

WARHAMMER
40,000



ICE GUARD

Steve Lyons

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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Imperial Guard - 05

Steve Lyons

(An Undead Scan v1.1)

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 48.00.00

This was the way a world died.

Chaos forces, the Lost and the Damned, had penetrated Alpha Hive, breaking down its walls. Hundreds of thousands of Guardsmen had given their lives to hold them back, to contain them in the outer zones at least, but the advance was relentless.

It was when the generators had blown, when production had ground to a halt, that the evacuation order had been signed. The civilians had been lifted out first, those few who could still be reached and who hadn't been slaughtered or turned traitor. Now it was the turn of the Imperial Guardsmen on the ground.

Cressida had been a proud world once. Its mines had been bountiful, and its refineries and factories the most efficient in the sector. Its standard of living, on the highest hive levels, had been good, and even the underhives had enjoyed a far lower than normal attrition rate. Cressida's subjects had been loyal and happy, with a consequently high rate of population growth. They had been in the process of building their thirteenth hive, and Imperial Guard Command had advanced plans to raise another Guard regiment from their numbers within ten years.

It had taken less than half that time for Cressida to be invaded, overrun, lost, and finally abandoned.

Colonel Stanislev Steele stood in what had been a mine overseer's office on Alpha Hive's eighty-third level. An explosion had ripped through the room recently, and two of its walls had been torn out. Its ceiling hung precariously over him, and every few seconds the vibrations from a fresh blast below travelled far enough to make it tremble and threaten to give way.

From this uncertain vantage point he could look out over what remained of the outer zones — at the ebb and flow of battle, at fire and smoke and metal, and the bottle-green lines of his regiment, the Valhallan 319th, marking the extent of the enemy's progress through the ruins.

It made sense, of course, that a Valhallan regiment should remain on the front lines, fighting a rearguard action to buy time for the evacuees. Cressida's temperature had been dropping steadily for the past few years — some side effect of the Chaos incursion, although no one had been quite able to explain it — but the men of Steele's world were well used to the freezing cold.

The Ice Warriors, as they called themselves, were also renowned for their tenacity in defence. Fighting in close formation, they held their ground long after the men of most other worlds would have given way.

They found themselves driven back, all the same. Again and again, blossoms of fire erupted within their ranks, and their green lines were broken and then erased, to be redrawn, a little shorter than before and a little further back, but as firmly as ever.

Steele drew his armoured greatcoat tighter around his body, tucked his gloved hands into its loose sleeves. He could have sworn that the temperature had dropped another two degrees in the past day. He checked his augmetics, but they didn't respond. So, he chose to believe his own instincts.

Streaks of light scarred the overcast grey sky: the trails of spacecraft carrying more troops clear of Cressida. They, at least, would live to fight another day, albeit in a different theatre of war, one in which they might stand a chance of winning.

Steele could hear footsteps approaching. His augmented ears filtered the soft sound from the clamour of war cries and the crump of mortars. He turned to greet Sergeant Ivon Gavotski, a tall, thoughtful man, approaching middle age, unflappable.

Gavotski threw up a crisp salute, and announced, “All done, sir. Orders have been sent to the eight men on our list, and to four more, in case some of the first eight are already dead or can’t be located. I filed a requisition order for a Termite with the Departamento Munitorum, and I mentioned the cardinal’s name as you suggested. I think I impressed upon the quartermaster the importance of this particular request.”

Steele nodded, and said, “I just hope the men we have chosen are as good as their records suggest they are. This could be the most important mission the 319th has ever undertaken, the one that will decide how we are remembered.”

He turned back to the battlefield, on which an array of Chaos-controlled tanks — Leman Russ Demolishers had managed to gain some purchase in the rubble to advance. The Ice Warriors’ tanks were responding, moving clumsily into position, trying to draw a fresh defensive line across this new, unexpected front.

“At any rate,” sighed Steele, “it appears it may be the last.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. The war on Cressida had been long and hard, and his men, their ranks already depleted after campaigns on Dellenos IV and Tempest, had suffered heavy casualties. He had heard the whispers, heard that when all this was over the survivors of the Valhallan 319th would be absorbed into other regiments, that their glorious history would come to an end.

It was starting to snow — but in contrast to the pure white, cleansing falls of his home world, these snowflakes were a dirty grey in colour.

Trooper Pozhar squinted down the sights of his las-gun, and scowled as a bone-biting wind whipped up a flurry of grey snow, obscuring his view of the enemy.

His trigger finger itched with the enforced delay. On the front line, a man could be dead in a second, without even seeing what had hit him. Pozhar was determined to make each second count. Even so, he didn’t want to waste power — not just because that would be a sin against the Emperor, but because he was down to his last pack. He had just clicked it into his gun, reciting the Litany of Loading as he did so in deference to the machine-spirits.

So, Pozhar held his fire until dark shapes began to loom through the haze, and then he thumbed his power pack setting to full auto and squeezed off fully a quarter of its charge in a deadly, low-level barrage across the rubble.

Many of the shapes crumpled, but as always there were more out there, many more. They clambered over the bodies of the fallen, bearing down on him. They were greeted by the percussion cracks of a hundred more lasguns, Pozhar’s comrades following his lead, and a score of frag grenades burst and filled the air with a cloud of blood and dismembered limbs, but still they came.

Pozhar could see them now, and he felt a surge of rage at the sight of their tattered uniforms. They were the worst kind of foe: Traitor Guard. He didn’t recognise their colours. So many regiments had turned on Cressida in the past few years that he had lost track of them all.

They were close enough for the Valhallans’ cover to mean very little. The traitors raised their guns, and Pozhar’s ears popped with the retorts of las-fire from both fronts. He had been crouching behind a half-demolished wall, but it had been all but chipped away by las-beams. A lucky shot penetrated the fur hat, and the head, of the trooper beside him, and Pozhar was left exposed.

It could only be a matter of minutes now. Soon, the order would come to fall back again, to surrender a little more ground to the enemy. But Pozhar was a Valhallan Ice Warrior, and until that order came, he would not give a centimetre.

The traitors swept over him, hardly seeming to notice that he was alive and still standing. Perhaps they expected him to fall and be trampled, but instead he cannoned into the stomach of the nearest of them, disarming him, sending him to the ground. Two more traitors rounded on Pozhar,

but he dropped beneath their lunges and swung his gun like a club, scoring a pair of palpable hits to a chin and a forehead. Then his micro-bead earpiece crackled into life, and he heard the urgent voice of a vox-operator, instructing him to fall back and report to the platoon commander.

He could almost have laughed at the timing of it. The traitors were pressing in all around him, and he could measure the rest of his life in seconds. It didn't matter. A red mist had settled over Pozhar, and he felt as if he was standing outside of his body as instinct took over and he punched and kicked and swiped, and jammed the muzzle of his lasgun into one traitor's stomach and blew out his guts.

It was over too soon, of course. He was borne to the ground by sheer weight of numbers. He reached into his greatcoat for a frag grenade and prepared to go out in a ball of fire that would consume ten or more alongside him.

"Do you hear me, Pozhar? Get your sorry carcass back here fast. Word is, you're being reassigned, by order of Colonel Steele himself."

The explosion deadened his ears, heat searing his skin, and he thought for a moment that his senses were deceiving him because he hadn't yet pulled out the pin.

The grenade that had gone off had not been his. It had been thrown by a comrade, evidently unaware of Pozhar's position. Friendly fire — and friendly indeed, because, by the Emperor's will, Pozhar had been protected from the force of the blast by the press of bodies around him. He lay on his back, drained by his unexpected escape, almost smothered by a pile of corpses. And he had been doubly blessed, because for now he was hidden from the rest of the traitors.

They were advancing past him, booted feet striking the ground near his head, more bodies falling — adding to the pile — as his Valhallan comrades retrenched and a fresh burst of las-fire scythed into their foes. The voice was still squawking in Pozhar's ear, and he did laugh then, a near-hysterical outburst of relief and fear and defiance all mingled together.

It took him a minute to calm down, to be able to assess the situation in which he found himself. He was alone, behind the enemy's front line, and the only way to survive in such a position was to stay where he was, to play dead. Which was out of the question — because not only would it have been a dereliction of duty, but there was also the matter of his unexpected summons to consider, and the tantalising prospect that he had been chosen to receive some great honour.

If Colonel Steele had asked for him by name, if he had a mission that he felt only Pozhar could undertake, then Pozhar would be there. Whatever it took.

They had taken the enemy by surprise.

The Chaos forces had pulled their artillery from this flank, believing it shielded by the heaped wreckage of a city street, thinking it impossible for the Imperial tanks to break through here. They had reckoned without an Ice Warrior named Grayle.

Grayle knew vehicles — not like a tech-priest knew them, from the inside out, but he had an instinct about them. It was almost as if he could bond with their spirits, and push them to incredible new heights of performance. And right now, he was at the controls of a Leman Russ Annihilator battle tank, and its sixty-tonne chassis was heaving, juddering fit to tear itself apart, and yet it was finding traction, finding a path somehow across the ruins.

Trooper Barreski, up in the turret, was able to look down on the battlefield — and as a knife-sharp blast of wind parted the snow curtain for a second, he fancied he could see the expressions of surprise and horror on the masses of the traitors, cultists and mutants as they saw what was coming their way.

Then the debris shifted, and it felt as if the tank had dropped out from beneath him, taking his stomach with it.

"Hey, Grayle," he yelled out over the engine's near-deafening roar, "steady on down there. You keep driving like that, you'll get this crate decorated in a nice shade of this morning's rations!"

As he spoke, the tank tore through the fragile remains of a building, its dozer blade collapsing the walls with ease. A stone beam bounced across Barreski's turret, and he ducked, avoiding decapitation by a centimetre. He picked himself up, filled his cheeks with air and expelled it slowly. He was less concerned with himself, and more with his guns: twin lascannons, objects of great beauty to him. It would have been a shame to have brought them this far and not put them to their intended use.

By the Emperor's grace, however, there was no real damage done. The beam had glanced off the left cannon, put a dent in its barrel, and the calibration had been thrown off a little, but he could compensate for that.

Then, with another great bump and a dip, they were on even ground, picking up speed, and the enemy was in Barreski's field of vision again, on a level with the tank. No obstructions remained between them.

The Chaos forces were undisciplined, some paralysed in the face of the approaching juggernaut, while some tried to fight and others simply turned and fled. They were getting in each other's way, falling over each other, their resistance collapsing before Barreski had loosed off a single shot.

The sponson gunners beat him to it, unleashing heavy bolter fire. Barreski bided his time, using his vantage point to survey the scene, seeking his optimum targets and taking aim, knowing that the lascannons' slow recharging cycle meant that he had to make every shot count.

He aimed for a giant of a man, towering over the rank and file, his face an eruption of pustules, his hair clinging to his head in clumps. Barreski could almost smell the Chaos stink on the mutant. He gave it both lascannons and let their recoil reverberate through him, through his bones, invigorating him with their power. The twin beams seemed to dissect the sky with their thunderous cracks, and when one of them struck true, the mutant was vaporised.

The Leman Russ ploughed into the Chaos army, pushing its soldiers back with its blade, mowing down those who couldn't get out of its way, powdering their bones and pulping their flesh.

Inevitably a few heretics survived — the lucky ones. And those that did found themselves behind the tank, in the sponson guns' blind spots — and, knowing their handheld weapons were useless against its plasteel hull, they concentrated their fire on the one vulnerable spot they could see: Barreski's head.

He dropped down into the turret, abandoning his lascannons reluctantly; like the sponson guns, they only had a forty-five degree arc of fire. He swung the pintle-mounted heavy stubber, and laid down a discouraging hail of bullets in the tank's wake even though he couldn't see to aim it properly.

He was alarmed when a head appeared over the turret's rim.

The cultist must have just missed being crushed, found himself alongside the tank, behind the sponson guns, and seized the opportunity to leap on board, to climb. He was ill-equipped, his body armour salvaged from many sources, some too small for him, some too large, and his only weapon appeared to be a knife. Still, the element of surprise made him a threat.

Barreski managed to shoulder his lasgun in time. The cultist was leaping for him with a snarl when a beam stabbed through his heart. His momentum kept him going, but by the time he hit the Ice Warrior he was already dead. Barreski risked raising his head, peering over the side of the turret, to see a second cultist climbing towards him. A single las-beam was enough to shake the man's grip and send him falling, screaming, beneath the tank's heavy tracks.

The Chaos army was reacting, slowly, to the incursion of this lone Imperial vehicle into its midst, starting to turn its war machines around. This was what the Ice Warriors had wanted, of course. Their attack had been calculated to distract, to take the pressure off their front lines, and to give their comrades time to regroup, to renew their defence of a stretch of land that would otherwise have been lost.

There were hundreds of foot soldiers in the path of the Chaos tanks, but their operators seemed no more concerned than Grayle had been about who they might crush beneath their treads.

Explosive rounds burst against the Leman Russ' armoured hide, but this was where its lascannons, with their superior range and firepower, came into their own. It was not for nothing that they were known as tank-killers.

Barreski was in his element as his cannons roared. He concentrated his fire on a Chaos-held Imperial Salamander, its slight form surging ahead of its fellows, its autocannon spitting furiously. He scored one direct hit, two, three, four, until he had blown it apart. In the heat of the moment, he could almost have forgotten where he was, seeing only his targets lined up in front of him as if on a range.

And then those targets were close enough to start to hit back, for their own guns to do some real damage, and Grayle had slammed the battle tank into reverse, but Barreski knew he couldn't go far with the ruins still piled up behind him.

The cannons were out of power. Barreski yelled down at the loader below to work faster, to chug the heavy, new cell into place, to give him more shots while he could. The Chaos tanks had formed an arc in front of them, closing in, the port sponson gun was lost, and of course there was no hope of back-up out here.

He couldn't complain. The whole crew had known what they were getting into when Barreski had suggested this, when Grayle had confirmed that he could drive them into position, when the tank commander had approved their plan.

They had achieved their goal, delivered a good, solid blow to the enemy and slowed their advance, and that was all they could have hoped for.

This had always been a suicide run.

The war on Cressida was lost.

Trooper Mikhaelev had seen it weeks ago. There was something about the scent, the feel, of the air, as if the planet itself had given up. He had heard that whole continents had been transformed in days, verdant fields devolving into arctic tundra — and even here, where the walls of civilisation had only just begun to come down, there were patches of a freezing purple fungus sprouting amid the wreckage.

Mikhaelev knelt on the plinth of a statue — of whom he couldn't tell, as a frag blast had cut it off at the knees — and steadied his missile launcher against his shoulder. He saw the shape of an enemy tank, and he sent a krak missile whistling over the heads of his squad, and of nine more ranks of Ice Warriors. He didn't wait to see if he had struck the tank, too busy with the cumbersome task of reloading. He should have had a comrade to assist him, but the last one had been cut down in the enemy's last push and hadn't yet been replaced.

When he tried to fire again, the launcher clicked and jammed, and Mikhaelev let out a resigned sigh and reached for his lasgun. At the rate at which his comrades were falling, he would be on the front line soon, anyhow.

It was all right for the clerks at Naval Command, he thought. They could afford to dither, so reluctant to lose a productive world that they had hung on to hope long after hope had died. They should have ordered this withdrawal long ago. They could have spared millions of Guardsmen to fight again — but to them, those Guardsmen's lives were only numbers on a data-slate, so what did they care?

It didn't especially bother Mikhaelev that he was going to die today. It just rankled with him that it would be for nothing.

Then a voice crackled over his earpiece, and rewrote his destiny.

He slipped down from the plinth and made his way deeper into the hive, still lugging the useless, heavy missile launcher along with him in case a tech-priest could salvage it. He thought about the summons he had received, and it cheered him up a little to think how irritated his commander would be to let him go.

So, Colonel Stanislev Steele was putting together a special mission, and he wanted Mikhaelev on board. The only question Mikhaelev had was... why me?

CHAPTER TWO

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 47.04.33

The Sentinel walkers were equipped as power lifters, not intended for combat use. The lost and the damned had got hold of a pair somehow — either they had captured them or their pilots had simply defected, as so many Guardsmen had done during this war — and their Imperial markings had been defaced.

The Sentinels were being used to deal death now. They were marching amid a legion of Chaos spawn and other mutant creatures, sweeping and gouging at the defenders of Alpha Hive with their single metal claws.

Trooper Borscz's Ice Warrior platoon was ranged along the edge of an empty residential sector. So far, they had been holding the tide back, but the Sentinels' appearance threatened to change that.

It had fallen to Borscz's squad to deal with that threat. His sergeant, Romanov, was bellowing orders, instructing his nine troopers to aim their fire at the leftmost of the two leviathans. Borscz's first beams went hopelessly wide, and he cursed the unreliable sights of his lasgun under his breath. Many of his comrades struck true, but their las-beams seemed to do little damage, at least to begin with.

At last, their sustained barrage began to bear fruit, and Borscz saw sparks flying from the left knee joint of the bipedal machine. Without needing to be told, the Ice Warriors refocused their fire on that spot — and a long, agonising minute later, the Sentinel collapsed, and flattened a number of luckless spawn beneath its mass.

It had taken too long.

Sergeant Romanov shouted again, and his squad turned its fire on the second Sentinel. Before it could be felled, though, the spawn would be upon them.

Borscz weighed up his options, and then lowered his gun. He caught Romanov's suspicious glare, and he shrugged his broad, muscular shoulders.

"Sorry, sergeant," he yelled, "the machine is kaput, it jams up in the cold. What is a trooper to do?" Then he drew his long-bladed knife, lowered his head and took a single giant step forward to meet the first of the charging mutants.

It cannoned into him, rebounding from his bulk, and Borscz thought he could read surprise in its twisted face. While it was still reeling, he seized it, kicked its legs from beneath it, and sent it sprawling against two more mutants behind it. Two more came up alongside him, and he dodged their clumsy swings, and threw one of them over his shoulder into the other.

Borscz knew that the mutants were stronger than he was. He was using their unwieldiness against them, keeping them off-balance, but he couldn't keep it up.

He didn't have to.

The second Sentinel was upon him, towering over him, more than three times his height. It had raised its foot to stamp on him, to crush him, and the mutants were trying to hold him still, wrapping their disgusting tentacles around him.

Borscz loosed a great roar from his powerful lungs, and hacked at the tentacles with his blade. He slashed and tore them, ploughing forward as one great foot slammed down in the spot where he had just been. Then he whipped a krak grenade from his belt, and with a grim flourish, he slapped it against the armoured stanchion of the Sentinel's leg.

The mutant saw what he had done, and even their tiny minds told them to run from the predictable explosion. This gave Borscz the chance to run too, back towards the rest of his squad, who were watching in astonishment and backing him up as best they could with las-fire.

A second later, there came a tremendous bang, and the shadow of the teetering Sentinel fell across him. Borscz twisted out of its way as it crashed to the ground, its cockpit beside him now. He could see his reflection in its cracked front shield, his wild black beard split by a white maniacal grin — and behind that shield, the pilot, the cockpit's lone occupant, his face white with terror as he realised that his unexpected plunge had taken him right to his enemy.

He was operating his controls feverishly, employing the only weapon he still had. The Sentinel's giant claw pivoted back on itself, and came snapping, grasping for the Ice Warrior. Borscz ducked underneath it, and drove his meaty fists through the plexiglas shield. He grabbed the pilot by the scruff of his tunic, tore him from his seat and drove him headfirst into the unyielding ground, breaking his neck.

Robbed of their advantage, the mutants and spawn were being driven back once more. His cheeks flushed, Borscz took his place among his comrades and drew his gun. He was alarmed to feel a firm hand on his shoulder, and, turning, he found himself fixed by the glowering eyes of an Imperial commissar.

For a moment, Borscz feared he was to be disciplined for disregarding orders. He and his sergeant had an understanding born of long service together — Romanov knew that, unconventional though his methods were, Borscz got results — but he knew that an outside observer might see things differently.

To his surprise, the commissar didn't want to talk about his behaviour. He had a message for Borscz, although, to judge by his scowl as he delivered it, he wasn't at all happy about it. It was a summons from Colonel Steele.

Trooper Anakora heard the Chaos hounds before she saw them, the scampering of their clawed feet in the tunnels and their ravening howls as they scented fresh meat even over the underhive's stink.

She whirled around, and saw the first of them, its twisted black bulk, in the light of the beam from her lamp-pack as it leapt on Petrovski and tore out his throat.

There were three more behind it. Anakora swore and abandoned the limpet mine she had been struggling to adhere to the crumbling wall of a slum building.

Her squad of eight had been sent down here on a demolition mission. Their commanders were concerned that as the Imperial Guard withdrew from Cressida, there weren't enough men left to hold all fronts in the ongoing war. By collapsing strategic sections of these underground levels, they could at least close off one route to the heart of Alpha Hive, preventing the Chaos forces from coming up beneath them.

Their enemies, it transpired, were a step ahead of them. They had penetrated deeper into the underhive than anyone had known. Anakora and her comrades hadn't planted even half their mines yet.

One of the hounds came for her, but with remarkable precision she fired a las-beam through its left eye and killed it. The momentum of its pounce kept it coming, and it hit with enough force to knock her from her feet. She crashed to the ground with the hound's slavering tusks in her face, and gagged on its last gasp of rancid breath as she hauled herself out from beneath it.

She had dropped her lamp-pack, breaking it, but the tunnel was lit by the criss-crossed beams of her surviving six comrades and the staccato flashes of their lasguns. The latter created an eerie kind of stop-motion effect in which Anakora saw the remaining two Chaos hounds dosing with their chosen prey.

She shouldered her weapon again, looking for a clear shot. When a second comrade fell, his broken body tossed in the air to be caught in the mantrap jaws of his feral killer, she let out a

strangled cry and pulled on the trigger for all she was worth, furious with herself for her well-meaning hesitation.

Two more squad members had the same thought, and the hound was struck from three angles at once, twisting and melting in the sizzling las-beams, slumping dead at last with a Valhallan leg still clamped in its mouth.

The third hound got past Sergeant Kubrikov's defences. It bore him down, and its claws pinned his shoulders before he could stand. Once again, Anakora couldn't fire without endangering her comrade, but this time she didn't waste a second. She leapt onto the creature's back, and felt its jagged spines digging into her thighs. She turned her lasgun around and slipped it over the Chaos hound's head so that the barrel was resting across its throat. She clenched her teeth and pulled for all she was worth. She could feel thick, knotted neck muscles resisting her, but she was determined not to fail, not to show herself to be weak again. At last, she felt bone snap. The monstrous black body sagged beneath her, and a grateful Kubrikov tore himself free from its dying grip.

In the time this had taken, Anakora's comrades had dealt with the final hound, although two more of them had been eviscerated in the process. The danger was not over, however. New shadows were looming, growing on the tunnel walls: dark, ominous shadows. A scant moment later, the first of their owners came marching around the bend, and Anakora's breath caught at the sight of them.

Clad in baroque armour and hailing from the Eye of Terror, the giant warriors exuded a palpable air of menace and power that turned men's blood to ice. They raised and fired bolt pistols, and Anakora flung herself against the wall, using the tunnel's slight curvature to shield her body. She returned fire, knowing that it was hopeless. The Ice Warriors were outgunned — outmatched not just by a little, but ludicrously, almost laughably so.

Sergeant Kubrikov knew it too, and he was screaming at his three remaining troopers to fall back. There was something else too: another sound, an insistent buzz in Anakora's earpiece. A voice, its tone urgent but its words drowned in a sea of static.

She didn't have time to worry about it. She was pinned down by the bolt pistols, but the glimmer of an idea formed in her head, and she screamed at Kubrikov, "The mines, sergeant! Blow the mines!"

Kubrikov was ahead of her, already fumbling with the detonator. The buildings to each side of the Chaos Space Marines blew out, and a cloud of dust billowed towards Anakora. She was already running when it caught up to her, engulfed her. She could hear the throaty growls of chainswords starting up behind her, and she knew that the explosion hadn't been enough, not nearly enough — that their pursuers were still standing, still ploughing forwards, and that all the Ice Warriors had gained was to slow them a fraction and to make themselves a harder target for their ranged weapons.

She almost wished that wasn't the case.

There were just two of them left, her and Kubrikov. Anakora reached the ladder first, glanced back, and saw her sergeant's eyes glazing over. Blood poured from his mouth, and then his body separated into two pieces along a horizontal line. The dust parted for a second to show the dead face of a Chaos Space Marine behind him, jerking his sword free of his victim's remains.

Then she was climbing, hand over hand, foot over foot, expecting at any moment to feel cold fingers closing around her ankle, dragging her back. Bolts pinged off the ladder, and she dropped a frag grenade to discourage another burst. Then she could see the open manhole above her, and she knew that she could make it. She ought to have been relieved — because now at least her comrades could be forewarned, that the Chaos Space Marines were about to emerge into their midst — but her stomach sank instead, because she knew that her mission had failed. Her squad was dead.

And the worst of it all, the hardest thing for Anakora to accept, was that she had survived... again.

Trooper Grayle stumbled over the rubble, hacking and coughing from the smoke in his throat, his arm gushing blood from a stray piece of shrapnel. His eyes and ears had been deadened, but he fired

his lasgun blindly over his shoulder as he staggered on, just hoping and waiting — waiting for Barreski to let go of him, to stop dragging him along, so that he could fall over.

He didn't know how they had got this far. His recent past was a blur of bangs and flashes, the only clear impression being of the searing, agonising pain he had felt when the controls of the Leman Russ had blown up in his face.

Then he was on the ground, staring up at Cressida's grey sky, the last flakes of the sputtering snowstorm wetting his cheeks and soothing his burns. His chest was heaving and his arm was throbbing, and he wondered for a moment if this was it, if Barreski had been gunned down and if he was to be next.

Then he saw his comrade's concerned face looming over him, his skin a livid pink too, the stubble on his chin singed and even more ragged than usual.

"Did... did we get the last of them?" stammered Grayle.

"I reckon so, yeah," said Barreski. Then something made him tense up, turn, and fire a burst from his lasgun at something Grayle couldn't see — though he did hear the scream that followed the blast, a scream abruptly curtailed. "Yeah," repeated Barreski, turning back to him, "yeah, we got the last of them, now."

Not many cultists had followed them back into the ruins. Those that had survived were mostly licking their wounds, shell-shocked from the fury that had just erupted around them. The Ice Warriors were safe from the enemy tanks — assuming that none of their drivers had Grayle's skill, which was a pretty safe bet.

"I think the captain made it," said Grayle, chasing a confused memory. "I think I saw him with... with someone else, I couldn't make out who."

"Kampanov, probably. As soon as he heard the evacuation order, he was out of that hatch like a snow leopard with a frag grenade up its backside."

Grayle pulled himself up onto his elbows, catching his second wind, and said, "They took out the turret guns, I'm assuming?"

"Cold got the first, shrapnel the second. Think I'd be here if I still had a lascannon to fire? They were works of art, they were. Another minute with them, I could have polished off two more tanks, no problem."

"Never mind, eh, Barreski. I'm sure we can find you a new toy to play with soon, maybe an even bigger one."

"You think they'll let us have another vehicle?" asked Barreski. "We didn't take such good care of the last one. Of the last three, in fact."

Grayle smiled at his fellow tanker with the smug air of one who knew an important secret. "Oh yeah," he said, "I think we'll get another vehicle. I expect we'll be back in action before you know it."

Then he told Barreski about the message. The one that had come in through the Leman Russ' vox system, just before it had exploded. Grayle had never had the chance to acknowledge the message, nor to relay it to its intended recipient, the battle tank's captain — but it had now been heard by both of the Ice Warriors name-checked therein.

"Better get yourself back on your feet then, my friend," said Barreski, "because if we want to report to Colonel Stanislev Steele on time, I'd say we've got a long, dangerous walk ahead of us."

Calchas Spaceport was teeming with Guardsmen, many of them lost, unable to hear their orders over the roar of an incoming lander. The ship was trying to squeeze its bristling form into a tight spot between a near-identical vessel and an older, scarred Ironclad. The Navy had assigned all the craft it could spare, all that could reach Cressida in time, to the evacuation effort, whatever their usual function.

The lander set down, at last, and its engines cut out, but those of another, departing ship had already fired up. Sergeants yelled themselves hoarse to be heard over the continuing racket, marshalling their troopers to the loading ramps. From the window beside Trooper Blonsky's head, the Guardsmen looked like coloured ants, streaming across a concrete bowl into the bellies of the great metal behemoths.

His interrogator delivered a backhanded slap to his face, drawing a little blood and snapping his attention back to the small, grey room in which he was seated.

"I asked you a question, Blonsky." The lieutenant was from a Validian regiment. *Royal Validians*, they called themselves. His uniform was red with highlights in polished gold, and he displayed the same superior attitude that Blonsky had seen in so many of his breed. He was probably also one of the most senior officers on Cressida. Most of the rest had been aboard the first ships to leave — Blonsky's Valhallan commanders excepted, of course.

He glanced down at his cuffed wrists, resting in his lap. Then he looked up to meet his interrogator's glare, and he said calmly, "With all due respect, sir, I think I have answered it. I have given you a full account of my actions this morning. I executed Sergeant Arkadin—"

"You killed him," the Validian spat, "killed him in cold blood!"

"I executed him," restated Blonsky, "because he was a deserter."

The lieutenant's nostrils flared. "Arkadin was a good friend of mine. If you had reason to doubt his courage, you should have come to me or to one of his other commanders. What evidence do you have, what evidence *could* you have, to support this claim?"

"I have the evidence of my own senses, sir. My platoon was fighting a horde of mutants when I was separated from them by an explosion. I took cover in an old storage depot. That's where I encountered Sergeant Arkadin. I believe he had been hiding in there for some time."

"Did he tell you that?" asked the lieutenant sharply.

"No sir," said Blonsky, "but it was evident from his body language that—"

"I don't want to hear about his body language."

"Very well. The mutants must have seen me entering the building. I had barricaded the door as best I could, but they were starting to batter it down. I was prepared to meet them with las-fire, but Sergeant Arkadin threw down his gun and tried to climb through the window."

"I won't accept that!" The lieutenant drove a frustrated fist into the table between them. "You made a mistake, Trooper Blonsky. Sergeant Arkadin is — was — an excellent tactician. No doubt he thought that, if he could escape from the depot, he could circle behind your attackers and—"

"He had thrown down his gun, sir!"

"What right do you have to judge one of us?" the Validian hissed.

"May I ask again, sir," said Blonsky, "if my commanders have been informed of my detention. By rights, one of them ought to be here." He could tell from the lieutenant's stony silence that the answer to his question was no.

He sighed, and restated for what seemed like the hundredth time, "Sergeant Arkadin was a deserter. I shot him, in accordance with standing orders, before he could—"

"No!" the lieutenant bellowed. Blonsky stopped talking. No one was listening anyway.

A long silence followed, during which his interrogator stared out of another window at the activity in the spaceport below. Perhaps he was worrying about his own place on one of those ships, wondering how much longer he could afford to wait behind.

"You were lucky," said the lieutenant at last, in a somewhat quieter voice, "that my platoon was in the area, that those mutants died before they could break down the door and reach you. I only wish they could have been in time to save my sergeant."

"I wish that too, sir."

"As far as I am concerned, Trooper Blonsky, you killed Sergeant Arkadin without reason. I don't know why. Perhaps you were the would-be deserter, and he was standing in your way. The

only way to be sure would be to convene a formal tribunal with, as you say, your commanders present. Under the circumstances, that would take some time. It would also mean blackening a good man's name, by airing these scurrilous accusations against him."

"If you say so, sir." Blonsky could see from the lieutenant's bearing, the way he could no longer quite meet his prisoner's eye, that he wanted to believe what he was saying, wanted it so much, but that he couldn't be entirely sure.

The lieutenant let out a heavy sigh, and said, "Go on. Get out of here. It would be a mercy to keep you off the front line anyway. You belong to the Valhallan 319th, yes? The regiment that is to stay behind, that is to be sacrificed. Well, then, Trooper Blonsky, if you are so zealous, so damn loyal to the Emperor, then this is your chance to prove it, isn't it? This is your chance to make sure you die for Him!"

CHAPTER THREE

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 45.57.14

The sight of the Termite stirred something in Sergeant Ivon Gavotski's heart.

It was just a small vehicle, its chassis almost outweighed by the great cylindrical borer it supported — but it had been given a distinctively Valhallan make-over, painted with white and green snow camouflage patterns. Six flamer emplacements had been added to its sides and four more flamers mounted on the borer itself.

Gavotski had heard the story many times, of course — about how, after his home world had been hit by an asteroid, after its lush fields had become frozen wastelands, his distant ancestors had struggled to survive. An ork invasion must have seemed like one misfortune too many, back then — but it had given the Valhallans a reason to fight back, a tangible goal to achieve.

The precise schematics of the ice-boring vehicle they had developed had been lost to history. But this Termite was the nearest thing, in the modern world, to the vehicle that had won the Valhallans their war — the nearest thing to the vehicle that had given them mastery of their changed environment, allowing them to tunnel through the hearts of the glaciers and to strike at the ork mobs where they least expected.

A single Termite wouldn't win *this* war — but with Cressida becoming more and more like Valhalla each day, it could at least carry one squad of Ice Warriors to where they needed to be. That was, if Gavotski could find it a squad to carry.

He had sent out the orders over two hours ago. Trooper Mikhaelev had been the first to report in: a quiet, lean, thin-faced man, not at all what Gavotski had been expecting from a heavy weapons expert. Anakora had arrived next, her face impassive, her eyes dead even as she had told Gavotski what an honour it was to be assigned to him. Then Blonsky had come in, his narrow, black eyes forever darting about him, alert like a hawk.

That, so far, had been it, apart from a few garbled vox messages. Two of Gavotski's draftees were listed as dead, three as missing in action, although efforts were ongoing to locate them. Of the remaining four, including his reserve choices, he had heard and seen nothing. It was with some relief, then, that he greeted the approach of a Chimera, although even the jaded sergeant couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the sight of a squat, muscular trooper hanging from its side.

The hitchhiker didn't wait for the vehicle to stop. He hopped down and ambled up to Gavotski, his broad, toothy grin a bright white behind his black beard.

"Trooper Borscz, sergeant," he introduced himself. "Apologies for my late arrival, but your first message did not get through. Machines, you know."

Gavotski introduced himself in turn, held up a hand to stem Borscz's eager questions, and indicated that he should wait beside the Termite with the others. As the newcomer moved to obey, the sergeant noted that his eyes flickered, as all their eyes had, towards the brooding figure of Colonel Stanislev Steele.

Steele stood a few metres away, his power sword at his hip, observing all with a cool but shrewd gaze. His bionic right eye glinted in the light of a flaring explosion in the sky, but there were no other outward signs of his internal augmetics.

It was said by some that Steele's emotions had been neutered by his cybernetic grafts, that he had become cold, unfeeling. Gavotski could see how that myth had been born. He counted himself privileged, however, to be one of the few who knew the truth.

The Chimera had come to a halt, and another two Ice Warriors emerged, exchanging amiable banter. They introduced themselves as Troopers Barreski and Grayle. That made six — eight, including the sergeant and the colonel. It was enough to make do, but two short of the full squad for which Gavotski had hoped. He glanced at Steele for instructions, but could see that, as always, he was happy to trust his sergeant's judgement.

He decided to wait another ten minutes. With luck, Palinev might still make it, and bring the count up to nine. Beyond that...

Gavotski had had high hopes for one more Ice Warrior. He had added Pozhar's name to his list, despite his chequered service record, despite Steele's concerns, because he had worked with the lad before and judged him to have potential. Pozhar was one of the three MIAs — which meant that Gavotski was now praying for a miracle.

Or, to put it another way, he was about to find out if his faith had been justified.

Pozhar had lost all track of time.

He was so close to his goal, so close to getting back to his comrades, the returning hero. It seemed like days since he had been separated from them, days since he had lain on the battlefield, almost gagging on the stench of the fallen Chaos worshippers whose bodies had protected him. Now, he was just a few metres away.

A few metres — but it may as well have been a few thousand.

It was not in the young trooper's nature to lie still for long. Anyway, the grumbling of approaching engines had alerted him to a new danger. The Chaos army had pressed forward, most of its foot soldiers passing him by without seeing him, but behind them had come the heavy artillery, the tanks and the battle cannons, and he had had to act fast to avoid being crushed beneath their wheels.

Pozhar had scrambled to his feet, feeling the sting of cold air on his face, expecting to be shot down as soon as he was seen. Instead, surrounded by the enemy, he went unnoticed. He had realised that his uniform was dishevelled and torn, coated in grime and blood, and thus there was no real visible difference between him and any number of Traitor Guardsmen on the battlefield. Thinking quickly, he had ripped off his unit badge to further this illusion, and had considered taking a coat from one of the fallen traitors, one daubed in Chaos sigils, but the thought of wearing such a thing had made his stomach turn and his skin crawl.

He couldn't just stand there, he had realised. He had to do something, make it look like he belonged here, give himself time to think, to find an escape route.

Casting around, he had seen a pair of cultists bickering over an upset cart. A purloined plasma cannon, too heavy to carry, had spilled from the rickety contraption, and Pozhar had rushed to help lift it back into place. In so doing, he had brushed against a cultist's arm and felt something shifting beneath his cloak. He had caught a glimpse of a slimy black tentacle, and had almost vomited on the spot.

Pozhar had ached — truly, physically ached — with the driving need to pull out his lasgun, to blast these freaks to whatever afterlife they believed in, and he would have done it too had it not been for the vox-message... had it not been for the fact that Colonel Stanislev Steele needed him.

He wished he knew how long it had been.

He had slipped away from the cultists at the first opportunity, leaving his last frag grenade in their cannon's barrel. When the weapon was fired, the grenade would burst and, Pozhar hoped, trigger a devastating plasma explosion. He had made his way to the edge of the battlefield, trying to remain innocuous, finding cover where he could in deserted, half-demolished buildings.

He had not counted on running into civilians. Four women and six children were huddled in a dark corner of one of those buildings, somehow overlooked by the heretics that had burnt out their homes and slaughtered their men.

At first they had been an unwelcome burden, because Pozhar would certainly have become a target as soon as he had stepped out into the open with them. But, emboldened by the appearance of an Imperial Guardsman, their saviour, the women had told him of a way out: a hatchway into the underhive.

And so, Pozhar had ended up here, in a tunnel mouth, up to his ankles in the filth of a billion departed slum-dwellers, as the women waited some way behind him and tried to keep their children quiet. And the ladder that would take them all back up to the surface, back to Pozhar's comrades, was just a few metres away... a few metres away, but guarded.

It had been a shock to find cultists in the underhive. Fortunately, the women had known their way around, and, so far, they had been able to keep out of sight, though a number of diversions due to blocked tunnels had left Pozhar fretting with impatience. His greatest fear was that Colonel Steele might have given up on him by now — worse still, might have written him off as a coward or a traitor.

Four cultists. He could take them, he thought, especially as their guns were trained on the manhole above them. They were expecting trouble from above, not from below. They weren't expecting him. He *could* take them.

And they would raise the alarm, and then more cultists would come running. Would he be able to ferry the women and the children up the ladder and hold their attackers off long enough to follow them?

A more cautious man might have waited a while longer, might have looked for a better chance, or even another ladder. Not Pozhar. He had lost enough time already.

Even though he knew that the fight ahead of him would be difficult, even though he knew that his chances of survival were slim, he drew his lasgun and he ran to meet it firing. And he did so not just because he felt he had no other choice, but with a grin on his face and a mad laugh erupting from his stomach.

A step gave way beneath Trooper Palinev's foot, and he leapt for the safety rail and pulled himself up. He had started a cascade effect, which demolished the rest of the staircase beneath him, but he had attained the balcony level of the refinery as planned.

