

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



A NOVEL OF THE ULTRAMARINES

# THE CHAPTER'S DUE

**GRAHAM MCNEILL**







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# (An Undead Scan v1.0)

*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.*

*“Pain and death are illusions of the weak mind.*

*While his gene-seed returns to the Chapter, a Space Marine cannot die.*

*Without death, pain loses its relevance.*

*He that may fight, heal him.*

*He that may fight no more, give him peace.*

*He that is dead, take from him the Chapter's due.”*

—Master of the Apothecarion, Aslon Marr



# PART 1

# Revelations

# On the Pilgrim Trail of Roboute Guilliman

ONE

In an Imperium of a million worlds, what matters the loss of one? The Emperor's realm stretches to the furthest extent of each spiral arm of the galaxy, his numberless armies holding dominion over them by the might of courage and devotion. To know them all is an impossible task, yet the billion scribes toiling in the dusty, candlelit gloom of the Imperial Aexactory care nothing for the futility of their task. Centuries-old records are updated as scraps of information are drip fed into the blind machine, yet even amid the benighted sepulchres of the Emperor's counting houses, some worlds shine brighter than others.

Armageddon, the world named for the end of days; Fenris, home of the savage Space Wolves; Cadia, fortress world at the gateway to the Ocularis Terribus; Catachan, deathworld and home to the hell-fighters.

Even held against such esteemed names, there are planets whose legacy outshines such heroic worlds. These worlds are known and revered throughout the Imperium, by the nobles of the patrician guilds on Terra to the sump-scum of Necromunda.

These are the worlds of Ultramar, glorious beacons of illumination that bring the light of civilisation to the furthest corner of the Imperium. Where the Emperor's radiance grows faint in the darkness, the worlds of Ultramar renew it. Where the frontiers of the Emperor's realm are weak, they strengthen it.

Storm-wracked Tallasar; the parched troika of Quintarn, Tarentus and Masali; rugged Espandor and the garden of Ultramar that is Iax. The blasted surface of Calth hides an incredible underground network of caverns as light and airy as any landscape open to the heavens.

Systems and worlds glitter in the darkness of space, but all are beholden to the glittering jewel at Ultramar's heart, the azure and emerald orb to which all others owe fealty. Alone amongst the worlds of the Imperium, this world holds dominion over its brethren, its master the ruler of a stellar empire of his own. No other world in the Imperium can lay claim to such status, and only by virtue of secret origins unknown even to the Emperor can such a singular entity exist.

It is called Macragge, this jewel in the darkness that alone holds sovereignty over others.

Its glittering seas are as clear as glass and teem with life, though the vast majority of its surface is covered in jagged, upthrust mountains of pale stone that claw the sky. So inhospitable are these mountains that Macragge's population, hardy as they are, cannot live in them. Instead, they duster close to the fertile lands around the Valley of Laponis and the towering fastness of this world's masters.

The Fortress of Hera is carved from the tallest mountains, seven peaks levelled and rebuilt to house the Emperor's greatest Legion, the Ultramarines. Even among the Adeptus Astartes, the names of Ultramarines heroes are bywords for courage and honour: Ancient Galatan, who raised the Chapter's colours in the breach of Corinth; Captain Ventanus of the lost 6th Chapter, who held Calth against the forces of the Arch-Traitors of the Word Bearers; doomed Invictus of the 1st who died defending his home world from the Great Devourer.

The Primarch Roboute Guilliman built Ultramar in ages past, and his warriors hold the frontier of the Imperium against every enemy, hurling them back with bolt and blade to preserve that which their gene-father created from the darkness.

In an Imperium of a million worlds, what matters the loss of one?

That depends very much on the world.

Self-sufficient and prosperous, the worlds of Ultramar are as far from the industrial hells typically found throughout the Imperium as is possible to imagine. Its people are clean-limbed, well-nourished and content. Raised in a warrior society, there is no room for those who do not pull their own weight. Though each world is quite different, each shares an ethos with Macragge a hardy determination to be a valued, industrious contributor to the greater good of humanity.

At the heart of Macragge, in the most awe-inspiring shrine ever constructed, lies the body of Roboute Guilliman, whose mortal remains sit unmoving within a stasis field that simultaneously preserves his life while preventing any continuation. Droplets of blood from the fatal wound inflicted by a fallen brother hang suspended like the brightest rubies, and eyes that once beheld the Emperor when he walked amongst his people are now stilled and lifeless. Objects of wonder inspire devotion, and ever since the primarch's body was interred in the Temple of Correction, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims have come to prostrate themselves before him and do honour to his memory. Without Guilliman there would be no Ultramar. Without Guilliman, there would be no Imperium.

Such a debt of gratitude can never be fully repaid, and so tens of thousands travel the Pilgrim Trail of Roboute Guilliman, walking in his footsteps and breathing the air of worlds he saved. A thousand times a thousand shrines dot the routes through Ultramar, and pilgrims

come from all across the galaxy to display their devotion to the legendary warrior who stood against the encroaching darkness when the light of the Emperor was laid low by the Great Betrayer.

Hundreds of chartered vessels ply the transit routes between the worlds of Ultramar every day, bringing thousands of devotees to pray at the feet of the primarch. To stand in the presence of one of the Emperor's sons is an honour few will ever equal in their lives, for many will have spent their last credit just to reach this place. Many never leave again and die on Macragge, having fulfilled their life's dream to bathe in the golden light that fills the glorious sepulchre.

Every world of Ultramar has its own legends, shrines and reason for pilgrims to descend to its surface. Tallasar, for the majestic ruin of Castra Tanagra; Calth for its wondrous caves and ancient battlegrounds from the time of the Great Betrayal.

The dry, sirocco-swept surface of Tarentus was no different, but the vast star fort entering its orbit had not come to pay homage.

Nothing ever happened on Tarentus. That universal truth had held true for the six years since Rufus Quintus had been appointed to the post of Praefectus orae Tarentus, and the sixty before that, but if the frantic summons from his Orbital Command Centre was even halfway as serious as Nkiru suggested, the years of peace could be at an end.

Quintus made his way swiftly along the cloistered walkway that encircled the great Prosperine Tower at the heart of the prefect's palace on Tarentus, his steps heavy and ever so slightly off centre. Behind him trotted Nkiru, his Quaestor and Master of the Treasury, a stoop-shouldered man with sun-darkened skin who was surely born to be a master of numbers and statistics.

Quintus wore a heavy blue robe over his gene-bulked frame, complemented by the gold and silver rosette of a Praefectus. The robe was voluminous and exquisitely tailored, yet could not conceal his Astartes physique, nor the limp when he walked. His manner was that of a warrior, though there was a faded quality to his bearing that suggested it had been many years since he had faced the Emperor's enemies with a bolter in his hands.

"Any further word on what has Master Unathi so alarmed?" asked Quintus.

"No, my lord," said Nkiru, consulting his ever-present data-slate. "He was unspecific as to the nature of his alert. But from his tone, I suspect it may be something serious."

"His tone?" queried Quintus. "He doesn't *have* a tone. Does he?"

"He did this time, my lord. That's what makes me think this is something serious."

Quintus cursed. Unathi wasn't given to issuing false alerts, but he was terse when it came to providing any details regarding them. Succinctness was a trait Quintus admired, but in this case, Unathi's alert could mean anything from a space hulk to nothing more than unexpected debris.

He paused in his walk and leaned out over the cloister's balustrade.

The city of Axum spread out around him, a wonder of geometric precision, colourful buildings and pleasing lines. Planned out by Roboute Guilliman, it was located at the confluence of three rivers and surrounded by millions of hectares of arable land. High above, the great dome stretched over the city and hundreds of kilometres beyond, shielding the farmland around the city from the arid climate and parched earth that sucked all moisture from the land.

It was a pleasant enough place, with its people as handsome and industrious as any of Ultramar, but six years was a long time to spend dealing with farmers and civilians. Quintus looked up through the shimmering dome into an ochre sky of sunset, looking to see if there were any signs as to what had caused the alert. He saw nothing, but then he hadn't expected to see anything.

So enormous was the dome that it had its own internal climate, and warm zephyrs blew in from the east, honeyed by their journey across the great grain fields. He let the subtle mix of flavours mingle in the sense gland at the back of his throat.

"Pass word to the Masters of Irrigation that the soil of the eastern reaches is slightly acidic," said Quintus. "Their chemical additives are too strong. It will reduce the harvest."

"Of course, my lord," said Nkiru, pulling a stylus from the data-slate and making a notation.

Quintus shook his head with a wry smile.

"Something funny, my lord?"

"No, Nkiru," said Quintus. "Just thinking how quaint it is to be worried about soil acidity instead of the disposition of the enemy or the litanies of battle before strapping myself into a drop-pod."

"We all serve the Emperor in our different ways," said Nkiru dutifully.

Rufus Quintus had served as a combat sergeant in the veterans' company of Captain Agemman for over a century, fighting alongside his battle-brothers until the fateful moment on Ichar IV when a tyranid spore mine exploded in the midst of his squad. Virulent bio-acids had eaten away his armour and destroyed his legs while its poisons burned the inner surfaces of his lungs with each pained breath.

That he had lived at all was a miracle, but live he had, and though his service as a front-line warrior was at an end, he was still able to serve his Chapter. Too whole to be interred in the armoured sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, too damaged to serve as a warrior, Quintus had been restored as well as the Chapter's Techmarines and Apothecaries could manage. His lower limbs and lungs were replaced with augmetics, and his long service had been honoured with the position of Praefectus orae Tarentus.

One of three worlds orbiting a common centre of gravity, Tarentus was an agri-world and part of the breadbasket of Ultramar. Billions of tonnes of foodstuffs were produced on Tarentus, and only by such planetary-scale agriculture could many other worlds of the Imperium flourish.

That his praefecture was a vital cog in the machine gave Quintus no comfort, for he was a man who longed to serve his Chapter in battle. The finest minds of ancient times had crafted the science that elevated him beyond human limits, yet the purpose for which he had been created was denied him.

Yet for all that, he was still a warrior of the Ultramarines and a man who could be counted on to fulfil his duty and rule with a studious mindset.

"Come, Nkiru," he said. "Let us see if Master Unathi can be made to elaborate on why he has called this alert."

The interior of the Orbital Command Centre was dry and parched, filled with cloying scents from the recessed cog shrines to the Machine-God. A bank of humming machinery filled one wall, with a row of hardwired servitors plugged into each station. A battered command throne sat in the corner of the chamber, linked to the wall of machinery by a host of cables running across the floor. From here, Master Unathi of the Adeptus Mechanicus kept watch over Axum and Tarentus.

Unathi commanded the orbital defences of Tarentus, a series of geostationary missile stations, gun batteries and a small fleet of system monitors. Each of these vessels made elliptical patrol circuits of the triple planets, but none were to be seen on the orbital plot displayed on the main pictur. Instead, a hazy image of what looked like a fortress of spikes and hateful donjons swam in the sea-green display. Quintus knew of no such fortifications on Tarentus, and wondered where this vile structure was located and why it was displayed on his command centre pictur.

The interior security door slid shut behind him and he said, "Very well, Master Unathi, what has you all riled up?"

"That," said Master Unathi, pointing with a waving, snake-like mechadendrite towards the image of the fortress. Quintus returned his gaze to the pictur, now seeing a familiar outline amid its jagged crenellations. As disturbing as it was, Quintus saw the outline of something that had once been magnificent and honourable buried beneath the layers of obscene embellishments.

"Emperor's blood," hissed Quintus. "It can't be."

Quintus had longed for something, anything, to remind him of what it meant to be a warrior of the Ultramarines, but this was more than he'd bargained for. A phrase that had been a popular saying of Sergeant Patrobus of the 5th came back to him, a phrase Quintus had never really understood until this moment.

*Be careful what you wish for.*

"My lord?" said Nkiru, seeing the blood drain from his face.

"Is that what I think it is?" he said, afraid of the answer.

"Clarification: what do you think it is?" replied Unathi, and Quintus was reminded of the literal-mindedness of the Martian priesthood.

"Is that the *Indomitable*?"

"Affirmative," said Unathi.

Quintus marched the length of the city walls with Nkiru at his side. His Quaestor jogged to keep up with him, dodging in between the hurried preparations that had turned Axum from an industrious agricultural centre of trade into a defensive bulwark. Thousands of men and women manned the walls, each clad in the blue uniform jackets marked with the three bound corn sheaves heraldry of Tarentus. The city's defence auxilia had responded in record time, the citizen militia answering the call to arms with alacrity and determination.

Such was the norm on worlds governed by the Ultramarines.

Quintus wore his battle armour, the plates polished and gleaming blue. The ivory of his shoulder guards and the gold of his chest plate glittered in the sunlight and though his legs were a dull iron colour, he was no less magnificent sight. His bolter was damped to his thigh and an ebonite-hilted sword was slung at his back beneath a cream cloak edged with repeating geometric motifs.

Word had been passed to the other cities of Tarentus and an astropathic alert hurled through space towards Macragge. Quintus stopped by a projecting redoubt and watched as the gunners spun the cranks to elevate the barrel of a defence turret heavenward. Falling sparks of light dropped through the evening sky, like a distant meteor shower sparkling over the mountains of the north. On any other day Quintus would have enjoyed such a sight but this was no meteor shower.



The orbital defences were destroyed, blasted to destruction by the unimaginable firepower of the *Indomitable*, the shattered wreckage falling to the planet below and burning up as it hit the atmosphere. The remaining system monitors were being recalled even now, though Quintus had no expectation that they would make any difference to the conflict he knew was coming. The two monitors in orbit around Tarentus had been hunted down and destroyed by the fleet of vessels that swarmed around the gargantuan star fort.

With the destruction of the planetary defences, Quintus had no doubt an assault was coming. But whoever these attackers were, they would find that every city of Ultramar had teeth and knew how to fight.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement to the gunners and looked up through the shimmering haze of the dome arcing overhead.

“Will it protect us?” asked Nkiru, following his gaze.

“The dome is strong, and protected by layers of voids, but against the weapons of a Ramilies-class star fort I fear it will be battered down in moments.”

“Then we are doomed?”

“If destruction is our enemies’ only thought, then we have little hope of surviving a bombardment.”

“Then why do we stand the defences to arms?” asked Nkiru, and Quintus was pleased to note the absence of fear in his Quaestor’s voice.

“Because we are in the presence of the enemy and the Codex Astartes tells us that is what we must do,” said Quintus.

“Of course,” said Nkiru.

“But beyond that,” elaborated Quintus, “the star fort above us is the *Indomitable*, which was lost with all hands six months ago. Ever since Lord Calgar defeated an infernal lord of the Ruinous Powers it has been hidden within the wilderness space of Ultramar. If it is back, it is certain those who command it seek to humble us beyond simple destruction from orbit.”

“Do you know who commands it?”

“Not for certain,” said Quintus, reaching up to touch the eagle on his breastplate, “but after seeing the corruption of the *Indomitable*’s character I fear the worst.”

The planet on the viewscreen was a shimmering orb of pale yellow and soft blue, its outline hazed by the warmth of its temperate climates and near-constant weather systems. It had been simplicity itself to overwhelm the planet’s orbital defences and though the power of the *Indomitable* was such that its guns could reduce its cities to ashen cinders, Honsou knew a far worse fate awaited its defenders.

He stood in the command chapel of the Basilica Dominastus, the vast citadel rearing from the heart of the star fort that had, until recently, been the command centre for the Ultramarines garrison. Those Ultramarines were now all dead, slain in the siege fought to capture the *Indomitable*.

In the crew pits below him, the warriors who had followed him from Medrengard eagerly awaited the unleashing of the star fort’s new power. Cadaras Grendel, the horribly scarred killer, clenched and unclenched his fists in anticipation of violence. The Newborn watched with the interest of a student, while Ardaric Vaanes stood apart from his fellow warriors.

Honsou turned from his inner cabal towards the molten alcove behind him where a Techmarine might once have linked with the star fort’s weapon systems and surveyors. Instead of a Techmarine, a monstrous form—part organic, part machine, part warp-matter—held court over the modified slaves and warriors filling the corrupted chapel.

A diabolical hybrid of Dreadnought and warp-spawn, the daemon lord M’kar was a hulking mass of dark iron and fluid flesh that seethed with immaterial energies and aeons-old malice. Its splay-clawed feet burned the deck where it stood, and its hideous bulk rippled with unnatural life where the armoured plates of the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus no longer held sway. Its horned head was bestial and raw, like burned meat left to spoil, and its fangs were cruel and hooked like barbs. Two arms of inconstant form hung from its wide, armoured shoulders. Powerfully muscled with warp-spawned power, dark pistons and chains, they slithered like the limbs of Adept Cycerin. Glossy and black, one arm terminated in an enormous mechanical piston hammer, the other in a rotary cannon of fearsome calibre.

Eyes alive with unholy light regarded the planet on the viewscreen with a hate of such purity that it was almost physical. This creature had trod the worlds of men when the Legions had carved the Imperium from the raw meat of the galaxy, and had spent millennia honing that hatred. It was a creature of ultimate darkness, a chosen avatar of the primal gods of the empyrean.

To Honsou, M’kar represented a weapon to bring about the destruction of all his nemesis cared for. The worlds of Ultramar were dear to Uriel Ventris, the only warrior ever to defy him and live, and that made them targets for Honsou’s rage. He cared little for the Long War, that aeons-long conflict waged by the followers of Horus Lupercal ever since their defeat in a time so long ago that it might as well have never existed.

M’kar, however, still carried that bright torch of hatred for the Ultramarines, and that was all that mattered to Honsou.

He had learned of the daemon lord’s existence from ancient texts he’d salvaged from the ruined fortress of Khalan-Ghol, and had set out to

bend the daemon lord to his will.

With the help of Moriana, the damned seer who guided the wars of the Despoiler, Honsou had unlocked the secret of M'kar's fate. Imperial propaganda told that Marneus Calgar of the Ultramarines had defeated M'kar and torn the daemon limb from limb, thus banishing it back to the warp, but Moriana had told Honsou the truth of that encounter. M'kar had been defeated, this much was true, but it had not been destroyed. Unable to unmake the daemon's essence, Marneus Calgar had imprisoned it within the *Indomitable*, a Ramilies-class star fort that roamed the forgotten places within the darkest corners of Ultramar.

The daemon's power was bound with hateful incantations and sigils, and the more it struggled, the tighter they pulled. And there it had remained for decades until Honsou had set his course upon freeing it. The Iron Warriors and the thousands of soldiers Honsou had rallied to his banner during Huron Blackheart's Skull Harvest laid siege to the star fort and released the daemon lord from his incarceration.

Now his vengeance upon Uriel Ventris and the Ultramarines was within Honsou's grasp.

"Tarentus," hissed M'kar, its voice a hideous mélange of depthless echoes from another world and a grating mechanical growl. "I remember this world as it was when the Imperium was young. Nothing has changed."

The words were spoken with a disgusted hiss, as though the idea that such places could endure without change was anathema to the daemon lord.

"Do you need the *Indomitable* to break the dome open first?" asked Honsou.

The daemon lord turned its smouldering eyes upon him, and Honsou felt the full force of its spite, an age of hatred for the scions of Guilliman that had gone unquenched for ten thousand years. The daemon shook its head with a sucking sound of wet meat and the clatter of corroded gears.

"You think such a paltry barrier can withstand my daemon army?"

"I don't know, can it?"

The daemon laughed, the sound like a consumptive's death rattle.

"You have a need to flirt with death, Halfbreed," hissed M'kar, pointing an outstretched talon towards Honsou. "One day you will go too far."

"So people keep telling me, but here I am."

"Defy me and I will tear your soul apart," promised M'kar.

Honsou shook his head and turned away. "No, you won't. You need me."

"We shall see," spat the daemon.

Honsou nodded towards the planet in the viewscreen.

"I'm waiting," he said. "Let's see what you can do."

Quintus listened to the streaming vox updates from Master Unathi with a growing sense of unease. Despite his earlier confident words to Nkiru, there was no indication that any assault was inbound. Darkness had fallen and the night air smelled of turned earth and harvested crops. Blazing arc lights swept the ground before the high walls of Axum and stabbed into the sky to unmask enemy fliers.

Every gun in the city was trained on the sky, and the tension hung on a knife-edge. This level of readiness could not be maintained for long, and Quintus was on the verge of ordering a relaxation of the city's defensive posture when he tasted something rank on the wind blowing in from the east.

It began as a foulness that reminded him of the blazing fields of dead xeno organisms on Ichar IV when the killing was done. Vast, city-sized pyres of alien corpses were burned to ashes in the aftermath of the fighting, and the stench of charred alien meat was a rank aftertaste that no rebreather could completely dispel.

Quintus tasted something similar, a horrid reek of dead things and corruption; a foulness that was unnatural and unclean. It was the antithesis of all that was good and pure in the world, and Quintus gagged as it swept over the ramparts.

He turned his gaze to the east, the autosenses of his visor easily penetrating the gloom of the far-off fields. His heart lurched as he saw hectare upon hectare of rotted vegetable matter, hundreds of kilometres square of mulched crop and decayed fields. The entirety of the east was lost, a swelling sea of rotten vegetation and sterilised earth.

An arc light next to Quintus blew out in sprays of fat orange sparks, and he turned his attention back to the city as the dark wind surged like a swirling miasma. He tasted ashes and the sour bile of despair, a bleak hopelessness that swept through him like a virus. Quintus angrily shook himself free of the sensation, gritting his teeth as he focussed on his duty as commander of this world.

Marneus Calgar had handed Quintus the Praefecture Staff, charging him with the defence of Tarentus, and he'd be damned before he failed in that duty to his Chapter Master.

Lights began failing throughout the city and a grotesque buzzing swelled on the edge of hearing, like a static-filled picter with a billion signals shrieking and screaming all at once.

Soldiers dropped to their knees as the sourceless sound blared. No decibel meter would have registered more than background noise, for it resonated in the mind, the sound of madness and pain combined. Soldiers fired their rifles at unseen enemies, their shots stabbing wildly into the darkness. Cries of fear turned to terror and pain as screaming defence auxilia fighters turned their swords and pistols on each other, fighting as though confronted by their worst nightmares made real.

The dark wind blew ever stronger and the air beneath the dome seethed with light as storms of unnatural colours blew to life with unnatural swiftness. Shapes moved in the clouds, like sharks through a billowing cloud of blood in the ocean. Quintus felt a host of hungry eyes looking down upon his city, mountainous creatures with bodies so vast they could not exist in this world, slaving beasts of hideous appetite and aeons-old lust for the souls of mankind. Unearthly laughter drifted on the wind and the clouds gathered together in one giant thunderhead.

An arcing bolt of lightning lanced from the clouds, flashing into existence with impossible brightness. It slammed down in the centre of the city but instead of a fleeting blaze of light, the lightning remained in place. Like a frozen pict image, the lightning bolt connected the sky and the earth in a looping, twisting tracery of energy.

Quintus felt the air grow thin, as though reality had become membranous and a multitude of hitherto unseen worlds pressed in from all around. He stared at the impossible lightning bolt, watching in horror as it seemed to unfold like a tear ripped in the curtain of night.

He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but it was already too late.

The tear opened wider and an unstoppable army of nightmares poured from the lightning.

“This,” said Cadaras Grendel, “is impressive.”

Honsou had to agree with his lieutenant, watching the scenes of carnage unfolding on the planet below. Flayed beasts with obsidian horns and claws ripped flesh from the bones of the city's defenders, while formless things of jelly-like ooze with teeth devoured the corpses of the fallen. Winged bat-creatures of utter darkness capered in the air, filling the city with their apocalyptic shrieking.

A violent tide of warp-spawned abominations filled the city, killing and destroying without mercy. Towering juggernauts of brazen flesh demolished entire buildings with their bulk, while howling pack hunters with raw meat skin dragged weeping victims from their hiding places. A riot of horrific forms rampaged below, and there was nothing the defenders could do to stop it.

“That must be their leader,” said Honsou, pointing to the image of a warrior in blue armour fighting against the hordes with an energy-sheathed sword. “One of Calgar's lackeys.”

“A veteran,” said Ardaric Vaanes, the renegade Raven Guard warrior Honsou had recruited prior to leaving Medrengard. “And a broken one at that.”

Honsou looked closer, now seeing the ivory trims on the warrior's armour and the dull gleam of bionics beneath the swarming monsters that beset him. The veteran's sword plunged into the body of a wiry daemon with skin the colour of an infected wound. Black ichor sprayed, but before the warrior could withdraw his blade, a scaled minotaur creature with russet skin and crackling horns gored him and hurled his body from the walls.

Honsou lost sight of the veteran as his body broke on the ground and the pack predators fell upon him with claw and fang.

“Is this how we are going to conquer Ultramar?” asked the Newborn, its dead skin bathed in the reflected light of the city's death. “It doesn't seem very... honourable.”

“Honourable?” hissed Grendel with a bark of bitter amusement. “What the hell's honour got to do with anything?”

“And who said anything about conquest?” said Honsou.

“So what are we doing here?” asked Vaanes.

“We're here to destroy,” said Grendel with relish, the scars around his mouth and eyes weeping infected fluid. Vaanes grimaced in disgust, and not without reason.

Grendel's face was a horrific mask of poorly-healed scars, his Astartes ability to survive mortal wounds tested to its limit by the damage done to him in the closing moments of the battle to take the *Indomitable*. An Imperial agent had shot Grendel with an archaic melta pistol and though his armour and sheer venom saved his life, his face was horribly burned. To see him with the Newborn was like seeing two twins standing together, for its face was as dreadfully malformed as Grendel's.

A patchwork mélange of stolen skin sewn together from the corpses of Medrengard, the Newborn's face was a hideous fleshmask through which its all too familiar stormcloud grey eyes stared with pain-filled innocence. Honsou almost laughed at the thought, knowing of the

slaughters and murder it had done in his name. Crafted by daemonic womb-mothers, torn into existence by the Savage Morticians and clad in the armour of the Iron Warriors, there was nothing innocent about the Newborn.

Alone of Honsou's followers, Ardaric Vaanes had come through their many conflicts without disfigurement, save the ritual cuts on his angular cheeks and a trio of scars above his left eye where long service studs had been removed. The plates of his battle armour were black, its shoulder guards without any heraldic devices. Scouring winds on the planet where Honsou had consulted Moriana had stripped his armour bare, and Vaanes had chosen not to renew them.

"Is that right, Honsou?" demanded Vaanes. "Are we just here to serve your vengeance?"

"What if we are?"

Vaanes shrugged, as though the matter were of no real import. "I need to know what I'm fighting for. It's been a long time since I've known."

"You fight because that's what he damn well tells you to do," spat Grendel. "That's a good enough reason to kill Imperials, isn't it?"

"Good enough for you, Grendel," snapped Vaanes.

Honsou let them spar, knowing that a little dissent in his underlings was never a bad thing. Fight amongst themselves and they couldn't unite to unseat him. The Newborn watched impassively, its loyalty to Honsou won through months of indoctrination and psycho-conditioning. Even the latest bouts of seizures, lunatic ravings and visions of a life unlived hadn't dented *that* devotion.

"We're here to kill Uriel Ventris and hurt him where it matters most," said Honsou.

"No," said a voice from above, as a shadow fell upon them, its touch icy and unclean.

Honsou turned his head and saw the dread form of M'kar standing over them, its armoured skin alive with trceries of warp energy. Traces of the Dreadnought it had possessed were still visible beneath its undulant warp-flesh, and Honsou saw the burned remnants of the Ultramarines inverted omega symbol at its shoulder.

"Your vengeance means nothing, Halfbreed," hissed the daemon. "The heart of Guilliman's empire must burn. The Eternal Powers require it. All else is irrelevant."

The daemon turned away, its every step like the hammer of a coffin nail.

Honsou bit back a venomous comment, feeling his warriors' eyes upon him.

"What next?" said Grendel.

"Let the monster have its moment and destroy this world's cities," said Honsou, nodding towards the viewscreen. "This planet means nothing to us, it's just the lighting of the fuse."

"And then?" asked Vaanes.

"Then we wait for the Ultramarines to react," said Honsou.

"They'll come here in force," promised Vaanes.

Honsou grinned. "That's what I'm counting on."

## TWO

*It's morning, but it's still dark and he can't stifle a yawn as it surfaces with the inevitability of a buried secret. He steps onto the high ramparts of the Scelus Progenium, and the cold hits his thin body like a blow. He lets out a soft gasp and follows Commissar Coehoom onto the ice-slick ramparts, keeping his eyes glued to the frozen stones to avoid slipping. Coehoom had flogged the last boy who'd slipped and allowed the scholam's flag to touch the ground. His breath mists as Coehoom walks towards the heavy blast door of Ursakar's Tower, and he trots after him with careful steps.*

*Junior cadets aren't permitted to wear winter coats yet, and his body is shivering uncontrollably. His fingers grip the flagpole tightly and he clamps his jawtogether to stop his teeth chattering. The senior cadets manning the walk are bundled in fur-lined greatcoats, stamping around the ramparts with lasrifles slung at their backs and gloved hands tucked in their pockets. No sooner has Commissar Coehoom appeared than those hands are withdrawn from pockets and the rifles are returned to the shoulder arms position.*

*Stars twinkle in the pre-dawn sky, and he recalls howunusual it is to see lights above that aren't orbital defences or starships in loworbit. He likes looking at the stars, but life at Scelus Progenium leaves little room for stargazing. Little room for anything fun for that matter.*

*It's only been a week and he hates it already. Cadet Miklo has established his dominance of the newclass with a vicious display of strength, and the*

swelling above his right eye is still tender to the touch. He wishes his mother had never sent him here. He wishes his father hadn't been killed in the wars raging around Fortress Cadia, thus dooming him to this frozen hellhole. His mother claims it will make a man of him, but he curses the ill-luck that has seen the premature end of his youth. Only twelve Terran standard and his life as a child is over, or so the commissar instructors are fond of telling them every day.

Coehoom has reached the tower's door, but it's limned with ice and wedged shut. The commissar wraps the metal fingers of his augmetic arm around the handle and tugs sharply. The door opens outwards with a crack of breaking ice and crystal shards fall to the steps.

"Hurry up, Cadet Samuquan," snaps Coehoom. "If that flag isn't raised by oh-five-hundred hours, you'll feel the bite of my lash."

He nods and through chattering teeth says, "Yes, Commissar Coehoom!"

The leather-tough commissar looks his scrawny body up and down, as though wondering whether to take the flag from him, but contents himself with a dismissive shake of his head and leads the way inside.

The tower is, if anything, colder than the outside, but before he can contemplate this apparent contradiction, Commissar Coehoom tramps up the spiral steps towards its summit. Stuttering lumen globes fizz with the dimmest illumination, and he quickly follows his class instructor, grateful to be out of the biting sharp wind raking the cold granite walls of the scholam. The rest of his class will still be asleep, but not for long. As soon as the aquila flag is raised over the battlements, the blaring reveille call will echo through the bare dormitories at deafening volume.

Strange... he never thought he'd miss the sprawling stacks and towers of Thracian Primaris, the noise and the stink and the masses of people. As the son of an officer, it was his right to be educated at the scholam, and his mother kept telling him how he should be grateful for such an honour. Some honour, he thinks as he climbs the cold, slippery steps.

The route upwards is narrow and he has to concentrate to avoid scraping the flag's finial on the dripping walls. The last boy to do that was flogged. A lot of boys are flogged at Scelus Progenium.

He reaches the top of the tower without damaging the flag and lets out a misty breath as he emerges onto its crenellated roof. Despite the horribly early hour and the bone-deep tiredness in his limbs, he is stunned at the vista before him. Icy mountains sweep into the sky, taller than the highest stack back home, and utterly white, as though painted with a fresh coat of anti-blast wash.

A hundred kilometres to the south, a haze of sulphurous fog and smeared light marks Scelium, the nearest city to the gambrel-roofed fortress he now calls home. Newcadets pass through Scelium on their way to the scholam, and though it is nowhere near as vast as the cities of Thracian Primaris, it is an impressive place, with ice-locked hive stacks and cliff-like Titan fabriks.

"This isn't a scenic tour, cadet," barks Coehoom. "Attend to your duty."

