars, the ruined crust of a long-dead organ. The necrons had built over it, vast sheets of metal, pyramids, tomb complexes and patterns of obelisks which had no discernible purpose other than to mark Selaaca as a planet that belonged to them.

‘Dwell not on the xenos,’ said Scout-Sergeant Borakis. He was old and grizzled where the Scouts were young, his voice gravelly thanks to the old wound on his throat, his armour festooned with kill-marks and trophies while the Scouts under his command were not yet permitted to mark their armour. Borakis leaned towards the open ramp, gripping the handhold mounted overhead. ‘It is not your place to seek to understand the enemy. It is enough to know only that he must be killed!’

‘Of course, Scout-sergeant,’ said Orfos, backing away from the ramp.

The Thunderhawk flew down low over a range of hills studded with obelisks and pylons, as if metallic tendrils had forced their way out of the ground to escape the bleak gravity of Selaaca. Patterns of silver like metal roads spiralled around the peaks and valleys, and sparks of power still spat between a few of the pylons.

‘We’re closing in on mark one,’ came the pilot’s voice from the cockpit of the Thunderhawk. The crew were two of the thousands of Chapter staff and crew who inhabited the *Phalanx*, a vast support network for the Imperial Fists’ campaigns. Using star maps developed by the Adeptus Mechanicus, the strike cruiser *Mantle of Wrath* had penetrated further into the Veiled Region than any Space Marine craft before it, to follow up the information extracted by the Castellan during his interrogation of a Soul Drinkers captive.

The ground rippled as the Thunderhawk hovered down low to land. The landing gear touched the

blasted earth and Borakis led his squad out. Borakis and his four Scouts deployed with the speed and fluidity that years of training had given them, spreading out to cover all angles with bolt pistols. Borakis carried a shotgun as old and scarred as he was, and in his other hand checked the auspex scanner loaded with the coordinates the Castellan had given him.

‘Laokan! Take the point! Orfos, you’re watching our backs. Kalliax, Caius, with me.’ Borakis pointed in the direction the auspex indicated, over the dead earth.

Once, these hills had been forested. Stumps and exposed roots remained, shorn down to ground level. Up close the pylons looked like spinal columns worked in steel, blackened by the haze of pollution that hung overhead. The obelisks were fingers of a substance so black it seemed to drink the light. A faint hum ran up through the ground, the echo of machinery far below.

‘The xenos have not departed this place,’ said Orfos quietly. ‘This world is dead, but these xenos never lived.’

‘It is an ill-omened world,’ agreed Scout Caius. ‘I hope our work here is quick.’

‘Hope,’ said Borakis sternly, ‘is a poisoned gift, given by our weaknesses. Do not follow hope. Follow your duty. If your duty is to fight on this world for a thousand years, Scout-novice, then you will give thanks to the Emperor for it. Move on.’

The squad moved down the hillside into a narrow valley where mist coiled around their ankles and the valley sides rose like walls of torn earth. The auspex blinked a path towards a formation of rocks that would have been completely uninteresting if it had not corresponded to the location given by Brother Kaiyon under interrogation. On closer inspection the rocks formed two pillars and a lintel, a doorway in the valley wall blocked by a tangle of fallen stone.

‘Charges,’ said Borakis.

Brother Kalliax crouched by the rocks, setting up a bundle of explosive charges. The cog symbol on his right pauldron signified his acceptance as an apprentice to the Techmarines of the Imperial Fists.

‘What do you see, Orfos?’ said Borakis.

‘No movement, sergeant,’ replied Orfos, scanning the crests of the valley ridges for signs of hostiles.

The intelligence on Selaaca’s hostiles was sketchy. The Imperial Fists had fought the necrons before, but their inhuman intelligence made the xenos impossible to interrogate and their goals could only be guessed at. Selaaca’s necrons were, according to the interrogated Soul Drinkers, a broken and leaderless force, but there were certainly necrons still on the planet and no telling how they might have organised themselves since the Imperial Fists had captured the Soul Drinkers there.

‘Ready,’ said Kalliax.

The Scout squad backed away from the entrance and Kalliax detonated the charge, blowing the blockage apart in a shower of dirt and stone. The blast echoed across the valley, shuddering the valley walls and starting a dozen tiny rockfalls.

‘Move in,’ said Borakis.

Laokan moved through the falling earth, his bolt pistol trained on the darkness revealed between the lintels. The darkness gave way to dressed stone and carvings inside.

The walls of the passageway were carved with repeating chalices, intertwined with eagles and skulls. The squad shadowed Laokan’s movement as he crossed the threshold into the passageway.

The floor shifted under his feet. Laokan dropped instinctively to one knee. A line of green light shimmered over him and a camera lens winked in the ceiling as it focussed on him.

‘Bleed,’ said an artificial voice.

Laokan backed away slowly. The lens stayed focussed on him.

‘Bleed,’ repeated the voice.

‘Stand down, Scout,’ said Borakis. He walked past Laokan and drew his combat knife. The blade was as long as the sergeant’s forearm, serrated and etched with lines of Imperial scripture. Borakis’s Scout armour, much less bulky than a full suit of power armour, had an armoured wrist guard that Borakis unbuckled from his left arm. He drew the knife along his left wrist and a bright scarlet trail ran down his hand.

Borakis flicked the blood off his hand into the passageway. It splattered across the walls and floor.

‘Astartes haemotypes detected,’ said the voice again, the lens this time roving over the sergeant.

Light flickered on along the passage way, lighting the way deep into the hillside.

‘We’re in the right place,’ said Borakis. ‘Follow me.’

Borakis and the Scouts entered the hillside, pistols trained on every shadow.

The *Mantle of Wrath* had two missions over Selaaca. The first was to deliver the Scout squad to follow up the Castellan’s intelligence. The other was to begin the destruction of the Soul Drinkers.

The *Mantle* was one of the better-armed ships in the Imperial Fists fleet, but for this mission its torpedo bays had been stripped out and replaced with high-yield charges normally used for orbital demolitions. The *Mantle* did not have long to wait in orbit over Selaaca before its target drifted into view, its massive bulk darkening the glare of Selaaca’s sun.

Few Imperial Fists would ever need more proof of the Soul Drinkers’ corruption than the *Brokenback*. Many a Fist had fought on a space hulk, one of the cursed ships lost in the warp and regurgitated back into realspace teeming with xenos or worse. The *Brokenback* was as huge and ugly a space hulk as any had seen, hundreds of smaller ships welded into a single lumbering mass by the tides of the warp. Imperial warships ten thousand years old jostled with xenos ships, vast cargo freighters and masses of twisted metal that bore no resemblance to anything that had ever crossed the void.

Thousands of crew on the *Mantle* prepared the torpedo arrays as the strike cruiser manoeuvred into position. Damage control crews were called to battle stations, for while the *Brokenback* was unmanned no one could be sure of what automated defences the hulk might have. As the *Mantle* approached firing position, the Imperial Fists officers and the unaugmented crewmen waited for the space hulk to leap into life and rain destruction from a dozen warships onto the *Mantle of Wrath*.

The hulk’s weapons stayed silent. A spread of torpedoes glittered against the void as they launched from the *Mantle*, leaving ripples of silvery fire in their wake. Defensive turrets, which would normally have shot down every one of the torpedoes, stayed silent as the first spread impacted into the space hulk amidships.

Bright explosions blossomed against the void, flashes of energy robbed of power an instant later by the vacuum. Shattered chunks of hulls floated outwards in clouds of debris, leaving open wounds of torn metal in the side of the *Brokenback*.

The space hulk was too big for a single volley, even of the high-yield demolition charges, to destroy. The *Mantle of Wrath* pumped out wave after wave of torpedoes. One volley blew an Imperial warship free of the space hulk’s mass and the ship span away from its parent, trailing coils of burning plasma and revealing the twisted steel honeycomb inside. Ruined orbital yachts and xenos fighter craft tumbled out of the rents opened up in the hull.

Moment by moment, the whole *Brokenback* came apart. Selaaca’s gravity drew the fragments down and the whole hulk rotated. The volley had opened up a weak point in the depths of the hulk’s mass and an enormous section of the stern bent away from it, dragged down towards the greyish disc of Selaaca.

The *Brokenback* could not resist orbital decay any longer. Its idling engines, which did the bare minimum of work to keep it in orbit, failed as plasma reactors collapsed and power systems were severed. Over the course of the next few hours the stern of the hulk was scoured by the upper

atmosphere and broke away entirely, followed by millions of chunks of debris raining down onto the planet. Like a dying whale the rest of the *Brokenback* lolled over and fell into the gravity well of Selaaca, gathering speed as it fell, its lower edges glowing cherry-red, then white, with friction.

The *Brokenback* disappeared into Selaaca's cloudy sky. Most of it, the *Mantle's* augurs divined, would come down in one of Selaaca's stagnant oceans, the rest scattered over a coastline.

The *Mantle of Wrath* had fulfilled one of its duties. The space hulk *Brokenback* was gone, and no renegade would ever use it to resurrect the Soul Drinkers' heresies.

The only duties keeping the ship over Selaaca was the Scout squad currently deployed on their service. Soon they would return, and the *Mantle* would leave this forsaken place behind forever.

BROTHER CIAUS DIED first.

The walls folded in on themselves, revealing rows of teeth lining the inside of a vast bristling throat. Caius had been the slowest to react. The rest of the squad threw themselves into the alcoves along the tunnel, which each contained statues of Space Marines with their armour covered in the ornate chalice of the Soul Drinkers. Caius's leg had snagged on the spikes and he had been dragged down the throat as it rippled and constricted, the sound of grinding stone competing with the tearing muscle and bone.

Caius did not scream. Perhaps he did not want to show weakness in his final moments. Perhaps he did not have time. When the corridor reformed, Caius's vermilion blood ran down the carvings and no other trace of his body remained.

Borakis hissed with frustration as Caius's lifesigns winked out on his retinal display.

'Caius!' shouted Orfos. 'Brother! Speak to us!'

'He is gone, Scout,' said Borakis.

Kalliax held his bolt pistol close to his face, his lips almost touching the top of the weapon's housing. He crouched in the alcove opposite Borakis. 'Repaid in blood shall every drop be,' he said, face set.

'First, your duty,' said Borakis. 'Then let your thoughts turn to revenge.'

'This place was a trap!' replied Kalliax. 'I should have seen it. By the hands of Dorn, why did I not see it? Some mechanism, something that should not be here, it should have been obvious to me!'

'If you think you killed our brother,' said Borakis sternly, 'then take that pistol and administer your vengeance to yourself. If not, focus on your duty. This place was a trap, but it was not placed here in isolation. It protects something. That is what we have come here to find.'

The sound of breaking stone came from the alcove in which Brother Laokan had taken cover. The remnants of the alcove's statue toppled into the tunnel and smashed on the floor.

'Speak, novice!' ordered Borakis.

'Through here,' said Laokan. 'This is a false tunnel. Behind this wall is another way.'

Borakis braced his arms against the alcove walls and kicked hard against the statue. The wall behind gave way and the statue fell into the void beyond, revealing long, low space lit by yellowish, muted glow-globes set into the walls.

'Follow, brothers!' said Borakis.

Kalliax and Orfos kicked their way through the false wall and followed the sergeant into the hidden space. They had not yet completed their transition into full Space Marines but their strength was already far beyond that of a normal man.

Up ahead of Borakis was a chapel with an altar, at the far end of the long room. The ceiling loomed down low, hung with stalactites that had formed from water dripping down. The altar was a solid block of grey stone topped with a gilded triptych depicting Rogal Dorn standing in the centre of a battle scene.

Borakis took the point himself this time. Now he knew there was danger here, he had a duty to place himself in its way, for part of his duty was to see his young charges safely back to the Chapter.

On the altar stood a chalice cut from black stone, studded with emeralds. Borakis kept his shotgun levelled on the altar as he approached it. The Scouts spread out behind him.

The altarpiece's rendition of Rogal Dorn was in gold with diamond eyes. Dorn was twice as tall as the gilded Astartes battling alongside him. The enemy were aliens, or perhaps mutants, humanoid but with gills and talons. Dorn was crushing them beneath his feet. It was a passable work. Dozens of higher quality could be found in the chapels and shrines of the *Phalanx*.

'Sergeant?' said Orfos. 'Anything?'

Borakis leant closer to the altar. The chalice was not empty. Something shimmered darkly inside it. In the dim light it was impossible to tell, but it looked like blood.

Blood could not remain liquid down here for the length of time the chapel had evidently been sealed. Borakis knew the smell of blood well enough. He put his face close to the chalice and sniffed, knowing his Astartes' senses would confirm what the liquid was.

Borakis's breath misted against the polished stone. He noticed for the first time the thin silvery wires covering the chalice in a network of circuitry.

The warmth and moistness of a human breath made filaments move. Expanding, they completed a circuit, wired through the base of the chalice to the mechanism behind the triptych.

Rogal Dorn's diamond eyes flashed red. A pencil-thin beam glittered across the chamber.

Sergeant Borakis fell, twin holes bored through his skull by the pulse of laser.

'Back!' shouted Laokan. 'Fall back!'

Kalliax darted forwards to grab Borakis's body by the collar of his armour and drag him away from the altar. The panels of the triptych slid aside, each revealing the veiny flesh of a gun-servitor supporting double-barrelled autoguns. Green and red lights flashed over Kalliax as he tried to scramble away, hauling Borakis's corpse with him.

The autoguns opened up, the gunfire filling the chamber to bursting. Kalliax almost made it to the hole leading to the tunnel. His armour almost held for the extra second he needed. Bursts of torn ceramite, then blood and meat, spattered from his back as bullets hit home. Kalliax fell to the floor as a shot blew his thigh open, revealing a wet red mess tangled around his shattered femur. Kalliax dropped Borakis's body and returned fire with his bolt pistol. His face and upper chest disappeared in a cloud of red.

Laokan and Orfos broke back into the tunnel, its walls still wet with Caius's blood. Orfos saw Kalliax die, and he felt that same instinct that must have seized Kalliax – grab the body of his fallen battle-brother, carry him back to the Chapter, see him interred with honour alongside the rest of the Chapter's venerated dead. But Orfos choked down the thought. That was what had killed Kalliax. Orfos would leave him to be entombed in this place. That was the way it had to be.

The back wall was falling in, showering the altar with rubble. The gun-servitors, one with a gun arm hanging limp thanks to Kalliax's bolter fire, lumbered out of their hiding place towards the surviving Scouts.

'Don't look back!' shouted Laokan above the gunfire, and pushed Orfos into the carved corridor.

The walls shifted again. Orfos made a decision with the quickness of mind that years of hypno-doctrination and battle training had given him. He could go for the entrance of the tunnel, to escape back into the valley. But Caius had died in that stretch of tunnel – Orfos knew that way was certainly trapped. That certainty did not exist for the other direction, deeper into the structure built into the hillside. It was not particularly compelling logic, but it was all he had.

Orfos broke into a sprint towards the darkness at the far end of the tunnel. Laokan was on his heels,

and the racket of the gunfire was joined by the grinding of stone and stone. The tunnel was closing up again, the ripple of shifting panels accelerating towards them from the tunnel entrance. Chunks of Caius's body were revealed, tumbling around the vortex of stone. A severed hand, a battered and featureless head, Caius's bolt pistol warped out of shape.

Orfos was fast. In the tests after each surgical procedure, he had always been. The sergeants of the Tenth Company had suggested his aptitude was for the Doctrines of Assault due to his speed and decisiveness of action.

Laokan was not so fast. He was a marksman. A trailing arm was caught between spiked panels and Laokan was yanked back off his feet. Orfos heard Laokan yell in shock and pain, and turned long enough to grab Laokan's boot, pulling his fellow Scout free of the chewing throat.

Laokan's arm came off, bone and sinew chewed through. Laokan collapsed onto Orfos and tried to propel himself forwards, buying time for them both. Orfos grabbed Laokan's remaining arm and dragged him behind him as he carried on running.

Laokan snagged on something. Orfos hauled harder and dragged Laokan along with him, every nerve straining to keep his battle-brother free of the fate that had claimed Caius.

There was no light now. Even the Scout's augmented vision, almost the equal of a full Space Marine's, could make out nothing but dense shadow.

The floor gave way beneath Orfos's feet. The lip of a stone pit slammed into the side of his head as he fell, and teeth cracked in his jaw. He was aware, on the edge of consciousness, of his body battering against the carved sides of the pit as he and Laokan fell.

ORFOS WOKE, AND realised that he had been knocked out. He cursed himself. Even if only for a moment, he should fight for awareness at all times. He had no bolt pistol in his hand, either. He had dropped his weapon. Borakis would assign him field punishment for such a failing. But Borakis, recalled Orfos with a lurch, was dead.

Orfos could still see nothing. He fumbled with the tactical light mounted on the shoulder of his breastplate. The light winked on and fell on the face of another stone Space Marine, far larger than in the alcoves above – twice life-size. Orfos read the inscription on the storm shield carried in the statue's left hand, a counterpart to the chainsword in its right. It read APOLLONIOS. Orfos recognised the trappings of a Chaplain among the weapons and armour of an assault-captain. Beside the statue was another of a Chaplain, this one inscribed with the name ACIAR.

'Brother,' said Orfos. 'Brother, what of this place? What have we found?'

Laokan did not reply. Orfos looked for his brother, who must have also been knocked out in the fall.

Laokan lay a short distance from Orfos, next to Orfos's bolt pistol. Laokan's body was gone from the mid-torso down, and trails of organs lay behind him in bloody loops. Laokan was face down, nose in the dust.

Orfos knelt beside Laokan's corpse. 'Forgive me, brother,' he said, but the words seemed meaningless as they fell dead against the chamber walls. 'I can pray for you later. I will, brother. I promise I will.'

Orfos picked up his bolt pistol and let the light play around the chamber. A third statue was mounted high up, above the lintel of a doorway framing a pair of steel blast doors. This statue, again of a Space Marine Chaplain, bore the name THEMISKON. Orfos recognised the chalice symbol on the statue's shoulder pad, echoing the statues in the alcoves above. It was the symbol of the Soul Drinkers.

Another crime laid at the feet of the Soul Drinkers – this death trap, laid out to claim the lives of good Imperial Fists. Orfos spat on the floor. Whatever holiness this place might have had for the Soul

Drinkers, Orfos wanted to defile it. Whatever it meant to them, he wanted it made meaningless.

Orfos looked up. The walls of a shaft rose above him. The carvings were probably deep enough to climb, but it would not be easy, and another fall might break a leg or an arm and render him unable to escape that way. He turned his attention to the door.

The metal was cold, drinking the warmth from Orfos's hands and face from a good distance away. A control panel was set into the stone. Orfos was not in enough of a hurry to press any of the buttons. He put a hand to the metal – it was freezing, and this close Orfos's breath misted in the air.

The doors slid open. Orfos jumped back, bolt pistol held level. Beyond the doors was darkness – the light on Orfos's armour glinted off ice and played through freezing mist that rolled from between the doors.

Orfos stepped slowly away from the doors. 'Whoever you may be,' he called, 'whatsoever fate you may have decided for me, know that I will fight it! I am an Imperial Fist! Die here I may, but it is as a Fist I shall die!'

The doors were open. The lump of ice inside, hooked up to the walls by thick cables hung with icicles, shuddered. An inner heat sent cracks blinking through its mass. Chunks of ice fell away. Orfos glimpsed ceramite within, painted dark purple under the frost.

The ice crumbled to reveal a shape familiar to Orfos. A massive square body on a bipedal chassis, squat cylindrical legs supported by spayed feel of articulated metal. The blocky shoulder mounts each carried a weapon – one a missile launcher, the other a barrel-shaped power fist ringed with flat steel fingers.

It was a Dreadnought – a walking war machine. All the Dreadnoughts of the Imperial Fists were piloted by Space Marines who had been crippled in battle, who were kept alive by the Dreadnought's life-support systems and permitted to carry on their duties as soldiers of the Emperor even after their bodies were ruined and useless. The Dreadnought's sarcophagus was covered in purity seals and the symbol of a gilded chalice was emblazoned across the front.

Orfos's bolt pistol would do nothing to the Dreadnought's armoured body. The power fist could crush Orfos with such ease the pilot, if there was one, would barely register the resistance provided by Orfos's body before his armour and skeleton gave way.

It would be quick. An Astartes did not fear pain, but Orfos did not see the need to pursue it as some Imperial Fists did. He had made his stand. He had not run, he had done his best to keep his battle-brothers alive. His conscience was clear. He told himself he could die. He tried to force himself to believe it.

The Dreadnought shifted on its powerful legs and the fingers of the power fist flexed. Flakes of ice fell off it. The cables unhooked and fell loose, showering the chamber floor with more chunks of ice. Lights flickered as the Dreadnought's power plant turned over and the chamber was filled with the rhythmic thrum of it.

'All this talk of death,' came the Dreadnought's voice, a synthesised bass rumble issuing from the vox-units mounted on the hull. 'Such morbidity. I have no wish to disappoint you, novice, but you will not die here.'

Orfos swallowed. 'What are you?' he said. 'Why lie you here, in a place designed to kill?'

'Your obtuseness has not yet been trained out of you,' said the voice again. Orfos looked for some vision slit so he might glimpse the pilot inside, but he could find none. 'My tomb was built to ensure that none but an Astartes could make it this far. So sad the Imperial Fists chose to send Scouts to do the work of a full battle-brother. But you have made it, and I have no intention to see you go the way of that unfortunate brother who lies behind you.'

'That is an answer to only one question,' said Orfos. 'I asked you two.'

‘Then I shall introduce myself,’ said the Dreadnought. ‘I am Daenyathos of the Soul Drinkers.’



Phalanx

By Ben Counter

Chapter 2

'GREETINGS, GREAT ONE,' said the lead pilgrim, his head bowed. Behind him snaked a chain of fellow pilgrims, decked out in sackcloth and jangling with the symbolic chains around their wrists.

'I am Lord Castellan Leucrontas of the *Phalanx*,' replied the Castellan. The cavernous docking bays of the *Phalanx* were Leucrontas's domain, just as the brig decks and Pain Glove chambers were his, and in spite of the high ceilings and enormous expanse of the docking chamber his stature still seemed to fill the place. 'Wherefore have you come to this place? You have not been asked, nor has your arrival been announced beforehand. I must warn you that accommodating your ship was a courtesy extended only in the light of it not being armed, and such a courtesy is mine to withdraw.'

The pilgrim's head seemed to bow even lower, as if his spine was permanently bent in an attitude of prayer. 'I would ask forgiveness, great one,' he said, in a rasping voice shredded by years of thunderous sermons, 'but it is not mine to offer apologies in the Emperor's name. For it is to do His work that we have come to this place.'

Castellan Leucrontas regarded the pilgrims emerging from the airlocks. Their ship, a converted merchantman, was a sturdy and ancient vessel, essential qualities for a craft that had evidently made it to the *Phalanx's* isolated location at short notice. Nevertheless, there had been great risk in taking them so close to the Veiled Region, with its pirates and xenos, in an unarmed ship. The pilgrims had clearly been willing to court death to make this journey, and still more to risk the chance that the Imperial Fists would refuse them a berth and leave them to drift.

'Then you represent the Church of the Imperial Creed?' said Leucrontas. 'That august congregation has no authority here. This ship is sovereign to the Imperial Fists Chapter.'

The lead pilgrim pulled back his hood. The face inside was barely recognisable as a face - not because it was inhuman or mutilated, but because the familiarity of its features was almost entirely hidden by the tattooed image of a pair of scales that covered it. The image was an electroo, edged in lines of light, and the two pans of the scales flickered with intricately rendered flames.

'We come not to usurp your rule, good lord Castellan,' said the pilgrim. 'Rather, we are here to observe. The standards, my brothers, if you please.'

Several other pilgrims jangled to the front of the crowd. Altogether there must have been three hundred of them, all hooded and chained like penitents. Several of them unfurled banners and held them aloft. They bore symbols of justice - the scales, the blinded eye, the image of a man holding a sword by the blade in a trial by ordeal. Other pilgrims were bent almost double by the loads of books strapped to their backs, each one a walking library. Still others had spools of parchment encased in units on their chests, so they could pay out a constant strip of parchment on which to write. Some were writing down the exchange between their leader and the Castellan, nimble fingers scribbling in an arcane shorthand with scratching quills.