He grinned at the memory of those comrades who had thought him mad for eschewing the standard Valhallan greatcoat. His basic flak jacket might not have provided the same level of protection against the cold, but it was much lighter, more flexible, and Palinev's unencumbered agility had just saved his life.

He reached the tall, narrow window — the one towards which his sergeant had directed him from outside, below. He settled behind it and used the butt of his long-las, his sniper variant lasgun, to knock out the glass. An icy gust of wind blew away the refinery's stuffy gloom, and further reddened Palinev's already ruddy cheeks.

He rested the long, thin barrel of his weapon against the sill, and waited.

The battle had only just spread to this part of the hive, and many of the buildings were still standing. Palinev's platoon was attempting to draw the enemy into a narrow street, a bottleneck in which the defenders would have the advantage, and the strategy was working. The first wave of Chaos forces came crashing against the Ice Warriors' front lines, and were held. That made them sitting ducks for Palinev, and the nine other snipers stationed behind the surrounding windows. He squeezed off round after round, claiming kill after kill.

And then, in a second, the tide turned.

Palinev didn't know what had happened at first, only that there had been a shift in the battle, that his comrades were reacting to something he hadn't seen. Something behind them. Then he saw lasbeams ripping into them, from an area that ought to have been secure, taking them by surprise. It was a massacre.

His heart in his throat, Palinev abandoned his post and raced along the circular balcony, his footsteps ringing off metal mesh. Three windows along, he found a better view, and he saw to his horror that cultists and traitors were rising from the manholes, from the underhive, outflanking their foes. The Ice Warriors on the ground were rallying, but they didn't stand a chance. Still, Palinev did what he could to help them, sniping down all the heretics he could in the time he had.

The refinery doors crashed open, somewhere beneath him, and all of a sudden the battle seemed a great deal louder, a great deal closer to him.

The intruders knew where he was. A frag grenade arced over the balcony rail and rolled up to Palinev's feet. He was already running, just ahead of the explosion, which blew out a section of the building's wall. The balcony was mangled, left partially unsupported, trembling and creaking — and, as Palinev reached the one remaining set of steps, he found four Chaos cultists ascending towards him, recognisable by their cloaks and by their obscene tattoos.

He brought up his gun, but the cultists were too fast for him, and he had to throw himself onto his stomach to avoid their las-fire. He wasn't accustomed to close combat, wasn't built for it. Palinev had spent his years in service honing his sneaking and sniping skills. This, then, was his worst nightmare: an enemy that could see him!

A section of mesh beneath him rattled and slid. Feverishly, he pried it loose and clambered down through a web of scaffolding. He dropped the six metres to the ground floor level, rolling to absorb the impact of his landing. The cultists were up on the teetering balcony, looking for him, and he decided to give them a taste of their own medicine. They saw the incoming grenade, and one of them tried to run, while the other three saw the futility of that course and jumped for it.

Palinev managed to get off a shot while they were in mid air, wounding one of the cultists, who landed awkwardly with a snap of bone. Then the grenade went off and the balcony gave way, bringing two walls down with it. All Palinev had time to do was to drop to his knees and cover his head with his hands as he was engulfed by a tidal wave of screeching, rending sound.

When it was all over, as the echoes died down, Palinev raised his head, and saw that one of the cultists had survived, and was training a lasgun on him. He closed his eyes, heard the familiar cracking retort, and expected it to be the last thing he would ever hear.

Then, he opened his eyes again to find the cultist dead on the floor.

An Ice Warrior stood over the corpse, one whose name Palinev did not know. "You the scout, Palinev?" the man grunted, and he nodded blankly.

"Must be something up with your comms," said the Ice Warrior. "They've been trying to contact you for the past half hour. Steele wants you."

They had lined up beside the Termite, Steele and his handpicked squad: the nine troopers to whom he would be trusting his life, and more importantly, the success of his assignment.

They stood with their heads bowed in silence, their hats and helmets removed, as a priest laid his hands upon each of them in turn, and bestowed the blessing of the God-Emperor upon them. Steele cursed his enhanced sense of smell; it took all the self-control he had not to choke on the pungent cloud that billowed from the holy man's incense burner.

The priest's arrival had been a surprise to them all. Steele had known, of course, that the Ecclesiarchy had a special interest in his mission, but this... For an entire squad to be sanctified like this was almost unheard of. Still, the ritual provided a rare moment of calm, of inner peace, despite the background sounds of gunfire and explosions, and engines and dying from the none-too-distant war. Steele had welcomed that and been re-energised by it.

He noted that Pozhar was not quite so appreciative. The young trooper had been the last of the squad to arrive, bounding up to an indulgent Gavotski full of energy, and bursting with stories about what he had been through to get here. His body was like a coiled spring, his hands twitching with the desire to get the ceremony done with and get on with the business of finding someone to kill.

When Blonsky's turn came, his chest swelled with pride and a righteous smile pulled at his thin lips. Mikhaelev, in contrast, held himself rigid, contained, and betrayed no reaction to his blessing at all. Beside him, Anakora reacted to the priest's touch with a little shudder, and a single tear dripped from her down-turned eyes.

Then it was done — and, with a final nod and a munificent smile in Steele's direction, the priest ambled away. The colonel took a deep breath as his moment of peace ended and he prepared to get back down to business. He nodded at his sergeant, to indicate that it was time — and Gavotski stepped forward, cleared his throat and addressed the squad.

"You may have heard the name Confessor Wollkenden," he said. "You may have heard that he came here to Cressida a month ago, to minister to its people, to help them resist the corruption of their world. You may also have heard that the confessor is one of the finest men the Imperium has bred. It is thanks in part to his leadership that the war in the Artemis system was won."

In fact, Steele hadn't heard Wollkenden's name before this morning, and he doubted whether Gavotski had either. He had been left in no doubt, however, of the stock placed in him by the Ecclesiarchy, that they considered him a virtual saint.

"Three days ago," Gavotski continued, "the confessor was en route to an outlying settlement to the north of here, intending to make contact with a group of loyalist resisters. His shuttle came under fire. A vox-message from its pilot confirmed that an emergency landing had been made, and that Confessor Wollkenden was alive. The message was interrupted. There has been no word since then. The area in which the confessor's ship came down was a forest, until it fell to Chaos forces three and a half years ago. Since then, of course, conditions on the ground have changed considerably. Intelligence is sparse, but we know that there has been a great deal of glacial activity in the area, which has rendered much of it almost impassable... Almost." At this, Gavotski gave the Termite a proud pat.

"Of course, it is possible that Confessor Wollkenden is dead. Our job, comrades, is to find out for sure, and, if he is alive, to bring him back. The Imperial Guard cannot spare the resources for a full-scale search and rescue at present — and it is felt anyway that a stealthy extraction has more chance of success. That is why Colonel Steele and I are taking only one squad through the glaciers, and it is why each of you has been chosen: because your respective commanders tell us that you are the best the Valhallan 319th has to offer."

"Pardon me, sergeant," said Trooper Borscz, "but are we to understand that Colonel Steele is to lead this mission?"

"That is correct, soldier," said Gavotski. "You have a problem with that?"

"No, sergeant." In fact, Borscz seemed positively enthused by the idea, and he looked at Steele with admiration blazing in his deep blue eyes.

The colonel cleared his throat, and said, "There is one thing that Sergeant Gavotski has not yet mentioned." It was the first time the troopers had heard his voice, and each of them became visibly more attentive. "You are aware," said Steele, "that Cressida is being evacuated. What you have not been told, because this information is strictly need-to-know, is that an Exterminatus order has been signed."

Palinev gave an audible gasp, but the others absorbed the news silently, grimly.

"Naval warships are on their way," said Steele. "Cressida will be virus-bombed from orbit, completely sterilised. As a world still rich in mineral resources, it is hoped that some day it can be recolonised. Until that day—"

Gavotski finished the thought for him. "The Chaos forces may have won this battle," he said, "but they will not live long to enjoy their spoils."

"All of which," said Steele, "means that we have a deadline. I was told this morning, in no uncertain terms, that the virus bombing would take place in forty-eight hours' time, whether we, or indeed Confessor Wollkenden, were still on Cressida or not. A little over three hours has passed since then.

“Gentlemen and lady, I suggest we get the Termite loaded up. The chrono is already ticking.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 44.49.09

“You should not have come back.”

The passenger compartment was raucous with the roar of the Termite’s engine and with the chatter of ten Ice Warriors, packed together in the confined space, getting to know one another, assessing each other’s strengths. Still, Blonsky’s voice cut across the noise, and brought the chatter to a halt.

“You should not have come back,” he said again, and his angular face was set into a stony scowl, his dark green eyes piercing his victim.

Pozhar had been telling the tale of how he had found himself behind enemy lines, and of his heroic return — although privately, Gavotski thought he might have exaggerated some of his more remarkable feats. The young trooper was cut off in mid-flow, and he didn’t know what to say, he just gaped at his accuser.

“Your chances of survival were minimal,” said Blonsky, “and if you had been killed it would have been by a shot to the back: a senseless death, and a dishonourable one in the Emperor’s eyes. He had carried you to the enemy’s heart. Instead of thinking of your own survival, you should have used your chance to strike at that heart.”

“But... but I did survive,” said Pozhar. “I survived, and I brought back some civilians, and... and some vital information about troop movements in the underhive.” He stole a sidelong glance at Steele, presumably to see if he agreed with Blonsky’s assessment. The colonel’s expression, however, remained neutral.

“I don’t think it’s helpful to talk about what might have been,” Gavotski said. “As Trooper Pozhar has proved, his situation wasn’t hopeless. He was able to come back to us, to fight another day in the Emperor’s service.”

Emboldened by the sergeant’s support, Pozhar rounded on Blonsky, and said, “Anyway, how long do you think I’d have lasted, surrounded by traitors, if I’d started shooting? How many do you think I’d have taken down? Five? Six? I killed three times that many before morning rations, and I’ll do the same tomorrow, and the next day. That’s how I serve the Emperor! How about you, Trooper Blonsky? How many kills have you claimed today? Do you really want to talk about whose life is the more valuable?”

Blonsky’s stare didn’t waver. “You should not have come back,” he repeated with the unshakeable conviction of a witch hunter.

The Termite gave a judder, and Grayle, seated at the controls, called back over his shoulder, “We’ve just left the hive, sir. No sighting of the enemy as yet.”

“How do we stand on that escort?” asked Gavotski.

“Looks like we can expect two Chimeras to meet us,” said Grayle. “Still waiting for a vox from Urza Platoon to see if we can make it three.”

“You clap eyes on the enemy, Grayle,” said Barreski, “you just point me in their direction. I’ll show them we don’t need bodyguards!” He was stationed at one of the six hull-mounted flamers, squinting along its barrel, making minute adjustments to its sights. His enthusiasm was appreciated, but Gavotski knew that the Termite was not built for combat. It didn’t have the firepower. That was why they had left the hive by an eastern gate, from a zone relatively untouched by the battle to the north. For the first leg of their journey, they would be travelling above ground, and they hoped to

avoid the battle altogether. Due to pressure of time, however, they couldn't give it as wide a berth as they would have liked.

"If we do come under attack," said Borscz, "I would rather get out there and trust to the strength of my own two hands than suffocate or freeze to death in this tin can." He did look uncomfortable, his massive frame sandwiched between Barreski and Anakora. However, as one of the first troopers into the Termite, Borscz appeared to have chosen his seat purposely to avoid having to man a flamer.

"You would agree with me, I think, my friend," he continued, leaning forward to give Palinev an overly familiar pat on the shoulder. The force of the blow almost knocked the smaller, slighter man to the floor. "As a scout, you must rely on your own abilities to stay silent and hidden, yes? Not much use to you inside a great clunking machine."

"You are joking, right?" said Barreski. "Without machines, our ancestors would never have won the Great War. It was machines like this one that turned the tide, and allowed them to drive the filthy orks from our world."

"The machines would have been little use," Borscz countered, "without good, strong men inside them. It is not in the machines that our ancestors found the will to defeat the invaders, Trooper Barreski, but rather in their own beating hearts."

Anakora played little part in the conversation. She had introduced herself to the others, given accurate but short answers to their questions about her war record, but that was all. She was acutely aware that they were all here because of their proven expertise in their fields. She had no right to sit among them.

Few Valhallan women served in the Imperial Guard. With so many men being marched off to war and so few returning, they had the vital and valued task of replenishing their world's population, of birthing and raising the next generation of Ice Warriors. This, then, was the life Anakora had expected to live, the life that had been shot to pieces by a few cold words from a disinterested medic.

It had taken her a few days to come to terms with the news, to accept that her life had no purpose any longer. Even one-time friends, even family, had looked at her with contempt, seeing her as a burden, a drain on their society. But far worse than that were those few who did understand, and whose looks were laced with pity.

There had been no compulsion on Anakora to join up, not ostensibly. But she had soon seen that she had no choice. The worst sin you could commit as an Imperial citizen was to serve the Emperor to less than your full ability, and there was only one way left in which she could serve.

She had expected to find basic training a struggle. She had just kept her head down and tried to get through it, her only goal not to embarrass herself beside men who had spent their lives in preparation for this. She had worked hard, steeled herself to appear as tough and as stoic as any of them, and no one could have been more surprised than Anakora when she had passed out with honours.

Still, she had felt she was faking it, bluffing her way through a world in which she did not belong, and she had known that her first battlefield would find her out. Fifteen hours, that was the average life expectancy of an Imperial Guardsman, though for an Ice Warrior it was a little more, maybe seventeen. Anakora didn't expect to last that long, but if she could claim just one kill, take one heretic down with her, then she would have balanced the scales and justified her fleeting existence.

Four years later, she was still here, and she didn't know why.

She should have died on that first battlefield. She should have died in the underhive, a couple of hours ago. She should have died so many times, on so many worlds — but most of all, she should have died two and a half years ago, on Astaroth Prime.

Astaroth Prime... A hellhole of a world, with lakes of fire and molten rivers; a world on which no Guardsman accustomed to the sub-zero temperatures of Valhalla should ever have set foot; a world to which a company of Ice Warriors had been sent anyway, to deal with an incursion by their oldest enemies, the orks; a world on which that company of Ice Warriors had been massacred.

In her brightest hours, Anakora tried to imagine that she had been spared for a reason, that the Emperor had had a higher purpose in mind for her. In her darkest, she forever relived that moment when a fellow trooper, a good comrade, had thrown himself in the path of an ork axe to save her.

Her record showed that she was a survivor, and in the Imperial Guard that ability was as highly prized as it was rare. Anakora knew the truth. She knew that she had not survived so long through her own efforts. She had survived because someone had taken pity on her, had thought her in need of protection.

So, now she had been pulled from another suicide mission and given this chance to survive again, precisely because of her record thus far. She couldn't help but wonder if this might be the time her luck ran out at last, the time that everyone would see through her.

Anakora looked forward to the release of death. Her only fear was that, when she died, she would take the rest of her new squad with her.

Mikhaelev joined in with the general chatter. He concurred with his new comrades that the Chaos forces didn't know what was about to hit them, that Confessor Wollkenden was as good as rescued. He kept his true feelings to himself.

He was worried. Behind the false bravado, he thought, they all were. Well, perhaps not Pozhar or Borscz — they both seemed like the kind of Guardsmen who lived only to die, the perfect brainwashed soldiers. It would not have occurred to them to question their orders, to wonder if their lives might have been put to better use.

Mikhaelev asked himself those questions. He stewed over the details of his briefing, the logic of staking ten lives on the faint chance of saving just one. If Confessor Wollkenden was so important, why did the Inquisition care so little about him? Why couldn't the virus bombing they had authorised be delayed a few days for his sake?

He couldn't speak out, of course. Even if some of the others, these relative strangers, agreed with him, they would not dare to confess to it. No, the floor would be held by the likes of Blonsky, spewing his accusations, insisting that to doubt one's leaders, even if they were only men, was to doubt the Emperor. Just as those same leaders would want him to think.

Not that Blonsky would hear him, of course. No, as soon as he opened his mouth, he knew that Steele or Gavotski would do their duty and shoot him dead.

So, he kept his own counsel, said what he was expected to say, and did what he was told as if he was the perfect brainwashed soldier too. And the fact that he was here, in this Termite, in this squad, was proof that he had played that part supremely well.

He did all this because he knew there was just one thing, one choice he could make, that would prove more dangerous than serving the Imperium... and that was not serving it.

The Termite was under attack, being buffeted by shock waves. If he tuned out the deafening sound of its engines, Steele could identify the crump of explosive shells from without, of the sort fired by a Basilisk or a Bombard.

"We have a problem, sir," Grayle yelled from the controls. "We're in the sights of something... long-range artillery. It's decided to take a few pot shots. Thing is, it has good cover. The Chimeras can't see to return fire. The captain of one is requesting your permission to break formation, to go after it."

"Denied," said Steele. "Do what you can, Grayle. Find us cover, get out of firing range. Do not, I repeat do not, engage with the enemy."

“Aye, sir,” Grayle answered. The Termite made a sharp right turn, sharper than Steele would have thought possible. He was sure that, for an instant, its left-hand track had left the ground.

“We need a smoke launcher on this thing,” opined Barreski. “Do we at least have smoke grenades, something we can lob out through the flamer emplacements?”

“We are sitting ducks in here,” Borscz fretted. “If we were out in the field, ten smaller, faster-moving targets, that machine could never get a bead on us.”

At that moment, a tremendous concussive force slammed through the Termite’s chassis, from its back left corner. A direct hit. It felt as if a tank had rammed them from behind, and only the fact that the Ice Warriors were so tightly wedged into their seats saved Steele from being thrown into Grayle’s back.

Grayle muttered a prayer as the engine coughed, spluttered, whined, and then roared back into full throat. The Termite’s suspension was shot. It felt as if it was shaking itself apart, and the passenger compartment was filled with smoke.

“Palinev, Mikhaev,” said Gavotski, “go through the equipment lockers, see if you can whip up a smokescreen as Barreski suggested. Barreski, I need you to check the borer, make sure it still functions. Grayle...”

“I know, sergeant,” said Grayle. “Get us the hell out of here!”

No one needed to say what every one of the ten Ice Warriors present was thinking: that they couldn’t take a second hit like that one.

Steele watched as they jumped to their assigned tasks. He had no need to intervene, trusting Gavotski to handle the situation. So, he took the opportunity to observe how each member of his new squad responded to pressure. The more he could learn about them, the more effectively he could lead them, and official records could only tell him so much.

There was something about Mikhaev’s body language, for example — the slump of his shoulders — that said his heart wasn’t truly in this mission, that perhaps he was just going through the motions. That hadn’t come across at all in his records, and it was a cause for concern. Pozhar, thought Steele, would bear watching too, although, in his case, the reports of his commanders had been perfectly clear.

Pozhar was a loose cannon. He was loyal to the Emperor, fervently so, but he appeared to have no concept of his own limitations. Send him up against a tyrannid army and, unless given specific instructions to the contrary, he would be the one to seek out the Hive Tyrant and to spit in its eye. On a mission like this one, that sort of overconfidence could be the death of everyone.

Pozhar was here because Gavotski had vouched for him. He had been the young trooper’s squad commander once, and had averred that he was one of the most skilled close-quarters combatants he had ever seen. Gavotski had also sworn that he could handle Pozhar’s rough edges and get the best out of him, and Steele had learned that his experienced sergeant was seldom wrong.

If Pozhar was overconfident, then Anakora had the opposite problem. She had come with the highest recommendations of any of them, but Steele had already seen enough to know that she lacked the faith in herself that others seemed to have in her. He felt that he, of all people, could identify with that.

Then there was Blonsky, a trooper in whom a succession of commanders had been unable to find fault, and yet they had couched their reports in terms that suggested they were more than happy to have seen the back of him.

Blonsky had summarily executed at least six comrades in combat, accusing them of heresy. He had made three similar accusations against superior officers, one of them a general no less. On the surface of it, his actions had always seemed justified — but reading between the lines, Steele had noted that his commanders considered him a liability, and a dangerous man to be around.

Blonsky had been one of Steele and Gavotski’s reserve choices for their squad. Gavotski had pointed out, quite reasonably, that the Imperial Guard had suffered more than its fair share of deserters and turncoats on Cressida. With nine pairs of eyes focused on the search for Confessor

Wollkenden, it was perhaps advisable to have the tenth pair turned inwards, watching the squad itself.

The shelling had ceased at last. Grayle, it seemed, had been right: the unseen gunner had just been taking potshots, and he had evidently decided to maintain his position rather than be enticed into pursuing a handful of enemy vehicles.

For the past few minutes, the only thing protecting the Termite had been the cloud kicked up by a handful of smoke bombs dropped by Palinev and Mikhaelev. By the Emperor's grace, it had been enough. A few more explosions had vibrated through the passenger compartment, but none had come close enough to cause real damage, and Barreski, who had moved up to the front seat beside Grayle, reported that the all-important borer was intact.

Grayle ploughed on, across land that had once been fertile fields but was now coated with grey slush and the ever-present purple fungus. He itched to put his foot down, to coax a little extra speed out of the grumbling engine, to make up for the time they had lost to their unplanned diversion. He didn't want to outpace the Chimeras, however.

There were four of them, each protecting one face of the Termite, and they were just starting to have trouble, struggling to find traction as the ground beneath them grew more icy and treacherous.

As the convoy proceeded, the snow became deeper until it was piled almost to the tops of their tracks. The Chimeras were equipped with dozer blades and crewed by experienced Ice Warriors, but still the going was painfully slow. With Gavotski's permission, Grayle got on the vox to the Chimera drivers and arranged to take point.

Shortly after this, Grayle got his first sight of the glaciers — and even he, who had been brought up amid the icescapes of Valhalla, let out a low whistle through his teeth. The glaciers formed an unbroken line in the middle-distance, dwarfing the paltry vehicles that approached it. He found himself nursing an unworthy thought, one of which he thought Trooper Borscz would have approved: that very little of what the Imperium of Man had ever built could compare with such natural splendour.

They were rumbling along the base of a U-shaped valley, and Gavotski cautioned the troopers to go easy with the flamers lest they bring an avalanche down on the Termite. There had been no signs of trouble for almost an hour, and at last Steele gave the order to release the escorts from service.

The Chimeras fell away, a couple of their drivers voxing Grayle with good luck messages. The Termite was finally alone, and Grayle pointed it at the sheer ice face that was looming before them.

Tactical maps suggested that the glaciers formed an almost unbroken ring around a great swathe of Chaos-held territory. Grayle had no doubt that the few routes in or out of the area would be under heavy guard. The last thing the Chaos forces would expect was for their enemies to strike through the great ice walls. Like the orks that had once invaded his home world, they were in for a rude surprise.

"Hey, Trooper Borscz," Barreski called back over his shoulder, "we're almost there. Should I start up the borer, or would you rather get out and dig your way through the ice with your bare hands and your teeth?"

"Impact with the ice face in thirty seconds," reported Grayle. "You ready there, Barreski?"

"Always," Barreski said, his hands moving over the controls with practiced ease, although to the best of his fellow tanker's knowledge he had never been in a vehicle like this one before. The Termite's great white borer dropped into the ready position, so that it blocked Grayle's view through his front shield. He wasn't missing much, he thought. For the past few minutes, all he had been able to see was the flat, grey surface of the approaching glacier.

He began to count down, as Barreski started the drill head turning, "Impact in ten... nine... eight..."

"Anyone want to bet Grayle and me we can punch our way through this berg without even slowing down?"

Barreski fired off a quick burst from all four of the borer's flamer attachments, and Grayle could see the telltale orange halo flaring around the drill head. The great grey wall was running with rivulets, steaming a little, but still it looked like nothing more than a solid mass of rock as it rushed up to meet the Termite's front shield, and even Grayle had to fight the urge to flinch from it.

"Three... two... one..." he counted, through clenched teeth.

And he pressed down hard on the accelerator pedal, rising to Barreski's boastful challenge, as the countdown reached zero.

CHAPTER FIVE

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 43.15.08

The Termite bucked, a shudder slamming through its plasteel body as its horn impacted with the great wall of ice.

But the impact was only momentary, because then the driver's front shield was pelted with jagged shards, spattered with melted water, and the engine howled in protest as it fought to make headway against a force of nature that should by rights have been immovable... and succeeded.

Barreski fired the borer-mounted flamers again, regretting only that he had to do so remotely and couldn't feel their kick to his shoulder. The Termite wheezed and shuddered, and a fresh wave of water broke over its front, but its tracks had gained purchase, and the vehicle surged forwards.

The hard part was done. They were inside the glacier and the borer had found its groove, its drill head shredding the ice in its path like paper. All they had to do now was keep up their momentum, and stay on a constant bearing.

In the absence of a clear view ahead, Grayle's gaze was fixed to the compass — while, for his part, Barreski yearned for a greater challenge than that of just keeping the drill head spinning. He was about to get his wish.

The ice had closed in around the Termite, and the walls and the roof of its self-made tunnel were pressing in on it, squeezing it. This was to be expected, of course — and at first Barreski thought little of the occasional groan from the plasteel above him, although he could feel the increased pressure as if the air itself had become denser. An especially heartfelt groan from behind him, he put down to one of his comrades back there, almost certainly Trooper Borscz.

But the groans from the hull were becoming more frequent, and louder.

And then, Grayle reported that their speed had dropped.

Barreski knew what to do. He pressed the flamers into service again, to ease their path through the ice, and the driver seemed satisfied. But no sooner had Barreski removed his hands from the trigger controls than Grayle frowned, shook his head and announced that they were slowing again.

They repeated the sequence twice more, with the same results, until Barreski was starting to worry about depleting the flamers' promethium tanks.

"Looks like we're going to lose that bet, Grayle," he said through clenched teeth.

Then the hull emitted a particularly violent crack. Borscz leapt to his feet in alarm and banged his head on the roof.

"Are you certain the machine can take much more of this?" he moaned.

"A couple of minutes ago," said Grayle, "I'd have guaranteed it. Now—"

"Now what?" Colonel Steele was on his feet too. With two long strides, he was with Barreski and Grayle, leaning between them, examining the dashboard runes. "What's happening out there, Grayle?"

"I don't know, sir. The Termite is performing at peak efficiency. Better than peak. It's the ice, it's... I know this sounds impossible, but I think it might be replenishing itself, reforming as fast as we can bore through it."

"He could be right," said Gavotski. "We know that Cressida's change of climate has no natural explanation. We know the taint of Chaos is in the soil, lending it abnormal properties. Why not in the water as well?"

"I knew it," Borscz groaned, dropping back into his seat. "The tunnel is closing behind us. We are going to be trapped in here, in this tin coffin, forever."

"Not if I can help it!" snarled Barreski. He fired the flamers again, and manipulated the borer, making it describe a small circle as it drilled, widening its tunnel.

"That's helping," reported Grayle, "but we still aren't making the progress we should."

"And we can't keep this up for long," Barreski added, still mindful of his dwindling fuel supplies.

"The ice!" cried Anakora. "It is forcing itself in here!" With a glance back over his shoulder, Barreski saw that she was right. Crushed ice was squeezing through the gun emplacements in the Termite's side, as if being pushed by an external force. Six troopers leapt to the guns, doing their best to discourage the intrusion, but both Palinev and Mikhaelev immediately reported that their flamers had seized up.

"What's your assessment, Grayle?" barked Steele. "Can we make it to the other side of this thing?"

"No, sir," said Grayle, "I don't think we can."

"Well, we certainly can't back up," said Gavotski. "We don't have the room to swing the borer around."

"If we changed our heading to oh-seven-nine," said Grayle, "we could be through the ice a lot faster. It'd take us a fair way off course, though."

Steele pulled up a tactical map on his data-slate, nodded, and said, "It's our best hope. Make that course correction, trooper."

As Grayle moved to obey, another almighty crack drew ten pairs of worried eyes upwards. A hairline fracture had appeared in the hull, stretching half the length of the passenger compartment.

"You see, Trooper Borscz," said Mikhaelev nervously, "you didn't have to worry about our being trapped in here. The ice is going to crack this vehicle open like an eggshell and crush us all to death instead."

"You think the ice caused that crack?" Pozhar joked, half-heartedly. "That's from where Borscz banged his great head up there!"

"Can you bring the back end of the borer down a little?" Gavotski enquired of Barreski. "Use it to protect the roof. I know it would slow down the drilling, but—"

"Can't do it anyway, sergeant," said Barreski. "I'm trying, but the ice is already packed in too tightly under there. The borer is stuck at this angle."

"It's a race, then," said Steele, his voice remarkably calm under the circumstances, "between us and the ice. I'm relying on the two of you, Grayle, Barreski. Do whatever you have to do. Just keep us moving, as fast as you can manage."

"Aye, sir," said Grayle. Then he turned to Barreski, raising his voice to be heard. "I can reroute some power to the borer from the engine. The harder that drill works, the less the engine has to do anyway."

"Another flamer down," reported Blonsky from behind them.

"I could do with one of those things up here," Barreski shouted back. "Rip one out of an emplacement if you have to." He was operating the borer-mounted flamers — just three of them now, as the fourth was returning jammed signals — almost constantly, but still the front shield was being battered, not by mere shards of ice now but by great chunks of it, which hit like rocks.

The Termite's roof was beginning to bulge inwards with the increasing pressure upon it, and the Ice Warriors in the passenger compartment were up to their ankles in freezing slush. Barreski was so engrossed in his task that he hardly heard Grayle's voice, announcing that at their current speed they would be through the glacier in one more minute. It seemed like the longest minute of his life, and especially so when his flamers, only two of them working now, used up the last of their reserves and sputtered to a halt.

He turned, and found Palinev at his shoulder with a hand flamer as requested. Barreski leapt from his seat and snatched the weapon from the smaller man, even as the ice smashed through the front shield at last, coming at them like an avalanche.

Grayle had no choice. He couldn't leave his position or they were all done for. He met the oncoming ice, head down, eyes closed, breath held, hands gripping the controls for dear life. Barreski met it with a jet of flame, driving it back. Melted water gushed into the Termite's controls, angering the machine-spirits, which responded with a salvo of little explosions — but he couldn't worry about that now.

Borscz was standing on a seat, bearing the weight of the roof on his shoulders, but the walls of the passenger compartment were starting to bulge. The one to the left burst at last, even as the engine uttered its final gasp.

Then, the Termite's front end emerged, with a cough and a splutter, into the open air, and fell still.

Gavotski gave the order to abandon the vehicle, and its occupants almost fell over each other in their haste to obey. Barreski would have expected the technophobic Borscz to be the first out — but with the back half of the Termite still trapped in the ice, its roof threatening to collapse, the burly Ice Warrior chose instead to continue in his role as human prop.

Barreski was just as surprised to see the colonel, the nearest man to Grayle, delaying his escape in order to dig the driver out of the ice drift that had buried him. He went to help, and together they freed his fellow tanker's head. A half-conscious Grayle blew ice from his nose and mouth, and murmured, "Did we make it?"

Then, something rammed the Termite from behind, and its rear end stove in, compacting the back half of the passenger compartment — fortunately cleared by now — into a tangle of plasteel.

Hauling Grayle between them, Barreski and Steele scrambled out through the hatch, found a two-metre drop beneath them, and dived into a blanket of grey snow. Steele landed on his feet, but Grayle's weight threw Barreski's balance, and he fell and rolled onto his back, just in time to hear a roar of "Incoming!" and to see Borscz's enormous form blotting out the dull grey sky.

The impact was tough on the pair of them, but Barreski got the worst of it. He felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach by an equatorial yak. For a moment, all he could see was a haze of red. He was tangled in Grayle's arms, pinned down by Borscz's bulk, and he could hear the grinding and rending of plasteel above him. He feared that the mangled remains of the Termite were about to come crashing down on him too. And there was another sound, too. A sound that, if anything, made Barreski even more concerned for his immediate future.

The sound of las-fire.

The creatures had been waiting for them.

Anakora didn't know how it was possible, how they could have been warned of the Ice Warriors' approach — but as soon as she dropped from the Termite, as soon as she planted her feet in the snow, they converged on her, three of them.

They were much like the Chaos hounds she had fought in the underhive, all teeth and claws and spines. The most apparent difference was that their fur was white, with patches of light green and brown: snow camouflage. It would have done them more good if they had been able to contain their eager growls at the prospect of a kill. Even so, it was hard to see where the shape of each of the beasts ended and its surroundings began, almost impossible to get a bead on any of them.

Anakora loosed off three shots from her lasgun anyway, one in the direction of each of the beasts. Then she ran — not out of cowardice, but in the hope of drawing the creatures away from the wreckage of the Termite, and from the nine other Ice Warriors who were about to emerge from it, dazed and confused. She would not lose another squad today. Not if she had any say in the matter.

The first of the beasts pounced on her from behind, sinking its claws into her shoulders. Carried by the momentum of her run, Anakora fell face first towards the snow — but she had been prepared

for this, and she angled her descent so that she landed side-on, rolled onto her back, and pinned the Chaos beast with her weight.

It squealed, and scrabbled at the backs of her legs with its back claws. Anakora could feel its hot breath on her neck, and although she frantically recited the Litany of Protection under her breath, she knew that she had only an instant before the beast sunk its teeth into the unprotected flesh between her helmet and her greatcoat's collar.

She shifted her grip on her lasgun and thrust it, butt-first, over her shoulder, aiming blindly, gratified to feel a crunch as she struck the beast in its grotesquely enlarged fangs. It howled, and its grip on her shoulders loosened. Anakora tore herself free of it, even as the second beast caught up with the first and leapt at her.

She got out of its way just in time. The second beast, unable to reverse the momentum of its lunge, landed on the first with its claws outstretched, and virtually gutted it. That left her free, for a moment, to defend herself against the third. As it thundered towards her, she got her first good look at it. She saw its feline features and its whiskers and she realised what the beasts were, or rather what they once must have been.

They were snow leopards, much like those that roamed Valhalla's tundra.

She blasted at the oncoming beast, scoring three palpable hits — but it was tough, tougher than the Chaos hounds had been, and it would not fall. It leapt for her throat, and Anakora turned her lasgun sideways, using its barrel to protect herself. As soon as the snow leopard's claws hit the weapon, she hefted it over her head as if it were the bar on a set of dumbbells, simultaneously dropping to her knees. Her attacker's huge body was carried over her head, but it reacted fast, faster than she had hoped, and by the time Anakora had regained her footing and shouldered her lasgun again, the snow leopard had reined in its momentum, turned, and was coming at her again.

Her only hope was a kill shot, right through its eye, into its brain.

It was impossible.

In a fraction of a second that stretched into an eternity, Anakora realised that she didn't have the time to level her gun, to turn it to protect herself, to do anything else before she was eviscerated. She faced her death with a heavy sense of resignation. She turned her head away, felt the impact of the beast with her chest, felt herself falling, felt the spray of hot, sticky blood on her face...

... and realised, to her surprise, that the blood wasn't hers.

The leopard was standing over her, black fluid gushing from its head, streaming into its eyes, one of its legs burnt off below the knee, fused into a bloody stump. It was unable to see, unable to run, thrashing in pain and confusion, and it seemed to have forgotten its erstwhile prey.

Then it was struck by three las-beams at once. More blood and offal erupted from between its ribs, and the beast toppled onto its side, quite dead.

Anakora's comrades had come to her rescue.

Steele was questioning his judgement once more.

He should have anticipated that there might be trouble outside the Termite. He *had* anticipated it. Should he, then, have left it to his troopers to help Grayle? Should he have taken point, been the first out there, ready to lead? There was no point in thinking like that. Gavotski and the others had things under control, for now.

Only one mutated leopard remained upright, and it was howling and twisting in the crossfire of five las-beams. It occurred to Steele to wonder if the beasts were native to this world, perhaps confined to its polar regions before the cold had spread. Or could they actually have evolved, even in the short time since a permanent winter had fallen over Cressida, to suit their altered climate?

He used his momentary respite to survey his new surroundings.

Two metres above him, the front end of his battered vehicle protruded from the glacier's sheer face. As he watched, the Termite's great horn crumpled and its wreck was dragged, screeching, back

into the ice. A moment later, it had been swallowed up, and a fresh layer of ice had formed across the mouth of the tunnel it had made. No sign remained that the Termite, or indeed its passengers, had ever been up there.

Borscz, Barreski and Grayle were on the ground beside Steele, struggling to disentangle themselves from each other. Borscz was the first to break free from the scrum, and he rushed to join in the near-ended battle with gusto.

In front of Steele, there was a forest. Its near edge was almost parallel with that of the glacier, leaving only a narrow strip of land between them, eighty metres wide or less. Like the glacier, the forest stretched out far to each side of him, a great deal further than even his bionic eye could see.

It was a forest not of wood but of ice — of obscene, twisted sculptures, mockeries of the natural shapes they had presumably replaced, growing thick around the trunks but branching out into grasping, clawing talons as they reached upwards. The ice trees grew high and thick enough to blot out the already-scant daylight and the shadows between them were dark and foreboding. Their surfaces were encrusted with the ever-present purple fungus, and Steele's sensitive nose wrinkled at its overripe stench.

He could detect something else too: a movement. There was something out there.

He activated his eye's zoom function. It took the augmetics a long second to react to his thought but then the colonel's gaze probed, searching, penetrating the ice forest's dark depths, and there...

There it was... for a moment at least: a humanoid creature, covered in light grey fur, or maybe it was just wearing a fur coat. Steele couldn't tell — because before he could adjust his focus to see the creature more clearly, it was off again, a blur of motion despite its odd, shambling gait. It disappeared behind an especially fat tree, and he had lost it.

Unless, he thought, he acted now.

There was no time to second-guess his instincts, this time. The figure might have been a Chaos scout, in which case Steele couldn't let it go, couldn't allow it to take news of the Ice Warriors' presence in this area to its masters. So, he drew his lasgun and set off in pursuit of it yelling to Troopers Blonsky, Palinev and Pozhar to follow him. The rest could catch up once the final snow leopard was dead.

As Steele crossed the tree line, he was plunged into an eerie gloom, and the aperture of his bionic eye widened to compensate. The recent snowfall had, for the most part, not touched the ground here. The soil was black and infertile, but the roots of many of the ice trees protruded from it like tripwires, and patches of the slippery fungus were everywhere. Steele had to slow his pace, watch his step. Even so, he almost lost his footing — and as he caught himself, he felt a sharp, slicing pain to his left shoulder.

He had brushed against a tree trunk, and it was razor sharp. Its edge had cut right through his greatcoat, through its layers of plasfibre and thermoplas, to score his skin. He turned to deliver a warning to his troopers, but saw that they had discovered the danger for themselves.

They proceeded as best they could after that. Steele used his power sword to cut away some of the more treacherous branches in his path — even without its energy field active, the well-honed blade sliced easily through the ice. Still, it was several minutes before he reached the spot in which the grey-furred figure had lurked — and, by then, he was not at all surprised to find no sign that it had ever been there.

Blonsky and Pozhar had fallen behind, but the smaller, slighter Palinev had been able to keep pace with his colonel, slipping through the forest as if its traps and snares were little impediment to him.

"There was something here, sir," he reported. "You can see where its breath has started to melt this tree. I could search for its tracks, but they'll be hard to follow on this ground."

"No," said Steele. "Thank you, Trooper Palinev, but we don't have time for that."

"It does look bleak, sir, if you don't mind my saying so. We've lost the Termite. Our escape route through the ice has closed behind us, so that even if we do find Confessor Wollkenden, we've

no way of getting back to Alpha Hive with him. We must be at least twenty kilometres from his crash site, and it seems our enemies know we're here."

Steele couldn't have summed up the situation more succinctly himself.

"We should get back to the others," he said. "We have a great deal of work to do."