He nods and marches to the centre of the tower, where he's been told there will be a slot for him to place the flag. The aquila flag is taken down every night and raised every morning. Why they don't just leave it up is a mystery to him, but even after only a week he knows the likely fate of any boy who might suggest leaving the flag in place overnight.

He looks down and sees there's no slot in the stone. Ice has formed over the ground and he looks desperately for somewhere to place the flag before the first rays of sun break across the mountains. He feels Commissar Coehoom's eyes boring into his back and knows this will be his only chance to avoid a flogging.

He spots what might be a slight depression and uses his boot heel to scrape away the top layer of ice. Taking the flagpole in both hands he thrusts the pointed tip of the base downwards. Ice cracks and he lets out a pent-up breath as the flagpole sinks into the slot. He steps back and salutes as the wind catches the flag and billows its red and black length out above him. The first sunrays peek over the mountaintops and catch the gold-stitched eagle with a crisp yellowlight.

He looks up at the flag, pleased beyond words he has managed to raise the flag without incident. Beyond its rippling fabric, he sees fiery lights and his eyes narrow as he sees that, instead of moving across the sky, they look as if they're getting bigger. A meteor shower?

Before he can say anything, the first notes of reveille sound, stirring blasts of a recorded triumphal band that echo through the draughty hallways and icy cloisters of the scholam below. He tilts his head to the side as he sees the lights above are leaving bright afterimages in the sky, as though they're falling at great speed.

"Come on, cadet," snaps Coehoom. "No dawdling."

He points to the sky and says, "Commissar?"

One look at Coehoom's face is enough to tell him that this is something very bad.

Coehoom bolts for the stairs, but by now the streaking objects are close enough to see that they are not meteors. They are bare metal seedpods, streaking towards the scholam at incredible speed and leaving burning contrails in their wake. He follows Coehoom's dash down to the ramparts.

By the time he gets there, the reveille notes have been replaced by alert klaxons. Tower-mounted turrets are unmasking and power-shielded mantlets are deploying. Acrid fog billows over the ramparts and he can't see Commissar Coehoom. For the first time, he feels real fear and looks up to reacquire the falling seedpods.

One slams into the far end of the rampart with a thunderous impact and he slips on the ice as the Shockwave spreads. Fire and smoke wreath its landing, but he still can't see what it is. He hears shouting and the snapping fire of lasrifles. Booming roars bounce around the stone ramparts as

*more of the metal seedpods slam down.*

*He scrabbles to his feet, hot fear pumping around his system as screams and hard bangs roar from the smoke. Man-shaped shadows move in the haze, but something must be distorting their size, because they're far too big to be men. He runs for the blast door that leads to the safety of the scholam's interior as more stuttering blasts of gunfire tear through the early morning.*

*Commissar Coehoom staggers from the smoke. The cadet cries out in terror as he sees his instructor's chest is a deep crater of exploded bone and dripping red matter. The commissar grabs his shoulder and sinks to his knees with a look of incredulous pain. Blood pours from his mouth and his face is a clenched fist of effort as he speaks.*

*"Run, Cadet Samuquan," commands Coehoom. "Run for your life."*

*He needs no second telling, and abandons the dying commissar. Tears of terror freeze on his cheeks as he slips and slides across the ramparts. More fiery seedpods batter the ramparts and the tramp of heavy feet crunch through the ice. Fizzing las-blasts crisscross the ramparts and he jumps every time he hears the booming detonations of the attackers' guns.*

*He runs blindly, not knowing where he's going, but knowing he needs to run. It doesn't matter where he is heading. That he runs is enough for his panic. Sulphurous smoke renders everything blurred and he can't see anything. He risks a glance over his shoulder and runs headlong into a wall that wasn't there before. It's a wall of iron and yellowchevrons, and he flops onto his backside, his face stinging from the impact.*

*Looking up, he sees it's not a wall, it's an enormous person.*

*Surely this towering slab of iron and yellowarmour is too big to be a person. The shoulders are far too wide and he carries a smoking gun that's surely heavier than any normal man could lift.*

*But this is no normal man. This is a nightmare from the cautionary vids come to life.*

*A horned helmet looks down at him, its eyes a shimmering red. There is no emotion in those eyes, only a blank, soulless emptiness. He is beneath this warrior's notice, unworthy of being killed.*

*"Who are you?" he weeps, feeling his control of his bodily functions surrender to the overwhelming terror.*

*The warrior does not answer, but reaches down and lifts him from the ground as easily as though he weighs nothing at all. With a casual flick of the warrior's wrist he's flying through the air. He lands heavily and skids across the ice, coming to rest at the edge of the blood-soaked ramparts. He sees he's not alone. The warriors in the armour of iron have gathered up perhaps thirty other cadets.*

*Looking at their tear- and snot-streaked faces, he sees none are over thirteen. Older cadets are tossed from the ramparts like waste. He closes his eyes, curling into a foetal ball and crying for his mother.*

**Captain Uriel Ventris gasped as his eyes snapped open. The breath caught in his throat as he let out a pent-up gasp of fear. The sensation was so alien to him that he felt a moment's dislocation as he saw he was no longer in the arming chambers of the 4th Company barracks. He looked down at his hands, where moments before—at least as far as he could remember it had been moments before—he had been cleaning his bolter.**

*The iron-armoured warrior... Commissar Coehoom... the blood-freezing terror...*

**The sensation of cold and fear drained from his body, the last lingering traces of the... not vision, but *experience*, fading from his consciousness. He hadn't been a passive observer of this youngster's fate; he had *shared* it, as though he had actually lived it. He dimly recalled a name, the last, shouted imprecation of the dying commissar. Was that his... the boy's name?**

**"Cadet Samuquan," whispered Uriel. "That was it."**

**The image of the young boy was so strong in his mind that he stared at his hands as though amazed they were so huge. Uriel lifted his eyes and saw a wall of black marble before him, its surface inscribed with a long list of names inlaid with gold leaf. As he read the first name, he knew without counting them that there were seventy-eight. He knew this because he had carved them himself, a lifetime ago.**

**This was the Temple of Correction, the sepulchre of Roboute Guilliman and most revered place in all Ultramar. The walls of this vast circular pantheon were lined with slabs of black marble hewn from the airless quarries of Formaska, each one chiselled with the names of Ultramarines warriors who had fallen in battle.**

**Uriel was kneeling before the bronze-edged slab dedicated to the dead of Tarsis Ultra, a desperate war fought to save an Imperial world from the jaws of the Great Devourer. Though the cost had been high, victory had been won, but now that victory had been snatched from the Chapter.**

**Tarsis Ultra was gone, its once industrious heart now stilled by an unknown force that had rendered it as desolate and lifeless as Prandium. No one yet knew what had destroyed this world that Roboute Guilliman had liberated during the heady days of the Great Crusade, and the ache in Uriel's heart was as fresh and raw as it had been on the day Lord Admiral Tiberius had told him of the planet's doom. The Ultramarines had been oath-sworn to defend Tarsis Ultra, and its death was a stain on their honour that could only be erased by the destruction of the nameless foe that had murdered an entire world.**

Was this why he found himself before the names of the dead? Was he here to reassure them that their sacrifice had not been without merit, that they *had* died for something worthwhile? Or had he been led here to remind him of his duty? The living endure, but the dead have long memories.

Uriel stood as sensory input around him pushed the vicarious sensations of another's life from the rear portions of his brain. A swelling murmured shuffling came to him, the sound of thousands of sandaled feet on marble from the mass of pilgrims thronging the Temple of Correction. Uriel heard their gaps of awe, mixed with the sound of weeping, a common enough response to the sight of Roboute Guilliman's magnificent form.

It was said that no one could gaze upon one of the Emperor's sons without feeling inadequate, but to look upon the serene form of Roboute Guilliman was to be judged worthy of the gift of humanity. None who made the arduous journey to Macragge left without a profound sense of humility and peace.

Finally daring to turn around, Uriel looked up into the perfect features of his gene-sire.

Unchanged since the day he had been dealt a mortal wound by a warrior he had once called brother, Roboute Guilliman sat unmoving upon his pale throne atop an enormous plinth of golden marble, a faint shimmer surrounding his armoured body. Frozen in time, the primarch of the Ultramarines stood sentinel over his adoptive home world and regarded those who had come to pay him homage with a serene, impassive gaze. Uriel wished, as did all Ultramarines, that he could have fought alongside the heroes of those long ago days, when the Imperium battled for its very survival against the Arch-Traitors. The Library of Ptolemy was replete with stirring tales of that legendary aeon, though the Ultramarines role in that titanic conflict was so shrouded in veils of secrecy and myth that not even Librarian Tigurius himself knew the whole truth of it.

Uriel turned his gaze from the primarch, for one cannot long look upon the sun. Instead, he turned his attention to the mighty structure that housed the primarch. It was a magnificent edifice, a marvel of construction so singular that even the most gifted magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus came to wonder at its secrets. Legend told that the tallest peak of Macragge had been quarried for the marble of its construction and an entire warfleet had been dismantled to provide the plasteel. Such hyperbole was, of course, untrue, but served to convey the proper sense of reverence the sepulchre demanded from its visitors.

Open-mouthed pilgrims wandered the interior precincts of the temple, shepherded by blue-jacketed soldiers from the Macragge Defence Auxilia, who stood guard at each entrance to the primarch's resting place. These men were not the primarch's only defence, for hand-picked warriors of Captain Agemman's 1st Company watched over this sacred temple, their armour bone white and trimmed with gold.

Helots in grey chitons escorted groups of pilgrims through the temple, pointing out the many architectural wonders of the building, though it would take a lifetime to catalogue them all. Heads craned upwards as the rapturous pilgrims were shown the Primarch's Arch, which was bathed in intertwined beams of spectral light from the Crystal Dome. Weeping men and women were led through Orphul's Gate, along the Triumphal Colonnade and finally shown the majesty of the Gallery of Ice and its forest of white and gold.

None who set foot in the Temple of Correction were ever the same again, whether mortal or Astartes, and though Uriel had visited this place many times, he was changed each time he walked within its memory-haunted precincts.

Uriel felt a presence next to him and turned to see a man clad in ragged, travel-stained clothes. Unshaven and painfully thin, he was the very image of a pilgrim who had spent every last scrap of his wealth to come to Macragge and stand in the primarch's presence. A dirty knapsack was slung over one shoulder, and the man reached inside to withdraw something that reflected the light from the Crystal Dome as he held it out to Uriel.

A small carving cut from steatite lay in the man's palm, fashioned to resemble a tower with an eagle atop its ramparts. The work was of exquisite quality, easily the equal of anything produced by the artisans of Ultramar, its every carved line worked with infinite care and polished to a smooth finish.

"Thank you," said Uriel, touched by this simple gesture, but the man was already turning away. Uriel was about to go after him, to learn this craftsman's name and where he had come from, but the sound of footsteps behind him pulled him up short as he recognised the heavy tread of Space Marines.

"We've been looking all over for you," said a gruff voice that suggested it was Uriel's fault the seekers hadn't found him until now.

"You were supposed to be in the company arming chambers," said another voice, clipped and with the unmistakable sharpness of a native of Macragge.

Uriel turned from his anonymous benefactor to see two warriors armoured in polished battle armour painted with the colours of 4th Company sergeants. It had been too long since these warriors had stood together, and Uriel's heart swelled with pride to see the renewed bond of brotherhood between them.

Learchus, once Uriel's nemesis at the Agiselus training barracks, but now his loyal supporter, was the quintessential warrior of the Ultramarines. The starched tones of a Macragge native belonged to Learchus, a warrior within whose veins ran the blood of ancient heroes. Though it had been Learchus that saw Uriel sent on his Death Oath, the war on Pavonis had given his veteran sergeant a unique perspective on the circumstances that had forced Uriel to make the decisions that had led to his exile. Learchus' unbending adherence to the ways of the Codex Astartes had been tempered by fighting behind enemy lines on Pavonis, and Uriel now counted him as a true brother.

Learchus' companion, Pasanus, was Uriel's oldest friend. They had grown up together, and Pasanus had helped Uriel when many others

had turned their back on the taciturn and brooding recruit from Calth. Such was Pasanius' bulk that he wore a suit of battle plate that incorporated elements cannibalised from a suit of Terminator armour. Half a head taller than Learchus, his shoulders were broader and his chest wider than even the veterans equipped to wear such blessed suits of armour.

Uriel smiled to see Pasanius clad in blue and returned to his rank of sergeant once more, for he had been forced to go to war on Pavonis without him. Pasanius now sported a bronze and iron augmetic arm, fashioned to his precise specifications by Techmarine Harkus in his newly adapted forge, one rebuilt to accommodate his extra bulk now that his mortal remains were interred within a Dreadnought.

Pasanius came forward and shook Uriel's hand. The augmetic arm was a work of art, a powerful yet delicate mechanism that enhanced Pasanius' already fearsome strength. Its surfaces glittered in the temple's multicoloured light, the metal gleaming and pristine, but Uriel caught sight of a series of short grooves cut into the metal by an Astartes combat blade.

"Harkus will have your hide if he sees that," said Uriel, nodding towards the grooves.

"He'll understand," said Pasanius. "I had to be sure the Bringer of Darkness was out of me."

Uriel nodded, understanding the source of his friend's caution.

"Well?" asked Learchus. "Why were you not in the arming chambers?"

"Look where we are, Learchus," said Pasanius. "Do any of us need a reason to be here?"

"I suppose not," replied Learchus, the ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"I *was* in my arming chamber, attending to my battle gear," said Uriel, unsure how much he wanted to tell his sergeants of how he had come to this place, "but then I had a powerful sensation that I had to come here."

"That's a good omen, see?" said Pasanius. "A black aircraft arrives in the dead of night without so much as an alert bulletin passed down the chain, and then we find our captain in the Shrine of the Primarch? I'm telling you it's a sign. We'll be getting a tasking order soon."

"You do not know that for certain," said Learchus. "You are jumping at shadows."

"Am I? We'll be readying the 4th for war within the day, you mark my words," Pasanius promised, turning to Uriel. "Have you heard any news? Do you know who has come to Macragge?"

"Not yet," said Uriel. "I am in the dark as much as you."

At the loneliest hour of night, a midnight-black Thunderhawk had flown down to the Fortress of Hera, shrouded in mystery and without the fanfare that usually accompanied the arrival of fellow Adeptus Astartes. Normally any traffic to the surface of the Ultramarines home world would merit a bulletin, but the vox-channels were silent, as though this craft had never arrived. Warriors of the 4th Company on sentry duty had logged the arrival of the gunship, but no word had filtered down from above. It reeked of mystery, but one that had no official answer as yet.

"Not for much longer, I suspect," said Learchus, as though anticipating Uriel's thought. "You have been summoned to the top of the mountain. That is why we were looking for you."

"The top of the mountain," said Uriel, heading towards the temple's western gateway. "The Chapter Master's chambers?"

"Aye," said Pasanius, following at his right shoulder. "We've been summoned."

"The captain has been summoned," corrected Learchus at his left.

"And his senior sergeants, I'd warrant. Stands to reason they'd want us there too."

Uriel smiled. "Nothing irks you like a mystery, eh, Pasanius?"

"Just looking forward to getting back into action," said Pasanius brightly. "It's been too long since I've taken the field with the 4th."

"Be careful what you wish for," said Learchus, and Uriel shivered as a cold breeze blew through the Temple of Correction.

A thousand steps led from the last plateau to the top of the mountain, a thousand steps worn smooth by the passage of countless supplicants to the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. Winding up the rugged height of the Valley of Laponis, the stepped flanks of the great canyon were shawled in highland fir and glistened with sprinklings of quartz. Intertwined rainbows arced across the valley as glacial water thundered from the top of the mountain and fell in misty sheets to the rocks below.

Uriel, Pasanius and Learchus ascended the last stair and stared out over Macragge from the roof of the world. White mountains stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions, though the western horizon glittered with the distant hint of ocean.

The vast body of the structure of the Ultramarines fortress-monastery was built around the mightiest peaks of Macragge, a gigantic, columned masterpiece of grace, strength and artful wonder. Its eternal surfaces were white and pristine, yet within its spacious chambers and mighty androns it was colourful and vibrant, each wall decorated with mosaics and murals so lifelike it felt like they were windows into



wondrous realms of light and marvel.

Golden geodesic domes topped miniature fortresses crusted with graceful balconies, and slender glass walkways stepped down towards the low foothills of Macragge, while slender silver-steel buttresses gave the impression of great strength and light, airy weightlessness. Yet for all its apparent lightness of form, there was no stronger fortification or more solid structure in all the Imperium. Every building within its high walls was a citadel in its own right, capable of being held by only a small number of defenders against a far larger force.

“It never gets any less beautiful,” said Learchus with feeling. “I could stay here all day.”

“Aye, it’s a grand view right enough,” agreed Pasanus. Uriel had to agree with his sergeants, for the view was one of stunning magnificence, a continent-sized fastness so massive that only one other manmade structure in the galaxy could compare to its grandeur—the Imperial Palace.

“I have never been to Terra,” said Uriel, running with the thought, “but from what I hear of its forgotten, benighted streets, abandoned wings, collapsed structures and pilgrim shanty towns I suspect the Fortress of Hera to be the more impressive.”

Learchus gave him a sidelong glance, and Uriel smiled. “I know,” said Uriel. “To suggest that Macragge outshines Terra is mildly heretical.”

“It is not that,” said Learchus. “I am just surprised you would not immediately think Macragge superior. Roboute Guilliman himself designed and built the Fortress of Hera.”

Pasanus laughed. “Just like he built every other incredible structure in Ultramar.”

“You don’t see the hand of the primarch in this place?” asked Learchus.

“Of course I do, but for him to have designed and constructed everything folk claim he did, he’d need to have spent the Great Crusade building instead of fighting.”

Uriel left his sergeants to their amiable banter and cast his gaze out over the Valley of Laponis. It had been little more than a narrow cleft in the mountain when Roboute Guilliman had first come to Macragge, but within a decade it had been transformed into a soaringly deep canyon of stepped galleries. The great slabs of marble that made up the bulk of the fortress’ structure had been hewn from its sides, and though time and water had softened its quarried edges, it was still a thousand-kilometre-long gouge in the planet’s surface.

“Come,” said Uriel, turning from the view. “I have kept Lord Calgar waiting long enough.”

Uriel marched towards the highest structure on Macragge, the Chapter Master’s Chambers—the top of the mountain. Though it was the inner sanctum of a warrior who commanded no less than eight systems, it was a simple, open-topped structure, modestly appointed and clad in white marble veined with gold. Two warriors in Terminator armour guarded the bronze gate at its entrance, armed with long-bladed polearms and storm bolters.

Uriel nodded respectfully as they entered the shadowed portico and passed into a terrazzo-floored vestibule where blue-robed helots waited with platters bearing goblets of aromatic wine. Uriel took one as he recognised the distinctively ripe aroma of Calthian wine, and Pasanus and Learchus did likewise.

Emerging into the sunken inner courtyard, Uriel felt an unfamiliar swell of wariness as he saw the assembly awaiting his arrival. Not since he had stood before the Chapter Master accused of heresy had he been part of so august a gathering of heroes.

Mightiest of them all was the giant warrior who stood in discourse with a figure robed in white who had his back to Uriel. He towered over the robed man, his armour the brightest blue imaginable, and every plate gleaming with a fresh application of lapping powder and sacred unguents. The polished quartz of his inverted omega captured the sunlight and the trims of his shoulder guards shone like molten gold. This warrior’s skill at arms had broken entire armies and enemy worlds had surrendered at the mere mention of his name, for it was a name that stood for courage and honour, strength of character and nobility of purpose.

Marneus Augustus Calgar, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines.

Adamant rings hung from his right ear and his left eye was a crimson, gem-like bionic with the finest copper wire linking its mechanics to the back of his skull. Marneus Calgar’s granite-carved face had lost none of its cunning or insight in the centuries he had led the Ultramarines to victory after victory, and the vitality of his enormous presence was palpable.

Attending this mortal god were his captains of battle, the mightiest warriors of Ultramar and each one a hero in his own right.

There, lounging next to the great statue of the first Battle King of Macragge at the heart of the courtyard was Captain Sicarius. The 2nd Company captain shared a joke with his sergeants, the ribald hero of Black Reach who some called reckless. Beside him, yet subtly apart, was the immense presence of First Captain Agemman of the Veteran Company. The title of First Captain was an old one, yet it was a perfect fit for the Regent of Ultramar, his brooding countenance and hoary wisdom known only too well to Uriel.

Galenus of the 5th paced at the edge of the courtyard, his face etched with anger and his fists tightly clenched. Across from Galenus were Epathus of the 6th and Sinon of the 9th. Both looked anxious at this summons, for they were captains of the reserve companies, not front-line battle leaders. Though both were as brave and capable as any Ultramarines warrior, only in times of great need were the reserve companies called to war.

Lastly, Captain Antiochus and Torias Telion of the 10th stood in the shadows of the cloister, as though unwilling to expose themselves to

the light of Macragge's sun.

Marneus Calgar looked up and Uriel saw his expression was serious, bereft of the great warmth Uriel had last seen upon his return from the war against the tau on Pavonis. Calgar's eyes were cold flint, and he nodded curtly as Uriel and his sergeants entered.

"Captain Ventris," said Calgar, beckoning them into the courtyard. "Our council is almost assembled."

"My lord," said Uriel with a crisp bow of acknowledgement.

"Every captain on Macragge," whispered Pasanius as they stepped down into the courtyard, "Must be serious."

Before Uriel could answer, three warriors in shadow-black armour stepped from the rear cloisters of the courtyard. They had been standing in plain sight, but Uriel had not seen them, as though the darkness cloaked them more thoroughly than any camouflage. Torias Telion's hand flashed to his sidearm, and Uriel realised with a start that even the legendary Scout-sergeant had been completely unaware of these warriors' presence.

Their shoulder guards bore the image of a pale white bird and Uriel remembered fighting alongside a warrior who bore identical heraldry once before. The lead warrior wore a cloak of iridescent black feathers, and his helmet was an older Mark VI variant with dark wings sweeping back from the faceplate. The fluidity of his movements was incredible, as though his feet barely touched the ground.

The warrior gave Uriel an almost imperceptible nod.

"Raven Guard," said Learchus.

"I told you this was serious," added Pasanius.

Uriel nodded. "I think you might be right," he said.

## THREE

Lord Calgar began by introducing the non-Ultramarines that joined their council upon Macragge, but Uriel already recognised one of the guests. The white-robed priest of Mars was already known to the warriors of the 4th Company, for they had fought alongside his master on the battlefields of Tarsis Ultra.

"This is Vianco Locard of the Adeptus Mechanicus," said Calgar as the robed priest gave a precisely modulated bow. The magos wore a cog-toothed medallion of gold and, save for the whirring augmetic that covered his right eye, his hairless features were bereft of anything obviously artificial. Hinged lenses of varying size were attached to a whirring device perched on his shoulder, each capable of sliding forward to drop before his glowing red bionic eye.

As Locard stepped down into the courtyard, Uriel was reminded of his first meeting with the magos; in the chamber of the Tarsis fresco, as they planned how to fight the incoming tyranid splinter fleet. Locard moved on metallic caliper-like legs that protruded from the bottom of his robes.

He clasped metallic hands that clicked with tiny internal movements, and a thin smile creased his pallid features.

"Captain Ventris, it is good to see you again," he said, his voice a rich baritone and surprising everyone with its richness.

"I would say the same, but I fear you come with ill-tidings," said Uriel.

"Regrettably so, but I shall leave such tidings for your master to deliver."

Uriel nodded as the Raven Guard warrior in the winged helmet joined Locard in the courtyard and unsnapped the airtight seals at his gorget. Puffs of old air gusted out softly, like that from a locked tomb, and Uriel tasted dust and darkness in the vapours.

His gaunt face was that of a dead man, his skin pale as alabaster, his lips cyanotic blue like a drowning victim's. His eyes were yellow and cat-like, but his dark hair was glossy and pulled in a tight scalp lock bound with a silver circlet at his temple.

Marneus Calgar placed his hand upon the warrior's shoulder, and Uriel caught the slightest flash of irritation on those pale features.

"Not a man used to the company of others, methinks," whispered Pasanius.

"No," agreed Uriel quietly as Lord Calgar addressed his warriors.

"Captain Aethon Shaan of the Raven Guard, commander of that illustrious Chapter's 4th Company," said Lord Calgar. "He and one of their finest squads have come to Ultramar to seek our aid in a most delicate matter, so I expect your full cooperation."

The Ultramarines captains nodded in respect, and the synchronicity of Shaan's company affiliation was not lost on Uriel. He began to

suspect there was more to his summons than simply his rank of captain.

A door opened behind Uriel and he turned to see Varro Tigurius, Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, lead a slender woman with caramel-coloured skin and flowing hair of purest white. She was clad in an ankle-length stormcoat, beneath which Uriel saw an armoured corslet of bronze and a form-fitting bodyglove.

“Our guest from Talasa Prime has arrived,” said Tigurius, indicating the woman and her entourage of savants, logi and soldiers clad in identical stormcoats. None of the soldiers were armed, and Uriel saw the awkwardness of fighting men forced to attend their master without weapons.

Tigurius swept past Uriel with only the briefest glance of acknowledgement, and Uriel was glad of its swiftness, for Varro Tigurius was a hard man to like. Deep-set eyes, gaunt cheeks and angular features already marked him out as different, but it was his prodigious psychic talent that set him apart from his battle-brothers. No matter that his loyalty and courage were beyond question or that he had saved the Chapter many times over with his gifts, his ability to wield the power of the warp would forever keep him aloof from those without such talents.

Uriel examined the woman as she made her way towards Lord Calgar. Like the Raven Guard, her movements were sinuous and graceful. A long, slender-bladed sword was slung at her back and the slit in her stormcoat revealed a pistol at her hip as she took her seat. Tigurius had deliberately mentioned Talasa Prime, which marked the woman as a member of the holy ordos and put everyone on their guard.

Uriel had worked with the Inquisition before and each instance left conflicting emotions. Though they were zealous servants of the Imperium who faced foes too terrible to contemplate, their methods were too absolute, too black and white for Uriel's liking. Inquisitor Barzano had almost destroyed Pavonis to deny the Bringer of Darkness its ancient vessel, and Locard's former master, Kryptman of the Ordo Xenos, had burned the world of Chordelis and all its people to prevent it from falling to the tyranid swarms.

“Inquisitor Namira Suzaku,” said Lord Calgar as the woman swept her gaze around the assembled warriors. To her credit, she seemed unfazed by the illustrious company she was keeping, an assembly that would have overwhelmed most mortals.

Uriel suspected Suzaku was not like most mortals, catching sight of a tiny hammer tattoo on the underside of her wrist.

She inclined her head, and Uriel caught the glint of artificial light within her eyes.

With the last of their company arrived, Lord Calgar strode to the centre of the courtyard, and the only sounds disturbing the silence were the water gurgling in the fountain and the rustle of the gold-stitched battle honours hanging from the courtyard's upper balconies.

“I will keep this brief, as time is against us,” began Lord Calgar. “Our enemies have already struck the first blow against us, and there is no telling where they may strike next.”

“Enemies?” cut in Sicarius. “What enemies?”

“The forces of the Ruinous Powers,” answered Inquisitor Suzaku. “An arch prince of the empyrean has returned from his banishment and laid waste to Tarentus.”

Uriel felt the astonishment that swept the chamber, his heart thudding in his chest with the shock of it. The idea that a world of Ultramar could be attacked without the captains of the Ultramarines being aware of it was unheard of.

“Ridiculous,” snapped Agemman. “Praefectus Quintus would have sent word they were under attack. We have heard nothing of the sort. Your information is incorrect.”

“I'm afraid it isn't, my friend,” said Calgar, turning to Suzaku. “Show them Tarentus.”

Suzaku nodded to one of her savants, an ascetic with a projection wand that plugged into an edit-engine strapped to his back like the ammo hopper of a Devastator. The savant swept the wand through the air, charging the particles and leaving a crackling haze in its wake. At a nod from his mistress, the image changed from one of grainy static to one of slaughter.

The quality was poor, the source of the recording clearly in orbit around Tarentus and working at maximum magnification. Yet despite the grainy nature of the scenes being played out before them, there was no mistaking their horror.

A city built along the clean lines of an Ultramarine plan was engulfed in battle. Uriel's jaw dropped as he saw monsters swarming the streets: horned and clawed beasts of multitudinous forms too outlandish to have come about by any process of evolution. These were monsters of madness, and there was only one place such abominations could have spawned.

“Daemons,” hissed Uriel.

“Just so,” agreed Inquisitor Suzaku. “A daemon army that broke through the gates of the empyrean without any hint of a weakness in the dimensional matrix. Only a being of immense power could achieve such a thing.”

“How were these images captured?” asked Tigurius.

“The Inquisition does not reveal its information sources,” said Suzaku archly.

“Every world of Ultramar has at least one Inquisition capture-drone in orbit,” said Lord Calgar, and Uriel was pleased to see Suzaku's eyes

narrow in annoyance. Lord Calgar met her angry stare. “Did you really think I wouldn’t know?”

he asked.

“I had thought our veils too subtle,” said Suzaku, unashamed at such blatant violation of trust. The Ultramarines permitted the Inquisition to maintain a base within Ultramar, but such an agreement was supposedly based on the premise that neither organisation would interfere with the other’s business. The atmosphere in the courtyard changed in a heartbeat. Where before Suzaku was someone to be wary of, now she was someone to be viewed with outright suspicion.

“You are spying on our worlds?” stormed Agemman.

“We were doing our job,” returned Suzaku.

“It does not matter,” said Calgar, ending the confrontation. “A world of Ultramar has been attacked, keep *that* as your focus.”

“Do we know how it happened?” asked Uriel. “How did the daemons get to Tarentus?”

“Keep watching,” advised Suzaku.

The view on the electrostatically charged air altered, and the edit-engine snapped into sharper focus as it shifted its aim back into space with a series of shuttered clicks. The sandy curve of Tarentus filled the lower portion of the image, but in the top corner, a vast structure was just visible, the edge of something so huge that it seemed inconceivable that it was not anchored to the surface of a world.

Its lines were brutally angled, jarring and cloaked in a veil of crystallising gasses. It had the suggestion of a castellum wall or an enormous earthwork covered in forests of razorwire. The shutter snapped one last time and the entirety of the structure was visible for a fraction of a second before the image froze in place, hissing and jerking with static.

“What is that?” asked Epathus. “A space hulk?”

“No,” said Marneus Calgar, and Uriel detected a hint of remorse in the Chapter Master’s voice. “It is something altogether worse.”

“Worse than a space hulk,” said Sicarius. “That’s something I’d like to see.”

“No you wouldn’t,” said Uriel, remembering the horror of razored claws reaching out of the darkness of the *Death of Virtue*. “Trust me.”

Sicarius gave him a bitter stare, but said nothing. The captain of the 2nd had been one of the most vocal in condemning Uriel after the Tarsis Ultra campaign, and also the most reluctant to accept him back within the fold of the Ultramarines after the completion of his Death Oath. The recent war on Pavonis had fully restored Uriel’s captaincy, but there were some who still felt his return was something to be regarded with suspicion.

“It’s not a space hulk,” said Captain Galenus of the 5th, his anger simmering just beneath his skin. “It’s the *Indomitable*!”

“The *Indomitable*?” said Epathus. “How is that possible?”

“It is possible because I was forced to make a dreadful decision,” said Lord Calgar, holding his head high as he spoke. “You all know of the Daemon Prince M’kar.”

“Aye, the daemon whelp whose fleet I destroyed at the Halamar Rift,” said Sicarius, hammering a fist on his breastplate. “You bested him too, my lord. On the *Indomitable*.”

“That I did, Cato,” said Lord Calgar, turning to Agemman. “I led the warriors of the 1st, reborn after the Battle for Macragge, onto the *Indomitable* and defeated him.”

“Tore him limb from limb!” roared Sicarius.

“No,” said Calgar. “I did not.”

Tigurius stepped into the courtyard, his eyes unfocussed as he looked at the twisting image of the *Indomitable*. He reached out with one gauntlet, as though to touch the image, but curled his fingers back at the last moment. He twisted around, and Uriel quailed before the pellucid light he saw in the Librarian’s eyes.