'Our purpose,' said the pilgrims' leader, 'is to follow the course of justice. The Emperor Himself created the institutions that see justice called down upon His subjects and His enemies. We are the Blind Retribution, and whenever the process of justice is enacted, we are there to observe. It has come to the notice of the Blind that a Chapter of Astartes is to be tried here, for several charges of rebellion and

heresy. And so we are here to watch over this process and record all the matters of justice therein. This is the will of the Emperor, for His justice is the most perfect of all and it is to His perfection that we aspire.'

The Castellan gave this some thought. 'It is true,' he said, 'that the *Phalanx* is to see these renegades put to trial. Your presence here, however, must be at the sufferance of the Chapter Master. I permit you entrance, but only he can permit you to stay, and should he withdraw my decision of welcome then you will be ejected.'

'We understand,' said the leader of the Blind Retribution. 'And we will obey. Might we beg of your crew some place to stay?'

'I shall have the crew find you lodgings,' replied the Castellan. 'You can expect no more than an unused cargo bay. The *Phalanx* is large but it has no shortage of population.'

'We would ask nothing more,' said the leader. 'Ours is a way of poverty and denial. Indulgence dulls the sharp edge of justice, and luxury dims the focus. Now we take our leave, lord Castellan. There are prayers and devotions to be made before our souls are fit to look upon the business of the Emperor's justice.'

Leucrontas watched as the pilgrims finished filing into the docking bay. They took loops of prayer beads from their robes and spoke droning prayers of thanks and humility.

The pilgrims were a small matter. The crew officers, who maintained the day-to-day workings of the *Phalanx* while the Imperial Fists attended the matters of war, could deal with them. Leucrontas had many more duties he had to see to before he could give the Blind Retribution another thought. Soon the Soul Drinkers would be in the dock, and many more powerful observers than the Blind Retribution would be watching the results closely.

THE FIRST SIGHT Sarpedon had of this place was of the hands over his face, clamping the mask down.

Even then, barely conscious, the soldier's part of his mind demanded to know how he had been taken. Nerve gas, pumped into his cell? A rapid, merciless assault? Some drug administered by a sly needle or dart? He was angry. He wanted to know. His memory of the last few hours was a dark fog.

He thrashed. The hands clamping the mask to his face snapped away. They were not the gauntlets of Astartes - Sarpedon was in the custody of Imperial Fists functionaries, unaugmented men and women who served the Fists as spaceship crew and support staff. The *Phalanx* was full of them. Somehow it was a greater insult that it did not take Space Marines to hold Sarpedon down.

Sarpedon struggled. He was held so fast he would have snapped his limbs before he loosened them. Incoherent voices shouted, medical code words barked between the staff of the *Phalanx's* Apothecarion. Cold rivers wound through his body as sedatives were pumped into his veins.

Sarpedon was being wheeled on his back through a corridor with a ceiling that looked like the negative cast of a giant spinal column. The walls were webs of bone.

The sedatives took hold. Sarpedon couldn't even flex the muscles that had forced uselessly against his bonds. His eyes still moved - he looked down at his body and saw metal clamps around each of his limbs, holding them fast to the metal slab on which he lay. The *Phalanx's* crew must have had to make the restraints specially to fit his six remaining legs.

Sarpedon was also aware of a constriction around the sides of his head. No doubt it was an inhibiting device to dull his psychic powers. His cell had been fitted out to hold a psyker - the wards and anti-psychic materials built into its construction had rendered him completely blunt, unable to even taste the psychic resonance of his surroundings. The hood holding back his head made him similarly useless psychically. Not that he would have needed his psychic prowess to kill every one of the crewmen dragging him through the Apothecarion, if only he could get free.

But they were just ordinary men and women, Sarpedon told himself. They believed as much as he did that their work was the work of the Emperor. Perhaps they were right.

Sarpedon passed through into a hall where the gnarled walls were lined with ceiling-high nutrient tanks, each with cultured organs suspended in viscous fluid. Gilded autosurgeons were mounted on the ceiling.

The next face that loomed over him was that of an Astartes - close-cropped hair, hollow cheeks and a sharp chin and nose, with a bionic like a miniature microscope mounted over one eye. An eyebrow arched up.

'Behold the enemy,' said the Space Marine. It was an Imperial Fist by the symbol on his shoulder pad, and an Apothecary by the white panels of his armour. 'What manner of creature has the galaxy placed this time upon my slab? Many foul things have I seen, and some of them once human in form. But this! Ah, this shall be a challenge and a privilege. The imager!'

An ornate piece of machinery, like an arch of inscribed panels, was slid over Sarpedon. Sarpedon wanted to speak, if only to tell the Apothecary that he was no enemy, but a Space Marine as the Apothecary himself was. But his tongue was as paralysed as the rest of him. He had only his senses.

Speckles of light played against Sarpedon's retinas as lasers measured every aspect of him. A screen unfolded from one wall, in glowing green lines displaying Sarpedon's skeleton and the complex pattern of a Space Marine's organs.

'The weapons carried by an Astartes begin with those augmentations within him,' said the Apothecary. 'All are present. Evidence here of extensive wounding and healing internally, as typical of a veteran Astartes. Most recent are extensive fractures to the skull and ribs. Note the abnormal shape of the omophagea, typical of this Chapter's gene-seed.'

The crewmen, the orderlies of the *Phalanx's* Apothecarion, were scribbling down the Apothecary's pronouncements with autoquills.

'And he is awake,' continued the Apothecary, noticing the movement of Sarpedon's eyes. 'We have an audience! What think you, Lord Sarpedon, of the hospitality aboard the *Phalanx*?'

The imager moved down over Sarpedon's body. The orderlies had to manoeuvre it past Sarpedon's restrained legs.

'The mutations,' said the Apothecary, 'are implicit throughout. The subject's musculo-skeletal strength is at the top end of Astartes maximum. I doubt there is any man-mountain of a Space Wolf who can match him. Material mutations begin with the thickened lumbar spine and the pelvis.' Again the Apothecary addressed Sarpedon. 'And what a pelvis! All the scholars of Mars could not machine such a hunk of bone! I have no doubt the strengthening properties of its shape shall make it a classic of its kind. I shall have it preserved and gilded, I think, and keep it here among my most prized samples. Perhaps the Mechanicus shipwrights can use it to develop some new form of docking clamp. Certainly I shall not permit it to be incinerated with the rest of you.'

The imager moved lower. Now on the screen were the muscle-packed exoskeletal segments of Sarpedon's legs.

'The subject's legs number six,' said the Apothecary. 'These are the most significant material mutations. Originally they numbered eight; note the remnants of the bionic joint around the centre left and the recent partially healed damage to the rear right socket. The structure of the legs is roughly arachnoid but has no direct analogue. The uncleanness of such deformities is profound. I have no interest in these. They can burn after the execution.'

The imager was withdrawn. Now Sarpedon found points of pain all over his body as the orderlies worked over him. They were looping wires and thin tubes around him, fixing them with needles in the gaps around his black carapace and in the muscles of his abdomen. One was slid into a vein in his neck,

another on the underside of one wrist.

'Begin,' said the Apothecary.

Sarpedon was bathed in pain. It was a pure, unalloyed pain. It was not like a blade in his skin, or scalding-hot liquid, or any other pain he had suffered. It was completely pure.

Sarpedon's mind shut down. Nothing in his consciousness found purchase in the endless, white landscape of pain. Time meant nothing. He no longer felt his restraints, or his anger at the arrogance of the Apothecary in dissecting him like any other specimen. He no longer felt anything. He was made of pain.

The sensation of tearing ligaments loomed through the pain. It was subsiding, being replaced with the normal input from his senses. His legs had forced against the restraints. His neck muscles had almost torn against the psychic inhibitor holding his head in place and his lungs burned against the breastplate of fused ribs in his chest. He gasped, unable to control his body's reactions to the onslaught.

'Note the reaction to pain,' the Apothecary's voice continued. 'It is within normal tolerances. So we see the core of an Astartes is present, but much embellished by corruption. I have no doubt that this subject can be considered a Space Marine by most definitions and can be tried as one.'

One of Sarpedon's legs hurt more than the others. It hurt more because it had some freedom of movement in the hip joint. The restraint holding it just above the talon was coming loose.

And he could move. Just a little, but he could do it. The sedatives were wearing off. The dose was too low. He had greater body mass than a normal Astartes thanks to his mutated legs, and the less obvious mutations inside him had changed his metabolism. He was getting movement back.

Sarpedon fought against it. The Apothecary was describing the results of some blood and tissue sample tests to the orderlies. Sarpedon ignored them. The restraint was working loose. With the greater range of movement afforded to his other limbs, he could gain more leverage against their restraints and they, too, were giving way.

Sarpedon took in a breath. He forced his chest upwards and dug his talons into the slab, trying to level himself off it.

The ping of snapping metal alerted the Apothecary, who broke off his talk mid-word.

Bolts sheared. Metal bands fractured. Sarpedon's lower body ripped itself free. He thrashed one arm free in a matter of seconds, the orderlies starting back at the sight of their captive's lower limbs slashing around him.

Sarpedon reached up to the head restraint and tore it off its moorings. He rolled off the slab and sprawled on the floor. The drugs in his system were still powerful enough to rob him of his coordination and he could not get all his legs moving him in the same direction at once. He yanked the remaining arm free just as the Apothecary drew his plasma pistol.

'What are you?' slurred Sarpedon. He clawed at the inhibitor device still clamped around his temples. 'What can you claim to be that you judge me? I am not some xenos thing on a slide! I am Astartes!'

'You are a traitor,' said the Apothecary. He had his plasma pistol levelled at Sarpedon's head. 'The dignity we give you in trying you before true and loyal Space Marines is more than you deserve.'

'But try me for what?' demanded Sarpedon. He lost his footing and crashed into one of the specimen tanks. The glass broke and the thick, cold nutrient fluid washed out over him, lapping around the feet of the orderlies who cowered against the far wall. 'How many enemies of man have fallen to the Soul Drinkers? How many catastrophes have we averted?'

'And how many Space Marines have fallen to you?' retorted the Apothecary. 'Our brethren in the Crimson Fists and the Howling Griffons could attest to that. If you had lost as many of your own to an enemy as mankind has to you, you would not hesitate to seek that enemy's death!'

Sarpedon tried to get to his feet, leaning against the wall behind him to force himself up. He tried to find a weapon among the debris around him, a shard of glass or a medical implement, but his head was swimming and he couldn't focus.

'If you had seen,' he said, 'what we had seen, then you would cross the galaxy to join us, though a legion of your own stand in your way.'

'Had I my mind, traitor,' said the Apothecary, 'I would have had you executed as soon as Lysander had brought you in, as a mercy to the human race so that you would be excised like the cancer you are. But the Chapter Master has said you must stand trial. He has more mercy in him than I, or any battle-brother I know. You should be sobbing your gratitude to us. Enough of this.'

The Apothecary operated a control on a unit attached to the waist of his armour. A white, dull sensation throbbed through Sarpedon's head, conducted from temple to temple by the inhibitor. Then Sarpedon was falling, his mind ripped free of his body. His sight failed and everything went white as he fell, and he did not stop falling until he could feel nothing at all.

THE FIRST TO arrive to take their part among a jury of the Soul Drinkers' peers were the Crimson Fists. On their strike cruiser *Vengeance Incandescent*, the whole Second Company attended their representative to the *Phalanx*. The Crimson Fists, a brother Chapter to the Imperial Fists just as the Soul Drinkers had once been, claimed a special place in the forthcoming trial, for they had suffered more than most at the hands of the renegades.

Chapter Master Vladimir had left his usual place among the tactical treatises and fortification maps of the Librarium Dorn, to welcome Captain Borganor as he boarded the *Phalanx*. Attended by the ninth company's honour guard, Borganor descended the embarkation ramp of his shuttle with a slight limp given him by the bionic with which his right leg had been replaced. His quartered yellow and red was swathed in the deep blue cloak embroidered with his personal heraldry, an image in gold and black thread of a Howling Griffon with his head bowed in shame and his hands at prayer. Borganor was as blunt and crude as his gnarled features suggested, and with a clap of his hand against his gilded breastplate he acknowledged Vladimir's salute.

'Chapter Master, it is an honour,' said Borganor. 'Would that I stand in your presence on a happier occasion, and without the stain of failure that still lies upon my Chapter.'

Vladimir Pugh of the Imperial Fists nodded sagely. He was, above all other things, a master tactician, a man of solemn and slow manner with a habit of dissecting a situation as cold-bloodedly as he weighed up potential recruits. The golden yellow of his artificer armour was polished to a mirror finish, and the red closed fist symbols on his shoulder pads and breastplate shone as if they were cut from rubies. The intelligent face beneath his close-shorn hair suggested something more than a mere soldier. 'Long have I lamented the loss of Lord Mercaeno at the hands of the renegades,' he said to Borganor. 'It is an ill that will surely be repaid when justice is pronounced upon them.'

Discomfort broke through Borganor's features for a moment. Librarian Mercaeno was the greatest Howling Griffon hero of the current age, the slayer of the daemon Periclitator and avenger of Chapter Master Furioso's death. Mercaeno had fallen in battle with Sarpedon, and a thousand oaths had been sworn to see Sarpedon dead before the pain of his loss could begin to subside. Borganor, who had taken over the depleted company, bore no little responsibility for Mercaeno's death and the escape of the Soul Drinkers.

'No doubt,' said Borganor. 'I wish to request one favour from you, however, before proceeding on.'

'Name it, brother-captain,' said the Chapter Master.

'That before Sarpedon is executed, I am first given liberty to remove his limbs, and leave him with a single leg, as he left me.' Borganor's eyes flitted to his bionic leg. 'Mercaeno's death is shared by all

Sons of Guilliman, by every Space Marine, and so vengeance for it shall belong to us all. But my crippling was Sarpedon's doing, and I would repay him for it as a personal debt.'

'We are not here to execute your petty vengeance, captain,' replied Vladimir. 'A far greater vengeance must be satisfied. If it is decided that the traitor Sarpedon is to suffer greatly before death, perhaps you can have a part in deciding the exact manner in which that suffering is to be inflicted. Until that decision is made, make justice your only goal.'

Borganor bowed before Vladimir. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'Such hatred burns in my heart for all those that would befoul the name of Rogal Dorn.'

'That such hatred should have its voice,' said Vladimir, 'is the reason you have your place at this trial.'

Borganor led the seventy Space Marines of the Howling Griffons Ninth Company onto the *Phalanx*'s docking bay. Three companies of the Imperial Fists, numbering more than three hundred Space Marines, were already stationed on the *Phalanx* - the Howling Griffons would be the next biggest contingent on board. But they would not be the only visitors to the *Phalanx* for the trial. Sarpedon and the Soul Drinkers had tangled with many Imperial servants, and every one wanted his voice to be heard.

IN A GOLDEN orbital yacht launched from the Inquisitorial escort ship *Traitorsgrave*, Lord Inquisitor Kolgo made his entrance into the *Phalanx*. Ahead of him danced a troupe of acrobats and musicians, enacting in elaborate mimes and song the greatest achievements of their master's long career hunting the enemies of the Emperor. Kolgo himself, in jet-black Terminator armour bearing the 'I' of the Inquisition proudly on his chest, was flanked by several battle-sisters of the Adepta Sororitas. They were led by Sister Superior Aescarion, who had requested the duty of accompanying Kolgo so that she, too, could witness at first hand the trial of the renegades whose deeds she had personally witnessed. She had previously been assigned to Inquisitor Thaddeus, and she had no doubt that the Soul Drinkers were responsible for his death since he had disappeared hunting down evidence of their activities.

The Adeptus Mechanicus, who had more cause than most to despise the Soul Drinkers, were present in the form of Archmagos Voar. Voar had been instrumental in the capture of the Soul Drinkers, in doing so helping to set right an age-old debt owed to the Mechanicus by Sarpedon and his renegades. Alongside Voar was a ceremonial guard of gun-servitors, marching precisely in time. Voar's legs had been lost on Selaaca and so he moved towards the engine sections of the *Phalanx*, where he had been given quarters, on a set of simple tracks he had fashioned to use until more suitable replacements could be found. There was none of the hatred in him that the other attendees flaunted, for Voar was an analytical creature for whom emotion was an inconvenience.

The word had spread beyond those who had personally encountered the Soul Drinkers after they had turned renegade. The *Killing Shadow* of the Doom Eagles Chapter and the *Judgement Upon Garadan* of the Iron Knights dropped out of warp near Kravamesh and demanded that they, as loyal Space Marine Chapters, also take part in the trial. Shortly after this they were joined by contingents of Angels Sanguine and Silver Skulls, both Chapters who had heard of the Soul Drinkers' capture and found they had officers stationed close enough to Kravamesh to have a presence at the trial.

Chapter Master Vladimir listened to their petitions. It was down to his judgement whether or not these Space Marines would be welcome. He accepted that the existence of renegade Space Marines was an affront to the whole Adeptus Astartes, and that the crime of any one renegade Chapter was a crime against them all for it blackened the name of Space Marines, their primarchs and even the Emperor Himself. So Vladimir gave the order for the Chapter representatives to be welcomed on board the *Phalanx*, and quartered among the monastic cells usually used by Imperial Fists who were on operations elsewhere in the galaxy.

Amid the pageantry of so many Chapters all announcing their presence and bringing their own officers and honour guards on board, the existence of a band of ragged pilgrims in the forward cargo

sections was all but forgotten.

IN THE DUSTY, long-empty cargo hall, Father Gyranar knelt and prayed. Decades before this place had been crammed with supplies of ammunition, food and spare parts long since used up, and it remained only in the memories of a few crewmen who recalled it when asked if there was somewhere the pilgrims of the Blind Retribution could be quartered. Those pilgrims now knelt on bedrolls or attended to their holy books, preparing their souls for the solemn duty of overseeing the great trial to come. No one had thought to tell them when the trial was expected to begin, but the pilgrims did not care. They would always be ready.

Father Gyranar, who had spoken with Castellan Leucrontas, was the oldest among them, and few of them were young. His own prayers were so familiar to him that he had to stop and think about the words, to stop them slipping through the well-worn channels of his mind. When he murmured that the Emperor's will was his will, he forced himself to pause and consider what that actually meant. That he had no will of his own, that he was the vessel for a higher power, that his own wishes and desires had long since withered away to be replaced with what the Emperor wanted for this particular instrument.

Gyranar carried a prayer book, but he had not opened it in thirty-seven years. He knew it by heart.

His evening prayers complete, Gyranar stood. 'Advance the standards,' he said.

The other pilgrims did not expect this. It was not a part of their normal routine. After a few moments of confusion the standards of the Blind Retribution were unfurled and held aloft.

'This place is now holy ground,' said Gyranar. His voice was brittle and frail, but the other pilgrims listened so attentively that he could have been no clearer with a vox-caster. 'The time for confession has come.'

'Confession, father?' said Brother Akulsan. He was the Blind Retribution's deacon, who oversaw the few permanent places of worship they had established on the worlds where they had settled for a while. On a pilgrimage such as this he became a second leader, a check to Gyranar's authority.

'Indeed,' said Gyranar. 'A confession most vital. There is in us all a sin. The task we undertake here is of such import that I would have it spoken aloud by all of us.'

'Many times have I made confession,' said Akulsan. 'Indeed, the very pride of confessing has itself become as a sin, and required yet more confession. I feel there is little in me that is still dangerous and unspoken, prideful though that thought may be.'

'Sister Solace?' said Gyranar.

'Every night I beg forgiveness for my failures,' replied Sister Solace, in a voice hoarse with endless prayers. Those not familiar with the Blind Retribution sometimes expressed surprise that Solace was a woman, for she had the dusty voice of an old man and beneath her robes it was impossible to tell gender. Most people never suspected there were women in the Blind Retribution at all. 'I yearn to be free of them. What confession can I make now that I have not in every moment before?'

'You know,' said Gyranar, 'of what I speak.' He had been kneeling but he now stood. He had never been a big man and now he was bent and drained, but still the pilgrims looked down or shied away a little as if he had the presence of an Astartes. 'Though the greater part of your soul may deny it. Though you beg the Emperor that it not be true. Though you have forced yourselves to forget all but its shadow, yet all of you know of what I speak.'

The pilgrims were silent. The only sound was the distant hum of the *Phalanx's* engines and the pulsing of the air recyclers overhead.

'Then I shall begin,' said Gyranar. 'O Emperor, I speak unto you the darkness of my deeds, and the poverty of this spirit so unworthy to serve you. My confession is of a time long ago, when first I wore the habit of the Blind. In the night as I lay in cloisters, a shadow came to me, clad in darkness. I am sure he was another brother of this order, though I know not his name. Perhaps it was that same father who

counselled me in your ways. He said nothing, and did no more than place a chalice beside the slab on which I slept. Tell me, brethren, is there some confession in you that begs to be released, that has some of the same character as mine? Is there some echo of recognition that tugs at you, though from your memory it be gone?"

The pilgrims said nothing. So rapt were they by Gyranar's words that the Imperial saints could have descended in that moment and not broken their concentration on what the old man had to say.

'Then I shall continue,' he said. 'In this chalice was a liquid dark and cold. The shadow bid me drink with a gesture, and I did so, for I was afraid. And then into my mind there flooded a terrible waterfall of knowledge. I saw destruction and suffering! But I saw also the good that would come of it, the sinners that would be purged and the dead flesh of this bloated Imperium burned away. And I saw this time, when the Angels of Death, the Emperor's own warriors, shall be brought to trial before their peers, and I saw the part we were to play therein. The sin I confess is that I have known since that night that this time would come, and that the Blind Retribution must be there not only to observe that justice be done, but to enact a most crucial and terrible act that is the Emperor's will. I have kept it secret, locked up in my soul. Knowing that the day would come everything I saw will come true. That is my confession. Who will follow mine with the excision of their own sin? Who?'

For a few moments, there was silence. Then one of the pilgrims raised a hand - Brother Sennon, one of the younger brethren who had been with the Blind Retribution only a few years. 'I drank of the chalice,' he said, his voice wavering. 'I saw... I saw the *Phalanx*. I thought it was a gilded eagle, a symbol of the Emperor's presence but... but when I looked upon this ship, I understood that whatever is to befall us must happen here. And it will be most dreadful. I saw flame, and blood, and torn bodies. Astartes battling one another. There was a terrible injustice, I am sure, which by this violence might be averted. And... Father Gyranar, I am sure that I must die.'

'Brother Sennon,' said Gyranar, 'your courage is that of one far beyond your years and wisdom. To have made this confession here, before your brothers, is an act of great bravery. Who here can show such valour? For he is not the only one with something to confess.'

'I, too,' said Sister Solace, 'have seen what I must do. It is indeed a terrible thing. But it was brought to me while at prayer. There was a searing pain about my temples and when my senses returned my mind was full of visions. I saw the *Phalanx*, and all that you have spoken of. I have hidden this for so long because I was afraid. I thought I was the only one. I thought that if I spoke of it I would be accused of corruption, and so I pushed it down to the depths of my soul. Only now am I able to acknowledge it within myself.'

More voices spoke out. Many had drunk of the chalice offered to them. Others had been struck by sudden visions while ill with a fever or at prayer. Some had been granted prophetic dreams. All of them had hidden what they had seen, and all of them had seen the same thing. The *Phalanx*. Fire and warfare. Destruction. And all had the same absolute certainty that what they saw was the Emperor's will. Every pilgrim cried out his own confession, finally unburdening himself of the dark thoughts that had been inside him since the days of his novitiate in the Blind Retribution.

Gyranar held up a hand to silence them. 'Now our confession is finished,' he said, 'is any of you in doubt as to what he must do? Does any fail to understand his own task in this, our final act of devotion?'

This time, there was silence again.

'Good,' said Gyranar. 'Then the Emperor's will must be done, dreadful though it is. And true, many of you will die, though the fear of death has no hold on you, I see.'

'Rather death,' said Brother Akulsan, 'than to live on with this task undone.'

'Good,' said Gyranar. 'Then we are all of the same mind. And now, let us pray.'

If ARCHMAGOS VOAR could have truly admired anything, he would have admired the Crucible of Ages.