CHAPTER SIX

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 40.42.39

Pozhar was beginning to wonder what he was doing here.

He was a front-line fighter, not a scout. Stealth was no more a virtue of his than was patience. Bad enough, he thought, that Steele had had the Termite flee from a single artillery unit; bad enough they had let the enemy have that victory. At least, he had thought, when they got to where they were going, when he was able to climb out into the open again at last, he would have the chance to flex his muscles.

The mutated snow leopards had been a welcome diversion — and Pozhar felt confident, although it was impossible to know for sure, that his las-beams had finished off two of them. But then Steele had directed his squad into the ice forest and warned them of the overriding need for caution.

And Pozhar had come to realise that the ice forest was almost as constricting, almost as claustrophobic, as the inside of the Termite had been.

The further they had ventured between its vile, warped trees, the more densely those trees had become packed. Already Pozhar had been scratched three times by their sharp edges, and he was starting to ache with the effort of walking with his elbows damped to his sides, his head bowed, checking the ground for the treacherous purple fungus before he dared to take each step.

Still, as bad as this was for him, he thought, it was far worse for Borscz, who was visibly straining to rein in his massive form, and who let out an aggrieved yelp every few minutes. Borscz's greatcoat was so crazed with cuts by now that Pozhar was expecting great squares of its fabric to start falling away.

He longed to set eyes on another snow leopard or two, something against which he could cut loose — but the ice forest seemed sterile, devoid even of birds, an entire area scoured of life, given over to the creeping rot that was destroying this world.

Pozhar shivered at the thought, and decided that on reflection this was far worse than being cooped up in any vehicle. Out here, he could feel the Chaos corruption in the air, pressing in on him like a physical force, battering him. He wanted to yell defiance at it, to fight back. He wanted to hack, slash and burn this accursed place down.

“Just give me a couple of flamers,” seethed Barreski, who had obviously had the same thought, “and I guarantee you there'll be nothing left standing here in ten minutes. We'd be wading through water the rest of the way to the crash site.”

“And the Chaos forces would hear us coming ten kilometres away,” said Borscz.

“Just making a point, that's all,” said Barreski. “I'd put my faith in Imperial firepower over anything Chaos can muster any day, no contest.”

“Forgetting what happened to the Termite, are we?” asked Mikhaev wryly.

Anyway, there were no flamers — only the one that Barreski had been carrying, and it was out of fuel. There had been no time for the Ice Warriors to salvage anything more than their standard kit, worn or carried in their rucksacks, from the stricken Termite. Mikhaev in particular was mourning the loss of his missile launcher, being now a heavy weapons expert with no heavy weapons.

Pozhar heard a noise ahead of him, glimpsed a moving shape and reacted with lightning speed. By the time he recognised Trooper Palinev, he was already staring at his comrade's slender form

through his lasgun sights. An instant later, and Pozhar would have pulled the trigger. He chafed at having to hold himself back.

Palinev had adapted to his surroundings with enviable ease. He moved between the ice trees like a ghost, seeming to know instinctively where to step, and when he had to twist or hop to avoid a grasping branch or a protruding root. "I've scouted two kilometres ahead, sir," he reported to Steele, "but there's nothing, nothing at all. The ice forest stretches as far as I've seen."

Gavotski's lips tightened with disappointment. "Maybe we should have tried to go around it after all. If it gets any thicker—"

Steele interrupted him. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, sergeant. In the meantime, assuming that the forest does reach all the way to our destination, if we maintain our current bearing and speed and encounter no further hostile life... assuming all that, we should be able to reach the crash site in..."

He hesitated for a second, and his eyes — both the real one and the augmetic — glazed over. Pozhar stared at his commander in fascination — but then Steele's eyes cleared and he concluded, "Approximately four hours and forty-seven minutes' time." And Pozhar wanted to scream.

Palinev was alone again.

He didn't mind that. He had become used to solitude, welcomed it even. It was a long time since he had been in an environment as quiet as the ice forest was, far from the sounds of battle or even from the thrum of an engine. He knew he had to be careful not to let the quiet fool him. Likewise, he was sure to examine every ice tree that came into his view, even though the aberrant shapes had long since lost the power to fascinate or even to repel him, had begun to take on a monotonous quality.

Palinev couldn't take anything for granted, couldn't drop his guard for a second. The others were depending on him. The information he could gather, alone and unseen, could prove vital to them. But it came with a risk attached. If he were to walk into an ambush, if he were to be captured, then the enemy would know that his comrades were behind him, and they would be prepared.

One mistake, and Palinev knew he could take his entire squad down with him.

He had left them almost an hour ago. It was time to drop back, he thought, and report in to Steele again, just to reassure the colonel that he hadn't run into trouble, that the way ahead was still safe. Cradling his Guard-issue compass in his palm, Palinev reoriented himself. He was confident that he could retrace his steps by memory, but there was no harm in a double-check. If he strayed off course by even one half of a degree, he was likely to miss his comrades altogether.

He was about to set off when a sound made him freeze.

It had been almost nothing — the tiniest of scrapes, perhaps a rustle of fabric — and yet, it had not been a natural sound. Palinev knew this because he had taken the time to attune himself to the natural sounds of the forest, such as they were: the faintest warbling of the wind between the trees, the occasional pops and cracks as a newly frozen shape settled, or perhaps even grew?

As quickly and as quietly as he could, taking only one careful step, Palinev tucked himself in behind the nearest ice tree, and dropped to his haunches. He drew his combat knife from his boot, recited the Litany of Stealth, made sure that his breathing was as soft as the breeze, and waited.

As he had expected, a figure came into view. It was a man, as slight of stature as Palinev was. He was wearing an armoured helmet and a tight-fitting flak jacket, also like Palinev's, except that where his was a bottle green in colour, the stranger's was a bold red with gold highlights. It was hardly good camouflage material.

Palinev thought that he recognised the colours, though he couldn't name the regiment to which they belonged. Evidently, though, this man was an Imperial soldier — or at least, he had been once. He was holding a lasgun, keeping it ready as he crept from one tree to another: a scout. The question was, for whom was he scouting? There were no visible signs of Chaos mutation on the stranger, but that didn't prove anything.

Palinev waited until the man had drawn almost level with him, waited for his questing eyes to turn away from him. Then he slipped out from behind his tree, and into the shade of another. He repeated this manoeuvre twice more, each time drawing closer to his unsuspecting prey, and moving further around behind him.

When at last he was close, almost close enough to reach out and touch the nape of the other scout's neck, then Palinev pounced. His prey heard him coming, too late, didn't even have time to spin around. Palinev was on the man's back, his left arm locked around his shoulders, his right hand holding his knife to the man's throat.

"A friendly warning," he hissed. "If you try to shout to your people, if you speak at all other than to answer my questions, I will slit your vocal cords." He would have done it by now if only he had been sure, if he had seen any proof that this man was a traitor. "Who are you?" he asked. "Answer me!"

"Trooper Garroway," the other scout spat defiantly, "of the 14th Royal Validian regiment of the Imperial Guard. Kill me if you like. Kill us all, but it won't save you. They will send a hundred thousand more like me — a million more — and they won't rest until this world is scoured clean of your filth, reclaimed for the Golden Throne!"

"You're Imperial Guard?" queried Palinev. "What are you doing out here? This is Chaos-held territory."

His prisoner relaxed a little in his grip, and this told Palinev more than words could have said. Garroway was relieved, not afraid, to have found himself in the hands of a fellow Guardsman. He was telling the truth.

"There are just under four hundred of our company left," said Garroway. "We were helping civilians out of Iota Hive to the north-west of here. When it fell, we were ordered back to Alpha, but the glaciers closed in front of us, blocking our path. We don't have a vox-caster any more, so we couldn't call for assistance. We have no maps. We've just been trying to find a way through, but the Chaos army is behind us. We were forced to take cover in this... this forest, whatever it is."

Palinev let go of him. "Palinev," he introduced himself, "Valhallan 319th."

Garroway turned to face him, and his eyes narrowed. "You're an Ice Warrior?"

"Don't let the lack of a greatcoat fool you. I move a lot better without it."

"Yeah? I can't say I'd turn down the chance of a little protection. When my regiment first came to Cressida, sure it was cold, but not like this. Maybe it's different for you, coming from an ice world, but we're losing men by the hour. But... but you've found us now, they sent someone for us at last!"

"Ah," said Palinev, "no, I'm afraid they didn't. We're on a mission of our own." He frowned. "And if the enemy is behind you, that's going to mean trouble for us."

"You can guide us out of here, at least," said Garroway. "You found your way past the glaciers, you can tell us how to get out... can't you?"

"We should report back to our commanders," said Palinev. "I should think they'll want to talk."

They came together not long after that: the Valhallans in green, the Validians in red, their paths converging in the heart of the white forest.

They had been expecting each other, of course, thanks to their respective scouts. A few of the troopers exchanged strained pleasantries, and Colonel Steele and the Validian commander, a fresh-faced young captain, sought each other out and moved to one side for a private conference.

The rest of the Guardsmen took this as a cue to relax, to recharge themselves as best they could. Their surroundings, however, offered them scant comfort. It was almost impossible for a man to sit down without touching the deadly tree trunks or roots — and after trying for a time, holding themselves in unnatural positions until their muscles ached, many of them gave up and stood again.

Few of the Validians could sit still anyway. They stamped their feet, rubbed their arms, did all they could to stave off the biting cold. Mikhaelev watched them, their bright colours spread through the forest as far as he could see, and he shook his head and sighed. Here they were, these brave men, doing the Emperor's work, and their leaders couldn't even equip them with the right clothing for the job.

In a perfect Imperium, of course, the Validians wouldn't have been assigned to this frozen world at all, unused as they were to such conditions. Somewhere, no doubt, a low-level clerk had looked at his slate, seen how many Guardsmen were dying from hypothermia on Cressida, weighed this against the cost of a few million armoured greatcoats and chosen to do nothing.

Mikhaelev was standing with three of his comrades, Anakora, Borscz and Pozhar.

"What do you think they are saying?" Borscz asked, inclining his head towards Steele and the captain.

"They'll be making plans to fight," said Pozhar with more hope than certainty. "According to Trooper Palinev, the Chaos army is on the Validians' heels. That puts them in our path. We'll have to shoot our way through them."

Anakora shook her head. "This is meant to be a stealth mission. If we start a full-scale battle here, it will lead every heretic in the area to us. Even with the Validians' help, we would be hopelessly outnumbered."

"I'm talking about a lightning strike," said Pozhar. "Take the Chaos scum by surprise, and be long gone before the reinforcements arrive. The heretics think they're safe here, cowering behind their walls of ice. We can teach them different."

Borscz grinned at that. "We can be like our ancestors, no? We can strike at our enemies' very heart, as those mighty heroes did against the invading orks."

"We can teach them to fear us!" said Pozhar, his eyes gleaming at the prospect.

"Yeah," said Mikhaelev dryly, "a lesson that will stay with them for all of about a day and a half before they're virus bombed out of existence."

"Trooper Mikhaelev is correct," said Anakora. "There is no purpose in our fighting and perhaps dying when it would not advance our cause."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Pozhar. "That we turn tail and run?"

"Colonel Steele will find a way," asserted Borscz loyally. "He has not brought us this far to give up on our mission just yet."

"No," said Mikhaelev, with a tight smile, "I should think not."

Anakora was starting to see it too, he thought. She was looking at the knots of red and gold Guardsmen around them, at the hope in their faces that, having been lost for so long, they might have been found again.

"They've been out of vox contact for weeks," she said. "They cannot know about the withdrawal, about the... about what is to come next. They don't know that it's already too late for them, that without air transport they have no hope of reaching Alpha Hive in time to evacuate."

"So, they're already dead," said Pozhar with a shrug. "All the more reason why they should die like soldiers, with their guns blazing."

"Anyone want to bet the Validians do just that?" asked Mikhaelev quietly.

The other three troopers turned to look at him.

"Anakora was right," he said. "These men are dead anyway. Frankly, even if that weren't the case, the Imperium sees them, sees us all, as expendable. The only person on this world who really matters is Wollkenden, and we are the only people who can save Wollkenden. So, if it costs the Imperium four hundred lives to preserve our ten... well, it's just numbers, right?"

"And how, my friend, might the sacrifice of those four hundred lives help us?" asked Borscz.

“Think about it,” said Mikhaelev. “We can’t go forward, can’t go back. There is one other option. We can’t fight our way through the Chaos forces, but perhaps we can go around them. If we are to do that, though, we will need a diversion... a big one.”

Anakora looked pale, shaken. Her gaze was pulled again to the surrounding Validians, but she turned away quickly as one of them caught her eye. She seemed almost ashamed. Pozhar, in contrast, closed his eyes and let out a groan of dismay. Mikhaelev guessed that he would have swapped regiments in a second for a chance to get back into combat.

“You want to know what our leaders are talking about over there, Borscz?” he said grimly. “I’ll lay you another bet if you like. I’ll bet you a day’s worth of dry rations that Steele is asking the Validians to die for us.”

Mikhaelev was right, of course.

Anakora prayed he wouldn’t be, that Colonel Steele and the Validian captain might have found another way between them. But the more she thought about it, the more she knew that Mikhaelev’s way was the only way that made sense.

The officers parted company, and Steele called his squad to him for a short briefing. Anakora hardly listened to his quiet words. She knew what he was going to say, anyway. Her eyes wandered instead to the captain, who was chairing a similar meeting with his sergeants, fourteen or fifteen of them. She watched as they received the news: that their trials of the past few weeks had been for nothing, that they wouldn’t make it home after all, that the Emperor required only one final service from them. They bore it stoically, of course, but Anakora detected a few wistful expressions and a few slumped shoulders, as the sergeants moved out to spread the word to their troopers.

Logically, she knew she had no reason to feel guilty. The Validians weren’t really sacrificing themselves for her sake, nor for that of her squad. They were doing it for Confessor Wollkenden, for the Ecclesiarchy, for the Emperor. Still, she couldn’t help but ask herself why, of all the good soldiers here, she should be among the few, the very few, to be spared — why this was starting to become a familiar pattern for her.

If the Emperor had a plan for her — and it seemed that He must — if He was keeping her alive for some reason, then Anakora just wished she could imagine what that reason might be.

With no more words left to say, the regiments went their separate ways.

The depleted company of Validians turned back the way they had come, and marched to meet the pursuers from whom they had fought so hard to escape. The squad of Valhallans headed off to the north-east, planning to skirt around the inevitable battlefield as they had back at Alpha Hive. The difference was, they were on foot this time, but at least this battlefield would be smaller.

Steele led the way. He had an unerring sense of direction, another gift of his augmetics, but still he paused frequently to check his bearings with Palinev. Gavotski knew that the colonel would be watching the chrono, calculating the cost of yet another diversion from their planned course. Steele had been tight-lipped since his talk with the captain — but then, this was hardly unusual for him.

It couldn’t have been easy for him, to have been the bearer of such bad news, to have had to ask a fellow commander to order his men to their deaths. It had still been just a few days, after all, since the same had been asked of him.

Gavotski’s thoughts drifted back to Alpha Hive, to the many good comrades he had left behind there, the scores of men alongside whom he had been proud to fight at one time or another. He wondered how many of them were still fighting, how many might yet make it onto the last of the exodus ships. He doubted he would see any of them again.

Barreski, at least, seemed happy. Somehow, he had talked one of the Validians into giving him another hand flamer — and with Grayle’s help, he was stripping it down on the move, lovingly cleaning and lubricating its components.

Presently, the squad bore north and then around to the north-west again, until they had completed a quarter-circle and were on a path parallel to the one they had been on before. They had seen and heard nothing of the Validians in an hour, but now the quiet of the ice forest was interrupted by a series of distant sounds: the usual sounds, the ones that could have been the soundtrack to Gavotski's life, to all of their lives.

Gunfire, explosions, screaming. The sounds of war. The sounds of four hundred good men, dying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 38.24.44

It seemed like a long time before the forest fell silent again.

For Steele, of course, with his enhanced hearing, it felt like even longer. This was a good thing, he told himself. It meant the Validian company had bought him more time than he could have expected from them. It meant they had died as they had lived, as heroes, and no Guardsman could want any more from his life than that.

It meant that he had done the right thing by sacrificing them.

Not that he had doubted this, not any longer. Steele had reviewed his decision six times, and was satisfied that he had overlooked nothing. Anyway, he had Sergeant Gavotski's support, which was always a reliable indicator.

The Ice Warriors had completed their half-circuit of the battlefield. They were behind the Chaos forces, whatever remained of them, back on course for the confessor's crash site. Steele just prayed that their enemies would take some time to lick their wounds, before turning to head homeward. Just time enough for his squad to gain a safe distance from them.

He heard the approaching mutants a full six seconds before he saw them.

They were making no attempt to be quiet, crashing through the ice forest at speed, whimpering and howling. They must have fled from the heat of the battle, thought Steele. They couldn't have known that the Ice Warriors were here — and yet, by some perverse chance, they were about to run right into them.

He hissed a warning to the others, telling them to take cover. Although they couldn't have seen anything themselves yet, they didn't stop to ask questions. They obeyed their colonel's order with varying degrees of success. Only a blind man could have failed to see Borscz, who was twice as broad as the ice tree behind which he attempted to hide. Still, thought Steele, if the mutants were in the throes of panic, and obviously feeble-minded, then they might not see the trap before it was sprung.

And suddenly, there were over a score of them, appearing in the gaps between the trees, their manifest and varied deformities an assault to Steele's eyes. He waited until they got closer, even closer... and then one of the mutants came scrambling to a halt, and its huge, pink eyes widened, staring at Borscz's protruding stomach. It opened its mouth to squeal a warning...

...and that was when Steele stepped out of hiding with his laspistol levelled, and before the mutant could let out a sound, he calmly blew a hole through its head.

The rest of his squad were quick to follow his lead. Pozhar, not surprisingly, was the first, his face lit up by a broad grin as he pumped las-beam after las-beam into his confused and terrified targets. Barreski took his time, waiting for the opportune moment to wreak maximum damage with one shot from his new flamer. Three mutants were engulfed in fire, filling the air with the stink of their burning flesh and the sounds of their screams.

"Don't let any of them get away!" Steele yelled.

He counted four mutants on the periphery of the group, making to turn back, deciding that the lesser of two perils was the one that lay behind them after all. He brought down a hunchbacked, tentacled horror with a shot to the back.

The other three mutants fled, and were out of sight before Steele could stop them — but an instant later a tremendous bang rent the air and a cloud of shrapnel billowed out from the trees

where they had vanished. Barreski had tossed a frag grenade after the mutants — and, although Steele winced at the sound that had almost overloaded the acoustic enhancers in his right ear, he couldn't deny that it had been an effective tactic.

Was there any hope, he wondered, that no one in the main body of the Chaos force had heard the explosion, that the ice trees might have deadened its sound before it could reach them? Perhaps, at least, it might be dismissed as the work of a lone Validian kamikaze, or even a dispute between undisciplined mutant stragglers.

So long, that was, as none of the mutants lived to tell a different tale.

In focusing on the would-be deserters, Steele had let down his guard against the more immediate threats to his wellbeing. He heard the cocking of a pistol, and turned to find its barrel aimed at his head by a creature that looked as if its face had melted, its eyes and its nose running towards its chin.

Before the mutant could fire, Borscz barrelled into its side and threw off its aim. It responded by swinging its gun butt at the burly Ice Warrior's jaw. It hit with a resounding crack, but Borscz barely seemed to feel the blow. He gripped his hapless opponent by its shoulders, thrust it back against a razor-edged ice tree. The mutant screamed and thrashed as blood gushed out of its back, but with a deep-throated chuckle and a flash of his brilliant white teeth, Borscz pushed its chin up and back with the heel of his hand. The tree cut through the mutant's misshapen head, bisecting it down the middle.

Three more of its kin made a break for it, but two ran into a crossfire of las-beams set up by Gavotski and Anakora. Palinev went racing after the third, with his knife drawn. Barreski pressed his flamer into service again, and Borscz, who had been about to pounce on another mutant when it combusted in his face, gave a yelp of protest and threw his hands up to his singed beard.

Surprise and discipline were the Ice Warriors' greatest assets, and many of their foes were cut down before they could do much more than gibber. Mikhaelev in particular proved to be an expert shot, choosing his angles well so that a single one of his las-beams often sliced through two bodies.

The closest the mutants came to exhibiting teamwork was when four of them tried to swarm Blonsky. Steele's pistol finished off one before it could reach its target, but the others fell upon the trooper. Most of the Ice Warriors held their fire for fear of hitting a comrade, although Steele noted that Pozhar was the exception.

He drew his power sword and activated a control in its hilt, causing the blade to flare with a crackling blue energy. He stepped up behind one of the mutants and struck with all the strength in his augmented muscles, severing its head from its spinal column.

Borscz wrenched a third mutant from its victim, while Grayle attempted a similar manoeuvre with the fourth, but found that it was stronger than he was. Nevertheless, he kept it occupied long enough for Blonsky to stand and to thrust his bayonet into the struggling creature's guts.

And then the fight was over, there were no more mutants standing, and Palinev returned, wiping his blade with a cloth, to report that the one he had chased was also dead. The Ice Warriors were left in a self-made clearing, but the ice trees that Barreski's flamer had melted were already beginning to grow again. Pozhar leapt as a new shoot sprouted with impossible speed beneath him, almost impaling his foot.

Before they moved on, Steele counted the bodies to confirm that all the mutants he had seen were accounted for. Then he took another second to rerun that calculation, four more times, to be sure.

It had become second nature for him to do this, and he did it for a good reason. He did it because he could not trust his own mind.

Some things, he remembered too well.

He remembered every detail of his time in the hospital, everything they had done to him there. The medics had rebuilt one side of Steele's head, inserted plates into his skull, and grafted foreign

objects onto his brain. They had replaced the shattered bones in his right shoulder and upper arm with plasteel, the muscles with hydraulic systems.

He remembered their assurances that the pain would be worthwhile, that they were doing the best they could for him. He hadn't believed them. He had thought it more likely that the medics were just pushing, testing, seeing how far they could go.

Steele could remember all that, but he couldn't remember what had landed him in that Emperor-forsaken place to begin with. He had no memory of Karnak, the world to which his service records told him he had been posted for more than two years. He did not know who his comrades had been on that world, in that campaign, which of the Imperium's many enemies they had been fighting, or what his orders had been on that fateful day.

He had no idea what had caused the explosion that had gone off in his face.

He couldn't remember his father's eyes, nor the touch of the girlfriend he had left behind on Valhalla when his draft papers had arrived.

Sometimes, in the weeks that had followed his discharge, Steele had wished that the medics had just left him to die.

He was aware that people saw him as a quiet man, a deep thinker. As a cold man. Some were jealous of his augmetics, of the feats they enabled him to achieve. Those people didn't know the real Colonel Stanislev Steele. They didn't know the abiding frustration that burnt at the core of his being.

He could hear the flapping of a moth's wings from forty paces now, detect its body heat from a hundred. He could perform complex calculations at lightning speed — or rather, a small part of his brain to which he felt little connection could perform them and offer up the results to him. He had near-perfect recall, and could store tactical maps and troop movements in that same small alien corner of his head.

Steele had heard it said that he could count the snowflakes in a storm, although he had never been quite bored enough to try.

And of course he had the strength of three men in his right arm — enough, he had been told, to slice through two armoured heretics with one swing of his power sword.

It must have sounded amazing, in theory, and Steele's new-found abilities had certainly helped him to rise through the ranks. But, as Trooper Borscz would no doubt have reminded him, Imperial technology wasn't always reliable — and far less so in conditions like these, on ice worlds such as Valhalla and the world that Cressida had become. Steele's eye, his acoustic enhancers, the olfactory sensors in his nose, even his right shoulder, they were all prone to intermittent failures. They could let him down at any moment.

And so, nine years after he had been reborn, he was still trying to work out what the medics hadn't been able to tell him. He still didn't know which of his thoughts were entirely his own, and which had been influenced by the augmetics that had oh-so-subtly insinuated themselves into his consciousness. He had to second-guess his every instinct, in case it was based on flawed information.

He couldn't tell where the real Stanislev Steele ended and the augmetics began.

They were nearing the edge of the ice forest, at last.

Steele knew this because his augmetics had calculated that the mean distance between the ice trees was a little greater than it had been a few minutes ago. He quickened his pace, knowing that his squad would fall into step beside him without being ordered to do so. There had been no signs that anyone was on their tail, but still he couldn't dismiss that possibility.

At last they emerged into the open, and Steele could see that the others were as happy about it as he was. Borscz let out a deep groan of relief, and took the opportunity to stretch his arms and legs and work out the cricks in his neck.

A great, snow-blanketed field stretched ahead of them — and in the distance Steele could see the spires and towers of Iota Hive. They had made good time, all things considered. The crash site was only a few more kilometres away, and the going looked set to be a lot easier from now on. The open terrain would bring its own problems, however. The Ice Warriors' bottle-green greatcoats would stand out like beacons to anyone who overlooked the field from any number of surrounding hills. And they would leave tracks in the grey snow, but there was no way around that.

Fortunately, the sky was beginning to darken. Steele considered waiting for a while, until the night had drawn in completely, but he concluded that the risks of so doing outweighed the advantages. His internal chrono was ticking away, impossible to ignore. It was counting down the seconds to the end of this world, making him acutely aware of the passing of each one.

It was only when Gavotski had a quiet word in his ear that he realised how hard he had been pushing his squad, how exhausting the ice forest had been for them. He conceded that they should take a short rest, while they had some cover. The Ice Warriors set themselves down on the ground, broke out their rations and their water bags, and relaxed for the first time in a good few hours.

The break buoyed their spirits, and Mikhaev and Grayle were soon engrossed in a conversation about the relative merits of Lightning and Thunderbolt fighters. Grayle was enthusing about the time he had got his hands on the controls of one of the latter, during a short secondment to the Imperial Navy.

Gavotski, in the meantime, was reciting old war stories to an attentive Pozhar and Palinev, while Barreski and Borscz had resumed their good-natured bickering.

"I'll make you a deal," said Barreski. "When this mission is over, we will have a contest: my flamer against your hands, and we will see which is the more deadly."

"Then you had best hope your flamer does not jam," said Borscz cheerfully, "or run out fuel, and that you do not miss with your first shot, because one is all you will get. After that, my hands will be around your throat, and there will be no doubt about the outcome then — because my hands, I can rely upon."

"Oh, I never miss," Barreski assured him, "you can count on that."

The Validian captain had warned Steele about the lake.

He had led his company around it — but it had taken him the better part of a day to do so, and they had run into more than one small Chaos encampment in the process. Steele had decided that, if it was at all possible, he would take his squad across; the lake, according to the Validian, was far narrower than it was long.

And so it was that, after a short, uneventful trek from the forest, the Ice Warriors came to the nearest bank of the lake and stumbled to a halt. Steele dropped to one knee, drew a long-bladed knife and held it so that its tip rested on the frozen surface. He pushed it down slowly, measuring the resistance it encountered, feeling when that resistance ended, when the knife tip had penetrated the ice and emerged into the water beneath it. By the time it did, he was pleased to note that the knife was buried almost to its hilt. The ice, he judged, was more than thick enough to support ten men.

Even so, the heavy Borscz was understandably apprehensive. He let the others get a short way ahead of him before he gingerly placed one foot on the ice, and then slowly, carefully eased his great bulk onto it. By the time he had taken four or five steps in this manner, however, he was beginning to grow in confidence, and he soon caught up with his comrades.

The Ice Warriors had fanned out so as not to concentrate their weight in any one spot. They moved slowly, focusing on their feet, mindful of the likely consequences should any of them slip and fall. Steele kept his ear attuned to the cracking, creaking sounds of the ice under pressure, hoping that those sounds would warn him in time if the pressure became too great.

The lake, he had been told, was a kilometre across, but it took his squad almost half an hour to reach the halfway point. By then, he could see the far bank, a black mass in the gathering gloom.

And it was shortly after that, when the Ice Warriors were at their most exposed, their most vulnerable, that the first shot rang out.

“Sniper!” yelled Palinev as a section, of the ice exploded a few metres to his right.

Steele replayed the last second in his mind, and found that his bionic eye had picked up something that he hadn’t noticed at the time: a muzzle flash, coming from the dark, rounded shape of a hill to the north-east. He relayed this information to the others, and tried to zoom in on the spot in question.

His eye’s Heads-Up Display flagged up the outline of a man’s head and shoulders, and identified the weapon he was holding: a long-las.

Fortunately, the sniper wasn’t a very good shot, at least not at this range. Unfortunately, he didn’t have to hit the Ice Warriors, not when he could shoot the ground out from beneath them. Two more beams punched through the ice, and blew up jets of water. The Ice Warriors returned fire, dropping into defensive crouches in the absence of cover to minimise their profiles. Their own lasguns, Palinev’s excepted, didn’t have the range of the long-las — even if they hit their target, it would be with half-strength beams. Still, they could encourage the sniper to keep his head down.

Palinev looked surprised when Steele came up behind him and snatched his long-las from his hands. “No offence, trooper,” he muttered, “I just think my aim might be a little better than yours.” Gavotski saw what Steele was doing, and ordered the rest of the squad to withdraw, to keep up the covering fire but to make for the far side of the lake as they did so — and to sacrifice caution now for speed.

Steele was trying to focus on the sniper again when another beam hit the ice directly in front of him, and the ensuing eruption threw him off his feet.

He landed heavily on his back and was winded, almost dropping his weapon. The frozen surface beneath him cracked, and for an instant Steele thought he might crash right through it. His relief when this didn’t happen was short-lived. The twin impacts of las-beam and Ice Warrior had begun a chain reaction in the ice, and he could hear the fault lines widening and spreading.

And then the rest of his squad saw it too, as great fissures began to appear around Steele, and met to carve out little floating ice islands.

He couldn’t stand. His weight was only supported because it was evenly distributed, and this wouldn’t help him for much longer. His comrades couldn’t reach him without sharing his fate, and they had their own problems anyway.

Unable to save himself, Steele did the only thing he could to save them.

He shouldered the long-las, lifted his head, and willed his bionic eye to work for him. He smiled as his HUD locked onto the distant sniper, and he squeezed the trigger and felt the recoil of his weapon driving him down, down, down...

There were some things in life, Steele thought, that it was best not to know.

He didn’t need to know the exact temperature of the freezing water into which he had been plunged, nor the combined weight of the armoured greatcoat and the packed rucksack that were dragging him towards the lake bed. He would rather not have been able to hear the ice re-forming above him, sealing him in this flooded tomb.

And yet still his augmetics insisted on seeking out such information, presenting it to him as if he might draw some useful conclusion from it, as if he didn’t already know what the only conclusion could be.

Any other man would have been blissfully insensate by now, his brain numbed by the cold. Any other man would have been at peace. Not Steele.

His head was awl with numbers. They filled it to bursting point, demanded his attention, demanded that he must know everything, every tiny detail of his impending fate. And, above it all,

that damned internal chrono was pounding at his temples, counting down to a new, more imminent, deadline now...

...ticking off the few remaining seconds of Colonel Steele's life...

CHAPTER EIGHT

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 35.14.56

Gavotski's first impulse, as Steele fell through the ice, was to dive in after him. Holding himself back was the hardest thing he had ever had to do, but he could not have survived immersion in the freezing lake. The only thing he could do for the colonel now was to lead his squad for him, and bring honour to Steele's name by ensuring the completion of his final mission.

After all the noise and the frenzy of the past few seconds, the silence that fell now felt unnatural, dreadful. It seemed that Steele's dying shot had struck true, because the sniper fire from the hill had ceased — but no one was thinking about that now. The Ice Warriors were standing, gaping at the jagged ice hole that had swallowed their leader. A hole that was rapidly frosting over again, resealing, until there was no trace that it, or Steele, had ever been there.

They were well-used to death, these soldiers. They had lived in its shadow all their lives, knew it could strike at any moment and from any quarter. But Colonel Steele had seemed like the strongest of them, somehow the least mortal, and his passing was a shock to them all.

"Everyone, get back!" growled Barreski — and his flamer flared, and melted a fresh hole in the ice, making the water beneath it steam. If Steele was somehow still conscious down there, trying to surface, then he had another chance, a few more seconds, in which he could do so — and as unlikely as it seemed, the Ice Warriors clung to that hope, staring, waiting, hoping...

...until, to Gavotski's astonishment, a gloved hand broke the surface, fumbling, reaching, flailing, finding purchase — and Colonel Stanislev Steele hauled himself up, losing strength halfway, collapsing face down with his legs still dangling in the water. Everyone started forward at once, but Gavotski threw up a warning hand, and beckoned only Palinev to follow him onto the weakened ice where the colonel lay. They gripped Steele under his shoulders, dragged him clear of the danger area, and brought him back to the others. His skin had a pale blue tint.

It was Anakora who noticed that he wasn't breathing.

Gavotski knelt by Steele's side, blew air into his lungs and gave him chest compressions until he jerked back to life. Steele sat bolt upright, so suddenly that it made everyone jump, and he spat water from his mouth. His head turned as he surveyed the concerned faces of the comrades gathered around him. This close up, Gavotski could see the lenses tilting and turning in Steele's bionic right eye. The left eye, Steele's real eye, was open but dead, staring blankly.

"How is he alive?" breathed Blonsky.

"He shouldn't be," said Gavotski. "His brain should have shut down in that water. I think some parts of it did, but... but the colonel's brain isn't entirely organic."

Barreski grinned, and nudged Borscz in the ribs "You see? His augmetics, the machines in his head, they have saved his life!"

Steele's eyes, both of them, rolled back into their sockets. Gavotski caught his head before it could fall, and lowered him down gently. "We must dry him off," said Anakora, "and take him someplace warm."

"Look around you," said Mikhaev. "There is no such place." However, he joined the other Ice Warriors in searching his rucksack, finding spare items of clothing. In fact, as the trooper with the closest build to Steele's, he donated his greatcoat, swapping it for the colonel's sodden one.

Other than that, there was little anyone could do.

“The colonel will be OK,” said Gavotski, as much to convince himself as to raise the troopers’ morale. “He was only in the water for a couple of minutes, and I’ve seen people survive after ten times that long. He’ll wake up when he’s ready.”

There were voices coming from the far side of the rise.

Palinev dropped onto his stomach, scrambling the rest of the way up on his elbows. Cautiously, he raised his head — and his heart leapt into his throat.

The night had well and truly fallen, over an hour ago. There was no moon in the sky, and few stars. Even Palinev could barely see his hand in front of his face. Still, Gavotski had insisted they press on. It was what Steele would have wanted.

Gavotski had asked his troopers to carry the colonel two at a time, in shifts. Instead, Borscz had volunteered to do the job alone. He had slung Steele’s unconscious body across his shoulders and hefted him with apparent ease.

And now they had reached their goal at last.

At least, their scout had reached it. The ship lay beneath him: an Aquila lander, its red wings proudly unfurled like those of the two-headed Imperial eagle after which it had been designed and named. But this eagle’s back was broken, its legs buckled. It sagged in the middle, listing to one side, and it took Palinev a minute to locate its detached and half-buried tail fin through his field goggles.

This, then, was the ship in which Confessor Wollkenden had been travelling, the ship that had been shot down, the ship that Colonel Steele and his squad of Ice Warriors had been dispatched to find. And, in confirmation of their paymasters’ worst fears, there had been a battle here. A battle that the Imperium had lost.

The ground was strewn with burnt and broken bodies. Bodies in red and gold. Palinev swept the goggles over them, searching for a hint of Ecclesiarchal robes among them. There was still a chance that Wollkenden had escaped the carnage, and let his willing guards lay down their lives for him. Without a closer inspection, though, it was impossible to tell for sure.

And for now, Palinev was more concerned with the living.

Chaos cultists. The area in front of the lander teemed with them: ordinary men and women, once, most likely born on Cressida itself. They had probably worked in its mines, served the Emperor in exchange for His shelter and His succour. Until their minds had snapped. Until they had succumbed to the infection of their world. Now, they dressed in robes of black and prayed to a different pantheon. Some had even had their faces tattooed with the obscene eight-pointed star of the Chaos gods.

The cultists had built a fire, and gathered around it to warm themselves. Its bright orange flames ruined Palinev’s night vision, but on the plus side they cast a spotlight on his enemies while deepening the darkness around him.

The cultists had been looting the stricken lander — or rather, they had been directing a number of grovelling mutant slaves to do the job for them. Two especially deformed specimens appeared in the hatchway, struggling with a bashed equipment locker. It got out of their control and hit the ground with a crash, and an enraged cultist yelled in the mutants’ faces and assaulted one of them with a lasgun butt.

One thing was clear in Palinev’s mind: if Confessor Wollkenden was indeed alive, then he was a long way from here.

Gavotski concurred with that assessment.

“We need to capture a few of those men alive,” he considered, “make one of them talk. Have they seen the confessor? Are they holding him?” He spoke in a low voice, because the enemy camp was only a few hundred metres away.

“How many did you see, Palinev?” Pozhar asked eagerly.

“It was hard to tell,” said the scout, “in the dark and with all the activity. At least ten cultists, maybe four or five mutants, although there could have been more inside the lander. They didn’t seem too well-equipped.”

“From the way you describe it,” said Mikhaev, “we have the terrain on our side this time. We can take cover at the top of that rise, start shooting and have half of them down before they know where we are.”

Palinev nodded. “There’s nowhere for them to run.”

Gavotski had been worried about leading the squad into combat again today. They were clearly exhausted, although none of them would have admitted to it. He was feeling the effects of his exertions himself. But Mikhaev was right, this seemed like it would be an easy victory for them — and maybe they needed that right now.

And then there was the ship, of course. If the Ice Warriors could recapture it, then it could provide them with shelter and some warmth for the night. They would all benefit from that, Steele in particular. Borscz had set the colonel down while they talked. He had settled into what seemed like a comfortable sleep, his breathing deep and regular, and his colour was improving.

“OK,” said Gavotski at length, “let’s do this. Barreski, Mikhaev, take point. Palinev, if you can sneak around to the other side of the camp, or as near as you can manage, you can pin the cultists down if they start to run. Everyone try to avoid hitting the lander; I don’t want it damaged any more than it is already. That means no explosives, Barreski. There’s a small chance that the engines are still—”

He didn’t get any further.

Steele’s eyes snapped open, and he opened his mouth and let out a long, full-throated scream. A scream that the cultists couldn’t have failed to hear.

Pozhar didn’t wait for orders, didn’t even wait for the echoes of the scream to die down. The enemy knew where they were. Any second now they would appear at the top of the rise that separated them, start picking off the Ice Warriors like targets on a range. Unless the Ice Warriors could gain and secure that vantage point first.

Pozhar raced as fast as he could, threw himself onto his stomach at the top of the slope, and started firing before he knew what he was firing at. He was rewarded by the sounds of growls and squeals. The cultists had sent the mutants ahead, and before Pozhar knew what was happening one of them had crested the rise, between his las-beams, and leapt upon him.

It was a huge, shambling creature, covered in grey fur. It hit Pozhar like a brick, and tried to wrest his lasgun from him. He fought it, and they rolled down the slope together. As they reached its foot, Borscz leapt into the melee, and seized the mutant’s head between his hands as if he thought he could crack its skull open — but it was too strong, even for him. With an animal roar, it broke his hold and rounded on him.

The mutant lashed out with a gnarled talon, and Borscz wasn’t fast enough to back out of its way. Three parallel tears opened across his chest, and the burly Ice Warrior went down.