“The Thrice Born, I see it now,” he hissed. “Defeated once at Halamar, broken again on the *Indomitable*. Now returned to wreak havoc on the sons of Ultramar. The Sentinel of the Tower is restored to us and the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more...”

“This is that time, Varro?” asked Calgar, as though afraid of the answer.

“Aye, my lord,” nodded Tigurius.

Uriel’s blood chilled at Tigurius’ words. On Salinas, Brother Leodegarius of the Grey Knights had performed cartomancy and drawn the Tower for Uriel, a card that symbolised change, conflict and catastrophe; an overturning of the existing order of things. Coupled with Tigurius’ words, it boded ill for the future. “The Thrice Born?” said Galenus. “It is the Daemon Lord M’kar?”

“It is,” said Tigurius, his eyes returning to their normal hue. “Aye, it has always been thus. Trapped on the *Indomitable* for sixty years, bound to the warp core with eldritch wards and set adrift in the heavens on an unknown course.”

“How can that be?” demanded Galenus. “Lord Calgar, you returned from the *Indomitable* with tidings of the daemon’s death. My men garrisoned that star fort!”

Lord Calgar slowly nodded. “To my eternal shame, I fear they must be dead. Olantor, Decimus, Sabbatina and even Venerable Brother Altarion,” he said, turning to address his captains. “With the aid of the Inquisition I was able to defeat M’kar, but I could not destroy its essence. To do so would have required strength not even I possess. In the end, all that could be done was to bind its essence to heart of the star fort’s warp core, a prison that pulled tighter with every raging attempt to break it open. The *Indomitable* was set to hurl itself into oblivion, to vanish forever in the depths of the warp, but so strong was M’kar’s hatred that no matter the course its Navigators plotted, it was forever bound to Ultramar.”

“That’s why it was always guarded,” said Galenus, the loss of half his company almost too much to bear. “You couldn’t get rid of it, so you had to keep watch on it.”

Lord Calgar nodded, and Uriel felt the rock upon which he had built his every belief being chipped away with every word the Chapter Master spoke. The destruction of M’kar was part of Lord Calgar’s legend, an inspirational tale told to recruits to fill their hearts with fire and ambition. To learn that Uriel, and the entire Chapter, had been lied to was a blow to rock the certainty of even the strongest character. Looking around the courtyard, Uriel saw the hurt in every warrior’s face. The notion that an Ultramarines warrior as revered as Lord Calgar could have broken faith with truth was as shocking as it was unimaginable.

“Then someone has found the *Indomitable* and freed the Thrice Born,” said Tigurius.

“It is the only explanation,” agreed Calgar sadly.

“Who?” demanded Sicarius. “Who could have known where to find it?”

“I believe I may shed some light on that matter,” said Magos Locard.

Locard clicked over the marble flagstones towards Suzaku’s savant. “If I may?” he said.

Suzaku nodded and Locard swivelled upon his central axis to pass an information wafer to the pict-savant. The man fed the waver into the edit-engine and waved the projection wand again. Immediately, the image of a planet appeared, complete with streams of biometric, geographic and cartographic data. The view zoomed into the planet’s surface to reveal a verdant world of bright jungle flora and vast agricultural holdings spread across its fertile regions.

Uriel saw nothing unremarkable in the imagery until the view focussed in on a facility of obviously Imperial design. Only then did he realise the scale of the forests and jungles surrounding it.

“The Golbasto Facility,” began Magos Locard. “An isolated research outpost set up fifty-three point nine Terran standard years ago to study the effect of various growth exacerbators on basic foodstuff crops. The research was only moderately successful at first, but two years ago Magos Szalin reported promising results with a new viral agent he named the Heraclitus strain.”

The view swept over the planet, and now that Uriel knew what the Adeptus Mechanicus had attempted, he saw the vast scale of production on Golbasto. Enormous forests with fruit the size of a man’s torso, crops with seeds like grenades, and grain fields taller than a Warhound. The potential of such work was incredible, but its significance to the current crisis was lost on him.

“What has this to do with anything?” demanded Agemman, echoing Uriel’s confusion.

“Everything, Captain Agemman,” assured Locard. “Everything is connected and all the pieces matter. Allow me to demonstrate.”

The view shifted back to the Golbasto Facility, but this time it was in ruins, smoke from numerous fires curling into the sky and spreading to the nearby forests.

“What happened?” asked Uriel.

“The facility was attacked and destroyed, and its entire stock of the Heraclitus strain was stolen. These images are all the data-sifters could retrieve from the shattered memory coils of Magos Third Class Evlame, the only body recovered from the site.”

Once more the view changed, but this time it was a series of static-washed still images: a view of the burning silver dome at the heart of the facility; a blurred impression of a corpse-face held together with wire stitching; and lastly a distant group of armoured warriors who were surely Space Marines. Most wore armour of bare metal plates, but one stood out from the others by virtue of the glossy black of his armour.

“Who are they?” asked Uriel, as a dreadful suspicion began to form in his gut.

Locard waved an augmetic limb and haptic receptors manipulated the image to zoom in on the figures. Too blurred and indistinct to recognise individual faces, the image was clear enough to identify their markings.

Yellow and black chevrons edged the plates of their armour and one shoulder guard bore a hateful iron skull set within an eight-pointed star.

“No!” hissed Uriel. “Iron Warriors. It can’t be.”

“But who’s the other one?” asked Learchus. “The one in black.”

Uriel didn’t answer, but the posture of the warrior in black seemed oddly familiar, his body language speaking volumes about his strength, skill and fighting style. This warrior was an ambush killer, a hunter who struck from the shadows and Uriel was certain he knew from where he recognised him.

“I suspect there is a more personal note to these events than simply the wrath of a daemonic entity,” continued Locard. “I postulate that the originator of the assault on Tarentus has a personal stake in this that centres upon Captain Ventris.”

“How so?” asked Calgar.

“I was led to the Golbasto Facility by an attack on another world. One that had been destroyed by the Heraclitus strain.”

“Tarsis Ultra,” said Uriel, already knowing where this was leading. “I am right, am I not?”

“You are,” confirmed Locard with all too human remorse. “I discovered trace elements of the Heraclitus strain in what little vegetation was left on Tarsis Ultra. It appears that enemy raiders took control of an orbital missile silo and launched a series of warheads armed with the virus.”

“This virus was that dangerous? You said it was supposed to enhance crop growth. How could it wipe out an entire world?” asked Lord Calgar.

“It could not, unless that world was tainted by the residue of a tyrannid invasion, my lord,” explained Locard. “Though the tyrannid fleet was defeated, much of the bio-matter already deposited on Tarsis Ultra remained, despite the best efforts of the slash and burn programs we instituted in the wake of victory. What you must understand is that the biological impetus of tyrannic organisms is to endlessly propagate, which is a hyper-evolutionary trait designed to smother a world in spore growth that chokes the life from it in order to allow easier digestion by the bio-harvesting organisms. The Heraclitus strain sent the tyrannic organisms into overdrive and no one could stop them. They carpeted the land in corrosive algae, infected every molecule of oxygen and burned away the atmosphere. Within days the entire planet was consumed and laid bare to the star’s radiation. It is a barren rock now.”

Locard looked over at Uriel and made his way back to the statue of Konor, where he bent to retrieve a silver-sided box. “But in the midst of that destruction we found one thing we did not expect. A missile launched from the orbital platform without a warhead, one that was used to carry something else to the planet’s surface. It had a locator signal, so it was clear that someone *wanted* us to find it.”

“That contains what the missile was carrying?” asked Uriel.

“Yes,” said Locard, opening the box and removing a battered Mark VII, Aquila-pattern helmet. The paint was peeling, but there was no mistaking the colouring or the inverted omega of the Ultramarines just visible beneath the paint on the forehead. Locard turned the helmet around and read the armourer’s mark inside the rim.

“Six Epsilon Gladius,” he said.

“My helmet,” said Uriel. “The one I wore on Medrengard. The one I left behind.”

“It seems you are linked to this coming war in a manner more personal than most,” said Lord Calgar. “Why should that be so?”

“There can be only one explanation,” said Uriel. “Honsou.”

Uriel spent the next hour retelling the epic tale of his Death Oath. He told how he and Pasanius had been carried halfway across the galaxy by the Omphalos Daemonium to Medrengard, a forsaken world in the Eye of Terror, and how they had been drawn into a war between rival Iron Warriors’ Warsmiths. He told of their meeting with the renegade Astartes and their leader, Ardaric Vaanes of the Raven Guard, at which point Captain Shaan’s interest was clearly piqued.

Though many of the gathered Ultramarines had heard this tale before, they listened attentively to this new rendition. Uriel was unflinching in his recital, telling how he and Pasanius had infiltrated the dread fortress of the Warsmith Honsou in the midst of a hellish siege and their subsequent capture by the creature Onyx.

Honsou had believed them to be renegades like Vaanes and offered them a place at his side, a notion that horrified the Ultramarines. Even Sicarius smiled when Uriel spoke of how they had spat his offer back in his face. Those smiles fell away as Uriel described the macabre lair of the Savage Morticians, his imprisonment within one of the Daemonculaba womb creatures and the horror of his escape.

More than a few raised their eyebrows anew when Uriel told of his alliance with the Unfleshed, and hissed with disgust at hearing of how Vaanes rejected the chance for redemption Uriel had offered him.

When Uriel explained how he had engineered the destruction of Honsou’s fortress, a heavy silence descended, but no one dared speak

out, for no less a force than the Grey Knights had declared Uriel and Pasanius untainted. Upon their return to Macragge, the Chaplaincy and Apothecarion carried out exhaustive tests of physical, mental and spiritual purity, and that declaration was confirmed.

Uriel and Pasanius had returned to their Chapter pure.

“What I can’t understand,” began Captain Galenus, “is how this Honsou knew to strike at Tarsis Ultra. How could he have picked one world with such a precise connection to Captain Ventris? How could he possibly have done that?”

“I do not know,” replied Uriel, stepping down into the courtyard. “But he did and he *wanted* us to know it was him. This attack is not just directed at me, it is directed at all of us. Our Chapter swore the Warrior’s Debt to defend Tarsis Ultra, and the honour of every one of us is stained by this base act of murder. Yet if Honsou has come to Ultramar, it falls to me to face him and kill him. My actions have drawn his vengeance down upon us, and however he has managed to do the things he has done is immaterial. He is here and he needs to be put down like the rabid dog he is.”

Uriel felt the his heart pulse with the excited urge for action that presaged going into combat, and looked around the Chapter Master’s chambers at the warriors he called brother and those who had come to Ultramar to fight alongside its guardians. The battle captains were on their feet, ready to go to war, while Librarian Tigurius regarded him coolly and with an intensity he found unsettling.

Marneus Calgar stepped towards Uriel and placed one enormous gauntlet upon his shoulder. The Chapter Master looked deep into his soul, seeing the strength that lay at his core, a strength that would stand against this upstart foe and see him defeated.

“Varro told me that you would prove key to the coming conflict,” said Lord Calgar.

“But for good or ill?” asked Sicarius.

“Who can know for sure?” said Tigurius, circling Uriel with an appraising glare. “Our salvation or the bringer of our doom? Either way, the fate of the Ultramarines is bonded to the blood feud this enemy has brought to our realm. Whatever else happens next, Captain Ventris must be at its heart.”

Uriel read the acknowledgement in the Librarian’s words and turned to Captain Shaan. He stared into the Raven Guard’s hooded eyes, so like those of the renegade warrior he had fought alongside on Medrengard.

“You came here for Ardaric Vaanes, didn’t you?” he said.

“I did,” agreed Shaan. “The traitor has the blood of my kin on his hands, and the Raven Guard do not forget those who have wronged them.”

Uriel held out his hand and said, “Then come to Tarentus and we will make him pay.”

Shaan nodded, his gaunt features sombre and unforgiving.

The Raven Guard shook Uriel’s hand with a crooked smile and said, “We will end these traitors together. The old-fashioned way.”

## FOUR

Scout-sergeant Issam panned the polarized lenses of the magnoculars over the darkened ramparts of Axum once more, checking his earlier count. He knew there were five of them, but there are only two kinds of Scouts, those who are thorough and those who are dead. He could see in the dark almost as well as he could during the hours of daylight, but the magnoculars registered the heat signature of their targets’ poorly maintained power armour.

“I make it five,” he whispered over the squad-vox.

“I concur,” said Daxian, his second. Of the four Scouts in his squad, Daxian had the most experience and had fought alongside Issam on Pavonis. With Sergeant Learchus leading them, they had penetrated deep behind the tau lines and proven key to the final victory. It had earned Issam and Daxian an Imperial Laurel, but three others hadn’t made it back alive from that mission.

Janek Lycean and Uriel Dios won their laurels with Learchus on Espandor against the greenskins, and had earned his approbation, which was enough of a recommendation for Issam. His last Scout was a new arrival, a native of Ixax named Aurelio. Issam hadn’t yet judged Aurelio’s worth, but so far he had kept up with the rest of them and hadn’t put a foot wrong.

Issam slung his magnoculars, and secured them to his belt, making sure they wouldn’t rattle or bang on his equipment. The last thing he needed was to give their position away, though the odds of their being heard were minimal given the raucous blare of horns and random gunfire coming from the city. But their targets were equipped almost as well as his Scouts, and it didn’t pay to be careless. The five Scouts lay in a field of rotted vegetation, a mulchy carpet of decaying matter that looked like the aftermath of the Life Eater virus. Issam had seen the effects of that planet-killing weapon, and it was not a fond memory.

As unpleasant as it was, the lingering heat of chemical reactions in the rotting soil would conceal their body heat, which would make all the difference in their approach.

“Let’s move,” he whispered, crawling on his elbows with smooth, unhurried movements. He went forward slowly, halting any time he caught a flash of movement from the walls. With five targets and five Scouts, they needed an optimum firing position to ensure each target was eliminated without noise or commotion.

His squad weren’t the only warriors on Tarentus; several other teams of Scouts were tasked with infiltrating the devastated city, but Issam wanted the honour of taking out the city’s aerial defence guns himself. The augurs of the *Vae Victus* had detected only one source of activity on Tarentus, a base set up in the ruins of Axum, which was occupied by a sizeable force of enemy warriors. Heat signatures also revealed that the guns of the city were still functional, and Captain Ventris had tasked the Scouts with their elimination.

The ground squelched underneath them, its sticky matter pulling at the deep blue plates and darkened canvas of his uniform. After thirty minutes, they had advanced a hundred metres, and Issam spotted an irrigation channel with machine-finished sides and a frond-choked lip; the perfect place from which to shoot.

He and his Scouts slithered forward, easing themselves into the channel and swiftly unlimbering their sniper rifles from the camo-slings on their backs. Issam pressed his body to the rockcrete channel and gave his rifle a thorough check. The action was clear, the energy cell fully charged and the sights clear.

Daxian performed a ranging check with his magnoculars.

“Two hundred and fifteen metres,” he said.

“Just like being on the range at Agiselus,” said Uriel Dios, dialling in the range on his rifle’s sights.

Issam shook his head. “It’s nothing like being on the range, Dios,” he said. “These targets will shoot back if you miss. One shot, one kill. No exceptions.”

His Scouts understood, and Issam slid his rifle through the fronds. He rested the barrel on the rockcrete lip and closed one eye, pressing the other to the rubberised end of the sight. His breathing deepened and he relaxed his body, letting it mould to the flat sides of the channel and pressing the rifle to his cheek. The stock was warm wood, crafted to the contours of his features from a highland fir he’d felled over sixty years ago on the flanks of the Valley of Laponis.

His vision through the sight was a pale blue. The angles of the wall were dark and cold, the outlines of the figures walking this segment of the ramparts a soft, glowing white. A Mark V helmet drifted through the crosshairs, but this was no warrior of the Adeptus Astartes he had slotted in his sight. This was a traitor. This was a warrior who had betrayed everything Issam and the Ultramarines stood for. He deserved to die.

“Fire on my shot,” he said. “Take them down.”

Issam let the sensors from his sight tell him the wind velocity, ambient temperature and relative humidity. He followed the winking icon to compensate for the local conditions and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly and curling his finger around the trigger.

Before he could shoot, his target vanished from sight as through dragged to the ground. A squirt of glowing light spurted upwards. Issam kept his aim for a few seconds then swept his rifle along the length of wall his squad had chosen as their entry point to Axum.

The wall was empty, no trace of the enemy Astartes to be seen.

“What just happened?” hissed Daxian, sliding back into the channel and unslinging his magnoculars.

Issam didn’t answer and kept scanning the ramparts. They were empty, no sign of occupation and certainly no sign of the sentries.

“We happened,” said a soft voice at Issam’s shoulder, and he jerked back, the rifle falling from his hands as he scrabbled for his combat blade.

A fluid shape rose from the darkness of a shadowed culvert.

“The way into Axum is clear, Sergeant Issam,” said Captain Aethon Shaan with a hint of amusement. “Your approach was made with great skill, but this is Raven Guard work.”

Issam swallowed his pride, recognising that Shaan’s stealth skills made him look like a stumbling recruit.

He nodded. “Then let’s get this done,” he said.

The Ultramarines Scouts and the Raven Guard entered Axum without difficulty, and Issam was impressed at how efficiently Shaan’s warriors had slain their targets. To get close to a target as well equipped as a Space Marine, even one branded a traitor, required an incredible gift of stealth.

He knelt by one of the dead bodies. The head was severed, cut cleanly from the neck with an energised combat blade. He had no doubt the



other sentries had been killed by similar killing blows. To inflict such grievous wounds in complete synchrony required incredible skill and perfect coordination.

“Your warriors are good,” whispered Issam as Shaan knelt beside him.

“I know,” said Shaan.

Issam examined the renegade warrior carefully. He was encased in a poorly maintained suit of Mark V armour, breaches in its cabling crudely repaired with patches of liquid sealant. He scanned the armour pattern and turned the shoulder guard around with a grimace of distaste. To touch the body of a traitor was unpleasant, but a good scout gathered intelligence where he could. After all, know thine enemy was one of the cardinal rules of warfare.

The ceramite plates were painted with vivid slashes of black and orange, like the stripes of a tiger. The shoulder guard was without insignia, simply a repetition of the same slashed pattern.

“You recognise the markings?” asked Shaan.

“I think so,” replied Issam, thinking back to the infrequent alerts on Chapters declared Excommunicatus. “The Claws of Lorek.”

“They are a long way from the Maelstrom.”

“That they are,” said Issam.

They concealed the bodies and ghosted over the ramparts, making their way into the remains of the city. Lights blazed in the distance and blaring warhorns spat foul imprecations to dark and bloody gods into the night sky.

“Makes our job easier,” said Issam, as Shaan appeared next to him.

“Almost too easy,” said Shaan, and Issam wasn’t sure whether the Raven Guard was irritated or suspicious of such ease.

Before Issam could reply, the warrior slid into the shadows and it took all Issam’s considerable skill to keep up with him through the darkened, corpse-strewn streets of Axum. The bodies of those slain in the city’s fall lay where they had been butchered, and the air reeked of decay. Ripened bodies bloated with noxious gasses rotted in the warm climate, and buzzing clouds of carrion flies grew fat on the human bounty.

“Guilliman’s oath,” hissed Janek Lycean. “They just left them to rot!”

“Quiet,” hissed Issam, catching Shaan’s glance of disapproval. “Control yourself, Lycean.”

Despite his rebuke, Issam shared his Scout’s outrage, but kept that anger bound with iron control. This mission required clinical detachment, but that was asking a lot when you were confronted by an entire city of Ultramar’s dead.

Shaan bunched his fist and made a series of quick chopping gestures. The Raven Guard moved out, ten of them, each advancing with smooth steps and flowing movements that were simply breathtaking.

They moved through the city, keeping to the shadows and avoiding any signs of activity. Orbital surveys had detected that the bulk of the enemy presence was located within the ruins of the Prosperine Tower, and the Imperial troops gave the main entrance of that structure a wide berth, heading towards the generator compound located towards its rear.

Within the hour, they reached the edges of a vile fortification built around the generator. Bathed in the stark glow of a score of arclights, it was an unlovely creation of rectangular blocks adorned with bloody spikes of sharpened metal. Corpses hung from every spike, and Issam felt his control slipping as he saw the violations inflicted on the bodies.

Atop the highest spike was the desecrated corpse of Rufus Quintus. The wounded veteran had been stripped of his armour and crucified on a pair of crossed girders, his arms spread-eagled and pierced by bolts fired from a heavy-duty rivet gun. His legs were missing and the angle of his neck told Issam that the hero of Ichar IV was unquestionably dead.

Issam tore his gaze from the horrific mutilations and forced himself to take stock of the defences. The sounds of shouting, gunfire and revving chainswords came from the Prosperine Tower, eclipsed by the intermittent squalling of a warhorn ripped from a Titan. Mortals in scavenged armour and fright-mask helmets sat on the walls with their rifles held loosely over their shoulders. What they wore couldn’t be called uniforms, but there was cohesion in the blood staining their right shoulder guards.

“This is it,” said Issam, hugging the cover of a claw-scarred buttress. “The generators are inside. Take them out and the defence turrets will go offline.”

“How long until the reserve generators take over?” asked Shaan.

“They won’t if that machine of Magos Locard’s works like it’s supposed to.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“About two minutes.”

**“Will that be enough time?”**

**Issam smiled. “For Captain Ventris? More than enough.”**

**“Are the rest of your squads in place?” asked Shaan.**

**Issam flipped down his visor lens and sent a rapid data squirt on a prearranged frequency. A series of icons flickered to life on the lens, each representing one of the four Scout squads that had made their approaches from different sectors.**

**“In place and ready to shoot,” he confirmed.**

**“Then I’ll see you on the inside,” said Shaan, and Issam heard the relish in his voice.**

**The Raven Guard vanished into the shadows, what few there were in the harsh glare of the arc lights, and Issam drew a bead on an enemy soldier whose face was obscured by an iron mask in the form of a snarling bear.**

**“All units, fire on my shot,” he commanded.**

**He counted to ninety, keeping his target locked in his crosshair as it made an all too predictable traverse of the wall. On the ninetieth second he squeezed the trigger, and the warrior pitched backwards, the shot going through the eyeslit and blowing out the back of his helmet in a near soundless explosion of blood and bone.**

**Others dropped in concert with Issam’s target, and he expertly shifted aim and took out another target. Masked faces stupidly looked out from the wall, and Issam took them down too. Three more enemy soldiers fell to Issam’s lethally accurate fire as they milled in confusion, but the rest had learned their lesson and kept their heads down.**

**Issam watched as the Raven Guard quickly scaled the blocky walls and slid over the ramparts, killing the warriors who cowered behind the walls with brutally efficient sweeps of blade and lightning claw.**

**“Go!” ordered Issam, running bent over with his rifle clutched tightly to his chest.**

**He reached the walls and slung his rifle, vaulting onto the uneven blocks and scrambling up with practised ease. Within seconds he was at the top with his combat blade unsheathed, but there was nothing left to kill. His squads were merciless in the accuracy of their sniper fire and the Raven Guard had been equally thorough in their close-range killing.**

**All around the crude fortress, Ultramarines Scouts were swarming over the walls, rifles poised to take down any last resistance, but what little was left was being quickly and efficiently ended by the claws of the Raven Guard. Issam and the Ultramarines moved down into the space enclosed by the tumbledown walls, despatching any wounded enemy soldiers with quick slashes of their combat blades.**

**“Daxian,” hissed Issam, waving his second towards the main generator building. “Get the charges planted and rig the disruption pod to the reserve generator trunk cabling.”**

**“Yes, sergeant,” said Daxian, running for the columned portico of the generator building.**

**Magos Locard had provided the Ultramarines with an experimental disruption pod, a device that would register any break in the power supply to the aerial guns. If it functioned as the magos claimed, it should prevent the reserve generator from kicking in once the main power supply was taken out.**

**While Daxian completed his part of the mission, Issam deployed the Scout squads into covered positions on the walls. Their rifles were aimed outward for any sign their swift assault had been detected, though this seemed unlikely since it had only taken twenty-six seconds from his first shot to the capture of the position.**

**Something wasn’t right, but Issam couldn’t put his finger on what was bothering him, so he climbed the rugged slope of tumbled blocks and glanced up at the flame-lit grace of the Prosperine Tower. Named for an ancient god of fertility, the tower’s name was in somewhat poor taste, but it had been in use since the earliest days of Ultramar and the Ultramarines were great respecters of tradition, so it had stuck.**

**Uriel Dios watched his sector beside the dead man Issam had shot in the opening salvo of the attack and nodded to him as he squatted beside the corpse. Issam pulled off the blasted remains of the corpse’s iron mask. The man’s face was gone, punched inwards by the shot and there was nothing left to tell where he had come from or what he had looked like. Dressed in combat fatigues and a padded jacket with circles of loose stitching where Issam guessed rank and insignia badges had been torn off, the dead man was clearly a deserter from an Imperial Guard regiment. How he had come to be in the service of the Archenemy, Issam couldn’t begin to guess.**

**He looked along the length of the crude defences, seeing more of the dead men and wondering at the stupidity of its defenders.**

**“Sergeant?” said Uriel Dios.**

**“What is it, Dios?”**

**“This doesn’t make any sense,” said Dios, tapping the body with his boot.**

**“What doesn’t?” replied Issam, though he was pleased the young Scout shared his sense of something being *off* about this whole set up.**

**“This,” said Dios, jerking a thumb back towards the power generator. “The enemy must know this is the most vulnerable part of the**

defences, so why are there only mortals on these walls? Why are there no traitor Astartes around the generators?”

Issam cursed himself for not seeing it earlier, but before he could answer, a perfectly controlled blast destroyed the defence guns’ generator, the noise of the detonation swallowed by the screaming klaxons and gunfire echoing from within the Prosperine Tower. The building was undamaged, and Magos Locard’s disruption pod functioned perfectly, feeding a power signal to the reserve generator and fooling its cogitator into thinking the main generator was still functioning.

Ninety seconds later, the Ultramarines assault began in earnest.

Uriel’s Thunderhawk swooped in from the east and blasted its way over the walls in a roar of jet engines. Two others followed it, their battlecannons pummelling the Prosperine Tower, reducing its upper section to flaming debris and collapsing the bulk of its structure into itself.

Seconds later, the lead gunship hammered down in the main plaza before the tower, its assault ramp slamming down and Ultramarines warriors fanning out in precisely orchestrated manoeuvre patterns to seize pre-selected objectives.

Uriel dropped to the surface of Tarentus, his bolter pulled in hard to his shoulder as he led his warriors towards the hellish, molten crater of fire and smoke which was all that remained of the Prosperine Tower. A gnawing sense of deep unease pervaded his entire body, and it wasn’t just because he had opened fire on an ancient building that had stood proud on a world of Ultramar for thousands of years.

No, something else sat ill with Uriel, but its source wouldn’t coalesce in his mind.

A flickering tactical overlay appeared on Uriel’s visor, displaying the location of his forces. Issam’s Scouts were picked out in green along the ramparts of a crude and hastily assembled bulwark, which had all the hallmarks of the Iron Warriors’ brutal simplicity.

“Issam, report,” said Uriel.

“Traitor Astartes on Axum’s outer walls, but only rebel mortals here. All are dead, but I have no count on enemy forces within the tower.”

“Understood. Maintain overwatch.”

“Affirmative,” said Issam. “Though I suspect there will be little left to oppose you.”

“I hope not,” snarled Uriel. “This enemy has killed citizens of Ultramar and defiled a world of Roboute Guilliman. I want them to feel the severity of our retribution.”

The two follow-on gunships landed in a storm of dust and billowing engine smoke. More warriors charged out, and Uriel saw Learchus and Pasanus at the head of their squads. Together with the Scouts, this force represented the entirety of the 4th Company’s strength, and as Ancient Peleus unfurled the brightly coloured company banner, he felt that familiar pride that came from leading the greatest warriors in the galaxy into battle once again.

There was no need to issue orders; the assault had been planned out according to the dictates of the Codex Astartes, and every Ultramarines warrior knew his place. Devastator squads found cover, as Assault squads moved alongside the Tactical warriors, ready to follow up any gunfire with a furious charge of chainswords and pistols.

Flaming debris fell from the tower, tumbling down in an avalanche of sparks and obscuring smoke.

And Uriel’s desire to lay the wrath of the Ultramarines upon his enemies was realised.

Warriors in ancient battle plate stained with the blood of ten thousand victims staggered from the wreckage, axes raised and vile war shouts shrieking from helmet vox. Many were horrifically injured, missing arms or bearing wounds that should have crippled even the toughest Space Marine, but Uriel saw that these were no ordinary traitors.

These were berserkers, mindless killers who fought without heed of pain or fear of death. In any fight, a skilled warrior would seek to kill his opponent without suffering any wounds in return, but the berserker cared nothing for his own survival. Killing was all that mattered to such ferocious warriors, and their survival was irrelevant.

They came in a rushing mass of screaming faces, horned helmets and scarred horror, their weapons a hideous mix of swords, axes, monstrously toothed cleavers and barbed meat hooks. Uriel counted around a hundred before the first shots rang out.

A warrior with a face covered in old blood pitched sideways as a sniper round punched through his temple and evacuated his skull. Another fell with his throat shot out, as the Ultramarines Scouts picked off enemy warriors through the gaps in their armour.

Uriel squeezed off a short burst of bolter fire, dropping a red-armoured warrior with a leering skull branded into his plastron. Streaking lines of bolter fire hammered the charging berserkers, dropping scores, but barely slowing the rest. Pasanus sprayed a streaming burst of promethium into the berserkers, but none of the enemy fell, and flaming warriors hurled themselves towards the Ultramarines with even greater ferocity. Warriors charged with arms blown off or hanging by meaty sinews of ruptured flesh. One berserker ran ten metres with half his head missing, only collapsing when the rage-fuelled vitality finally bled out of his system.

Uriel fired a last burst of shots, then slung his bolter. He drew the golden-hilted sword of Idaeus and his pistol. The blade flashed to life, its

edge fizzing with killing light.

“Into them!” he yelled as the lines of blue and crimson met in a brutal clatter of armour.

Screaming ferocity met clinical precision as the Ultramarines’ parade-perfect formation smashed into the charge of the berserkers. Axes rose and fell, pistols boomed and chainswords tore through armour in flaring bursts of sparks like angle-grinders in an armourer’s workshop.

Uriel shut off his tactical overlay, the icons of friendly and enemy forces too hopelessly intermixed for it to be of any use. No sooner had the icons faded from view than a sweeping axe blade flashed towards him. He ducked and thrust his blade into his attacker’s exposed midriff, a warrior with skull-stamped plates and a daemonic helm. Uriel felt his blade slice cleanly through armour, flesh and bone, and dragged it to the side, almost cutting his foe in half.

Another came at him with a huge iron hook swinging for his neck. Uriel turned the blow aside, but the warrior slammed into him, driving the hook under his shoulder guard. They spun around, locked together like dancers as the warrior repeatedly slammed a spiked cestus gauntlet against Uriel’s side. Driven with such force and hate, the blows cracked the plate and Uriel felt stabbing pain in his ribs.

He locked his elbow around the traitor’s arm and spun around, using the berserker’s momentum to hurl him to the ground. Quick as a feral beast, the warrior found his feet, but before he could pounce, a black shape flashed past and a warrior armed with twin lightning claws cut the maniacal killer apart with a flurry of slashing blows.

Aethon Shaan and his squad of Raven Guard swept through the desperate melee with smooth and seemingly casual motion, as though the berserkers were moving in slow motion. They swayed aside from killing blows, lopped heads and limbs with elegant sweeps of claws and swords, turning their enemies fury into clumsy, blind rages.

The Ultramarines way of war was professional, disciplined and utterly without mercy, but the Raven Guard fought with a sinuous grace that was unlike anything Uriel had seen before. Captain Shaan moved as though guided by preternatural senses, striking enemies down without effort, and anticipating attacks before they were unleashed.

A howling, axe-wielding warrior hurled himself at Uriel, and he lost sight of the Raven Guard captain. Uriel rolled beneath the attack, slicing his sword in an overhead arc, opening the berserker from groin to sternum. He rose to his feet, taking in the nature of the fight in a snapshot appraisal of the battle.