The complex angles of its construction, wrought in iron and bronze to form a great segmented dome, were lit from beneath by the molten metal running in channels between the four great forges in which blades and armour segments were being heated by crewmen in heavy protective suits. The sound of steel on steel rang like the falling of a metallic rain. The work was overseen by the Techmarines of the Fourth, Seventh and Eighth Companies of the Imperial Fists, those companies present on the *Phalanx* for the trial. The Techmarines checked each piece for flaws after its cooling in the huge vat of water in the centre of the dome, throwing those pieces that failed back into the streams of molten metal.

Voar did not really like anything in the traditional human sense, since he had lost much of his emotional centre over the course of his various augmentations. But as much as he could, he liked this place. It was a place of both industry and wisdom. The exacting standards of the Techmarines were something to admire, as was the devotion the crewmen had to the orders of their Imperial Fists masters. The Crucible of Ages could have been lifted straight out of an Adeptus Mechanicus forge world, which was as high a compliment as a magos of the Mechanicus could pay.

Archmagos Voar had been summoned here. Ordinarily one did not summon an archmagos, but he was a guest here on the *Phalanx* and his datamedia still contained enough matters of etiquette to suggest he should accept the request to come to the Crucible.

In the centre of the Crucible stood an Astartes who was not a Techmarine. He wore Terminator armour, its yellow ceramite panels lit red and orange by the molten streams. He was testing the weight and balance of several hammers recently forged and left by the cooling pool. Each hammer was as long as a man was tall but the Imperial Fist swung them as if they weighed nothing. He swung each in turn a few times, running through a simple weapons drill, then scowled and placed each one back in the pile. None of them seemed to please him very much. None of them, presumably, was the equal of the thunder hammer he carried strapped to the back of his armour.

'Demenos!' shouted the Imperial Fist over the din.

One of the Techmarines turned to him. 'Captain Lysander?'

'What grade of material are you using for your hammer heads? These things feel like they would splinter against a child's hand! And the shafts are about as sturdy as straw!'

Techmarine Demenos bowed his head. 'Many of my forgers are new, captain,' he said. 'They have yet to understand the artificer's art. These weapons are exemplars of their competence thus far. They shall be used as training weapons, I would imagine.'

'If you wish to train our novices to fear the failing of their wargear, then they will do perfectly,' retorted Lysander. He picked up a sword this time and made a few thrusts and chops with it. 'This is better,' he said. 'This would go through a few skulls.'

'My own work,' said Demenos.

'Then you need to learn how to balance a hilt. Good work, though.' Lysander spotted Voar trundling between the forges towards him. 'Archmagos! I am glad you could come. I think perhaps this place is more suited to your tastes than the rest of the *Phalanx*.'

'I have no tastes,' replied Voar. 'A magos metallurgicus could gain no little pleasure from the specifications of your forges, no doubt, but my specialities lie in the fields of reverse engineering and theoretical mechanics.'

'Well, be that as it may,' said Lysander, 'the Crucible itself is not why I requested your presence. This is.' Lysander took from a compartment in his armour a tube of black metal, as long as a normal man's forearm. Its surface was knurled into a grip and on one end it had a small control surface with indented sensors. 'Perhaps you recognise it?'

Voar walked up to Lysander and took the cylinder. Voar's bionic hand did not fit the grip well - it

was sized for a Space Marine's hand.

'This is the Soulspear,' said Voar flatly.

'As seized at the Lakonia Star Fort,' said Lysander. 'The seed of the conflict between the Priesthood of Mars and the Soul Drinkers. We recovered it from the *Brokenback* before it was scuttled. I understand that it is to be considered your property. It was taken from you by the Soul Drinkers, and as heretics they have no right to it. Therefore its possession defaults to the Adeptus Mechanicus. Specifically, you.'

Voar turned the weapon over in his artificial hand. 'I confess that my dealings with emotive matters are long behind me,' he said, 'but still I have the impression, a remnant of some human sense if you will, that you are not happy about this situation.'

'The Soulspear is a relic of our primarch,' replied Lysander. 'Rogal Dorn himself found and re-engineered it. By rights it should belong to one of the successors of Dorn's Legion, the Imperial Fists or one of our brother Chapters. I have no shame in that belief. Any son of Dorn would say the same. But my Chapter Master has no wish to see another rift between the Adeptus Astartes and the Mechanicus, and I must bow to his decision. Here.'

Lysander touched a finger to one of the control surfaces and a tiny laser pulse punched a microscopic hole through the ceramite of his gauntlet's finger joint. Twin blades of pure blackness shot out of each end of the cylinder. The air sighed as it was cut apart by the voids of the blades.

'Vortex blades,' said Lysander. 'A vortex field bound by Throne knows what technology from before the Age of Imperium. Activated by a gene-lock keyed to the genetic signature of Rogal Dorn. This was wielded by Dorn's own hand, archmagos. A man of whom no Fabricator General can claim to be the equal. The saviour of the Emperor Himself at the height of the Heresy. The greatest soldier this galaxy has ever seen, and I say the greatest man, too. Remember that, whatever you choose to do with this relic. Fail to show Dorn's own handiwork the proper respect and the Imperial Fists just might choose to risk a new rift after all.'

'I see,' said Voar. 'Your information has been logged and will be made available to all those given the honour of examining this device.'

'In return for this,' said Lysander with obvious disdain for Voar's manner, 'the Chapter Master expects the Adeptus Mechanicus to conduct their part in the trial with all the honour that your status as a guest here demands. This is no place to settle a feud between the Soul Drinkers and the Mechanicus. No place for vengeance.'

'Your battle-brothers are not all of the same mind,' said Voar. 'Nor, logic suggests, will many of the visiting Astartes agree with such a stance. There is a great deal of vengeance sought on the *Phalanx*, and the better part of it stems not from the Mechanicus.'

'Chapter Master Vladimir Pugh has pronounced on the subject,' said Lysander. 'He has tasked me, among others, with seeing his word made law.'

'Then it shall be abided by,' said Voar with a nod of his head. It seemed the archmagos was not capable of any gesture of greater deference. 'Our interest is in justice.'

'If you cared about justice, archmagos, you would give the Soulspear to us.'

'And if you cared about justice, brother-captain, then Sarpedon would have died on Selaaca.' Archmagos Voar wheeled around and left the forge, the Soulspear clutched in his bionic hand.



Questing Knight

By Anthony Reynolds

I

THE SILVER MOON of Mannslieb resembled a sickle blade hanging low in clear night sky. Patches of snow shone brightly beneath it, and while it was almost a month into spring, the wind whipping across the fields still held a touch of winter's bite. Hunched against the icy gale, two riders were making their weary progress along a muddy road, passing fields, abandoned hovels and isolated clumps of woodland.

They travelled in silence, one behind the other, offering no conversation. The only sound accompanying them was the steady clomping of hooves, the jingle of tack and the ghostly whispering of the wind.

The lead rider drew his travel-stained cloak tighter around his shoulders as the wind picked up. His features were completely hidden in the deep shadow of his hood, yet his eyes glinted in the moonlight. He rode a massive warhorse, over sixteen hands high at the shoulder, and had a large sword strapped across his back. In stark contrast to his companion, he rode in the languid manner of one who had spent most of his life in the saddle.

The second rider looked decidedly awkward, slumped in the saddle of a mange-ridden mule. The plodding beast was a picture of misery, head hanging almost to the ground as it trudged through the mud, laden with heavy packs and chests. This rider was shivering, for while he too wore a cloak, it was threadbare and moth-eaten. His head was nodding towards his chest. Losing the battle to keep his eyes open, he pitched sideways. He came awake with a muffled yelp, and after a brief, inelegant struggle, he hauled himself back upright.

'I will not wait for you if you fall off again, Chlod,' said the lead rider without turning. Chlod's hood had fallen back, exposing his brutish head. His hair was shaved short in a vain attempt to rid him of lice, and his eyes were piggish and uneven. He had only one ear, the other having been hacked off by a Norscan shaman years earlier, and his jutting jaw and heavy brow made him look like a simpleton. He glared at his master's back, and pulled a grotesque face.

'Make that face again, Chlod, and I will cut off your thumbs,' said his master.

'Sorry, my lord,' said Chlod, knowing that it was not some idle threat.

They continued along in silence once more. Chlod blinked the sleep out of his eyes and concentrated on his surroundings. He thought they looked vaguely familiar, but it was hard to say under the cover of darkness, and besides, it had been many years since last he had set foot in Bretonnia.

'Where are we, my lord?' he said at last.

'Home,' came the reply.

IT FELT STRANGE to say the word, thought Calard. *Home*.

Six long and difficult years had passed since he had left Castle Garamont. It felt like a lifetime. Six years ago he had taken up the grail quest, setting aside his lance and handing over the running of his castle and lands to his young cousin, Orlando, under the watchful eye of Baron Montcadas. Orlando had been just a boy when he had left, and by now he would be all but unrecognisable, on the cusp of becoming a man.

Calard had travelled the Old World and beyond seeking the Lady of the Lake, patron goddess of Bretonnia. Never in all that time had he spent more than a single night in one place, as per the decree of his oath, lest the Lady find him wanting.

Seeking the Lady's divine favour, he had bested creatures foul and murderous in the forests of the Empire, championed the oppressed in the burning lands of Araby far to the south, and battled alongside dwarf thanes against screaming hordes of greenskins far beneath the Worlds Edge Mountains. He had fought in a dozen duels of honour, one against a monstrous ogre tyrant. He had battled trolls upon the frozen oblast of Kislev, rescued a nobleman's daughter from sacrifice at the hands of a band of cultists beneath Altdorf, and emerged victorious from the famed Dance of Blades in the cutthroat city of Sartosa, off the coast of Estalia. Always, he chased the elusive presence of the goddess, yet always she led him further on. Now, she had brought him back to his homeland.

For months, Calard's dreams had been haunted by a recurring vision. Though he could not discern its full meaning, one thing was certain beyond any doubt; the goddess wished for him to return to Castle Garamont.

Calard reined his destrier in as he topped a tussocked rise. He drew his hood back. Gone was any hint of softness in his appearance, the years on the road having hardened his body and his mind. His eyes were dark and stern, and his cheeks rough with stubble. His hair was unwashed and hung past his shoulders, and his face was tanned. As alert and lean as a hunting wolf, he stared over the fields into the distance. His eyes narrowed.

'Master?' said Chlod, after a minute. 'What is it? I see nothing.'

'Exactly,' said Calard. 'Where are the lights of Castle Garamont? We should be able to see them on the horizon from here.'

The mighty fortress dominated the landscape for miles around, and its men-at-arms always kept its beacon fires burning through the hours of darkness. Nevertheless, the western horizon was ominously dark.

'Perhaps someone forgot to light them?' offered Chlod, but Calard shook his head.

'There is something wrong here,' he said, his eyes glinting fiercely in the moonlight. 'I'll move quicker alone. Follow after me, and keep to the road. Do not tarry.' Chlod nodded.

With a flick of the reins Calard urged his destrier into a canter and began riding towards the distant silhouette of Castle Garamont.

Mannslieb was just touching the horizon by the time he drew close. Dark and ominous, his family castle loomed above him. He circled around it in a wide arc, scouting for danger, but saw no sign of life other than a startled fox and a mated pair of ghost-owls hunting for prey. Calard's expression was grim. The scent of ash filled the air, and several of the castle's towers had collapsed. There were no sentries upon the walls, and no light in any of its windows. By all appearances, it was utterly abandoned, and had been left to ruin.

Nevertheless, Calard's experience had taught him to be cautious, and he completed his wide circuit around the castle before he began his approach from the south, angling towards Garamont's main gatehouse. Out of habit, he ensured that the wind was always in his face, so as to mask his scent from anything ahead.

The drawbridge was lowered and in a state of disrepair, and the rusted portcullis was up. Calard rode through the gatehouse into the courtyard beyond, staring around him at the ruin of his once great castle.

The keep was a burnt-out shell, its pale stone blackened with soot, and the wind howled mournfully through its empty halls. The stables were completely gone, with nothing but a few charred stumps and charcoal marking where they had stood. The north-east wall had partially collapsed, the debris scattered

on the ground like grave markers.

Dismounting, Calard tied his warhorse to a fire-blackened post before climbing the stairs towards the keep. One of its doors was gone, while the other hung forlornly on one hinge, creaking in the breeze. Drawing his sword, he moved into the keep's dark interior.

He passed through its empty halls, his expression betraying none of his surging emotions. The inside of the keep was now open to the sky, the upper floors completely gone, and the stars were visible high overhead. A few thick supporting beams remained intact, but even these were charred and looked as though they might fall at any moment. The grand stone staircase that rose from the main entrance hall still stood, rendered pointless now that it climbed nowhere, and its steps were thick with ash.

Bones and scraps of armour protruded from the debris in one hall, and these Calard inspected carefully, turning them over in his hands in an attempt to discern what tragedy had befallen his home. Chipped bone showed evidence of heavy sword blows, and as he prowled deeper into the ruin, he found more evidence that a great battle had taken place here some years earlier.

Without conscious thought, Calard found himself in a small annex off the western wing, where the castle's shrine to the Lady was located. No divine power had protected it from the fire that had clearly ravaged the keep, and only a few jagged shards remained of its once beautiful stained-glass windows.

Something caught his eye, and Calard sheathed his sword and knelt before the fire-blackened altar. Half-buried amongst the rubble, a small statue of the Lady remained intact, lying on its side. It was covered in soot and chipped, but Calard picked it up and placed it reverently upon the altar. Closing his eyes, he began to pray.

There was noise outside and Calard was instantly on his feet, sword drawn. Moving silently and keeping to the shadows, he ghosted back through the ruined hall.

'Master?' called a voice.

'Silence, fool,' Calard hissed, stepping from the concealing darkness of the ruined keep.

'What happened here, master?' said Chlod. He half-climbed, half-fell from the saddle, and tied his mule to the post alongside Calard's steed.

Calard's eyes were locked on the ground at the peasant's feet.

'Stand still,' he ordered.

'What?' said Chlod, turning in Calard's direction.

'Be still! Stop moving,' said Calard, and the peasant froze. Calard moved forward, studying the ground intently. There were prints in the mud that he had not noticed earlier. 'Back away over there,' he said, gesturing.

'Shall I prepare you some food, master?' said Chlod, doing as he was bid.

'Fine, but no fire,' said Calard, not looking up. 'It would be seen for miles around.'

Careful not to disturb the tracks, Calard crouched and studied them intently. They were difficult to read, for the prints were old and crossed over themselves time and again. Nevertheless, after several minutes Calard had identified the tracks of nine separate individuals and their steeds. He judged that they had made camp here a week ago, perhaps two.

His eyes narrowed when he came across one particularly clear hoof-print. The depth of the track indicated a horse heavily burdened, and the mark of its shoe was clear. In the centre of the imprint was the blacksmith's mark. Calard recognised the heraldic device instantly.

'Sangasse,' Calard spat.

Standing, Calard marched towards his waiting warhorse, and called for Chlod to make ready to depart.

‘Where do we go, master?’ said the peasant as he hurriedly began packing up his pots.

‘To visit an old neighbour,’ said Calard, his voice filled with rage.

II

‘MALORIC!’

The sky glowed with pre-dawn light. The peasants of Sangasse had been awake for hours, working the muddy fields. Many of them had halted their work as Calard had passed by, leaning on hoes and muttering under their breath. Calard had ignored them, his head held high and his face a grim mask.

Though they were neighbours, no knight of Garamont had set foot on Sangasse lands for over six generations without blood being spilt. The border between the two powerful noble families had long been disputed, changing hands countless times over the centuries. As Calard had ridden towards the border, his anger had deepened, for it was clear that the Sangasse family had claimed much of Garamont’s land in his absence. By the time he arrived outside the gates of Castle Sangasse, a formidable bastion built atop a natural rocky bluff, his rage was incandescent.

‘Maloric!’ he bellowed again, wheeling his warhorse beneath him.

Nervous men-at-arms looked down from the castle walls at him. All of them were garbed in tabards bearing the heraldry of Maloric, the Earl of Sangasse. Maloric and Calard were of a similar age and had a long history of antagonism. Since childhood they had been raised to loathe one another, and even though they had fought side by side on dozens of occasions, even going so far as saving each other’s lives on the field of battle, they could never be anything but rivals.

Chlod licked his lips. Hundreds of bowmen were stationed along the walls, and a pair of mighty trebuchets were positioned atop the gatehouse. Scores of men-at-arms barred the way, shields locked together. Calard was undaunted, refusing to be intimidated by mere peasants.

‘Show yourself, Maloric!’ he shouted. ‘Calard, Castellan of Garamont demands it!’

At last, a young knight appeared atop the gatehouse. His hair was dishevelled and he was still blinking the sleep out of his eyes. Calard did not recognise him.

‘What is it you seek here, Garamont?’ called the knight.

‘Fetch your master, and be quick about it,’ shouted Calard. ‘I will not bandy words with you or any of Maloric’s lackeys.’

Chlod winced as the knight’s face reddened and several archers nocked arrows to strings.

‘Speak to me in such a tone again, Garamont, and you will be cut down where you stand,’ shouted back the knight. ‘Speak your piece quickly, or take your leave!’

‘I am a Questing Knight of the Lady,’ shouted Calard. ‘Any man who dares loose an arrow in my direction will be cursed by the goddess, as shall you if you give the order. Now be gone from my sight, I am done talking to you. I will speak to Maloric, and no one else. Fetch him from his bed if sleeping past dawn is his habit.’

His face flushed, the knight turned and disappeared from sight.

For long minutes, Calard and Chlod waited while men-at-arms and peasant bowmen shuffled their feet awkwardly. Chlod tried to shrink, making himself as inconspicuous as possible, while Calard paced back and forth before the gatehouse, his mount snorting and stamping its hooves in agitation.

Finally, the ranks of the men-at-arms in front parted, and an elderly knight appeared, his expression cold. This knight Calard recognised, though he could not recall his name. The knight bowed curtly, just low enough not to be openly discourteous.

‘The Earl of Sangasse and his lady bid you welcome, Calard of Garamont,’ said the knight. ‘My lord is currently sitting for breakfast, and asks that you join him.’

Calard dismounted, and a peasant ran forwards to take his reins.

‘Stay with the horses,’ he said to Chlod, before turning back towards the knight of Sangasse.

‘Lead on,’ said Calard.

The knight nodded, and turned on his heel, leading the way into Castle Sangasse.

‘CALARD, WHAT A pleasant surprise,’ said Maloric with a sardonic half-smile. ‘I thought you were dead.’

The earl was a lean man in his early thirties, handsome in an angular, sharp-featured way. His hair was pale and he sported a slender goatee beard. His clothes were finely made, and edged in silver. A long table laid with a spread fit for the king himself was before him. The rich aromas made Calard’s stomach knot, and he began to salivate despite himself; it had been weeks since he had eaten a meal not prepared by his manservant Chlod, who was a poor cook at best.

‘Sorry to disappoint, Maloric,’ said Calard, dragging his gaze from the food on display.

The Earl of Sangasse did not rise from his high-backed seat – a subtle insult that Calard did not fail to notice – and he looked Calard up and down.

‘My, my, you are quite a sight,’ said Maloric. ‘And what a stink! When was the last time you washed?’

‘One does not have much time for such luxuries when embarked on the quest, Maloric.’

‘Of course. I take it that you have still not yet been successful. It has been what, five years?’

‘Six.’

‘Six years,’ said Maloric, taking a swig of wine. ‘How time flies. Please, sit. No wait, I will send for a blanket. No offence, of course, but these chairs were imported from Cathay at not inconsiderable cost.’

‘I will stand, thank you,’ said Calard, coldly.

‘As you wish,’ said Maloric, shrugging. He gestured towards the food on the table. ‘Eat. Drink. You look half-starved.’

‘I did not come here to eat your food, nor to trade insults, Sangasse,’ said Calard.

‘Oh?’ said Maloric. ‘Then to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?’

‘I have returned home to find my castle in ruin,’ said Calard, ‘and to suffer the insult of seeing Sangasse peasants tilling Garamont land. I have seen no sign of even one of my vassal knights, nor my appointed heir Orlando or his guardian, Baron Montcadas. I come here to call you to account for these transgressions, Maloric, and I swear by all that I hold holy that if you have done harm to my household, I will kill you.’

Holding Calard’s gaze, Maloric reached out and plucked a shelled quail’s egg from a silver plate. He popped it between his teeth and washed it down with another swig from his ornate goblet.

‘Are you done?’ said Maloric, dabbing at his lips with a silk napkin.

‘Long has Sangasse looked upon Garamont lands with envious eyes. I should have known that you would make a play for them in my absence,’ said Calard. ‘Did you murder Orlando with your own blade, Maloric, or did you have one of your knights do it for you?’

‘I am no murderer of children, and I would be well within my rights to demand justice for such an insult, offered in my own hall no less. However, you are clearly aggrieved and not in full control of yourself. What god did your family offend, Calard, to see it suffer so? Truly your bloodline is cursed.’

‘Do not speak of my family, Sangasse dog,’ said Calard.

‘I will forgive that this once, Garamont, for you speak in rashness and ignorance. But I warn you, do not fling your baseless insults and accusations in my direction again or I will not be so tolerant. I would not wish such a fate as your family has suffered on any noble son of Bastonne, even you, but my patience can be pushed only so far.’

‘I saw men garbed in the regalia of Sangasse patrolling Garamont lands,’ said Calard in an even voice, regathering some control of his temper. ‘And I know that your men have camped in the ruin of my castle. What explanation do you offer for this?’

‘I would not have an empty, unguarded land bordering my own,’ said Maloric. ‘Without a standing military force, Garamont would be a breeding ground for miscreants and outcasts, a haven for bandits and worse. I am merely ensuring the protection of my own lands by sending patrols into your homeland. I have annexed a portion of Garamont lands to pay for this additional militia, in lieu of recompense – for whom should I claim recompense *from*? As I said, I thought you dead.’

‘And what of my nephew and heir, Orlando? What has become of him?’

Before Maloric could answer, a side door to the chamber opened and a lady swept into the room, trailed by handmaidens. Rose-scented perfume wafted into the room in her wake.

‘You know my wife, Josephine,’ said Maloric.

‘Your wife?’ said Calard in shock.

The last time he had seen the Lady Josephine had been in the halls of Garamont. She was Baron Montcadas’s niece, and Calard had thought of her often during his long absence. On dark and lonely nights he had harboured romantic notions of marrying her on his return to Bretonnia, were she unwed. The old Baron Montcadas, who had always been more of a father than his own had ever been, had hoped to see the two of them wed years earlier, and had Calard not taken up the quest he believed they might have done. He had known her to be a warm-hearted and beautiful young woman, born of a wealthy and respectable noble family, and he had always found her company engaging.

‘Calard, we thought you were dead!’ said Josephine, rushing across to him. She hugged him tightly, tears in her gentle eyes.

‘You married *Maloric*?’ said Calard.

‘He is a good man, Calard,’ said Josephine, softly, ‘and a dutiful father.’

‘You... You have children?’ said Calard, stepping awkwardly away from her embrace.

‘You have been gone a long time, Calard,’ she said. There were dirty smudges on her silk dress, and Calard was suddenly conscious of his travel-worn appearance.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, but she waved away his apology.

‘It is nothing.’

‘Say you,’ said Maloric, standing and moving to Josephine’s side. ‘I am the one who pays for these dresses. She has expensive taste,’ he said to Calard as he embraced his wife.

Calard turned away, his mind reeling. He helped himself to a goblet of wine and downed it in one draught.

When he turned back around, his face was an unreadable mask.

‘Have you heard from Bertelis?’ asked Josephine.

‘No,’ said Calard. ‘I hoped that you might have?’

Josephine shook her head sadly.

The last time Calard had seen his half-brother had been in Lyonesse, just months before he had taken

up the quest, and he still carried the guilt over the last words they had exchanged. Calard had just witnessed the death of Elisabet, a noblewoman he had once loved. While he could see now that it had been an accident, at the time all he had seen was that she had died at his brother's hand. Blinded by grief, he had spoken angrily, and his words haunted him still, six years on.

'You are my brother no longer,' he had said. Calard had had many nights to regret those words, but he feared that he would never have the opportunity to atone for them. Bertelis and he had parted ways soon after.

'What happened to my home?' said Calard, dragging himself back to the present. 'Where is Orlando? Where is Montcadas?'