The mutant turned to Pozhar again as he was still scrambling to his feet, still fumbling with his weapon. It leapt at him, and he delivered four rapid-fire bursts to its stomach, but they weren’t enough to stop it. He went down for a second time, with the creature on top of him, bleeding onto him. Its brow was low, pronounced, and its narrow, crazed eyes bored into Pozhar’s skull as he fought to keep its blood-dripping talons at bay with the stock of his lasgun.

It was Borscz who came to his rescue again — Borscz who, incredibly, must have kept himself awake, lifted his massive body from the ground by sheer force of will and the strength of his own two arms. He landed heavily on the mutant from behind, gripped its ribs between his knees, and drove his meaty fists again and again into its head until it was insensate. Pozhar slipped out from

beneath its bulk as the mutant rallied, as it tried to throw Borscz from its back but found that, this time, his grip was unbreakable: he was literally holding on for his life.

Pozhar fired again, aiming three more point-blank beams at the gaping wound in the mutant's stomach. He must have struck something vital, because the mutant fell at last — but it fell backwards, and it landed hard on top of the still-clinging Borscz. It was the final straw for the Ice Warrior: his eyelids fluttered and closed. Pozhar saw that his comrade was still breathing, shallowly, but he was bleeding from his chest. Borscz needed synth-skin, needed someone to close his wounds for him, and he needed it soon. Pozhar could have helped him, but it would have cost him precious seconds, rummaging through his field rucksack for his Guard issue medi-pack.

He surveyed the scene around him. Another four mutants had appeared over the rise, all of them with the same grey fur, and each of them appeared to be as tough as the first one had been. Two of them were on fire, no doubt the work of Barreski and his flamer, but still they fought on. One of them had Gavotski in a bear hug, no doubt hoping he would burn with it. Having seen how resistant the creatures were to las-fire, Anakora and Blonsky were attacking it with bayonets, trying to loosen its grip on their sergeant. Another mutant was attempting to get Palinev in a similar hold, but for now his agility was keeping him out of its clutches.

As Pozhar watched, another creature staggered under a barrage of las-beams from Grayle and Mikhaelev — staggered, but did not fall. The mutants were doing their job well, keeping their foes occupied. The Ice Warriors had given up all hope of securing the rise as the first robed cultist appeared at its top, and levelled a lasgun, able to take his time and choose his target.

It was all the excuse Pozhar needed. He abandoned the fallen, bleeding, dying Borscz and charged back into the fray.

The burning mutant could ignore Blonsky and Anakora no longer.

It let go of Gavotski, who dropped and rolled in the snow to extinguish the flamer chemicals that had stuck to his greatcoat. The mutant lashed out at Anakora, but she parried its talon with her lasgun. For an instant, the creature was wide open to Blonsky, and he took great pleasure in driving his bayonet through one of its narrow eyes. It howled and recoiled, but he stayed with it, driving the spike further into its head like a corkscrew, simultaneously blasting at its simian face with las-fire.

The merest touch of this aberration, the brush of its fur against his elbow, the spatter of its blood on his skin, made him feel unclean. Like the cultists on the other side of the rise, like all of the insane devotees of Chaos, it must have been human once. It must have known, back then, that this was what the future held for it, must have seen what lay at the end of its chosen path.

Blonsky had no sympathy for it. It deserved what its gods had done to it.

The mutant died at last, as did one of its fellows, succumbing to a second flamer burst. That left just two. One was being kept occupied by the nimble Palinev, while the other had just lost a claw to Grayle and Mikhaelev's beams and had dropped to its knees. Blonsky set his sights on Palinev's opponent, but was suddenly tackled by Anakora. For a second, as they fell, he wondered if her mind had snapped as well, if she had chosen this moment to turn traitor — but then, a las-beam rent the air above his head, and he realised that she had just saved his life.

A cultist had attained the top of the rise, a perfect sniping position — and, had he fired again, with both Blonsky and Anakora on the ground, he could have killed one of them. Instead, he saw Pozhar charging him, gun blazing, and he turned his fire upon the young trooper — and Pozhar was hit, a glancing blow to the shoulder. The force of the blast knocked him head over heels, and for the second time in as many minutes he came rolling back down the slope.

Emboldened by his success, the cultist became careless. He lifted himself up to get a better angle on his fallen foe, to finish him off — and two las-beams ripped through him. As the sniper fell, his killers, Blonsky and Anakora, started forward, joined again now by Gavotski. The other cultists had mistimed their advance, must have hung back too long behind their mutant cannon fodder, because

the opposing factions met at the top of the rise. The Ice Warriors were the first to react, and three of their foes were dead before they could return fire.

The cultists, despite their greater numbers, were outmatched. They were untrained, unarmoured and, in some cases, even unarmed. The outcome, of the battle was already beyond doubt when Pozhar waded back into it. He wielded his lasgun in his left hand, his right hanging uselessly by his side, and most of his shots went wild.

A cultist slipped in beneath the Ice Warriors' beams, and was suddenly in Blonsky's face, trying to push a knife through the layers of his greatcoat.

"You're too late, Guardsman," the foul heretic hissed. "Mangellan has the power on this world, and if you wish to live you will renounce your decadent Emperor and turn to—"

The threat was never completed. Blonsky seized his attacker's wrist and twisted it until it broke. The cultist screamed, and the blade dropped from his numbed fingers.

Blonsky raised his bayonet to the wretch's throat, but remembered that Gavotski had wanted a hostage. So, as much as it went against his instincts to do so, he turned his lasgun around and drove its butt into the cultist's skull, knocking him cold.

Barreski skirted the final mutant, trying to find an angle from which he could torch it without setting light to Palinev too. The scout was still keeping clear of the mutant's raking talons, ducking and weaving, twisting and turning — but the mutant was relentless, starting to wear him down.

Barreski ventured a little closer to it. He thought it was too busy with Palinev to notice him. He was wrong. The mutant swung around, and suddenly he was the focus of all its attention. With a powerful swipe, it knocked the flamer from his hands. Barreski recovered his wits only just in time to avoid a second talon, which would have ripped out his throat. He had no way of fighting back, didn't have time to draw his lasgun — and he knew that he was far less agile than Palinev, and couldn't evade many more attacks like that one.

Mikhaelev and Grayle came to his assistance. They had finished with their opponent, and turned their las-fire upon his. The mutant shuddered with the impacts of the beams to its back — but, to Barreski's horror, its red eyes never flickered from him. Somewhere in its disturbed little mind, the mutant must have known it was finished, and it was determined not to be distracted from its prey, determined to take at least one of its foes down with it.

Palinev saw what was happening and flung himself at the mutant, heedless of the danger of incoming las-beams. He bought Barreski a second, but no more than that, before the mutant flung him aside with an almost casual shrug.

And then it pounced on Barreski, and although he was prepared for its weight he was still driven down onto one knee, struggling to push the rancid creature away from him. It raised its talon and he knew that this would be the killing blow.

And then the air itself exploded. The mutant stiffened and crumpled and Barreski was left gaping at its blackened corpse, wondering what had just happened.

His nostrils were filled with the stink of burnt ozone, and he glanced to the sky and wondered if somehow, through some incredible twist of fate or perhaps even through divine intervention, he had been saved by a thunderbolt from on high.

Then he saw Steele, standing unaided, looking down at the dead mutant with an expression of grim satisfaction — and Barreski saw that the colonel's right eye was black, smouldering a little.

"A small enhancement I had made on Pyrites a few years back," explained Steele gruffly, seeing that Barreski, Mikhaelev and Grayle were all staring at him. "A one-shot electrical weapon of last resort. It will take about twenty hours to recharge now, and my right eye will be useless until it does."

He looked down at the mutant again, and smiled. "Still, some things are worth a little inconvenience."

CHAPTER NINE

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 33.16.04

Borscz was dead.

It wasn't easy to tell, at first. He was covered in blood, but much of it was from the mutant that he and Pozhar had slain. The Ice Warriors had to shift its carcass before they could get close to him, close enough to tell that he was no longer breathing.

Anakora wanted to bury him, but Gavotski pointed out that they lacked the tools to dig in the frozen ground. They could do it, but it would take them most of the night.

"And it's not as if a normal-sized hole would do," Grayle muttered.

Anyway, they all agreed that it would make little difference at this point. Below ground or above it, Borscz's body would be liquefied by the imminent virus bombs, reduced to a protoplasmic slime. And after all, the last thing any Guardsman expected when he went to war was a decent burial; his remains, he knew, were far more likely to be trampled into the mud of the battlefield.

So, in the end, they gathered around their fallen comrade and Gavotski said a short prayer for his soul, and that was that — although Anakora still insisted they take Borscz onto the Aquila with them, and seal him into its hold, sparing him at least the attention of passing predators.

"If only he'd been a better shot," said Barreski with a shake of the head. "If he hadn't been so keen to go toe to toe with that thing..."

"Then it would have been Pozhar lying there instead of him," Anakora pointed out crisply. "You saw how resistant the mutants were to our las-fire."

Apart from the loss of Borscz, casualties were mercifully light. Palinev had a mild concussion from where the last mutant had backhanded him, and Gavotski had a couple of second-degree burns, which he had dressed. And Pozhar's firing arm was in a sling, which aggrieved the young trooper no end.

Steele was back on his feet, but he seemed deeply tired — and, although no one would have said it to his face, even a little shell-shocked. Gavotski covered for him by taking charge again. He sent Anakora, Barreski and Grayle onto the lander to ensure that no one was hiding inside. Grayle was also to report back on the state of the engines. Two cultists remained alive, and so Blonsky and Mikhaelev were detailed to bind them with tent ropes from their rucksacks.

Steele examined one of the mutants' corpses.

"It looked like this," he said to Gavotski. When the sergeant looked puzzled, Steele expounded, "The creature I saw in the forest. It had grey fur, like this one does. Some sort of adaptation to the cold, I expect. But if it was a mutant I saw, then where did it go? The cultists didn't know we were coming until I... until they heard us."

"So, who did it report to?" Gavotski concluded the thought. "Who knows we're here? And how many more mutants like this one are still out there?"

Steele didn't need to ask what had happened while he had been unconscious, since he had plunged into the lake. His bionic eye had recorded all the details — every visual detail, at least — and stored them for his later inspection.

The whole episode had left him feeling deeply uneasy. The organic parts — the real parts — of his brain had shut down in the water, but the mechanical parts had kept him going. He was grateful

to be alive, of course — but the thought that his augmetics could function without him, even in a limited capacity, chilled him to the marrow.

The two prisoners had started to come round. Mikhaelev and Blonsky had carried them to the camp-fire, and were standing guard over them. Despite his weariness, Steele had chosen to conduct the interrogation. He deliberately started with the toughest-looking of the pair, the one least likely to break. He was a heavy-set man with a tattooed face and a broken wrist — this latter courtesy of Blonsky — who returned the colonel's glare with mute defiance.

"I know what you're thinking," said Steele. "You think you have nothing to gain by answering my questions because I won't let you live anyway. You're right. But you can die quickly, and as easily as possible, or I can make you suffer."

The cultist spat in his face.

Steele nodded at Blonsky, who took the man's wrist and manipulated it, grinding the shattered bones into each other. The cultist suppressed his screams for almost a full second. By the time the Ice Warrior had finished with him, there were tears in his eyes. Still, he hadn't said a word.

Nevertheless, the technique was having an effect — not on this cultist, maybe, but on his fellow. The other man was smaller, younger than the first, and abjectly horrified by what he had just seen.

"Very well," said Steele calmly, "it looks like this one has made his choice. You may as well dispose of him, Blonsky. We'll talk to his friend instead."

Blonsky knew what was required of him. He planted his boot in the larger cultist's back, and propelled him face first onto the fire. He started to scream again, and struggled to stand — but whenever he came close to so doing, Blonsky's foot was ready to kick him back into the flames.

It took the cultist a long time to die, and by the time he did the air was rank with the smell of his burning flesh. His smaller comrade was so afraid that he was shaking, and he had vomited into his lap. He looked like he might be about to do this again, as Steele turned to him with the smile of a wolf.

"I... I didn't want to join them," the cultist bleated, "I swear. It's just that, once it started, it spread within days, and soon..."

"Mangellan?" prompted Blonsky.

The cultist nodded, seeming glad that the Ice Warrior knew the name, that he hadn't had to reveal it himself. "No one knew where he'd come from, he was just... suddenly, his followers were everywhere, in the streets, and no one seemed able to stop them, and my family, my friends, they were saying that Mangellan was right, that we owed the Emperor nothing, that He couldn't protect us. Then they were banging on our doors, dragging us outside, putting guns to our heads and making us swear allegiance to them, and we had no choice."

"There is always a choice," growled Blonsky.

"When this ship landed here," said Steele, indicating the Aquila behind him, "it was carrying an important member of the Adeptus Ministorum. He could have helped your people, could have guided them back to the path of righteousness."

The cultist nodded eagerly. "I did hear something, that they'd found someone... a religious man. Is that why you're here? Are you looking for him?"

"Do you know where he is?" asked Steele.

"He... he's dead," said the cultist.

Steele saw the look that passed between Blonsky and Mikhaelev, but he kept his own gaze fixed on the prisoner. Normally, his bionic eye would have enabled him to count the beads of sweat on the cultist's face and hands, his acoustic enhancers would have tuned in to the skip of the man's heartbeat and Steele would have been able to tell if he was lying or not. With his eye out of action and only the heartbeat to go on, it was harder to make that judgement. Despite the inconvenience, he felt oddly liberated.

"You saw him die?" Steele asked.

"I just thought," said the cultist, "I mean, he must be by now. The confessor was brought into the hive, Iota Hive, three days ago. I saw him being marched up the steps of the Ice Palace. Mangellan has him."

"Where is it," asked Steele, "this Ice Palace? Can you take us there?"

The prisoner blanched at the prospect.

"Please," he stammered, "I've told you all I know. Don't make me... I can't go up against him, he's too... he's too strong. You can't beat him. It took Mangellan less than a month to drive the Imperial Guard out of Iota Hive, hundreds of thousands of them. Hundreds of thousands of men dead, and you... There are only a handful of you."

Steele had made up his mind about the cultist now, but still he glanced up at Blonsky and Mikhaelev for a second and third opinion.

"Do you believe him?" he asked, and the troopers confirmed that they did. "Good," said Steele. "I do, too."

He drew his laspistol, and shot the young cultist through the head.

The Aquila had been gutted. Even its seats, once luxuriously appointed for the carriage of dignitaries, had been torn out, and the mutants had left their slobber everywhere. Still, once the passenger compartment had been cleaned up a little and blankets laid out, it made an adequate shelter for nine dog-tired soldiers.

Much more than that, the ship could not offer. Grayle had been unable to start the engines, to no one's surprise, and the comms were fried. Barreski, however, had found a portable vox-caster, not too badly damaged. The only thing it lacked was power — and a few hours of sunlight, even through Cressida's grey clouds, would provide that. He thought he could have it working by mid-morning. Steele could then contact a naval vessel, report the loss of the Termite and arrange an airlift for after they had found Wollkenden.

For the first time in half a day, Grayle could see a way off this world, and the prospect cheered him — almost enough for him to overlook the small fact that an army of Chaos worshippers stood between the Ice Warriors and their goal.

He and Barreski had taken the first shift of the night watch, being in better condition than most. Grayle sat in the Aquila's hatchway, alert for any sign of an approaching foe, hearing only the deep breathing of the sleeping men behind him. Barreski was over by the embers of the campfire, laying out a number of broken machine parts in the scant light. It was unlikely he'd be able to salvage anything more of use, but he wanted to be sure.

It was Grayle, then, who saw it: a movement, behind the rise on which the Ice Warriors and the cultists had fought. He had only glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye, couldn't be sure that there had been anything at all. But Barreski had picked up on his body language, and ceased his tinkering.

They watched the dark shape of the rise for a while, but saw nothing, heard nothing. At last, Grayle signalled to his fellow tanker that he was going to take a closer look.

While Barreski covered him with his lasgun, Grayle crept forward, keeping low. As he climbed the rise, he lowered himself onto his stomach and crawled the final few metres. He lay there for a few minutes, overlooking the field through which his squad had so recently marched, feeling the wet snow seeping into his greatcoat, letting his eyes adjust to every shadow in the darkness until he was sure it was no threat.

There it was again!

It had just disappeared behind another natural contour: a grey-furred figure with an odd shambling gait. Quickly, Grayle weighed up his options. If this was indeed a mutant, and it was alone, then he and Barreski could handle it. They had no need to wake the others — and anyway, by the time they had done so, it might have escaped, might have gone to fetch more like itself. But then, what if it was not alone? What if it had been sent to lead him into an ambush?

He didn't think that was likely. It was trying too hard not to be seen.

With a quick warning gesture to Barreski, to stay where he was, Grayle plunged down the rise and went after the creature.

"Colonel Steele. Colonel Steele, sir."

Steele was sitting up before he had opened his eyes, some inbuilt danger sense putting him on the alert. Immediately, he checked his internal chrono, which told him that he had been asleep for just under three hours. He was still blind in his right eye. Palinev was beside him, had just shaken him awake, and around them five more Ice Warriors were beginning to stir.

Something was burning, but Steele couldn't pinpoint the source of the smell.

"I heard a shot," reported Palinev, and Steele could tell from his comrades' body language that Gavotski, Blonsky and Anakora had been woken by it too. It irked him that he had not, that his acoustic enhancers had apparently failed him again.

"It sounded close," said Anakora, "maybe just outside."

"And I don't see any sign of Barreski or Grayle," added Palinev.

Gavotski and Pozhar had drawn their lasguns and were making for the open, empty hatchway. They peered around its frame, and Pozhar reported that there was nothing out there. A second later, he added, "No, no, wait, I can see someone, running towards us. It looks like... It's Barreski, and here comes Grayle. It looks like they're okay."

"Maybe they were just taking pot-shots at rats," said Mikhaelev.

"I don't think so," said Blonsky. "I think Trooper Anakora was wrong. I don't think that gunshot came from outside the ship at all."

Everyone turned to look at him, and Steele saw that he was holding the vox-caster, now a smouldering wreck, its components fused together, the source of the burning smell.

"You think...?" began Palinev, in disbelief.

"I think," said Blonsky, "that a single las-beam was fired at this machine — and it must have been fired from inside this compartment."

Barreski appeared in the hatchway to find seven pairs of eyes staring at him. "What the hell happened here?" he asked. "Did someone fire a lasgun?"

"We were about to ask you the same question," said Steele.

"You're the one who's supposed to be on watch," said Pozhar. "You and Grayle."

"You didn't see anyone?" asked Anakora.

Grayle had appeared at Barreski's shoulder. "There was something," he reported. "Another mutant, I think. I tried to follow it, but I lost it. I don't know how it got away, it must have moved like lightning."

"So, you let this mutant lure you away from the ship?" asked Steele.

Barreski shook his head firmly. "Grayle went after the mutant. I went as far as the top of the rise, to keep an eye on him, but I never left sight of the lander. There's no way anything could have got near this hatchway without my seeing it."

"Are you certain about that?" asked Steele. He indicated the remains of the vox-caster, still in Blonsky's hands, and Barreski's face fell as he saw the damage for the first time. "Because if this was not the work of an intruder..."

"Then one of us is a traitor," said Blonsky.

"Now steady on," said Gavotski. "Let's not jump to conclusions, shall we?"

But Blonsky insisted, "The evidence speaks for itself. One of us must have woken, found himself unobserved and taken the opportunity to destroy the vox-caster, our best hope of being able to complete this mission."

“Why are you looking at me?” cried Pozhar. “I saw you, you were looking at me as you said that. You’ve done nothing but criticise me, and question my loyalty, since we climbed into the Termite.”

“I think you are more concerned with your personal glory,” said Blonsky, “than with serving the Emperor. I consider that a dangerous attitude.”

“Even if that were true,” said Gavotski, “it doesn’t make Pozhar the guilty party.”

“You’re just accusing me,” said Pozhar hotly, “because you have something to hide. Well, how about it, Blonsky? I didn’t see you when that mutant attacked me. What were you doing when Borscz died?”

“He was fighting alongside me,” said Anakora. “He played his part.”

“Yeah?” said Pozhar. “So, maybe we should look at you then. Maybe we should ask how you managed to survive Astaroth Prime when no one else in your company did. Oh yeah, I know all about that, Anakora. I remember your name.”

“Sergeant Gavotski is right,” Steele broke in. “None of us is above suspicion.”

“Well, Grayle and I can vouch for each other,” said Barreski.

“Can you?” asked Palinev. “I... I don’t meant to imply anything, it’s just... well, you know that Grayle couldn’t have snuck in here, but can he say the same for you? He must have taken his eyes off you to search for that mutant.”

“I’ve known Barreski since basic training,” said Grayle, “and apart from anything else, the last thing he’d do is harm one of his precious machines. It was him who found the vox-caster in the first place, remember?”

“Then there is our comrade Mikhaev,” said Blonsky, “who has had nothing to say for himself so far. In fact, it is rare that he voices his thoughts — but when he does speak, he says more than he thinks he does.”

Mikhaev turned purple, and spluttered, “I have always followed orders.”

“But you have not always agreed with them, have you? Tell me, Mikhaev, how greatly does it bother you that the Emperor considers your life less valuable than that of a man like Confessor Wollkenden?”

“There’s one possibility none of you has considered,” said Steele. “The traitor could be me.” His quiet words brought down a heavy silence, as he had known they would.

“You all know about the augmetics in my brain,” he continued. “My heart may not have been corrupted by Chaos, but what if my head has been?”

Their initial shock dispelled, the Ice Warriors rushed to assure their commander that they couldn’t believe it, that the Emperor would allow no such thing to happen. He raised his hand to stem their protests.

“I’m just making a point,” he said. “We know nothing for sure — and until we do, we can gain nothing by hurling accusations.”

“Colonel Steele is right,” said Gavotski. “I am pleased with the way this squad has bonded so far. We must not jeopardise that. We will fight again tomorrow, as comrades, and we need to be able to trust each other.”

“Nevertheless,” said Blonsky, “I would request that the colonel search each of us for signs of mutation — and that, for the rest of the night, we have one man standing sentry outside this ship, and two inside.”

Pozhar pretended to be asleep.

Anakora and Mikhaev were sitting nearby, Steele having agreed to Blonsky’s suggestion that the guard be increased. Pozhar didn’t want them to see that he was awake, couldn’t let them suspect that his conscience was troubling him. The back of his right hand itched, but he didn’t dare scratch it.

He didn't know why he had done it.

He had woken from a vivid and troubling dream, had perhaps been half-dreaming still. It had taken him a minute to work out where he was, to identify the shapes around him as those of his comrades, to see the vox-caster on the floor beside the hatchway, to remember...

In the dream, Steele had contacted the Imperial Navy on that caster. They had told him that the search for the confessor had become too dangerous, that they were sending another lander for his squad, that Cressida was to be left to its new masters. The details were hazy, but Pozhar thought he remembered an army of cultists and mutants, laughing. Laughing at the Ice Warriors as they turned their backs on their mission, as they turned and ran.

He had acted on instinct. He had seen that Grayle had abandoned his post. No one was watching him. It had all been exactly as Blonsky had said: one las-beam, one squeeze of his trigger. He hadn't even thought about the sound it would make. As the other Ice Warriors had woken, Pozhar had dropped back onto his blanket and pretended to be waking too, although his heart had been hammering in his chest and he had felt a cold flush down his back.

His right hand was itching like crazy now. He shifted his position, carefully, until he could reach it with his left. Steele and Gavotski had searched everyone, again as Blonsky had suggested. Pozhar had been certain he would pass their inspection, but still he had felt relieved to be given the all-clear. The verdict had reaffirmed his belief in himself, reassured him that although he couldn't explain what he had done, he had done it for the right reasons. For the Emperor.

His questing fingers found the back of his right hand, and Pozhar froze in horror as he felt something unfamiliar, something strange, something that had not been there an hour ago: a tuft of fur.

CHAPTER TEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 23.53.42

The first avalanche was a small one.

The Ice Warriors had been expecting it. Still, all they could do was brace themselves as the snow shifted beneath their feet — and hope, of course, that this small slide would not trigger a bigger one.

They had faced a choice this morning: take the well-trodden roads to Mangellan's stronghold, the erstwhile Iota Hive, facing the likelihood of more encounters with the enemy en route, or attempt to approach through treacherous, snow-laden hills. Steele, being unlike many other commanders, had opened the question to debate. It had been the only time so far today that his troopers had spoken more than two words to each other.

The accusations of the previous night hung like a dark cloud over them. Even Palinev, although still scouting ahead, reported back more frequently than he had done yesterday, as if thinking that too long an absence might arouse the suspicions of his comrades. He might have been right. Everyone was watching each other, and Steele could hardly blame them. He was watching too.

They waited for the snow to settle, and then they moved on in silence.

As they rounded the edge of a hill, the contours of the land brought the hive back into view, just a few kilometres ahead of them. The sight made Steele's stomach turn. Every horizontal surface of the city was thick with snow, every vertical plane iced over. It looked unreal, like a life-sized model sculpted from the ice. There was no doubt at all that the Chaos infection of Cressida had Iota Hive in the firmest of grips, had corrupted it beyond all hope of reclamation.

This morning, Steele's squad had agreed that they stood a better chance against the perils of their environment than they did against more of Mangellan's followers. Even Pozhar had not argued too strongly for a full-frontal approach to the hive. In fact, he seemed unusually subdued, although whether this was due to the events of last night or to his damaged gun arm, Steele could not say.

He was starting to wonder if they had made the wrong choice.

His men had all been brought up on Valhalla; these surroundings looked almost familiar to them. They thought they knew all the perils that the snow and the ice could bring, were alert for the warning signs — and if the worst should happen, as it had on the frozen lake, then they thought they knew how to minimise the consequences. A squad from any other world would have been dead by now; for the Ice Warriors of Valhalla, this was just a morning stroll.

But as Gavotski had pointed out inside the glacier, the water on this world had been infected too. And the snow and the ice didn't always behave as it should.

The second avalanche was bigger. Much bigger.

Steele couldn't blame anyone in his squad for setting it off. It started high above them, and came crashing down at them like a tidal wave. It might have been a natural consequence of recent snowfall upon hard-packed ice — but the timing of it, at least, was suspicious.

The Ice Warriors, minus Palinev, were spread out across a hillside, keeping a short distance between each of them in case of just such an occurrence — but the avalanche was in the perfect spot, and exactly wide enough, to threaten all eight of them.

Barreski and Grayle were at the greatest risk. They were closest to the centre of the flow, the point at which the snow would be moving its fastest. They knew they couldn't outrun it — an

avalanche of this size could reach a speed of two hundred kilometres per hour — but they used the few seconds they had before it hit to make a sprint for its edge, as did their comrades.

Gavotski and Steele, who had been respectively leading the procession and following at its rear, had the least far to go. Steele ran for all he was worth, but still it wasn't enough. It could never have been enough. He turned his back to the avalanche as it reached him, and prepared for the impact.

It felt as if a rug had been pulled out from under him. He maintained his balance for as long as he could, but he was soon swept away. He pedalled with his arms and legs, as if swimming, knowing that to resist the tide would be futile, attempting to ride it instead. The landscape flashed by to each side of him, and Steele could only hope that he wouldn't be dashed against something solid.

He was aware of Blonsky being carried alongside him — and of Anakora, who had managed to grab a sturdy tree before the snow hit and was clinging to it for dear life, being left behind. He did the best he could to keep track of them both, as he knew they would be doing for the comrades to each side of them.

Steele went under several times, and his mind flashed back to the frozen lake. He was determined not to be buried, not to lose consciousness again — and so, each time he was engulfed, he kicked and he thrashed, and he put all the strength he had into his swimming stroke, and he resurfaced.

After what seemed like an age, it was over. Steele was half-buried, breathless, but still able to dig himself free and climb to his feet. He had only been carried a short distance, but his surroundings looked very different to him now. The shifting snow had formed new contours, and covered old landmarks. Closing his one good eye, the colonel reoriented himself by his internal compass.

He found Anakora first, three hundred metres up the slope behind him, still holding onto her tree, although she had been buried up to the chest. She was stronger than she looked, he thought. She was also safe.

He couldn't say the same for Blonsky. There was no sign of him. He had to have gone under. Steele hurried to the spot at which he had last seen him, and soon found a single gloved hand protruding from the snow, its fingers wagging in a feeble attempt to summon help. Fortunately, the snow hadn't set too hard yet, and Steele was able to scoop handfuls of it away, to reveal Blonsky's head. A minute later, he had freed an arm too, and he knew his trooper could do the rest for himself.

"G-Grayle," gasped Blonsky, raising a hand to point — and, joined by Anakora, who had managed to free herself, Steele repeated the whole process again, until a fourth Ice Warrior was dragged spluttering to the surface. Fortunately, Grayle had been able to make an air hole for himself as the snow had settled around him, otherwise he would have suffocated.

When the avalanche had started, Pozhar had been a few metres behind Sergeant Gavotski. However, he was young and he was fast, and he had easily overtaken the older man. Relatively safe on the edge of the flow, he had surfed the snow with consummate skill and exulted in the head rush it gave him. In so doing — he had realised too late — he had quite lost track of his sergeant.

He had clambered over the freshly turned snow, yelling for Gavotski, his stomach churning with the thought that he had failed this man of all men, his mentor, his sponsor. His hand had started to itch again, beneath his glove, and Pozhar would have sworn that at that moment he could feel the grey fur spreading across it.

He had located Gavotski at last, worried that he might have left him buried too long. He had tried to dig down to him, but his bad arm had slowed him too much. Fortunately, Palinev had seen the avalanche from ahead, and returned to assist him.

Gavotski had not questioned the delay in his rescue, doubtless assuming that Pozhar had had his own problems. He had led the way to the next Ice Warrior instead, and now he and Palinev were digging for Mikhaelev. Pozhar hung back for fear of getting in their way. He felt useless. Useless and ashamed. And for the first time, he wondered if he might deserve what was happening to him

after all, if the fur on his hand was a warning that he could do better, that he wasn't serving the Emperor to the fullest of his ability. That he could have saved Borscz.

He vowed that, from this moment on, he would try even harder, become even more fierce in the execution of his duty. He would cleanse Iota Hive of the Chaos filth single-handedly if he had to, or die in the attempt.

Then Pozhar heard a sound behind him — the soft crunch of a footstep in the snow — and he whirled around, and caught a glimpse of a grey-furred mutant as it ducked out of sight. He grinned and offered up a grateful prayer to the Emperor for giving him this chance to prove himself so soon.

His comrades were still occupied, hadn't seen anything — and something stopped Pozhar from calling to them. This was his test, not theirs. He crept away from them, and only built up speed once he knew they could no longer see him, as he rounded the side of the hill down which the avalanche had come.

This was probably the same mutant that had stalked the Ice Warriors outside the Aquila, and before that in the ice forest. Barreski and Grayle had already failed to kill it, as had Steele himself. Pozhar would not fail.

His enemy had made a mistake. Post-avalanche, the snow was deep and smooth and undisturbed, like a virgin fall. The mutant was trying to hide from him, but it had left a clear trail. It would not escape this time.

All but one of the Ice Warriors had been found.

They converged on the spot where Mikhaev and Grayle had last seen Barreski. He could have ended up anywhere within a hundred metre radius, but a quick search turned up no sign of him. That was bad, thought Steele. It meant that the trooper had been completely buried, and would be running out of air.

"Start digging," he instructed. "Centre on this spot here. Take a five-metre square each to begin with." His augmetics had already analysed the speed of the avalanche's flow as he had experienced it, extrapolated its likely speed this much closer to its centre, and correlated Barreski's reported trajectory and last known distance from his starting point — to conclude that they couldn't narrow the search area much more than his comrades' instincts already had.

Then Steele picked up a sound from beneath his feet, a sound that he identified a moment later as the muffled cough of a misfiring flamer.

He grabbed Anakora by her greatcoat collar and yanked her backwards as a boiling geyser erupted from the ground where she had been standing. The Ice Warriors were showered with cooling water. When the deluge had ended, they crowded forward to find a large, round hole in the snow — and, at its bottom, the top half of a red-faced, spluttering Barreski.

"S-sorry, sir," he addressed Steele breathlessly. "Couldn't breathe down there, couldn't wait any longer. I knew it was risky, but..."

He was cradling his flamer across his chest.

That was when they all heard las-fire, coming from behind the hill — and Steele realised, in that selfsame moment, that one of his troopers was missing.

Pozhar ran at the mutant, firing. It had been fleeing from him — but as fast as it was, he was faster. As his first las-beam hit, the mutant gave a roar of pain and spun around to face him, throwing up its arms. It looked as if it was trying to surrender — although Pozhar doubted this, and it would have made no difference to him anyway.

"Not... what you... think..."

It took Pozhar by surprise, to be addressed by something he had thought of as an animal, dumb in both senses of the word. The mutant's voice was hoarse and rough, like gravel across a rock surface, and the words came out slowly as if speaking was an effort for it.

"I can see what you are," spat Pozhar, and he fired again.

His next two beams missed their target. He still wasn't used to shooting left-handed, and that gave the mutant its chance. Having seen that it couldn't fool him, it reverted to type — at least, that was how Pozhar chose to see it.

It came in low, its talons outstretched, and Pozhar slid to a halt and braced himself to meet it. As it thundered towards him, growing larger in his sights, he was able to zero in on it, and two beams sizzled through the mutant's chest fur and created livid red sores. Then it cannoned into him, clawing at his throat — but Pozhar wasn't about to be knocked down by another of these things, and although he was forced onto his back foot, he remained upright and jabbed at the creature's stomach with his bayonet.

"Listen," it rasped, switching its grip to Pozhar's lasgun, twisting it so that it pointed away from them both, "Trying to... help. I know where Confessor... Confessor Wollkenden! Can take you."

The mutant's breath was hot and fetid in his face, and he recoiled from it, lost hold of his gun, panicked as he began to fear that he wasn't strong enough to pass this test after all.

"You expect me to trust you?" he yelled. "You're a filthy stinking mutant, and I won't listen to you, I won't be corrupted, I won't!"

Somehow, he found the strength to hurl his foe away from him, and he leapt for his gun, lying in the snow. The mutant leapt for it too, but Pozhar got there first. He grabbed the gun, rolled onto his back, and he fired, striking the mutant again in the chest, and then in the stomach, widening its bayonet wound.

It was losing too much blood, It couldn't survive. But it was still fighting. It came at Pozhar with a roar of rage, its eyes a blazing red, and he knew that he couldn't fend it off again. He knew it would kill him, but that was all right because he had killed it first and would die a pure man. The mutant was on top of him, pinning his good arm, and it brought up its talons to strike, to tear out his throat.

Then it hesitated, and the fire in its eyes died out, and when it next spoke its words were more lucid than they had been.

"A few months ago," said the mutant sadly, "I would have tried to kill me too."

"Don't you dare say that!" hissed Pozhar. "Don't you dare try to say that I'm anything like you. And don't stay your hand, I don't want your... your pity. Kill me!"

But instead, the mutant died, and Pozhar let out a howl of frustration. He punched and kicked at it until it rolled off him, and then stood and drove his lasgun butt into the creature's corpse again and again, shattering its bones.

He only stopped when he was exhausted. He looked down at the mutant's staring red eyes seeming to accuse him even now, and he felt the itch on his right hand spreading, crawling up his arm. His right glove had come adrift from his greatcoat sleeve, and he was sickened by the sight of grey fur bristling in the gap. He pulled up the glove quickly, and buried the hand in its sling to conceal it more fully. He could almost have cried. Hadn't he done what the Emperor had asked of him? It wasn't his fault that the mutant had stopped fighting, hadn't challenged him fully. Pozhar had expected redemption, but instead he felt empty.

And that was how Steele and the others found him, a short time later: standing over the fallen mutant, staring down at it, unable to tear his gaze away from it, unable to answer the one burning question, the unthinkable question, in his thoughts.

Is that my future?

Iota Hive was a little smaller than Alpha, and yet still it dwarfed the Ice Warriors as they emerged from the hills into its shadow. Its size fooled Mikhaelev, making him think that the hive was closer than it was. And the closer they got to it, the larger — and the further away — it seemed to grow. Even so, he could already smell the rank purple fungus that encrusted its iced-over surfaces.

It looked as if the hive had been abandoned a long time ago to the uncaring elements. If only, Mikhaelev thought, that could have been the case.

There was a breach in the hive's blackstone outer wall, but Steele steered his squad well clear of this after Palinev sighted through his field goggles and reported that he saw figures moving amid the wreckage.

The hive stopped growing at last, and the great wall filled Mikhaelev's field of vision. The Ice Warriors tucked themselves in against it, careful not to touch the reeking ice, and Steele led the way along the sheer black face. It soon became evident to Mikhaelev that they were making for the breach after all.

Not long after that, the colonel motioned to his squad to be silent and still. They were nearing their goal, he said, although Mikhaelev had no way of seeing this for himself. Presumably, Steele's augmetics had helped him calculate the distance to the breach.

"We don't know how many guards there might be in there," said the colonel, "but as always it only takes one to raise the alarm."

"Fortunately," said Gavotski, "we still have surprise on our side. If anyone had seen us coming, I'm sure we would know about it by now."

"We're a long way behind enemy lines," said Blonsky. "Those guards have every reason to be complacent, to have let their attention wander. We all know that the followers of Chaos lack self-discipline." A couple of the others murmured their agreement, and Mikhaelev joined in belatedly. After what Blonsky had said about him last night, after the number of suspicious glares he had drawn today, he thought it wise to display his enthusiasm for their cause.

"What we need," said Gavotski, "is for a couple of troopers to scout ahead, to take out the sentries without being seen if they can. Palinev should be one."

"I can do that!" Pozhar chirped up. Seeing Gavotski's doubtful look, he said, "It makes sense, sergeant. After Palinev, I'm the lightest on his feet — and I know what you're thinking, you're thinking this sling will slow me down, but I'm getting used to it. I know I'm having trouble shooting with my left hand, but I can handle a knife with it, just let me show you."

The look on his face was imploring, almost desperate — and Gavotski gave Pozhar a long, appraising stare, and then glanced at Steele, before he made his decision and announced it with a curt nod of his head.

Mikhaelev thought that he had made a mistake. Pozhar was too impatient for a job like this one. He had volunteered for no other reason than that he wanted some action, and nothing would get in the way of that for him. But then this wasn't the first time Gavotski had shown a soft spot for the young trooper — and the last thing Mikhaelev could afford to do right now was question that.

In the event, his pessimism was proved ill-founded. Only a few minutes after Palinev and Pozhar had slipped away, the latter returned beaming from ear to ear, to report that there had been four cultists on sentry duty and that they had all been despatched. Steele motioned the squad forwards again, and soon the black wall beside them fell away, and they were climbing over rubble.

There were, indeed, four robed corpses at the entrance. It looked as if the cultists had been playing cards when Palinev and Pozhar had got the drop on them and slashed two of their throats. A third cultist had struggled, and had had his neck broken. The fourth had evidently tried to run, and had been brought down by a knife to the back.

"We should try to hide the bodies," said Anakora. "Then, if anyone comes by, they might assume that these guards have just deserted their post."

They were inside the hive at last — Mangellan's hive, as it was now.

From now on, thought Mikhaelev gloomily, things could only get a great deal more dangerous.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 20.32.13

From the outside, Iota Hive had seemed relatively intact.

Inside, it was a different story. Hardly a structure had been left untouched by the war that had raged within. Bridges had been blown out, gantries collapsed, water tanks exploded. A burnt-out Chimera lay on its roof, the corpses of a driver and two gunners rotting inside. There were many more bodies, and parts thereof, strewn about the streets or half-buried in the wreckage of demolished walls. Barricades had been built up from whatever materials were available, to be broken down again.