Though they were horribly outnumbered, the forces of the Archenemy were fighting with the killing fury of warriors who lusted only after death, be it theirs or their enemies. Learchus and Pasanus fought with controlled aggression, drawing the berserkers into isolated pockets of resistance that could be destroyed piecemeal. The berserkers could not win, but that was of no consequence. That blood was spilled was all that mattered to such bestial killers, and Uriel could not conceive of how so noble a warrior as a Space Marine could fall to such degraded depths.

Uriel killed another berserker and kicked the body from his sword as he felt a powerful sense of danger. He spun on his heel, sword raised to strike. No berserkers were close, yet the sense of impending doom would not leave him. He scanned left and right for threats, but could see nothing to explain such a feeling of dread.

He saw twin points of gleaming light reflected on the blade of his sword and looked up to see two glowing embers in the sky, like a pair of malevolent eyes staring down at him.

Fast-moving and brighter than the pre-dawn stars, the image reminded Uriel of the shared memory he’d lived before arriving at the Temple of Correction. Without quite knowing how, he knew that these were harbingers of destruction.

Uriel called up his tactical plot and opened a channel to every warrior under his command.

“All Imperial forces, emergency withdrawal!” he said, shocked to be issuing such an order when victory was moments away. “Command prefix omicron!”

It was an easy order to issue, but a harder one to obey. Withdrawing from a close quarters battle was a horrendously dangerous manoeuvre, but against a foe such as this it was nearly impossible. The Ultramarines pulled back in disciplined groups, one combat squad breaking off the fight and running for cover as their fraternal unit kept the enemy in the fight.

Accurate sniper fire from Issam’s Scouts provided openings for retreat, and as Assault squads fell back, Devastators raked the enemy warriors with heavy calibre shells or sent booming missiles into their midst. Uriel jogged back with his warriors in a textbook manoeuvre of withdrawal that might have been executed on the parade ground, such was its efficiency.

Pasanus ran over to him, the nozzle of his flamer copper brown from the many gouts of promethium he had unleashed.

“What’s going on? Why are we pulling back? We have them!”

“We need to get away,” said Uriel. “Something is desperately wrong here.”

Pasanus started to ask more, but Uriel held up his hand as he heard a desperate voice calling for his attention in his earpiece. A blast of static resolved into the voice of Lazlo Tiberius. The Lord Admiral was aboard the strike cruiser *Vae Victus*, the grand old dam of the Ultramarines fleet that had carried the 4th Company into battle for decades.

“Captain Ventris receiving,” he said, finding some space. “Repeat last transmission.”

“Uriel, thank the Emperor!” said Tiberius. “Get out of there. *Now* Fall back to the gunships and get as far from Axum as you can.”

“I have already issued the order,” he said. “We will be airborne momentarily.”

“How did you know?” said Tiberius. “We only just picked them up.”

“Picked what up?”

“An orbital torpedo battery launched two warheads at the surface. Space is lousy with electromagnetic radiation, and we didn’t see them through the clutter of the debris up here.”

“Trajectory?” asked Uriel, though he already knew the answer.

“On Axum,” said Tiberius. “You’ve got a minute at best.”

“Understood. Ventris out.”

The Thunderhawks were already spooling up their engines and Uriel glanced up to see the two specks of light in the sky drawing closer with every passing second.

Disciplined volleys of bolter fire punished the last of the berserkers as the Ultramarines fell back by squads to their gunships. Learchus’ aircraft lifted off as soon as the last warrior was aboard and Pasanius’ was hot on its heels. Both gunships were overloaded with personnel. Issam’s Scout squads had deployed via Land Speeder Storms, but there was no way they could reach them in time.

Though it went against Codex doctrine to abandon such valuable equipment, they had no choice. Only Uriel’s gunship remained on Tarentus, but it was the most heavily loaded, for Issam’s squad and Aethon Shaan’s warriors had to squeeze on board also.

Uriel fired single shots from the assault ramp of the Thunderhawk as Issam and Shaan ran back to the gunship, firing from the hip as they went. The berserkers were a howling mob of killers, driven mad with killing fury and heedless of their impending doom. The Thunderhawk’s guns added to the din as the berserkers surged forward in one last futile attempt to claim their blood victims.

“Ramp up!” shouted Uriel, hammering the closing mechanism as the Raven Guard and the Scouts dashed on board. Only Issam remained on Tarentus, picking off berserkers with snap-fired shots of his bolt pistol.

“Get in!” cried Uriel.

The hammer on Issam’s gun slammed down on an empty chamber, and he vaulted onto the rising ramp of the gunship. An instant later, a howling killer with a serrated dagger leapt onto his back and plunged the blade into the Scout-sergeant’s shoulder. Issam cried out and was borne to the deck.

The assault ramp closed and Uriel heard furious clanging on the outside as the berserkers tried to batter their way in.

He hit the intercom to the pilot and shouted, “Go!”

The gunship lurched and the enemy warrior was thrown from Issam’s back. He rolled upright, a maddened savage with a face so scarred with self-inflicted wounds that barely any trace of humanity remained. The berserker spat a mouthful of blood, his wetted blade raised to kill more of his enemies.

Uriel swung his bolter round, but before he could take the shot, a black-clad warrior flashed before him and a spray of hot arterial blood arced over the fuselage like a ruptured hydraulic.

The berserker dropped to his knees, and where his head had been there was simply a neatly severed stump that pumped blood energetically onto the ribbed flooring of the gunship.

Aethon Shaan spun around, dropping into a predatory stance, but there was no need for further violence.

“That was fast,” said Uriel, lowering his bolter.

“Not fast enough,” said Shaan, helping Issam to his feet.

The Scout-sergeant grimaced in pain, his shoulder a mass of bright blood and torn armour plates.

“How’s the shoulder?” asked Uriel.

“Painful, but I’ll live,” replied Issam. “Bastard was fast.”

“Not fast enough,” echoed Uriel, watching as Shaan returned to his warriors.

Seconds later, Uriel watched from the pilot’s compartment as the two warheads impacted in the centre of Axum. The cockpit canopy had

been dimmed, and a blinding light flashed into existence just before a second detonation. By the time the canopy cleared, twin mushroom clouds clawed their way into the sky with dreadful finality.

Axum was gone, a city that bore the hallmarks of all that was good and noble in Ultramar, reduced to ashes in a microsecond. All trace of the battle they had just fought was obliterated by warheads designed to cripple starships. A shuddering blast wave shook the Thunderhawk roughly, but as the pilot gunned the engines the vibrations in the fuselage lessened.

But for a moment's lucky premonition, Uriel and the 4th Company would be dead.

"It was a trap," said Aethon Shaan, appearing at his shoulder.

"Yes," said Uriel. "They knew we would come in force."

"They baited it with their own warriors," said Shaan. "Ones who wouldn't care about being left to die."

"It sounds like you admire that," said Uriel.

"No, but it tells of a singular lack of conscience in their leader. To know him is to know his weaknesses, but such a warrior will be a dangerous foe."

"You have no idea."

"Truly this Honsou must hate you."

Uriel watched the flaming remains of Axum and clenched his fists.

"Not as much as I hate him," he promised.

## FIVE

*Warbreed's* superstructure groaned under the pressure of so sharp a turn, but Honsou knew the ship well enough to be confident she could handle it. An alarm sounded from one of the servitor-stations, but Adept Cycerin silenced it with a dismissive wave of an organic mechadendrite. Enmeshed within a pool of sluicing amniotic gel, the corrupt magos of the Mechanicus had evolved his internal mecha-organic workings to no longer require him to move from station to station.

The Titan they had destroyed on Majaax had furnished Cycerin with bio-conductive gels, and technology stripped from the Basilica Dominastus of the *Indomitable* had allowed him to fashion this disgusting means of more effectively linking with the mechanisms of the *Warbreed*. The smell was horrendous and the undulating shapes moving beneath the sludgy pink fluid filled the bridge of the battle-barge with the reek of sour milk.

"Gods of the warp, that stuff is rank," said Cadaras Grendel. Honsou thought his lieutenant was grimacing at the slopping pool in the centre of the bridge, but it was hard to tell what expression Grendel was making these days.

"If it helps him carry out my orders then it could smell like a cultist of the Plaguefather for all I care," said Honsou. "Now be quiet."

Grendel shrugged and returned his attention to the viewing bay.

Honsou kept his gaze fixed on the swirling images on the plotting table, a cracked slate edged in battered steel with a projected field of red-washed static. Searing icons representing the dancers in this deadly ballet moved slowly through the hash of interference, with the largest being the glaring eye that was the *Indomitable*.

While the makeweights of Honsou's fleet battered themselves against Talassar's screen of orbital torpedo silos and the relentless broadsides of hundreds of geostationary gun platforms, the ships of his warlords fought the real enemy—the Ultramarines fleet.

It was a small fleet, three frigates and a destroyer attended by a host of rapid strike craft and a pair of aging system monitors, yet its strength was not to be underestimated.

A distant explosion flared in the distance and Grendel laughed.

"One for Kaarja Salombar," he said. "That's the *Moonblade*. It's got to be."

Honsou glanced down at the images.

The Corsair Queen's ships ranged far ahead of the Iron Warriors vessels, recklessly dashing off to provoke the Ultramarines ships to battle. As expected, the enemy ships had taken the bait, working to their predictable Codex. The fighting had been fierce, with the Ultramarines vessels taking out three of Salombar's ships without loss. Yet Salombar was no slouch when it came to void war, and her

captains were fast and unpredictable.

And that played havoc with the Ultramarines' rote battle plans.

Salombar's flagship, the *Moonblade*, was a sleek dart of a ship, long and graceful, with a host of delicate solar sails descending from her underside. Multiple broadside batteries pummelled the Ultramarines ships, raking a Nova-class frigate from prow to stern.

Then the *Farsider* had joined the fight.

One of the vessels Huron Blackheart had presented Honsou, the venerable Apocalypse-class battleship was ready for the scrapyard, with more than half its weapon systems non-functioning. The old beast still had teeth, however, and its nameless spawn-captain knew how to use them.

The *Farsider's* lance batteries were defunct, but its main gun could still fire and it unleashed a searing blast from its frontal cannon, a weapon whose barrel ran almost the length of its keel. Graviometric impellers hurled the deadly projectile towards the Ultramarines ships at close to light speed. The resulting implosion obliterated three rapid strike cruisers and sent a system monitor limping for the dark side of the planet.

More and more ships moved to engage the Ultramarines, attacking from almost every axis to pin them in place.

Except the Ultramarines weren't cooperating and staying locked in battle; they were breaking through the Corsair Queen's battle lines.

"She's lost them," said Grendel, watching the dance of icons. "She went in too thin and left them a way out. Obvious really."

"Yes," agreed Honsou. "But look where that way out leads."

Grendel followed the path the Ultramarines breakout would take and grunted with dark amusement. "You planned this?"

"Of course," said Honsou. "You didn't think we'd fight this on their terms did you?"

Honsou turned his attention back to the plotter, watching as the Ultramarines punched through the weakness in Salombar's attack, destroying another corsair vessel as they surged through the gap their weapons had created.

"Too bad their way out is towards the *Indomitable*," said Honsou.

"Can they hurt it?"

"Unlikely, but one of the frigates is armed with lance batteries," said Honsou. "And that could do some real damage if it gets through. Maybe even to the Basilica Dominastus."

"And that would be a terrible shame, eh?" laughed Grendel.

"It won't be pleasant," said Honsou with a smile, "but at least it'll show M'kar how much it needs us if it wants to bring Ultramar to its knees."

"You think that's what it wants?" said Grendel.

"Of course, don't you?"

Grendel shook his head. "No, it just wants to kill Ultramarines. It doesn't care about revenge. It even told you vengeance was irrelevant."

Honsou took a long look at Grendel's disfigured features, unable to tell whether or not he was being serious.

"How do you know? Since when did you become confidante to a daemon?"

"It's as plain as day," said Grendel, as though amazed Honsou hadn't seen it. "It doesn't matter how this ends. It's a creature of the warp. It will endure, but the Ultramarines will be a spent force when the dust finally settles. It'll see us all dead by the end of this, if we let it."

"Once Ventris has been made to suffer and all he holds dear is in ashes, I am done with Ultramar," said Honsou as the *Warbreed's* vast manoeuvring jets fired and forced its enormous bulk around. "M'kar can get itself destroyed killing Ultramarines, but I won't go down with it."

Grendel tapped the plotter screen and said, "You won't need to worry about that if the Ultramarines break through."

Honsou had no intention of allowing the *Indomitable* to suffer any real damage, but it would do no harm to remind M'kar that it relied on its mortal allies. Yes, the star fort was a potent weapon, almost impregnable and capable of unleashing a fearsome amount of destruction, but without the attendant fleet, it was a static weapon. And if his time as master of Khalan-Ghol had taught him anything, it was that static targets would eventually find themselves brought to ruin.

++Notification: incoming vessels,++ said the grating, wet noise of Adept Cyzerin's voice. It was without definite source, simultaneously appearing from every vent and vox-grille and bubbling up from the depths of his grotesque, scum-frothed pool.

"Identify!" barked Honsou.

++Engine signatures, displacement and inter-ship vox protocols identify incoming vessels as follows: vessel on bearing zero-one-nine is Gladius-class frigate, *Sword of Ultramar*. Vessel on bearing zero-three-seven is Gladius-class frigate, *Grand Duke of Tallasar*. Vessel bearing zero-two-six is Nova-class frigate, *Guilliman's Spear*. Vessel bearing zero-four-one is Hunter-class destroyer, *Hera's Wrath*.++

“That’s a lot of firepower,” noted Grendel.

“Not as much as *Warbreed*,” promised Honsou.

++Warning: external augurs detecting torpedo launch.++

“Now it begins,” said Honsou with relish. “Ready close-in defence guns.”

++Status: all guns armed and acquiring target information.++

“Increase speed to full,” ordered Honsou, the words barely out of his mouth when he felt the vibration in the deck plate change in response. As repugnant as Cycerin’s transformation had made him, Honsou couldn’t argue with the results.

“Launch counter-spread. Target *Hera's Wrath*, she’s the only one with torpedoes.”

Though he couldn’t feel it, Honsou knew the torpedoes were already blasting from their prow launch bays. Sure enough the plotter came alive with a squall of light, though it was impossible to pick out how many weapons had been launched.

++Picket screen of rapid strike vessels manoeuvring to intercept torpedoes.++

“Let them,” said Honsou. “Enough will get through.”

The Ultramarines rapid strike vessels flew into the path of the incoming torpedoes and unleashed a withering storm of gunfire into the path of the warheads. The odds of actually hitting an object as slender and fast as a torpedo were infinitesimally small, but the captains of the rapid strike vessels knew that, and filled space before them with expanding storms of whickering explosive shrapnel and scrambling flurries of electromagnetic radiation.

Thirteen torpedoes detonated prematurely as their machine spirits registered false signals and the expanding clouds of spinning debris shredded another dozen. The rapid strike captains dived into the midst of the surviving torpedoes to rake their appointed sector with battery fire. Such a reckless manoeuvre caught yet more of the torpedoes, but not all of them.

Of the fifty torpedoes launched, barely a handful breached the picket screen, and the close-in defences of *Hera's Wrath* blew all but one to pieces. Efficient damage control kept the ship in the fight, with only a barely noticeable loss in performance.

Together with the other vessels in the Ultramarines fleet, *Hera's Wrath* punched through the Iron Warriors’ first line of defence, with Kaarja Salombar’s corsair fleet regrouping in its wake and setting off in pursuit.

While the bulk of Honsou’s fleet completed the destruction of Talassar’s orbital defences, the gap between the Ultramarines fleet and the *Indomitable* closed with every passing moment.

Only one vessel lay between the Imperial ships and the *Indomitable*.

The *Warbreed*.

Far below Honsou, in the shadowed halls of *Warbreed's* lower decks, Ardaric Vaanes moved through the darkness with a predator’s silence. He was an oil-black shape in the deeper darkness, his movements swift and measured. Honsou’s flagship was not a populous ship; barely a hundred Iron Warriors filled its bare metal corridors, its crew a mélange of slaves, servitors and disfigured creatures of indeterminate origin.

It was easy to move unseen through the ship, yet Vaanes moved as though an army of hunters pursued him. He passed through the cavernous armaments decks where thousands of slaves hauled on chained block and tackle to load the vast torpedoes onto their launch rails. He ghosted through the crackling capacitor bays that powered the sustaining mechanisms of the ship, avoiding detection by the corrupted magos hardwired into its beating heart. His course took him through the crew decks, past sparring warriors and cruel practices designed to attract the favour of the fickle gods of the warp.

Vaanes felt a subtle pull as he watched these votive rituals, a beguiling and insistent tugging at his soul that he had once welcomed, but now dreaded. Fickle they might be, but the gods that haunted the swells and currents of the warp had long memories and did not lightly take rejection. He turned away and slid into the darkness once again, letting the pungent aroma of oil, hot metal and dust take his mind from vivid splashes of blood, scented incense and the taste of warm flesh on the tongue.

Such thoughts came to him in the night, reminding him of sensations that could be wrung from each moment: a million ecstasies that could be his were he to once again acknowledge the possessor of his soul.



Vaanes shook off those thoughts and focussed his will on remaining unseen as he moved from one end of the ship to the other. He heard the groans and creaks of its superstructure as it turned and its master drove it to war. Honsou was a decent enough ship's captain, but he was no expert in void war. Vaanes doubted the Ultramarines presence around Talassar was enough to seriously threaten the *Warbreed*, but part of him hoped for that microsecond of fire and light of a torpedo or lance strike nearby that would suck him into space and end his miserable servitude to Honsou.

That wasn't going to happen. His experiences with Honsou had shown him the underlying cosmic order to the galaxy. There were no coincidences in events of great moment, and this was one of those moments. Though he was not an arrogant man, Vaanes knew he was too important in these unfolding events to have his life ended by something so arbitrary.

He eased from the darkness, allowing his oneness with the shadows to bleed away until he stood revealed in the bare-lumen glow of the iron-plated decking. Two serfs robed in bleached grey robes started in shock as he emerged, a towering warrior in black battle plate with the hint of razored claws extending from his gauntlets.

"My lord," said one, bowing before him.

"Don't call me that," snapped Vaanes, striding past them and moving into the arched vault of the training decks. He had trained the Newborn here, letting it kill Jeffar San and Svoljard to prove a point. Vaanes moved to the edge of the half-lit chamber beside the weapon racks and swiftly removed his armour.

Once he had worn this armour with pride. He had a host of personal armourers and squires to attend upon him then, ensuring that every plate was removed and oiled and treated with reverence. Every identifying mark had since been scoured and filed from his armour, leaving nothing to give any clue to its origin, yet no matter how hard he tried to erase his past he could not erase his memory.

Beneath the heavy plates, Vaanes wore a faded bodyglove, its fabric stretched and torn in places. With his armour discarded around him, he stripped this from his body as well, leaving him naked in the centre of the training hall. Vaanes resisted glancing down at his shoulder, where Shrike himself had inked a tattoo to mirror the insignia his armour's shoulder guard once bore. He'd gouged the winged image from his deltoid a long time ago and the pale patch of scar tissue was all that remained of that once proud mark.

His disrobing complete, he moved through the training hall at speed, performing unarmed combat drills, leaping into the air and twisting with savage chops of his hand and feet. His every extremity was a killing weapon, his every slashing blow a lethal strike. Though a battle was being fought around him in space, he cared only for the fluid perfection of his attacks.

At last he slammed down on one knee, fist punching the deck where a crippled opponent would be choking on their lifeblood had this been a real fight. He let out a shuddering breath, his entire body taut and his breathing laboured.

He felt the Newborn's presence like an infectious itch, and looked up to see it watching him from the chamber's entrance.

"How long have you been there?" asked Vaanes, rising to his feet and letting the tension drain from his body.

"Long enough to see that you are troubled," said the Newborn with disarming clarity.

"I am not troubled," lied Vaanes.

The creature cocked its head to the side, no doubt trying to figure out why he was lying. It was an incredibly powerful creature, hot-housed in the daemonic wombs of Medrengard and imbued with unnatural potency by its warp-spawned birth. Despite the stolen genetic legacy of Uriel Ventris encoded in its genetic structure, the Newborn had been, in many ways, a blank canvas. Its impressionable mind had been moulded by its creators into something monstrous, a spoonfed soldier of disorder. Vaanes had seen its cruelties and savagery, and knew they had their origins in Honsou's brainwashing.

"What might you be if left to your own devices?" he wondered aloud.

"I don't understand."

"No, you probably don't," said Vaanes.

"Then tell me," snapped the Newborn. "You are supposed to train me, remember?"

Vaanes shook his head, irritated at the Newborn's lack of guile. Everything it was had come from Honsou. Even its anger was fraudulent and unconvincing.

Vaanes moved with his customary grace towards his armour, hearing the ship groan as it executed another sharp manoeuvre.

"There's nothing left for me to show you," he said, pulling the bodyglove over his legs and setting the rubberised loops over the input ports implanted in his thighs. "You're already a more deadly fighter than I ever could have trained you to be."

The Newborn joined him at the weapon racks and gestured towards the centre of the training area.

"The fighting style you employed. Can you teach me how to kill like that?" it asked. "I have never seen you fight in that manner."

"Even you cannot master that," said Vaanes, with more than a hint of pride.

“Why not?”

“It is a secret fighting style known only to a few select warriors trained by the masters of the Raven Guard. Few can master its subtlety, and you, my friend, are not subtle.”

“I can learn,” said the Newborn.

“Not this, you can’t,” promised Vaanes.

“I could try.”

“No damn it!” snapped Vaanes. “I said no!”

“You are unsettled,” said the Newborn. “Is it this war with the Ultramarines? Do you regret that you will have to fight warriors you might once have fought alongside?”

“You’re full of questions today,” said Vaanes. “Why so curious?”

The Newborn shrugged, though the gesture was unconvincing. “I... feel as though I have been here before. I know I have not, yet I have a fondness for many of the worlds we are destroying.”

“That’s Ventris,” said Vaanes. “It’s his memories you’re experiencing.”

“I am aware of that, but still...”

“You don’t want this?”

“I am not sure,” said the Newborn, rubbing the heel of one palm against its temple. “All I know is hatred for the Imperium and Ventris. Everything I have been taught tells me he is the enemy, yet everything I *feel* tells me of his nobility and the grand ideals that drive him. I will kill him eventually, but I wonder what I might make of him were I not part of this army.”

“You can’t fight what you are,” said Vaanes. “You’ve been bred for this fight ever since you were... hatched, born, or however you came into this world. You are what you are because they made you that way, but who knows what you *could* have been.”

“But does that mean this is all I am capable of being?”

“Who knows?” said Vaanes. “Honsou and Grendel are relishing this chance to fight the Ultramarines, but this war holds no glory for me. The idea that I might face Uriel Ventris fills me with nothing but dread.”

“You fear he will slay you?”

Vaanes laughed. “No, I can kill Ventris easily enough.”

“Then what?”

“He reminds me of what I used to be,” said Vaanes. “He reminds me of what I could have been, but turned my back on.”

“Then maybe it isn’t the thought of facing Ventris that makes you so uneasy, perhaps it is the thought that your former Chapter has sent the hunters after you.”

“Perhaps,” said Vaanes, turning away. “Or maybe I’m afraid of what I might become if they *don’t* catch me.”

“Maybe it is not too late,” said the Newborn. “For both of us.”

“What are you talking about?”

The Newborn reached out and tapped his shoulder, and Vaanes looked down.

Beneath the pale knot of scar tissue on the rounded curve of his deltoid a tattooed black raven could clearly be seen.

Once it had been a grand muster hall for the garrison of the *Indomitable*, but the pale stone walls and grand marble columns of the Hall of Ancients now sheltered warriors of a very different stripe. Blue and gold banners had once hung from adamantine flagpoles, but they had been torn down and those that hadn’t been burned were now bedrolls for kroot mercenaries. Bronze statuary of Ultramarines banner bearers lay shattered on the inlaid terrazzo floor and the air reeked of alien excrement where fountains of water filled from the rivers of Macragge had been defiled.

Honsou smiled to see the icons of his enemy cast down, relishing this chance to bring the hated Ultramarines low. Grendel, Vaanes and the Newborn followed him into the vast chamber. He held his head high, as befitted the master of this fleet, walking with earned arrogance through the ranks of warriors towards the grand plinth at the far end of the chamber.

As he had promised, the incoming Ultramarines vessels had nowhere near enough firepower to match *Warbreed*, and she had crippled the

smaller vessels in the opening moments of the firefight. Even now, all three were being repaired and reconfigured in the dock facilities of the *Indomitable*, and it gave Honsou no small amount of satisfaction to be turning these vessels against their masters.

“What’s so important our new... *ally* needs to call us all together?” asked Vaanes, and Honsou caught the careful choice in his words.

“The next stage of our attack on Ultramar,” he said. “The Ultramarines know what we can do now, and it’s time to keep them on the back foot.”

“What does that mean?” said Grendel.

“They’re used to us going after one world at a time, so we have to step up a gear.”

Honsou strode off before anyone could ask him anymore. M’kar had summoned every warlord to the *Indomitable* in the wake of ravaging the surface of Talassar. Honsou hadn’t bothered to watch the destruction this time, already bored with the tens of thousands of daemons rampaging through the cities of the great continent that was the sole landmass standing proud of the planet-wide ocean.

Talassar’s cities were now tombs, graveyards of torn flesh and blood, though not a single structure had been toppled or reduced to flattened rubble by siege artillery—a notion that troubled Honsou’s Iron Warrior soul. There was joy to be had in watching the precisely applied mathematical force of bombardments, approach trenches, saps and countermines. A siege was as much science and art as it was blunt force, and after the thrill of taking the iron to the stone in the battle for the *Indomitable*, Honsou felt as though he were leaving a crucial aspect of this war undone.

He marched past Ekoh’s host of stinking kroot, their skin oily and reeking of biochemical sweat. Their crests were a mix of vivid greens and yellow, their beaks mottled black and purple. Across from them were the reptilian forms of Xaneant’s loxatl warband, and Honsou saw that even among this assembly of pirates, rogues and renegades there was a hierarchy. The xenos species were forced to the back of the chamber, while the grander warlords took centre stage before their daemoniac patron.

Kaarja Salombar sketched him a roguish salute, her wild blue hair swirling around her thin features. Honsou supposed that she was beautiful, with pale skin and warm, almond-shaped eyes of striking violet. There were some who said there was eldar blood in her veins, and Honsou would be hard pressed to disagree. Her tall, slender frame and inhuman grace certainly suggested an affinity with that ancient race. Clad in brightly coloured fabrics that rippled in an unseen breeze and armoured with strips of lacquered leather, she cut a fearsome figure, and her lips eased apart in a smile that was at once repellent and alluring.

Closer to the plinth was Votheer Tark, the master of a host of battle engines crafted on a world once sacred to the priests of the Mechanicus, but now taken by their dark kin. Its foundries crafted cursed iron tempered with the souls of a thousand sacrifices, and machines fed on the ground-up bodies of slaves shaped them with bloodstained hammers into dread vehicles for their dark master. Tark himself was little more than a fragmented scrap of meat and brain hung together in a sloshing amniotic tank. The last time Honsou had seen him, he was marching up the rubble slope of a breach in the Gauntlet Bastion as part of a monstrous spider-like machine with mortar spines. His organic components were now fitted to a long, multi-limbed chassis of blades and stalk-like claw-arms that looked absurdly fragile, but probably wasn’t.

Honsou passed through ranks of pirate captains and renegades of no particular note, paying them no mind until he reached the Blade dancers once led by Notha Etassay. The champion of the Dark Prince had fought his last battle on the *Indomitable* against an Imperial assassin, an incredible fight of deadly blades that ended badly for Etassay.

Honsou won Etassay’s warband on New Badab, and had found his addiction to sensation irritating, but now that the champion was gone, he found he actually missed the lightness of his words. Before he could pass the Blade dancers, a woman in rippling silver armour that covered her entire body stepped from their ranks with a graceful pirouette.

Her helmet, which was moulded in a perfectly androgynous fashion, unfolded with liquid sweeps, as though it were not truly solid, and Honsou was reminded of the gleaming texture of the arm he had stolen from the Ultramarines sergeant. The woman’s features were black and finely sculpted, like a perfect statue of onyx. Incongruously yellow eyes met his stare, and as her helmet smoothly retracted into the armour at her shoulder, her cropped golden hair was revealed. “Honsou,” said the woman, and her voice was like a breath of perfumed air.

“Who are you, and why should I care?” he answered.

“I am Xiomagra,” said the warrior woman. “I am the new blademistress.”

“Good for you,” said Grendel, pushing past her. Without seeming to move, the woman was suddenly holding a pair of blades, one silver, one black across Grendel’s throat. One twist of her wrists would see him decapitated, and Honsou was almost tempted to let her.

“Those are Etassay’s swords,” he said, recognising the ornate, inscribed blades and decorative pommels.

“They are the Blade dancers’ swords,” corrected Xiomagra. “When one master dies, the next takes up the blades. Etassay died at your side, and the Law of the Swords compels me to be your shadow until such time as I can repay that debt.”

“I already have a bodyguard,” said Honsou, jerking his thumb at the Newborn.

Xiomagra sneered. “That bastard by-blow? I should kill the abomination now.”

“I really wouldn’t,” advised Honsou. “It’s tougher than it looks.”

Xiomagra released Grendel and Honsou grabbed his lieutenant's arm before he could reach for his pistol.

"Not now," said Honsou, and Grendel gave him a stare of such ferocity that he felt sure the warrior was going to strike him down. Grendel shrugged off his arm and turned to Xiomagra, drawing a finger across his scarred throat.

Honsou caught up with him and said, "Kill her later, but for now we need her."

"Fair enough," said Grendel, glancing back at the warrior woman. "I can wait."

With the mortal champions behind him, Honsou finally reached the plinth where the elite of this gathering were waiting.

The Iron Warriors had the honour of standing closest to the wide plinth, and Honsou felt a strange sense of pride in their upright bearing and the proud swagger of their status. These were the pre-eminent warriors of this host, though many jostled for that position. Skull-visored helms turned to him as he approached and he felt the wary respect of his warriors.

Iron Warriors seldom loved their commanders, and a leader's death often came at the hands of his subordinates. Bitter jealousy and twisted ambition was endemic to the Iron Warriors, but Honsou wouldn't have it any other way. Such violent competition bred ruthless warriors to whom the notion of conscience and honour were utterly alien.

Alongside the Iron Warriors were the warlords and champions of the renegade Astartes who had joined his swelling army en route to Ultramar: Neshan Voor's Claws of Lorek and Muscara's Skultakers. Lacking the cohesion of the Iron Warriors, Honsou had little respect for them, fierce fighters though they undoubtedly were. Individuals from numerous renegade Chapters bulked out their numbers: the Apostles of Mithras, the Death Shadows and even a few of more illustrious pedigree. Honsou spotted three warriors who were clearly Space Wolves, perhaps those selfsame traitors who had turned on their brethren aboard the *Wolf of Fenris*.

He smiled to think of treachery in such a Chapter and mounted the steps to the plinth as the air grew dense and scratchy, like old pict film dredged from a forgotten basement and streamed on a broken player.

The heavy tread of iron feet cracking marble announced the arrival of M'kar and a palpable sense of excitement filled the chamber as the daemon-Dreadnought emerged from the darkness to preach to its followers.

"Sons of Chaos, we have taken the first steps on a glorious road!" began M'kar, its arms raised in the air. Dark radiance sweated from its form, mighty and swollen with warp energy, as the daemon's true form flickered in and out of focus, as though seeking to overwhelm the mechanical shell it had been forced to occupy.

Honsou watched it speak, the rasping, deathly tones crashing together like rusted iron bars. Looking out over the adoring faces of warriors, killers, monsters and xenos creatures, he was momentarily taken aback as he realised the churning sensation in his gut was hatred for the daemon-thing he had freed from the warp-core of the *Indomitable*.

He had thought to use it as a weapon, but the weapon turned out to have its own agenda, and had more or less taken over his army without him even being aware of it. He shouldn't have been surprised, for it was a prince of the immaterium, a being older than any living thing in the galaxy, and the simple-minded would always see such beings as objects of worship. Not only that, but a daemon prince would always seek to be the master of whatever host it was summoned into.