Fresh tears welled in Josephine's eyes and Maloric's expression darkened.

'I'm sorry, Calard,' Josephine said.

CALARD STARED AT the empty plate in front of him. Despite its quality and his hunger, the food had been like ash in his mouth.

'It was ablaze by the time my knights and I arrived,' said Maloric. 'There was nothing to be done. It burned solidly for two days, and it was a week before the embers cooled.'

'The goddess must have been looking over me,' said Josephine. 'Only my two handmaidens, a stableboy and I escaped.'

'How she didn't break a leg leaping from her window, I'll never know,' said Maloric.

'How could two knights have killed them all?' asked Calard. 'Fifteen of my vassal knights, as well as what, forty men-at-arms? Fifty? It is inconceivable. No two men could do that.'

'They were no men,' said Josephine. 'Of that I am certain. They were daemons in knights' bodies.'

'You saw them, you said?' said Calard.

'Only from afar. I was in my chambers preparing for bed when I heard them arrive at the castle gates. It was late. I heard the voices of your knights welcome these newcomers, as if they knew them. Their voices were raised, not in alarm but in surprise, joy even. At first I thought maybe it was you, Calard, returning home, but I was mistaken. The screams started soon after that.'

Calard leaned forward, focused completely on Josephine's words. Her face was pale and drawn, and her eyes misted over as she took herself back to that fateful night five years earlier.

'I know this is hard,' said Calard. Josephine composed herself before continuing.

'I left my room and was coming down the stairs. There were bodies everywhere. The screams were deafening. I could see one of them clearly through the open doors of the main hall. He – *it* – was covered in blood, from head to toe, and it moved faster than any man should. I ran to Orlando's room, but one of the monsters had already been there.' She sobbed, and took a moment to contain herself before continuing. 'He looked as though he was sleeping. His eyes were closed, but there was so much blood... The baron was there too. He died with a sword in his hand, blind as he was, the brave old fool. I ran to my room, and barricaded the door. I stayed there until I smelled smoke. The floor started to get hot. When the heat became unbearable I leapt from my window.'

'The knight you saw,' said Calard. 'Did you see his heraldry?'

'No,' said Josephine. 'But the devil was garbed in white.'

'Dressed in white...' breathed Calard. The vision that had been plaguing him for months sprang unbidden into his mind. The images were confusing, their meaning unclear, but he recalled again a shield of white lying discarded on the ground, splattered with blood. Bones and a skull, bleached white in the sun, were visible in the dead grass. A breeze picked up and black petals filled the air. Several flowers settled on the shield face, and only now did Calard recognise them for what they were.

‘This knight. His shield bore a black fleur-de-lys, didn’t it?’

‘It is possible,’ said Josephine, frowning, ‘but I could not be sure.’

‘I am certain,’ said Calard. ‘The Lady sent me a vision of black lilies falling upon a shield of white. She was telling me who did this.’

The lily was sacred to the Lady, and had been since the founding of Bretonnia. The tri-petalled symbol of the fleur-de-lys was a stylistic representation of the sacred flower, and while it had always been a sign of purity, the symbol had also been traditionally worn by the nobles of a house that was once proud and honourable, but had long fallen to darkness.

‘The goddess has shown me who has brought this ruination on my house that I might seek vengeance,’ said Calard, his eyes gleaming with conviction.

‘If you say so,’ said Maloric, putting his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

‘My path is clear,’ said Calard, standing. ‘I must leave.’

‘Leave?’ said Josephine, half-rising. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘If he wishes to chase foolish dreams, let him go,’ said Maloric, placing a hand on his wife’s arm.

‘But go where?’

‘The knight that you saw,’ said Calard. ‘I know who he is.’

‘Who?’ said Josephine.

‘A black fleur-de-lys against a white field. That is the heraldry of Merovech of Arlons.’

‘The knight that defeated your brother at the tournament in Lyonesse,’ said Maloric. ‘Am I right?’

‘You are.’

‘Arlons?’ said Josephine. ‘Where is that? I am not familiar with the name.’

‘I am not surprised,’ said Maloric, ‘for it is a cursed place. It lies within the borders of Mousillon.’

‘Mousillon,’ breathed Josephine, her eyes widening in horror.

‘And that is where I go,’ said Calard.

III

MOUSILLON, REALM OF the Damned.

Chlod stared ahead with wide, unblinking eyes as the barge made steady progress across the black waters of the River Grismarie. His gaze was locked in the near distance, where a solid wall of fog rose up, linking the icy black water with the overcast sky, concealing the shores of Mousillon. The peasant shivered.

‘It is like the edge of the world,’ said Chlod. ‘And we are sailing straight towards it.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Calard. ‘It is fog, nothing more.’

He was turning a sword over in his hands, marvelling at its workmanship. The blade was flawless, gleaming silver and the pommel was beautifully crafted into the shape of a fleur-de-lys.

The Sword of Garamont was a priceless heirloom, and it had been in the family for generations. Said to have been blessed by the kiss of the Lady herself, Calard had presented it to his nephew Orlando when he had taken up his quest. He had feared it lost, stolen or destroyed when his castle was sacked, but such fears had been proven unfounded. Before he had left Sangasse three weeks earlier, Maloric had brought it to him, wrapped in velvet.

‘My men found it in the ruins,’ the Earl of Sangasse had said. ‘I thought it best not to leave it for

scavengers.'

Miraculously, perhaps protected by the Lady's blessing, the blade had survived the fire unscathed. Calard sheathed the sword, and buckled it around his waist.

They were approaching the midway point of the Grismarie, and the river's black water was flowing fast and deep beneath them. Squat guard towers could be seen along the river bank in the distance behind them, on the Bastonne side of the Grismarie. Similar towers were positioned all along the many hundreds of miles of Mousillon's borders. Funded by the king's coffers, these bastions had been erected almost five hundred years earlier, and they stood as silent sentinels, ever watchful for a threat from Mousillon. At the first sign of trouble, the massive pyres atop the towers would be lit, one after another, spreading the word faster than an eagle could fly.

Calard's horse whinnied and shuffled uneasily, hooves sounding sharply on the barge's deck. Standing, Calard moved back to where the destrier was tethered and spoke to her in soothing tones, stroking her neck. Five surly boatmen worked the barge in silence, but Calard ignored them. Having settled his warhorse, he made his way towards the bow, where Chlod sat clutching the gunwale. The barge rocked gently to and fro, and Calard, unused to being on the water, kept a solid grip on the railing as he moved to the front of the barge.

'No good will come of this,' said Chlod. The peasant was clearly terrified.

The fog loomed hundreds of feet above them, like the sheer walls of a castle marking the midway point across the Grismarie. The hunch-backed peasant closed his eyes and muttered a prayer as the barge entered the murk.

A chill descended on them, its touch wet and cloying, and visibility was suddenly reduced to less than a few feet. The mist seemed to swallow up all sound, making even the lapping of water upon the hull of the barge sound strangely distant. The fog seeped in under Calard's armour, making his skin wet and clammy, and he began to shiver.

Something ground against the underside of the barge, which began to rock back and forth alarmingly.

'What was that?' squeaked Chlod, eyes snapping open, fingernails digging into the wooden gunwale.

'Big fish,' said one of the grim-faced boatmen. Calard was unsure if the man was joking or not.

Within minutes, Calard was soaked to the skin, his hair clinging in long wet strands down his neck. The journey through the fog seemed to last an eternity. Strange noises echoed around them: creaks, groans and distant screams that Calard guessed were seabirds but sounded distinctly human. On more than one occasion he was convinced he heard whispering voices nearby, but saw nothing.

Chlod gave a yelp at one point, and Calard glared at him.

'I felt someone breathing on my neck,' said Chlod, his voice strained.

'You imagined it,' said Calard. 'Be silent.'

Calard was starting to doubt the boatmen's ability to guide the barge safely through the fog when the sound of gravel scraping against the hull signalled their arrival on the shores of Mousillon.

The riverbank appeared like a mirage through the fog as the barge came to a grinding halt in the shallows. The land was rendered in shades of grey and hidden in mist, but a narrow strip of black sand soon emerged forming a beach in front of them.

Clearly eager to be away, the boatmen unloaded the barge hastily. There was a brief struggle to get Chlod's mule off the deck. The obstinate beast was reluctant to step ashore, and the struggle only ended after Calard slapped it hard on the flank. His own steed was equally uneasy, but did as it was bid with less complaint, stepping off the front of the vessel and splashing into the shallow black water. Without a

word of farewell, the boatmen poled the barge off the river bank and were swallowed by the fog.

It was as dark as twilight, though it couldn't have been an hour past midday. Looking around them, it seemed to Calard as if all colour had been bleached from the land. The sun had been shining through the clouds on the other side of the river, but it was nowhere to be seen here. The grass and vegetation was shrivelled and dead. A lone tree stood nearby, its trunk twisted. A raven the size of a small dog perched on a leafless branch, watching them with its head cocked to one side. Calard saw movement in the corner of his eye, but whenever he turned to face it, it was gone.

'We're never leaving here alive,' said Chlod.

Somewhere in the mist, a wolf began to howl.

IV

SOMETHING WAS HUNTING them.

They had barely halted, riding westwards through lonely, wind-swept landscapes and muddy fields filled with rotting crops. They had passed through a number of isolated peasant hamlets, but seen only glimpses of the inhabitants peeking out at them through barred windows.

The haunted realm had at first seemed to exist in a permanent state of twilight, but the shadows deepened as that twilight gave way to night. With no visible moon or star in the sky overhead, the darkness was soon all-consuming. Only far beneath the Worlds Edge Mountains had Calard experienced such utter blackness. Lighting torches, they continued on through that first, nightmarish night.

The darkness was filled with the howling of wolves, the beat of heavy, leathery wings, and the rustle of unseen creatures in the undergrowth nearby. They dared not rest, and pushed on through the night. A multitude of eyes glinted in the torchlight, watching their progress. In a break in the ever-present fog, Calard glimpsed huge, black-furred wolves loping alongside the road, dogging their progress.

Wolves were not the only things stalking them. On more than one occasion Calard glimpsed hunched figures on the road behind them.

'They're back again,' said Chlod, his voice strained as he looked back along the road behind.

'They have been there for some time,' Calard replied.

'They are growing bolder.'

'We need to find shelter,' said Calard. 'We cannot travel on through another night without rest, not hounded by those... things.'

They continued on in silence as the shadows deepened around them. Abruptly, the muddy road turned and veered over a small creek, angling straight into the dark forest they had so far been skirting. The wood was shadowy and threatening, its trees bloated and misshapen. Their trunks were rotten and covered in lichen and fungus.

'Do we go in?' asked Chlod.

'It has to lead somewhere,' said Calard. 'And we have to keep moving.'

With a nudge, he urged his steed on. Its hooves sank into the marshy ground as it stepped down to the shallow creek. The water stank, and was covered in a film of scum. With a kick of encouragement, Calard's warhorse leapt forward, clearing the stream and climbing the bank on the other side.

Chlod's mule was incapable of such a leap and seemed reluctant to step into the foul waters. As Chlod kicked and swore at the stubborn beast, Calard's gaze was drawn upwards by the ugly cawing of carrion birds.

More than a dozen corpses were strung up in the trees overhead, hanging from ropes and gibbets.

They spun gently as black birds tore strips of flesh from the bodies.

Movement in the trees dragged his attention down from the grisly sight. Shadows were detaching themselves from the surrounding darkness, edging towards them.

Calard reached over his back and drew his massive bastard sword from its sheath, holding it one-handed.

‘Hurry up, peasant!’ he hissed.

Perhaps catching a scent of the hunters on the breeze, the mule lurched forwards suddenly, almost throwing Chlod from its back, and the peasant lost his grip on the reins.

‘Whoa!’ shouted Chlod, clinging on desperately as the mule set off down the roadway, ears flat against its skull.

Calard’s steed flared its nostrils and stamped its hooves, and he fought to keep it under control, guiding it skilfully with his knees as he took his sword in both hands. He heard something hiss nearby, the sound low and sibilant, and he kicked his steed into a canter. It needed no encouragement, and took after Chlod instantly.

Glancing back, Calard saw a pack of hunched creatures loping after them. He could not tell if they were human or beast, or some horrid blend of the two.

Something caught at his hair, scratching his neck, and Calard swung his sword with a cry. It was just a branch, and Calard swore, berating himself. Foul-smelling sap was dripping like blood from the tree, and it recoiled with a groan, twigs shivering.

‘Lady above,’ Calard breathed. The other trees seemed to lean in, branches reaching towards him. Ducking away from their snagging twigs, Calard urged his warhorse into a gallop.

Within a few heartbeats he had drawn alongside Chlod, still clinging vainly to his panicked mule, and he reached out and grabbed the beast’s wildly swinging reins. Calard forced the animal to slow its wild gallop. Behind him, the road was clear again.

It was half an hour before they escaped the grotesque wood, and Calard let out a breath that he didn’t realise he had been holding. Up ahead he saw a small farmhouse. Turning up a muddy path, he led the way towards it.

There was no sign of life at the farm other than a starving three-legged goat tethered to a rotten stump. The pitiful animal’s ribs were clearly visible beneath its stretched skin. It bleated frantically, pink tongue protruding as it strained on its chain.

Calard spied a small covered well, and slid from his saddle alongside it. He began drawing the bucket up from below, hauling it up on its thin rope. His horse was lathered in sweat, its mouth flecked with foam. Calard hoped the well-water was drinkable. He dragged the bucket over the lip of the well, and lifted it to his nose. Frowning, he brought it to his lips and took a swig. He spat it out instantly, coughing.

‘Bad?’ asked Chlod.

‘Bad,’ said Calard, throwing the bucket to the ground in disgust. It split like an overripe fruit, spilling its contents. His stomach churned as he saw bloated worms wriggling in the water.

A woman’s cry sounded nearby, high-pitched and in pain, and it was joined by voices raised in anger or excitement. The sounds were coming from around the side of the farmstead’s barn. Calard drew his sword and rode towards it.

A foetid stench assailed his nose as he approached the barn, something akin to rotting meat and excrement. Rounding the rotting structure, he saw a cluster of peasants gathered around a woman on the ground. They were beating her mercilessly with sticks, and Calard winced at the savagery of the attack. She screamed again, but was knocked back to the ground as she tried to rise. The peasants laughed

cruelly, clearly enjoying their sport. Indignation and anger swelled in Calard, and with a yell, he kicked his steed forwards.

The peasants looked up in shock, then scattered. They took off over the fields, and Calard dragged on the reins, cutting short his pursuit.

‘Cowards,’ snarled Calard, shaking his head in disgust. He sheathed his sword and turned his attention to the woman.

She was sitting on the ground like a broken puppet, slumped forward over her splayed legs. Her hair was long and unkempt, hanging down over her face. Her thin shoulders heaved with each pained intake of breath.

‘They are gone,’ said Calard, stepping towards her. ‘They will trouble you no more.’

Her tattered peasant garb was ripped at the shoulder, exposing skin that was purple with bruises and cuts. The girl made no move to cover herself, and Calard averted his eyes out of modesty.

‘You are hurt,’ he said, stepping close.

Her head snapped up and Calard caught a glimpse of bloodshot eyes staring out through the girl’s tangle of matted hair. Thin lips drew back to expose filthy, jagged teeth, and as Calard recoiled in disgust she lashed out, seizing his forearm. Swearing, he tried to pull away, but the girl was surprisingly strong and held him in a vice-like grip.

With a feral hiss she slashed at him with her free hand, fingers curved like talons. Those fingers were long and bone-thin, their nails cracked and encrusted with filth. Instinctively, Calard turned his face away from the blow, a move that undoubtedly saved his eyes from being torn from their sockets. Still, he could not avoid the strike entirely, and her nails gouged four deep cuts across his cheek bone.

With a curse, Calard backhanded the feral peasant girl hard in the side of her head. She slammed heavily to the ground, losing her grip, and Calard backed away, blood dripping from the left side of his face.

Scrambling onto all fours, the girl glared up at him, pure hatred burning in her eyes. An animalistic growl rumbled from deep in her chest. Her teeth were bared and she began to crawl swiftly towards him, like a spider closing in on its prey.

Calard drew his bastard sword, and she hesitated. Sensing her indecision, he yelled loudly and took an aggressive step towards her.

With a hiss, the girl turned and fled. He watched her go, revulsion written on his face, but his head snapped around as he heard Chlod scream.

‘Master!’

Moving quickly, Calard hauled himself into the saddle of his warhorse. Rounding the front of the barn, he saw his manservant pointing wildly.

There were dozens of loping figures approaching the farm from across the muddy fields. Calard could not be sure if they were the same ones that had been following them, but he thought it likely. He saw instantly that there were too many of them to fight, and while the notion of fleeing from them made his face burn with shame, he knew that it would not serve the Lady’s purpose to die meaninglessly here.

‘Forgive me, Lady,’ he whispered. ‘Peasant! We ride!’

Chlod’s mule bucked suddenly as the wind shifted, bringing with it the scent of the approaching hunters. The hunchbacked peasant fell backwards into the mud, and the mule took off over the fields.

Calard swore, and made to go after the beast, but dragged himself back as more of the hunched figures appeared, rising from concealment. They leapt on the mule like a pack of wild dogs, and it screamed in terror as it was dragged to the ground. They were peasants, he saw now, undernourished and filthy, but some of them appeared so devolved and inbred as to be barely human at all.

His steed tensed beneath him, stamping its hooves and snorting in agitation.

The starving peasants were running towards them now, closing the distance quickly. Their faces were twisted in ravenous hunger.

‘Keep back, or by the Lady’s name I will not stay my blade!’ roared Calard, holding his sword high. They came on undaunted, and he swore again.

Making his decision quickly, Calard rode forward and plucked Chlod from the ground by the scruff of his neck. He dumped him on the saddle behind him, and urged his destrier on.

If the warhorse was overburdened carrying two riders, it didn’t show, and within heartbeats they were riding hard up the muddy roadway. The starving peasants ran after them, but they were easily outpaced. Only once the hellish farmstead was several miles behind them did Calard rein the destrier in, patting her neck appreciatively.

Darkness closed in, bringing all its claustrophobic terrors with it, and so their second night in Mousillon began.

V

IT WAS PITCH-BLACK as they approached the inn, yet it could only have been an hour after nightfall.

It was built like a fortress. It had few windows on its lowest level, and these were shuttered and barred. Fifteen-foot-high walls topped with spikes enclosed it completely. Braziers burned brightly in a vain attempt to keep the night at bay. A stout gatehouse was the only entrance to the compound, and to Calard’s trained eye it looked able to withstand all but the most concerted siege.

As they rode into the light, Calard pulled his hood down over his face. They were spotted as they approached the inn’s fortified gate, and sentries levelled heavy crossbows in their direction. Calard knew that his armour would provide scant protection at this distance, but if he felt any unease, he did not show it.

‘Who goes there?’ called out one of the guards.

‘Travellers seeking a room,’ replied Calard.

‘The gates are sealed at nightfall, stranger,’ came the reply. ‘Move along.’

‘What now?’ said Chlod, eyeing the night with haunted eyes. Wolves howled in the distance and he shivered.

‘I’ll be damned if we’re spending the night out here,’ Calard said under his breath. ‘We have coin, peasant,’ he called out. ‘We are not paupers.’

‘How much?’ called down the guard.

‘Enough,’ said Calard.

‘Approach,’ ordered the guard.

Calard nudged his warhorse forward, noting the deep scratches and gouges in the front of the gate. The sign swinging above the arched gateway proclaimed the inn to be called Morr’s Rest. Below the sign was a carved icon of the god of death in his guise as the reaper. Unlike more formal representations, this carved wooden statuette clasped a foaming mug of ale in one skeletal hand, while in its other it held its more traditional sword. Calard frowned, uncomfortable at such disrespect, and he muttered a prayer of appeasement to the god of the underworld.

A hatch in the gate opened up, just large enough to show the pig-like face of a guard, who squinted at them through a latticework of bars.

‘Show us the colour of your coin, stranger,’ he said.

Calard edged his steed closer and slid from the saddle. He drew a copper piece from his coin pouch and held it out.

‘You’ll have to do better than that,’ said the guard.

‘This is more than you deserve,’ said Calard. ‘Take it and open the gate.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the porcine guard, grinning smugly. ‘What else you got?’

Calard sighed.

‘Fine,’ he said, pulling a second pouch from beneath his travel worn tabard. This one was made of fine velvet, and the sentry’s small eyes lit up.

‘Closer,’ Calard said in a conspiratorial whisper. ‘I’ve only got the one, so it will only do for you, not the other guards.’

The man leaned in close, licking his lips. Calard’s hand shot out, slipping through the bars to grab the guard by the throat.

‘You should have taken the copper,’ said Calard in a low voice.

The guard’s eyes were bulging. Calard shifted his grip to the back of the man’s neck and pulled him violently forwards, slamming his face against the bars. Before the guard could recover, Calard pressed the blade of a knife to his throat.

‘I have a new proposition. Open the gate and you live to see another dawn.’

The man tried to speak, but Calard pushed the knife more forcefully into the rolls of fat beneath his chin, drawing blood.

‘Nod your head if you agree,’ he said, eyes cold and dispassionate. ‘*Gently.*’

The man’s eyes were wide with fear, and he nodded his head slightly.

‘Good,’ said Calard.

‘Open it up,’ said the guard, his voice hoarse, and Calard heard the heavy bar being removed. He released the guard, his knife disappearing.

The gate swung wide.

‘Try anything before I leave, and I’ll gut you like the pig you are,’ Calard hissed, leaning in close to the shaken guard as he walked through.

Calard caught a snatch of the conversation behind him as he led his steed into the walled inn’s courtyard. He heard guards asking how much the gatekeeper had got. Calard glanced over his shoulder and caught the man’s eye.

‘Enough,’ he heard him say, looking away quickly.

THE COMMON ROOM of Morr’s Rest was crowded and filled with smoke, and even the aroma of cooking meat, sawdust and ale was unable to fully conceal the stink of humanity and vomit within. Conversation stopped and heads turned as Calard stepped through the door.

He drew his hood down lower over his face under the scrutiny and took in the layout of the place at a glance. He noted that the inn had holy sigils and loops of garlic hung above its entrances. The drinkers themselves were a surly lot, their expressions ranging from suspicion to outright hostility. He glared at those whose gaze lingered on him too long, and one by one they turned back to their drinks, muttering darkly, and the hubbub of conversation resumed.

A more disreputable crowd of people Calard had rarely encountered, and he wondered wryly if he would be better off facing the creatures of the night. The patrons of Morr’s Rest scowled, bickered and spat as they gambled, drank and stuffed their faces with greasy stew and stale bread, laughing loudly at

ribald jokes and groping the beleaguered serving girls as they squeezed from table to table. Calard kept one hand on the hilt of his sword as he pushed his way towards the bar, scanning for potential threats.

Most of the drinkers had the look of outlaws, brigands and vagabonds, though some of them might have been desperate merchants fallen on hard times or fleeing debtors. Nor were they all of low birth; many were knights, though few of them displayed their colours or heraldry. Most of these were outcasts and dispossessed nobles, Calard judged; knights who had fled to Mousillon in dishonour rather than face justice. Most were likely murderers, traitors and cowards, and Calard fought to keep the disdain off his face as he moved amongst them.

He bumped into one of these knights as he shouldered his way to the bar. The nobleman was tall, gaunt-featured and dressed in dark colours, and he had his hand on the hilt of his sword. He had a vicious scar across his throat, and his eyes were cold. Calard held the man's gaze for a moment, before pushing past him and signalling the squint-eyed innkeeper for service. An ogre stood nearby, easily nine feet tall, its brutal face a mess of scars. It had a bored expression on its face, and its arms, as thick as tree trunks, were folded across its massive chest.

'Keeps the rowdier ones in check,' said the innkeeper. He wore a heavily stained apron over his obese gut. 'What are you wanting?'

'A room,' said Calard, 'and feed for my horse.' He pushed a pair of coins across the bar and they disappeared in the blink of an eye.

'One of the girls will bring you food and drink,' said the innkeeper, handing over a room key before turning to serve another patron. Calard grabbed the innkeeper by his arm and dragged him back.

'I'm looking for someone,' said Calard in low voice. 'A noble by the name of Merovech.'

The innkeeper pulled his arm away, scowling. 'You ain't from around here, are you?' he said.