No natural light could penetrate this deeply into the hive — and the electric lights were intermittent, unreliable, allowing black pools to congregate between them. Grayle drove through it all, along narrow streets that had once teemed with people. Those streets were empty now, most of the people dead — and of those who had survived, most would have joined their attackers and left with them, marching on to wage their next bloody battle.

Even so, the sounds of other vehicles and of pounding machinery still thrummed through the hive, and occasionally a voice could be heard raised in maniacal laughter or a tortured scream.

All in all, it was a sobering scene — especially for these nine soldiers who had, only yesterday, been fighting to defend a hive much like this one. The difference was, thought Grayle, that Alpha Hive had been attacked from without, its walls beaten down. The reason that Iota's walls were still, for the most part, standing was that it had suffered a far worse fate. Iota had been attacked from within.

When he had started the truck's engine, it had roared like an asthmatic lion. The unnatural sound had reverberated from the roof and the walls until it had seemed loud enough to bring them all crashing down. Gavotski had handed him a tattered robe, torn from a dead cultist, and offered the same to Barreski who was seated beside Grayle now in the cab. Neither of them had been happy about touching the foul cloth, wrapping it about their shoulders, but it had had to be done.

"The cultist I questioned talked about an Ice Palace," Steele had said, "the stronghold of the Chaos leader in these parts. He didn't exactly provide a map, but there's no doubt that it will be the most defensible and defended building in the city. That means it will be as near as damn it to the centre, and most likely on one of the higher levels. We'll have to make our way inwards and upwards, get as close as we can to our goal before the enemy knows we're here."

So far, Grayle had seen precious little of the enemy — just a few shapes flitting across high walkways, and at one point a cloaked figure slumped in the gutter, singing to herself. That changed as he guided his truck around a tight corner and was confronted by at least twenty of them.

It looked like they had been celebrating here, among the ruins. There were bottles everywhere. The revelry had died down now, though, and most of the cultists were lying around listlessly. That was, until they clapped eyes on the new arrivals. A half-hearted cheer went up at the sight of what the drunken cultists took to be friends, partners in their recent victory — and they rushed to surround the truck, banging on its sides and rocking it on its suspension.

Grayle fought down his natural disgust, forced a tight smile onto his lips and gave a thumbs-up sign through the window. Beside him, Barreski tried to do likewise, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. The cultists were probably too far gone to notice anyway, thought Grayle. The real

problems would arise if they were to open the truck's back door and find a squad of Valhallan Ice Warriors seated inside.

He had to get away from here — but the cultists were in front of him too, slowing him to a crawl lest he crush three or four of them beneath his wheels. The temptation to do just that was almost irresistible. However, he kept his cool, and was soon through the crowd, able to pull away from them.

A moment later, Barreski sat bolt upright and cried, "Stop! Stop here!" And Grayle stepped hard on the brakes, although he couldn't see the reason for the urgency.

Barreski hopped out of the cab, and scurried over to the corpse of an Imperial Guard officer. Grayle almost laughed with relief. There was no danger, his fellow tanker had just noticed a salvageable piece of kit and hadn't been able to resist it. He peeled a metal gauntlet from the dead Guardsman's hand, and his face was alight with enthusiasm as he climbed back into his seat with it.

"Nice glove," said Grayle. "What's it supposed to be?"

"A power fist, of course," said Barreski, sounding surprised that his comrade didn't know. "You put this on your arm, and it generates an energy field, lets you punch with the strength of ten men. It doesn't seem too badly damaged, either. The casing is a little scorched, that's all. Never used one before, but I've seen them in action. I'm pretty sure I can work out how to activate it."

"Activate it?" said Grayle. "You can barely even lift it!"

"Once this thing is working," said Barreski, "it'll lift itself."

At that moment, knuckles rapped on the partition behind them, a reminder from their colonel that they had a deadline. Grayle started up the truck again, and guided it into an area of relatively untouched streets, where the going was a little easier and cover more plentiful. The habitats of the lower-level hive-dwellers rose up around them, rows of tiny windows stretching to the roof.

They made good progress for a couple of hours — but eventually, inevitably, they ran into more cultists. The further they went, the more they saw, no matter how many detours Grayle took to avoid them. Their comings and goings appeared to be centred around a large, black building. It was obviously a manufactory, and its great steaming chimneys signified that it was in use.

He performed a U-turn, heading back into the dark residential sector. He pulled up in the shadows just out of range of a sputtering light, and when Barreski asked him why, he explained, "There are just a few too many heretics out there for my liking. Someone's bound to notice us soon, and start asking questions."

He had been intending to consult Colonel Steele, to ask his permission to abandon the truck. He was surprised to find his comrades already disembarking onto the street.

"I think you're right, Grayle," Steele said — and Grayle realised that, thanks to his augmented senses, he had been well aware of everything that was happening outside the vehicle, had probably heard its driver's every word. "It's far too much of a risk to go through that crowd. It's time we headed upwards."

It was Palinev who found the lifter.

On Gavotski's orders, the Ice Warriors had spread out in search of a way up to the hive's higher levels. Creeping down an unlit street, Palinev had found himself uncomfortably close to the manufactory that Grayle had described. He had seen cultists thronging in the lit area before it, but so long as he kept close to the wall they couldn't see him — and there had been a ladder in front of him.

He had climbed it carefully, disappointed to find that it led only to a high bridge. He had decided to scout along it anyway — but before he could do so, his attention had been drawn to the scene laid out beneath him.

The manufactory had no roof. This appeared to be by design rather than the result of battle damage, as all six of its walls were whole. Palinev was looking down into an enormous, round vat

filled with what he could only describe as liquid fire. Suspended above this were a number of thick chains, attached to pulley systems, many of them trailing into the vat itself-and surrounding the vat were hundreds of cultists, cheering and chanting while some of their number operated the levers of squat grey machines in precise, arcane sequences.

Palinev could feel the heat of the fire, but that wasn't the only thing that made his throat dry.

This, then, was the Chaos war machine at work, extracting iron from Cressida's fertile ore as the Imperium had done before it, using foul practices to fashion that iron into weapons, armour, vehicles of destruction. Cressida had fallen, but its occupiers were already equipping themselves for the next conquest.

The lifter doors were tucked around the corner of a narrow walkway, out of sight of the evil below. The summoning rune was lit, so Palinev pressed it and took cover as, with a grinding and a screeching of gears, the cab rose from what sounded like it must have been the lowest level of the underhive. The lifter was functional, and empty, so Palinev returned to the others to report his discovery, being sure to keep low as he crossed the bridge again.

A few minutes later, the nine Ice Warriors packed themselves into the cramped cab, and Steele activated one of the highest runes on its wall.

The journey upward took an age. The wall runes lit in sequence as they passed each of the hive's hundred-plus levels. Palinev was uncomfortably aware, as he was sure the others were, that were anyone to hear their noisy approach, were they to stop the lifter for any reason, then its occupants would be sitting ducks.

His heart sank as they bumped to a halt and, although the doors failed to open, the cab was filled with a soft but insistent chime.

Gavotski sighed. "I was afraid of this. We can't go any higher without an access code. It's to keep the underhive dwellers from the higher levels."

"Let me," said Barreski. He produced a knife, and inserted its blade into a vertical seam beside the runes. With some expert manipulation, he was able to flip open a section of the wall to reveal a jumble of wires. Palinev gasped as his comrade cavalierly plunged his hands into them.

Barreski pulled on several wires, tearing them from their mountings, seeming not to care as the machine-spirits spat their disapproval. He grinned as the chiming sound cut out and the lifter began to rise again.

"A little trick I picked up as a boy," he said.

They reached their destination at last, and the doors rumbled open, allowing nine grateful soldiers to spill out onto a wide, empty street.

The contrast with the ground floor was extreme. Although the Ice Warriors were still surrounded by buildings, there were open walkways and squares in between, into which some natural light fell from translucent panels in the hive's roof some ten levels above them. Below, the architecture had been strictly utilitarian, but up here there were statues and fluted columns and fountains and gargoyles.

Many of the buildings sported eagle crests over their doorways — administrative offices — but Barreski could also see an apartment block with wide windows opening onto balconies.

Not that Chaos hadn't left its mark here too. Many of the walls had been defaced with hateful sigils, most of the buildings looted and some burned out. And the air was cold, far colder than it had been below — almost as cold as it had been outside.

Steele had found something: a rectangular, white-framed data panel, mounted on a free-standing, pivoting base. He motioned Barreski to join him at it, and had him confirm that it was a public terminal. The interface was designed to be accessible, the inlaid runes simple to interpret, and Barreski was soon able to punch up a plan of the hive, and to show Steele how to select more detailed views of each of its levels and sectors. Then he watched in fascination as the colonel

scrolled through map after map, hardly pausing at some long enough to read their labels, but — Barreski felt sure — somehow committing the details of each one to his augmented memory.

“Spaceport,” Steele muttered, as he lingered briefly over one map. “That’s good to know. Could be a way out of here for us, if we’re lucky.”

“No mention of an Ice Palace though, sir?” asked Barreski.

“I wouldn’t have expected one. I should think the Ice Palace is a recent addition, something Mangellan has had built for himself.”

“It was Gavotski who suggested sending someone further upwards, to the roof of one of the taller buildings. We must be close to the centre of the hive,” he said. “If the palace is on this level, it should be visible from up there. If not, then we’ll know we’re wasting our time here.”

Palinev volunteered to be the scout, of course. Everyone was surprised when Steele sent Grayle instead.

“Get up there,” he instructed, “take a quick sighting and come straight down again. You still have your cloak, so if any heretic does spot you he should think you’re an ally. Still, I’d rather not take that chance.”

Grayle disappeared into the apartment building, emerged a few minutes later onto one of its topmost balconies, and began to find handholds in the brickwork, hauling himself all the way up to the roof. It was only then that Barreski realised why it was that his fellow tanker had been assigned to the task. Grayle was the only one of them who had a solid alibi for when the vox-caster was destroyed, an alibi that Barreski had provided. He was the only one Steele trusted to stray so far from the squad on his own.

A few minutes later, Grayle was back, flushed and breathless.

“It’s on this level, all right,” he reported, “the Ice Palace. It’s on *all* the levels, all the ones up here. Its foundations are a couple of floors down, but it reaches all the way up to the roof. It looks like... like it’s almost organic, like it wasn’t built or carved or whatever, like it must have... grown.”

“Like the so-called trees in the forest,” said Mikhaelev.

“Like them, yes,” said Grayle. “It’s huge, at least a kilometre square, and the area around it is in ruins, as if the palace just... as if it burst through from below, destroying everything in its path as it sprouted upwards. I could see bridges, great bridges of ice, leading across to it from the streets.”

“How far?” asked Steele.

“It was hard to tell,” said Grayle, “with the sheer scale of the thing. Another three or four hours, I’d say, on foot. But there are patrols in the streets: Traitor Guard, lots of them, between the Ice Palace and here. I don’t think it’s safe to take a vehicle.”

“Mangellan is well protected,” said Steele. “I’d expect no less. The sound of an engine won’t go unnoticed up here, and I can’t see a couple of cultists’ robes fooling anyone either.” This was good news for Barreski, whose borrowed cloak had been making his skin crawl where it touched his bare neck. He ripped it from his shoulders, bundled it into a ball and flung it into a nearby gutter.

“We have to face the fact,” said Gavotski, “that we have come almost as far as we can on stealth alone. I think we all knew from the start that our chances of surviving this mission were slim. Once we learned that Confessor Wollkenden had been brought here, to this hive... well, that’s when this turned into a suicide run. Most of us will die here today, but remember: if just one of us can beat the odds, if one of us can escape with the confessor, then we will have won the kind of victory that men sing about. We will have secured the memory of the Valhallan 319th for a thousand years, and I think that’s a cause well worth fighting for.”

The first patrol, they heard coming.

They took cover on the portico of a great library, crouching behind its pillars as the well-drilled ranks of a traitor platoon marched through the bordering public square. While the other Ice

Warriors were watching the traitors, Blonsky watched his comrades. Would this be the moment, he wondered, when one of them would make his move, give them away? Or just lose his nerve and run?

And then the traitors had passed them by, and the Ice Warriors let out a collective sigh of relief — all except for Pozhar, who was itching for a fight as always — and they moved on.

It seemed to Blonsky that the further they went — the deeper into the hive — the colder it became, in defiance of all logic. It had already been a long, tiring day, but Steele set his usual brusque pace — and Gavotski, in particular, was starting to flag, although he tried not to show it.

And then it came, at last. The moment they had all been dreading.

Steele must have heard something, seen something, sensed something, because he threw himself at Palinev an instant before they all heard the crack of a lasgun, and knocked him out of the path of its beam. The sniper had to have been on a nearby roof, but Blonsky didn't have time to locate him. Steele was running, yelling at the others to follow him. Two more las-beams stabbed into the street like lightning bolts, but then they were around a corner, out of the firing line.

"We can't just let them get away with that," protested Pozhar, "with firing at the Emperor's troops. We have to—"

Gavotski interrupted him firmly, saying, "We can't kill every heretic in this place, much as we'd like to. We have to concentrate on reaching the Ice Palace — which means getting out of this area before that sniper calls in reinforcements."

They ran across another public square, through an ornate archway, and down another wide street. Steele was leading the way, but he suddenly came to a halt, listened for a moment, reversed direction. They rounded the corner of a generatorium relay station — and this time, even Blonsky could hear the footsteps tramping towards them, forcing them to revise their course again.

They made for a wide flight of steps leading up to the next hive level. But four Traitor Guardsmen appeared before them, dropped to their knees and fired. The Ice Warriors plunged into a network of side streets, making so many twists and turns that Blonsky had soon lost all sense of direction. Then Steele stopped again, listened for a second, and growled, "This way!" He ushered his squad through the gaping doorway of a residential block as Blonsky too heard the whine of a vectored thrust engine and saw a thin grey shadow flitting across the ground behind him.

He suppressed a shiver. Someone... something out there was using a jump pack to search for them. And they all knew that no mere Imperial Guardsman, traitor or otherwise, had the strength to bear such a device.

They raced along a carpeted corridor. To each side of them, the doors of once-luxurious rooms had been smashed open. The furniture in those rooms had been trashed, and more than a few dead bodies had been left behind. Imperial citizens, thought Blonsky, who had tried to hide in their homes once the fighting had started, who had died in them. Cowards, all of them. They had got what they deserved.

They emerged into the street again, but the sounds of footsteps were all around them.

"They're everywhere!" breathed Anakora.

"Not quite," said Steele. "We're dealing with a single traitor platoon — perhaps forty men, fifty at most — but they know this ground and they know where we're heading. They're cutting off all our routes to the Ice Palace — and at the same time, they're closing in behind us, making sure we can't turn back."

"Then we have to go through them!" Pozhar declared.

Steele looked at him, then sighed and nodded.

"The palace is in that direction," he said, pointing. "Just remember, all of you, that to reach that palace, to find Confessor Wollkenden, is our only objective. If that means leaving heretics alive behind us, then so be it. Let the virus bombs take care of them."

"Yes sir," chorused the Ice Warriors.

“We hit the traitors hard and we hit them fast,” said Gavotski. “We break through their circle, and we keep on running. We don’t stop for anything.”

“Comrades,” said Steele, “prepare for the fight of your lives.”

Blonsky was just close enough to Pozhar to hear the young trooper’s murmured exclamation of, “About damn time!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 17.12.41

They took their foes by surprise.

The traitors had probably expected the Ice Warriors to go to ground, to find a defensible position — a secure building, maybe — from which they could sell their lives dearly. The last thing they had considered was that they might come out fighting.

Several of them died in that first barrage of las-fire, some marching right into the beams before they could stop. A few turned and fled — which made sense, thought Anakora, as these one-time Guardsmen wouldn't have defected in the first place had they possessed any real moral fibre.

The rest of them rallied and returned fire even as they looked for cover. A frag grenade hurled into their midst by Steele shredded two more bodies and left the rest reeling, more disoriented than ever. And then, before the debris from the blast could settle, the Ice Warriors surged forwards, knowing that to do so was to leave themselves wide open, but also knowing that to stay still was to invite certain death at the hands of the rest of the traitors, who were still closing in around them.

They kept their heads down, relying on speed and surprise — and the las-beams they were pumping out to each side of them — to carry them through. Anakora trampled over traitor corpses, and was alarmed to find one of them still alive, a gloved hand lashing out to seize her by the ankle. She stumbled, putting out her hands to arrest her fall. She kicked at the traitor's fingers with her free foot, and luckily he was injured, his strength drained, because he let out a groan and let go of her.

She saw that Palinev had stopped, half-turning, to come to her aid. She shook her head firmly, didn't need his help, didn't want him to risk his life for her. This was what she had feared, after Pozhar had revealed her secret to the others: not that they would suspect her motives, but that they would think her weak.

Palinev seemed to get the message, though, and he ran on, pausing for a second to snatch a lasgun from a fallen traitor. Anakora realised that he wanted its power pack, and this seemed like a good idea — so she saw to it that, by the time she caught up with her comrades, she was carrying two extra guns. She detached the pack from one of them and tossed it to Pozhar, who seemed like the trooper most likely to need it soon.

And then the second wave of traitors was upon them, moving in from either side, threatening to trap them in a pincer movement.

Pozhar was the first to react, running left, ploughing into the oncoming ranks, swinging his lasgun wildly, one-handed — but most of the others were right behind him. Anakora found herself plunged into the chaos of the melee, and looked for her nearest comrade — Mikhaev — and she stood back to back with him, as they fought with knives, bayonets and even fists against odds that were swelling by the moment, becoming almost overwhelming.

Only Palinev held back. Palinev, who had slipped into a deep doorway before he could be seen by the newcomers. Palinev, who now raised his long-las.

He took his time, choosing his targets well. His eight comrades were under attack by over twenty traitors, but they had formed into a tight knot so that only one or two men could attack any of them at once. Their more numerous enemies were also providing them with cover, and more than one traitor fired into the skirmish, aiming for an Ice Warrior but striking an ally instead. Palinev didn't share that problem.

A traitor landed a punch to Gavotski's chin, sending him reeling, so Palinev blew a hole in his head before he could press his advantage. He picked off another figure on the periphery of the battle before anyone knew he was there, and another two while they were trying to find him in the confusion. And then, when the traitors did start to fire back at him, las-beams blasting chunks from the stonework by his head, at least he knew that four or five of them were no longer focused upon his comrades.

He shouldered open the door beside him, and leapt into another apartment complex, even as a frag grenade rolled into the space he had just vacated. The explosion tore the door from its hinges, followed him down the corridor, and almost lifted him off his feet.

He paused at a window, fired six more shots from a fresh angle, claimed another kill. Then Palinev was running again before he could be pinned down.

From the next window, he saw that the melee was thinning out, the odds becoming more even. Some of the traitors were starting to disengage, to realise that they would be better off gaining some distance and using their guns.

Barreski charged two of them. They set their bayonets to greet him — but the gauntlet he was wearing on his right arm crackled with energy, and with one well-timed swipe he knocked the weapons right out of their hands.

He drove his gauntlet into a traitor's stomach, doubling him up with pain, causing him to cough up blood as he crumpled. The other traitor grappled with him, tried to wrest the gauntlet from him, but Barreski gripped him by the front of his flak jacket and tossed him almost casually over his shoulder. The traitor described a graceless arc, his arms and legs flailing, and slammed into the side of a building.

Pozhar was dragged clear of the others, thrown against a balcony rail, a ten-storey drop behind him. With his injured arm, he couldn't draw his lasgun in time. Two traitors shoulder-charged him, trying to force him over. Palinev fired at them, and managed to strike one between the shoulder blades, taking him down.

His heart leapt into his mouth as Pozhar toppled backwards, flipping over the railing, but somehow managing to take his remaining attacker with him. Palinev leapt out of his window, and raced across the street, fearing that he was already too late, only too well aware that he had no cover out here, but knowing that the rest of his squad were tied up with their own problems. He was Pozhar's only hope.

His sudden appearance took the traitors by surprise — and like Palinev's comrades, most of them had their hands full. He reached the railing, and found Pozhar clinging one-handed to the edge of the road beneath it, the traitor hanging from his waist, still trying to drag him down.

It would be a tough shot. Palinev took the time to steady his aim, tried to forget the imminent danger to himself. His las-beam struck the Traitor Guardsman in the face, and he lost his hold on Pozhar and fell with a bloodcurdling scream.

And Palinev turned to find a knife-wielding traitor barrelling towards him, just in time to sidestep and to fling the man over his shoulder, to join his comrade below.

For the longest time, Gavotski hadn't known where he was, hadn't seen any comrades beyond Colonel Steele to his immediate left and Blonsky to his right, hadn't known how many Traitor Guardsmen were still standing, hadn't been able to see a way out of this for himself or for any of them.

All he could do was keep fighting, keep swinging his lasgun, keep slashing with his knife, keep dodging the blows that were aimed at him in return. Gavotski prided himself that he was still a strong man, almost as strong as he had been in his youth, and the reactions of his opponents as he struck at them confirmed this in the most satisfying way. With every traitor that fell, landing in a growing pile at the sergeant's feet, it became harder for the next one to reach him.

And then, to his surprise, there was nobody left. He regained his bearings, and saw that they had done it, they had broken through the cordon — that, although there would certainly be yet more foes searching for the Ice Warriors, perhaps already coming up behind them, the way ahead was clear for the moment, and Gavotski yelled out for the others to follow him as he took it.

Once again, they sprinted through the streets, and Gavotski prickled with fresh hope, knowing that each step was taking them closer to their goal.

It couldn't last. He knew that. But it ended sooner than he had hoped.

As before, it was Steele who heard the incoming platoon first, who tried to find a way around it. This time, however, his options were more limited by the Traitor Guardsmen, the remnants of the first platoon, still pursuing them.

They found themselves outside a censorium, and Gavotski was disheartened when Steele turned and led his squad inside the building. They clambered over upturned filing cabinets, and kicked up the ashes that were all that remained of hundreds of thousands of Imperial documents. A few of the Ice Warriors took up sniping positions in the frames of the shattered ground floor windows, but Gavotski followed Palinev and Blonsky up a flight of stairs in search of a better vantage point above.

He looked out onto the street again, and saw that two squads of traitors had just turned into it, one from each end. Steele's senses had saved the Ice Warriors again, warning them that they were surrounded.

It took the traitors a moment to work out where their prey had disappeared to. By the time they had, almost half of them were dead. Gavotski leaned out of his window, pumping out las-beam after las-beam on full auto as the remaining traitors scattered, feeling a momentary catharsis with each one that fell. It was not enough, though, to quell the searing frustration inside him.

The last thing the Ice Warriors had wanted was a siege situation. The last thing they could afford was to be trapped.

A traitor ventured into view with a frag grenade in his hand. Gavotski fired at him before he could hurl it, and his beam was joined by two more from the windows below him. A second later, another traitor tried the same stunt, but Palinev and Blonsky made just as short work of him.

This was getting them nowhere. The traitors had time on their side. Word of the Ice Warriors' presence would have spread, and for every traitor they felled there could be no doubt that ten more were on their way to replace him. They needed a way out, and they needed it fast.

No sooner had Gavotski formed that thought than the whole of the censorium trembled with a powerful explosion, showering him with mortar from the ceiling, almost knocking him off his feet. For a second, he feared that a traitor had somehow, unseen by him, run the gauntlet of the Ice Warriors' las-fire and managed to lob a frag grenade into the building. But then Steele's voice drifted up to him:

"Everybody," yelled the colonel, "down here!"

They raced down ten flights of a winding metal staircase, which rang and shook with the impacts of eight pairs of boots.

It had been Mikhaelev who had offered up the demolition charge. Barreski had helped him set it up in the censorium's basement, standing the cylindrical shell on its end to focus its explosive power downwards. Grayle's ears still rang with the force of the blast, but it had achieved the desired results.

A hole had been blown through the building's foundations — and, peering into it, Grayle had been pleased to see the remains of a top-floor apartment. The Ice Warriors had dropped into the room one by one, looking for a way down, and now at last they burst out onto the street of the hive level below.

They were greeted by las-fire. The traitors, having just worked out where their foes had gone, were crowding the balconies above them. Steele kept his squad moving, steering clear of open squares, hugging the walls of buildings, making sharp turns beneath archways and bridges.

The strategy proved successful. The fire from above dropped off, the traitors finding it hard to track the fugitives below them, impossible to target them when they did. Some of them, frustrated, were swarming down ladders, just trying to get closer, but making themselves easy pickings for the Ice Warriors' guns.

They were gaining ground, putting their foes behind them, closing in on the Ice Palace, and for a moment Grayle thought they might actually make it. But then, the deep-throated roar of an engine heralded the onset of a new peril.

Steele must have heard the bike coming — but it was too fast, there had been no chance of avoiding it. It shot out from a narrow alleyway, squat and black, its twin-linked bolters spitting out death metal.

Even ridden by a cultist or a traitor, it would have presented a significant threat to the Ice Warriors. But the rider of this bike was no mere traitor. His eyes were dead, his face criss-crossed with badly stitched scars, and his features warped so that his lips were forever twisted into a disdainful leer. The rider's muscular frame was made even bulkier, more imposing, by a suit of jet-black power armour — and that armour had been daubed with red Chaos sigils, and bristled with spikes on which had been impaled a number of cracked, blank-eyed skulls.

A Chaos Space Marine!

He was standing in his broad saddle, leaning eagerly over his handlebars, slashing at the air with a chattering chainsword. Grayle found himself running at full pelt, almost before Steele had given the order to do so, with Gavotski, Blonsky and Pozhar beside him.

He hesitated as he reached the nearest corner, glanced back, and saw that Palinev had actually run at the oncoming monster. The Chaos Space Marine swiped at the scout with his chainsword. Palinev twisted nimbly and avoided the blow by a hair's breadth. It was one of the bravest things Grayle had seen, albeit somewhat undermined by the terrified expression on Palinev's face. It seemed he had put a little too much trust in his own speed and agility, hadn't expected the sword to cut quite as close as it had.

He slipped around behind the bike and was gone, haring up the alleyway from which it had emerged. The Chaos Space Marine tried to wrestle his vehicle around on its axis, to follow, but only succeeded in unseating himself — as Palinev had no doubt hoped he would. He fell hard on his shoulder, and the bike veered off into a wall, but its rider was back on his feet in a second.

Grayle didn't wait to see what he did next, who he would go after. Whichever of the Ice Warriors drew the short straw, he would probably end up dead — and the only chance the rest of them had was to be long gone before that happened. So, Grayle and Pozhar ran one way, Gavotski and Blonsky the other, and Grayle was so worried about what might be closing behind him that he almost didn't see what was waiting ahead.

He was rushed by two traitors, one from each side. He sidestepped the first, and greeted the second with his lasgun butt, striking his jaw. As the traitor reeled, Grayle grabbed him by the shoulder, and spun him into his comrade. While both were off-balance, he stepped back, brought up his gun, then thought about the noise it would make, the attention it would draw, and thrust his bayonet instead through the first traitor's kidney until he choked on his own blood.

The second traitor made to run, but Pozhar — following Grayle's lead in not firing his gun — brought him down with a low tackle. The traitor opened his mouth to yell out, but Pozhar filled it with his fist. Then he drove his gun butt repeatedly into the traitor's head until he was quite certain that he was dead.

"Quickly, in here!"

Grayle whirled around, brought up his gun, and saw a slim, fair-haired young man in its sights. The man was wearing a basic blue worker's smock; he certainly didn't look like a traitor or a cultist.

Still, Grayle wasn't the only Ice Warrior to be suspicious, and the new arrival blanched as he found himself staring down two lasgun barrels.

The man threw up his hands to show that he was unarmed.

"I can help you," he said, *'but* you have to come now. We don't have long."

"How do we know this isn't some trick?" demanded Pozhar.

"I don't know how to convince you," said the man, *'but* I am loyal to the Emperor, praise His name. I am one of the few men left in this city who is. And the Traitor Guardsmen are moving to surround you again. If you stay out here, you're dead for sure — you may as well take your chances with me."

Grayle looked at Pozhar, and could see that they were both thinking the same thing: that the stranger was right. He was their best hope. So, Grayle turned to him with a nod, and said, "Okay, lead the way."

"But if you are lying to us," Pozhar hissed, "it won't matter how many friends you have waiting back there, what sort of a trap you might be leading us into, I will fight my way to you and I will cut your throat — with my dying breath if I have to."

Steele was running with Anakora, Barreski and Mikhaelev when he heard the bike roaring up behind them. It came screaming past the Ice Warriors, skidded to a halt in their path, and its rider was already in mid-leap towards them.

They greeted him with las-fire, but they may as well have been shining flashlights in his face for all the effect it had. Steele ducked beneath the Chaos Space Marine's chainsword, while Anakora drove her bayonet at him. She was aiming for an armour joint but missed, and the tip of her blade snapped off. The Chaos Space Marine grabbed her by the greatcoat, lifted her and flung her away like a piece of trash.

Barreski took the opportunity, while his foe was distracted, to attempt to drive his power fist into his stomach. The Chaos Space Marine caught Barreski's hand and squeezed, and the gauntlet broke with a shower of sparks. Barreski was barely able to pull out his hand in time to spare it the same fate.

Steele was aiming his laspistol, looking for an opening, when the chainsword lashed out at him again. He could smell the engine oil on its whirring teeth as he stumbled backwards away from it.

The Chaos Space Marine was focusing his attacks upon him. He must have seen the rank insignias on Steele's coat, identified him as the leader. He had chosen his victim; the other three Ice Warriors were just an inconvenience, a minor one at that. Steele offered up a prayer to the Emperor — not for his own life, because he knew this was lost, but that he could occupy this monster long enough for his comrades to get clear.

He ran, knowing he would not get far, hoping that he could get just far enough. He could hear the jackhammer footsteps of the Chaos Space Marine behind him — it had taken him less than a second to cast Barreski and Mikhaelev aside, to set off in pursuit of his true prey — and then he heard the whine of a jump pack.

Steele threw himself onto his stomach, and the Chaos Space Marine hurtled over him, having not expected such quick reflexes from a Guardsman. Scrambling to his feet, Steele raced for a litter-strewn alleyway, slipped through a gateway, hauled himself into a burnt-out building through an open window, and ran out through the main door.

He ducked behind a statue of a great Imperial general, and tried to control his breathing, not to make the slightest sound.

And the statue exploded, shredded by the explosive payload of a bolt pistol.

The Chaos Space Marine was upon Steele again, marching through a cloud of dust and debris, and for the third time Steele only just avoided being sliced in two by his chainsword. There was no

running now, no one to get between him and his attacker, and no hope of matching him for sheer strength.

He drew his power sword anyway, and triggered its energy field.

He was in this fight to the death, and he had no doubt that he would be the one to die. But by the time Colonel Stanislev Steele went down, his killer would be left in no doubt that he had just gone toe to toe with an Ice Warrior.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 16.24.39

“The Chaos worshippers don’t come down here,” said the man in the worker’s smock.

“I can see why not,” muttered Grayle.

They were picking their way along a dark, dank tunnel, lit only by the yellow glow of their lamp-packs. Their guide, who had introduced himself as Tollenberg, had led Grayle and Pozhar through a concealed manhole in the basement of an office building. The foul smell had been the first thing to hit Grayle. He had been wading ankle-deep in cold, rank water before he realised what this was: a sewer pipe.

“Oh, they’ve tried a time or two,” Tollenberg went on. “Mangellan knows we’re here, even if he underestimates our numbers and our fortitude. He’s sent cultists to find us. I don’t think he knows how extensive these tunnels are, doesn’t realise it’s a maze down here. It’s all too easy to get lost, easier still to walk into an ambush.”

They climbed up onto a crumbling ledge, and slipped through an iron door that had been left rusted half-open.

Then Tollenberg led them down a long ladder, its rungs made slippery by a continual dribble of the foul water. At its base, they found another tunnel, apparently identical to the one above.

“We’ve had time, you see — those of us still loyal to the Emperor, still free. We’ve had time to find our way around, draw up maps, scope out the best hiding places. We can get from one side of the hive to the other now, from its top to its bottom, without leaving these pipes for more than a few strides. We can—”

Tollenberg came to an abrupt halt, fell silent, and held up a hand for the Ice Warriors to do likewise. They switched off their lights and stood waiting in the darkness, in the quiet, and they could all hear it: footsteps, sloshing towards them from behind another opening in the brick wall. Footsteps that now fell silent, as if the people making them had also realised that they weren’t alone, were also standing and waiting.

Cautiously, Tollenberg tapped his lamp-pack against the wall, three times, paused, then tapped twice more, each knock echoing along the tunnel behind and ahead of them. A moment later, answering knocks came, four in quick succession, and Tollenberg relit his pack.

“It’s OK,” he said. “They’re friends.”

They met at the tunnel junction, Tollenberg embracing a middle-aged woman with tied-back red hair, who wore a blue smock like his, while Grayle and Pozhar were delighted to find her accompanied by two comrades: Gavotski and Blonsky.

“We have people searching the whole of this sector,” explained Tollenberg. “With luck, they’ll find a few more of your fellows yet.”

“But why?” asked Pozhar impatiently. “What do you want with us?”

“Where are you taking us?” asked Blonsky.

“Somewhere safe,” said Tollenberg.

Anakora was alive.

Her encounter with the Chaos Space Marine had lasted all of about three seconds, and was a blur in her memory. She only knew that she had hit the ground hard, been winded, and now she could

hear the growling of a chainsword blade. It filled her ears, seeming to come from right beside her — but as she picked herself up, as she made herself look, she saw that she was alone in the gutter.

She could hear the retort of las-fire, too — from a pistol, if she was not mistaken. Colonel Steele!

She didn't stop to think. She pounded down the street, heedless of the risk to herself, of the possibility that more traitors might be lurking between the buildings. And she wasn't running away from the sounds of battle, as would have been the sensible thing to do, the right thing, as Barreski and Mikhaelev must have done already. No, Anakora ran towards them — and she realised as she did so that those sounds ought to have ceased by now, that no human opponent of a Chaos Space Marine could have survived this long. It just wasn't possible.

Rounding the next corner, she saw that the impossible was happening.

Beside the Chaos Space Marine in his black power armour, Steele looked small and helpless. Still, somehow he was managing to go toe to toe with him. He ducked each blow almost before it was thrown, or parried it with his blue-flaring power sword, making his foe look clumsy. He aimed the majority of his thrusts at the Chaos Space Marine's face, and some of them had got through. Even as Anakora watched, Steele drew blood again, scoring a red line across the bridge of his opponent's nose, a fresh scar to add to his collection.

The Chaos Space Marine didn't flinch, hardly seemed to register the shallow cut, his system no doubt flooded with painkilling drugs. Anakora knew that, in contrast, one punch from him would be enough to break Steele's neck, one hit from his chainsword enough to decapitate him. Steele's reflexes, or his augmetics, only had to let him down once and he would be dead.

Her first las-beam glanced off the Chaos Space Marine's armour. She had been trying to find a joint, hoping to blow it open, but with Steele in her line of fire she had to err on the side of caution. The Chaos Space Marine didn't even look, never took his eyes off Steele. He simply drew his bolt pistol with his left hand and loosed off a short burst in Anakora's direction. For a blind shot, it was horribly accurate, and she was barely able to leap back around her corner as a chunk of the wall was blown out behind her head.

She tried two more beams, each provoking an answering burst of bolts, before she decided that she needed something bigger.

A big green truck was parked on the street, a few metres away. The door to the cab hung loose, and Anakora yanked it open so hard that she wrenched it from its hinges. She hadn't driven a vehicle since her training, she was hardly a specialist, but she could remember the basics and she had seen Grayle at work.

She hauled herself up into the driver's seat, closed her eyes, muttered a fervent prayer to the engine's machine-spirits and almost brimmed over with gratitude towards them when they came alive for her.

The frame of the truck juddered as she pulled away, and the vehicle proceeded in fits and starts, and almost stalled. But Anakora was getting a feel for its workings, and she picked up speed as she pulled the steering wheel around hard. And now Steele and the Chaos Space Marine were dead ahead of her.

They heard her coming, of course. She had been counting on that, counting on Steele being able to get out of her way somehow. As the chainsword lashed out again, he fainted and, instead of ducking beneath its teeth, he darted inwards, caught the Chaos Space Marine's elbow, and twisted and pushed for all he was worth.

He couldn't overbalance his opponent — he was too strong, too heavy — but he did make him shift his footing, and that gave Steele the tiniest of openings. It gave him time enough to disengage from the battle, and to throw himself backwards. Seeing what he was doing, the Chaos Space Marine made a grab for him, tried to make a human shield out of him, but Steele was just a fraction too fast for him — and Anakora had a clear run at her target. She floored the accelerator pedal.

The Chaos Space Marine whirled to face her, flexing his powerful leg muscles, making to jump. For a moment, Anakora thought he was actually going to make it, thought he was going to leap up onto the bonnet, thrust his hands through the windscreen and find her throat. But then the track smacked into him, and carried him ten metres or more, before, with a rending and a screeching of metal and plasteel, it slammed him hard into, and almost through, a solid stone wall.

Anakora was flung forward, and her head hit the windscreen, shattering the plexiglas. Her helmet protected her, but she was dazed. She thought the sensation she could feel in her stomach, the feeling that the world was tilting, was a symptom of nausea, until firm hands took her shoulders, and she was distantly aware that Steele had reached into the cab, grabbed her, and was dragging her out of there.

Even so, the sword was inching its way towards the colonel's heart, howling as if in anticipation of the moment when it would sink its teeth into his flimsy armour.

Anakora raised her gun, but Steele yelled, "No! Leave me! Find the others! Complete the mission! I'll hold this thing off for as long as I can!"

She was rooted to the spot, still unsure, still thinking. If only I could find some way to die instead of him. She couldn't be the one to report to the others that he'd fallen, that she had done nothing to stop it, nothing but run. She couldn't do that again.

She moved around behind the Chaos Space Marine, putting his great bulk between her and Steele. She set her gun to full auto and pounded him with las-fire until her power pack was exhausted — by which time she had burned through his armour and dislodged a shoulder plate, but Steele was on his knees, unable to keep his attacker at bay for much longer, and through clenched teeth, in a hoarse voice, he yelled, "Get out of here. That's an order, Trooper Anakora. Go!"

She had no choice now. Anakora ran — because, if there was one thing the Imperial Guard instilled in its troopers, one mantra by which they lived, it was that an order was always to be obeyed, immediately and without question.

That, and because Steele was right, because she couldn't achieve anything by staying, because the Emperor would have disapproved of her giving her life in a lost cause, taking the easy way out.

Anakora ran, with the ghosts of Astaroth Prime howling in her ears.

And the teeth of the chainsword gave one final, piercing scream behind her, and then silence fell.

That damned itch had spread to Pozhar's shoulder.

He almost wished the Chaos Space Marine had come after him instead of choosing another target. He longed to be discovered by more Traitor Guardsmen.

It was no longer just that he wished to serve the Emperor through combat. It had become much more than that. When Pozhar was fighting, he couldn't feel what was happening to him. He could believe that, when the fighting stopped, everything would be all right — that, through the practice of exercising his muscles in a righteous cause, he could somehow cleanse his system, force a reversal of the... the...

He couldn't even think the word, couldn't form it in his mind.

He would have hacked off his own arm to keep the grey fur from spreading, had there been a way to do that without betraying his shame to everyone.

He tried not to think about it, tried to concentrate on the gloomy surroundings of the sewer tunnel and on his comrades. Sergeant Gavotski was walking at the head of the six-strong group with Tollenberg. The rest of the Ice Warriors were behind them, with the red-headed woman bringing up the rear.

"How many of you are there?" asked Gavotski.