A being of such power could no more be a follower than Honsou.

He was not normally given to jealousy, for he had no need of his warriors' love. A commander could be hated or loved, but never both, and Honsou would far rather be hated. So long as his warriors killed the enemy, he cared nothing for their affections. That was the Iron Warriors' way and he saw no need to change it, but to have his own army stolen from under him was something he had never considered.

Did it matter though? Two of Guilliman's worlds were bloody charnel houses, which was better than any foe had managed in ten thousand years, even the Great Devourer. More would fall before M'kar's daemonic army and the power of Honsou's warriors.

So did it matter whose hand was on the tiller?

Absolutely. This was his army, *his* dark crusade and *his* vengeance.

Honsou felt his emotions threatening to get the better of him, and he bit the inside of his mouth bloody to control his rising fury. He forced himself to listen to the daemon prince's proselytising, feeling his contempt for it as acrid bile in the back of his throat.

M'kar spoke with the passion of a zealot with utter faith and certainty in its words. It spoke with a fervour Honsou found distasteful. He had never felt any overwhelming urge to pray to any of the warp gods, save for the power they could grant. Pacts were made and deals were struck, but worship... leave that to fools and the desperate.

"The worlds of Ultramar are ripe for the warriors of the Eternal Powers to sweep the infidels to their doom!" bellowed M'kar. "For too long the scions of Guilliman have flaunted their superiority over their fellows, for too long have they held a place of pre-eminence they do not deserve. You are all warriors chosen by powers greater than you can comprehend to do their bidding. You shall march upon the silver citadels of the unclean and purge their worlds with fire and the unbridled majesty of the warp!"

M'kar's seething red form billowed, and dark wings of shadow flared at its back, smoking and leaving the reek of burned air in their wake.

Its bestial face twisted in rage, a boiling light surging in its maw as its hatred tainted the air with the taste of hot metal.

“You are soldiers on a holy war, warriors tasked to bring the true powers of the universe to those who have turned their back on what it means to be alive. Trapped in lives of one dimension they deny those who would hear the holy word of Chaos and hunt them down. Which of you has not felt the heat of their unholy pursuit? Which of you would not turn your blades and guns upon your persecutors? The universe belongs to the Eternal Powers and all who do not praise their glory and sacrifice unto them what is their right and proper tribute are heretics whose only fate is to die screaming in torment!”

The gathered warlords waved a thousand blades in the air and answered with a mix of howling machine voices, alien screeches and human bellows of fealty. The Hall of Ancients shook with the violence of their affirmation, and its walls had never known such venom.

“I didn’t think warp creatures were big on inspiring speeches,” hissed Ardaric Vaanes, leaning in close to Honsou. The howling almost swallowed his words.

Honsou shrugged. “Not any I’ve known. The legends tell that M’kar was once mortal, an Astartes some say. Perhaps it was some kind of fire and brimstone preacher in its previous incarnation.”

“You sound bitter.”

“I don’t care for speeches,” said Honsou. “In my experience, warriors are either going to fight for you or they are not. Fancy words won’t change that.”

“I think M’kar would disagree,” said the Newborn, its eyes fixed on the daemon prince as it held its blurred, machine-flesh arms out for silence.

“We have stirred the Legion of Guilliman to action, and they will fight to protect that which they believe is theirs, but they will find us scattered to the corners of their realm, taking the cleansing fire of Chaos to every one of their worlds! Leave no heart beating, no stone upon another and render every field of turned earth to scorched wasteland. Only when Ultramar is a tomb, and all the sons of Guilliman are dead, will our task be complete.”

The daemon raised its arms and darkness swept out from its monstrous form, filling the chamber with crackling shadows as they spread from its exhaling form. Every warrior enveloped by the darkness gasped, honoured by the touch of a daemonic lord of the warp.

“The inferno of my vengeance fills you!” roared the daemon. “It will burn you, my bearers of the holy word, it will fill your veins with power and fire until Ultramar is in ashes. As my power flows in you, so too will I see what you see, feel what you feel and know what you know. With each death I will grow stronger. With every fortress burned my reach will stretch further. You will be my army of dark righteousness. You will be the Bloodborn and your name shall strike terror into the hearts of men!”

The daemon’s eyes shone with the light of its infernal fury, a hatred born thousands of years ago when the galaxy was a place of wonder and possibility.

“Spread throughout Ultramar and take my fire to the Ultramarines! Burn them from their fastnesses until no trace remains. This is my holy word!”

## SIX

Tigurius closed his eyes, letting his breathing deepen and his concentration focus as he entered his trance. He sat within his private chambers within the Library of Ptolemy, that mountainous repository of knowledge that bore the name of the first and greatest Librarian of the Ultramarines. Little was known of Ptolemy, though some said he had been present at the trial of Magnus the Red. Whether he had stood as an accuser or one of the forgotten Librarians who had rallied to his defence was unknown.

Magnus was a figure of fascination to Varro Tigurius. Where he could understand the fallen primarch’s thirst for knowledge, he could never imagine what had driven him to wield the foulest arts and think they would not taint him. Such power was corrupt and no one, not primarch or mortal, could touch it without blackening their soul. The Imperium’s distrust of the psyker was one of the crucial hypocrisies that kept it from total unity, yet the solution to that dichotomy was beyond Tigurius.

How could any society preach intolerance of that which allowed it to function?

What was the difference between sorcery and psychic power? Did it depend on the wielder, or did it depend on the outcome? Or was it the means employed to gain the power what mattered? It was all in the definitions, knew Tigurius.

Votive candles burned in the corners of his chambers and incense tapers filled the air with mandragora essence. A fug of vapours hung beneath the Imperial eagle cut into the stonework of the ceiling, and the psychically-attuned hellfire crystals woven within the fabric of his armoured hood chimed in sympathy with his heartbeat.

This ritual of divination he was attempting could be achieved without such props, but Tigurius found they aided his concentration, and in matters concerning the warp, concentration was key to survival.

He put the matter aside for now, already thinking of a lesson for the Codicers and more advanced Lexicani. Tigurius took a deep, cleansing breath and let his body relax, drawing the power of the warp into the protected conduits within his flesh. Its touch was cold, like liquid mercury flowing through his veins, and he shivered at its touch.

One by one the sensations of the world around him faded away, his perceptions of mundane reality overtaken by a rushing cascade of white noise. He let it come, allowing his consciousness to be borne along by the tides and ever-shifting currents of the fluid realm beyond the gates of the empyrean.

Some men could free their souls from their flesh, but to fly the depths of the warp was to invite disaster or worse. Ultramarines Librarians understood that to risk their immortal souls with such reckless leaps into the unknown were foolhardy, though Tigurius couldn't deny he had been tempted to venture beyond the confines of his flesh to feel the rushing currents of the warp flowing around his subtle body.

Tigurius dismissed the petty blandishments of the warp, recognising the impulse for what it was. How easily men's souls were tempted!

He smiled and felt the first stirrings of the vast web of the future coalescing around him, its shivering cords visible as the finest golden lines. All existence was embodied within this web, an unimaginably complex and interwoven lattice that constantly sang with the impacts mortals made upon it. The vast majority of individuals were so insignificant to the grand parade of history that even the mightiest among them sent only the tiniest shiver along its fibres, but every now and again...

The cords around Tigurius were singing and he felt the confluence of destinies in this moment. Lives of consequence were coming together, and such was the force of the vibrations running along the web that Tigurius knew that many would soon be stilled forever. Dozens of the golden lines around him were in motion and he followed the nearest, letting the subtle shifts of its temporal frequency guide him to a potential future.

He followed it until the world splintered around him as the future took on too many aspects to see any with any degree of clarity. The future of Ultramar hung on a million different threads, each one pulled taut in myriad different directions.

Tigurius saw a host of threads knotted together, each vibrating with desperate urgency as events impacted upon them. Worlds of Ultramar burned with daemoniac fire upon some, while in others they bloomed as verdant as Prandium had once burst with life.

A rocky world of forest-shawled mountains was engulfed in battle, a world Tigurius recognised as Espandor. He saw the great city of the river, the place named for Ancient Galatan's fall. Its once proud triumphal ways and processional ways were now thronged with the forces of the Archenemy as they closed in upon a wedge of blue-armoured warriors. Their flag was falling and amid the carnage, Tigurius saw a shining warrior beset by all manner of foes. The red cloak identified him as Cato Sicarius.

A half-breed witch woman with blue hair and colourful robes launched herself at him, but the threads sang and Tigurius was hurled from Espandor. His spiralling vision settled upon a forsaken world of the dead, its cities lifeless tombs and its people exterminated. He saw a citadel of ancient days restored to glory, its marble walls defended by a host of warriors in enormous suits of armour. The Chapter banner of the Ultramarines flew from its tallest tower, and the light of glory shone from this heroic flag, a light that was all that stood between inevitable decline and glorious resurgence.

He saw familiar faces upon the citadel's cracked ramparts, but before he could see more, the threads sang again and he was hurled onwards to a world of darkness, a world of caverns that had never known the sun. Yet within the warren of tunnels, humanity thrived in enormous caves so vast that they were as grand as any fertile valley of Quintarn. Four underground rivers fed the largest cavern, and though Tigurius knew the surface of this world was more lethal than any deathworld, its people were as contented and fortunate as any of Ultramar.

Of all the worlds Tigurius had seen, he knew with utter conviction that this was the point upon which all things revolved. This world held the key to Ultramar's salvation, but equally it was also the source of its doom.

With that realisation, his perception of the web of possible futures fell away and Tigurius was seized with a lurching sense of vertigo. He closed his eyes and allowed the senses of his body to reacquaint themselves with the material world. He recited the books of the Codex Astartes and allowed the soothing rendition of his primarch's greatest work to soothe his soul before opening his eyes.

Though he hadn't been aware of moving, he was holding his staff out before him and the fingers of his right hand were resting upon the symbols representing the four ethical cords.

"Incorruptibility, modesty, duty and the proper observation of ceremony," said Tigurius, reciting them from rote. He spun the staff and smoothly rose to his feet, turning towards the great desk carved from a single piece of laxian goldwood. Instantly his eyes fell upon his *Duanshi* ink-stone, his calligraphy brush, a sheet of parchment and the metal-gall ink itself.

"The four scholarly treasures," he said, pleased that at least one aspect of his vision was making sense. While the visions were still clear in his head, he sat behind his desk and began to commit all he had seen to the parchment. It took him two hours to recall every nuance and feeling, and four sheets of paper, which didn't surprise him.

"Always the symbol of four..." he whispered.

When he had finished, Tigurius left the library and made his way to the top of the mountain, where he found Lord Calgar in conference with

First Captain Agemman and Sicarius of the 2nd. The sun was low in the sky, throwing long shadows throughout the courtyard. Calgar looked up as he entered, his face set in a mask of controlled aggression.

Waves of fury radiated from Sicarius, and Tigurius was surprised to realise the captain's anger was directed at him.

"You heard what happened on Talassar?" said Sicarius.

"I did," said Tigurius. "I grieve with you, my friend, but the people of Talassar will be avenged."

"Avenged?" snapped Sicarius. "They would not need avenging if you had read the portents! You saw Behemoth, you saw Nidar and you saw the arrival of the greenskins fleet. Why did you not see this?"

"Tell me, Captain Sicarius," said Tigurius, carefully modulating his tone to be both soothing and sympathetic. "Is it truly me you are angry with? Or am I just a convenient target for your rage?"

Sicarius looked set to spit a caustic reply, but his jaw tightened and he bowed to Tigurius.

"I apologise, my lord. You are, of course, correct. I am Grand Duke of Talassar, I should have been there to defend my people. I failed them."

"We all failed them," said Marneus Calgar. "Our enemies took us by surprise and we reacted as the Codex dictates. Perhaps that was our error."

"Our error?" said Agemman. "I do not follow."

"If you know both yourself and your enemy, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss," said Calgar, quoting from the Codex Astartes. "Our enemies clearly know our methods. They know us well enough to know how we will react to any given circumstance, and what makes us predictable makes us vulnerable."

Tigurius was impressed. For any Ultramarines warrior, especially the Chapter Master, to admit that their adherence to the Codex Astartes might have left them open to this attack spoke volumes of his humility and willingness to adapt.

"The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy's will to be imposed on him," said Tigurius, completing the Chapter Master's quote.

"Just so," said Calgar, waving Tigurius over to a rolled parchment map of Ultramar. Tigurius scanned the parchment, seeing the dispositions of Ultramarines fleet assets and military deployments. The bulk of the fleet was based around Macragge, with elements scattered throughout Ultramar on patrol circuits and garrison duties. Likewise, the warriors of the Ultramarines were primarily based on Macragge, though numerous squads were assigned other duties throughout the realm.

"I have tasking orders for every portion of our strength, Varro," said Calgar, tapping the finger of his heavy gauntlet onto the map. "I have recalled the 3rd and 7th, but I suspect events will unfold before they can reach us. But Ultramar is a vast empire, so tell me your divinations revealed some aspect of our enemies' plan."

"It did, my lord," said Tigurius, laying the four sheets of parchment upon the map.

Patiently, he explained all that he had seen and what he believed it meant, seeing the sceptical glances exchanged between the war-captains as he spoke.

"It's not much," said Calgar, when Tigurius had finished.

"There are gaps," admitted Tigurius, "but any plan is better than no plan. These are not set futures, nor are they even probable futures. What is yet to come is like water and flows where it will, yet as the worker of the land can know which way the water will run, a canny practitioner of the subtle arts can read the likely paths of the future."

Marneus Calgar smiled. "And there are none cannier than you, Varro."

"You honour me, my lord," said Tigurius. "I believe what I saw to be true, and I urge you to trust me, Marneus."

He saw Agemman and Sicarius flinch at his use of the Chapter Master's given name, but he needed to impress upon him the seriousness of his urging.

"Your visions have served us well before, Varro," said Calgar, staring at the map. "Without your prescience, Behemoth would have overwhelmed us and countless other threats might have sorely tested us. So I will trust that what you say now is no less accurate."

"So we base our deployments on... psykery?" said Sicarius. "I mean no offence, Lord Tigurius."

"None taken, I assure you," replied Tigurius. "It is often hard for warriors to understand the complexities of the subtle arts. I mean no offence, of course."

Sicarius blinked, unsure if he were being insulted, but he could only meet Tigurius' stare for a few moments before the awesome weight of knowledge in the Librarian's eyes forced him to look away.

"And Calth," said Agemman. "You say it is the key?"

“I believe so,” said Tigurius, looking away from Sicarius.

“Then surely that should be the focus of our deployment?” said Agemman. “If the key to victory lies beneath its surface, then I will take the 1st Company there to fight in its defence.”

Calgar shook his head. “No, you and your warriors are to be despatched to Talassar.”

Agemman began to protest, but Calgar cut him off. “You heard what Varro said. You and I will be fighting together, but it will not be on Calth. If I read the omens in these visions correctly, another will have the heavy burden of defending that world, eh Varro?”

“Aye, my lord,” said Tigurius. “The Sentinel of the Tower.”

“Remember the last time the four of us walked like this?” said Pasanius, as they marched along the shadowed corridors of the *Vae Victus*.

Uriel remembered well when it had been, but it was Lord Admiral Tiberius who answered.

“I remember,” said Tiberius, sourly. “When we went to meet the Mortifactors on the Basilica Mortis. The scars those damned pilot ships left have still to be repaired.”

“The shipwrights didn’t get to them after the damage taken at Espandor?” asked Uriel.

“No,” said Tiberius. “There wasn’t time between fighting the greenskins and then heading off to fight the tau.”

“Damned inconsiderate these xenos species, eh?” said Pasanius.

Tiberius didn’t answer and they continued on their way to the embarkation deck, past softly-lit shrines to the Emperor of Mankind and reliquaries containing ancient battle trophies of the Ultramarines. From time to time they would pass a Chapter serf in a blue chiton, hard-wearing fatigues and combat rig, but for the most part they made their way without meeting another soul. Given the nature of the individual coming aboard the *Vae Victus*, Tiberius had restricted the movements of his crew.

Tiberius was a bald giant in power armour, one side of his leather tough face gruesomely scarred and his craggy features perfectly matching the character of his ship he had commanded these last three centuries. The *Vae Victus* had taken part in some of the most heroic actions in the Ultramarines history, and wore its scars with pride, no matter that Tiberius complained bitterly about the lack of care she received in Calth’s orbital docks. He wore his green ceremonial cloak of office at his shoulders, and though the foxbat fur at its collar was a constant irritation to him, it symbolised his role as Master of the Fleet. By rights that title should have fallen to Uriel, but there was no shame in passing it to a warrior like Tiberius. There was little Lazlo Tiberius didn’t know about void war, and he had accepted the role with honour.

As they took the elevator to the embarkation deck, Pasanius said, “I hear Sicarius and the 2nd are setting off for Espandor. He won’t be happy about that after what happened to Talassar.”

“I don’t blame him,” agreed Uriel. “I know how I would feel if something happened to Calth and the 4th Company were not being sent to avenge its people. I understand Sicarius’ disappointment completely.”

“Lord Calgar and the 1st Company are going to Talassar,” said Learchus. “Surely Sicarius should be pleased at so powerful a response to the attack.”

“Then you don’t know Sicarius,” grunted Tiberius. “The idea that Agemman will get the chance to fight alongside the Chapter Master and save Sicarius’ home world will not sit well with him. He is Grand Duke of Talassar, and it is his duty to fight for his people. And Sicarius will not like anything that sidelines the 2nd and boosts Agemman’s standing.”

“You really think Sicarius has his eye on Captain Agemman’s position?” said Pasanius.

“Cato has his eye on a greater prize than Regent of Ultramar,” replied Tiberius.

“Enough,” said Uriel. “Cato Sicarius is a warrior of great honour and it does not become you, *any of you*, to be talking about him in this way.”

Suitably chastened, the subject of Sicarius’ ambition was dropped and the talk moved to the other deployments throughout Ultramar.

Lord Calgar and the 1st Company made for Talassar in answer to the murderous attack, while the 2nd Company were en route to Espandor. Elements of the 5th and 6th travelled to Quintam with Chaplain Cassius, and in response to Tigurius’ vision, Antaro Chronus had been attached to their armoured elements.

Uriel and the 4th Company were ordered to Calth, but they would not be travelling alone.

Several ships of the Ultramar fleet had been tasked to accompany the *Vae Victus*, a small assembly of frigates, destroyers and rapid strike vessels, each a craft with a legacy of honour that was the envy of most other Chapters.

Anchored in the midst of these ships was a Gothic-class cruiser that had taken part in the war that bore its name, though little remained of



its exterior silhouette to reveal that proud heritage. Emblazoned on the ship's blade-like prow was a mechanised skull on a black and white cog symbol, and the vessel's flanks bristled with augmentations its original builders could never have envisaged.

This was the *Perpetuum Cogito*, flagship of Magos Locard, a vessel that radiated such strange energy signatures that the deck crew of the *Vae Victus* could barely register them.

The remaining strength of the Chapter garrisoned Macragge under the command of Captain Sinon, for the Fortress of Hera required defending by more than just the Defence Auxilia and Chapter serfs. Captain Antiochus and Torias Telion of the 10th had deployed in secret, letting none save the Chapter Master know of their ultimate destination, but such was typical of these masters of the Scouts' art.

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Pasanus, as they reached the blast doors leading to the embarkation deck.

"Just one?" said Learchus with a smile.

Pasanus ignored the jibe and continued. "After what happened on Tarentus, why would the Chapter Master bother going to Talassar? He could be walking into another trap."

"Lord Tigurius saw him on Talassar," said Learchus. "Just as he saw Sicarius on Espandor. You can't fight the future."

"Since when did you become an expert on causality, Learchus?" asked Tiberius.

Learchus shook his head. "I am not, but it makes sense that if Lord Tigurius saw the Chapter Master there then that is where he will be."

"I do not think the powers of a Librarian work that way," said Uriel. "What Lord Tigurius has seen is only one *possible* future. Perhaps the most likely but still not certain."

"Is that why we have to have *her* on board?" asked Pasanus. "To make sure the future plays out the way it's meant to?"

"That's what we'll find out," said Uriel as the blast doors opened.

The embarkation deck was unusually quiet. Normally a frenetic hive of activity, with Chapter serfs, Techmarines and armourers working to ready the 4th Company Thunderhawks or drop-pods for launch, its gothic immensity felt eerily silent as the four warriors made their way towards the blinking lights of the recovery platform, a long rectangle of blast-scorched steel that sat before the shimmering starscape of the integrity field.

Chaplain Clausel was waiting for them at the platform's edge, the black of his armour blending with the darkness filling the embarkation deck. The gold of his crozius and the bone white of his death mask shone brightly, and the ferocious solidity of his presence reassured Uriel that they would meet their guest with a united front.

"Chaplain," said Uriel. "It is good to have you back."

In the weeks since the 4th Company's return from Pavonis, Chaplain Clausel had spent much of his time in Macragge's most isolated solitarium, fasting and meditating on his duty to the Chapter. He had returned only moments before the last Thunderhawk had left Macragge for the *Vae Victus*, and Uriel was glad to have him aboard. The 4th never fought harder than when Clausel led them into battle.

"It is good to be back, Captain Ventris," said Clausel. "I felt the call to arms and knew my presence was required."

"You felt that all the way up in Illyrium?" asked Pasanus.

"I did," said Clausel. "Didn't you?"

"I suppose I did," said Pasanus, taking Clausel's proffered hand. "It will be good to fight alongside you, Chaplain."

"It is good to have you back with us. I trust your exclusion from the war on Pavonis has taught you the value of honesty in all things?"

"Aye, it has," Pasanus assured him. "You have nothing to worry about on *that* score."

Clausel nodded and greeted his fellow warriors of the 4th. Uriel felt a bittersweet finality to this assembly of heroes, a strange unease that felt like the moment before a doomed charge. As he listened to their words of renewed brotherhood, he wondered that no one else could feel the charged air between them.

Was this another moment of prescience, such as had saved them all on Tarentus?

"She's late," said Learchus, his low voice sounding like a shout in the dimly lit deck.

"It's her prerogative," said Uriel, rubbing a hand over his jaw to mask his consternation.

"As what? A woman or an inquisitor?" quipped Pasanus.

"As an inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus," replied Uriel.

“Malleus?” said Learchus. “How do you know that?”

“I saw the tattoo on her wrist when we met with the Chapter Master,” said Uriel. “Do not underestimate her, and cooperate with her in all things, but have no more dealings with her than are necessary. Understood?”

Both his sergeants nodded, all too willing to keep their dealings with an inquisitor, especially one who dealt with the daemonic, to a minimum.

“Here she comes,” said Tiberius, nodding towards the integrity field.

An angular wedge of a ship slid through the darkness of space towards the *Vae Victus*, its lines clean and its non-reflective surfaces seeming to swallow the light. It was a small ship for an inquisitor, but Uriel suspected there was another, larger, ship concealed somewhere in orbit with Macragge.

The ship passed through the field, and Uriel felt the cold of space radiating from its hull as it settled to land with a bass thrumming of powerful engines. Decontaminating blasts of superheated steam washed over the craft, and no sooner had they ended than a ramp extended from the side of the vessel and a door slid open.

Inquisitor Namira Suzaku emerged and made her way down the ramp towards them with her stormcoat billowing in the venting gasses of her ship. Her strides were long and assured, her bearing that of a woman who knew exactly which path to follow. Her coterie of acolytes came after her. Most Uriel recognised from the meeting with the Chapter Masters, but one he didn't stand out from the others, a man with dark skin and pure white hair pulled in a long ponytail. He too was clad in a black bodyglove and long stormcoat, identical to the Inquisitor, and Uriel wondered if his mirroring of his master's appearance was an affectation or a uniform.

Suzaku halted before Uriel and gave him a curt nod of acknowledgement.

“Captain Ventris,” she said, her voice edged like glass and every syllable sharp. “I have heard a great deal about you. Your achievements are impressive. Few can return from the Eye of Terror and remain uncorrupted. I would be interested in hearing how you achieved that remarkable feat.”

“Thank you,” said Uriel, keeping his voice even at the mention of his ordeals. “I kept true to the teachings of the Codex Astartes and its words were our guide.”

“Interesting, given it was your deviance from its words that saw you exiled in the first place. Most intriguing.”

Suzaku's eyes flicked over to Uriel's left. “And this must be Pasanus Lysane. Such a shame you did not return with the augmetic tainted with the necrontyr living metal. I know of many of my brethren who desire to study such artefacts. Much can be learned from the perusal of the weapons of the enemy.”

“I was glad to be rid of it,” said Pasanus. “Though it hurt like the fires of damnation, I thank the Emperor every day those monsters took it from me.”

“An interesting metaphor,” noted Suzaku. “You are acquainted with the fires of damnation?”

“A colourful turn of phrase,” said Pasanus smoothly. “Nothing more.”

Suzaku shifted her gaze to Learchus.

“Sergeant Learchus,” she said. “The hero of Herapolis who led the 4th Company of the Ultramarines to Espandor and defeated the greenskin hordes. To single-handedly destroy a gargant is a great achievement.”

Uriel smiled as Learchus actually blushed. “Hardly single-handedly. Chaplain Clausel and many other Space Marines fought at my side. Governor Saul Gallow is also to be commended. His defence force troops fought with great courage.”

Suzaku nodded, as though she already knew every detail of the campaign, and turned to Chaplain Clausel.

“Chaplain,” said the inquisitor. “Your litany of honours speaks for itself.”

Suzaku then turned to Admiral Tiberius, and Uriel masked his surprise at the deferential tone of the inquisitor's voice in her words to Clausel.

“Spare me a recitation of my battle honours,” said the venerable admiral. “I know them better than you, and I don't need reminding. You are welcome aboard the *Vae Victus*, but I'll thank you to keep to your assigned areas of the ship. The fighting decks of a vessel of the Adeptus Astartes are no place for anyone not trained in Ultramar.”

Suzaku smiled and tilted her head coquettishly to one side, as though deciding whether to remind the Lord Admiral that she was an agent of the Inquisition, an organisation with carte blanche in its remit of protecting the Imperium. With a word, an inquisitor could requisition armies and fleets, depose planetary rulers or condemn entire star systems to death. Only a very brave or very foolish individual dared stand in their way.

Inquisitor Suzaku looked like she hadn't yet made her mind up into which category Lord Admiral Tiberius fell.

“You are bold, Lord Admiral,” said Suzaku. “But I would expect no less from a veteran of the Battle of Circe. I will accede to your request.”

“It’s not a request,” said Tiberius.

Suzaku nodded and turned to the white-haired man beside her.

“This is my interrogator acolyte, Soburo Suzaku,” she said. Seeing the Ultramarines’ questioning looks, she added. “Suzaku is a common name on our home world.”

Uriel looked for any familial resemblance between the two, but the extent of Suzaku’s subtle augmetics made any examination pointless. He placed a hand on the Lord Admiral’s shoulder and said, “Inquisitor Suzaku, Sergeant Learchus will show you and your retinue to the quarters we have assigned you. They should be sufficient to your needs.”

“I am sure they will,” said Suzaku. “When do we translate into the warp?”

Tiberius answered her. “We’ll reach the fringeward jump point in two days, then it shouldn’t take us more than a week, warp-willing, to reach Calth.”

“And then we see how accurate your Librarian Tigurius is at reading the fate lines,” said Suzaku.

“He has never been wrong before,” said Uriel.

A shadow passed over Suzaku’s face. “There is always a first time,” she said.

## SEVEN

The convoy emerged from the tunnel and thundered along the wide roadway that curved over the flanks of the mountains. A Salamander Scout vehicle led the way, its main gun traversing to cover the bend ahead, a constant relay of surveyor chatter passing between it and the Chimera troop carrier following behind it.

A second Chimera followed the first, and a Salamander command tank was sandwiched between it and a third armoured carrier. Eight heavily laden trucks marked with the winged skull and crossed pistol symbol of the Munitorum drew up the rear, and a final Chimera took on the role of tail-gunner.

Two aircraft flew in overlapping figure of eight formation overhead, a Valkyrie assault carrier and a Vulture gunship, both painted in the pale blue and silver of the Espandor Defence Auxilia.

The convoy moved at speed, for the highways through the Anasta Peaks had proven to be a dangerous route for Imperial forces. Many convoys travelling from the planetary capital of Herapolis to the outlying cities of Espandor had come under attack within its narrow canyons and undulant slopes. The landscape was primal in its rugged splendour, high waterfalls and sprawling forests carpeting the jagged spire-like hills in swathes of green and crystal.

No sooner had the lead vehicle rounded the bend when it tripped a remote sensor and a dull cough of an explosion flipped it onto its side, a smoking hole punched in its underside. Rock dust and debris fell in a burning rain as the first Chimera gunned its engine, intending to punch through the ambush. Its tracks churned the road as it slewed around the deep crater torn in the roadway. A flurry of gunfire erupted from the timberline, sparking from its hull as the gunner providing top cover in the cupola swung his heavy stubber to bear.

Heavy calibre gunshots ripped uphill, tearing off branches and splintering ancient trees. Another explosion boomed and the surface of the road shuddered in a sine wave like a cracked whip. Cracks split the black surface and a huge section of road heaved upwards before plunging down into a giant sinkhole. The Chimera’s tracks bit the road, but it was too close and too fast to avoid falling into the giant crater the underground detonation had blown. It teetered on the edge for a moment before falling in, skidding over onto its side and coming to rest upside down.

Raiders swarmed from the trees, a mismatched host of savage kroot and corsairs in brightly patterned cloaks, ragged plates of armour and elaborate fright masks. Vile battle flags bearing a curved tulwar were carried by whooping warriors in tattered, patchwork uniforms, each bearing a bright blue headband, sash or belt. Hundreds of them spilled from the trees, firing wildly from the hip or hurling disc-like grenades into the battle. Heavy barks of powerful lasers stabbed out, slamming into the flanks of the remaining tanks in the convoy.

Defence force troops debarked from their Chimeras and began returning fire, filling the space between the two forces with sizzling blades of light and ricocheting hard rounds.

A bass thrumming filled the air as three heavily-laden skiffs swung around the bend in the road, skimming on rippling curtains of charged air. A cackling warrior in a grinning skull mask manned a heavy cannon on each prow. Streams of fire blitzed from the cannons, filling the air with a whickering storm of explosive rounds. Streams of shell casings spewed onto the roadway in a musical rain.

The first skiff exploded as a pair of missiles from the Vulture slashed downward and impacted in the centre of its deck. Its nose came down

and ploughed a gouge through the road, spilling bodies and weapons as it rolled onto its side in a shower of bright sparks and flame.

No sooner had the gunners on the Vulture congratulated themselves on their kill when a trio of missiles spiralled up from the trees. The pilot wrenched his aircraft to the side and one missile arced over his canopy. Blisteringly hot flares popped from its rear quarter, decoying a second missile away, but the third flew straight into the intake on its port side and exploded.

The aircraft lurched and dropped almost straight down. One wing dipped and the burning aircraft slammed into the roadway with a thunderous explosion. Blazing fuel sprayed over the roadway, sending up sheets of flame. The Imperial vehicles began turning, but they weren't trying to escape.

The coverings of the trucks dropped. Instead of revealing tightly-packed crates of ammunition and war supplies, they were laden with a far more deadly cargo. The second and third trucks carried the ten warriors of Assault Squad Ixion, the fourth and fifth the gunners of Devastator Squad Tirian. With swift economy, the Devastators hefted their heavy guns and began shooting into the charging mass of enemy warriors.

Missiles and heavy bolter shells exploded amid the corsairs ranks, scything down a score of warriors in the blink of an eye. A warrior in a scarlet cloak and clad in armour of brilliant blue edged in gold leapt from the back of the lead truck and drew his Talassarian Tempest sword. Cato Sicarius vaulted to the road and raised his shimmering blade over his head.

"For Talassar and the Second!" he shouted, as his command squad landed next to him. Vandius unfurled the company standard as Prabian drew his power sword and Malcian fired up his flame weapon. A ragged mob of corsairs and kroot were advancing through the smoke, and Sicarius chose a kroot with a thick crest of yellow head spines as his first kill.