'You know him?' said Calard.

The innkeeper nodded.

'Them's his knights back there,' he said, gesturing through the crowd. 'Bastards'll ruin me, drinking me dry and not paying a copper, but what can I do?'

Nodding his thanks, Calard found a secluded table in a dark corner and sat with his back against the wall. A bowl of gristly stew was brought to him along with a goblet of cheap wine, and he had some bread and water sent out to Chlod. He didn't touch his food, and made only a pretence of drinking his wine, eyes locked on the knights that the innkeeper had identified.

There were six of them, drinking heavily, and their table was piled high with empty dishes and goblets. Calard saw that one of their number was the cold-eyed knight he had bumped into at the bar, though he sat apart from the others, distancing himself from their drunken excesses. These other five were being loud, obnoxious and aggressive, shouting and pounding their goblets on the table as they watched a puppet show under way upon the small stage at the back of the inn.

Creepy-looking marionettes were re-enacting various events from history, and Calard's attention was drawn to the performance as something caught his eye. He saw a puppet knight dressed in a white tabard, and his eyes narrowed. The puppet's heraldry was unmistakable: a black fleur-de-lys on a white field. The knight's face was white, as was his hair, and he wore a crown of rulership upon his head.

'The duke invited all the nobles in Bretonnia to Mousillon, to celebrate his great victory!' screeched the voice of the story's narrator from behind the puppeteers' screen. 'The king himself came, and the Duke of Mousillon was proclaimed saviour of Bretonnia!'

A cheer erupted from the watching crowd as puppets representing the dukes of Bretonnia lifted the puppet of Duke Merovech high into the air.

'However, the king was jealous of our beloved duke's achievements,' continued the narrator, 'and

he knew that Duke Merovech would make a far better king than himself. He began plotting our duke's downfall.'

The crowd booed as the puppet of the king, carved to look like a drunken buffoon, rubbed its hands together in an evil, conspiratorial manner. Calard frowned. He knew this tale, but its telling was unlike any he had heard before: its perspective was skewed, its heroes and villains flipped.

The true tale was from a dark period in the history of Bretonnia, hundreds of years earlier, and it told the story of the last Duke of Mousillon, who was, by all reports, a butcher and murderer, a drinker of blood and an eater of children. However, in the puppet show being performed here, the sadistic duke was portrayed as a living saint, while the king and his loyal dukes were little more than jealous inbreds, conspiring against him.

The crowd cheered as the Duke of Mousillon uncovered the conspiracy against him, and thumped their tables as the puppets of their duke and the king drew swords against one another. The marionettes duelled, the skilled puppeteers making them fight with surprising believability, and the inn resounded to the sound of swords clashing.

Cheers and laughter erupted as the king's head was lopped from its shoulders, and those in the front row were sprayed with pig's blood pumped up through the puppet's severed neck. The marionette of the Duke of Mousillon lifted up a tiny goblet to catch the rain of blood, which it then drank down in one gulp, which was met with further cheers.

The curtain fell, and the narrator continued.

'The traitor king was dead, but the jealous dukes turned against Mousillon.'

The curtain lifted again, showing the Duke of Mousillon and his knights battling against the other dukes.

'Led by the treacherous Duke of Lyonesse,' said the narrator, eliciting derisive hisses from the crowd, 'they besieged Mousillon. Yet even heavily outnumbered, our lord could not be bested, not with his five trusted lieutenants beside him. Finally, the Duke of Lyonesse resorted to treachery.'

Boos and hisses greeted the appearance of a cloaked and hooded marionette that reared up behind the Duke of Mousillon and stabbed him to death. The deed done, the puppet threw off its disguise, revealing its identity as none other than the Duke of Lyonesse. The lights dimmed and the curtain fell.

The crowd booed loudly, but they hushed as the curtain rose one more time. The stage was unlit and bare but for a puppet reclined in death, wrapped in a shroud.

'But before he died, our beloved duke swore an oath. He swore that he would return from beyond the grave and seek vengeance! He swore that Mousillon would be returned to its former glory, and that the rest of Bretonnia would pay for its betrayal!'

The death shroud was suddenly whisked away from the puppet-corpse and the figure of the Duke of Mousillon leapt up, a sword held in each hand.

'Long live Duke Merovech!' screeched the narrator, and the curtain fell for the last time.

Calard shook his head as the crowd cheered and banged their tables. His gaze settled on the knight that he had bumped into at the bar.

Perhaps sensing someone watching him, the knight looked up, but by the time he did, Calard had already gone.

VI

AN HOUR LATER, the knight made his way up the narrow staircase to his room. He unlocked the door,

which opened with a drawn-out creak. It was dark within, and he cursed. He had left a lamp burning low on the table within, but a draught must have blown it out. Leaving the door ajar so that he could see by the light in the hallway, he moved towards the table.

The door clicked shut abruptly, and darkness swallowed him. He spun around on his heel, reaching for his blade. It was half-drawn when the tip of a sword touched his throat, and he froze.

‘Sheathe it,’ said a voice from the darkness. The gaunt-featured knight scowled but did as he was bid. The shutters of a lamp were opened, and the knight squinted against the glare.

‘Sit,’ said Calard. He forced the knight back with the point of his sword, making him sink into a moth-eaten chair. To his credit, the dishonoured knight showed no fear. ‘Put your hands behind your head,’ Calard said. The knight gave Calard a long look.

‘You are making a mistake,’ the knight said, placing his hands casually behind his head. His voice was coarse, little more than a growl. Calard lifted the man’s chin with the point of his blade, exposing a jagged scar that reached across his throat from ear to ear.

‘Nice scar,’ said Calard.

‘I’m alive,’ growled the knight. ‘The same cannot be said for the whoreson who gave it to me.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Raben,’ said the knight. ‘Who the hell are you?’

‘You are going to answer a few questions for me, Raben.’

‘You’re the one with the sword.’

‘You are one of Merovech’s knights?’

‘You already know the answer to that.’

‘Where is he, then?’

‘You honestly don’t know?’ said Raben.

‘If I did, I wouldn’t need you, outcast,’ said Calard.

‘Outcast, is it? Oh that hurts,’ said Raben.

‘Where?’ said Calard. A trickle of blood ran from Raben’s throat.

‘The ducal palace of Mousillon city,’ he said in his gravelly voice. ‘He does proclaim himself to be the long lost ruler of this realm, after all.’

‘The mad duke was killed centuries years ago,’ hissed Calard.

‘Who am I to dispute his claim?’ said Raben. ‘I’m just an outcast.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Is that it?’ said Raben. ‘Are we done?’

Calard lowered his sword, and the dispossessed knight let down his hands. Without warning, Calard slammed the heavy pommel of his sword into the side of Raben’s head. He fell sideways from his chair and hit the floor, unconscious.

‘We are done,’ said Calard.

CHLOD AWOKED WITH a start, his heart pounding. It took him a moment to remember where he was: the stable of Morr’s Rest. He lay there in the rotting hay, breathing hard. The sound came again – something like a heavy chunk of wood being dropped to the ground.

A shaft of torchlight seeped in from the courtyard outside through a knothole in the wall. Chlod

squatted alongside it, squinting through the gap.

At first he saw nothing untoward. The courtyard of the inn was deserted. His eye swept the compound, and at last settled on the gatehouse. He frowned.

The shadows beneath the archway were dark, but even so he could see that the gate was open. The heavy locking bars were on the ground. Sealed, nothing short of a battering ram would be able to breach those gates, but they had been flung wide, an open invitation to the creatures beyond.

For a moment, Chlod half-considered a mad dash across the courtyard to lock the gates, for he knew well the horrors that lurked outside. However, he was no hero, and they would have been too heavy for him alone anyway. He stayed put, rooted in fear, staring at the gate in silent dread.

For long minutes he watched, barely daring to breathe. After what seemed an eternity, he saw a shadow appear, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

The dark shape hugged the ground, moving low. It paused at the edge of the torchlight, then edged forwards. Chlod saw a pallid face atop a scrawny, malnourished body. Bones were starkly visible beneath its skin. It sniffed the air like an animal, then hissed over its shoulder. Rising from the ground into a low crouch, the starving peasant padded warily into the courtyard of Morr's Rest, hands twitching.

A second peasant came through behind the first, a filthy bearded man carrying a rusted plough blade. More followed. Chlod's heart was hammering loudly in his chest, but he could not tear himself away from his spy-hole.

He froze as one of the peasants came within feet of him, separated only by the thin overlapping planks of the barn wall. This one was a foul creature, barely human at all. It came to a halt and cocked its head to one side, nostrils flaring. Chlod could make out the fine web of blue veins beneath its skin, and could smell its animal stink. It turned and stared straight at him. Chlod's heart skipped a beat as it saw him. It grinned, exposing stained, jagged teeth.

Chlod fell away from the wall with a gasp, scrambling backwards. He heard footsteps inside the stable, and the horses and ponies began whinnying and kicking in their stalls. His master's warhorse was trembling, ears flat against its skull.

A scream close by made him jump. It was cut short, ending in the strangled gargle of someone dying.

Chlod's breathing was coming in frantic gasps, and his hands were shaking. Creeping forwards, he peered around the corner of the stall, looking out towards the entrance to the stables. He saw a handful of hunched peasants making their way up the aisle towards him. Their heads were low and swung from side to side, like dogs seeking a scent. He ducked back into the stall before he was seen.

'Ranald, protect me,' he said under his breath, invoking the trickster god of luck, benefactor of thieves, gamblers and ne'er-do-wells the Old World over. He turned around on the spot, undecided as to his best course of action. He considered hiding under the loose straw on the floor, but there wasn't enough to adequately conceal him, and the peasants would surely sniff him out. He thought about mounting his master's warhorse and riding free, but he doubted that he would have been able to haul himself up upon its back anyway, let alone ride it. And if he did somehow survive, his master would surely see him hang for sullyng the noble beast.

He backed away into the far corner of the stall, edging past the powerful destrier. The horse's muscles were twitching; it knew that predators approached. The feral peasants would be only yards away now, and Chlod bit his lip, indecision paralysing him.

A shadow appeared in the open stall gate, and the warhorse shuffled uneasily, snorting. Without thinking, Chlod slapped the horse hard on the rump.

'Yah!' he shouted, and the warhorse reared, smashing the stall gate to splinters. It leapt forwards, hooves clattering loudly, and Chlod glimpsed several figures throwing themselves aside. The destrier

slipped on the cobblestones and half-fell, before righting itself and bolting for the courtyard.

Grabbing his spiked club from his meagre pile of belongings, Chlod dropped to hands and knees and started crawling frantically under the barriers separating the stalls. As he scrabbled through the rotten straw and horse manure, he saw the slapping feet of the feral peasants running up the aisle.

He was almost trampled by an immense draught horse in one stall and barely avoided being kicked by a panicked pony in another. With a deep breath he hurled himself under the last barrier and scrambled to his feet, glancing behind him for signs of pursuit.

He nearly ran headlong into one of the peasants, who was crouched over the body of the stableboy. It was feeding, mouth caked with blood. Chlod could not halt his forward momentum, and bowled into the cannibalistic peasant. His knee cracked it in the face, and Chlod was sent sprawling on the ground at the stable's entrance.

In a heartbeat he was back on his feet and running. He risked a glance behind him and saw the peasant stagger to its feet. It leapt after him, hair streaming wildly as it bounded along on all fours. More of the cannibalistic inbreds were streaming through the open gates, and Chlod saw right away that he had no chance of escape there. He angled his awkward, limping run towards the inn itself, knowing that his best chance of survival now lay with Calard.

'Master!' he screamed as he ran. 'Master!'

At any moment he expected to be dragged down, but he made it across the courtyard and staggered up onto the inn's covered stoop, breathing hard. He was just feet from the door when a weight landed on his back, bearing him to the ground. The air exploded from his lungs and he lost his grip on his spiked maul, which clattered out of reach.

He was pinned to the ground, and though he fought like a wild animal, he could not dislodge the hissing peasant. Bony hands grasped his skull, and he felt nails biting deep into his scalp. He screamed wordlessly, neck muscles straining to resist as his head was lifted high, then slammed down with brutal force. White hot pain blossomed. Dazed, Chlod registered his head being lifted again. In moments, his skull would be pulverised, his brain matter splattered across the stoop.

Blinking heavily, unable to focus, he vaguely saw the door to the inn swing open before him. He saw a shadow emerge, and a flash of silver.

Calard took the peasant's head off with a double-handed sweep of his broadsword. The headless corpse slumped forwards over Chlod, blood pumping from its neck.

'Up!' shouted Calard, grabbing Chlod by back of his flea-ridden tunic and dragging him to his feet. His manservant's legs were unsteady, unable yet to support his weight, and he flopped back to the ground, struggling to focus. Blood was dripping from his forehead. Swearing, Calard adjusted his grip on his manservant, then hurled him bodily through the door of the inn. He kicked the club through after him, then spun back to face the courtyard as three rabid peasants hurled themselves at him.

He cut the first down with a heavy blow that shattered its ribcage, and sliced the second from groin to sternum with the return sweep. The third leapt on him, scratching and biting, but he threw it off, sending it crashing into the wall of the inn. It dropped to its knees, and before it could recover Calard stepped in close and brought the pommel of his sword down onto its head, killing it instantly.

Seeing dozens of the creatures swarming across the courtyard towards him, Calard stepped back inside the inn and slammed the door shut. He threw his weight against it.

'Chlod, the locks!'

A heavy impact struck the door, almost dislodging Calard. He gritted his teeth as his heels began sliding across the floor. The door was forced open a fraction, and claw-like hands reached around the edge.

Chlod picked up his spiked cudgel from the floor and bashed at the clutching hands, breaking bones

and crushing fingers.

The door slammed shut and Chlod slid first the upper lock home, then the lower one. Breathing hard, Calard stepped away from the door, his sword levelled towards it. It shook violently, but held.

‘What in Morr’s name is going on?’ came a slurred voice. Calard looked over his shoulder to see one of Merovech’s knights stumbling down the stairs, a drawn blade in his hands. He was clearly still the worse for wear from the night’s drinking, and he was followed by several of his comrades, all in various stages of dishevelment. Other guests of the inn were emerging from their rooms, their faces drawn and pale.

‘We are besieged,’ said Calard.

The banging at the door subsided, and Calard edged towards it, listening intently.

‘How did they get into the compound?’ said one of the knights.

‘Someone let them in, most likely,’ said Calard, glancing around. ‘The innkeeper would be my guess.

‘What?’ said a voice. ‘Why would you say that?’

‘Do you see him here, or any of his staff?’ said Calard, gesturing around him. ‘They are probably all holed up in the gatehouse.’

‘The bastard’s sold us out to Mortis,’ growled one of Merovech’s knights. At mention of the name, Chlod whimpered.

Several of the other guests began to speak at once, their voices rising in panic.

‘Quiet,’ snapped Calard.

In the ensuing silence, they could all hear shuffling around the exterior of the inn. There were scuffling noises at the walls, and Calard looked up.

‘They are going for the second floor windows,’ shouted someone, and Calard quickly looked around him. There were over half a dozen armed men in the main room of the inn now.

‘You three,’ he said, jabbing a finger at a cluster of men holding weapons. ‘Get upstairs and barricade the windows.’

‘I’ll be damned if I take orders from—’ snarled one of them, but Calard cut him off.

‘Do it!’ he thundered. The man looked like he was going to argue, but the others saw sense in Calard’s words, and hurried up the stairs. Calard gestured towards other men with his sword. ‘Get those tables on their sides to block the windows! You and you, help me slide this one in front of the door!’

Unseen by Calard, Raben staggered unsteadily down the stairs into the common room, one hand pressed to his temple. He had a sword in his hand, and his eyes burned with cold fury. He moved purposefully towards Calard as he heaved at a heavy oak table, positioning it to block the front door.

A shuttered window suddenly exploded inwards amid a shower of splinters, and feral peasants began clawing their way through, howling and braying like demented madmen. A table propped against another window was shoved aside, and more of the cannibalistic rabble began clambering inside.

‘For the Lady!’

Calard leapt forwards and brought his sword down on the head of the first peasant to scramble through, cleaving its skull down to the teeth, spraying blood.

He smashed another peasant back with the pommel of his sword, but dozens more were straining to get in. He could hear banging from upstairs, but that was soon drowned out by shouting, the clash of weapons and the sickly sound of blades hacking into flesh and bone.

Hands clawed for him and he stepped swiftly away from the door, slashing with his sword. A clutch

of fingers dropped to the floor, twitching.

Chlod backed off, looking around frantically for an escape route. He ran behind the bar and tugged at the cellar door, but he could not lift it.

The front door was ripped off its hinges and tossed aside suddenly, and a flood of peasants streamed in, scrambling over the table slid up against it. Some carried crude clubs and rusted farm implements, while others seemed intent on killing with nothing more than tooth and claw.

Chlod dropped to the floor and crawled under the bar, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Calard found himself fighting side by side with Raben and two other men. Despite the knock Calard had given him, the outcast knight fought with poise and control. He was fast and deadly, his timing impeccable. Calard was careful not to turn his back on him.

The devolved peasants came on like a living tide, scrabbling over tables and sending chairs flying, forcing Calard and Raben back against the bar. For every one of their number that was cut down, two more squeezed through the windows and clambered through the gaping door.

The room was filled with their stink, a mixture of sweat, rotting meat and wet soil.

It was not long before they started to attack down the inn's stairs.

'They've taken the upper floor,' said Calard.

One of Raben's knights was knocked to the ground and brained with what looked like a human thigh-bone.

'This is hopeless,' growled Raben. 'There are too many of them!'

'I have no intention of dying here,' said Calard, kicking a twitching corpse off his blade. 'The Lady is with me.'

Raben ran another peasant through, then spat derisively. 'The Lady forsook this place long ago.'

One by one, the inn's defenders were dragged down, their heads smashed in with sticks and their throats ripped out with blood-stained teeth. The peasants descended on them like starved beasts, and screams rang out from those not yet dead when the cannibals began their gory feast.

'There must be another way out,' shouted Calard, now fighting back to back with Raben. The notion of fleeing from mere peasants wrenched at his sense of pride, but it would not serve the Lady's purpose if he died here.

Calard was wielding his bastard sword in one hand now, and had drawn the Sword of Garamont with his other.

A screeching, near naked peasant leapt at Calard from atop the bar, its body scrawny and malnourished. Calard cut it down in midair, and it fell in a bloody heap to the floor. Calard glanced around him, getting a sense of their position within the common room.

'The kitchen,' he said, indicating towards it with a nod. 'That's our best chance. There must be a back door.'

Both Calard and Raben were splattered with blood, and while most of it was not their own, neither man was uninjured. Raben risked a quick glance back towards the kitchen. It was at least ten yards away, and they were now completely surrounded.

'We won't make it,' said Raben.

'Stay here and die then, damn you,' said Calard.

With a roar, he forced the enemy back, swinging his swords around in a pair of deadly arcs. Taking advantage of the space he had created, he leapt atop the bar and ran along its length towards the back of the inn. Peasants reached for him but his blades sliced out, keeping them at bay. He leapt off the far end,

slamming a pair of enemies to the floor. He came to his feet in the kitchen doorway, blades at the ready. The kitchen was disgustingly dirty, and rats scuttled in the shadows, but it was free of foes. He spotted a door on the far wall.

Glancing back into the common room, he saw Chlod emerge from beneath the bar, scurrying under tables towards him.

‘Quickly!’ Calard shouted. Peasants were close behind his manservant, their red-rimmed eyes wide.

Raben was standing alone, surrounded. He turned on the spot, holding his sword at the ready as peasants closed in around him, too many to hold off alone. Briefly, Calard’s gaze met Raben’s across the room. He saw the outcast mouth a curse. The peasants attacked as one but Raben had pre-empted them and was already moving. He swayed aside from a vicious blow and launched a lightning counter that took off an arm at the elbow.

Calard shoved Chlod into the kitchen.

‘Unlock the door!’ he ordered. Calard stepped back to give himself more room to swing as the enemy came at him. The first through the doorway was hacked almost in two as he cleaved it from shoulder-blade to armpit. He dragged his sword free and waited for the next to enter, but the peasants hung back, none willing to be his next victim. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Chlod at the back door, and began to edge towards him. The peasants came after him, spreading out, but they were wary now of his blade. There was a commotion behind the peasants, and he caught a glimpse of Raben barging his way through the press of bodies.

‘Wait,’ he ordered Chlod as he heard the bolts of the back door sliding open.

The knight burst into the room, but the leg of a chair wielded as a club struck him, and he stumbled. Three peasants were on him in an instant. Without thought, Calard moved to his aid. He hacked into the bare back of one of the peasants crouched over the outcast, severing its spine. He kicked another away, sending it flying face-first into a bench top, bringing a pile of dirty pots down with a crash. He slashed at another, and it reeled backwards with a screech, blood spraying from its neck. The peasants had now circled around them, filling the kitchen.

Calard gripped Raben under the arm and helped him to his feet. Blood was dripping from bite wounds on his cheek and neck. The outcast knight had lost his grip on his sword, and drew a slender knife from his boot.

‘You should have gone without me,’ said Raben. ‘I would have.’

‘And that is the difference between your kind and mine,’ said Calard.

The peasants came at them in a rush. Two died to Calard’s bastard sword and another to Raben’s stabbing knife before the two knights were overwhelmed.

Seeing his master disarmed and dragged to the ground, Chlod slid back the last bolt on the door in a rush and threw the door open. The cold night air washed in and without a backwards glance he bolted out into the darkness.

Before he had made two yards, a hand locked around his throat. His legs went out from under him, and he was hurled back into the kitchen. From the floor, he looked up to see a gaunt peasant appear in the doorway. His eyes widened as the figure came into the light.

‘No, no, no, no, no,’ said Chlod, scrambling backwards on his hands and knees.

The figure was covered in crude tattoos and wore a necklace of fingers around his scrawny neck. Splinters of bone had been pushed through the skin of his forearms. He looked down at Chlod and smiled, exposing stained teeth that had been filed to points.

‘Hello, Chlod,’ he said.

CALARD'S ARMS WERE wrenched behind his back and his wrists bound with tough, sinewy cord.

'Chlod,' he said. 'What in the Lady's name is going on?'

His manservant stood nearby, shivering, his eyes wide and staring. He avoided Calard's gaze as he too was bound.

'By all that is holy, I swear—' said Calard, but his words were cut short as a hastily tied noose was looped around his neck. A foot between his shoulder blades pinned him down as it was yanked taut, making him gasp for breath.

Alongside him, Raben was suffering similar treatment, held face down on the floor while he was trussed up like a prize hog.

The tattooed leader of the peasant rabble barked something indecipherable in a repulsive, guttural tongue and Calard and Raben were dragged to their feet. Another barked order and they were hauled out into the night. The tattooed peasant followed, holding Chlod tightly around the back of the neck.

'We've missed you, Chlod,' he hissed.

VII

FOR OVER THREE hours they were dragged through stinking marshes and haunted forests by the loping parade of filthy, cannibalistic peasants. Their captives were not the feral brood's only spoils; they had hastily ransacked the larder of Morr's Rest, filling sacks with cheese and bread, meat and wineskins. Corpses had been mutilated and dismembered, and several of the sacks were now soaked through with blood, stuffed with human body parts.

They kept off the roads, hauled along paths overgrown with thorn-bushes and rushes. Occasionally they were forced into the open, scurrying across muddy fields filled with rotten crops, watched over by the silhouettes of scarecrows. Sometimes they could see lights in the distance, but their captors seemed keen to avoid areas of habitation, and veered away from them.

They trudged knee-deep through vast tracts of swampland, beset by great clouds of stinging midges. They climbed from this stinking morass as the ground rose, and their pace picked up again as they ran through an abandoned village that had been left to rot. The peasants seemed more at ease here, speaking amongst themselves in their low, ugly tongue. Calard was poked and prodded by peasants whose eyes gleamed with hunger.

Feet slapped loudly on the roadway, which rose steadily, winding its way through the dead village. Soon they were in the countryside again, leaving the decrepit houses behind them, but their progress continued upwards, the muddy roadway clinging to the steep sides of a hill. A crumbling, six foot wall ran alongside the high side of the road.