“A couple of hundred,” said their guide. “We were civilians before the war: miners, administrators, teachers. When Chaos came to our doorsteps, we gathered in the chapels to pray for His guidance. When the chapels fell, He led us into these tunnels.”

“You should have stayed and fought,” grumbled Blonsky.

“We’re fighting now,” Tollenberg assured him, “fighting to keep our minds pure, learning how to use what weapons we can scavenge, preparing for the day when the Imperial army arrives to retake our home. On that day, we will emerge into our streets again, into the traitors’ midst, and we will die for that glorious cause.”

His words swelled something in Pozhar’s heart. He wished he could tell this eager young man that salvation was on its way, that the Ice Warriors were merely the vanguard for a far larger force, and that the loyalists of Cressida had not been abandoned. He wished he could join them in their fight, a glorious cause indeed.

“We have a mission,” said Gavotski, skirting the issue, “a very specific mission. We have come here to rescue one man.”

“Confessor Wollkenden, yes.” Tollenberg nodded. “We know about him.”

“Then you know we have to get to the Ice Palace.”

“And you’re leading us away from it,” said Grayle, suddenly. He had been inspecting his compass in the yellow lamplight, but he was not as adept with it as Palinev would have been, and it had taken him some time to confirm his suspicions.

They had been walking along a narrow ledge, in single file, but now the brickwork tapered away and they were forced back into the water. Pozhar thought he felt something — a cold, wriggling something — brushing against his foot.

“The direct approach is dangerous,” said Tollenberg. “Mangellan may not have men down here, but there are other things, dreadful things, in the dark — and the closer you get to the Ice Palace, the worse the corruption becomes.”

“We’re not afraid of any stinking mutants!” grumbled Pozhar.

Tollenberg fixed him with a long, narrow-eyed look that the young trooper couldn’t quite read. Then, quietly, he said, “No, I am sure you’re not. Still, we can help you avoid the worst of the dangers — if you trust us.”

There was something wrong.

Blonsky knew it as soon he emerged into the candlelit chapel, as soon as he was able to stand upright, and his hand went to his lasgun.

They had climbed another ladder — a short one, this time — and Tollenberg had rapped on the underside of a manhole cover at its top: the same signal as before, three taps, then a pause, then two more. The cover had been scraped aside, and the silhouette of another smock-clad man had loomed over them, against a circular background of flaring light. The man had reached down a hand towards them.

Blonsky had been the second of the Ice Warriors to be hauled up out of the hole, behind Pozhar — and immediately, he had detected the stench of Chaos. But reeking as he was, as they all were, from the sewer water, he couldn’t pinpoint its source — and, casting around, he could see no immediate threat.

Perhaps, he thought, his senses were reacting to the desecration of this once-holy place. Some effort had been made by the loyalists to reclaim the building, to reconstruct the altar and to scrub the disgusting Chaos sigils from the walls — but still, he couldn’t help but feel that the spirit of the God-Emperor had withdrawn from here and that no amount of restitution could induce its return.

At one end of the chapel, two ornate pillars had been shattered, bringing about a partial collapse of the vaulted ceiling. A little daylight spilled in through a broken window frame, and glinted off fragments of coloured glass amid the rubble. Wall hangings had been torn down and burnt.

There were more figures here, thirty or forty of them, their blue worker's smocks beginning to look like a kind of uniform. They were scrubbing the floors or trying to piece together the remnants of broken treasures, or just kneeling at the altar in silent prayer. All of them started to react to the arrival of four strangers, to clamber to their feet, to stare in both awe and hope.

They began to close in around the Ice Warriors.

And that was when Blonsky realised what was happening: when he saw the figures' odd, shambling gaits and glimpsed a tuft of grey fur protruding from a blue sleeve. And he drew his lasgun, and spun around and shot the red-headed woman through the head as she was helping Gavotski up from the ladder. She fell, a look of wounded surprise on her face, and Blonsky turned to deal with Tollenberg.

He had been beaten to it. Their fair-haired young guide was lying at Pozhar's feet, his hands clutched to his throat, blood welling between his fingers.

"I warned you," Pozhar snarled. "I told you what I'd do to you." And as Tollenberg died, his smock slipped from his left shoulder, and Blonsky saw a bright green mole on his skin, proof that he had been right.

By now, Grayle was reaching for his weapon too. Gavotski scrambled to his feet, looking as surprised as the woman had been, and Blonsky spelled it out to him:

"It's an ambush, sergeant. They're mutants, all of them. They're stinking mutants!"

This was getting to be a habit, thought Steele: facing his own death, making peace with it, only to be given a very rude awakening.

This time, even the mechanical parts of his brain had shut down. His memories ended with the battle, with the chainsword that had shredded his armoured greatcoat, and the flesh beneath it. Bleeding from the chest, Steele had fallen onto his face, and blacked out. The Chaos Space Marine could have, should have, finished him off there and then. He didn't know why he hadn't.

He couldn't feel his legs. He was surrounded by Traitor Guardsmen. They were pressed up against him, holding his arms, half-carrying him so that his feet dragged along the street behind him. His greatcoat hung open, no more than a few ragged strips of plasfibre now. His chest and his stomach were stiff with synth-skin.

"He's awake!" a voice grunted, somewhere near his ear.

"Yeah? Then why are we still carrying him?" He felt the muzzle of a lasgun in his back, and the second voice snarled, "Get walking, Emperor-lover!"

Steele's response to this was short and succinct, but it effectively conveyed his thoughts on the question of taking orders from a heretic.

The heretic in question made to lash out with his gun butt, but one of his fellows stayed his hand.

"You can't risk it," he said. "He's already damaged goods. You could break his skull, spill his brains out onto the street, and what would *he* say then?"

Steele smiled tightly to himself. The traitors had confirmed what he had already guessed, that their leader in Iota Hive wanted him alive. Most likely, Mangellan intended to question him about his comrades: their numbers, their plans and their current whereabouts. Not that it would do him any good.

They had taken Steele's weapons, his field rucksack, even his fur hat. They had turned out his pockets. They thought he was helpless. They were wrong.

Steele's greatest weapons were inside him. His mechanical shoulder was still in working order, and his bionic eye had almost completed its repair cycle. He could see with it now, albeit through a faint blur. He could call up its HUD, which told him that the eye would be fully functional in just fifty-eight minutes' time.

In the meantime, the traitors were doing him a favour. A prisoner he may have been, for now — but they were taking him just where he wanted to go.

They were taking him to the Ice Palace... to Confessor Wollkenden.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 14.33.04

They were sitting ducks.

Gavotski cursed himself for having trusted the redheaded woman when she had called to him and Blonsky out in the street. He had followed his instincts about her, not stopping to interrogate her further despite his comrade's misgivings. But then the Traitor Guard had been so close on their heels, and his instincts had never steered him wrong before.

His instincts were telling him something now.

The chapel was filled with the retorts of lasguns. They echoed from the vaulted ceiling to return to their wielders' ears with deafening force. But the only guns being fired belonged to the Ice Warriors. The mutants were not fighting back; few of them were even armed. They were cowering, whimpering behind stone columns and the remains of splintered pews, behind the altar itself.

"Cease fire!" yelled Gavotski over the clamour. "I said cease fire, that's an order!"

Grayle was the first to obey, although he turned to his sergeant with a puzzled frown. Pozhar looked like he was a second away from mutiny, while Blonsky...

Blonsky didn't exactly aim his gun at Gavotski — he held it at a downward angle, pointed at the floor between them — but the muscles in his arms were tensed, ready, as his black eyes searched and probed.

"With respect, sergeant," he said, "may I ask the reason for that order?"

"Look at them!" said Gavotski. "Does this look like an ambush to you? No one has attacked us. They've done nothing but defend themselves."

"They are mutants," spat Blonsky. "Their existence is offence enough!"

Gavotski returned his glare evenly. He wasn't about to be intimidated. "Ordinarily, yes," he said, "but these are extraordinary circumstances. I don't think our guides lied to us. These... these 'people' have information we can use. They have ways into the Ice Palace and knowledge of Mangellan's capabilities."

"In the circumstances, sergeant," said Blonsky, "I think it is my duty to ask if you're protecting these abominations because of some misguided sympathy with them? Can you swear that you are still loyal to the God-Emperor?"

Gavotski hit him with the butt of his lasgun. He hit him so hard and so fast that, even though Blonsky had been watching for such a move, he was taken by surprise and floored.

"When you can prove an accusation like that," growled Gavotski, standing over him, "then I expect you to shoot me dead. Until then, you will keep your mouth shut and do as I tell you. Is that understood, trooper?"

"They were praying," said Pozhar in a small voice. "They were praying to the Emperor." The resentment had drained from him, and he looked confused, even afraid. Gavotski hadn't expected that. He had expected Pozhar to disapprove of his decision as vociferously as Blonsky had.

And the mutants — the human-looking mutants — were picking themselves up, re-emerging from their hiding places, and closing in around the Ice Warriors, emboldened by their inaction. Gavotski brought up his gun, and focused it on the nearest of them.

"That's far enough!" he snapped, and the mutant came to a halt, raised its hands.

“We understand your... suspicions, blame you for being... repulsed.” The voice was a lumbering baritone, and it came from behind Gavotski. He turned, and felt his throat tightening. The speaker stepped out of the shadows: a shambling monster with grey fur, its fingers twisted into claws, its eyes a burning red, its brow unnaturally pronounced. “We repulse ourselves,” it said, “but none of us... chose this. Didn’t want to be this way. Chaos, so... so strong... in the water, the air... It has taken a hold of... our bodies.” He swallowed painfully.

Gavotski remembered what Tollenberg had said.

“But you’re fighting it, fighting to keep your minds pure.”

“If you are so loyal,” grumbled Blonsky, massaging his jaw as he climbed to his feet, “then you know your duty. The Emperor’s edict on impurities is clear. There is only one way you can be purged.”

“And we know we must... die,” the mutant said, “but want it to be for a... purpose. We want to... want to strike against the heretics. They did this to us. They did this to our... world, to Cressida.” It was having trouble breathing, and it broke off its speech as it groaned and wheezed, sucking air into its lungs.

“You knew we were coming!” Grayle realised. “You sent out spies, into the mountains and the forest. I saw one of them. You’ve been watching us!”

“Just... sorry,” said the mutant, “we could not approach sooner... before the sniper on the lake, before you lost your... comrade at the landing site... before the Traitor Guardsmen... Had to choose our moment carefully, as you will... as you will appreciate. So hard, these days, to know who can be... trusted.”

Gavotski followed the mutant’s sorrowful gaze, down to the floor, to the body of the Ice Warriors’ erstwhile guides, and to the others — six of them — cut down before he had called for his ceasefire.

“We can’t save your world,” he said quietly. “That’s not what we’re here for. But with your help, we can save one man. An important man.”

“Then we will give... what help we can,” the mutant promised. “We will fight in the Emperor’s... service, and pray that, when we reach the afterlife, He will... look upon our tainted souls with... with understanding.”

The Ice Palace was as huge as Grayle had described. It rose up high above Steele — higher than he could see, held as he was.

He was starting to get his strength back, though he was concealing this fact from his captors, letting them half-carry him, letting them think him still weak.

The traitors hustled him down a stone staircase, flight after flight — all the way down, he guessed, to the next hive level. As they stepped out into another street, as the traitors repositioned their grips on him, Steele was let go for a second and he feigned a collapse, taking the chance to steal a glance upwards.

He saw grand towers and turrets, and the broad undersides of bridges of ice.

The air was more than cold, it was like invisible daggers were being driven through his bones. Steele rued the damage done to his greatcoat, though he suspected that even it would not have afforded him a great deal of protection. He knew cold, natural cold, and he knew that this was something different. The traitors, in contrast, seemed perfectly comfortable in their flak jackets.

They were taking him to an archway in the base of the palace’s front wall. As they drew closer to it, the white surface took on a translucent quality, and Steele could see faint veins of the familiar purple fungus crazing through it.

The archway was protected by four Traitor Guardsmen — and by a heavy portcullis, this too formed from the ice. Steele remembered Barreski’s confident words in the forest: “Just give me a

couple of flamers, and I guarantee you there'll be nothing left standing here in ten minutes." If only it could be so easy.

On his way here, Steele had seen at least two hundred more traitors, many of them attaching themselves to his entourage as it passed, basking in their fellows' victory. His comrades, he accepted now, hadn't a hope of beating those odds, of making it here. At best, they could keep some of the traitors occupied outside the palace.

The rest, he feared, was up to him.

Pozhar had never felt less comfortable.

The mutants had offered him and his three comrades seats, which they had accepted, and food, which they hadn't. Gavotski had suggested that Grayle and Pozhar get some sleep while they could, while he and Blonsky kept watch. Grayle had nodded off with his chin on his chest, but Pozhar couldn't rest.

Most of the mutants stayed well away from their guests, in deference to their sensibilities, or perhaps just in fear of arousing their wrath again. However, the most mutated of them, the one that had spoken to them earlier, now shuffled over to them, and announced that it had bad news.

"Your commander has been... captured," it wheezed. "He fought... well, but was outclassed by a... a Traitor Space Marine. However, we have found your... remaining four comrades... bringing them here."

Since Tollenberg, none of the mutants had introduced themselves by name. Pozhar wondered if they had names any more. Perhaps they considered themselves unworthy, had come to think of themselves, as he would once have thought of them—as *he still thought of them*—as mere monsters.

"Colonel Steele isn't dead?" asked Gavotski.

"They are taking him to... the Ice Palace," said the mutant, "to Mangellan."

"Then we can still save him," said Gavotski. "If you can do as you said, if you can get us into the palace, we can rescue the colonel and Confessor Wollkenden. But we have to make our plans soon. We have less than fourteen hours."

The mutant inclined its shaggy head, graciously, and withdrew.

Blonsky watched it go with a shudder.

"They're fooling themselves," he muttered, "or lying to us. If a man's faith is strong, he can resist the corruption of Chaos, the Emperor has taught us that. To have been mutated as these wretches have—"

"But they're fighting it!" said Pozhar.

"Too late." Blonsky turned to Gavotski. "We can't trust them, sergeant. We don't know what they did to deserve this, don't know if they are cowards or traitors or just weak — but whichever it is, they are already lost. Even if they are sincere in their intentions, they cannot be cleansed of their sins. Sooner or later, Chaos will take their minds — and when that happens, they will turn on us."

Gavotski just nodded. "I know," he said.

And his words were like a knife blow to Pozhar's heart.

The interior of the Ice Palace was no less impressive than its exterior — and no less well-guarded. Steele was guided through what seemed like legions of Traitor Guardsmen, across an enormous hallway — formed from the ice, of course, but lushly appointed with velvet rugs and wall hangings.

The hall was festooned with elaborate ice sculptures, lent a certain beauty by soft and perhaps sorcerous inner lights — until Steele drew close enough to make out their twisted, daemoniac shapes. A frozen staircase swept in an elegant curve upwards to the balconies and balustrades of the next floor. He was dragged past this, into a small, dark corner, and bundled through a nondescript doorway.

Behind this, steps — stone steps — stretched downwards into an oppressive gloom. There was scarcely room to descend in single file, so Steele was set on his feet and prodded in the back with a lasgun muzzle, forced to walk with a traitor close in front of him and another close behind.

Rough-hewn stone walls opened up around them, lit only by the glows of the traitors' lamp-packs. Steele could hear an insistent drip, echoing and re-echoing until even he could not have pinpointed its source. He felt as if he was sinking into the depths of the underhive, except that he knew he was still high above ground level. The cavern appeared natural enough — but Steele suspected that, if he could have looked with his bionic eye, he would have found tell-tale signs that it was man-made.

Mangellan had decided, it seemed, to complement the splendour of his castle above with the traditional dungeons below.

The steps were streaked with ice fungus, some of them treacherously so. Steele contrived to slip, and to fall backwards, toppling the unprepared traitors that followed him like a row of dominoes. Three of them fell, screaming, over the side, and were broken on the rock floor below. It didn't ease the colonel's predicament at all — the casualties were immediately replaced, new hands grasping for him, forcing him to walk onwards — but it did make him smile.

Thick iron doors had been punched into the cavern walls. They nestled in nooks, listing at odd angles. Steele felt his heart beating a little faster at the thought that Confessor Wollkenden might have been behind one of them. He resisted the urge to call out to him. He didn't want to tip his hand just yet, thought it best to bide his time, to continue the pretence that he was a broken prisoner. Not that it was so hard to pretend.

A door was heaved open, and Steele was thrust through it. His new quarters consisted of a windowless stone box, extending no more than a metre and a half in any direction. He had to stoop to avoid knocking his head on the ceiling, nor was there enough space for him to lie comfortably.

A solid metal ring was set into one wall, a heap of chains draped across it. Two of the traitors placed their hands on Steele's shoulders, pushed him down to the ground and wrapped him, quickly and efficiently, in the chains, passing them four or five times through the ring and securing them at last with a heavy padlock. By the time they had finished, he was so tightly trussed that he could neither sit nor stand, his body forced instead into an unnatural, painful hunch: the traitors' revenge, he supposed, for his trick on the steps.

They withdrew, and took their lamp-packs with them. The slam of the cell door plunged Steele into an impenetrable darkness. He tried to switch to infrared vision, but his bionic eye still wasn't responding. Its HUD reported that the self-repair cycle would be completed in thirty-five seconds' time.

Ten minutes later, that countdown still stood at thirty-five seconds.

The Ice Warriors were back on the move, back in the sewers — and despite their odorous surroundings, Pozhar was just grateful to be out of that chapel. He had felt no trace of the Emperor's presence in there, not for him. He had felt like an intruder.

His squad was eight-strong again. Barreski, Mikhaev and Palinev had been brought up through the manhole together, and Gavotski had greeted them and explained the situation, explaining the details of their unlikely alliance with the mutants.

Barreski had looked appalled, but he had kept his own counsel. Mikhaev, however, had been surprisingly supportive.

"They can help us," he had said to the others, when Blonsky was safely out of earshot, "or we can kill them, and throw away any hope of succeeding in our mission for the sake of Imperial dogma, rules written by men who have never set foot on a battlefield. I ask you, why shouldn't we do this?"

Pozhar had wanted to answer that question. He had itched to tear open his greatcoat, to expose the fur that was crawling across his chest, to yell out, “Because you don’t want to end up like me!” But he had no wish to die like that.

“Once we have the confessor,” Barreski had said sullenly, “we can pump these abominations full of las-fire. We can do that, right?”

The sounds of combat from below had heralded Anakora’s approach. She had been collected by one of the more human-looking mutants, as had the others — but evidently she had seen through its disguise. Gavotski had sent Palinev down into the tunnels, to find her before she could flee, to convince her that there was no threat here.

They had all listened with heavy hearts as Anakora had related the details of Steele’s last stand.

“I shouldn’t have left him,” she had sighed — to which Blonsky had retorted that of course she should, she had been following orders.

They had all felt as uneasy as Pozhar had in the chapel — and so, although it might have been safer to sleep there and set out for the Ice Palace in the morning, Gavotski had declined this offer. He had also stipulated that no more than two mutant guides should accompany the Ice Warriors — and so, two had been detailed to the task, chosen once more it seemed for their near-human looks and ease of speech.

Pozhar was wading behind one of them, wondering how misshapen it was beneath its blue worker’s smock.

He would almost have preferred the company of an obvious monster. At least that would have been concealing nothing. Not like me, he thought.

The mutants had built a fire on the chapel floor, in which all of the Ice Warriors had recharged their las-guns’ power packs. They had also provided a few scavenged frag grenades and knives, but nothing more useful than that.

Pozhar was concerned that they seemed to have climbed a long way down, via various ladders and sometimes short drops into underlying tunnels — but their guides had assured them that they knew where they were going, that the best way to reach the Ice Palace was to come up from below it.

They were sloshing their way along another stinking tunnel when Palinev brought them to a halt.

“Does anyone else hear that?” he asked. “Something up ahead.”

They fell silent, still, listening, and they could all hear it now, could feel as well, the flow of the usually stagnant sewer water about their shins.

Something was coming this way, *swimming* this way.

The mutants were the first to react, to turn, to look at each other in pale-faced horror... and to run. One of them slipped through Grayle’s fingers, but the other was caught by Barreski and pinned against the wall.

“What is it?” the Ice Warrior yelled in the mutant’s face. “What are you afraid of?”

“And did you bring us down here on purpose?” spat Blonsky. “Were you leading us to it?” The mutant couldn’t answer, could only stare and babble and whimper and kick in a futile attempt to shake off Barreski’s grip.

And then a miniature tidal wave slapped out from the opening of a nearby side tunnel, to be followed an instant later by a body: green, scaly, sinewy, bristling with eyes and teeth. It leapt into the tunnel, almost bounced off the wall, landed on its feet, and oriented itself with incredible speed as it sighted its prey.

And then the monster was upon them.

Steele had been alone for almost an hour.

He knew this because his internal chrono told him so; it had kept him horribly aware of every second that had passed. And because of that drip, that infernal drip, marking off the slow passage of time, one beat every two point four seconds, a total of fourteen hundred and sixteen drips so far.

He half-stood, stooped, in his heavy chains, his spine aching fit to break, and he prayed to the Emperor, and silently cajoled the machine-spirits in his bionic eye, but they were deaf to his pleas, those same two digits frozen in the HUD.

Thirty-five seconds...

He heard footsteps on the steps outside, and he knew that his time was up.

A small, square panel in his cell door slid open, and light spilled in, almost blinding Steele after so long in the dark. A cultist peered in through the hole, satisfied himself that the prisoner was still bound, and opened a heavy lock.

The door creaked open to reveal a tall, thin figure standing on the threshold. Like Steele before him, this new arrival had to stoop to enter the cell; there was hardly any space between the two of them as he perched on a narrow ledge in the wall opposite the colonel, arms folded casually, a smug smile twisting his lips.

He was no longer backlit now, and Steele saw him properly for the first time, could make out his pinched features. The newcomer's eyes were like deep black holes, into which Steele felt he could almost have fallen. He sported no visible mutations, but he wore the black robes of a cultist. His hood was folded back, to show off an elaborate tattoo that spread like a spider's web across his face, over his shaved head, behind his ears and down his neck. He also wore a golden sash, and a general's shoulder flash on his right shoulder only — and he carried an ornate sceptre with the most vile obscenities carved into it: purloined and makeshift symbols of rank for a leader whose army barely acknowledged the concept.

"Let me introduce myself," he said in a voice as smooth as silk. "I am the ruler of this hive by right of conquest. I am the favoured of the Chaos gods, a high priest in their service. I am your jailer, your interrogator, and perhaps in time your executioner. I am all of these things and more — but the one thing you need to know about me, the most important fact in your life right now, is that I am your new, your only, master."

"Oh, I know who you are," said Steele, not bothering to disguise the contempt in his voice. "You're Mangellan."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 12.12.08

The creature was moving so fast they barely had time to react.

It came surfing towards them on the shallow sewer water. Then it flexed its stumpy legs and its prehensile tail, and sprang into their midst, shrugging off Pozhar and Anakora's las-fire. The Ice Warriors scattered as best they could, but the tunnel was narrow, confining. The creature lashed out at them with claws and fangs; its mouth was wide, incredibly wide, its teeth like chainsword blades. It almost caught Gavotski's arm in its jaws, but he pulled away in time.

The creature smacked back into the water on its stomach — its natural orientation, Barreski realised. It was like an alligator, its body elongated and scaled, but its back was a mess of spines, and its head a splatter of misshapen, rheumy eyes.

It reared up again. He felt its hot, fetid breath and its spittle on his face, and he grabbed the mutant he had been holding, swung it around and gave it a push.

The mutant screamed as it stumbled into the sewer creature — which, not questioning its good fortune, immediately sank its claws into the mutant's shoulders, clamped its jaws over its head and dived back down into the water with it.

This gave the Ice Warriors time to regroup, to start firing in earnest. The creature hardly seemed to notice. It tore the mutant's head from its shoulders, and threw back its own head with a triumphant roar, showering the walls with blood.

But if the Ice Warriors had hoped that one kill might satisfy its appetite, they were about to be sorely disappointed.

"Colonel Stanislev Steele," recited Steele, "officer in command of the Valhallan 319th regiment of the Imperial Guard — and that's all you're going to get from me."

"A regimental commander, hmm?" said Mangellan, the smirk still on his lips. "Should I be honoured that they sent you to fight me? Or should I feel slighted that, apparently, you only brought a handful of men with you?"

Steele snarled back at his captor, baring his teeth. "You should feel afraid! When I get out of these chains—"

"Oh yes," said Mangellan, "you would like to be free, wouldn't you? Isn't that what we all want, ultimately? To be free of the chains that bind us?"

"All I want," growled Steele, "is to do my duty to the Emperor."

"And you serve him well. You have done your best. You made it a lot further into my hive than I would have thought possible. You are evidently a skilled combatant, and a great leader. How, then, does your god repay your devotion?"

"The Emperor provides all we need."

"How does it feel, Colonel Steele, to know that he thinks so little of your life as to waste it on a fool's errand?"

"It is never a waste to fight for order, to strike a blow against your philosophy."

"Oh, I know why you're here. It seems that Confessor Wollkenden's opinion of his own importance is not quite as inflated as I had believed."

Steele tightened at the mention of the confessor's name. He couldn't help himself.

“Oh yes,” said Mangellan, basking in the reaction, “I thought that might get your attention. Wollkenden is here. He is alive. We have spoken many times, he and I. You can see for yourself soon. I will bring you face to face with the man for whom you were prepared to sacrifice yourself. It should prove an interesting meeting.”

“Shall I cut him, master? Shall I make him talk?”

Steele’s glare had been fixed on Mangellan; he hadn’t noticed another arrival. It had pushed its way through the traitors outside, and stood now in the doorway to the cell: a black-robed mutant, short and stooped, with lank black hair hanging over its sloping brow, tufts of grey fur sprouting from its ears, its eyebrows, its neck. It was carrying a long-bladed, blood-caked knife, fingering its edges almost lovingly.

“There will be no need for that, Furst,” said Mangellan. “Colonel Steele is not our prisoner, he is our guest.”

“Then unchain me,” suggested Steele, “and let me show you how a Valhallan Ice Warrior repays your hospitality.”

“And I have no questions to ask him,” Mangellan continued as if the colonel had not spoken. “I know why he came here, and I suspect that I know as well as he does the whereabouts of his troopers. They will be cowering out there in the city somewhere, plucking up the courage to attempt to approach my Ice Palace again.”

Had Steele’s bionic eye been working, he would have discharged it into Mangellan’s face right then. It was a good thing, then, that it wasn’t. He might have maimed his foe, gained some satisfaction, but it wouldn’t have helped him in the long term. He had to keep Mangellan talking, await his moment — and hope that, when that moment came, he would be ready. Thirty-five seconds...

“Then why am I alive?” he asked. “If you don’t want anything from me...”

“You do not question the high priest!” spat the stunted mutant, Furst, hopping from foot to foot as he became agitated, panting with the effort.

“It’s all right, Furst,” said Mangellan, sounding a little weary at the interruption. “I am quite happy to tell Colonel Steele all he wishes to know. That is why I came here, after all: to talk with him, to reassure him.”

He looked directly at Steele, and something glinted in the black depths of his eyes as he concluded, “To invite him to join our cause.”

“Concentrate your fire,” yelled Gavotski. “Try to burn through its hide!”

The sewer creature had reared up again, its broad mouth stretched into a great, keening howl — of defiance or of pain, it was impossible to tell.

It was caught, dazed, confused, swaying for an instant in a criss-cross of las-beams, and Mikhaevlev dared hope that it might succumb, might fall, might at least err on the side of caution and flee — but then it chose its target, and it lashed out.

Palinev dived out of the creature’s way. Its snout smacked hard into the tunnel wall, so hard that it seemed like its neck must have broken. No such luck, though. It hit the water on its stomach, and the head of its previous victim, the luckless mutant, was tossed on a wave born of the impact.

The creature was stunned, immobile, its back crowning the water like a miniature island, covered in thorns. The Ice Warriors pressed their advantage, and the scales at the base of the creature’s spines began to bubble and blacken in their beams. Its tail thrashed helplessly, and Anakora moved in, thrusting her bayonet downwards at it, attempting to pin it. Her aim was true, but her broken blade too weak for the task.

The creature was recovering, raising its head so that its scalp formed another little island, its many eyes glaring in all directions so that it was impossible to work out which way it would go, who it would target next.

Suddenly, Anakora was yanked off her feet. As she landed heavily, Mikhaelev, behind her, caught a glimpse of the great tail looped round her ankles. The creature was twisting back on itself, with incredible agility and liveness, bending double to reach its ensnared, floundering victim.

Mikhaelev was about to fire again when his line of sight was blocked by Pozhar, who threw himself onto the sewer creature's back with a zeal of which the late Trooper Borscz would surely have approved of. He found an eye with his knife, and punctured it with a jab, eliciting another howl — and the creature relaxed its grip on Anakora to deal with the more immediate threat.

It bucked and squirmed beneath the young trooper's weight; Pozhar let out a groan as a spine slipped through his greatcoat and into his stomach. Then he slid into the water, winded, and Anakora was trying to pull him clear, to return the favour he had done for her, but the creature had reared up again, was looming over the pair of them.

Mikhaelev's hand was in the pocket of his greatcoat, fingering a hard, cylindrical object, one he had kept ready for just such an occasion. It would be risky to use it in this confined space — especially for Anakora and Pozhar — but, unless he did something, his two comrades were dead anyway, and he had a perfect shot.

"Demolition charge!" he yelled as he lobbed the device. His aim and his timing could not have been better. The charge disappeared between the creature's teeth, bounced off its tongue... and Mikhaelev was running, as were the other Ice Warriors — six of them, at least. The remaining two were still cornered, helpless.

The blast, when it came, filled Mikhaelev's ears, shook the tunnel around him and splattered his back with chunks of something soft and moist. But it didn't lift him from his feet, and it didn't bring down the roof — and when he stopped, when he turned, when he looked, Anakora and Pozhar were still alive, covered in the blood and the guts and the sizzling flesh of the monster that had menaced them...

...the monster that, if it hadn't swallowed his charge outright, or found it lodged in its throat, must have closed its mouth reflexively around it, and contained the brunt of the explosion, as Mikhaelev had prayed it might, within itself.

Barreski punched the air, let out a whoop of delight, and clapped Mikhaelev on the back.

"Well, I hope you're pleased with yourself," said Grayle with a mock frown, as he brushed clinging, rancid lumps of meat from his hat and his coat. "You know, after sloshing my way through this hive's sewer system for about an hour and a half, I didn't think it was possible to smell any worse. Obviously, my mistake."

"Unfortunately," said Gavotski grimly, "we do have a more pressing problem than your personal hygiene, Grayle."

Blonsky spelled it out, "We've lost our guides, both of them."

"And with them," sighed Mikhaelev, "our way into the Ice Palace."

Steele laughed in Mangellan's face. It seemed the only rational thing to do.

"You're insane!" he accused the high priest. "Well, of course you are, that goes with the territory — but do you really expect an officer of the Imperium to just... to...?"

Mangellan was unfazed. "Many of us here were once officers in your Imperium," he reminded his prisoner. "You know that. Of course, the idea of joining me is abhorrent to you. You have been brought up, conditioned, to look at the universe in one way, and one way only: the Imperium's way."

"There is no other way," Steele growled. "At least, none that bear thinking about."

"Ah yes," said Mangellan, "that is what they tell you, isn't it? That you mustn't think about it, that the knowledge itself is forbidden. Don't you wonder why they tell you that. Colonel Steele? Don't you wonder if there could be more to life than following orders, being shipped from one war

zone to another? Have you asked yourself what they are keeping from you, what they are so afraid you might learn?"

"Let me cut him, master," whined Furst, his knife trembling in his hand as if it were all he could do to keep from thrusting it between Steele's ribs. "Let me punish him for his insolence."

"All I need to know," said Steele, "is right here in this cell with us." He jerked his head towards the mutant. "That is the price of your knowledge, Mangellan. That is what happens when we stop fighting it, when we start to question."

Mangellan snorted with derision. "Furst is a pawn, no more. Our gods have gifted him with physical strength, so I use him to fetch and carry for me. Look at me! I have worshipped Chaos all my life. Do you see the mark of the mutant on me?"

"Perhaps," growled Steele, "your mark is inside you."

"I used to think I had been overlooked. I used to pray to feel the touch of my gods. But now I know the truth. They have recognised my intellect, my vision, my strength of will. They do not need to make me over in their image, because I am already their perfect servant. The gods have favoured me over all."

"You know," said Steele, "when I first heard about you, when I heard your name, I feared you might be a challenge. But you're just a small man, after all."

Mangellan's smile faded for the first time. Steele had touched a nerve.

"And yet," the high priest growled, "I am in control of my destiny. That is more than anyone can say of you. You could wield power in this world, Colonel Steele — the power to build an Ice Palace like this one, to have men grovel at your feet."

"I'd rather bare my backside to a Valhallan tusked mammoth," snapped Steele, "because your gods will betray you. That is what Chaos does. That is what Chaos is. It is treachery and deceit. How many men did you betray to get here, Mangellan? You didn't lead the invasion of Iota Hive, did you? No, you let others do that, and waited for them to die so that you could seize power. Did you even fight with them?"

"That is where we differ, my friend. While you foolishly risk your life on the front lines, I stand back, taking an overview, waiting for my chances."

"Like finding a Chaos Space Marine that will throw in his lot with you? That would buy you a bit of respect around here, I suppose — for as long as it lasts. As long as it takes him to realise that, whatever you promised him, you can't deliver on it."

"You will serve me too, Colonel Steele — if not as an ally, then as a sacrifice, an offering to my gods. They will be only too pleased to receive your soul, and will reward me for conveying it to them."

"Is that what you have planned for Wollkenden?"

It was a bold question, and Steele didn't expect Mangellan to answer it, to give anything away. To his surprise, however, the high priest smiled and said, "Such a pious man, your confessor; an important man, as your presence here proves. A man who, to hear him tell it, saved an entire star system for your Emperor. For him to fall from the sky as he did, into my grasp... well, my gods were smiling upon me again that day. And then, along *you* came."

Mangellan pushed himself up from his stone ledge, leaned over Steele so that his lips almost touched the colonel's ear. Steele tried to flinch from him, but his chains held him too tightly. A feeling of revulsion shuddered through his body. He called up his bionic eye's HUD again, but still it gave only the same discouraging report: thirty-five seconds... thirty-five seconds...

"The irony of it," Mangellan crooned, "is that your masters do not value you. They would snuff out your life in a second for the chance, the merest chance, of getting their important, pious man back. But I have met the both of you, spoken with you, and I know the truth of it. I know that you, Colonel Stanislev Steele, are a far better man, a far stronger man, than Wollkenden will ever be."

“This is it,” said Palinev, staring at his compass. “This must be it!” Then he looked at the walls of yet another nondescript tunnel, and he felt a lot less confident. “At least, I think... If the colonel were here...”

“You haven’t let us down yet, Trooper Palinev,” said Gavotski. “If you say we’re underneath the Ice Palace, then that is where we are.”

Grayle reached up to touch the tunnel roof, and snatched his hand away with a wince.

“Ice burn!” he exclaimed. “And it’s been getting colder for the past half-hour, since before we ran into that creature. The Ice Palace is up there, all right.”

“The question is,” said Blonsky, “where is this supposed entrance to it?”

Mikhaelev shrugged. “Hardly likely to be in plain sight, is it? Maybe we should have turned back after all.”

“We discussed this,” said Gavotski firmly. “It would have wasted too much time. No, our guides have brought us most of the way, and they assured us that there is a way into the palace from down here. We just have to find it.”

“If we can’t,” offered Palinev, ‘I could go back to the chapel. I can find my way... at least, I think I can. I could fetch us another guide.’”

“Maybe,” said Gavotski, “but only as a last resort. We’ve all seen what’s out there. I don’t want anyone wandering about down here alone. For now, I suggest we search the tunnels from root to floor. And remember what Grayle told us: the Ice Palace is at least a kilometre square. The entrance could be anywhere in that area. Remember this too: Confessor Wollkenden is in that palace, as is Colonel Steele. All that stands between us is a thin layer of masonry — and we aren’t going to let that stop the Ice Warriors of Valhalla, now are we?”

Mangellan’s words still echoed in Steele’s head, making him feel sick.

He imagined he could still feel the condensation from the high priest’s rancid breath on his ear, and he itched to be able to move his hand, to wipe it away.

“I think it’s time,” Mangellan had whispered to him. “Time for Wollkenden to leave this mortal plane, to take his place as the plaything of Khorne, of Slaanesh, of Tzeentch, of Nurgle. The ceremony will take place at dawn. That is the usual time, I believe, for rituals of this kind. If you wish, Colonel Steele, I might let you watch. It may help to concentrate your thoughts.”

Alone again, he had released a primal scream from the depths of his stomach, and had struggled against his chains, although he knew he had no hope of breaking them.

There was nothing he could do.

So, he had tried to sleep instead, so that when his chance did come he would be ready to take it. He had succeeded only in dozing fitfully, woken each time by the pain in his muscles and along his spine, and by the urgent ticking of his internal chrono, and the ever-present drip-drip-dripping from somewhere outside.

And this time, by the creaking, squealing, scraping of his cell door.

Again, the light of a lamp-pack spilled over him. This time, Steele didn’t flinch. His left eye closed to protect itself, but his right eye adjusted instantly to the glare. He didn’t question this at first, didn’t see anything unusual in it. It took a moment for him to realise what it meant. By the time he had, he was focused on the short, stooped figure that had come shuffling into the cell, glancing back over its shoulder, moving with what appeared to be a clumsy attempt at stealth.

“Well, well,” said Steele, “so Mangellan’s dog has slipped its leash.”

Furst snarled up at him, even with Steele hunched over as he was, the mutant’s head barely came up to his chin. ‘You can insult me all you like, but you will regret your slurs against my master. I will make you scream for the mercy of death.’ The mutant produced his knife again, brandishing it before his prisoner’s eyes — but Steele was more concerned with what he was holding in his other hand.

“Mangellan doesn’t know you’re here, does he?” he said. “So much for loyalty among heretics.”

“The master will be grateful that I have dealt with his enemy. He will see that I can take the initiative too.”

“Will he? I know you’re only trying to be like him, Furst — a traitor like him — but the last thing a traitor can afford to tolerate when he gains power is the treachery of others. He will squash you, Furst, like the loathsome bug you are.”

Steele’s goading was working. Furst was pressed right up against him, reaching up with the tip of his knife, tracing faint lines across the colonel’s face. The mutant’s breathing was excited, ragged, and Steele could see flecks of drool on his chin and feel the shape of a bunch of keys against his stomach.

“Join us or die,” gurgled Furst, “that is the choice you were given by the master. Well, I can make that choice easy for you. I can use this blade to carve the mark of Chaos Undivided into your face.”

“Do your worst,” said Steele calmly, “but do this one thing for me, would you, Furst? Have the courage to look me in the eye as you do it.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 09.53.21

The mutant Furst didn't have time to scream.

The energy discharge from Steele's bionic eye hit him square in the face, scorched his skin, made his hair stand on end, froze the open-mouthed leer on his lips. It also propelled him backwards into the stone wall of the cell, which he hit with the back of his skull. He slumped to the floor, leaving a smear of blood, his eyes rolling into his head, his tongue hanging out.

And Steele had the keys. He had managed to wrap two fingers around them before he had struck, had almost lost them as Furst had been wrenched away from him but had kept his hold, pulling them out of the mutant's hand. He gathered them carefully into his palm, securing his grip, trying not to be impatient, to rush.