Without waiting for his warriors, Sicarius charged toward the thickest wedge of enemy as Ixion's fighters clambered from the back of the truck and triggered their jump packs.

Gunfire reached up to them, but so fast and so unexpected was their assault that none of it came near. The unexpected presence of the warriors from the Ultramarines 2nd Company threw the enemy into disarray, but they were quick to recover and swiftly hurled themselves at this newly-revealed enemy.

The lines of Ultramarines and xenos warriors met in a roar of hatred, and Sicarius clove the Tempest Blade through the chest of the yellow-spined kroot, splitting him from neck to hipbone, before spinning and putting a plasma round through the face of another squawking kroot fighter. He grimaced with distaste as he dragged the blade free of the xenos creature. He had fought this mercenary species before, yet the stink of their vile bodies and grotesque appearance was no less repulsive. Prabian fought at his side, slashing and cutting with brutal strikes. No cunning or finesse in his blows, Prabian was a killer, pure and simple.

Scores of kroot surrounded them, a howling, shrieking mass of avian-featured savages. Their limbs were like whipping cords, and they wielded their bladed rifles and hunting swords with unnatural swiftness. One launched itself at him and its beak snapped on his sword arm as it rammed its blade into his chest. The metal shattered on the Eternium Ultra and Sicarius rammed his helmet into its face.

The beak crumpled and the creature fell away, but five more pressed in. His pistol took one down, his sword a second, but before he could kill again, Prabian was at his side. The company champion's sword clove into a kroot warrior's skull and before the dead xenos fell, the blade was ripped clear and beheaded another. Maldan cleared some space with precise gouts of ignited promethium as Sergeant Daceus drove the rest back with controlled bursts of bolter fire.

"Trying to win this without us?" said Daceus, his augmetic eye seeming to wink at him.

Sicarius grinned and shook his head. "I wouldn't dare."

"Damn right," said his sergeant, speaking with the easy informality of warriors who have fought side by side for decades.

Booming explosions and thudding beats of heavy bolter fire ripped through the enemy ranks and a strafing hail of shots sawed through the wrecked skiff as enemy warriors took cover behind it. Sicarius looked up in time to see the Valkyrie swoop down, its engines transitioning from conventional flight to hover mode. Storm-troopers armoured in blue stood in the open hatches, itching to take the fight to their enemies.

A slender man in black armour with an eagle-visored helm stood in their midst, a combat shotgun slung around his shoulders. "Looks as if Governor Gallow wants to get in on the action," said Daceus.

"Learchus said he was game," replied Sicarius.

"Looks like he was right."

Howling gales of downdraft sent up clouds of dust and cleared the smoke from the burning vehicles. Sicarius saw the surviving two skiffs easing themselves from the cover of the wrecked skimmer, bringing their main cannons to bear on the aerial assault carrier.

"Sergeant Tirian, take out that damn skiff before the good governor gets his backside shot out from under him."

"Targeting now," replied Tirian, and, moments later, a pair of missiles streaked overhead to slam into the prow of the skiff. Blooms of fire punched into the vehicle's hull and it slewed to the side, a rippling line of tracer fire zipping wildly from its prow cannon and going wide of

the governor's aircraft. The vehicle sank to the road's surface, its hull crumpling as its keel broke in two.

"Ixion," said Sicarius. "Get aboard that skiff and get me survivors."

"Understood," responded Sergeant Ixion.

The battlefield was secure, the renegades dead and their corpses piled high on makeshift pyres. The kroot were disposed of downwind, the stench from their burning bodies too alien and too rank to be tolerated. Two skiffs were broken-down hulks, their hulls peppered with bolter craters and missile impacts. Defence Auxilia dragged the bodies of the enemy soldiers who'd tried to flee from the woods and flame units burned them to cinders.

No trace of such unclean warriors would be allowed to remain on Ultramar's soil.

The third skiff had fled after witnessing the horrendous destruction wrought upon the second at the hands of Ixion's assaulters. Dropping onto its buckled decks with roaring chainswords and booming pistols, the Assault Marines had made short work of the surviving crew, killing all but two warriors in a bloody melee that lasted just seven seconds.

"You were right," said Governor Saul Gallow, a handsome man with an unruly shock of sandy brown hair and a winning smile. "They couldn't resist such a juicy target."

"Their commander was reckless," said Sicarius. "They had attacked the same way the last three times and were sloppy."

"Sloppy?" said Gallow. "They fought hard. We lost twenty men and several vehicles."

"Acceptable losses," said Sicarius. "The enemy now know we are not afraid to take the fight to them, and that will make them wary. And wary enemies are already beaten."

Gallow shouldered his shotgun. "I hope you're right," he said. "We've lost six cities already, and they don't seem beaten."

"That's because you are thinking of mortal warfare," said Sicarius. "The Adeptus Astartes are fighting alongside you now. We do not fight like you."

"I remember," said Gallow, "I fought alongside Sergeant Learchus and the 4th Company."

"Against greenskins. This is warfare of a very different kind."

"I know that. I am not a fool, Captain Sicarius," said Saul Gallow. "I am a planetary governor of a world of Ultramar, appointed by Lord Calgar himself."

"Be that as it may, your forces are subordinate to mine. This world is an Ultramarines world. Understand your place."

"I understand it well enough, Captain Sicarius," Gallow assured him, an edge of steel to his voice. "But this ambush has cost lives, Cato, my people's lives. I want to know they are not dying in vain. Lord Calgar would not want that."

"Lord Calgar wants victory," said Sicarius, irritated at the governor's use of his forename. He made his way to where Sergeant Daceus had secured the two prisoners, and Gallow had to jog to match his strides.

"What is it you hope to get out of talking to these wretches?" asked Gallow.

"I want to know their leader," said Sicarius. "Slay the beast and the horde will die. It worked on Black Reach and I see no reason it won't work here."

"I thought you said this was a different kind of warfare to fighting greenskins," pointed out Gallow.

"It is, but that principle never changes," said Sicarius, regarding the two bound captives.

Both wore patchwork uniforms of vividly coloured cloth, a riot of pinks, blues, greens and gold. It was offensively bright, and Sicarius' lip curled in distaste. To fight such abominations was bad enough, but to talk to them...

One man had been wearing a helmet fixed to his skull by bone hooks driven through the skin of his temple, and his head was covered in blood where it had been torn off. A strip of flesh hung down on his cheek with a stained hook dangling like a piece of vile jewellery. The other was similarly attired, yet his weapons and adornments were of superior quality. The defiance in his gaunt features marked him as some kind of officer. Both wore brilliant blue sashes, the only unifying aspect of their attire.

"Before I kill you, I want to know the name of your commander," said Sicarius.

"Voshad nether yousan pothai!" spat the first and Sicarius backhanded him across the jaw with enough force to shatter teeth, but leave the jawbone intact.

"Understand this," said Sicarius, kneeling beside the prisoner and placing the barrel of his plasma pistol under his chin. "You are going to die. Speak words like that again and your death will be slow and painful. Now I ask again, what is the name of your war leader?"

“We is Bloodborn. We tell to you of nothing,” hissed the officer, his words halting and unfamiliar, as though it had been many years since he had spoken Imperial language.

“Then you are no use to me,” said Sicarius. His pistol flared, and the top of the officer’s head vaporised, spraying his compatriot with boiling blood and brain fragments. The man cried out and struggled uselessly in Daceus’ grip as Sicarius turned towards him.

“Ustras mithoryushad merk!” he babbled, the words spilling out in a terrified babble.

“Gothic!” thundered Sicarius. “I know you understand me, now speak!”

“I serve the Corsair Queen,” cried the man. His face crumpled in terror, and Sicarius smelled the acrid reek of urine. He shook his head at the man’s craven soul. “Does this *Queen* have a name?”

“Salombar,” sobbed the broken soldier. “Kaarja Salombar. She commands the Bloodborn host sent to despoil this world.”

“Bloodborn? What is that?”

“The holy army of the Eternal Powers,” spat the man, some of his courage returning. “The Corsair Queen is our prophet, and she will see you burn in the fire of our master’s wrath!”

“Don’t count on it,” said Sicarius. “And she is what? Human, xenos?”

The man hesitated. “Human,” he said at last.

“Don’t you know?” said Sicarius, pressing his gun to the man’s temple. The barrel fizzed as the weapon recharged.

“No one knows for sure! Some say she’s part eldar. She’s quick like them, but strong.”

Sicarius stood up straight. “Tell me more of this Corsair Queen. How many warriors does she have? What are her strengths and weaknesses?”

“She’s clever,” laughed the Bloodborn soldier, resigned to the fact of his death. “Cleverer than you if you think she’ll face you in a straight-up fight.”

“Who said I was going to face her in a straight-up fight?”

“You’re Ultramarine, that’s what you do,” hissed the man. “That’s all you ever do.”

“Shows what you know,” said Sicarius, and sent a searing lance of plasma into the man’s brain.

System space around Talassar was thick with electromagnetic debris and blistering spikes of residual radiation as the *Caesar* eased its way towards the latest world to feel the invaders’ wrath. Accompanying the enormous battle-barge was a small fleet of frigates and destroyers, clustering close, like cleaner fish around an ocean predator. In the prow of the battle-barge’s strategium, Marneus Calgar tried to take in the scale of the battle fought around Talassar.

Crippled hulks drifted in high orbit in a decaying trajectory, and the flaring bursts of damaged reactors bled into the surveyor readouts, filling them with hissing washes of static. The deck crew and augur servitors fought to clean the imaging, but a lot of firepower had been unleashed, and such weapons left a brutal afterburn in their wake.

“Damn, but this was a fight and a half,” he said, more to himself than any of the warriors behind him. Varro Tigurius and Severus Agemman stood at parade rest on the hardwood decking, each with their arms crossed across the plates of their armour. Both knew their Chapter Master well enough to know when his statements were rhetorical, and neither intruded upon his grieving anger.

Calgar scanned the debris fields, seeing the remains of at least thirteen ships, four of which were Ultramarines vessels. Such was the dreadfully abused nature of the enemy vessels, it was impossible to know for sure how many wrecks littered this sector of space.

“Reading residual engine signatures,” said Vibius, the *Caesar*’s deck officer.

“No need,” said Calgar. “I can see well enough which vessels we have lost. *Hera’s Wrath*, *Guillitnan’s Spear*, *Sword of Ultramar* and *Grand Duke of Talassar*.”

“All four...” hissed Agemman.

Calgar shook his head. “I never thought to see such loss in my time,” he said. “And the planet? Tell me there are life signs.”

Vibius shook his head. “I am sorry, my lord. I detect nothing, but I cannot be certain. The after-effects of the fighting are creating too much interference to be certain.”

“There’s nothing left alive, Marneus,” said Tigurius sadly.

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I’m sure enough,” said his Chief Librarian.

“We will avenge them, my lord,” added Agemman. “On my honour, the 1st will reap a fearsome tally of enemy dead in return.”

“I know you will, Severus,” answered Calgar. “Well, Varro, you said you saw a battle here, but there is no one here to fight. How do you explain this?”

“I do not know, my lord,” said Tigurius. “Divination is not an exact science, but I believe what I saw will come to pass. We *will* fight for Talassar and we will avenge its dead. Of that I am certain.”

“How can that be so?” demanded Calgar. “Look! All I see is wreckage. Honourable ships of the Ultramar fleet and the blasted hulks of the enemy.”

Tigurius looked deep into the viewer and Calgar was on the point of rebuking him for failing to answer when the Librarian shook his head.

“No,” he said. “The enemy is still here. Hidden and wounded, but still here.”

Calgar turned his gaze back to the viewer as Tigurius rushed over to the surveyor stations and gripped the edge of the plotter table. He saw nothing more than he had seen before, the wrecked and drifting shells of gutted enemy vessels and crippled ships bearing the Ultramarines inverted omega upon their broken, eagle-winged prows.

He joined Tigurius and Agemman at the plotting table, casting his eyes over the shifting patterns coming in and out of focus. Tigurius flipped through varied spectra of search parameters, increasing magnification and zooming in on portions of the celestial battlefield.

Energy spikes registered in the low end of the detection window, little more than the bleeding background radiation one might expect after such a furious exchange of weapons.

“What do you see?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

“They’re here,” hissed Tigurius, a faraway light in his eyes. “Oh, they’re cunning, but I’m wise to them.”

Calgar looked over at Agemman, but his first captain merely shrugged, as in the dark as he was. Tigurius flashed through a dozen images, the flat of his palm pressed to the slate of the glowing display, before finally coming to rest on a sector of space hashed with blizzards of nuclear radiation, the fallout from a nova cannon burst. Vast clouds of gently spinning debris filled this area, a virtually impenetrable mist of physical and electromagnetic static that hung like a wedge of impenetrable fog.

“There,” said Tigurius triumphantly. “Vibius, filter out the echo-band rad-spikes and send an active surveyor scan through that cloud. As strong as you can make it.”

“If there’s anything in there, they’ll know we looked for them,” Vibius warned him.

“I know, just do it,” ordered Tigurius.

Vibius looked over to Calgar, who nodded and said, “Do as he says.”

The tension in the strategium ratcheted up as the *Caesar’s* surveyors sent a surge of reflective energy into the cloud. Much of the energy was scattered by the debris, but enough returned to paint a blurred outline on the plotter table. Though its lines were shimmering and unclear, there was no mistaking the shape that lay behind it. Calgar drew in a breath at the hideously familiar sight and Agemman issued ready orders to his warriors.

“The *Indomitable*,” said Calgar, seeing a dreadful familiarity in the crenellated lines of the star fort. It had changed since he had seen it last, its once proud and regal form now embellished with brutal redoubts, high towers of fearful aspect and every hateful killing trap known to the military architects of the Iron Warriors.

Vibius studied the returns in more detail. “Energy signatures suggest heavy damage. I’m reading numerous spikes indicative of multiple reactor breaches and warp core damage.”

“They almost got it,” said Agemman. “Damn me, but they almost did it.”

“Then we can finish what they started,” hissed Calgar, his heart a searing furnace of anger. “All ships form on the *Caesar*, we’re going to take the fight to these bastards and make sure they pay for every life they’ve taken.”

Agemman held out his hand, and Calgar took it. “The 1st Company stand with you, my lord. We’ll finish this together.”

“Aye,” agreed Calgar, feeling the *Caesar* increase speed, as though eager to be in the fight.

He looked over to the smear of displaced light and radiation, feeling the familiar excitement of going into battle once more.

He would finish a job he should have completed a long time ago.

“This time there will be no stay of execution,” Calgar told the daemon-haunted star fort.

The *Caesar* plunged into the debris surrounding Talassar, cutting through the swirling radiation storms and electrostatic clouds. It passed the derelict vessels crippled in the furious battles, their sad, cratered hulls grim testament to the uncompromising nature of war in space.

Lord Calgar's mission was vengeance, and nothing would come between him and that sacred duty. Fresh from a refit in the surface shipyards of Calth, the *Caesar's* systems were operating at optimal efficiency and her crew were trained more intensely and thoroughly than any Naval ship of the line. The lights in the strategium burned red, the colour of war, as every weapon system came online.

Far beneath the strategium, Captain Agemman readied his warriors for the fight to come, the Terminators of the 1st Company running the last of their pre-battle drills as Techmarines prepped the Thunderhawks and intoned the ritual blessings upon their hulls and armaments.

Marneus Calgar watched the image of the *Indomitable* as it drew closer. He remembered leading the 1st Company aboard the star fort sixty years ago. It was a battle he would never forget, much as he wished to, for its outcome had been the one stain on his honour. M'kar had proven impossible to destroy, so he had made the devil's bargain with Inquisitor Mazeon to trap it instead. What had seemed like the best solution at the time had now come back to visit its terrible wrath upon his sons.

"You endured once," he whispered, clenching the mighty Gauntlets of Ultramar. "You will not endure again."

Clad in the Armour of Antilochus, Calgar towered above even the mightiest of his warriors, the enormous plates of his Terminator armour thick and impenetrable. Its every surface was engraved with minute lettering, almost too small for the naked eye to see, the lessons of the Codex Astartes. Hundreds of thousands of words were etched into his armour, but it was still only a fraction of the entire tome. The teachings of Roboute Guilliman could not so easily be rendered by mortals, even one as mighty as Marneus Calgar.

"Approaching outer edges of *Indomitable's* range," said Vibius at the tactical plotter.

"Understood," said Calgar. "Any change in its posture?"

"Negative, my lord. It's still haemorrhaging energy and its warp core readings are fluctuating wildly. Give it enough time and it will probably tear itself apart."

"Not a chance," said Calgar. "This time I will make no mistakes. I will see the body and I will crush the life from it myself."

"Aye, my lord," said Vibius. "We're all with you," and a ripple of assent swept around the bridge. Calgar smiled, seeing the same determination to strike back at this diabolical foe in every face. Even the servitors hardwired into the automated systems of the ship seemed energised by the nearness of battle.

Calgar stepped over to the plotting table, watching the feeds from the *Caesar's* many surveyor systems merge with the current tactical globe. The display was cluttered with rad-flares and washed with static from atomic detonations, but the Ultramarines fleet was clearly picked out in pale blue darts arcing their way towards the red shimmer that represented the *Indomitable*. It reminded Calgar of images he had seen in the Apothecarion of bacterial invaders in a patient's bloodstream being targeted by white blood cells.

The metaphor was an apt one, he thought.

"Detecting weapon level ordnance drifting in the debris clouds," warned Vibius, cycling through the surveyor feeds. "As per Codex manoeuvre protocols, I recommend increasing fleet spacing, my lord."

"Agreed," said Calgar automatically. "I don't want multiple vessels caught by any unexploded warheads before we get there. Issue the alert, and have all captains verify."

Moments later, the blue darts moved apart on the plotter and crackling confirmation icons flashed next to them. An Ultramarines fleet was a well-oiled machine, one that could be relied on to function exactly in battle as it would in any simulation or battle drill. No sooner had he formed the thought than he knew his order was a mistake.

Reliable was just another word for predictable, and their foes had already shown they knew how to exploit predictability.

"Belay that order!" he yelled as a series of icons blossomed to life across the plotter table.

Incongruously, a number of them were the pale blue of friendlies, and it took him a second to realise why. The Ultramarines vessels crippled in the fighting were not crippled at all, they were in enemy hands!

"All ships, enemy close!" warned Calgar, as yet more icons winked into existence on the plotter table. These were very definitely hostiles, the red of their threat unmistakable. What the surveyors had read as crippled derelicts were coming back to life and plotting firing solutions on the *Caesar*.

"Torpedo launch!" shouted Vibius, and. "Coming in on bearing one-nine-three. Range six thousand kilometres. Emperor save us, but they're from *Hera's Wrath*!"

"All ahead full, fire manoeuvring thrusters and get us out of their path," ordered Calgar, though he knew they would be too close to evade. He knew he should rebuke Vibius for his exclamation, but his horror at one vessel of the Ultramarines fleet firing on another was perfectly understandable.



“Plot a firing solution on the return trajectory,” said Calgar, working out the permutations of this unfolding battle. In any normal engagement, the opposing fleets jockeyed for the perfect firing positions, running broadside with guns blazing or crossing the T of an opposing battle line to bring all their weapons to bear while minimising the return fire of the enemy. Such battles were fought at enormous ranges, giving each commander ample time to plot their stratagems and best utilise the strengths of his ships.

This battle was fought at what was, in void war terms, point-blank range, and the enemy had taken the first shots. This was going to get nasty, bloody and messy very quickly.

“Incoming torpedoes now at two thousand kilometres,” cried Vibius. “Close-in defence turrets engaging now.”

“It won’t be enough,” said Calgar, gripping the edge of the plotter table and buckling the metal as the force of his grip increased. “Launch all countermeasures and take us into the upper atmosphere. All vessels follow on.”

“More launches! *Indomitable* has launched a spread, range sixty thousand kilometres. At least fifty warheads!”

Calgar looked back at the plotting table, seeing the fresh torpedo launches as an incoming wall of red blotches. “Launch counter spread,” he ordered. “Disengage all safeties.”

“Aye, my lord,” intoned the Master of Weapons. “All safeties disengaged.”

Ultramarines vessels could not normally fire upon one another, but with the safety mechanisms removed, any ship was now a target. Though it broke his heart to fire on vessels he had sailed into battle upon, the destruction of yet more Ultramarines ships was the only possible outcome of this fight.

“Escort craft engaging now. *Konor’s Gulf* taking hits, *Ultramar Endures* engaging three escort-class vessels, and *Prandium Memoriam* reports catastrophic engine damage. She’s out of the fight.”

“Brace for impact!” shouted Calgar as the proximity alarms blared throughout the strategium. High up in the bridge, the impacts were felt merely as a faint, shuddering vibration in the deck plates, but the damage to the vessel’s rear quarter would be significant.

“Damage report.”

“Starboard engines took the brunt of the impacts,” said Vibius. “Hull breaches on decks six through seventeen and multiple pressure losses throughout the engineering decks. We’re losing power and the manoeuvring systems are offline.”

“Get them back, Vibius,” said Calgar, with a calm he did not feel. “We’re dead in space without them.”

“Aye, my lord. Damage control teams are already on the scene and all bulkheads to vented compartments have been sealed. Losses estimated to be in the region of six hundred dead.”

Calgar nodded, filing that bleak statistic away for now. Mourning the dead could wait, or else they would all be numbered amongst them.

The enemy ships clustered around them, like wolves around a cornered stag, but their eagerness to strike the deathblow had made them careless. A vessel identified as *Sword of Ultramar* was coming about before the *Caesar’s* prow and Calgar smiled grimly as he saw the correlation to the vessels approaching on either flank. From their positioning, he saw they were moments from launching devastating broadsides of raking fire.

“You might have my ships, but you’re not Ultramarines,” he said. His fingers danced over the controls, far more delicately than should have been possible with such cumbersome-looking gauntlets. Centuries of experience, an innate grasp of the vagaries of void war and his enhanced cognition allowed him to plot out the movements of his enemies in seconds.

“Passing multiple firing solutions to you, Master of Weapons,” said Calgar. “Execute them on my mark, if you please.”

“Aye, my lord,” responded the Master of Weapons, a Techmarine named Estoca. “Solutions received and plotted. Vessels to our port and starboard are firing.”

“Vibius, increase bow angle thirty degrees and send as much power as you can to the engines,” said Calgar. “And make it soon.”

“It will be done,” Vibius assured him.

Seconds later, the lights in the strategium dimmed as power diverted to the straining ship’s damaged engines. This time the ship’s protests were felt keenly by the bridge crew as the superstructure groaned with the strain of the manoeuvre. Pressure lines ruptured and emergency sirens blared as the toll taken upon damaged engines rippled outwards, blowing pressurised bulkheads and ripping open its already ravaged hull.

But his play worked. None of the incoming fire touched the *Caesar*, the explosive projectiles passing-harmlessly beneath the venerable warship and hurtling onward. Calgar followed the plots of the shells, and gave a triumphant yell as he saw them impact on the vessels to the *Caesar’s* flanks.

“They have the ships, but they don’t know how to use them except by hurling them at us in great numbers,” he said, storing that morsel of knowledge for another day. He glanced down at the plotter and judged his moment.

“Master Estoca,” he said. “Open fire with the prow bombardment cannon.”

“Firing now,” said Estoca.

Vast projectiles launched from the battle-barge’s main cannons, and the ships to its fore were too close and too committed to the attack to avoid them. One, a sword-class frigate that had seen service in Battlefleet Pacificus, was obliterated almost immediately, torn open from prow to stern by a series of catastrophic secondary explosions. The second, a frigate of unknown provenance, was struck repeatedly and broke into three distinct sections, each one trailing a spray of short-lived flames and freezing oxygen. The power of the blasts combined and magnified as venting plasma and warheads exploded, forming an expanding cloud of explosive debris and a blooming vortex of radiation.

Calgar watched the trajectory of the incoming torpedoes from the *Indomitable*, holding his breath as the spinning cloud of wreckage and radiation from the two frigates they had destroyed grew to encompass them. The plotter table blurred the whole region of space as the torpedoes flew into the mass of volatile gasses, plasma and debris, but as the seconds passed, he released his breath as he saw that none of the torpedoes had survived their journey through the soup of interference and debris.

“Incoming torpedoes,” shouted Vibius. “It’s *Hera’s Wrath* again!”

“Damn it,” swore Calgar. “She was a tenacious attack dog when she was ours and has lost none of her fury. Range?”

“Point-blank!” said Vibius. “She’s right on top of us!”

Once again the *Caesar* shook as a host of torpedoes slammed into her engines and flanks. Consoles erupted with sparks and flames, and a station towards the fore of the strategium exploded, consuming the servitor wired to it in seconds. Calgar felt the protests of his ship and knew that she could not survive much longer.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

Vibius scanned down the long list of winking emergency lights and shook his head. “The engines are gone and we’ve lost pressure to the lower decks completely. Hull breaches all over the ship and the weapons are offline. Manoeuvring functions are restored, but that’s all we’ve got!”

Calgar nodded and scanned the plotter, looking for a way out, a way to salvage this ambush from becoming a massacre. Three of his escorts were gone, crippled and drifting, while another two fought on, though ravening packs of hunters surrounded them with punishing broadsides. They wouldn’t last much longer.

It had been an unequal fight from the start, but it was one his pride and anger had led them into. Calgar cursed himself for missing so obvious a trap. His anger had blinded him to the signs. M’kar or Honsou were cunning enough to exploit their innate trust in the Codex, but they also knew that they fought from a place of emotion.

Most galling of all was the knowledge that the ships lost in this engagement would likely be recovered and repaired in the docking piers of the *Indomitable*. Such ships would be unreliable and ramshackle, but they could carry guns and that was all these invaders seemed to care about.

“My lord,” said Vibius. “What are your orders?”

“Contact the Master of Engineering,” he said. “See if there’s any way to get the engines back online. Even for a moment.”

“My lord,” said Vibius, incredulous at having to relate such terrible news. “The engines are gone! We’re dropping into Talassar’s atmosphere, and nothing is going to change that. The *Caesar* is lost.”

“You say we have the manoeuvring engines?”

“Barely.”

“Then get us through the atmosphere in one piece, Vibius,” said Calgar “That’s all I ask.”

“We won’t be able to land the *Caesar*,” pointed out Vibius.  
“I know,” said Calgar. “We’re abandoning her.”

## EIGHT

She wasn’t here. Sicarius had examined every corpse, and she wasn’t here. Disappointed, he dropped the last body back onto its front and stood, wiping his gauntlets on a rag he kept specifically for the purpose. The ruined town smoked in the pre-dawn light, its once proud structures now tombs of the dead.

Sicarius gripped the hilt of his Tempest Blade. It had reaped many of the Bloodborn soldiers—they did not merit being called warriors—this day, but it could never be enough. This small settlement had once been Olynthus, a prosperous trading post in the south-eastern reaches of Espandor’s great forests. Its buildings were simple and rustic, emblematic of the rugged character and earthy lifestyle favoured by this planet’s natives.

Espandor had a primal, unspoiled beauty few other worlds could match, but Sicarius was a son of Talassar and preferred his worlds to have a modicum of culture. Olynthus looked dreadfully dull compared to the majesty of Talassar’s wondrously uplifting architectural styles.

Where on Espandor was there anything to match the magnificence of the Reef Towers, the great golden spires that rose out of the waters on Glaudor’s northern coastline? What on this frontier world could hope to rival the marble citadels of Perusia’s consul guilders? Sadness touched him as he wondered how much of that beauty survived.

In the distance, tall mountains reared over the forest, rugged and untamed. Portions of the forest were ablaze, sending tall pillars of grey smoke into the sky. Praxor Manorian had detached men from the Shield Bearers to douse the fires on the edge of the settlement, and Ixion’s men were cutting down trees to form a makeshift firebreak.

He turned back to Olynthus, the white plasterwork on many of its buildings daubed with unclean runes by the enemy soldiers who’d occupied them. *Cato’s Pride*, the Land Raider that carried Sicarius into battle, had demolished these buildings, its adamantine dozer blade making short work of the defiled structures.

What little was left standing was either ablaze or so punctured by bolter impacts and Thunderfire fragments as to be almost unrecognisable as manmade structures. Nearly a thousand corpses were piled like cordwood in the centre of the town, the vile enemy soldiery that had been garrisoned here. Sergeant Tirian’s men were rigging the Bloodborn vehicles for destruction, and within the hour, nothing would be left of this force.

“Did you find her?” asked Sergeant Daceus, picking his way through the fallen rubble. Daceus carried his bolter across his chest, the silver steel of its barrel and the bronze of its cheek plates pristine, as though it had come fresh from the armourer.

“No,” said Sicarius. “She’s not here. A thousand bodies and she’s not here.”

Daceus shook his head. “I told you she wouldn’t be. Anyone who calls themselves a queen wouldn’t surround herself with such rabble.”

“Six of these advance forces we’ve hit and there’s no sign of her,” said Sicarius. “I am beginning to suspect she does have eldar farsight.”

“Or perhaps she’s just been lucky?” suggested Daceus, kneeling beside the body Sicarius had been inspecting.

“I don’t like lucky opponents.”

“Who does? But we should be pulling out, captain,” said Daceus. “All this smoke will surely bring reinforcements.”

“You’re right,” said Sicarius. “We need to recon our next target.”

Daceus didn’t answer immediately, and turned back to the ruins of Olynthus. “Did you know this town once housed nearly six hundred people?”

“I saw the bodies,” said Sicarius, recalling the hideous sight of the butchered inhabitants.

“Some of its people fled to Herapolis, but most refused to retreat,” said Daceus. “They took up their rifles and stayed to defend their homes.”

“I would expect no less of Ultramar’s citizens,” said Sicarius. “What’s your point?”

“It was a noble stand, but ultimately futile,” said Daceus. “We need to return to Herapolis.”

“Retreat? Not when there are enemies still to destroy.”

“There is no choice, captain,” said Daceus firmly. “We are already overextended. Ammunition stocks are lower than I would like and our transports are almost at the end of their limits of fuel. If we press on much longer, we will not have enough to return to Herapolis. We need to go and we need to go now.”

Sicarius bit back his frustration, wanting to argue, but knowing that Daceus was right. This far out, they were dangerously exposed and far from help. He smiled, his decision made.

“I am what I am, Daceus,” said Sicarius at last. “I can’t change that.”

“Nor would I want you to.”

“Some call me vainglorious, I know that. But I am not,” said Sicarius, casting his gaze out over the forest. “I serve the Chapter to the best of my abilities. My way is to move fast and never give my enemies a static target. And the best way to do that is to kill the Corsair Queen. She’s the key, Daceus, I know it.”

Sicarius kicked the dead body at his feet. “Look at this scum,” he said. “You think his kind will fight on without the strength of this Salombar holding them together? If there’s one truth of warfare I believe in the most, it’s that if you kill the head, the body will die.”

“We’ll find her,” said Daceus. “And then you’ll kill her, I know it.”

Further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Gaius Prabian, his power sword and shield slung across his back. The company champion had slain over a hundred enemies today, and Sicarius marvelled at the apparent ease of his killing.

“What is it, Gaius?” asked Sicarius, sensing his champion’s urgency.

“Word from Scipio Vorolanus,” said Prabian. “Bloodborn forces are on the move.”

In the absence of Scout forces, the warriors of Squad Vorolanus often acted as recon units for the 2nd Company. Deployed in the hills to the west, they had acted as Sicarius’ eyes and ears for this engagement.

“Where?” demanded Daceus, as Sicarius set off for the ruined town.

“There’s two distinct groups. The largest is coming straight for us, about six kilometres to the east. Heavy armour and traitor Astartes. Greater than company strength.”

“And the other?” asked Sicarius.

“Five kilometres north, but cutting south-west towards the bridge over Actium Gorge.”

“They’re trying to cut our line of retreat,” said Daceus.

“We need to go,” said Sicarius. “Now.”

Uriel regarded the warriors before him with a critical eye and found much to his liking. These were the best and bravest of the 4th Company, warriors who had, time and time again, proved their valour and honour in the face of the most horrific foes imaginable. Each was a heroic warrior of noble aspect and legendary exploits, with entire volumes within the Library of Ptolemy dedicated to their mighty deeds.