They turned through a decaying stone gateway overrun with thorn-bushes and ivy. An ancient gate hung on rusted hinges, and the procession of peasants passed through. Calard noted the hourglass carved atop the archway as he was hustled through beneath it.

'A Garden of Morr,' he said.

They rose above the cloying blanket of ever-present fog and Calard was afforded a clearer view of their surroundings. The graveyard reared up before them, clinging to a hilltop riddled with tombs and mausoleums. It was massive and sprawling, a veritable city of the dead; tens of thousands were likely buried here. The graves lowest on the hill were packed in tight and marked with cracked headstones and slabs worn smooth by the passage of time. Many had clearly been desecrated and dug up. Winged, skeletal statues being slowly strangled by ivy stood over some, while in other areas mass pit graves were

commemorated with little more than crude epitaphs scratched into stone slabs. Large family mausoleums protruded from the hillside as they climbed higher, the richer tombs carved deep into the rock cliffs.

Black roses grew in abundance, their petals soft and velveteen, their deadly thorns curved and shining silver. They exuded a heady, sickly-sweet aroma.

Ravens perched in leafless, twisted trees clinging to the hillside, staring down at the procession passing below. Images of death were everywhere, from carved hourglasses and black roses on tombs and opulent facades to extravagant sculptures depicting the god of the underworld, Morr, in his various guises.

The peasants became more animated, cavorting and leaping, grinning and guffawing. More of the depraved creatures joined their group, though Calard had no idea where they had appeared from. Within the tombs themselves, perhaps.

Feeling eyes upon him, he looked up to see a child clinging to the base of a cracked, moss-covered statue. The child – he could not tell if it was a boy or a girl – was clearly starving, little more than a skeleton encased in skin, its head too big for its frail body. It stared at him with red-rimmed eyes and its flesh was covered in open sores. Something about the child's intense gaze made his skin crawl. It hissed at him, baring small, pointed teeth.

Calard grimaced as his captors yanked at the noose around his neck, jerking him onward.

Ever higher they climbed, then down into the yawning mouth of one of the larger crypts. They passed under a lintel carved in the likeness of Morr, arms outspread as if in welcome. It was cold and dank in the low-ceilinged burial chamber, and it smelt of wet earth and things long dead. Roots hung through rough-hewn roof, like grasping, skeletal arms.

A massive sculptured sarcophagus dominated the tomb. The heavy lid, carved to represent a serenely posed knight with arms crossed over his chest, lay cracked and discarded on the floor.

'What is this?' said Calard through clenched teeth as he was dragged towards the casket.

'Get in,' hissed one of the peasants.

He strained against his captors, fighting against them as they tried to haul him towards the open casket. Had they dragged him all this way just to bury him alive? He was far bigger than any of them, and they struggled to make him move, but his face began to turn purple as the noose around his neck tightened.

'Enough,' hissed one of them, breaking the deadlock by kicking Calard hard in the small of his back. He staggered forwards into the casket, and looked down into it, gasping for breath.

Bones and rotting cloth had been pushed roughly aside, and he saw that a hole had been smashed in the bottom of the sarcophagus. He could feel a slight breeze coming up through the hole, bringing with it a foetid stench of decay.

One of the peasants crawled in, like a spider, and disappeared down the hole.

'Bring them,' came its voice, from the darkness.

'Lady, protect your servant,' breathed Calard.

THE ENTIRE HILL was riddled with tunnels, and they were dragged deep into the labyrinth. Chewed bones were strewn across the floor of these tunnels, and the way was lit by stinking candles burning in carved niches.

Faces crowded around to look upon these newcomers, from tiny children to ancient crones, and Calard realised that there must have been many hundreds of peasants eking out a horrid existence down here beneath the earth. What better place for them to call home than a graveyard, he thought darkly.

All of the inhabitants were starving. Their eyes were dull and lifeless, as if any hope that had ever

dwelt there had long faded. Tiny, shrunken babes, too weak even to cry, were held to the bony chests of mothers unable to produce milk to feed them. Most of the peasants were stooped and hunched, their bodies and faces malformed and ugly from generations of inbreeding and malnutrition. Many were missing limbs, and more than a few bore evidence of leprosy and the wasting sickness. They were a pitiful bunch, and even Calard, who was generally inured to the fate of those of low birth, found himself disturbed. Hands covered in dirt reached for him as he was dragged deeper beneath the ground, touching his face and clothes in wonder.

The procession gathered a sizeable entourage as Calard, Raben and Chlod were led into the depths beneath the Garden of Morr. They crowded after the captives, straining to see. Every side-passage was filled with staring faces. Children ran behind them. As they descended further, the catacombs carved by the hands of men gave way to naturally formed caves, their walls slick with moisture.

At last they came to a rocky cavern at the dark heart of the hill. Hundreds of stubby candles lit the area with a flickering orange glow. It was cold and moist, and an acrid stink hung in the air. Looking up, Calard could see that the roof was a seething mass of furred shapes: bats.

Rock formations jutted up from the floor and hung from the ceiling. In places these had had come together, forming slick-sided columns. Drips fell from the ceiling like rain, causing ripples in milky pools of water that gathered in hollows.

Dozens of natural windows looked down into the chamber, each crowded with the graveyard's inhabitants, who bustled for the best vantages.

Calard and Raben were dragged towards a natural stone platform in the centre of the cavern. An empty throne was carved into the rock at the centre of this platform. Hundreds of human skulls were piled up around it.

Seated on the roughly hewn steps below the throne was a figure that Calard at first mistook for a dusty corpse.

Almost imperceptibly, the skeletal figure raised its head to regard their approach. Thick matted clumps of grey hair hung down over an overly long, ashen face. That face was ancient; so deep were its lines that they looked as though they had been carved with a chisel. Clouded eyes glinted in deep sockets.

Calard and Raben were forced to their knees. Their weapons were tossed to the floor nearby, and the clatter they made reverberated sharply off the cavern walls. Chlod tried to hang back, his head low, but he was shoved forwards to stand alongside his master.

'What have you been keeping from me, you little toad?' said Calard out of the corner of his mouth. It was the first chance that he had to speak to Chlod since their capture. The hunchbacked manservant made no answer.

'Quiet,' said a voice, and Calard was cuffed across the side of the head.

'How is it you are known here?' hissed Calard. 'Answer me!'

Still Chlod offered no explanation, and again Calard was struck, harder this time, knocking him to the ground.

A bone shard, as sharp as a dagger and three inches long, lay on the cavern floor just inches from his nose. He turned onto his side, wriggling, and as he was hauled back to his knees, he picked up the bone shard and secreted it in his clasped hands.

A hush descended over the cavern, broken only by the steady dripping of water. The figure on the steps regarded them in silence, his gaze inscrutable. Calard lifted his head high, eyes blazing.

'I demand that I be released,' he said in a low voice.

The grey man's eyes bored into Calard, but he remained silent.

‘My purpose in this cursed land lies not with you, or your... people,’ said Calard. ‘Release me.’

The ashen-faced figure continued to regard him silently for a moment, then stood, his movements slow and deliberate. He looked as though he was unfolding as he rose to his feet, his limbs looking too long and too thin, like the legs on an insect. His matted hair hung past his thin waist. He wore a threadbare robe of faded majesty, something that might have been worn by a noble lord in a bygone era. Delicate, moth-eaten lace hung from the cuffs of his sleeves like dusty spider webs.

With regal grace he moved in front of the two kneeling knights and the quaking figure of Chlod.

His hands were long and slender, his fingers like ivory needles. He gestured for the two knights to rise, and they were hauled roughly to their feet. Calard stood with his head held high, refusing to be cowed before this pauper king and his tattered court.

The grey man was frail and corpse-thin, and his back was slightly stooped, yet even so he towered over Calard. He walked around the three of them, appraising them.

He came to a halt in front of Chlod. The hunch-backed manservant flinched as the grey man reached out towards him. Thin fingers lifted Chlod’s chin until he was looking up into the ancient face. Tears ran down his face.

The skeletally gaunt figure began to laugh. The sound was deep and hollow.

‘It has been a long time,’ said the grey man, still chuckling. ‘Welcome home, Chlod.’

‘*Home?*’ hissed Calard, glancing sideways at his manservant. All colour had drained from Chlod’s face.

‘Allow me to introduce myself,’ said the wasted old man, turning towards Calard. The ghost of a smile played at his ashen lips and the result was unsettling; he resembled nothing more than a grinning corpse.

‘I,’ said the deathly old man, ‘am Grandfather Mortis.’

‘Grandfather Mortis,’ said Calard, dryly.

‘The one and only,’ said the old man, giving Calard a mocking bow.

‘I am Calard of Garamont, a questing knight of Bastonne.’

‘Engaged on the quest, is it?’ said Mortis. ‘And this?’

‘Raben,’ said the outcast knight.

‘Just Raben?’

‘Just Raben.’

‘I see,’ said Mortis. He looked at Raben for moment, then turned away. He stretched his skeletal arms theatrically wide, fingers unfurling. ‘And these,’ he said, ‘these are my children. My loving, *trustworthy* children.’ He looked pointedly at Chlod, who shrank under his gaze.

‘Your children,’ said Calard, ‘are cannibalistic inbreds.’

‘In lean times, needs must, and so forth and so on,’ said Mortis with a shrug.

‘To eat the flesh of one’s fellow man is an abomination,’ said Calard. ‘These peasants would be better off dead.’

‘Keep your moral outrage, it means nothing here,’ said Mortis. ‘My children *live*, and that is itself a triumph in this gods-forsaken land.’

‘This is no life,’ said Calard, looking around him. ‘I’d sooner die than live like this.’

‘That is a most interesting notion,’ said Mortis. ‘There’s good meat on your bones.’

‘Are you going to kill us?’ said Chlod, tears still running down his face.

‘Kill you?’ said Mortis, reaching out a hand to stroke Chlod’s face. ‘These others, maybe. But you? Of course not, child! This is where you belong. All your sins will be forgiven, in time. You will be punished, of course, but you are home, and that is what matters.’

At the mention of punishment, Chlod paled. Turning from him, Mortis jabbed a finger towards Raben.

‘This is one of the duke’s knights,’ he said. ‘Why is it not dead?’

‘This knight is under my protection,’ said Calard. ‘He is not to be harmed.’

‘Is that so?’ said Mortis. ‘What are you doing here in Mousillon, Calard of Garamont? What brings you to our cursed realm?’

‘The Lady herself has led me here.’

‘Why?’

‘What does it matter?’ said Calard.

‘Curiosity,’ said Mortis. ‘Indulge an old man.’

‘I came to find someone,’ said Calard. ‘And when I do, I intend to kill him.’

Raben smirked at that.

‘You came here to kill him?’ he said. ‘You are more of a fool than I thought! He cannot be killed, not by one such as you.’

‘Any man can be killed,’ said Calard.

‘Merovech is no man,’ said Raben.

‘Man, fiend, devil; I care not,’ said Calard. ‘I *will* kill him.’

Mortis lashed out, grabbing Calard around the throat. His nails bit deep into his flesh, drawing blood.

‘Merovech?’ Mortis said, enunciating the name clearly so there could be no misunderstanding. ‘You came here to kill Duke Merovech?’

Before anyone could react, Calard’s hands were free, the tough cord falling away from his wrists. No one had noticed him cutting his bindings, and in the blink of an eye he had the razor-sharp bone shard he had retrieved from the ground pressed to Mortis’s neck.

The old man released him, and held up both hands in a sign of submission. The cavern erupted in shouts and hisses. Hands tightened the noose around his neck, but Calard increased the pressure on the bone held to Mortis’s throat.

‘Call them off, or you die,’ hissed Calard.

The old man made a sound like he was clearing his throat, and the peasants drew back, tense and uneasy.

‘I am no friend of Duke Merovech’s, Calard of Garamont,’ said Mortis with a deathly grin. ‘And the enemy of one’s enemy is one’s friend, no?’

‘MEROVECH THE MAD,’ said Mortis. ‘The fool is obsessed with regaining Mousillon’s lost prestige, and in doing so, eradicating all he sees as vermin. Namely my children and I. You don’t mind if I sit?’

Calard had the Sword of Garamont in his hand, its point levelled at Mortis’s skeletal chest. At Calard’s order, Chlod had released Raben from his bonds, and retrieved their weapons. His shield and bastard sword were strapped to his back, and behind him stood Raben, blade drawn, eyeing the hostile peasants warily. Chlod stood nearby, wringing his hands.

Mortis lowered himself onto the stone steps below the throne with a sigh. At a guess, Calard judged

the old man to be perhaps ninety years of age. Still, as frail as the old man appeared, Calard was not about to underestimate him. His mind was clearly still as sharp as a razor, and he had but to speak the word and the onlooking peasants would tear them limb from limb.

‘Five years Merovech has waged war upon us. Always in that time, we have been protected by our lord,’ said Mortis, gesturing towards the empty throne. ‘But he is gone now, captured three nights past on the Shadow-Moors. Without him, we are lost.’

‘The ancient one is gone?’ gasped Chlod. Mortis nodded grimly.

‘You would be doing me a great favour if you succeeded in slaying the duke,’ said Mortis, his skeletal fingers drumming on the stone steps. ‘Though it would not be easily achieved.’

‘The Lady is with me,’ said Calard grimly. ‘The duke will die by my blade, you have my oath on it.’

‘Let’s just get out of here,’ said Raben over his shoulder.

Mortis’s fingers drummed upon the dusty stone surface of the steps.

‘Leave that one with us,’ he said, gesturing towards Raben, ‘and you are free to leave.’

Raben flashed Calard an alarmed look.

‘Take me with you,’ said Raben swiftly. ‘I’ll get you close to Merovech. You won’t get within a hundred yards of him without me.’

Calard considered his decision.

‘He comes with me,’ he said finally.

‘He is one of the duke’s sworn knights,’ said Mortis. ‘You think you can trust his word?’

‘Not for a moment,’ said Calard. ‘He is an outcast and has no honour, but he may prove useful.’

The sound of a bell tolling in the distance echoed down through the catacombs, and Mortis looked up.

The bats on the ceiling erupted into flight, the beat of their wings and their high-pitched cries deafening. They swirled around the cavern in a dense cloud, like a school of shoaling fish, then hurtled through an opening in the ceiling and were gone. The doleful bell continued to sound.

‘What is it?’ said Calard.

‘A warning. They have come to end it,’ said Mortis. The peasants all around began shouting and wailing, hissing and gnashing their teeth.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Raben. ‘We have to go!’

‘Merovech marches against us,’ said Mortis. ‘The Warren is no longer a safe haven.’

‘He is here?’ said Calard, eyes lighting up. ‘Merovech is here?’

‘He would not sully his hands in person,’ said Mortis, shaking his head.

‘How can you be sure?’ said Calard. ‘This could end now.’

‘He is not here,’ said Raben, firmly. ‘He waits at the palace. A victory banquet has been prepared to welcome back his captains in two nights’ time.’

‘And how would you know that?’ said Calard.

‘I was invited,’ said Raben with a sardonic smile.

‘Enough talk. We leave now,’ said Mortis.

‘We?’ said Calard.

‘I’ll get you inside the city,’ said Grandfather Mortis.

VIII

‘GODS, HAVE YOU ever smelt anything fouler?’ growled Raben. Calard had to admit that he hadn’t. Even with a cloth anointed with perfumed oil tied around his mouth and nose, he could barely keep from gagging.

They were moving single file through a narrow sewer tunnel, choosing their steps carefully. Mortis’s peasants led the way, picking the safest and most direct route. Every surface was slick with filth, from the curving walls to the narrow shelf beneath their boots. Beside them was a foetid flow, barely moving and stagnant. Pale things wriggled within, making Calard’s stomach heave. They passed countless floating bodies, their flesh rotting and bloated.

The torches they carried filled the narrow tunnels with sickly black smoke. Spider webs crackled as they were consumed by flame, and rats the size of small dogs scurried into the darkness, where they stopped and stared back at these interlopers into their realm, eyes glittering like malignant red jewels.

They were beneath the walled city of Mousillon, drawing ever nearer their goal. It had taken them almost three days to get here. Calard longed to see daylight and be away from Mortis and his repulsive brood.

At sluice junctions, places where the water flowed more swiftly, they encountered peasants fishing out bodies and floating junk with long poles. They clasped their muddy hats in their hands and bowed their heads respectfully as Grandfather Mortis passed by.

‘You were telling me of L’Anguille,’ said Calard. Calard was certain that the rebel knight was omitting many facts, but even so, he painted a bleak picture of the events leading to his becoming an outcast.

Raben sighed. ‘I slit the bastard’s throat. His death was quicker than he deserved.’

‘He was your liege lord, whom you were sworn to protect and serve,’ said Calard. They turned a corner, and rats scurried away from their light.

‘Earl Barahir was a debauched fiend and a murderer,’ said Raben. ‘He had no honour. He got what he deserved.’

Calard remained silent. In truth, he could not say that he would have done differently had he been in Raben’s place.

‘I was stripped of my land and titles and imprisoned. I did not resist, assured that my family would be spared if I gave myself in willingly. They were not,’ said Raben, bitterly. ‘My wife was flogged and forced into the fields with the twins. I was due to hang, but guilt over what I brought upon my wife and daughters consumed me. Bribing my gaoler, I escaped, but the pox had already done its work. Perhaps it was a blessing that they did not suffer long. My daughters would have been on the cusp of womanhood by now, had they lived.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Calard.

In the gloom, he saw Raben shrug.

‘And so you came to Mousillon?’ prompted Calard.

‘And so I came to Mousillon,’ said Raben. ‘I had nothing to live for, but not the courage to end it. I was hunted as an outlaw, but my pursuers dropped off once I came here. That was nine years ago.’

They continued along in silence for some time, until word was passed back along the line that they were nearing to their destination.

‘Thank the Lady for small mercies,’ said Calard. Raben scoffed at his piety, and Calard glared at him.

‘What?’ said Raben, looking back at Calard. ‘Worship of the Lady is a sham. Just because one of our forefathers thought he saw some watery tart doesn’t mean—’

The outcast knight’s words were cut short as he slipped in an overflow of effluent. He would have fallen into the befouled waters had not Calard grabbed him under one arm and hauled him back, dumping him unceremoniously on the ground.

Even so, one of Raben’s boots broke the surface of the stinking flow. In the blink of an eye, a decaying corpse floating face down nearby lurched at him. Worms writhed in its throat as its mouth gaped open, and fingers that had rotted down to the bone latched onto Raben’s leg.

The outcast knight cried out in shock, kicking at the horrid dead thing. Calard’s sword carved into its head with a wet, squelching sound and it slipped back into the mire, releasing its grip. Raben scrambled back away from the edge and hauled himself to his feet, clearly shaken.

‘The dead do not rest easy in Mousillon,’ said Grandfather Mortis with an evil grin, materialising like a wraith out of the gloom. ‘Come. This is where we part ways.’

THE HEAVY SEWER grate was dragged aside, and Calard lifted himself up from the darkness, eyeing his surroundings. He was in a shadowy, refuse-strewn alley no more than three feet wide. Rats were feasting on the body of a dead cat nearby, and they hissed at him aggressively as he interrupted their meal. The smell was hardly any better here than it was down in the sewer, but at least he was no longer below ground.

Calard turned and helped Raben out, then looked back down into the darkness.

‘Hurry, peasant,’ he said. ‘We have not got much time.’

Down at bottom of the rusted ladder, unseen by Calard, Grandfather Mortis had a tight hold of Chlod and was speaking to him in a low, threatening voice. The hunchbacked peasant’s face was pale.

‘Do this one thing and your past crimes will be forgotten,’ hissed Mortis.

Chlod nodded vigorously, and Mortis released him. Straightening, he stepped backwards and was swallowed by the darkness.

‘Do not fail me,’ came his deep, hollow voice.

Shaking, Chlod climbed up towards street level. Calard grabbed him by the shirt front and lifted him up the last few feet.

Calard had not wished to take the peasant with him, but Mortis had been insistent.

‘He is no longer yours to command,’ the old man had said. ‘He is mine, and mine alone, but he accompanies you to the palace.’

The idea of being abandoned beneath the city had not been an appealing one, for he doubted that he would have ever gotten out, and he had reluctantly agreed.

The sewer grate was dragged back into place, and Calard pulled his hood down low over his face.

‘Let’s end this,’ he said.

NEVER HAD CALARD walked the streets of a city more wretched, threatening or foul.

Every building was dark and oppressive, and so twisted beyond its original construction that it looked as though it was contorted in silent agony. Timbers were warped and swollen with moisture, and brickwork was bulging and uneven. The foundations of some had sunk, while others had seemingly given up completely and collapsed in upon themselves.

The smell of rot was heavy in the air and mould covered every surface. A foetid yellow fog filled the streets, reducing visibility to little more than a dozen yards, deadening all sound. The ground was rutted

and undulating, and refuse and filth was piled up high against the walls.

They were not alone in this city of the damned.

Everywhere they walked they saw hundreds of downtrodden, desperate people, filthy and dressed in rags. From shuttered windows and dark alleyways, the inhabitants of Mousillon city watched their progress through the district of Old City. Lepers and crippled beggars clutched at them, holding out wooden bowls. Miserable, malformed street-sellers sat alongside carts filled with rotten produce, while others offered them such tempting treats as twitching toads on sticks and greasy bags of slugs.

Wasted children clutching butcher's knives ran by them, giggling as they chased a terrified, scabby dog. Muscled brutes wearing leather masks were throwing fresh corpses onto a wagon piled high with the dead. Whores with bruises and open sores on their faces called out to them from doorways. Sickly smoke rose from shadowy dens where a man could lose himself if he had the coin and inclination.

Footpads, pickpockets and bruisers lurked in the shadows, but Calard and his companions were left well alone. It seemed that Mortis was as good as his word. The cadaverous old bastard had told them that they would be untouched, claiming that his word was law in the poorer districts of Mousillon. Calard had thought this boast just to be bluster, but he saw now that he had been mistaken. He had had no doubt in his mind that their throats would have already been slit and their bodies dumped in a back alley without Mortis's patronage.

It took them the better part of an hour to wind their way through the slums. At last they came to a wide bridge lined with crumbling statues that crossed the River Grismarie. The smell of brine was strong, for the river opened up to the sea less than five miles to the west.

The river was wide and slow here, and it bisected the city, dividing it into two halves. To the south were the poorer and more populated districts, along with the sprawling docklands. On the north side was the old temple district, and beyond that, the ducal palace itself.

IT WAS SAID that Mousillon had once been the pride of Bretonnia, its most bustling, wealthy and beautiful city. It had been home to Landuin, the finest knight to have ever lived, and was said to have been a place of beauty, culture and learning. How things changed, thought Calard.

Thousands of downward-pointing spikes protruded from the high walls lining the river, set several feet above the high-tide mark. Similar spikes adorned the legs of the mile-long bridge itself. Calard frowned.

'They stop the city from being overrun,' said Raben. 'Look there.'

Following where the outcast pointed, Calard squinted through the gloom. A number of corpses were impaled on the rusting spikes. With a shudder, he saw that most of them were moving.

'Come,' said Raben. 'This is our gate.'

A fortified gate barred entry to the north side of the city, and as they walked towards it, Calard saw armoured figures waiting for them. If Raben was going to betray him, this was his moment.

'Just so we are clear, you're on your own once we're inside,' said Raben under his breath, as if on cue.

'Fine,' said Calard.

'And if by some miracle you succeed, I want full patronage. A title. And land. A castle by the sea would be nice.'

'What?' said Calard.

'A little something to ensure that I don't accidentally let the cat out of the bag,' said Raben.

'For a moment, I was starting to think you risked showing something approaching honour,' Calard snarled.

‘No fear of that,’ said Raben. Calard began to answer, but Raben interjected. ‘Careful now, they’re watching,’ he said. ‘You want to get near the duke, don’t you? One word from me, and your quest is over.’

They drew closer to the checkpoint, and Calard saw that there were more than twenty soldiers stationed here, armed with crossbows and halberds. The gates were closed and barred.

‘If we get through this, and you somehow prove to me that I would not regret it, I’ll see you are rewarded,’ said Calard. ‘I will offer you no more than that, but you have my word.’

‘Just keep silent then,’ said Raben as they came to a halt in front of the gate. He flashed a sardonic smile at Calard. ‘Trust me.’

‘YOU I KNOW, sir, but who are these, then?’ said the captain of the guard, eyeing Calard and Chlod suspiciously.