There were nine keys in the bundle, and Furst's lamp-pack had been extinguished when he'd fallen. Steele worked by touch alone, analysing the shape of each key until he found the one that matched the padlock on his chains. If he hunched his left shoulder, thrust his elbow back, twisted his wrist, he could just about reach it. After a couple of false starts, scrabbling and scratching in the dark, the teeth of the key clicked into place in the hole. It was the sweetest sound he had heard all day.

As the chains fell away, Steele's legs almost buckled beneath him. It took all the will-power he had not to fall, to crouch beside Furst, to take his knife and his lamp-pack, and then to half-stagger, half-fall out through the door that the mutant had left open, out into the cavern. Steele's right eye was blind again, but his augmented ear told him that he was alone down here. Fortunately for him.

He found a damp, uneven wall to lean against, to cool his forehead — for he was burning up, despite the freezing temperature. He gave his muscles time to adjust to being able to stretch again. His throat was parched, and there was condensation on the wall — but it was stained purple by the clinging fungus, and Steele didn't dare drink it.

When he felt able, he pushed himself up, took his own weight, lit his purloined lamp-pack and inspected his surroundings. He could see six cell doors, but the cavern meandered off into passageways and alcoves that were hidden from him. If he upped the gain on his acoustic enhancers, he could hear the soft breathing of people behind some of those doors. Some were asleep, letting out the occasional snore, while others stirred, clanking their chains, and someone was sobbing to himself.

Each door had a small inspection hatch, secured by a metal bar. Steele opened the nearest and raised his lamp, letting just enough light fall into the cell for him to make out its occupant. It was an Imperial Guardsman, in the tattered remains of a red and gold Validian flak jacket, chained as Steele had been — and to judge by the smell of him, he had been there for some time. He looked up at the colonel with a wretched expression, and gasped, "Help... help me... for the love of the Emperor, help..."

It was with some regret that Steele closed the panel, leaving the man to his fate. He would have been dead weight, more hindrance than help. And his suffering would be over soon, Steele told himself. As soon as the virus bombs fell.

He opened another hatch, and something heavy threw itself at the door. Steele leapt back by reflex, and narrowly avoided a clawed hand that swiped at him through the aperture. He discouraged

it with a blow from the hatch's locking bar, and its owner — another grey-furred mutant — howled and recoiled.

The vile creature was still howling a minute later, and Steele cursed it under his breath. He had taken cover as best he could behind a rocky outcrop, and was wondering if he dared make a sprint back to his cell, to hide in there.

He kept his good eye fixed on the steps, expecting Traitor Guardsmen to appear at their head. He cast around for a weapon with which to greet them if they did, but could see only rocks. He collected a few anyway, but was relieved not to have to use them. The mutant's howls subsided into a quiet whimpering, and Steele assumed that the traitors were more than used to hearing sounds of anguish from down here and so had not bothered to investigate.

He recognised the prisoner in the third cell at once.

He had seen him only once before, and then only in holographic effigy — but he had studied the image, committed it to his enhanced memory.

Confessor Wollkenden looked thinner than he had in his hologram. He was also dehydrated, his skin stretched like parchment, but his bone structure was unaltered. His prominent jaw was unmistakable. The hologram, Steve saw now, had also been an old one, showing the confessor in his prime.

To his surprise, Wollkenden was not chained, but instead lay curled on a filthy mattress, asleep, wisps of white hair splayed about the oval crown of his head. Steele fumbled with Furst's keys, almost dropping them as his hands trembled in anticipation. He opened the cell door, stepped inside, leaned over the prone form of its occupant and tried to shake him awake. Wollkenden didn't respond at first, and for a moment Steele feared that he might already be dead, that he might have come all this way for nothing. Then, as he tapped the confessor lightly on his pale cheeks, he rolled over onto his back, let out a soft groan, and his eyelids fluttered.

"Confessor Wollkenden. Confessor. It's OK, I'm going to get you out of here. Can you hear me? Confessor?"

Steele glanced over his shoulder anxiously. He didn't know how much time he had. Somebody had to know that Furst had come down here — and, if not, they might yet find a set of keys missing and come to investigate.

He took Wollkenden's right arm, draped it around his shoulders, put his arm around the confessor's waist and hauled him to his feet.

"We need to find you some water," he muttered. "We need to find us both some water."

He carried Wollkenden out into the cavern, walked him up and down. He was gratified to feel the confessor responding, finding his strength again — but worried, at the same time, that he wouldn't find enough.

"Who... who are you?" the confessor asked hoarsely.

"Colonel Stanislev Steele, sir, of the Valhallan 319th."

"They... sent a regiment to rescue me?" Wollkenden seemed to find the idea amusing, although Steele had no idea why. Perhaps it was just relief, or a mild form of hunger-induced hysteria that choked a spluttering laugh out of him. "I told Mangellan. I told him they wouldn't leave Helmat Wollkenden to rot in these dungeons, he is too important... too, too important."

"The Ecclesiarchy is keen to get you back, confessor," said Steele. He thought it best not to mention, for now, that he hadn't exactly brought a whole regiment with him.

And then Wollkenden was struggling in his grip, trying to stand by himself although he evidently wasn't able.

"Where are they?" he babbled. "Where are your men? I wish to address them. They need to know what is expected of them, and they will listen to me. I can inspire them, turn them into heroes."

"I know, confessor, but—"

Wollkenden squirmed around, gripped the front of Steele's ragged coat, and stared intensely into his eyes. "That's the worst thing, you know, the hardest thing about imprisonment. So much time to think, and yet... Did they tell you about the Artemis System? They say that, without my words, we would have lost a score of worlds to the Chaos blight there."

"I know you have had a distinguished career," said Steele, "but we ought to—"

"What am I, then, without an audience? What am I without my voice?"

"We'll find you an audience," Steele promised, "but not here. Mangellan is—"

"How did he die? Las-beam? Grenade? Did he live to see his Ice Palace fall? I imagine that was some sight, yes? Did you break down the walls, or just melt through them? Water running through the streets, washing away the blood... Oh, I knew you'd come, I knew you'd kill Mangellan for taking me, I told him so."

Wollkenden's voice was getting louder, more strident, and Steele couldn't interrupt him. He pressed his hand over the confessor's mouth, stifling the flow, and prayed that the Emperor would forgive his discourtesy.

"With respect, sir," he hissed, "Mangellan's palace has not fallen, and if we make too much noise his men will be down here in a second. We have to get out of here, and we have to do it quietly. Do you understand?"

Wollkenden nodded frantically. He looked almost afraid of his rescuer now; still the message appeared to have got through to him. Steele removed his hand, and guided the confessor to the steps. It became apparent, as they tried to climb them, just how weak Wollkenden truly was. He slipped on the purple fungus, and would have fallen on his face had Steele not caught him. With each subsequent step they took, he threatened to overbalance the pair of them, send them over the side.

Somehow, though, they made it to the top. Steele lowered his charge into a sitting position, cautioned him to be silent and still. He put out his lamp, flattened himself beside the doorway through which he had been dragged almost four hours before, and peered out into the Ice Palace's grand hallway.

A part of him had hoped to find the hall empty, its sentries off-duty for the night. He had known, however, that this was unlikely. Almost immediately, he heard the footsteps of a pair of Traitor Guardsmen, and he shrank back into the shadows. The traitors had hardly gone by when another pair approached from the opposite direction.

Mangellan had set regular patrols. Funny, thought Steele, how men like that preached Chaos and yet were so quick to dispense orders. That said, there was no point in his trying to time the traitors, to deduce when there might be a gap between their patrols — they would hardly be so disciplined.

There was no hope of crossing the hallway unseen, and the portcullis would be guarded anyway. But Steele remembered the ice bridges spanning the expanses between the palace's upper levels and the hive streets around them. And closing his eyes, concentrating, he also remembered something else, something to which he had paid scant attention as he had passed it earlier. He remembered a door, standing half-open — and behind that door, the base of a winding staircase.

He would have to rely on his enhanced ear to alert him to approaching patrols — and on the Emperor's grace, to ensure that the guards at the entrance wouldn't turn and see him and Wollkenden while they were exposed. But Steele thought that they could reach that door. And from there...

The palace was an enormous building. There had to be places in which they could hide. And maybe they could find weapons, and robes to disguise themselves. Maybe they could find an unguarded bridge. Anything was possible... if they could just reach that door.

Steele crouched beside Wollkenden, told him what he had planned, asked him if he felt up to it. Wollkenden stared through him, and he said, "It looks majestic out there, doesn't it? All that ice... It reminds me of the victory celebrations on Artemis Major, of the crystal statues they erected in Imperial Square."

Steele explained the plan again, patiently. Then he helped Wollkenden up to the doorway and waited.

They crept out behind the next two-man patrol, Steele praying that neither of the traitors would look over their shoulders. He could already hear the next pair, tramping towards them. They had... his processors quickly worked out the figure... eleven seconds before they came into view around the grand staircase. He tried to pick up the pace, but Wollkenden chose that moment to apparently lose all strength in his legs. He let out a grunt as Steele caught him, and the colonel felt his heart freeze, expecting the sound to reveal them.

Five seconds... and the door, that inviting door, was still an unattainable four metres away.

Wollkenden's chin sagged onto his chest. He was losing consciousness, but they had come too far to turn back now. Steele bundled the confessor's limp body into his arms, almost staggered by the weight. He would have to run, have to sacrifice silence for speed.

He had made it all of three paces when Wollkenden began to struggle violently. "No!" he yelled. "No, you won't take me through that door, you won't put me in chains again!"

Steele tried to hush him, made to put his hand over the confessor's mouth again, but it was already far, far too late.

Wollkenden wriggled out of his grip, tried to stand, but fell to his knees, and crawled up to an ice statue of a leering, gargoyle-like figure. "Help me," he beseeched it, extending his clasped hands towards it as if in prayer. "It is your duty to help me, for the Emperor, for the score of worlds I liberated from—"

There was more, much more. But Steele heard none of it — because Traitor Guardsmen were streaming in from all directions, even through the door that he had hoped would be his escape route. And even if he had been in any condition to fight them, he could never have won. Even if he could have run, there was nowhere he could have run to.

They were dragged along endless passageways, Steele and Wollkenden, by cultists and traitors — their numbers growing as more of their kind rushed out of their rooms or abandoned patrols to join the throng, until the two prisoners were all but borne aloft on a fast-moving river of bodies.

Steele said nothing, bearing his fate stoically, but Wollkenden was delirious. He was waving to the crowd, thanking them, assuring them that a parade was not necessary, that he had only done what any man of his considerable talents would do.

They emerged, at last, into a large courtyard, bordered by four sheer walls, overlooked by hundreds of windows. Ice trees grew around its edges, reaching sizes of a hundred storeys tall, their branches spreading across the yard to intertwine with each other. Moonlight streamed in through this intricate frozen web, and bathed the courtyard in a cool shade of blue.

Overlooked amid the crowd, one cultist watched all this, and tried his best not to rub shoulders with those around him. He kept his hood pulled over his head, concealing his face, and was careful not to catch anybody's eye. When the crowd yelled out anti-Imperium slogans, he pretended to join in, although he couldn't bring himself to give voice to the words.

A huge stone dais stood in the centre of the courtyard — and from this, there rose an ice column, eight-pointed like the Chaos star, its sides engraved with sigils that hurt the naked eye to look at them. Steele and Wollkenden were thrust against two of the column's points, secured to them with chains.

That was when Mangellan appeared, with an imposing figure marching at his shoulder. The lone cultist recognised the Chaos Space Marine, and could tell that he had been in a fight since last he had seen him. His black power armour was damaged, his face bloodied. Still, the crowd parted as he moved through it, even the heretics keen to give this abomination a wide berth.

Shuffling at Mangellan's heels was his disgusting, mutated little servant, his head bandaged. The lone cultist had heard that his name was Furst, that he was a man of scant intellect — but favoured by Mangellan, perhaps for that very reason. The rumours had been rife since the attempted escape of

Steele and Wollkenden that it was Furst who had let them go. It seemed that Mangellan either didn't believe those rumours or did not care.

As the high priest mounted the dais, Wollkenden seemed to recognise him, to realise where he was at last, and he started to yell out, to struggle. Mangellan ignored him, turning to his audience, raising his hands for silence. It took a moment for the clamour to subside, and then Mangellan assembled a squad of Traitor Guardsmen and instructed them to patrol the courtyard for the rest of the night, to keep a close eye on the prisoners. The Chaos Space Marine had taken up a position at a back corner of the dais, and it looked like he intended to stay put too.

"Our guests will not trouble us much longer," Mangellan assured his flock. "Our plans remain as they were. In four hours' time, we will meet here to begin the ceremony. As the first light of dawn touches the courtyard, we will deliver not one but two noble souls to our gods."

The lone cultist had heard enough.

The crowd was shouting, roaring its approval of Mangellan's plan. The cultist slipped with surprising ease through the crush of bodies, heading for the archway through which most of them had entered. He didn't want to be the first to leave, so he waited nervously for the crowd to begin to disperse, to return to their rooms or their duties in twos and threes, chattering about the undoubted spectacle to come.

He retraced his steps through the Ice Palace, trying not to appear too hurried. As the other cultists peeled off around him, streaming up staircases, he was left on his own for a moment. He ducked into a side passageway, narrow, dark, uncarpeted, its floor smooth and slippery in contrast to the well-trodden paths elsewhere.

An iron door caught in its ice frame, and it took all the cultist's strength to wrench it free. He stepped through onto a flight of stone steps, and produced a lamp-pack from beneath his robes to light the way down into a dank cave.

This unnatural system extended, as far as he had been able to tell, beneath the whole of the Ice Palace. The dungeons, he had learned, were housed in a part of it — a part that, after much searching, he had reluctantly accepted could not be reached except through the palace itself — as were various wine cellars and treasure troves housing the spoils of the Chaos army's recent victory. This cave, however, had not found a use yet. Indeed, the cultist had seen no sign that anyone had passed this way before him.

It was with some relief, then, that he shucked off his purloined robes, and became Trooper Palinev of the Imperial Guard again.

He squeezed through a niche in the rock wall into a tiny antechamber. Lying there, where he could not be seen from the steps, was the corpse of a defrocked cultist, his throat slit. The man had made the fatal error of passing the wrong door at the wrong moment. And of being about Palinev's size.

A hole had been knocked through the wall of the small cave. Palinev had to lie on his stomach in order to squeeze through it. He lowered himself feet first, and dropped the last half-metre into the tunnel below. He landed on a precarious ledge, its brickwork slimy with sewer water — and immediately, dark shapes rose around him.

Raising his lamp-pack, he identified those shapes as his comrades. Anakora and Mikhaevlev greeted the scout's return with relief, and quickly woke Sergeant Gavotski as they had been instructed. The Ice Warriors had been taking the opportunity to catch up on their sleep, spread out across the ledge, while they awaited the outcome of Palinev's scouting mission — although of course they had left two troopers on watch.

Everyone was cheered by the news that both Wollkenden and Steele were alive. Beside that, the matter of rescuing them seemed almost inconsequential. Palinev had to remind himself that they still had much to do.

"We could go in there now," said Gavotski, "but it sounds as if the colonel and the confessor are well-guarded, and we're dog-tired. We can't take out two squads of traitors, not before they can

raise the alarm and surround us. I suggest we wait until this ceremony of theirs has started. At least then we'll know where most of the heretics are, and that they'll be distracted. We should have the run of the palace."

"Until we reach that courtyard," said Mikhaelev, as always sounding the first note of caution. "Then we'll have to fight our way through the heretics, and they'll outnumber us by hundreds to one."

"You're right," said Gavotski, with a quiet smile. "They won't know what's hit them."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 04.22.14

Steele wished he could close his senses to it all.

He wished he couldn't hear the baying of the heretics — hundreds of them were packed into the courtyard, standing in the arched doorways, even hanging out of the surrounding windows. He wished he couldn't feel the touch of the cultists that had gathered around him, preparing him, painting their vile symbols on his face and his exposed chest. He wished he couldn't smell the stink of the incense burner that Furst carried, waving it under Steele's nose as if it were some kind of a trophy, or feel the evil presence of the Chaos Space Marine lurking behind his right shoulder.

And he wished he couldn't hear Wollkenden, to his left, still chained to the eight-pointed ice pillar as was Steele, but whimpering and pleading for mercy. The so-called saviour of the Artemis system, his demeanour shaming his legend.

Steele wasn't afraid to die. Even now, he would have given his life gladly in exchange for the confessor's freedom. But he could think of nothing worse than this: to die a failure.

He closed his good eye, tried to blot it all out, tried to cast his mind back to a happier time, a more serene time, a more welcome ceremony. It seemed like months — although, in fact, little more than a day and a half had passed — since he had stood beside the Termite borer, his head bowed, to receive the blessing of an Imperial priest.

Had the Ecclesiarchy known, then, that this was to be his fate? Had they sanctified his soul to deny it to the Chaos gods? He prayed that this might be the case. He prayed as hard and as loud as he could, tried to fill his own head with the uplifting sound.

"Your Emperor can't save you now," Furst hissed spitefully in Steele's ear.

The mutant's master, Mangellan, was on the dais too, strutting around, circling his captives, waving his sceptre, playing to the crowd. His voice rose and fell as he half-chanted, half-sang words in some ancient, evil language — words that Steele didn't understand, didn't want to understand. He knew that his augmented brain wouldn't let him forget those words; he couldn't bear that they would be captured inside him, a part of him. They were dark words, cold words. Words that seemed to distort space itself, to punch open a channel to a more malignant realm.

But the words were, he sensed, coming to an end. Mangellan had whipped his audience into a frenzy. He was gesturing at the pillar, at the readied sacrifices — the colonel and the confessor — with the sceptre in one hand and a large, ornamental dagger clutched by the jewelled hilt in the other.

And now he turned to Steele, rested the dagger's point on his chest, traced the outlines of the symbols that had been daubed onto his skin — and Mangellan sighed, and in his calm, honeyed voice, he said, "You should have joined us when I gave you the chance. A shame that such a spirit, such an intellect, as yours should have been wasted on a lifetime of servitude to an ungrateful master. You could have been anything you wanted to be, Colonel Steele."

Steele looked him in the eye, and he said, "I was."

And at that moment, a ray of sunlight streamed into the courtyard, through the network of ice-formed branches above their heads, and glinted off the dagger as Mangellan drew it back, let the crowd see its blade for a final time as he prepared to plunge it into its first victim.

"Do it, master," breathed Furst eagerly. "Do it now! Cut out their hearts!"

That was when the first bomb went off.

Grayle and Palinev had timed their ascent to the dais perfectly.

Cloaked in their purloined robes, they had given themselves enough time to reach Wollkenden and Steele respectively — but not quite enough for the cultists to realise that their numbers had been swelled by two, to start asking questions.

The explosion ripped through the courtyard, incinerating heretics by the score in a great blossom of fire. They hadn't seen it coming, hadn't spotted that their enemies were walking among them in disguise. And Mikhaelev had placed his demolition charge well. It collapsed two huge ice trees, their razor branches falling clear of the dais and into the crowd, where they sliced, dismembered and decapitated. Grayle just hoped that his comrade was not among the casualties, that he had had time to get clear. He concentrated on his own task, concealing his lasgun as best he could with his body as he placed its muzzle to Wollkenden's chains.

The heretics were screaming, surging away from the site of the first blast... to where the second was waiting.

The courtyard became a seething mass of panic. None of the heretics knew which way to run, but they trampled each other in their haste to run somewhere.

A hand came down on Grayle's shoulder; he was spun around to face a suspicious cultist, whose eyes widened at the sight of a stranger's features beneath the hood. The cultist opened his mouth to yell a warning that might have been heard by the augmented ears of the Chaos Space Marine even over all the noise. Two las-beams struck him in the head, one more in the shoulder, and he went down.

More beams flashed from the surrounding windows, and the cultists on the dais cried out, scattered, leapt into the turmoil around them rather than remain sitting ducks. Grayle prayed that his comrades knew who they were shooting at, that they wouldn't mistake him and Palinev for their targets.

Most of their fire, in fact, was directed at Mangellan — but he was well-protected, by the Traitor Guardsmen around him, bustling him away down the dais steps. Furst scurried along behind them, keeping close, benefiting from their armour, although Grayle couldn't tell if the traitors had even seen him in their wake.

And then there was the Chaos Space Marine.

He leapt from the dais, reaching the edge of the courtyard with one powerful spring. He smacked into the palace wall, punching through the ice to make handholds for himself, started to haul himself upwards. Grayle saw Blonsky's face in a window, paling as a gauntleted hand clamped onto the sill in front of him. He drove his gun butt into the Chaos Space Marine's fingers, but couldn't dislodge them. He turned and ran, disappearing from Grayle's view as his pursuer squeezed his massive form through the small window after him.

In the confusion, no one had thought to secure the would-be sacrifices. Perhaps Mangellan thought them secure enough, hadn't realised that his enemies had already got to them. Grayle's lasgun burnt through Wollkenden's chains at last, and the confessor fell into his arms.

"Is it my turn to speak?" he asked weakly. "I must say, I expected a little more discipline from the troops. Obviously, I've been gone too long. That's the trouble these days, no leadership."

"Please, confessor," said Grayle, "I'm trying to rescue you. Just... just hold still... sir, please... I need to get this cloak over your head."

"Take your hands off me!" bellowed Wollkenden — and he pushed Grayle aside, took his own weight unsteadily, and looked around like a startled rabbit about to bolt...

...as Steele, having been freed and disguised by Palinev, strode up beside him and, without breaking his step, threw a punch to Wollkenden's head that knocked him spark out. Grayle and Palinev watched in abject astonishment as the colonel hoisted the confessor's limp body over his shoulders.

"Well?" he barked at them. "Are we getting out of here or what?"

Barreski could hardly breathe.

The explosions had kicked up twin plumes of smoke, which were settling now upon the occupants of the courtyard. The Chaos worshippers were packed too tightly around him, restricting his movement, their elbows digging into his ribs and his stomach. He braced himself against them, knowing that if he let his guard down for an instant he would be crushed between them or just overrun.

He had one advantage, though, over the heretics. He knew where the bombs were — or rather, where they had been, because Mikhaelev had only had two demolition charges left and they had both blown. Barreski had placed one himself, and was proud of his handiwork, the carnage he had caused.

A hapless cultist lost his footing and fell coughing against the disguised Ice Warrior. Barreski took the opportunity to slip his knife into the man's heart, let him slide to the floor. Another one less to worry about, he thought.

His quarter of the crowd appeared to have reached an unspoken consensus. They had chosen an archway, an escape route, through which to evacuate, had started to move together instead of fighting each other. Barreski hoisted himself onto the shoulders of a protesting cultist in front of him, and he screamed out, "Another bomb! Look! There it is! Can't you see it? In the branches of that tree!"

No one could see the bomb, because it didn't exist. Still, Barreski's words were enough to make a significant number of the heretics turn back, to fight once more against the tide of their fellows, to spread more panic.

He glanced up at the dais, and saw that it was empty. Grayle and Palinev would be heading for their preselected exit, taking Steele and Wollkenden with them. He muttered a quick prayer for their safety. It was time for him to get out of here himself.

Palinev had chosen a different way out for Barreski, a closer one to his position. He had scouted a route for him back to the sewer tunnel, made sure that he had memorised the directions. Barreski pressed his elbows into service, and started to force his way across the yard.

And that was when he saw Mangellan, his traitor escort clearing a path for him, using their lasguns when they had to. And he was just a few metres away...

He couldn't resist it. He knew it meant giving himself away, but he snuck his lasgun out from beneath his robes, flicked its power pack to full auto and squeezed off ten las-beams in the high priest's direction.

The traitors reacted quickly, putting themselves in the line of fire, deflecting most of it with their armour... most of it... Barreski gave a triumphant cry as one of his beams glanced across Mangellan's face, causing him to scream out, to clap his hands to his eyes. But now he had his own safety to worry about.

Already, the traitors were starting to move towards him. He had to lose himself again. He put his head down, tried to slip away amid the other black cloaks, but he was brought up short by a brawny cultist with a knife.

"Did you see him?" bluffed Barreski, pointing wildly. "He had a bomb, and he was coming up behind the high priest. He would have killed him if I hadn't... Look, you need to defend yourself!" He thrust his lasgun into the cultist's hands while he was still gaping, trying to work out what it was he had seen.

Then Barreski was gone, leaving the brawny cultist with the weapon. Which was how the Traitor Guardsmen found him, a second later.

"Space Marines! Coming up the passageway!" Pozhar hated this.

He was stationed in one of the arched doorways into the palace proper, his job to keep it as clear as he could for Steele and Wollkenden's escape. This meant pretending to be one of the heretics — almost as bad, pretending to be afraid — but Gavotski had given him no say in the matter.

Few of the cultists were coming this way, anyway. Mikhaelev and Barreski had placed their charges carefully, herding them in the opposite direction — and of those who did try to pass Pozhar, about half were turned back by his feigned panic. Still, there were some who didn't seem to hear him, or were so eager to get out of the courtyard that they took their chances. As one of them bumped into him, it was all he could do not to draw his lasgun and start shooting.

"They... they've got chainswords!" he shouted desperately after the escapees. "And guns! Big guns!"

"Pozhar!"

He turned at the sound of his name, couldn't see who had called it at first. In a yard full of robed figures, it was near impossible to tell which ones were his comrades. Then he recognised the slight form of Palinev — and there, beside him, that had to be Grayle. And between them...

Pozhar raced forward, dived into the crowd, helped Palinev to lift the unconscious Wollkenden. He had discarded his sling, declaring himself healed; still, this exercise of his muscles sent a lance of pain down his right arm.

"What happened?" he cried. "What went wrong?"

"It's okay, trooper," said Steele breathlessly, picking himself up, leaning on Palinev. "I just... overestimated my strength, that's all. Still tired... Perhaps you and Grayle could... could look after Confessor Wollkenden for me?"

Pozhar would have accepted that burden gladly. But at that moment, he heard gunfire from somewhere close by, and he turned to see a squad of Traitor Guardsmen pushing their way towards the Ice Warriors. They were brandishing lasguns, firing into the air so that the heretics parted before them.

Pozhar drew his gun, shouting to Grayle and Palinev, "Go! Get the confessor and the colonel out of here. I'll hold them off!"

And he started firing — not upwards, but straight into the bodies in front of him.

The cultists were taken unawares. They fell like dominoes, each hit felling three or more of them — and the ripple effect spread back to the Traitor Guardsmen, blocking their path, threatening to knock them down too. They tried to fire back, but the seething mass of people between them and Pozhar made it an impossible shot, and they only succeeded in taking out a few more of their own.

He could have gone after the others, then, could have taken the chance that he had delayed their pursuers long enough for them all to escape. Yes, he could have done that...

The cultists between Pozhar and the Traitor Guardsmen had begun to rally, identified the threat in their midst and, unable to flee, swarmed him instead. Few of them were trained fighters — half of them were women — but they had overwhelming numbers on their side. They punched the Ice Warrior, clawed at him, dragged him down. He saw the glint of a knife blade, too late to avoid its swipe, felt it breaking the synth-skin on his stomach where the sewer creature had holed him with its spines. His lasgun was snatched from him. He took blow after blow to his head. He wasn't quite sure what kept him from falling down — but as long as he was standing, he would fight.

Pozhar was a whirlwind of limbs, punching, kicking, scratching, defying any of his foes to get a firm hold on him.

And clutched in his left fist, he held his ultimate weapon: the primed frag grenade that would collapse the archway behind Steele and the others, slow down anyone who tried to follow them — and also ensure that the heretics that killed him would die by his side. Just as he had planned would happen outside Alpha Hive two mornings ago.

He wondered if this, then, was what the Emperor had spared him for on that occasion. He wanted to believe this. But the itchy grey fur was all over his chest, spreading down his back, and he could no longer open his right hand fully. His fingers had hunched over and he thought his

fingernails had grown longer, and Pozhar knew in his heart that his god could have played no part in any of that.

He hadn't come into this battle with the intention of dying in it. At least, he didn't think he had. But the only thing keeping his secret now, he was sure, was the black cloak he was wearing, and he couldn't bear to see the expressions of his comrades, didn't want to have to face their judgement, when that cloak came off.

The Traitor Guardsmen were almost upon him. Another few seconds, and they would have a clear shot, would be able to finish him. He activated the grenade, on a short fuse, and he lured them back towards the archway.

It was better this way, he thought.

Better that his body be blown apart, and then liquefied by the virus bombs before any piece of him could suffer the ignominy of being flung into a Chaos burial pit. Better that no one should have the chance to inspect his remains, that his comrades, let alone his commanders, should never learn of his shame.

Better to let them all believe that Trooper Pozhar died a hero.

Mangellan was blind.

He hadn't seen the las-beam that had hit him, his eyes already teary with smoke. There had just been a flash, and a searing pain. He felt as if his face was on fire. He couldn't see where he was going, didn't know what was happening, he had to trust to his escorts to guide him to safety.

He stumbled into the cooling embrace of his palace, his magnificent Ice Palace, his gods' gift to him — but, for the first time, he felt unsafe within its walls.

He could hear running footsteps, cultists evacuating around him, and he yelled at the Traitor Guardsmen to keep them away from him, to trust no one.

He felt an insistent tugging at his sleeve, heard Furst's voice ask, "Why are we running, master? What about the sacrifices? Who is guarding them?"

He brushed the irritant away.

"They are chained!" he insisted, leaning against the wall to compose himself, rubbing his eyes and blinking, praying to his gods that the blindness might only be temporary.

"But if their allies have come to free them—"

"Try to use your brains, Furst," Mangellan snapped, "such as they are. Steele brought only a handful of soldiers into our hive. How could they have penetrated this palace, my palace, without our knowing about it? No, this attack has come from the inside, from someone who is jealous of all I have achieved, the power I have earned, someone who wished to sully my most glorious moment."

"I am sure you are correct, master, but—"

"I always knew it would happen. I knew the priests were always scheming and plotting, but to act so boldly... Which of them was it? What do you say, Furst?"

"I... I wouldn't know, master. I—"

Mangellan lashed out, trying to grab Furst by his robes. He felt his hand brush against the loathsome little mutant but failed to take hold of him.

"*You* are always sneaking about," he growled, "lurking in places you should not be, overhearing what you should not have heard. Tell me, Furst, who is to blame for this attack upon my person, this affront to the gods I serve?"

"Nobody, master. None of us would dare cross you in this way."

"You saw him, didn't you! If not the traitor who planted the bombs, then certainly the wretched opportunist who shot at me, who dared take my sight! I will find him, Furst, and when I am through with him, he will wish he... he..."

Mangellan hadn't felt the knife enter his stomach, so quick and clean had been the incision. Only now, as he felt his blood spill out, as a dull pain spread through him as if he had been kicked... only now that he realised what had happened.

He was speechless, weak, dizzy. He could only listen in uncomprehending horror as Furst leaned close to his ear — Mangellan's legs must have buckled, making him slide down the wall that was supporting him, bringing him down to the mutant's level — and whispered to him, "*You* are the one to blame. You presumed too much, thought too much of yourself, and now look what you have wrought. A 'handful' of Emperor-lovers has humiliated us, brought you to this. I hear the gods — oh, you were so certain they would not deign to speak to one such as I, that I would not understand them — but I hear them, and they are disappointed with you. You have failed them, Mangellan."

He was on the floor, although he didn't remember falling. He tried to lift his hands, tried to turn his head to where he imagined his protectors might be, tried to cry out to them, "Guards! Guards, attend me!"

"They won't help you," Furst's voice said through the deepening darkness. "They too know that this is the gods' will. And they now serve a new master."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 03.34.45

The room was small, not much bigger than the apartment blocks on the lower hive levels. It was dominated by a single bed, though there was plenty of junk piled in the narrow spaces around it: bits of furniture, clothing, broken lamps, even a couple of paintings with their corners touched by fire.

The walls were made of ice, of course. A large, eight-pointed star had been painted clumsily on one, so that black rivulets ran from it to the floor.

It didn't surprise Blonsky that, with all the power he had, all the space available in the near-emptied hive and in the Ice Palace, Mangellan still had his followers live like this. The harder they had to work to survive, the less time they had to plot against him. Not that the occupant of this room could care much any more.

He lay crumpled beneath the window to the courtyard, through which he had been leaning when Blonsky had kicked open his door. Some Ice Warriors held that it was wrong to shoot an enemy in the back, but Blonsky disagreed. All that mattered was that the heretic was vanquished. To fail to take that shot was the sin.

He only wished he had had a few more shots at Mangellan. He had been taking aim when he had seen that Grayle was in trouble, had had to help him out instead. And the high priest's guards had reacted too fast, faster than he had expected.

One of them was here now. The Chaos Space Marine. His bulk filled the window frame, casting the small room into shadow. Blonsky had backed up as far as the door, scrambling over the bed, wading through the junk, firing his lasgun, knowing it would do little damage, hoping at least to throw off the Chaos Marine's balance, make him lose his grip on the outside wall and fall.

He should have given up by now, should have withdrawn.

He hurled a frag grenade, but the Chaos Space Marine caught it easily, and tossed it over his shoulder to erupt in the sky above the courtyard. And then he was inside the room, and Blonsky was out of both ammunition and time.

The Chaos Space Marine raised his gun and fired, and Blonsky slammed the door between them and ran as bolts punched through the wood. Barely a second later, he heard a cracking, wrenching sound as the door was torn from its ice frame.

He raced along empty passageways, sprang down a flight of steps, but his pursuer remained doggedly on his heels. Blonsky could hear his heavy footsteps, thump, thump, thumping behind him. The only thing that kept the Chaos Space Marine from closing the gap between them was the fact that the Ice Warrior was lighter, more lithe, able to corner more efficiently on the slippery, uncarpeted floors.

He sped past two shaken cultists, refugees from the courtyard, and was away from them before they could react to his presence. Next time, he knew he might not be so lucky. He rounded two corners in quick succession, and heard a great crash behind him as the Chaos Space Marine lost control and slammed into a wall. For the first time, Blonsky had a few seconds' grace, and he knew he couldn't wait for a better chance. He chose a door at random, and found himself in a banquet hall, decorated in rich shades of brown and red with tapestries hanging from the walls.

He had intended to find a hiding place, and hope that the Chaos Space Marine went past. He had known that this was a long shot, but it was the best he had had. He got lucky, again. There were

more doors out of the room, on opposite walls at its far end. He hurried to one of them, and was turning the handle as the main door was smashed open, quivering on its hinges.

The Chaos Space Marine leapt into the room, propelling himself over the table. Blonsky didn't wait for him to land. He raced through a small kitchen and out into another passageway, worried that he was starting to lose his bearings, that he might not be able to find his way out. As if that was the worst of his problems.

He had gained some distance on the Chaos Marine, but it was still behind him. He could still hear its footsteps. It just kept on coming.

There were fewer heretics on their heels than Palinev had feared.

He didn't stop to ask why, he just counted his blessings. He suspected that the explosion he had heard a moment ago, the distinctive burst of a frag grenade, might have had something to do with it. He didn't stop to wonder what had happened to Pozhar, why he hadn't followed his comrades out of the courtyard, because he guessed he would not like the answer.

Anyway, there were still some heretics out here — cultists and a few Traitor Guardsmen who had escaped before the Ice Warriors had, who were starting to regain their senses, to gather and to talk, and to look for the threat in their midst.

And they found it.

"It's him!" a cultist screamed, pointing at Steele, her finger trembling. Then her eyes turned to Confessor Wollkenden, still unconscious, slung over Grayle's shoulder. "It's both of them. The sacrifices! They're escaping with the sacrifices! They—"

Palinev shot her through the head, but it was too late. More cultists were coming at them with knives, while others hung back, shouldering lasguns. They must have looked like easy pickings, Steele still leaning on Palinev's shoulder, Grayle encumbered by Wollkenden. But Steele was not as helpless as he seemed. He seized two incoming cultists by their robes, smashed their heads together, thrust them into the path of the first las-beams.

Taking advantage of their temporary human shields, the Ice Warriors ducked into a side passageway — but it came to a dead end, a few metres along.

Steele snatched Grayle's lasgun from him and ordered him to keep back, to keep Wollkenden out of the line of fire. Palinev was already strafing the corridor behind them, discouraging the heretics from approaching, forcing them to run for cover. As his power pack ran dry, Steele took his place and continued the barrage. Palinev reloaded and was able to relieve the colonel in turn.

"We can't keep this up," Steele grumbled. "The longer we're pinned down here, the more attention we'll draw. And once that Chaos Space Marine gets wind of our location..." He didn't have to complete the sentence.

"Can we burn through the walls?" asked Palinev.

"I doubt it," said Grayle. "We could try, but remember the glacier, remember how it re-formed around the Termite."

Palinev was firing into an empty passageway. He eased his finger off the trigger, thinking to conserve power — and immediately, four Traitor Guardsmen rushed his position. He fired in concert with Steele, counting them down, one, two, three... but the last of them refused to fall. It just kept on advancing.

The fourth traitor had hung back, using his fellows as cover so that only when he was almost upon the Ice Warriors did they have a clear shot at him. Their beams glanced off his flak jacket, failing to score that critical hit — and Palinev could see behind the traitor the shapes of more of his kind beginning to rise, to crane forward, ready to advance as soon as he engaged the enemy.

They were to be disappointed. The traitor staggered up to the corner, raised his gun, collapsed and died at Palinev's feet.

Steele strafed the corridor for another few seconds, then turned to his two troopers. "This is what we're going to do," he said. "How many frag grenades do you have left between you? We're going to pitch the whole damn lot of them out there, at the heretics, bring down the roof if we can. And then we're going to run like hell in the other direction. Palinev, you must know where we're going, you take point. Grayle, behind him, with Wollkenden. I'll bring up the rear, lay down covering fire, make sure that anyone who survives the explosion doesn't dare so much as glance after us."

"I should take the rear, sir," said Grayle. "It's too dangerous for—"

"Those are my orders, trooper," interrupted Steele.

"At least take my greatcoat. Yours is in shreds. One bull's-eye from a lasgun and—"

Steele shook his head. "You have the most important job of any of us. I'm not strong enough yet to carry the confessor. You have to protect him. We move on my mark. Three, two, one... Palinev, do you hear that?"

Palinev did hear it, although his ears were a second behind the colonel's. "Gunfire, sir. To the right of us. It must be the others. They had to come this way too. They must have come up behind the heretics, taken them by surprise."

Steele considered that news for a moment, then a tight smile pulled at his lips and he hefted Grayle's lasgun. "In that case," he said, "change of plan."

Anakora had known it wouldn't be easy. No matter how much confusion, how many distractions, the Ice Warriors could cause, no matter how good their disguises nor how skilled they were, she had not expected to get out of the Ice Palace without a fight.

Already they appeared to have lost Blonsky; having abandoned their sniping positions up above, she and Gavotski had planned to meet him at the base of a flight of stairs. They had waited as long as they could.

They had set off running at first, but slowed down as they had begun to run into heretics from the courtyard. They had tried to look less like they had an urgent purpose, less like they were trying to get out. Anakora's stomach had tightened as a squad of Traitor Guardsmen had rushed out of a side passageway into their path, but they had drawn their cultists' robes around themselves, bowed their heads and kept their cool, and the traitors had hurried right on by.

Not long after that, their path had converged with those of Barreski and Mikhaelev, and Anakora was glad that two comrades at least had made it this far.

And then they had heard las-fire, and she had feared the worst.

A score of heretics had gathered at a four-way junction, and more were rushing up to join them from all directions. No one had questioned the arrival of what they took to be four more reinforcements to their cause. The heretics were laying siege to an opening in the wall a few metres away, being kept at bay only by a volley of las-fire from said opening. Anakora had guessed who was wielding the guns, even before she had caught a glimpse of Colonel Steele's face.