Uriel had never felt the need to lead a command squad before now, preferring to fight within the ranks of his line forces, but Chaplain Clausel had urged him to assemble one for this latest conflict.

“They will have need of a hero to lead them,” said Clausel. “And a hero needs his lancers around him. Choose these warriors well and the men will fight all the harder as they seek to emulate them and earn a place at your side.”

Uriel had seen the sense of this, and had chosen the warriors to form his retinue on the journey to Calth after long deliberation, for every warrior of the 4th was worthy of a place. Learchus had helped him with the selection, and Uriel was grateful for the assistance.

Ancient Peleus bore the company standard, a rippling icon of the 4th’s glorious legacy that had been carried into the most violent conflicts and which had never yet fallen in battle. Only the best and bravest were entrusted with such a sacred duty, and Peleus had more than justified his selection, defending the banner against foes of every stripe with a skill that was truly exceptional.

Apothecary Selenus had saved every warrior in the 4th Company’s life more than once, the ivory plates of his armour gleaming and pristine. Though his duties as an Apothecary were of vital importance in maintaining the physical integrity of the company, Selenus was, first and foremost, a warrior, and Uriel had seen how deadly his knowledge of a body’s weak points could be in battle.

Uriel had selected Petronius Nero to be his company champion, a warrior he had always known was skilful with a blade, but had only come to appreciate *how* skilful in the drop assault on the tau internment camp on Pavonis. He wielded a slender blade he had forged to his precise measurements, exquisitely balanced and weighted to be the perfect killing weapon. Likewise, his combat shield was a bespoke creation, lightweight and as much a weapon as the blade.

Rounding out the command squad were Livius Hadrianus and Brutus Cyprian, warriors who had excelled in the war against the greenskins of Espandor and on Pavonis. Uriel knew both from the battles on Tarsis Ultra, and their courage was like tempered steel. Hadrianus carried a meltagun, and Uriel remembered him bringing down an entire tau tank squadron with one well-placed shot after another. Cyprian was a warrior of great strength, almost as large as Pasanius, though his physique did not require parts from Terminator armour. Uriel had seen him grapple a tau battlesuit, smashing it open with his bare hands and throttling the life from the xenos creature within.

“You are to be my lancers,” said Uriel, proud to lead these warriors into battle against this most hated of foes. “And as such you shall be known as the Swords of Calth.”

Uriel had chosen the name to honour the world they fought to defend, and from the straightening of their spines, he saw that his warriors approved. Clausel was right: every warrior in the 4th Company would strive to equal these warriors’ deeds.

He let a slow smile creep onto his face as he dismissed the squad and turned to watch the preparations for war filling the enormous structure in which he stood. Cold blue light spilled through distant skylights, and the sound of marching feet, shouting stevedores and honking power rigs as they unloaded hundreds of cargo lifters echoed from its cavernous sides.

It had been many years since Uriel had set foot on the world of his birth, but upon taking his first breath of its air, albeit the recycled air of Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia, he felt a potent sense of homecoming, as though Calth itself were welcoming a favoured son. Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia was just one of a thousand construction yards, nestled cheek by jowl in Calth's largest surface metropolis. Its official designation was Ultimus Prime, but everyone of Calth knew it as Highside City.

The last of the 4th Company's supplies, equipment and war machines were being unloaded from Thunderhawk transports by massively-muscled dock servitors and directed to their staging areas by Techmarines. Thousands of soldiers and labourers filled the hangar, a vast mechanised space of heavy machinery and overhead construction rigs.

The glow of welding torches and sparking plasma cutters normally flickered in the assembly hangar as naval shipwrights and Mechanicus tech-adepts worked on the hulls of enormous starships. Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia was a facility for the construction of star-faring vessels, a kilometres-long structure that now served as the mustering area for an army.

The air reeked of oil, burnt metal and incense, for the building of so complex a machine required more than simply knowledge, it required ritual and incantation. The shipyards of Calth were justly famous throughout the Imperium, and the skill and craftsmanship of their artificers was beyond compare. Unusually for a facility devoted to crafting such colossal vessels, it was not located in orbit, but upon the smooth, flat surface of Calth.

Beyond the armoured, pressurised walls, the planet's surface was cold and deadly, utterly lethal to all life, even Space Marines. An ancient enemy had bombarded Calth's sun with deadly poisons that stripped the planet's atmosphere away and swept its surface with lethal radiation. Calth's population now lived below the surface, far from the sun's deadly rays.

The Ultramarines had been first to deploy, alongside Inquisitor Suzaku's small assembly of savants, warriors and other, less easily identifiable servants. The rest of the newly arrived forces were now disembarking within the cavernous assembly hangar. Boxy dropships from *Perpetuum Cogito* unfolded rotating racks from within their holds to deploy rank after rank of Mechanicus Protectors, cybernetic soldiers with the look of martial tech-priests fitted with numerous weapon augmentations. Magos Locard oversaw clattering maniples of weaponised servitors as they marched in perfect synchrony, little more than mechanised torsos fitted to numerous means of locomotion: multiple legs, tracked units or heavy, off-road wheels.

Behind them came thousands of skitarii, feral, brutish warriors clad in hide and reptile skin with gleaming battle augmentations surgically implanted in their flesh. They marched beneath a flapping banner of mottled green skin, branded with the cogged skull of the Mechanicus, and bore a multitude of weapons; heavy cannons, wide-barrelled rifles and a glittering forest of long polearms, axes and toothed eviscerators. The savage-looking warriors chanted a repeating binaric war-shout, and but for the plethora of Imperial icons dotting their armour Uriel might have thought them creations of the enemy.

The Raven Guard deployed to the surface of Calth in a single Rhino, and though it was no structurally different to those of the Ultramarines, it possessed a shadowed quality that made it seem somehow sleeker, darker and less bulky.

"Quite a force we've assembled, eh?" said Pasanus, strolling over from the inspection of his squad. Learchus walked alongside him, though he looked singularly unimpressed with his first impressions of Calth.

"It is impressive," agreed Uriel. "I have fought alongside the Adeptus Mechanicus before, but never in such numbers. It makes me glad they are on our side."

"Aye," said Pasanus, watching the battle march of the skitarii. "I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that lot."

"Are your warriors ready?" asked Uriel.

"The Firebrands are ready," confirmed Pasanus. "Just let these bastards try and take this world from us."

The 4th Company did not normally bestow martial names upon its squads in the manner of some captains, but many had earned unofficial titles during the Pavonis campaign. Uriel suspected the name of Pasanus' squad had more to do with its sergeant than any specific battle in which they had fought.

"Learchus?"

"The Guardians stand ready," said Learchus. While Learchus had hunted the captured governor of Pavonis behind enemy lines, Uriel had led Squad Learchus, and he had been more than a little flattered to know they had become known as the Guardians, in honour of the drop assault that broke the back of the tau invasion.

"Swords of Calth," said Pasanus, nodding towards Uriel's dismissed command squad. "I like it. It has a nice ring."

"Thank you," said Uriel. "It seemed appropriate given the world we are to defend."

"Feels good to be back, doesn't it?"

"That it does," agreed Uriel, taking his friend's hand.

"So this is where you both came from before you got to Agiselus?" asked Learchus, looking up at the deadly light of Calth spilling in through the armoured skylights.

“Yes,” said Uriel.

“I am beginning to see why you were such a belligerent cadet. This is a bleak place.”

“You have never been here before, have you?” asked Uriel, with a sly grin.

“No,” said Learchus. “Though I have, of course, read of the cavern cities.”

“Ah, well then you’re in for a treat, my friend,” said Pasanius as a colossal rumbling filled the assembly hangar. Uriel and his veteran sergeants turned to see a towering vehicle emerge from the cliff-like flanks of a Mechanicus lander. Taller than a hab-block, it was a colossal behemoth on tracks wider than three Land Raiders side by side. Oblong and graceless, it was an enormous mobile fortress that dwarfed even the battle engines of the Legio Titanicus. Its massively thick hull could transport several companies worth of soldiery as well as their attendant armoured vehicles.

“A Capitol Imperialis,” hissed Pasanius. “I haven’t seen one of them in action since Tarsis Ultra. Colonel Rabelaq commanded it, remember?”

“I remember,” said Uriel, picturing the colonel’s desperate sacrifice against the tyranid Bio-titan on that snow-locked battlefield. “And to think they had three on Salinas and just abandoned them.”

A Capitol Imperialis was more commonly deployed behind the front lines where it would act as a command and control base for an army’s senior officers, as well as providing emergency medicae facilities.

“Is that going to fight on the surface?” asked Learchus.

Uriel and Pasanius shared a puzzled glance.

“No,” said Uriel. “Of course not.”

“Surely that thing will be too big to fit within the caves beneath Calth.”

Uriel smiled. “Not even a little bit.”

His vox-bead chirruped, and Uriel pressed a hand to his ear as the voice of Lord Admiral Tiberius sounded.

“Uriel, we have company,” said Tiberius. “I don’t know how they’ve done it, but we’ve picked up enemy ships well within the system reaches and moving into attack formation. A battle-barge and at least fifteen other ships, destroyers and frigates mainly, but some others we’ve never seen before.”

“Can you hold them?”

Tiberius hesitated. “Together with the orbital defences, I can buy you some time, but we won’t be able to stop them from reaching the surface, that’s a certainty.”

“Understood,” said Uriel. “Do what you can, but keep the *Vae Victus* safe.”

“I will, Uriel,” said Tiberius. “Courage and honour!”

“Trouble,” said Pasanius, reading his expression. “How bad?”

“Bad enough that we need to hurry up,” said Uriel. “Pass the word that we make for Guilliman’s Gate within the hour.”

Honsou watched the Ultramarines fleet break into battle formation. Lines of howling scrapcode trickled down *Warbreed’s* viewing bay, obscuring much of the view with gibberish. The symbols were meaningless to Honsou and the rest of the crew, but with Cycerin controlling virtually every aspect of the ship now, there was little need for mortal crew members to understand them.

The feeling that his ship was becoming a living entity, with Cycerin at its heart, was unsettling, though the warpcraft of the rapidly evolving magos had kept their enemies blind to their presence long enough for the fleet to reach the innermost regions of the Calth system. But for a hidden picket line of augur buoys, they might have reached the blue planet’s orbit in complete secrecy.

“So this is where Uriel Ventris is from?” said Cadaras Grendel, staring hungrily at the cold planet gently revolving before him.

“Yes,” said Honsou, glancing over his shoulder at the shuddering form of the Newborn as Cycerin plumbed the depths of its mind with invasive mechadendrites.

“It doesn’t look like much.”

“It’s a poisoned rock,” said Honsou, keeping his tone even. “Uninhabitable unless you live like a troglodyte in a cave deep underground, but there is something here we need to destroy, an ancient shrine from the days of Horus Lupercal.”

“Ashrine? What shrine?” demanded Vaanes.

Honsou hesitated before answering. “M’kar told me of it before the fleet dispersed. It’s a reliquary shrine to some lost Chapter of the Ultramarines. I figure it’s something symbolic from the days of Horus. Whatever it is, M’kar wants the shrine and everything in it destroyed.”

“So we’re acting on the daemon lord’s orders now, eh?” smirked Grendel.

“No,” snapped Honsou. “Calth and Ventris are our priorities.”

“If this shrine is so important to M’kar, why isn’t it here destroying it?” asked Vaanes.

Honsou gave him a cold glance, trying to hide his own interest in the shrine. Vaanes had always been the cleverest of his lieutenants. Honsou had asked that same question of M’kar, but the daemon lord had been cryptic in its response.

“That world is anathema to me,” was all it had said.

Honsou turned away, ignoring Vaanes’ question, and marched to the edge of Cycerin’s vat of gelatinous amniotic fluid. Pulsing tendrils like fat, oily snakes writhed from the pool, twisting across the deck and plugging into warp-knew-what. Each was wreathed in flickering green light, sickly and rotten.

One dripping tendril waved in the air, the sharpened interface spike buried in the back of the Newborn’s skull. Like the rest of them, the Newborn was clad in its armour, though whether or not it would be fit for battle was another matter entirely. Emerald light bled from beneath its eyelids and sweated from the joints of its armour.

Grendel and Ardaric Vaanes followed him, watching the distance between the two fleets of ships wind down. To have approached so close to Calth without detection was no small achievement, and Grendel knelt beside the vat containing Cycerin’s essence.

“Not bad,” said the disfigured champion, begrudging even that faint praise for the magos.

“I’ll be more impressed if he’s able to do what he says he can do,” said Honsou.

“Will it be a problem if he can’t?” asked Vaanes, looking over at the approaching Ultramarines ships. “These aren’t just picket ships, they’re Adeptus Astartes ships of war.”

“It won’t be a problem, it’ll just take longer,” said Honsou, pushing Grendel out of his way. He felt foolish at addressing a bloated shape in a gelatinous pool, but Cycerin never emerged from his sunken vat now.

“Are you ready?” he said.

++Affirmative++ said the magos in his vile, bubbling cant.

“Then let’s get this started,” said Honsou.

Emerald columns of corrupt scrapcode flooded the main viewscreen.

Aboard Orbital Defence Platform Heliotropus Three-Nine, Magos Secundus Lacimae ran through his pre-battle system checks. Launch algorithms were checked a thousand times a second by the machine spirits, and remote telemetry feeds from the augurs reported a margin of error in the region of 0.00000034, which was well within acceptable tolerances.

Around his circular command throne, twenty mono-tasked servitors oversaw the proper maintenance rituals of the ten macro-cannon batteries mounted on Heliotropus Three-Nine, each attending to the rites necessary to effect the swift loading and accurate firing of such complicated and fractious weapons. Gusts of incense filled the command centre and rites of accuracy and destruction scrolled over the targeting cogitators in binary and hexadecimal.

The hololithic globe floating over the surveyor station displayed the precisely aligned formation of the Ultramarines fleet, though Lacimae noted that the *Blue Sun* was out of position by nine point four kilometres. A negligible amount in spatial terms, but a significant one to a priest of Mars.

He factored the captain’s misaligned vessel into his firing solutions, knowing that anything daring to come within the lethal envelope of his guns would soon be reduced to a blasted hulk, blazing from end to end.

One of his servitors twitched at its station, its head and shoulders convulsing as green sparks flashed from its console. Like a deadly infection, the green lighting arced from console to console, spitting and fizzing as it wormed its way into every system.

Ladmae turned his noospheric senses inward, tracing the source of the intrusion. Fields of binaric code overlaid his vision, endless streams of ones and zeroes arranged with fluid grace in a seamless ballet of mathematics. But something black and oozing was spilling out, like oil from a sinkhole.

He tried to isolate the corrupt code, but with every shunt and code-blocker he erected, more of the impure numbers would spill into the operating systems of the machine spirits. He felt their pain as beautiful lines of code became twisted and ugly, endlessly replicating their incorrect formulae until he knew there was no way he could stop it.

“Notification: Defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine, Magos Secundus Lacimae reporting hostile code attack. Unable to maintain operational readiness.”

The vox system burbled, spitting an angry growl of static back at him, and he had no way of knowing if his warning had been heard. Lacimae withdrew his senses from the internal systems and saw the green lightning flowing throughout the command centre.

He felt it probing his own defences, and steeled his aegis barriers to keep it out.

Though many of his emotional responses had been removed in his progression through the ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he was not so far gone down the route of mechanisation that he did not feel fear as he saw the corrupt scrapcode realigning the weapons of the defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine.

He extended a mechadendrite spike into the input port, but no sooner had he done so than a vicious bark of green lightning fused it in place. Unable to break his connection to the defence platform’s systems, he could only watch in horror as his wondrously crafted firing solutions began changing.

“Lord Admiral,” said Philotas, the deck officer of the *Vae Victus*. “I’m picking up some disturbing signals passing between the enemy fleet and the orbital defence platforms.”

Tiberius stood at his hardwood command lectern, his fingers dancing over the embedded hololithic slate he used to send his orders around his ship. The softly-lit command bridge of the *Vae Victus* was a place of quiet efficiency, the deck crew well-trained and motivated, the servitors regularly maintained and serviced.

The addition of servitors was a change for the venerable ship, the conflicts with the greenskins and tau having proven their use to Tiberius in no uncertain terms. Though he preferred a living crew capable of functioning under their own initiative, he grudgingly admitted that servitors were at least efficient.

“What kind of signals?” he asked. “Send them to my lectern.”

“These,” said Philotas, transferring the surveyor data to the Lord Admiral.

Tiberius watched as a stream of unintelligible machine code scrolled across the slate, bile green and somehow *wrong*, as though these numbers violated all sane mathematical laws.

“What is this?” demanded Tiberius. “We’re about to get into a fleet engagement here, Philotas, I don’t have time for random data curios.”

“My lord, this is scrapcode!” said Philotas with sudden, horrified recognition. “The language of the Dark Mechanicus!”

Tiberius reached the same conclusion as the unclean numbers seemed to clump together on the slate. Dread touched him, for he had seen firsthand how much damage scrapcode attacks could do to the delicate logic engines of a starship. A number of warning icons flashed to life on his slate and he shut off the flow of hissing, angry numbers.

“What in the name of the Holy Throne...” he said.

“Weapons lock!” called the Master of Weapons as the bridge lights switched to the blood red hue of battle stations. “Defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine has a locked firing solution on us.”

“Torpedoes in the void!” cried Philotas. “Defence Platform Arklight Seven-Seven has fired a full spread of hull-piercing warheads at us. I read a minimum of nineteen inbounds.”

Tiberius descended the steps of his lectern and rushed over to the stone-rimmed plotter table, watching as the zipping icons of the torpedo spread closed the distance between Calth’s defence platforms and the Ultramarines fleet.

Six more platforms winked as the augurs detected launches, and alarm klaxons blared as fresh target locks were detected.

“Launch countermeasures!” ordered Tiberius. “Evasive manoeuvres! Get us out of here!”

“Aye, my lord,” answered Philotas, issuing the necessary commands. The deck plates groaned as the ship’s engines fired up and the atmospheric manoeuvring thrusters roared to life. A Space Marine strike cruiser was far more agile than its vast size would suggest, but it could not turn and evade as quickly as it now needed to.

Proximity alarms chimed as the torpedo spreads raced towards them. Whoever had taken control of the orbital defences knew their craft, and every vessel in the Imperial fleet faced a host of incoming warheads.

“Brace for impact!” shouted the Master of Weapons. “Battery fire incoming!”

The bridge shook as building-sized explosive shells impacted on the shields, and Tiberius knew they would be collapsed in moments by the multiple batteries at their rear.

“Are we betrayed?” demanded Tiberius.



“No, my lord,” said Philotas, running over and pulling out a brass jackplug from the plotting table and slotting it into a socket behind his ear. “Not betrayed, compromised. The enemy must have a data-savant with knowledge of Ultramar’s command protocols.”

“How in the nine hells would they get something like that?”

“I don’t know, my lord.”

Tiberius dismissed the question as irrelevant, cursing himself for wasting time when there were more pressing matters to hand. He returned his attention to the plotter table, despairing as he saw the enemy vessels surge forward in the wake of the explosions and crippling damage cutting through the Imperial fleet.

He’d promised Uriel more time, but as more and more damage reports from his fleet appeared on the plotter, Tiberius saw that was a promise he wouldn’t be able to keep. His fleet was crippled, six ships already out of action and another three drifting away from the battle lines. This fight was lost, and they hadn’t even fired a shot. Tiberius opened a fleet-wide vox-channel.

“All ships, this is Admiral Tiberius on the *Vae Victus*,” he said, affecting an air of calm he certainly didn’t feel. “Every captain who is able is hereby ordered to disengage, I repeat, disengage. Remove your vessel from the fight and regroup at rally point Ultima Six-Eight. Tiberius out, and may the Emperor guide you!”

He closed the channel, his heart heavy at having to issue such an order.

Tiberius looked over at Philotas and tapped the image of Calth on the plotter.

“Contact all ground forces,” he said. “Warn them they’ll have the enemy dropping on them any moment.”





# FORTRESS ULTRAMAR

## NINE

The assault on Calth began with a thorough bombardment designed to strip away the air defences of Highside City. As the Imperial ships withdrew, Honsou's fleet dropped into low orbit to more precisely aim their weapons, and lancing bolts of vertical light winked into existence as gun batteries flashed like strobes. Their accuracy was undiminished by thermal blooming since Calth had no atmosphere and the results were devastating.

*Warbreed's* bombardment cannon, guided by Cycerin's absolute knowledge of ballistic trajectories, slammed high explosive shells on their targets with a precision not even the greatest gunners of the Imperial Navy or Adeptus Astartes could match. The Iron Warriors would have need of Highside City, and the destruction was wrought with surgical precision.

Highside City was now open to the air, its defences stripped by the accuracy of the bombardment, and in the wake of the barrage from space, drop-pods fell towards Calth without the fiery contrails normally associated with such assaults. With no atmospheric friction, the iron missiles slashed down at terrifying speeds, a host of aircraft following in their wake. Heavy landers, bulk carriers and vessels that could not normally pass through the atmosphere without burning up dropped to the surface of the planet, all bearing warriors of the Bloodborn and everything they needed to prosecute the attack on Calth.

The majority of the city's defenders were no longer there, already making best speed for Guilliman's Gate. Any units left to defend Highside City would not survive, and Uriel was unwilling to ask any man to make such a sacrifice when there were greater battles still to come. Yet the city was not undefended, far from it.

Magos Locard volunteered a regiment of weaponised servitors to defend Highside City, hurriedly inloading basic hunt and eliminate wet-ware into their biomechanical cortexes. They wouldn't be able to adapt to any changing battlefield circumstances, but they would never retreat and would never stop fighting until they were destroyed. Five hundred skitarii volunteered to remain behind and further delay the attackers.

The first drop-pods smashed through the skylights of Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia, hammering down on the exact spot where the first Thunderhawk of the *Vae Victus* had landed. The weaponised servitors could not appreciate the synchronicity of the moment, and simply opened fire at the first iron-plated warriors to emerge.

Honsou felt a delicious thrill as he leapt from the drop-pod, tasting the caustic bite of the lethal atmosphere mixed with the burned stone and metal taste surrounding the drop-pod. To set foot on a world of Ultramar with carnage in mind was a feat few had achieved, and he wondered what Kroeger and Forrix would have made of his achievements.

Twelve drop-pods were scattered through the vast hangar, each one spilling warriors in burnished plates of iron with yellow and black chevrons into the thick of battle. Bolters roared in a near-continuous cacophony, filling the hangar with muzzle flashes. Eight warriors followed him onto the segmented decking of the drop zone, the most brutal and zealous of his army. The Newborn dropped to the ground next to him, its bolter firing with practiced ease and unerring accuracy.

Honsou's artificial eye fuzzed with static as he saw Ventris in the creature's easy movements, remembering the shot that nearly killed him and left him with the crude augmetic in the first place.

Grendel led the initial landing, his lieutenant's temperament ideally suited for the thundering violence of such battles. There could be no subtlety in a drop assault; the defenders needed to be smashed aside with speed and ferocity, pushed back from the landing zone with brute force to allow follow-on units to land in safety. The enemy they were facing was no ordinary foe, but the Iron Warriors had weapons of such bludgeoning power that their foe's lack of fear was of no consequence.

Two Dreadnoughts emerged from heavily armoured drop-pods, slamming down and unleashing mechanised howls of insane bloodlust from their sarcophagus-mounted augmitters. Towering giants of blackened iron, these killers of men were little more than psychotics chained within an armoured shell and fitted with the most destructive weapons imaginable. That these sometimes turned upon their allies was a small price to pay for such powerful linebreakers. Hooked chains swung from their shoulders and blazing light suffused the horned heads carved on the glacies of their sarcophagi. Gunfire pattered from their armour and they crashed with stomping footsteps toward their enemies. Honsou jogged into the smoke of battle with his bolter pressed tightly to his shoulder in search of targets.

There was no shape to a drop assault, simply a swirling mass of fighters struggling for the upper hand. Strategy was nonsensical and tactics useless. All depended on simple ferocity and the will to win. Augmented Mechanicus soldiery clad in armour as outlandish as any of Kaarja Salombar's corsairs swirled in bloody close quarters battle with Iron Warriors. Battle servitors stalked through the smoke, their presence announced by blazing gouts of fire and streams of gunshots. The battle was a seething mass of screaming warriors, slashing blades, snap-shots and thudding explosions.

Fizzing blasts of superheated plasma streaked past Honsou, and he felt the burn of their passing through the plates of his armour. If the siege to capture the *Indomitable* had rekindled his love of taking the iron to the stone, this fight was a reminder of the savage joy that could be had in the fiery cauldron of combat. He saw the glimmer of a targeting laser on his breastplate, and spun on his heel towards its source.

Someone barrelled into him, and Honsou was thrown to the ground as a roaring blizzard of heavy calibre shells sawed the air above him. Three of his Iron Warriors were hurled back, all but one pulped to shredded meat and bone by the barrage.

He craned his neck to see the Newborn lying on top of him, its helmet a blasted ruin on one side where a shell had torn the ceramite. One of its stormcloud eyes stared through the mass of twisted metal, blinking in the sudden light.

The Newborn reached up and tore off the useless helmet, revealing its loathsome patchwork skin. Blood and oily light seeped from its head, but as Honsou watched the leathery skin began to knit together until only the bloodstain remained. The Newborn's regenerative powers seemed also to stretch to allowing it to breathe in this toxic environment.

"You are being careless," said the Newborn over the remains of its gorget vox, sounding like a drill instructor admonishing a particularly stupid cadet. "Did you not see the danger?"

"Get off me!" yelled Honsou. Figures moved in the roiling smoke banks, but where their allegiance lay was impossible to tell.

"Gun servitors," said the Newborn, pointing into the smoke as it rolled clear. "Praetorian class. Assault cannons."

Honsou swung his bolter around as three clattering machine warriors emerged from the haze. Each was taller than a Space Marine, the hard grey flesh of their torsos fused with a heavy track unit, like a mobile artillery piece. Their skulls were black and white death masks and the musculature of their upper bodies was massively exaggerated, swollen with gene-bulking and enhanced with cybernetic augmentations to carry the implanted assault cannons that replaced their forearms. Enormous ammo hoppers spewed copper-jacketed casings as their weapons sprayed lethal fire.

He squeezed his trigger, pummelling the nearest Praetorian with shots. It rocked back, chunks of dead meat and armour blasted clear, but such machines were built to last. Targeting lasers flickered in the smoke and fastened on Honsou and the rest of his squad.

Before the Praetorians could open fire, a dark shape flashed through the smoke and landed on the ammo hopper of the leftmost machine. Lightning-wreathed claws slashed down and a heavy arm clanged to the floor as it was neatly severed. Sparks and oil-dark blood sprayed from the wound as the black shape drove his claws down through the machine's neck and bisected it from collarbone to stomach.

Ardaric Vaanes vaulted over the second machine, his claws sweeping out to decapitate it as he kicked off from its chest to land on the shoulders of the third Praetorian. Silver steel flashed and the machine collapsed as the renegade Raven Guard tore out its heart and throat with a series of quicksilver slashes. It had taken less than five seconds.

Despite himself, Honsou was impressed. He'd known that Vaanes was a superlative ambush predator, but to see this up close was a stark reminder of the fact.

"That was careless," said Vaanes, stepping forwards and offering Honsou a hand up. Honsou ignored it and stood with an insouciant shrug.

The Newborn nodded. "That is what I said."

"I thrive on danger," he said. "What you see as careless, I see as daring."

"Daring will get you killed," said Vaanes. Honsou laughed. "And you'd grieve for me, would you?"

"Hardly, but that's not the point. Without you there is no army here, just a bunch of killers on the rampage. You keep reaching for the victory that's as likely to see you dead as triumphant and this whole enterprise is as good as over. Don't you care about that?"

Honsou rammed a fresh magazine into his bolter, feeling the axe on his back awaken with the scent of blood on the air.

"That's what you never understood about me, Vaanes," said Honsou. "I *don't* care. I do what I want because it is who I am. Anything else is a lie and if there is one thing I can say of myself, it is that I will never compromise who I am. Not for the powers of the warp, not for the M'kar and certainly not for you. When death is a heartbeat away, I am truly alive."

Honsou turned away, uncomfortable with such honesty. "That's the only way I know how to live," he said. "What else is there?"

*Lex Tredecim*, the immense, cliff-sided Capitol Imperialis, rumbled through a high-sided gorge at the centre of a great convoy of armoured vehicles and troop transports. The roadway led through the Mountains of Twilight towards Guilliman's Gate, the vast portal fortress that led down to the network of caverns beneath the surface. Only this route through the mountains would allow the Imperial forces to reach their destination in complete safety.

Within the command bridge, Uriel watched the feed from Highside City on the holo-globe hovering in the centre of *Lex Tredecim's* long bridge. The interior of the Mechanicus vehicle was unlike any other such command leviathan Uriel had travelled within, its fittings alien to him with their bizarre, inhuman machine parts. Nothing within the enormous vehicle looked designed for use by unaugmented mortals. Every command station was manned by a servitor or a tech-priest so far removed from humanity that it was difficult to tell them apart.

The panels of its logic engines and drive controls were machined bronze and steel, gleaming with fresh coatings of sacred oils and impossible to use without cybernetic enhancement. An acrid haze of incense sympathetic to the machine spirits caged within each terminal drifted from the recyc-vents, and Uriel tasted oil and metal in the back of his throat.

Pasanius and Learchus stood to either side of him, as Shaan paced the command deck like a stalking predator. Inquisitor Suzaku watched the carnage within the globe impassively, her hands laced behind her back and her white hair scraped back in a severe ponytail.

Magos Locard's limbs clicked on the brushed steel decking as he altered position, a number of extruded mechadendrites plugged into the projection unit below the shimmering holo-globe. They gathered around the shimmering sphere, watching through the gun camera of a heavily armoured Praetorian, catching fragmentary, juddering images of the fighting.

The targets of the battle servitors' guns were obscured by blazing muzzle flashes the instant they were revealed, but the stark contrast of their iron armour and yellow and black trims was impossible to mistake. Though Uriel had known the nature of the foe they would face on Calth, it was still a shock to see the Iron Warriors at war on a world of Ultramar.

"How much longer can your forces give us?" asked Uriel, his voice hard as stone.

"Projection: at current rate of attrition, there will be none left alive within twenty-seven point three minutes," answered Magos Locard.

A flickering bar of light appeared at the base of the globe, diminishing with every passing moment, and Uriel realised it was a measure of the number of warriors left in Highside City.

"Turn that off," he said. "I will take your word for it."

"Ah, you find the numerical visual rendition of life distasteful."

"We do," said Shaan. "These warriors are giving their lives so that we may get below. They should be remembered as more than just numbers."

Locard looked askance. "They shall be, Captain Shaan. Their designations will be stored within the memory coils of *Lex Tredecim*, and the Mechanicus never deletes anything."

"That's not what he means," said Pasanius.

"I apologise," said Locard, "but do the Ultramarines not record the designations of your dead upon the stone of the Temple of Correction?"

"We do," agreed Uriel, seeing where Locard was going.

"This is no different," said the magos. "Save that the Mechanicus way is more permanent."

Uriel could see his veteran sergeants about to take offence at the notion of Macragge's impermanence, but forestalled their outrage by saying. "We each remember our dead in our own way, magos, and who is to say which method is superior?"

Locard looked to be on the verge of answering that question, but whatever humanity was left within his skull wisely decided to interpret it as rhetorical.

"As you say, Captain Ventris, remembrance of the dead takes many forms."

Satisfied he had made his point, Uriel watched impassively as the battle servitors and skitarii fought their desperate battle against the Iron Warriors. Aethon Shaan looked over and said, "Will twenty-seven minutes allow us to reach Guilliman's Gate?"

"No, but it will get us close enough that we will reach it before any pursuit can catch us."

"Good enough," said Shaan, returning his attention to the furious battle on the holo-globe.

A group of Iron Warriors emerged from the smoke, their leader running towards the machine bearing the gun camera. Uriel immediately saw a dreadful familiarity in the arrogant swagger of the warrior's movements.