‘My second in command,’ said Raben, ‘and my servant. Let us through, captain. I don’t want to be any later than we already are.’

‘What’s his name?’ said the captain, indicating Calard. ‘I don’t recognise him, and I’ve a gift for faces.’

Calard opened his mouth to speak, but Raben interceded.

‘Valacar,’ said Raben. ‘His name is Valacar.’

‘Why don’t he speak for himself?’ said the captain.

‘He’s mute,’ said Raben in a deadpan voice, ignoring Calard’s stare.

‘He’s not on my list,’ said the captain. ‘And neither is your servant. My orders are strict. Ain’t no one not on my list getting through this gate.’

‘Let me make this simple,’ Raben said, reaching out to put his arm around the captain’s shoulders. ‘The Duke Merovech is a close personal friend of mine, and he is expecting us to be there tonight. We are already late as it is, and if we are any later, I will make certain that I inform the duke personally exactly who it was that detained us. It is Harol, isn’t it? That is your name, if I am not mistaken?’

‘You are not, sir,’ said the captain, swallowing heavily.

‘Are we done here, captain?’ said Raben, slapping the man hard on the shoulder.

‘We’re done. I’ll have a coach drop you at the palace right away, sir. Open them up!’

Raben released the captain, and gave Calard a wink as the gates yawned open.

‘Oh, and sir?’

‘Yes, captain?’ said Raben.

‘Enjoy the celebration.’

‘Oh, we will,’ said Raben with a smile.

IX

THE COACH ROLLED smoothly to a halt and its black lacquered doors swung open, seemingly of their own accord. A small set of steps unfolded with a clatter, and Calard and Raben stepped down from the plush, dark velvet interior.

Other coaches were lined up around the curve of the circular roadway inside the palace gates. Each was gleaming black, and on every door was emblazoned a black fleur-de-lys upon a white shield. Hunched coachmen sat up front of each, garbed in flowing black robes, their faces hidden by dark

hoods. Six immense horses were harnessed to each coach, their coats the colour of the midnight sky, and immaculate feathered plumes the colour of congealed blood bobbed above their heads. Each horse stood unnaturally still, like statues.

Chlod had ridden up front with the driver, and he stood waiting for them, his face drained of colour and his eyes wide and unblinking.

Twelve-foot-high fences enclosed the palace, tipped with wickedly sharp silver points, each shaped as a fleur-de-lys. Calard noted that there was a heavy guard presence. They stood at regular intervals around the palace exterior, utterly motionless, their features hidden in fully enclosed black plate armour of ancient design.

Grandiose stairs of red-veined black marble swept up before them, and Calard's gaze rose towards the palace itself.

It was breathtaking in its scale and the sheer audacity of its darkly majestic design. It was oppressive and domineering, yet in places its architecture was as delicate as lace. Dozens of spires rose like needles above immense lead-plated domes, linked by a web of delicate buttresses. Hanging arches that seemed to defy all the laws of gravity stretched between knife-edged towers. Slender columns reared up to support heavy archways that concealed grand stained-glass windows in their shadows, the coloured glass glinting in the fractured moonlit straining to penetrate the clouds. Rainwater dripped from the gaping mouths of fanged gargoyles, and winged statues carved of black granite gazed down upon them in mute disdain.

Other late arrivals were hurrying past them up the steps. Flustered ladies garbed in velvet and adorned with precious jewels were being hastened towards the palace by knights wearing freshly laundered tabards over battered suits of armour.

Calard and Raben climbed briskly, their faces grim, while Chlod trotted along behind them in silence.

The entry hall of the palace was cavernous, the arched ceiling a hundred feet high. Statues of past dukes of Mousillon were arrayed on pedestals, each standing in heroic poses and dressed for war. Pre-eminent was a dramatic sculpture of Merovech himself, five times life size, carved from a block of faultless white marble. He stood gazing into the distance, hair flowing in a frozen wind, one foot upon the chest of a headless enemy. The expression he wore was one of noble arrogance.

Standing as still as any of the statues, dozens of guards stood arrayed around the grand foyer, blocking access to closed doors and sweeping staircases that rose up to higher levels. The doors to the west wing had been thrown wide, and it was through here that Calard and Raben marched, following the other late arrivals.

Oil paintings lined the hallway, some of them almost twenty feet in height. Their frames were opulent and heavy, though many were fading and crumbling. Gaunt, unfriendly faces stared down at them from dark and somewhat disturbing portraits. Eyes seemed to follow them as they hurried by.

Turning a corner, Calard instinctively reached for his sword as they were suddenly surrounded by a swarm of pale, aristocratic courtiers, richly dressed as if for a masquerade ball. The ladies wore extravagant ball gowns and seemed to barely touch the ground as they glided across the floor upon the arms of their partners, who were garbed in strange, archaic fashion. All wore bizarre, grotesque masks, complete with devilish horns, jagged teeth and long, pointed noses. An icy chill seemed to penetrate Calard's bones as the courtiers passed them in silence, and he released his grasp on his sword hilt.

They moved deeper into the palace and could soon hear the ring of clashing swords. The harsh sound echoed through the cold halls, and as it got steadily louder, they could also make out polite clapping and the dull murmur of conversation.

Rounding a final corner, they approached a large, domed chamber. Hundreds of knights were gathered within, clustered in small groups and drinking wine.

‘Where is Chlod?’ said Calard suddenly, coming to a halt as they approached the entrance to the large room. Raben looked behind them. The peasant was nowhere to be seen. The outcast shrugged.

The clash of swords echoed loudly, and there was an enthusiastic cheer.

‘No matter,’ said Calard, and they moved within, slipping effortlessly into the crowd.

The chamber was even larger than it had at first appeared, and Calard guessed that there must have been in the realms of three hundred nobles gathered within. Massive pillars propped up the exquisitely painted domed ceiling, and dozens of alcoves and side-chambers were set off the main expanse.

A raised dais was positioned against the western wall, dominating the room. The statues of five ancient warriors were seated in high-backed thrones there, covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. They sat side by side beneath an immense window of stained glass that depicted them as they had been in life. The window was backlit with candles, and Calard frowned up at the scenes of depravity and wanton barbarism depicted there. They showed the warriors slaughtering men, women and children, cutting their hearts out and drinking their blood.

A covered altar lit with candles was positioned centrally upon the dais in front of the old statues. A large chalice of silver and ebony was housed within this tabernacle, its shape formed in the likeness of serpentine wyrms twisting around one another.

Raben took a delicate crystal glass of claret from a tray, smiling and nodding to those he knew. Calard scanned the room, his gaze darting from face to face.

‘Take a drink,’ said Raben under his breath. ‘And try not to look quite so out of place.’

Calard saw the sense in Raben’s words and made a conscious effort to relax. They slipped through the crowd, angling towards the raised dais, and he nodded to several knights who turned to coldly regard him. They nodded in return and turned away in disinterest.

They approached the centre of the room, where the revellers were gathered most tightly. A circle some thirty feet in diameter was sunk into the centre of the chamber, positioned directly below the domed ceiling. Three circles of steps descended down to this sunken floor, which was carved with intricate spiralling designs.

Two knights were duelling in this combat circle, while more gathered knights and their ladies watched on, politely clapping and cheering when either knight scored a palpable hit. Calard hardly glanced at the two combatants as he pushed through the crowd, his gaze locking on a figure on the opposite side of the circle.

Merovech stood engrossed in the contest, arms folded across his chest. A full head taller than any other knight in the room, he was armoured in archaic, fluted armour of such dark metal it was virtually black, its edges serrated. His face was handsome and cruel, and as white as the palest marble. He appeared not to have aged at all from the last time Calard had seen him, six years earlier. His pure white hair was long and straight, hanging halfway down his back.

‘This is where I leave you,’ said Raben under his breath. ‘I wish you luck.’

Calard ignored him, completely focused on the duke. Raben backed away into the crowd, and was gone.

Moving slowly, like a man stalking a wolf, Calard closed the distance with his prey.

X

CHLODRAN AROUND the corner, breathing hard, and leaned back against the wall. His heart was thumping loudly, and he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to control his breathing. From beneath his shirt he pulled a rat skull attached to a string. Lifting it to his lips, he kissed it, whispering a prayer to

Ranald, before tucking it back into place.

Glancing back around the corner, Chlod saw a pair of guards marching down the hallway towards him, their movements unhurried and perfectly synchronous. Each held a large double-handed sword, and was armoured head to toe in black plate armour.

Cursing under his breath, Chlod broke into an awkward run, moving as quickly as his ragged breath and uneven legs would allow. He ducked into a side-passage, and loped through a storage room packed to the ceiling with dusty casks and wooden pallets.

He was five levels below the ground. The nobility clearly rarely came down this low in the palace, for the passages were narrow, cluttered and bereft of the opulent ornamentation of the upper levels. This was the domain of the duke's servants, though he had seen far fewer of them down here than he had imagined were needed to service the daily running of the palace.

Rounding a corner, he came upon the kitchens, which were utterly deserted. Rats and spiders scuttled across the floor, and everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. Chlod judged that no one had used them for decades. There were four kitchens all in all, connected by low arches, and there were enough ovens to feed an army.

Hearing the clomp of armoured feet behind him, Chlod bolted, running through the kitchens and passing through a host of empty walkthrough pantries.

A pair of closed double doors loomed ahead of him. A rotten chair and a desk were tucked into an alcove alongside them. A skeleton was slumped in the chair, a quill pen still clasped in its hand. Chlod could see what looked like a ledger upon on the sloped desk, its paper yellow with age. Neat handwriting could still be discerned on the pages. Evidently, this was the post of the larder-master, whose job it was to keep a tally of all goods taken in and out. Chlod had worked for a time in a middling-sized castle in Carcassonne, and he had made an art out of deceiving the larder-master there. It had been a good life, that, and he had not felt a moment's remorse when the man had been hanged for the irregularities in this ledger.

A dark shadow seemed to hover around the skeleton slumped in the larder-master's chair, and it coalesced into a roughly man-like shape as Chlod drew near. It solidified as he got closer, turning from an indistinguishable vague shape to that of a portly man with huge sideburns.

It opened its mouth to speak, but no words came out. It seemed angry, gesturing insistently at Chlod with its ghost quill, and it radiated a deadly chill. He had no wish to pass near this restless spirit, but he could already hear the sound of armoured boots closing in behind him.

Taking a deep breath, his blood running to ice in his veins, Chlod hurried to the double doors. The spirit became more agitated, shouting soundlessly at him and pointing at its ledger. The doors would not give, and he rattled them as he struggled to turn the rusted handles. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the two black-armoured guards marching towards him.

The shade of the larder-master was incandescent with rage, bellowing at him silently. It came out from behind its desk, separating completely from its skeleton, and hovered towards him. Chlod quaked, fighting with the double doors vigorously as panic set in.

The ghost reached for him. Chlod recoiled from its touch, but there was nowhere to go, and he was backed up against the closed doors. The shadowy form touched his face, and he screamed. It felt as though needles of ice were penetrating his skin, and the left side of his face went numb. He saw the ethereal shade of the larder-master smile.

The doors gave way behind him suddenly, ripping free of their hinges, and Chlod crashed through. Weevils and rot-worms writhed in the splintered chunks of rotten wood, and he scrambled backwards through the debris.

The shade stared down at him from the open doorway. Its image wavered, like a mirage, as the two black-armoured guards marched through it.

Chlod clambered to his feet and ran. He staggered through storerooms stacked with empty shelves and others hanging with meat hooks, until he came to the very back of the larder. Here, a heavy wooden crane was positioned above a large wooden trapdoor in the floor. A thick, corroded chain was spooled around the crane's mechanism, and a massive hook hung at head height from the end of its length. The underside of a further trapdoor was positioned directly overhead, leading to the upper levels of the palace.

It was through these trapdoors that the palace's stores were replenished. Branches of the Grismarie had been redirected beneath the palace in centuries past, and in times gone by, barges laden with produce were poled up the wide tunnels from upriver. Casks of wines, pallets stacked with meats and all manner of goods and foodstuffs from all across Bretonnia and beyond would have once been hauled directly into the palace from the canals below without the Mousillon nobility ever being forced to witness their arrival.

Chlod turned around on the spot, eyes darting around frantically for a way to release the trapdoor, before his eyes settled on a rusted lever set in the wall. A spider the size of his hand had constructed an intricate web between the lever and the stone wall, and it turned towards him, a myriad of eyes glinting in the darkness. He slapped it away, and took hold of the lever's handle.

The lever was ancient and rusted, and had clearly not been used for decades. It resisted him, and he closed his eyes as he strained to move it. He planted one foot against the wall and bent his back against it, groaning with the exertion. It did not budge.

The guards closed towards him unerringly, hefting their heavy swords. They were less than ten yards away.

'Come on!' shouted Chlod, tugging frantically on the lever.

With a horrendous screeching of metal, the lever gave way and Chlod fell to the ground. There was a grinding of gears and the two halves of the trapdoor swung downwards, like the floor beneath a hangman's noose. They struck the walls of the vertical shaft with a resounding boom, and at the same moment, the chain from the crane began to unspool. The heavy hook rocketed down into the darkness, and the sound of the chain unravelling was deafening.

A cloud of bats erupted from below, screeching and clawing. In their midst, eyes tinged red and their flesh covered in open sores and filth, the most devolved of Grandfather Mortis's children burst from the darkness. A narrow staircase descended around the edge of the vertical shaft leading down to the canal fifty feet below, and dozens of wild-eyed, emaciated figures appeared, crawling over each other in their haste.

One of them was cut almost in two by a black-armoured guard, the heavy blow splitting him diagonally from shoulder to hip. Then the two armoured figures disappeared beneath the feral tide, borne to the ground with a crash.

The chain had come to a shuddering halt, and after a pause, it began to reverse, hauled back up by toothed cogs and immense counter-weights hidden behind the stone wall.

Chlod lay still, breathing heavily, as he watched the demise of the two guards. Rocks pounded their helmets until the metal buckled inwards, and knives were slid between gaps in their plate. Finally, the two armoured figures were still. One of their visors had been wrenched completely out of shape and torn loose, and Chlod hurriedly looked away as he saw what was contained within. If ever the suit of armour had ever been worn by a living man, that time was long past.

The chain continued to recoil, clunking loudly as each link was reeled in. Finally, the massive hook reappeared. Four iron rings had been attached to it, each hooked into smaller chains that were orange with rust. A loading pallet was hauled into view, carrying the smiling figure of Grandfather Mortis, who

was standing with his arms raised above him like an ascendant god.

A cluster of filthy peasants manhandled the crane, swinging it away from the gaping trapdoor, and it settled to the floor with a final groan.

‘Excellent, excellent,’ said Mortis, stepping away from the platform and rubbing his skeletal hands together.

He moved towards Chlod, still lying against the wall, and lifted him gently to his feet. He stroked Chlod’s cheek with the back of one grey, wrinkled hand. ‘You have done well, my child,’ he said. ‘The sins of the past are forgiven.’

Grandfather Mortis continued to stroke Chlod’s cheek for a moment, then he grabbed him tightly around the neck, his thumbs pressing hard into his throat. Chlod gaped like a landed fish, his eyes boggling.

‘But don’t even think about leaving us again,’ said Mortis. ‘You belong with us, and I will not tolerate any disobedience from you again.’

From somewhere distant, there came a ferocious roar, booming up through the lower levels of the palace. Mortis released Chlod, a look of rapture upon his face, and Calard’s manservant fell to his knees, gasping for air.

‘Harken, my children!’ said Mortis, lifting a hand to his ear. ‘Hear the call of our beloved lord!’

XI

HIS FACE A mask of grim resolve, Calard slipped through the braying crowd. His gaze did not waver from Merovech. Calard was some ten people back from the edge of the fighting circle, and was making his way steadily through the press, closing the distance to the albino duke. His fist was clenched tightly around the hilt of the Sword of Garamont, sheathed at his hip.

There was a grunt of pain and a splash of blood in the fighting circle below, and the crowd roared its approval. Merovech alone made no reaction, his expression cold and detached. Calard ignored the glances he received from knights and ladies as he pushed his way through the onlookers, drawing ever nearer the butcher responsible for the sacking of Castle Garamont.

‘Kill him!’ shouted a woman wearing a spidery lace ruff around her slender neck. Her powdered cheeks were flushed and her pupils dilated. Her cry was echoed by dozens of others, all crying out for blood.

Calard was now directly behind Merovech, and he began to work his way forwards, shouldering through the crowd.

The duke stood alone, aloof and distant from all those gathered around him. No one came within arm’s distance of his person, possibly out of respect, or perhaps more likely out of fear. Merovech was a motionless island amidst a braying sea of humanity, yet far from making him appear unthreatening or calm, his utter stillness was deeply unsettling. It set him apart from those around him, perhaps even more so than his alabaster countenance, making him appear inhuman and alien.

Calard’s gaze never wavered. Cold fury burned in his eyes. He was only yards away now, only seconds from attaining his vengeance. His whole being became utterly focused, his senses heightened to unsurpassed levels in anticipation of this final confrontation.

He could smell the sickly fragrance of the scented perfumes and oils worn by the courtiers, which did little to mask the excited sweat exuded by those watching the brutal contest below. He could taste the metallic tang of blood in the air. He could hear every grunt and grimace of the two duelling knights, the scrape of their boots upon the grooved floor of the killing circle, and the sharp clang of metal on metal.

He could feel the reassuring weight of the Sword of Garamont beneath his grasp.

Calard stood directly behind the duke now. All he had to do was draw his blade and run the fiend through. No one, not Merovech nor any of his gathered knights would be able to stop him. He started drawing the Sword of Garamont before he regained control of himself.

Cutting an enemy down from behind, even a monster like Merovech, was an honourless, dog act, and one that would lessen him in his own eyes and the eyes of the Lady. And besides, Merovech was only one half of the murderous pair that had butchered his nephew and laid waste to his castle. Before Merovech died, he was honour bound to discover the identity of the second fiend, so that he too could be brought to justice.

The duel came to a sudden, brutal end. It was a shockingly one-sided affair, with one knight clearly toying with the other. Finally tiring of the game, he struck his opponent a vicious blow to the neck. The knight dropped to one knee, sword clattering from his grip.

Calard saw all this only dimly, the action taking place in his peripheral vision, his gaze still locked on Merovech.

The crowd hollered and stomped their feet, and Calard heard the fallen knight begging for mercy. The other knight turned his back on him, lifting his sword high into the air, accepting the roar of the crowd. The beaten warrior lowered his hand, and his head dropped in defeat. There was a lot of blood, but the wound was not fatal.

With inhuman speed and savagery, the victorious knight swung around suddenly, sword blade flashing. The defenceless knight was decapitated, and a fountain of blood erupted from the stump of his neck. The head bounced and rolled across the floor, coming to a halt against the lowest curved step of the killing circle. A surprised expression was etched upon its ashen face. For a second the headless corpse remained upright, blood spraying forth in rhythmic spurts, before it toppled forwards and was still. Blood continued to gush from the body, running into the spiralling grooves carved in the floor. The crowd cheered their approval.

The speed and savagery of the dishonourable blow dragged Calard's attention briefly away from his foe.

He looked upon the face of the duel's victor, and his blood ran cold.

It was his brother, Bertelis.

XII

CALARD'S EYES WIDENED in horror.

Bertelis stood alone in the circle, splattered in blood. His face bore an unhealthy pallor, and a cruel half-smile ghosted across his blue-tinged lips. He dropped to his knees before Duke Merovech.

'For your honour, my lord,' said Bertelis in a voice that made the hairs on the back of Calard's neck stand on end. It was at once his brother's voice, and it wasn't, tinged with bitterness and cruelty.

Merovech laid his hand upon the back of Bertelis's head as if in some dark benediction. They held the pose for a moment, then Merovech spoke.

'Rise,' he said, his voice cold and dispassionate.

Calard was frozen in place, staring at his brother.

The duke loosened one of his exquisite, tight-fitting leather gloves and pulled it free, exposing a hand as pale as virgin snow. He drew a slender dagger from his hip and placed it across his naked hand. His fingers closed tightly around the blade, and with a smooth, slow movement, he slid the dagger free. His

blood shone brightly upon the blade.

Sheathing the knife, Merovech clicked his fingers and a goblet of wine was handed to him. He lifted his pale hand above the goblet, still clenched in a fist, and let his blood drip steadily into the wine. When the flow ceased, he handed the goblet to Bertelis, who accepted it with a look of hunger.

‘All of Mousillon salutes you, Bertelis, champion of champions,’ said Merovech.

Bertelis lifted the goblet high, then threw his head back and gulped back its contents. He shuddered in rapture, his eyes half-closed as he lowered the drinking vessel from his lips.

Calard groaned in horror as he watched his brother drink the wine infused with blood, shocked to the core of his being. Bertelis wiped a ruby drip from the corner of his mouth, and Duke Merovech stepped down into the centre of the duelling ring. He moved with a lion’s grace.

Bertelis had always been tall, standing half a head clear of Calard himself, but Merovech towered over him. He turned around on the spot, eyeing the gathered knights. His white features contrasted sharply with the black of his armour, and his red-tinged eyes glinted in the torchlight, like those of a wolf. All conversation had ceased in the chamber, and now all were gathered close in around the duelling pit to hear their master’s words.

‘Tonight is an auspicious night, my brothers,’ said Merovech, his voice booming out to fill the expansive hall. He began to stalk around the perimeter of the circle, like a caged beast. ‘Tonight is the dawning of a new era in Mousillon’s history. Once, our realm was the most powerful in all Bretonnia. Now we have a chance to reclaim that glory, you and I.’

Calard found himself captivated by Merovech, unable to tear his eyes away from him.

‘For seven hundred years I slumbered,’ said Merovech. ‘I awoke to find Mousillon a pale shadow of its glorious past, overrun with vermin, its lands annexed by its neighbours, its very name a by-word for despair and failure. But now, I have returned. Now, Mousillon will rise again. And you, my brothers, will rise with it.’

Merovech had returned to the centre of the circle and now he stopped his restless pacing. Calard could feel the excitement building amongst the onlookers.

‘Each of you has proven yourself worthy,’ said Merovech, ‘and so, I will grant you the greatest gift that you shall ever receive. Tonight, you become as gods among men, and together we shall take back what is rightfully ours. All of Bretonnia shall kneel before us, and the lands shall run red with blood.’

As if on cue, there came a grinding of gears and the turning of ancient mechanisms, and the domed ceiling overhead began to open, unfurling like the petals of a black rose under the midnight sky. The clouds were parting overhead, and the silver light of Mannslieb shone down into the expansive chamber. There were gasps from the crowd of onlookers, but it was not for this mechanical wonder, or the sight of the silver moon. No, those intakes of air were for the appearance of the second moon: Morrslieb, glowing malignant and green, that stared down at them like a baleful eye.

Merovech was standing with his arms raised to the heavens, bathing in Morrslieb’s sinister emerald glow.

‘It is time!’ bellowed the duke. ‘Bring forth the prisoner!’

BOUND IN HEAVY, ensorcelled chains and surrounded by armed guards, the prisoner was dragged up through the palace halls from the oubliette that had held it, far below. It bellowed its fury, the sound echoing deafeningly through the lower levels. Its massive body was a patchwork of burns, savage cuts and mottled bruises courtesy of the duke’s finest torturers. More than a score of muscle-bound wardens hauled upon the thick chains, straining and heaving to keep the prisoner moving. They wore black leather hoods over their heads, and were accompanied by an entourage of palace guards, silent, long-dead warriors enclosed in black plate armour.

The ambush hit them hard and fast. The battle took place halfway up a wide marble staircase, with the attackers striking simultaneously from above and below. The fight was brutal and bloody, and over within thirty heartbeats. The prisoner itself tore apart half a dozen of its gaolers, ripping them limb from limb in a gory explosion of rage and savagery.

Grandfather Mortis approached the prisoner warily, hands raised, as one might approach a wounded bear. His eyes were full of pity as he looked upon his lord's tortured flesh.

Murmuring calming words, he laid a hand gently upon one of the prisoner's immensely muscled shoulders. Its heavy head came up sharply, snarling, and Mortis jerked back. Its snarl descended into a low, warning rumble deep in its chest, and Mortis placed his hand back upon its shoulder. This time it accepted his touch.