A dark-skinned Traitor Guardsman with narrow eyes and pinched nostrils had taken command. He was barking out orders: "Hold your fire! Let the Emperor-lovers discharge their power packs, then they'll be defenceless."

Gavotski moved up behind him, tapped him on the shoulder — and the traitor turned to find himself staring down a gun barrel. A las-beam stabbed into his right eye and fried his brain. The other three Ice Warriors took this as their cue to act. Anakora took another traitor by surprise and slit his throat with her knife. Barreski tried to do likewise, but his chosen victim had faster reflexes and was able to throw off his hold. And Mikhaelev was firing his lasgun on full auto, apparently indiscriminately, creating the maximum amount of panic.

As in the courtyard, the cultists were confused, terrified by this sudden threat in their midst, by the loss of their leader. Some of them fled. But others chose to fight back.

At first, the Ice Warriors had the advantage. The cultists still weren't quite sure who their enemies were, which of the robed figures around them they could trust, to whom they could turn their backs. It made them fight with one eye over their shoulders, which proved to be the downfall of many of them. Anakora bludgeoned two to the ground with her fists, and gutted a third with her blade. She smiled to herself as a disoriented cultist plunged a knife into a friend's ribs. His fellows interpreted his mistake as an act of treachery and fell upon him.

The Traitor Guardsmen, however — the few that remained — were more perceptive, zeroing in on their true foes. Anakora found herself in a knife fight with one, straining to get her blade past his defences, aware that every second he could keep her occupied was a second longer for his allies to rally.

Sure enough, she felt hands grasping at her from behind, an arm around her throat, and she was held by two cultists. If they had been armed, she would have been dead already. But the Traitor Guardsman did have a knife, and Anakora's arms were pinned so that all she could do to defend herself was to kick out at him, at the same time pushing backwards, trying to slam her captors into the wall, to make them release their grips. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Mikhaev was in trouble too, forced onto his knees.

And then, once again, the tide of battle turned — as Colonel Steele and Palinev broke cover and came racing onto the scene with guns blazing.

They were running again.

Somehow they always seemed to be running — and Gavotski's lungs were burning, his legs aching, and he began to wonder if he was finally getting too old for this.

They had disengaged from the melee as soon as they were able, knowing that they couldn't win that fight, that their enemies' numbers would just keep on growing. There were Traitor Guardsmen at their heels, sending las-beams after them. The Ice Warriors were returning fire as best they could. Barreski and Grayle, both of whom seemed to have lost their guns, were carrying Wollkenden.

And as they hurried past a junction, Gavotski saw a robed figure barrelling down the connecting corridor towards them. He whirled, brought up his lasgun... and the figure skidded to a halt, threw up his hands and whipped back his hood, to reveal the flushed face of Trooper Blonsky.

"He... he's behind me!" the new arrival panted, gesturing over his shoulder.

And there he was now: the Chaos Space Marine, stumbling into view just a couple of hundred metres behind Blonsky, raising a bolt pistol. Gavotski grabbed his exhausted comrade, bundled him around the corner, and pushed him off after the others. He hurled a frag grenade at the Chaos Marine in the hope of at least slowing him down, and then he followed at full pelt.

They returned, at last, to the stone cellar through which they had entered the Ice Palace an hour ago. Anakora and Mikhaev took up positions in the doorway, firing out into the corridor, as the others negotiated the slippery steps and began to squeeze themselves, one by one, through the hole in the wall.

This rearguard action would buy them time, but not much. Gavotski knew that once the Chaos Space Marine caught up with them, his two comrades would have no choice but to fall back.

He helped Grayle feed Wollkenden through the hole headfirst, to Barreski and Palinev on the far side, below. Then he wriggled through himself, and dropped down into the sewer tunnel. Colonel Steele hadn't seen this side of Iota Hive before, and he was inspecting his surroundings in the glow of his comrades' lamp-packs.

Palinev set off along the narrow brick ledge, Barreski and Grayle hauling Wollkenden along after him. Steele shouted at them to wait. "We need to head for the spaceport," he said. "If there's still a way off this planet, one we can reach in time, that's where it'll be. And it's in that direction." He pointed through the wall, and Gavotski didn't doubt for a second that he knew what he was talking about.

“I don’t know if we can get through that way, sir,” said Palinev. “These tunnels are a maze. We might end up being cornered, and with that Traitor Space Marine on our tails...”

“Yeah,” Barreski muttered to Blonsky, “thanks for leading that straight to us.”

“And the less time we spend down here,” said Gavotski, “the better.” Catching Steele’s inquisitive look, he said, “I’ll explain later. With your permission, sir, I’d like to make our way back to the mutant chapel. I’ll, ah, explain about that too. We can get our bearings there, and strike out for the port above ground. We might even get some help, someone to run interference for us.”

Steele nodded, accepting that his sergeant knew the situation better than he did at the moment — and the Ice Warriors set off again. Gavotski lingered behind, to help first Mikhaevlev and then Anakora down from the cellar. As Anakora’s first foot touched down, Gavotski saw the muzzle of a bolt pistol poking through the entrance hole above her, and he threw himself at the startled trooper, flattening them both against the side of the tunnel.

A hail of bolts rained down at their backs, and churned up the black water below them. They waited for a lull in the firing, then they hurried after their comrades. The last of them, Mikhaevlev, was just disappearing through a hole in the wall — and as Gavotski reached the hole, he heard a heavy thud behind him, and he turned to look, and found his worst fear realised.

The Chaos Space Marine had just dropped into the tunnel, and was turning to follow them. But there was something else too, something in the water.

And the water erupted, and a monster filled the tunnel, looming over the new arrival, its jaws darting for his throat: a sewer creature, perhaps attracted by the Chaos Space Marine’s own bolter fire — a creature like the one the Ice Warriors had fought earlier, only Gavotski thought this one might have been even larger.

The Chaos Space Marine was trying to bat its thrusting head away from him, swiping at the creature with his chainsword, carving into its scales, drawing black blood. But Gavotski didn’t wait to see the outcome of their battle.

He slipped away from there, and he kept on running.

There had been rubble on top of the manhole cover.

Palinev had been unable to shift it. Blonsky had volunteered to climb the ladder instead, to put his shoulder to the task. By now, of course, they had all been worried about what they might find out there, in the chapel, on the surface. Steele had listened for a moment, and assured his squad that he could hear nobody. No foes. But no friends either.

The cover had yielded at last, and Blonsky had been the first to climb through it, to stand blinking in the unexpected light, though the others had soon joined him.

The Chaos forces had done a more thorough job, this time.

They had left no walls of the chapel standing. They had demolished its columns, brought down its roof. They had burned what was left of its pews, and smashed its altar beyond all hope of reclamation. The smell of cordite still hung heavy in the air, as did the altogether more rotten stench of death.

Blonsky jabbed at the nearest corpse with his toe, turned it over to inspect it properly. He didn’t want to stoop, didn’t want to get closer to it than he already was. It was a mutant, of course. Its grey fur was matted with dark blood, beneath its torn blue smock. It might have been one of the loyalists they had met, one to which they had talked. He couldn’t tell. They all looked the same to him.

“What happened here?” asked Steele. Gavotski told him about the mutants, their chapel and their apparent desire to help. Steele frowned and said nothing. Blonsky guessed that he was unhappy about his men allying themselves with the impure, but he didn’t want to question his sergeant’s judgement, not in front of the troopers.

“Anyway,” sighed Gavotski, “it seems they got what they wanted. They died, fighting. For the Emperor.”

“It must have happened just after we left,” said Palinev. “Maybe just a few minutes after. Do you think any of them escaped?”

Gavotski shrugged. “Without a full search of the rubble...”

“Either way,” said Steele, “it looks like we are on our own after all.” With a sidelong glance at Gavotski, he added, “And perhaps it’s best that way.”

Blonsky couldn’t have agreed more. “The only good mutant,” he muttered with some satisfaction, “is a dead mutant.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 01.29.22

The spaceport lay at the eastern edge of the hive, on one of its mid-levels. Steele knew the way, of course, thanks to his brief inspection of the city maps the day before.

And so, for the second time, he found himself in the back of a rickety old truck, pressed in against his comrades. Grayle and Barreski had taken the cab, still in their black robes — although Steele doubted whether the disguises would do them much good, not with every heretic in the hive on their trail.

They had been driving for some time when he felt the truck swerve, heard its tyres squeal, felt an impact with its front bumper. “What’s happening up there?” he yelled.

“We’ve been seen, sir,” Barreski’s voice came back through the partition that separated them. “A bunch of cultists. Grayle tried to run them down — got a few of them, too — but two more escaped.”

“And they’ll run to the nearest vox-caster,” sighed Mikhaelev.

Steele feared that he was right. Until now, he had been banking on the hope that their enemies didn’t know where they were heading, didn’t know they had lost their own transport. The bulk of the Chaos forces, with luck, would be guarding the hive’s exits, leaving a clear run to the Ice Warriors’ real objective. Now, that hope was lost. Now, all they could do was try to reach the spaceport first.

Steele hammered on the partition, and shouted to Grayle to put his foot down.

Confessor Wollkenden had woken half an hour ago, looking nauseous. He had stared at the faces of each of the Ice Warriors in turn, before drawing his knees up to his chest and resting his forehead on them, shutting out the world. Steele had collected dry rations and water from his troopers, and the confessor had consumed them greedily, but he hadn’t moved since nor spoken a word.

He looked up now, though — and in a loud, clear voice, he said, “Is this transport appropriate for a war hero? I will have somebody’s head for this. This engine should be silent. We don’t want *him* to hear, to come down here. Is it almost time to eat? They’re waiting for me to address them. They need me to give them hope, and the strength to resist.”

The others were looking at each other, at the roof, anywhere but at the confessor. Steele shared their discomfort. He had been worried about Wollkenden since he had found him in the dungeons, had feared that whatever Mangellan had done to him had broken his mind. He had pushed that fear to the back of his thoughts, concentrated on the job at hand. Now he had no choice but to face it.

“You’re free, confessor,” he said. “Mangellan isn’t coming. He can’t hurt you any more. Do you remember me? I’m Colonel Stanislev Steele. I rescued you. I just need you to be patient, to be strong, and we’ll get you out of here. We’ll get you to a doctor. They can treat your... fever.”

“I still have some water left,” offered Paliney, “if you think that might... I mean, if the confessor...”

Wollkenden looked Steele in the eye, and he said, “I’ll say a prayer for us.”

Steele smiled. “I’m sure we would all appreciate that, sir.”

“And you will kill him for me, won’t you?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, confessor. In a few hours’ time, there will be nobody alive on this planet. Mangellan will be—”

“I don’t mean him, not the one with the words. I mean the big bruiser in the cloak, the one who punched me in the face. You will make him suffer, won’t you? You will make him pay for presuming to lay his hands on a holy man.”

Steele was saved from having to answer that, as, again, something smacked into the truck and made its frame judder. “What the hell has Grayle hit now?” complained Blonsky, who had been caught unawares and banged his head. But Steele and a couple of the others had felt that this impact was different from the first — and his enhanced hearing confirmed it.

It wasn’t the front of the truck that had hit something this time, rather that something had landed on its roof... something that was moving about up there. Something with a roaring chainsword...

The tip of the sword came slicing through the roof of the cab, above Grayle’s head. He let out a cry, and slid down in his seat until he could only just see through the windscreen, barely see where he was going. He spun the wheel hard right, left, right again, and pumped the pedals furiously. Beside him, Barreski was tossed back and forth, and Grayle could hear muffled protests from the rear compartment.

But he could not shake his unwanted passenger.

The Chaos Space Marine clung on, and his sword cut deeper. It was rising and falling, in a sawing motion, scoring a seam across the roof. Then the sword was withdrawn, and Grayle saw gauntleted fingers scrabbling at that seam, widening it.

Barreski fired at those fingers — he had replaced his lasgun with one taken from a dead Traitor Guardsman in the street — and the hand was withdrawn, stung. A moment later, it returned, looking for and finding fresh purchase. And then, with a terrible, nerve-jangling wrench, the Chaos Space Marine peeled back the roof, and Grayle gaped up into his leering face, could smell his fetid breath.

“Everybody, brace yourselves!” he yelled, and he stamped on the brake pedal.

This time, the Chaos Space Marine was taken by surprise. He was reaching for Grayle when the truck jolted to a halt and catapulted him forwards. He hit the windscreen, shattering the plexiglas, and then slid sideways across the bonnet and disappeared from sight. Feverishly, Grayle slammed the engine into reverse. He felt his front right wheel bouncing over an obstacle in the road — the monster’s head, he hoped, although whether this was the case or not it seemed to make little difference.

The Chaos Space Marine was already back on his feet, his head down, charging towards the retreating truck like an enraged bull. He looked a mess, his black armour barely clinging to his battered body. His left arm had been amputated at the elbow, presumably by the teeth of the sewer creature. One of his eyes was missing. He had dropped his chainsword, but he was wielding his bolt pistol.

Grayle couldn’t outpace him, not driving backwards. He forced his back wheels around, made to set off along another street. He was too late. The Chaos Space Marine had caught up to them. He braced himself against the bumper so that no matter how hard the engine strained, or how fast the wheels spun, they couldn’t gain headway against him.

And now the Chaos Space Marine stooped, took the truck by its axle, lifted it, one-handed, and Barreski was banging on the partition, yelling, “Everybody out!” and he and Grayle kicked open their doors, and leapt as the Chaos Space Marine flexed a powerful shoulder and gave the truck one final *twist*...

Blonsky and Mikhaev had been the nearest troopers to the back doors, and thus the first two out of them. Steele had made sure that Wollkenden went next, helping him along with a push to the back when he had hesitated. The confessor had fallen awkwardly, landing face first in the street, and Steele had leapt down beside him and hoisted him to his feet.

All of which had left Anakora, Gavotski and Palinev in the back of the truck as it was flipped over.

Anakora had been in the doorway, poised to jump, when the world had spun in front of her. The next thing she knew, she was on her back, tangled up with her comrades, on a plasteel surface that had been upright a moment ago. She had bumped her head, and black spots were crowding her vision, threatening to close in, to enshroud her in their darkness. She would not give in to them.

She could hear las-fire, and the answering bark of a bolt pistol. She couldn't just lie there, letting the others down.

Palinev was the first to extricate himself and crawl away. Anakora watched as his blurry shape was swallowed by a fierce white light — streetlights, she realised, shining in from outside. The truck was on its side, and one of its back doors — the higher one — had fallen shut. The lower door had been snapped from its hinges. Its frame had crumpled a little, but there was still room to squeeze through it.

“Are you OK?” asked Gavotski, waving a hand in front of Anakora's eyes.

She gritted her teeth and gave a determined nod. Gavotski followed Palinev through the bright white square. Anakora blinked, wishing her eyes would clear, and forced herself up onto her hands and knees and made to follow him.

Then she heard a strangled cry, and Gavotski was whipped away from her — and she caught her breath at the sight of a pair of black armoured boots through the exit hole. Gavotski had crawled right into the Chaos Space Marine's clutches.

She could see his boots too, half a metre off the ground, kicking furiously. He was pinned to the back of the truck, doubtless having the life squeezed out of him, and the desperate las-fire of the other Ice Warriors was doing little to change that situation. But from down here, up close, Anakora could make out cracks in the Chaos Space Marine's black armour. She could see the flesh beneath them.

She pulled her knife, thrust it into an exposed ankle, twisting it around and burying it deeper, hoping to sever a tendon. She couldn't tell if she had been successful in this — but she had certainly had some effect. The Chaos Marine gave a howl of fury and flung Gavotski aside. Then he gripped the truck's remaining door and tore it free, to expose his attacker.

It was only now that Anakora saw how damaged he was. She couldn't believe he was still standing, still fighting. But she didn't doubt that he was still more than capable of killing her in a second.

She scrambled away from him, until she was backed up against the partition to the driver's cab and was cornered there. The Chaos Space Marine dropped to his haunches, down to her level, blocking out the white light, and he screamed obscenities at her, and brought up his bolt pistol. Her head was still pounding, and she closed her eyes and yelled to her comrades, “Go! Get out of here while you can!”

Just as Steele had yelled at her when they had last fought this monster.

But then: she heard a mechanical scream, and her would-be executioner stiffened. His eyes glazed over, blood spewed from his mouth, and he turned, he made to rise, but the effort was too much for him and he toppled and fell — and Anakora saw a chainsword embedded in his back, sputtering and sparking.

Palinev helped her out of the truck, and she stood unsteadily in what now seemed to be a rather faint light after all. And like the rest of the Ice Warriors, her eyes were drawn to her commander, his face and his chest still painted with vile symbols from the ceremony — although he had tried to scrub them off with sewer water — and his right hand held away from his body as if he considered it unclean.

It was with that hand, Anakora realised, that he must have lifted the Chaos Space Marine's own weapon, his augmented muscles giving him the strength to do so.

But there was no satisfaction in Colonel Steele's eyes at his victory. Just a look of deep-seated disgust.

They remained on foot after that. Steele didn't want to waste time searching for another working vehicle — and the spaceport, he said, was only just over a kilometre away. They formed up in two ranks and advanced at double time. The effort of keeping pace with each other, of maintaining formation and step, helped to spur on these soldiers, to overcome the fatigue they were all feeling. It helped them feel more in control, like they had imposed a little order of their own upon this chaotic world — and even Wollkenden responded well to this. He said nothing as he marched at Steele's side, although he stumbled now and again.

Palinev could tell they were approaching their goal, because the buildings grew a little taller, a little more proud. Eagle crests began to appear over the doorways of customs and shipping offices, and the streets grew wider and brighter, more like those on the upper levels.

Steele brought his squad to a halt and ordered them to break step, to proceed with caution. He appeared to be worried — and a minute later, Palinev learned why.

There were people ahead of them. He could hear them — they could all hear them now — talking and laughing. The Ice Warriors took cover in a narrow alleyway, and Steele sent Palinev ahead to see what they were facing.

The spaceport was a magnificent, circular building of white stone, studded with dark windows. Evidently, there had been small-arms fighting here, and the front wall was pock-marked but unholed. Laid out in front of that wall was a wide forecourt, in which broken fountains brimmed with frozen black water. Lifter tubes had been shattered, and trees — real organic trees — had withered and died. Once, this area would have been a welcoming first sight for visitors to Iota Hive, maybe to Cressida itself. Now, it gave an entirely different impression.

Palinev looked down on all of this from a gantry between two buildings. Below him, a wide flight of steps swept down from the street where the rest of his squad hid, to the forecourt and the enticing open gates beyond it.

At some point, a sleek, black grav-car had come speeding this way, its driver presumably hoping to ferry an important passenger to safety. It had lost control, had maybe come under fire, and had smacked into a pillar at the top of the steps, crumpling its front end. The car was empty now; Palinev wondered if its occupants had escaped or been dragged from the wreckage.

There were more grav-cars down on the forecourt, most of them burnt out or turned over, or both. There was also a dirty old bus — transport for the less privileged — leaning against a fountain, its windows broken, its tyres slashed.

And there were heretics: cultists, Traitor Guardsmen, mutants, even a few spawn, spread out as far as Palinev could see, almost certainly surrounding the whole building, and more of them arriving with each moment that passed. The encounter with the Chaos Space Marine had cost the Ice Warriors dearly. Their enemies had beaten them here.

Palinev slipped away from his vantage point, dispirited, and returned to the others. Steele listened to his report in grave silence, and Palinev knew that he was only confirming what the colonel had expected to hear.

“We have less than an hour before the virus bombs drop,” said Steele. “We don't have time to find another escape route, even if we had somewhere to look. Our only hope, however small, lies in that spaceport, and the sooner we make our move the fewer enemies will be standing between us and it.”

No one could argue with that. Still, it seemed as if a dark cloud had settled upon the squad, and Palinev could feel its weight too. It seemed so unfair that they had come so far to fall at this final hurdle. They had achieved so much, pulled off feats that had seemed impossible, and no one would even know.

“I won't give you the speech again,” said Gavotski. “You all know what to do, and you know what the odds are against us. Just remember that, last time, we bucked those odds. Nine of us went into the Ice Palace, and nine of us, including Confessor Wollkenden, came out again. If that doesn't prove that the Emperor is with us, then nothing does. I know you'll make me proud.”

The heretics' voices were getting louder.

It wasn't just that Grayle was drawing closer to them. He could hear that the crowd was growing in size, and in confidence too. He feared that, at any moment, someone might come rushing up the steps from the spaceport to find him and Palinev sneaking along the street towards them.

Either that or, by chance, reinforcements might come up behind them.

He quickened his pace, reasoning that with all the noise down there, no one would hear the footsteps of two men up here. He was still twenty metres away from his objective, the stricken grav-car, when Palinev took his arm and brought him to a halt.

"This is as far as we can go," said the scout, "without being seen from down there." Grayle nodded and dropped onto his stomach, preparing to pull himself the rest of the way on his elbows.

That was when the pitch of the crowd changed, confidence becoming fear in an instant. And then Grayle heard a series of staccato explosions. Then gunfire.

He looked at Palinev in alarm. Palinev looked back at him with a helpless shrug. Then the scout turned, made a dash for the side of the road and swung himself up onto a metal gantry. He returned a few seconds later, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"It's the mutants!" he reported. "The loyalist mutants. There are... I didn't know there were so many of them. More than we ever saw. More than the heretics killed at the chapel. They're everywhere, climbing up through the manholes. They've taken the heretics by surprise."

It seemed that the Emperor was with the Ice Warriors after all.

"Can they win?" asked Grayle.

Palinev shook his head. "There aren't enough of them. But they're providing a perfect distraction. If we move fast enough..."

Grayle nodded, stood and raced to the grav-car. He doubted that anyone would notice him now — and even if they did they would probably be too busy to do much about it. As he reached the steps, he caught a glimpse of the melee that his comrade had described, below — but his attention was reserved for the car itself.

The driver's door had jammed shut in the crash. Grayle had to brace his foot against the bodywork, had to pull at it with all his might. It came free at last, flying up with such force that it almost caught him on the chin. He leapt into the vehicle, and sent a silent appeal to its machine-spirits as he jabbed at the dashboard runes. Fortunately, as Grayle had already noticed, the twin engines were housed at the back of the vehicle, and were therefore relatively unscathed.

They caught on the third attempt, and the grav-car gave a protesting screech as its back end was raised, but its front end remained stubbornly embedded in its pillar. Grayle eased the vehicle backwards, and winced as it slowly tore itself free, as parts of it became detached and clattered to the ground. For a moment, he feared that the car might have been supporting the pillar, that it might now come crashing down across his windscreen — but, although the pillar wobbled, it held.

And the car was free now, and picking up speed, and Grayle could see in his rear-view mirror that the rest of his squad was running to meet it.

They bundled Wollkenden into the back seat first, told him to keep his head down. Steele and Gavotski squeezed in to each side of him, while Anakora and Palinev joined Grayle in the front. The car couldn't lift any more weight than that, so Barreski, Blonsky and Mikhaev would have to advance in its wake, trust that Grayle could clear a path for them and also lay down some covering fire behind him.

"Everyone ready?" asked Grayle. "Then hold on to something!"

And he stepped on the accelerator.

The grav-car's top speed was not exactly remarkable, but it seemed fast enough as it hurtled towards the steps and shot over the edge. The Ice Warriors were flying for a moment, but they came down with a bone-shaking jolt. The car surfed its antigravity cushion onto the spaceport forecourt,

where a jostling crowd tried to part before it but some stumbled across its mangled bonnet or tumbled beneath its skirt.

A few of the heretics — those not immediately occupied by mutant attackers — saw what was happening, saw that their targets were getting away, and started to fire. Most of them were cut down in a second by the three Ice Warriors following in the car's wake.

And then they were through the spaceport gates, speeding along the main concourse, and the sounds of battle were receding behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Time to Destruction of Cressida: 00.18.49

The fighting had spilled into the spaceport. The grav-car smacked into a smock-wearing mutant, tossed it into the air. It landed on the windshield, clung there for a second, and its red eyes seemed to be pleading with the Ice Warriors inside the vehicle: why?

Steele didn't want to think about that, didn't want to have to acknowledge that his life, Wollkenden's life, all their lives, might have been saved by such aberrations. He blinked, and the mutant was gone, fallen beneath the car to die.

And Grayle drove on. He took a sharp right turn through a vandalised waiting room, crashed through a glass door, and then they were out on the spaceport's main ramp: a vast circular floor that would once have been filled with spacecraft of all types. Right now, it was almost empty. Steele had expected that. He and his squad wouldn't have been the first to try to leave Iota Hive this way. He could only pray that the previous evacuees had left them something they could use.

"There," he said, "that frigate. You think you can fly that, Grayle?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't have much experience in the air. I could try." Grayle had already brought them around so that they were circling the decrepit old vessel. They saw that its engine housings had been torn open, perhaps by an asteroid strike, perhaps by enemy fire. Steele took a cursory glance at the exposed machinery, then shook his head and instructed Grayle to keep going.

They could see the concave far wall now, lined with hatchways. Some of them gaped open, and they tantalised Steele with a view of the grey sky of Cressida beyond. He had only been in this Chaos-held cesspit for a day, but it had been too long. That way lay freedom, if they could just claim it.

"This one might be worth a look, sir." Grayle had pulled up beside a tiny lander, similar to the one in which Wollkenden had made his forced landing — and hardly in better condition. Its surfaces were encrusted with ice, its engine pods fire-blackened, and its landing legs were crippled so that it listed to one side. It was a sorry sight, and it was easy to see why the ship had been overlooked thus far — but there was nothing to indicate that it couldn't be made to fly.

The Ice Warriors piled out of the car. Grayle and Anakora worked on the lander's frozen hatch with their knives until, with a throaty whine and a splintering of ice, it opened part-way, and Grayle was able to duck through. Steele ordered Palinev to follow him, with Wollkenden.

The Chaos forces had started to pour onto the ramp. Barreski, Blonsky and Mikhaelev came running ahead of them, firing back at them — but, as Steele watched, Blonsky was cut down in a crossfire of las-beams. He wasn't dead yet, but he had evidently been crippled. The only thing Steele could have done for him, if he could have reached him, was to put him out of his misery.

It looked like Barreski and Mikhaelev had reached the same conclusion — because, after a brief hesitation, they resumed their fighting withdrawal and left their fallen comrade behind. They joined Steele, Gavotski and Anakora, breathless and, in Mikhaelev's case, wounded, a livid burn standing out on his temple.

Gavotski was already barking out orders: "This ship has armour plating. Use it. Find a defensible position and fire at will!"

With the Emperor's favour, thought Steele, it might work. There were less than a score of heretics in the first wave — most of them, he guessed, were still out on the forecourt, dealing with the mutated loyalists — and so far they were wielding nothing more deadly than las-guns. They

couldn't damage the lander itself, so the only threat they posed to Wollkenden was if they were able to board it. He prayed that, with just five Ice Warriors including himself, he could stop them from doing that.

He crouched behind one of the ship's wings, as las-beams cracked into it and were comfortably absorbed. When it was safe to do so, he returned fire, and gritted his teeth with malicious satisfaction as he mowed down cultist after cultist.

The second wave came with barely a moment's respite. And this one was larger, and consisted primarily of mutants and spawn: a sure sign that the heretics were becoming more organised, enough to send in their cannon fodder ahead of them.

A particularly large, hairy mutant shrugged off all the las-fire aimed at it, staying on its feet long enough to reach Steele. It came around the wing, growling and clawing at him. When the colonel avoided its first swipes, the mutant shoulder-charged him instead, and slammed him into the hull.

He jammed his bayonet into its throat, fighting a gag reflex as its stinking blood spewed over him. The mutant fought on, although it could only have been kept alive now by the force of its own fury.

Steele ducked under its claws and slipped beneath the lopsided lander itself, squeezing himself into the acute angle where its belly almost touched the ground. The mutant tried to follow, but its shoulders were too broad. It strained to reach its prey, and its claws came within a hair's breadth of Steele's chest — but, at last, it shuddered and died. At almost the same moment, an enemy las-beam struck one of the few undamaged struts around Steele, and it bowed and almost broke. The ship's bulk shifted over his head and threatened to drop, to crush him. He scrambled out of there as fast as he could.

The heretics' advance had faltered. Steele's comrades were mounting a stout defence, as was the Valhallan way, giving him a moment to pause and take stock. He saw three Traitor Guardsmen darting behind a gutted lander. They were trying to circle around behind the ship, just as he would have done in their place.

Steele sent a volley of las-beams after them. He didn't manage to kill any of them before they took cover — he was starting to miss his bionic eye, still on auto-repair after its latest discharge — but he did send a message.

The traitors knew he had seen them. They would proceed more slowly, more carefully, from now on — if they dared to proceed at all.

One of the lander's engines groaned, and belched smoke from its exhaust port before it fell silent again. The hull of the ship creaked and shuddered, and gave an alarming lurch as the weakened landing leg buckled a little further.

Steele concentrated on gunning down the oncoming mutants. The most important task was out of his hands. It was all down to Grayle now.

And then, to his relief, the engines started — both of them.

"Fall back," he yelled to the others. "Onto the ship. We're getting out of here!"

He was closest to the stubby loading ramp. He raced up it, firing a few parting shots back over his shoulder, and leapt through the hatchway that Grayle had left half-open.

He was greeted by a sight that made his heart sink into his boots.

Palinev was sprawled out on the floor of the passenger compartment, unconscious. Of Confessor Wollkenden, there was no sign.

Steele dropped by his scout's side, and shook him vigourously until his eyelids fluttered. "The confessor," he hissed. "Where is the confessor?"

"He... took me by surprise," groaned Palinev. "Came up... behind me. He was burbling something about... I think he thought I was Mangellan, he..."

Steele didn't need to hear any more. He turned to find Gavotski and Mikhaelev behind him, pushed his way past them and collided with Anakora and Barreski in the hatchway. Gavotski began to ask him what was happening, where he was going.

"None of you," Steele ordered, "are to leave this ship under any circumstances. Give me as much time as you can — but as soon as it looks as if the heretics might board, you get up to that cockpit and you tell Grayle to lift off, whether Wollkenden and I have returned or not. Is that understood, sergeant?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

He was out in the open again, cursing himself for not having foreseen this, for not having detailed more men to watch Wollkenden — for not having heard as the confessor had knocked out Palinev and escaped behind his back. It must have happened, he thought, while he was underneath the ship, occupied with the mutant.

The heretics were just realising that the lander was no longer defended, just starting to close in. They reacted to Steele's sudden reappearance — too slowly. Steele reasoned that Wollkenden would have made for the nearest cover. He saw a line of man-sized, metal-framed packing crates, and he leapt behind them as the first las-beams stabbed out behind him.

His acoustic enhancers led him straight to the confessor, who was sitting behind the crates, whimpering into his hands. He seized Wollkenden by the front of his robes, hauled him to his feet. "I'm sorry I don't have time to show you all due respect, sir, but this is the situation: you are boarding that ship with me — and I would rather you did so willingly, because if I have to carry you it will probably get us both killed, but I will knock you out again if I have to. Which is it to be?"

Wollkenden squirmed out of his grasp and ran for it. Steele caught him before he could take two steps, and slammed him into a crate hard enough to splinter one of its wooden panels. "Get your hands off me!" Wollkenden gasped, winded. "You're just like the rest of them, telling me what to do. He was right all along, with his words... Let me go, I want to go to him!"

"You're confused," said Steele. "You don't know what you're saying. I need you to trust me, confessor. I need you to do as I say, just for a few—"

A Traitor Guardsman, bolder than Steele had expected, stepped into view. His lasgun was readied, but he didn't fire. Perhaps he was out of power, or the gun had simply jammed. Steele didn't stop to question his good fortune. He bundled Wollkenden into the narrow space between two crates and started firing himself. The traitor leapt back into cover, but Steele could hear footsteps running to join him.

He cursed under his breath. Wollkenden had delayed him too long. Their way back to the lander was blocked, and the heretics were moving to surround them. They couldn't stay where they were. But there was nowhere to run, nowhere that didn't involve breaking cover and making themselves easy targets.

If Steele had been alone, he could have hauled himself up onto one of the crates, got the drop on his foes from up there — but he doubted Wollkenden could make the climb even if he was willing to try.

Wollkenden... Suddenly, it occurred to Steele that his presence might be his greatest asset, that that traitor's gun might not have jammed after all.

He turned on the confessor, spun him around. He yanked his arm up behind his back, slipped his arm around Wollkenden's throat and pulled tight to choke his words of protest. "Sorry about this, sir," he muttered, "but needs must, and this is the only way I can think of to keep you alive."

He pushed Wollkenden ahead of him, stepped out from behind the crate, found himself facing a score of armed traitors...

...and was relieved to find that his hunch had been right. The traitors kept him covered with their guns, but didn't dare fire, couldn't risk hitting his hostage. Evidently, they had been ordered to retake Wollkenden, their offering to their gods, alive. It occurred to Steele that those same orders might apply to him too — until Wollkenden's legs gave way and he sagged in the colonel's grip,

and one of the traitors fired a las-beam, tried to hit Steele over the confessor's head and only missed him by a whisker.

"I wouldn't try that again," Steele snarled. "Even if you could hit me, I could snap Wollkenden's neck as I went down. And I swear this by the Emperor's name, I will do it. I will see him dead, rather than let Mangellan have him."

"Don't speak that name," spat one of the traitors. "Mangellan is dead. He failed our gods and has paid the price for it. Furst is our high priest now."

"Then you're in more trouble than I thought," said Steele.

He was inching his way around them, keeping his back to the crates so that no one could come up behind him — and he could see it now, the lander, his goal. Its engines were still ticking over, ice melting and dripping from its hull.

And it was under attack.

The ship had been rushed by mutants and spawn — and Steele could see Barreski and Anakora in the hatchway, fighting to keep it clear, to keep the creatures away from it — a losing battle.

As he watched, one muscular mutant landed a blow to Barreski's head, send him reeling back into the ship, out of sight — and then it disappeared inside after him. Anakora had to fall back as two more creatures forced their way on board. And there were more of them, jostling each other, knocking each other off the loading ramp in their haste to follow. In a few seconds' time, the Ice Warriors would be overwhelmed, the ship taken. Unless...

The pitch of the engines changed, the sound building to a deafening shriek, and the lander began to haul itself into the air.

For a moment, all eyes were off Steele and Wollkenden, but Steele couldn't take advantage of this distraction — because he was staring too, watching as his last hope of survival, of completing his mission, rose out of his reach.

The lander rotated clumsily, orienting itself towards the exit hatches. The few mutants that had clung to its landing ramp were shaken free and dashed to the floor. Another was wedged in the open hatchway — but as Steele watched, this too was thrown clear by a volley of las-fire from inside the ship. It gave him some satisfaction to know that his squad was still fighting in there.

And then another hatchway slid open — in the belly of the lander, this time — and something was tossed out: a coiled something that rolled and unfurled as it fell, something that told Steele that his men were still fighting for more than themselves.

He raced around the still-gaping traitors, somehow finding the strength to lift Wollkenden off his feet, to carry him. He leapt for the trailing ladder, and caught it with his left hand.

That was when the firing started, the traitors no doubt reasoning that Furst would prefer Wollkenden dead than escaped. A las-beam glanced off Steele's shoulder, only part of its force absorbed by the ragged remains of his armoured greatcoat, and he clenched his teeth against the searing pain and forced himself to hold on, although he couldn't feel his fingers any longer.

The ship lined itself up with an exit hatch, shot forwards, and the sudden acceleration almost yanked Steele's numbed left arm out of its socket. His right hand was still fastened around Wollkenden's arm, the confessor reaching but unable to establish a grip on the ladder for himself. Then the lander's hull scraped the hatchway, showering them both with sparks — a sign of Grayle's piloting inexperience — and the ground dropped away beneath them, and Wollkenden fell...

Steele caught his hand, felt the augmetics in his right shoulder whirring and straining to arrest the confessor's plunge.

They were soaring above fields of snow now, above glaciers, high enough to see the burning spires of Alpha Hive towards the horizon, to trace the whole of the Ice Warriors' journey from there to here. And Wollkenden's legs were flailing, pedalling at the air, and his face was white, his eyes bulging with fear.

Five minutes. That was all the time they had, according to Steele's internal chrono. Five minutes before the virus bombs dropped. Five minutes for Grayle to reach escape velocity and leave this doomed world behind. And before he could do so, Steele and Wollkenden had to climb that ladder.

Looking up, Steele could see Gavotski peering through the aperture in the lander's belly, calling to him, his words whipped away by a howling, freezing wind.

The ladder was buffeted in that wind, and it was all Steele could do to hang on to it. He couldn't get his feet to it, couldn't do anything without letting go of Wollkenden.

Maybe, just maybe, he thought, if he could persuade his passenger to hang on to him, to free up his right arm, he could haul them both up. He screamed instructions at the confessor, but they didn't seem to get through.

And Wollkenden was screaming back at him, and Steele tuned his enhanced ear in to his voice, and he heard, "...me go, damn you. I don't want to go back to your shackles, be a slave to your Emperor. Mangellan promised me I could be free. He promised me..."

And suddenly, it all made sense: why the Ecclesiarchy had appeared so keen to retrieve their confessor, keen enough to have his would-be rescuers sanctified, and yet the virus bombing couldn't be delayed for him; why the fate of such a dignitary had been left in the hands of a mere ten men. Not that Steele had ever questioned those orders, of course, but he had wondered...

"A virtual saint." That was what he had been told about Wollkenden. A man who, through words and faith alone, had inspired great deeds. A man who could turn the tides of war, whose name was fast becoming legend. So, the Ecclesiarchy could hardly have turned their backs on him, could they? Even if they had known...

Mangellan had known. He had delighted in telling Steele, gloating about it, only Steele had refused to listen. He had no choice now.

The legend was a lie. The man for whom he had come so far, risked so much, was just an ordinary man after all: a man touched by Chaos. Wollkenden had been tested, and he had failed that test. His mind had been forever warped.

Steele had never had a chance to succeed in his mission. He had never been meant to succeed in it. Wollkenden could not be saved.

In the end, it was easier than he had expected. He didn't even have to try. He just had to relax his fingers, just a little.

And then it was done, and Confessor Wollkenden was plunging away from him — and he felt his heart lurch at the sheer speed of it all, at the suddenness with which it had become too late to turn back, to regret.

He had done the right thing. Steele knew this with a certainty that he had seldom before experienced. He knew it not just because his enhanced brain told him it was true, but because he could feel it. He had done what the Emperor would have wanted him to do, what the Ecclesiarchy could never have asked of him.

And Wollkenden was shrinking beneath him now, dwarfed by the white expanse that awaited him below, but Steele did not wish to see that. He turned away, reached up and caught the next rung of the ladder with his right hand. And, wearily, he pulled himself up that-ladder, to the lander, to his comrades, to safety.

Colonel Stanislev Steele stood silently in the lander's cockpit and looked down on the bleak, white globe of Cressida through the forward screen.

It looked the same as it had when he had first been posted to it. He only knew that it wasn't because his internal chrono had completed its countdown. Cressida was a dead world now; no man would touch its soil again during his lifetime.

The rest of his squad — Gavotski, Anakora, Barreski, Mikhaelev, Grayle, Palinev — had all made it. They had survived the mutants' attack on their ship. They had contacted an Imperial

Cruiser, and were waiting to be picked up. He was fiercely proud of all of them, although they did not feel that pride in themselves.

They had failed in their mission, fallen at the last hurdle — or so they thought.

He wished he could tell them the truth — tell them that, in the end, one man's life did not matter after all. What mattered was his legend — and today, the Ice Warriors had safeguarded one such legend, ensured that it would inspire more great deeds yet.

Colonel Steele's report would state that Confessor Wollkenden had died a hero.

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