'It's over,' said Grandfather Mortis in a soothing voice. 'It's over.'

'No,' growled the prisoner, forming the words with some difficulty. Its mouth was built for tearing and ripping, not for speech. 'It is time for vengeance.'

CALARD SAW THE thrill of anticipation on Bertelis's ungodly pale face, mirroring the expression of every onlooker. His brother grinned, exposing needle-sharp canines.

'Blessed Lady of mercy,' Calard breathed.

As if hearing his words, Bertelis's head snapped around. For a second his eyes darted from face to face, searching for who had spoken, but then they settled on Calard. His grin widened, and he began to chuckle. With slow, unhurried movements he drew his sword and began walking towards Calard. The knights and ladies around the questing knight drew back away from him, leaving him isolated and exposed.

'Hello, Calard,' said Bertelis. 'What a pleasant surprise this is.'

'What has he done to you, my brother?' said Calard, standing alone.

'Nothing that I did not wish for,' said Bertelis with a grin, loosening the muscles of his neck and shoulders languorously, like a cat stretching. 'And it feels fantastic.'

'Finish it quickly,' hissed Merovech. 'The time of the conjunction draws near.'

'I've been looking forward to this for a long time, *brother*,' spat Bertelis, hefting his sword and moving purposefully across the killing circle.

Reluctantly, Calard drew the Sword of Garamont and stepped out to meet him. He swung his battered shield from his back and secured it on his left arm.

'It does not have to be like this, brother,' he said.

'Oh, it does,' said Bertelis. 'It truly does.'

BERTELIS ATTACKED WITH such savagery and speed that Calard was instantly fighting for his life, defending desperately as furious attack after attack rained down on him. It took all his concentration, skill and hard-earned experience just to survive the opening exchange, and such was the power and vitriol behind each blow that he was knocked physically backwards each time his sword met his brother's.

He was given no opportunity to even consider launching a counter-attack, and his left arm was numb from the jarring blows he took on his shield. He was doing all he could to evade Bertelis's furious assault, stepping off the line of attack and retreating hastily in an effort to put some distance between them. His brother came after him relentlessly, sword blade flashing as it sliced through the air again and again. Had any of those attacks struck home, they would have been fatal.

Calard knew that he was a vastly superior warrior now than he had been when he first took up the quest, six years earlier. The long years on the road had hardened him, body and soul, forging him anew

and honing his killer instincts to a razor's edge. He was stronger, leaner and faster than he had been, and was confident enough in his own abilities to back himself against any man. Even so, he was struggling now with the pace of battle that Bertelis was setting, and struggling even more with his brother's unprecedented strength and fury.

Calard and Bertelis had trained together since childhood, and both had been schooled by Gunthar, the old weapon master of Garamont. Growing up, their duels had always been evenly matched, though it had been obvious that Bertelis was the more gifted of the two, a natural swordsman with the perfect blend of strength, balance, speed and instinct. He had always relied too heavily on his natural-born talents, however, and in his youth had been a lax student, earning many stern words from Gunthar. In contrast, Calard had worked hard at his swordsmanship, rising hours before the rest of the household to hone his technique and strengthen his body. It was only after Gunthar's death that Bertelis began taking his training more seriously, devoting himself to it with a focus bordering on obsession. Only then had he started to show his true potential.

It was clear now that Bertelis had eclipsed those expectations and taken them to a whole new level, reaching a plane that Calard had no hope of matching, and even less of competing with. Bertelis's skill was bordering the sublime, and Calard could think of few – perhaps only the Grail Knight Reolus, Lady rest his soul – that could have equalled it. The speed of his blade was incomparable, and Calard had rarely crossed blades with one who struck with such power. It was overwhelming how far Bertelis's blade skill had come in the last six years. Calard felt a child facing a master.

A blow thundered into his shield, wrenching it out of shape, and he winced. He slashed a riposte towards his brother's neck, but it was batted aside with contemptuous ease. Bertelis grinned and stepped back, allowing Calard a moment to catch his breath. He realised that his brother was toying with him, just as he had his earlier opponent.

'You have grown soft,' said Bertelis.

'Turn from this path, Bertelis,' said Calard. 'It leads you only to damnation.'

'You drove me onto this path, brother,' snapped Bertelis. '*You* turned your back on *me*!'

'And I'm truly sorry,' said Calard. 'My words were spoken in haste. I was blinded by grief. I meant not what I said.'

'It is too late for apologies,' said Bertelis, and Calard knew he spoke the truth. There was a madness behind his eyes that Calard had never seen before, a simmering, insatiable rage that threatened to consume him. It was as if some wild beast had taken up residence in the flesh of his brother, directing his movements like a puppet.

'You are no longer the brother I knew and loved,' said Calard. His breath was ragged from the intensity of the fight, yet Bertelis appeared completely rested, barely having raised a sweat.

'No,' agreed Bertelis. 'I am something far greater.'

'Enough!' hissed Duke Merovech from the edge of the killing circle. 'Finish it, now!'

Calard's gaze darted between the fiend that was once his brother and the pale, immortal figure of Duke Merovech. Realisation dawned.

'It was you who sacked Garamont,' he said, looking back at Bertelis. 'It was you who killed Orlando and Montcadas, and butchered my knights.'

'I would have killed you too,' said Bertelis, 'had you been there. Now, the cycle will be complete, and every tie to my former life will at last be severed.'

'You are not even human,' said Calard. Bertelis smiled in response, exposing needle-sharp canines.

'My, you are quick, brother,' he said. The smile dropped from his face. 'And now, you die.'

For a moment the brothers regarded each other from opposite sides of the killing circle, before they

began closing the distance, swords at the ready.

A deafening roar boomed through the cavernous chamber, echoing loudly and making the windows rattle in their frames. Calard could feel the reverberant sound in his bones. He looked up, the duel momentarily forgotten.

An arched balcony jutted out over the room, thirty feet overhead, and crouched upon its marble balustrade was a monster.

XIII

IT WAS HUGE, easily six times the bulk of a man, and it looked like some monstrous gargoyle come to life. It was hunched, and black matted fur covered its massive shoulders. Immense talons carved furrows in the marble as it tensed its huge arms, bulging with sinew and muscle. It howled at the heavens again, the sound deeply affecting on some primal level, before turning its baleful gaze down into the chamber below.

Its head was huge and wide, a hideous blend of man, bat and wolf. Its lips drew back to expose a terrifying array of fangs, and its snarl rumbled deep in its powerful chest. Its canines were heavily pronounced, and each was easily six inches in length. Its eyes were those of a predator, burning with fury and hunger, and they locked on the pale figure of Duke Merovech, far below.

The monster howled again, spittle flying from its maw, and it launched from its eyrie. Powerful leg muscles propelled it downwards at astonishing speed, and its huge taloned arms extended in front of it, veined membranes of skin unfurling from wrist to hip like vestigial wings.

It hurtled downwards, like a monstrous bird of prey dropping on its quarry, and shouts and screams erupted across the chamber. Calard heard the sound of weapons clashing along with cries of shock and pain, and through the dense crowd he spied the filth-encrusted forms of Grandfather Mortis's children, leaping and howling as they attacked. Like a frenzied pack, they descended on the crowded chamber, and chaos erupted.

Duke Merovech hurled himself to one side as the monster struck. It slammed down into the floor with titanic force, sending cracks shooting out across the surface of the marble from the impact. Merovech rolled neatly to his feet, a sword in each hand.

People were running across the killing circle in panic, separating Calard and Bertelis. He saw his brother fighting his way through the crowd towards him, his face a mask of fury. A knight slammed into Calard, knocking him back a step, and a heavy blow to his arm knocked the Sword of Garamont from his grasp. The ancient heirloom clattered to the ground and was kicked away, spinning just out of reach.

Calard swore and dived after it. Someone tripped over him and fell sprawling, and he grunted as he was kicked and trampled, but he ensured that he kept his eyes locked on the holy sword. He reached for it, and his fingers grazed its hilt tantalisingly, but then it was kicked away again, this time disappearing into the crowd. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Bertelis storming towards him, hacking down knights, ladies and feral peasants alike, and he swore again.

Fighting back to his feet, he tore the shield from his arm and hurled it aside. He reached up over his back and yanked his hand-and-a-half sword from its scabbard as Bertelis drew close.

Had he been a fraction slower he would have been dead, and he only barely managed to block Bertelis's blow slicing in at his neck. He was knocked back a step and Bertelis came after him, getting inside the reach of his longer blade.

He was completely outclassed, and they both knew it. Confident that Calard could not match him, Bertelis was now fighting well within his own limits, and his form was slipping. Calard's anger swelled; he was determined to punish Bertelis for such arrogance, but knew he might only get one chance.

After a few more passes, Bertelis lunged. Calard sidestepped neatly, turning side-on to let Bertelis's momentum take him past him. His brother's blade slid by him, a hair's-breadth from his throat. With a grunt of exertion, he rammed his sword's heavy pommel into the side of Bertelis's head, putting his whole armoured weight behind it.

The move was expertly delivered, his timing perfect, and it should have caved Bertelis's skull in. His brother's head snapped back, but he did not fall. Calard used the moment to step back, adopting a ready stance with his blade held high, its point levelled at Bertelis.

A trickle of blood ran from Bertelis's temple, but he appeared otherwise unaffected by the blow. He reached up to the wound, and then licked the blood from his finger tips.

'For that, I'm going to make this really hurt,' said Bertelis.

Calard lunged at him and Bertelis danced out of the way. Calard turned, sweeping his blade overhead and bringing it crashing down in a heavy, diagonal strike. Bertelis parried it early and leapt in under the blade to grab Calard by the throat. He moved so fast, he was little more than a blur. His grip was like iron, and his snarling face was close. Up close, he looked barely human at all, his eyes glinting with fathomless hunger and madness, his skin almost translucent, and his expression twisted and bestial.

'Orlando's blood was so sweet, so innocent,' he hissed. 'It was like nectar on my lips, sweeter than the finest wine.'

Bertelis lifted Calard off his feet, holding him aloft with one hand before tossing him aside like a child. Calard slammed into one of Merovech's knights, bowling him over, and they fell in a tangled heap. Calard was up first, and as the knight grappled with him, he pummelled his elbow into the man's face, dropping him instantly.

Calard staggered to his feet, dragging his sword up. Bertelis's boot slammed down on it hard, snapping the blade halfway up its length, and Calard reeled back.

A knight lunged at him with a drawn sword, and Calard swayed to the side, avoiding the killing thrust. He stabbed the jagged end of his shattered sword into the man's face, and he fell away with a strangled cry. Another knight swung at him from behind, but Calard sidestepped neatly. Grabbing the man's arm as he came around, he pulled him off-balance, shoving him into Bertelis's path.

Without blinking, Bertelis ran the knight through, and the tip of Bertelis's blade burst from his back. He dragged his sword clear, and hurled the man aside.

Calard took a moment to survey his surroundings. The attack by Mortis's feral brood had taken the knights by surprise, but they were fighting back now, gathering into tight huddles to support each other, and both sides were taking heavy casualties. Bodies were strewn across the chamber floor, and more than a few of the hunched peasants had dropped to the ground to feed, unable to restrain their hunger amid the sight and smell of so much blood.

He saw Mortis standing alone, up on the balcony where the monster had appeared, watching the mayhem unfold.

The immense beast and Duke Merovech had taken their fight up onto the raised dais where the five statues sat enthroned, separating themselves from the chaotic melee below.

The creature was bleeding from a dozen wounds, but it did not appear to be slowing. Merovech danced and weaved like a dervish, ducking under blows that would have torn him in half, twin blades flashing. He moved with preternatural speed, but the monster he fought was almost as quick, despite its bulk. As he watched, he saw the beast catch Merovech a glancing blow that sent the duke skittering across the dais like a rag doll, crashing into the central altar holding the huge, dark chalice with bone-jarring force.

The beast roared in victory and leapt after him but Merovech recovered quickly, and rolled under the blade-like talons that hammered down towards him. As he came to his feet, both blades carved bloody

furrows across the monster's chest, and it hissed in pain.

Using the immense beast's arm like a ladder, Merovech turned and leapt lightly up his enemy's body, spinning both swords around in his hands so that they were pointed downwards, like daggers. Kicking off the beast's chest, he turned in mid-air and plunged both swords into its neck.

The monster bellowed. Both swords were embedded to the hilt, and Calard could see their tips protruding from the back of its neck as it thrashed around in pain. It reached up and ripped both weapons free, hurling them away from it, and blood gushed from the wounds. Such a blow ought to have been fatal, but the beast merely shook its head and dropped to all fours, and began stalking towards the now unarmed Duke Merovech.

'Your master's going to die,' said Calard as Bertelis closed the distance between them.

'I think not,' said his brother. 'No devolved varghulf is a match for him.'

Bertelis lunged, feinting high and coming in low with a brutal attack intended to disembowel him. Calard saw it coming, and dropped his guard to block the vicious attack, but Bertelis had already shifted the angle of his attack once more.

Spinning on his heel, Bertelis turned quickly, his head whipping around and his body following. His sword slashed across Calard's shoulder, striking just under his pauldron. The blow hacked through his chainmail and padding, and bit deep into flesh before striking bone.

Before Calard could even cry out, Bertelis spun back around the way he had come and rammed his blade into Calard's body. The tip penetrated just inside his hip, slipping through the slender gap under his breastplate.

Calard gasped, and his shattered sword-blade dropped from his hands. He fell to one knee, and Bertelis loomed above him, his blade slick with blood.

'Goodbye, brother,' said Bertelis, drawing his sword back for the killing thrust.

A knight burst from the crowd nearby. He had a sword in each hand, and he shouted at the top of his lungs as he charged.

'Calard!' Raben cried, tossing one of the blades towards him.

Calard caught the sword, his fingers closing around the familiar hilt.

Raben swung a two-handed blow at Bertelis, who turned and blocked the attack with one of his own. Dropping to one knee, Bertelis slashed from right to left across Raben's stomach, carving through his chain hauberk and the muscle beneath, then rose and kicked the outcast away.

With a snarl, Bertelis rounded on Calard, but his eyes went wide as the Sword of Garamont impaled him.

Calard was on his feet now, and he grunted with effort as he gave his sword another shove, ramming it up into Bertelis's body.

Blood gushed from the fatal wound, and Bertelis's face became increasingly gaunt, as if all the moisture in his body was being sucked out of him. His features became ever more skeletal and inhuman as his translucent flesh withered, his lips drawing back to expose his savage fangs. Calard stepped back, a look of disgust on his face, and slid his blade free.

The Sword of Garamont was glowing with an aura of white light, and Calard looked upon it in wonder. Bertelis's blood splattered off it, leaving the blade spotless. The shimmering radiance felt like sunlight on Calard's face, and despite the mayhem surrounding him, he felt a sense of calm and assurance envelop him.

Bertelis fell to his knees, blood pooling beneath him. His flesh continued to shrink upon his skull, until he looked barely human at all. His hands had withered to little more than talons, and their veins, purple and blue, stood out sharply. He glared up at Calard then. Hatred and fury burnt in his eyes, but also fear.

He hissed like a cornered animal, teeth bared, as if he were devolving before Calard's eyes.

The luminosity of the sword in Calard's hands intensified, glowing hot and pure, and Bertelis's skin began to blacken and blister beneath its glare. He held his hands up, shielding his eyes, and they too began to burn. A pitiful wail emitted from his throat.

'Lady, give him peace,' murmured Calard, clasping his sword in both hands. Without pause, he stepped forwards and beheaded the creature that had once been Bertelis.

Raben was lying on the ground nearby, clutching at his stomach, and he smiled wryly as his gaze met Calard's.

'Thank you,' said Calard.

Raben grunted. 'That was your brother?' he said, indicating towards Bertelis's corpse with his chin.

'No,' said Calard. 'My brother died a long time ago.'

A roar of pain and fury dragged Calard's attention up towards the raised dais. The immense, loathsome beast that Bertelis had called a varghulf was down, blood pooling beneath it. Its flesh was slashed and torn, hanging from it in bloody tatters.

Duke Merovech stood before it, sword in hand. He too was injured. One of his pauldrons had been ripped away, exposing his shoulder, which was covered in blood. Four bloody rents were carved through his breastplate. Nevertheless, Duke Merovech stood victorious, and Calard shook his head in wonderment. Could nothing kill him?

The varghulf's powerful legs bunched for one final spring, but it was never given the chance. Duke Merovech hurled his sword aside and leapt towards his enemy with a blood-curdling battle cry, hands extended like claws. He grabbed the immense creature by the head, grappling with it, and with a roar of effort, he wrenched it upwards, exposing its neck.

Merovech's fangs flashed, and he tore into the varghulf's neck. The creature fought against him, but its strength was gone. For long moments Merovech drank, glutting himself before pulling away. His mouth and chin were caked in blood.

Duke Merovech dragged the immense weight of the varghulf across the dais floor, until he reached the altar. With one hand, he grabbed the chalice from altar's tabernacle. He glanced heavenward. The green moon of Morrslieb was eclipsing Mannslieb now, like a repulsive, burning pupil in a silver iris. Apparently satisfied, Merovech forced the varghulf's neck back, and lowered his mouth to its neck once more. This time he did not feed, but rather tore. He ripped open its throat, and the last of its blood began to gush forth.

GRANDFATHER MORTIS CLUTCHED unsteadily at the railing of the balcony as he watched his beloved lord and master slain. His children were being butchered down below, their will to fight evaporating as they too registered that their master was no more.

He staggered back, casting his eyes from the sickening sight of his master's body defiled. A took a deep, shuddering breath, and turned away.

A heavy spiked cudgel smashed one of his kneecaps to splinters, and he fell to the ground with a cry of pain and shock.

Chlod stood over him, and the old man gaped up at him.

'Fifteen years I was your slave, one of your cursed *children*,' said Chlod. 'I'll not be that again.'

The hunchbacked peasant spat in Mortis's face, making the old man flinch. That merely enraged Chlod more, and he slammed his spiked cudgel into Mortis's side. Ribs snapped like dry twigs.

'Fifteen years I stole and murdered for you, you old bastard,' said Chlod. 'Fifteen years you starved me. How many times did I feel the touch of your switch, hmm? How many bones did you break? How

many scars did you leave?’

He made to strike Mortis again, and the old man recoiled, his face twisted in agony.

‘Who has the power now?’ said Chlod.

‘I took you in, you wretched ingrate,’ hissed Mortis between clenched teeth. ‘I fed you! I clothed you! I! Without me you’d be dead! You’d be nothing! I made you what you are!’

‘You did at that,’ said Chlod. ‘Do you like what you see?’

Chlod brought his spiked cudgel down again and again, and as loud as Mortis’s screams were, no one came to his aid. He continued his brutal attack even after Mortis had ceased screaming, even after he was far beyond recognisable.

Finally, Chlod stopped his relentless assault. He was breathing heavily, and tears were running down his face. He was completely covered in blood, and chunks of skin and hair clung to the spikes of his club.

He spat down on the thing that had once been Grandfather Mortis, and then turned away.

CALARD KNELT BY Raben, and gently drew back the outcast’s arm to see the extent of his injuries.

‘How’s it look?’ said Raben. His face was pale.

‘It’s a scratch,’ said Calard. ‘You’ll be whoring again in a week, mark my words.’

‘Liar,’ said Raben, with a sardonic smile.

‘You’ll survive,’ said Calard, more seriously. ‘Though you’ll have one hell of a scar to match that one,’ he said, indicating the jagged old wound that crossed Raben’s throat.

‘Ladies don’t like a man that’s too pretty,’ said Raben.

‘Well, you certainly aren’t that,’ said Calard, casting a wary eye around them.

There were few left standing, in truth. It seemed that both sides had practically annihilated the other, though from the looks of things, there were far more of Mortis’s people dead than Merovech’s.

Looking back up towards the dais, he saw that Merovech had filled the chalice with the varghulf’s blood. Now he stood, letting the massive creature’s head drop to the floor, dead. The vampire duke moved towards the first of the throned statues. He raised the chalice above its head, and tipped it slightly, allowing a trickle of frothing blood to drip onto the statue’s head. Red rivulets ran down over its face, removing centuries of dust and grime. Calard’s heart skipped a beat as the statue moved.

It turned its face up towards the stream of blood, its mouth opening wide, showing off impressively elongated canines. Its tongue lapped at the flow, and Calard saw its throat moving as it swallowed.

‘That’s not good,’ said Raben.

Merovech righted the chalice, and the enthroned creature returned to its former position. The duke moved on to the next in line, but Calard’s gaze was locked on the first. Its eyes snapped open, and it smiled.

Calard took a few steps towards the steps of the dais, knowing that he stood little chance against Merovech alone, even without with his newly awoken allies. Nevertheless, he had sworn an oath, and would see Merovech dead or die in the attempt.

‘Calard,’ called Raben, and he looked back. ‘Don’t throw your life away.’

‘This is something I have to do,’ Calard said. He swung back around. His step faltered as the holy light radiating from the Sword of Garamont dimmed, then died altogether. He halted, looking down at it.

What did it mean? Did the Lady disapprove of his actions? But how could she? Was it not she who had led him here?

Three of the 'statues' had come awake now, and were on their feet, blinking and stretching their necks like men awakening from a deep slumber. Each was as tall as Merovech himself, and all of them were garbed in similar, barbed armour.

Calard stood stock still, indecision plaguing him.

'Lady, give me a sign,' he whispered. 'Show me what it is you wish of me.'

A blinding flash exploded in Calard's mind, sending him crashing to his knees, his eyes tightly closed. He gasped at the searing pain in his temples, clutching his head in his hands.

A bewildering flash of images assailed him, overwhelming in their intensity and their power.

It was over in an instant, the pain gone as if it had never been, but the images were seared forever into his mind's eye.

'As you will it, Lady, so shall it be done,' he whispered.

'Calard?' called Raben, straining to see him.

'We have to go,' said Calard, turning his back on the dais, where all five of Merovech's vampiric lieutenants how now arisen.

Calard hurried to Raben's side.

'We have to go,' he said again.

'Sounds good to me,' said Raben.

'Put your arm around me,' said Calard, and then he lifted Raben to his feet. The outcast knight groaned in pain, but did not cry out. Together, they staggered across a floor littered with the dead, making their way towards the chamber's exit. The few of Merovech's knights that still stood paid them no heed, staring in wonder at the duke and his newly arisen entourage.

At the door of the chamber they paused, glancing back within.

The scene was one of utter devastation. Hundreds of bodies were sprawled across the marble floor. Many were not yet dead, and the ground rippled with movement. Their cries and moans were pitiful. Blood was splattered up the walls, and more than a few of the bodies had been partially devoured. The corpse of the monstrous varghulf lay motionless upon the dais. Merovech descended the stairs of the raised platform, flanked by the five lieutenants that had served him seven hundred years earlier.

The few living knights still standing in the room dropped to their knees before Merovech. The duke ignored them, walking past with barely a glance. His companions, however, circled them like wolves. As one, they closed in, and began to feed.

Merovech dropped to one knee alongside Bertelis's headless corpse, and Calard thought he saw something approaching sorrow ghost across the duke's features as he placed a hand upon his brother's chest. Then Merovech raised his head, looking down the length of the chamber directly at Calard. He stood, and began walking towards them.

'We have to leave,' said Raben.

Calard nodded, and supporting the outcast's weight, hurried from the room.

They almost collided with Chlod as he came bowling down a wide set of stairs. The peasant was covered from head to toe in blood.

No words were spoken, and after a brief pause, Chlod moved forward to help support Raben. The outcast threw his arm over his shoulder and the three of them began making their way from the palace of Mousillon.

'Gods, peasant,' said Calard. 'You stink.'

Drained of blood, the corpse was dropped unceremoniously to the ground. The vampire's flesh was

flushed, and its mouth and chin was stained with congealing gore.

Nothing living moved within the great hall. Every corpse has been bled dry to satiate the thirst of the duke's newly risen lieutenants.

It would not be long now, Merovech knew.

Within the hour, the first of the drained knights stirred and rose unsteadily to its feet, staggering like a newborn colt. Darkness lingered in its eyes, and its lips curled back to reveal newly formed canines. More knights stirred as they awoke to darkness, and Merovech smiled.

‘Welcome, brothers,’ he said, spreading his arms wide. ‘Welcome to damnation.’

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