"Hera's bones!" swore Pasanius, recognising the warrior's gleaming silver arm, an artificial limb that owed nothing to the ministrations of a tech-priest. Blazing muzzle flare obscured the Iron Warriors, and Uriel took an involuntary step towards the shimmering globe, his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword.

"Honsou," hissed Uriel, staring at the warrior within the crackling image. "Damn it, but I hoped we were wrong. Even after everything, I didn't really think it could be him."

"That's him all right," said Pasanius, with a glance over to Learchus. "I'd recognise that cursed arm anywhere."

The image blurred as something dark flashed in front of the gun camera. Sparks flew and arcing tracers of lightning slashed across the image as it skewed sideways.

"What happened?" demanded Uriel.

Darting light flickered behind Locard's eyes and a series of flashing red icons streamed over the curved display. "The servitor has been rendered inactive by lethal damage that exceeds its ability to retain functionality," he said.

"Someone killed it," translated Learchus. "Who?"

The image hissed with static, jerking and washing in and out of focus, as a warrior in black armour walked into shot. Broad-shouldered and moving with a grace that reminded Uriel of Shaan's supple ease, the figure bore a set of long claws on each gauntlet.

"Him, I'm guessing," said Pasanus.

Uriel recognised the warrior with a jolt of sick horror, but it was left to Aethon Shaan to name the killer of the battle servitor.

"Vaanes," spat Shaan, his own claws snapping from his gauntlets with a sharp, metallic click of sliding steel. The image flashed with static and rippling lines of interference as black engine fluid seeped over the image before it crackled one last time and froze.

The wavering tableau remained on the holo-globe, framing the architects of this bloodshed. Pinpoints of light flashed over the black-armoured warrior, mapping out his body mass and indexing it against supplied records.

"Adeptus Astartes records match biometric analysis," confirmed Magos Locard. "Ardaric Vaanes, battle captain, 4th Company of the Raven Guard Chapter. Declared Excommunicatus Mortis 934.M41."

"I need no machine to tell me that," hissed Shaan. "I would know that traitor anywhere."

Learchus leaned forward as the afterimages of the muzzle flare faded. "If that is Honsou, then who is that with him?" he asked.

Uriel peered at the fuzzy image and the breath caught in his throat as he found himself looking at a dead-featured reflection of himself. Locard froze the image and the Imperial commanders stared in open-mouthed horror at the dead skin mask looking back at them.

Its face was unmistakably that of Uriel Ventris.

Hard-edged moonlight sheened the jagged granite mountains of Talassar, imparting a shimmering, blushed texture to the bands of azurite that flecked every rock. On any normal night, Varro Tigurius would have found the view quite beautiful, worthy of rendering in a wild and tempestuous painting, where the cold blues and vivid purples of the sky would contrast starkly with the paleness of the mountain stone.

But on this night, there was no beauty: there was only blood and death.

The ocean planet's only continent was named Glaudor, and the survivors of the *Caesar's* destruction climbed through the foothills of the Lirian Mountains, close to where Roboute Guilliman had broken the greenskin horde in the years following the Great Betrayal.

Abandoning the *Caesar* had cut every warrior deeply, but grief would have to take second place to survival. The enemy would be upon them soon, and to remain in the open was to die. Just over two thousand of the *Caesar's* crew escaped the dying battle-barge, borne to the surface of Talassar in saviour pods or Thunderhawk gunships. There was no panic, for these were citizens of Ultramar. Though only a hundred were Ultramarines, the Chapter serfs, helots and Defence Auxilia were men and women who trained every day to be worthy of Roboute Guilliman's legacy.

Yet as stoic and controlled as every heart undoubtedly was, there was not one amongst the survivors who could fail to be moved by the *Caesar's* death.

The mighty battle-barge had streaked towards the ground like a glittering comet, its hull ablaze with the fire of atmospheric entry. Tigurius had forced himself to watch its final flight as it vanished over the horizon to plunge into the vast ocean that covered the bulk of the planet's surface.

"We will never see her like again," said Marneus Calgar, and First Captain Agemman had wept to see so mighty a vessel destroyed.

Moments later, the daemons attacked.

Unfolding from the air like bloodstains on a blank canvas, they fell upon the survivors in a fury of fang and claw. Scores had died before anyone realised what was happening, but the iron discipline of the 1st Company crushed any panic before it could take hold and slew the vanguard of M'kar's daemon host with disciplined volleys of gunfire.

The only hope of survival lay in the mountains, and so had begun this gruelling march into the high peaks, with packs of snapping daemon creatures harrying them at every turn. The column of survivors trudged into the high peaks on limbs weary beyond imagining, but each man and woman was determined to survive and avenge the death of their beloved vessel.

This latest attack was the sixth they had endured since landing on Talassar, and as the mortals climbed higher, the Ultramarines veterans turned to fight.

Relentless volleys of storm bolter fire echoed from the sides of the canyon, hammering blasts that pulped scaled flesh and exploded within immaterial bodies with explosive fury. Arcing jets of promethium sprayed from heavy flamers and streams of missiles from cyclone missile pods hammered the narrowest point of the canyon, where a host of warp-spawned abominations surged in a tide of inhuman bloodlust.

Beasts conjured from the darkest nightmares of mankind shrieked and howled as they clawed their way over the rocks. Sinewy daemonic hunters with twisting horns and reptilian bodies scaled the rocks with hooked talons and whipping tails. Monstrous creatures with elongated skulls and grotesquely fanged jaws bounded over the rocks with surging leaps as powerfully muscled spawn creatures with grasping limbs of claw and sucker slithered towards the Ultramarines battle line.

None could survive the punishing barrages laid down by Captain Agemman's 1st Company veterans.

Marneus Calgar stood in the centre of the battle line, torrents of gunfire blasting from the bolters worked with great cunning into the underside of his famous gauntlets. The Chapter Master picked his targets with rapid precision, and such was his skill that not a single shell was wasted.

Tigurius felt the courage of the warriors around him as a physical force, a resolute strength that was stronger than adamantium and could never be broken. The warriors of the 1st Company stood shoulder to shoulder with their captain and the master of their Chapter. No force in the galaxy could break their resolve.

Tigurius hurled arcing bolts of coruscating fire into the daemons, his power inimical to the unclean existence of the horde. Warp flesh melted at its touch and Tigurius relished the screams of the damned creatures as they were hurled back to their infernal realm.

With every volley, the daemonic horde melted away until the sound of gunfire diminished and silence descended on Talassar.

Without any words needing to be spoken, the Ultramarines turned and plunged deeper into the mountains, climbing through winding canyons and over great chasms. Agemman led the way at the head of the column.

Tigurius matched step with Marneus Calgar, who favoured him with a nod of acknowledgement. "Once again your prescience has saved lives," he said.

Tigurius accepted the compliment gracefully and said, "Are we headed where I think we're headed?"

Calgar nodded. "It is our only hope of life, Varro. It galls me that I must lead our enemies there too, but where else is there?"

"It is a good choice," said Tigurius. "It is a place of Ultramarines legend, a grand tale of impossible victory told to the Chapter's neophytes to instil the proper appreciation for our primarch's glory."

"It's a risk, and you know it."

"True, but it is our best chance of survival. And if I may be blunt, my lord, you must survive. If you fall, Ultramar will fall."

"Then do your best to keep me alive," said Calgar. "It's still a hard climb away."

"Count on it, my lord."

Calgar looked up into the starlit peaks and said, "First we have to reach it, and that in itself will be no small achievement."

"We will reach it," said Tigurius. "I have seen you at its walls, fighting with courage and honour. You will face the daemons and you must hold them here long enough for the Sentinel of the Tower to fulfil his destiny."

"How long will that be?"

"I do not know, but if Uriel Ventris has proven anything since he took command of the 4th, it is that he is resourceful in the face of adversity."

"Then there is hope yet, my friend," said Calgar with a wan smile.

Tigurius grimaced and felt a familiar sickness in his gut that could mean only one thing.

"Daemons!" he yelled.

The flickering image of the warrior with Uriel's face danced and jerked on the frozen holo-globe. Magos Locard had zoomed in as much as the captured image allowed, and the interpolation matrices within *Lex Tredecim's* cogitators sharpened the image as best they were able. There was no mistaking the aquiline cast of these lean, patrician features or the grey stormcloud eyes.

But for the armour and corpse pallor of the face, they could be looking at Uriel.

"I don't understand," said Suzaku, looking at Uriel and the image within the globe. "You have a twin?"

"No," said Uriel, horrified at this violation of his identity. "Absolutely not. I do not know what that is."

Yet even as he said the words, he suddenly knew what this abomination was, how it bore his face and how it had come to be here. Once again he pictured the vision he'd had while immersed in the vile fluids and fleshy embrace of the daemonic womb-creature of Medrengard. Sinking fast within its amniotic suspension, his mind had fled to the idyll of his youth. He'd walked the caves of Calth, relived old glories



and conversed with the image of his former captain.

Even then, he'd known it could not have been Idaeus, but now he was not so sure.

"The Dark Son..." Uriel whispered. "Idaeus tried to warn me."

"Idaeus," asked Suzaku, the merest flicker of light behind her iris telling Uriel she was accessing implanted memory coils. "The previous captain of the 4th?"

"Aye," said Pasanius with a nod. "What are you talking about, Uriel? Idaeus is long dead."

"I know that, but I saw him," said Uriel. "On Medrengard, when the monsters put me in the daemonic incubator creatures. I don't know; it was like a vision or a fever dream. I think he was trying to warn me of this, but I did not understand what he meant. I clawed my way free of the monster I was trapped within, but while I was in there, it felt like..."

"Like what?" asked Locard, always eager to hear tales of such aberrant xenobiology.

"Like there was something else in there with me," finished Uriel, horrified at the implication. "I felt it next to me and I felt it reaching into me. I did not understand what was happening, but Emperor save me, it must have been that... *thing*."

"Interesting," said Locard. "A warp-spawned gestation creature that bio-samples the superior specimen and implants the lesser with its enhanced genes. In all but the literal sense, this creature is your brother, Captain Ventris."

"Never say that," snapped Uriel. "These are my brothers, not that freakish monster."

"I apologise for my choice of words," said Locard. "But for all intents and purposes, this being is real and shares a rudimentary genetic link to Captain Ventris. I believe I now know how our enemies have managed to overcome the defences of Ultramar with such ease."

The magos extended a series of wand-like probes from his back and slotted them home into a console behind him with gem-like buttons and numerous binaric displays.

"What do you mean?" asked Suzaku.

"One moment, inquisitor," said Locard. "I am exloading the telemetry from the conflict in space, which I believe will confirm what I suspect to be the answer."

A binary string column scrolled across the surface of the holo-globe, unintelligible to Uriel, but which appeared to mean something to Locard.

"Ah, yes, it is as I feared," said the magos.

"What?" demanded Uriel.

"The orbital defences were infected by a scrapcode attack," explained Locard. "A corrupt and debased version of the blessed Lingua Technis, one of the *Mechanilingua* family of languages used in servitorware scripts. This is a nasty one, very advanced, but they could not have breached the aegis code without knowledge of Ultramar's defence protocols."

"And you think this clone creature knows those codes?" asked Suzaku.

"It knows them because Captain Ventris knows them."

"Are you saying that everything I know it now knows?"

"No, that seems unlikely," said Locard. "I imagine it would have absorbed random portions of your brain chemistry and memory. And by the principle of exchange, it is possible you would have absorbed some of *its* past existence. Is that the case?"

All eyes turned to him, and Uriel hesitated before answering. "Perhaps," he said. "I have been having strange dreams of late."

"What manner of dreams?"

Uriel shook his head. "Nothing I can truly remember, just flashes. More than a dream, it is like memories of events that happened to someone else. I suppose that is exactly what it is."

"What happens in these visions?" asked Locard. "It could hold the key to unlocking what this creature is and how it is able to function."

Uriel cast his mind back to the Temple of Correction, reliving the terror of the attack on the frozen castellum and the capture of the young cadets.

"I am a young boy," he began. "A cadet at a scholam, I don't know where. It is attacked by Iron Warriors, and they capture me... him. I do not see any more than that."

"Fascinating. You may have experienced the child's memory of its abduction prior to its implantation in the womb creature you were later sealed within."

“That makes a kind of sense,” said Shaan, his pale features tinged green with the light from the holo-globe. “A cadet of that age would be a suitable candidate for gene-seed implantation.”

“A crude method to be sure,” said Locard. “I would imagine a dreadful rate of mortality in such a procedure, but the Archenemy cares little for such things.”

“So why have I not experienced these visions before now?” asked Uriel.

Locard disconnected himself from the console and circled the info-globe on his clicking, calliper legs to stand before Uriel. “Your cognitive architecture was fully formed by the time you were imprisoned, so your dominance of your psyche was complete. This child’s was malleable and easily reshaped into something monstrous. Its own memories and personality will be fighting for dominance with everything it took from you, which I imagine would be enough to drive anyone to madness.”

“You call it a child,” said Shaan, jabbing a finger at the image. “But that is no child.”

“Once he was,” said Locard, his tone sympathetic. “Once he had a name and a life ahead of him, but now he is a monster, his mind filled with the indoctrinations of the Ruinous Powers. Who knows what he might have been with only Captain Ventris’ genetic influence?”

“A creature grown within such an abomination can only ever be a thing of darkness,” said Inquisitor Suzaku. “Chaos corrupts all it touches.”

“Be that as it may,” said Locard. “Clearly this requires further investigation.”

“Indeed it does,” agreed Suzaku, turning to Uriel. “Why did you not mention this before, Captain Ventris? This could very well have a bearing on the coming conflict. If this link can work both ways, then clearly it is something we must endeavour to exploit.”

“Now just wait a minute,” said Pasanus, stepping between Uriel and Suzaku.

“Captain Ventris was declared pure by the Grey Knights,” pointed out Learchus, also moving into a blocking position. “Our own Apothecaries and Chaplains confirmed that.”

Suzaku looked amused at their display of solidarity, but Uriel saw past her mask of acquiescence. The inquisitor saw potential in his connection to this monstrous clone, and, if he were honest, he knew she was right.

“Stand down, sergeants,” said Uriel. “If I can unlock more of this creature’s memories then perhaps there might be a something that will help us fight the Iron Warriors. Can you do that, Magos Locard? Can you get these memories out of me?”

Locard nodded, his expression alight with anticipation. “I have neuro-invasive equipment on board that should be able to pluck any residual traces of your clone from your mind,” he said with a gleeful smile. “Of course, that equipment was designed for xenos creatures, but it should still be reasonably safe.”

“Reasonably? That sounds somewhat imprecise for you, magos,” said Uriel, folding his arms across his plastron. “Define reasonably.”

“You will have a sixty-seven point six three four nine per cent chance of survival,” said Locard.

## TEN

Though the Newborn had told Honsou of Guilliman’s Gate, its mighty scale and incredible power, it was still a shock to see how massive a structure it was. Visible from fifty kilometres away as a bronze gleam in the face of indigo-sheened mountains, its size wasn’t apparent until the army of the Bloodborn climbed into the rugged slopes of the Mountains of Twilight.

An entire flank of the mountain had been sculpted into a mighty gateway, a vertical chasm crafted into the rock with the inner faces carved with tens of thousands of statues, reliquaries, shrines and decorative arches. Greatest of these was the golden statue of Captain Ventanus, the saviour of Calth, fully a hundred metres high. The gateway sat atop a wide causeway of polished granite that led up from the desolate wastelands of the surface. Built two thousand metres high and the equal of any of the great gates of Terra, it was a monumental piece of defensive architecture. Ultramarines heroes stood atop outsize plinths in heroic poses all along the length of the causeway with their shields and heads lifted towards the deadly sun.

Kroot warriors glistening with oily secretions that allowed them to breathe climbed the statues and smeared excrement over the pallid marble faces. The alien mercenaries squawked with raucous amusement at their vandalism, their alien skin darkened under the influence of Calth’s poisonous sun. Mortal soldiers took pot shots at the statues with primitive bolt-action lascarbines, while armoured vehicles sideswiped them and sent each one tumbling to the plains below.

The gate itself stood on the far side of a bottomless chasm, its twin leaves formed from a pair of towering slabs of bronze and adamantium locked together at their centre by a pair of intertwined Ultramarines symbols. Divided into coffers, each panel depicted some ludicrously

overblown image of Ultramarines heroes, slaying dragons, greenskins and horned daemons. Projecting bunkers and gun bastions studded the inner faces of the cave, creating a deadly killing ground from which little would emerge alive. To reach the gate would be no mean feat, but to breach it would require more than brute force.

Honsou rode in the open cupola of his Land Raider, the pistol grips of its heavy bolter grasped lightly in his gauntleted hands. He rolled with the motion of the tank, relishing the sense of power such a vehicle conferred. He had crushed Ultramarines beneath its tracks already and looked forward to hearing the death screams of many more before this conflict was done. Though it was unwise, his vehicle was part of the Bloodborn van, a chaotic mixture of powerful battle tanks, troop carriers and bizarre hybrid machines fabricated by Votheer Tark and his coterie of lunatic magos.

As powerful as Honsou's mighty tank was, it was like an ant before a grox compared to the vehicle crunching over Calth's quartz desert behind him, a vast, tracked leviathan of steel and dark iron. A hundred metres high, its core structure bore the design hallmarks of a race that once counted the Imperium as an ally until it was betrayed and allowed to fall into extinction. Once, this mobile fortress had fought for the Corpse-Emperor, but now it was a dark cathedral of destruction that served the warriors of the Dark Gods.

It was the Black Basilica, and those Bloodborn without rebreathers travelled within its armoured, oil-soaked hull. An enormous cannon projected from its steep-sided glacis, and its lower reaches were swathed with filth-encrusted barbs and looping coils of energised razorwire. This was a thunderous symbol of bloody destruction that had ended wars, as much a dark idol of adoration and a temple to the Ruinous Powers as it was a weapon.

Adept Cycerin travelled within the Black Basilica, his stinking vat of conductive fluids transported from *Warbreed's* strategium to its converted bridge, where his oozing mechadendrites meshed with its systems until there was little to separate magos and machine.

Tens of thousands of Bloodborn followed the Black Basilica, a host unlike any of Honsou's Legion had commanded since the defeat of Horus Lupercal. Thousands of mutants, xenos mercenaries, pirates, renegade Astartes, outcasts, monsters, degenerates and criminals stood ready to do his bidding and unleash hell upon the greatest symbol of the Imperium that had rejected them.

Even when Abaddon led his host from the Great Eye, the Iron Warriors had fought in isolated warbands, fearful of being drawn into another disastrous conflict that would see them broken on the wheel of Imperial retribution.

Now Honsou would see one of the pillars of that Imperium torn down.

Uriel lay on the silver gurney within the medicae bay of *Lex Tredecim*, staring at the stark lumen strips of the ceiling as Magos Locard busied himself with a host of open-sided metal frames that bristled with machine parts that looked as though they belonged to a dozen different branches of xenos technologies. A ribbed length of cable emerged from one box as Magos Locard's mechadendrites machined its connector plug to allow it to slot into the input socket at the back of Uriel's neck.

Normally, this socket allowed his armour's autosenses to mesh with his genhanced physique, providing Uriel with a more intuitive situational awareness and a faster reactive instinct for danger.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Pasanus, leaning over the table to look down at him.

"The enemy is at the gate," said Uriel emphatically. "Against any other foe, I would not fear for it, but the Iron Warriors are masters of siegecraft and Honsou is driven by hate and the lust for vengeance. So, yes, I am sure."

Pasanus glanced at Learchus, and Uriel was touched by their concern, but what he had said was true. If risking his life in this manner would help in the coming fight, then he was only too willing to allow Locard's attempt to reach any inherited memories buried within his brain.

"I don't like it," said Pasanus. "It's not natural."

Trying to sound at ease, Uriel said, "I will be fine."

"But what if you're not?" said Pasanus. "Who'll command the 4th?"

Uriel twisted his head to look at Learchus. "Learchus did it once before, and if need be, he will do it again."

Learchus shook his head. "I want my captaincy," he said. "But not like this."

"I said the same thing when Idaeus died," said Uriel, "but I have learned that life cares little for what we want or what we deserve."

Pasanus grunted and jerked a thumb towards the humming boxes of circuitry. "It doesn't look safe to me," he said. "It looks alien."

"It is," said Magos Locard without turning around. "Much of it employs technology recovered from the ruins of Golgotha in the wake of the routing of the greenskins."

"This is greenskin technology?" hissed Pasanus. "See, I told you it wasn't safe!"

"No, Sergeant Pasanus," said Locard. "It is older than that, remnants of the race the greenskins exterminated to claim Golgotha for themselves. Calm yourself, your captain is in safe hands."

Uriel hoped Locard was right, for the mechadendrites had finished their tooling of the connector socket and curled through the air towards him as the magos approached him.

“Are you ready, Captain Ventris?” asked Locard.

“I am,” said Uriel. “How long will this take?”

“Speculation: not long,” said Locard, as the connector slotted neatly into the socket in his neck. “The other subjects experienced memory recall in seconds. I suspect this will be little different.”

The plug in his neck felt cold and there was a moment of metallic taste in his mouth, like a low-level current of electricity running through him. He heard the *snick* of connection and the whirr of locking bolts screwing home in the threads cut in his skull. A numb sense of cold spread through him as invasive fibres meshed with his brain stem and infiltrated his skull.

Inquisitor Suzaku appeared in his peripheral vision. Uriel hadn’t heard her enter the medicae bay.

“I shall be observing,” she said. “In case anything should manifest other the creature’s memories.”

“I understand,” said Uriel, seeing the stark purpose in Namira Suzaku’s eyes.

Locard leaned over him, what was left of his organic features struggling to conceal the excitement at utilising his technology is such a unique way.

“Shall we begin?” he asked.

“Do it,” said Uriel.

He heard a faint click, and searing pain stabbed up into his skull as repressed horror rushed to fill the spaces of his mind.

*The pain is intense, a shooting spike of eye-watering agony. He closes his eyes and tries to remember something good, something pleasurable, but there is nothing left. All he remembers now is pain and degradation. He remembers cages, whips and casual brutality that cheapens life until those he shares his cage with sometimes turn on one another.*

*All he knows is pain, hunger and sickness.*

*The starship was a metal coffin, its translations unshielded, and the nightmares drove dozens to madness and suicide. Barely a handful remain, though he cannot now remember how many began this dreadful journey. They live in darkness, are fed scraps and subsist on condensate licked from the cold iron walls.*

*Yet for all its horror, the starship was paradise compared to the sweltering hell of the cavern. He toils day and night in this charnel house of corpses, feeding mangled limbs and bloated bodies to the grinding machines that howl for blood and sift the valuable morsels from the gruel of flesh. His masters whip him and chastise him with razors, flensing the skin from his back and licking the blood from their blades.*

*They tower over him: hideously warped creatures with skeletal bodies so mutilated with surgery that they are little more than patchwork creations of their own making. They stalk the cavern on blade-like limbs, their heads encased in brass armatures, rasping in their broken dialect of machine-hash and fragmented Gothic.*

*Their eyes are cold and to attract their notice is death.*

*They call themselves the Savage Morticians.*

*He knows they will kill him soon, just as he knows he will welcome that day.*

*He pushes a heavy gurney loaded with bodies towards the churning machines. Other boys have been dragged into the machines and killed, and he thinks that some jumped in deliberately. He thinks of doing the same. Anything would be better than this nightmare.*

*Another boy pushes the gurney beside him, but he doesn’t know his name. He thinks he might have known it once, but nothing now remains of his memory beyond this blood-soaked existence. They push the gurney towards the chute above the grinding pits and lift it until the body parts slide off and vanish into the pounding hammers of the machines. Flesh explodes and bone splinters and the manglers growl in pleasure at the feast.*

*The other boy turns to look at him and says something, but he’s too numb to hear it.*

*“Samuquan,” says the boy.*

*Samuquan? Is that his name?*

*Thinking it might be, he turns to the boy, seeing a mirror of his own numb desperation in his eyes.*

*“What?” he says.*

*“Come on,” says the boy, nodding to the chute. “I can’t take this no more.”*

*“What?” he says again, his brain too slow to process the words he’s hearing.*

*“Let’s do it together,” weeps the other boy, holding out his hand.*

*He looks at the hand dumbly, not really seeing it, and unable to grasp the other boy’s meaning. The boy looks at him pleadingly but he can’t move, he can’t do anything.*

*Then, over the grinding of meat hammers there comes the sound of stabbing steps, the clanking, metallic grinding of spidery legs. The boy looks up in terror and takes a step towards the chute.*

*“They gonna put you in this time,” says the boy and jumps into the grinding pit.*

*He watches the boy fall, feeling nothing as he hears the monstrous noises of a human body being ground up by daemonic machines. He knows this should horrify him, but he can feel nothing but irritation that he will have to push the gurney back without help.*

*A shadow envelops him, all angles and blades and hissing breath that reeks of rotting insides. He looks up, though he has been warned many times not to do so, and meets the gaze of a creature with a face swathed in blood-soaked bandages and bronze eyepieces. Robed in black, and with a misshapen skull icon sewn into its exposed flesh, its mantis-like limbs sway above him, a multitude of rusted blades scraping together like broken fingernails.*

*A vicious slash of a lipless mouth filled with needle-like teeth and exposed gums leers down at him. A black tongue emerges from behind the teeth and tastes his fear on the air.*

*“Flesh-thing make newbody,” it said, its words like chittering insect noise.*

*He doesn’t answer, hoping against hope that it means the other boy. Tears spill down his cheeks as he prays that they will take the other boy. Shame and fear burn in his heart. Please, he thinks, please take him and not me. Then he realises that the other boy is gone. He is alone, and there is no one else to take.*

*He drops to his knees, terror of this new fate overtaking the automatic reactions that have allowed him to keep putting one foot in front of the other all this time. Bladed pincers reach down and lift him from the ground, and he is carried, almost tenderly, through this vision of hell, all molten lakes, chained daemons and howling machines that feast on flesh.*

*He senses the presence of others nearby, but all he hears are his own strangled sobs.*

*The claws lower him to the ground, but he cannot move. He has no energy to run, to even pick himself up. Something huge and reeking of weeping, ulcerated sores looms over him, and he hears a sopping wetness spill onto the floor as blades slice flesh. He turns his head and sees a vast body, grossly swollen yet familiar in its original shape. It has a woman’s face, a bloated and hideously disfigured woman, but a woman nonetheless.*

*He thinks it is his mother and he cries for her as the claws reach for him and lift him towards her. Blood stink fills his nostrils, nothing new in this place, but this is warm, fresh, and wet. Hot, moist flesh enfolds him and he hears a contented sigh from the woman’s blubbery mouth, as though she welcomes this addition to her daemonic womb. She needs this child to nurture and develop, though he knows there will be no wondrous birth for him.*

*He has seen the wretched offspring of these womb creatures. He has flushed their mutant corpses from this hall many times, sweeping their mewling, twisted carcasses from the fortress like garbage. This will be his fate; he will become a monster, and everything he was will be perverted into something dreadful.*

*Heavy sheets of ruptured flesh are lifted over him, swaddling him in darkness, and he finally gives voice to the scream that has been building within him for the last six months. Stinking amniotic fluid fills his mouth, rank and frothed with corruption. His lungs fill with it and he struggles as he feels himself drowning.*

*But he does not drown, and he floats in the warmth of the daemon’s belly for what seems like an age. He is alone. With every passing moment, his body is changing and growing as his vile mother feeds him the hideous brew that will transform his body into a thing to be hated or a thing to be thrown away in disgust.*

*He is alone, his bones lengthening and his physique swelling, but there is something missing, some essential element yet to be added to his pupating form to make it complete.*

*Then, as the daemon mother’s body is opened once more, that element is added and he is no longer alone.*

*The new flesh fights as it is implanted, and he wants to tell it not to bother.*

*Death will be swifter that way.*

*But they do not die.*

**“So how are we supposed to get through that?” asked Cadaras Grendel as another barrage of shells impacted on the earthwork mantlets. Debris rained down upon Honsou’s makeshift command post, but this far back from the shelling it was simply dust and pebble-sized fragments of marble. “Even Perturabo would have his work cut out to break open that gate. And where does it even go? Through the**

mountains?”

“It leads below the surface,” said the Newborn, sweeping the dust from the highly detailed map it had drawn on a sheet of wax paper. “The population of Calth live in vast, underground caves. They are so enormous they have their own weather patterns, and some are so verdant that you could wander for days in their ecologies and forget you were underground.”

Honsou already knew that, but it was unnerving to hear the Newborn talk as though it had walked beneath their stone ceilings and lived a life within them. The map it had drawn them showed the layout of the cave systems beyond the gate, as thorough as any drawn by precise measurement. This was better than any such map, as this was drawn from personal experience, albeit experience inherited from another. Though the Newborn had perfect recall of the terrain, Honsou had made the creature draw it out, preferring the reassurance of a map he could hold in his hands.

The ground shook as another pounding barrage slammed down. The guns on Guilliman’s Gate hammered the end of the causeway, but the Iron Warriors were experts in withstanding such fire. Three shots from the Black Basilica’s great cannon had cratered the end of the causeway enough for the Iron Warriors to bulldoze the rubble into a series of earthworks behind which a heavily armoured pontoon roadway was extending over the chasm beneath the guns of the gateway’s angle of fire.

“Are there any other ways in?” asked Ardaric Vaanes, looking up from his careful study of the wax paper. “Something you missed off this map?”

“There are other ways in, yes,” nodded the Newborn.

“Then why can’t we use *them* to get below?” asked Grendel, ever the warrior of direct action. “Be a damn sight easier than trying to blow these bloody doors off.”

The Newborn sneered, and Honsou caught the flash of the pain and madness simmering behind its eyes. Magos Cycerin’s last round of tortuous mental interrogation had stripped away more of its control, and it was only a matter of time until the continual pain of its existence drove it utterly insane.

“You think the Ultramarines would make it that easy to bypass their greatest defence?”

“You tell me,” hissed Grendel, his hand reaching for the pistol at his hip.

“Can you two stop fighting for two seconds?” snapped Vaanes. “I can’t think with your incessant nonsense.”

The renegade Raven Guard was looking up at the immense gates as he spoke, and Honsou knew he was plotting angles of approach, dead zones and a hundred other stratagems other than going head on into the gateway.

Grendel glared at him, but the Newborn simply nodded. “There are other ways in, but none that would allow the Bloodborn army to pass,” it said, missing the threat in Grendel’s words and the exasperation in the Raven Guard’s.

“Don’t use that word,” snapped Honsou. “Bloodborn. Don’t use it.”

“Why not?” chuckled Grendel, his animosity towards the Newborn forgotten. “Don’t you like it? I think it sounds good.”

“That’s M’kar’s name, not mine,” said Honsou. “This war is ours and I won’t have it co-opted by some damn daemon just because it decides to give the warriors waging it a name.”

“To name something is to have power over it,” said the Newborn.

Honsou put his fist down on the map table and said, “Then that’s another good reason not to use it.”

“I have no name,” said the Newborn absently. “Though I think I did once.”

“You don’t remember it?” asked Vaanes.

“No,” it said, before slumping its shoulders. “I am not sure I want to. If I remember who I was, what will I make of who I am now?”

“Who cares?” said Grendel. “You don’t need one. You are what you are, and nothing will change that, name or no name. Now, like I said, how the hell do we get through that gate?”

“Don’t worry, Grendel,” said Honsou. “This gateway won’t be a problem.”

A cold wind funnelled down the length of the Valley of the Sun, sweeping over the flood plains and bending the newly-planted saplings on its sloping sides. A wide river flowed from the head of the valley where the seat of Imperial power rested on Espandor, the marble-spired city of Herapolis.

A curved wall of pale stone ran the width of the valley, its towering height rounded out by silver-capped towers, projecting ramparts and gun batteries. Yet for all its formidable appearance, it was a city of great beauty, like a vast glacier of silver, gold and marble set forever at the end of the valley. Enduring and immovable.

It had survived one invasion in recent times. Now it would have to survive a second.

Praxor Manorian and Scipio Vorolanus climbed the steps cut into the rear of the wall towards the ramparts, giants in brilliant blue armour edged with gold. Behind them came Iulius Fennion, and Scipio saw his gaze continually drawn to the soldiers drilling in the wide training grounds behind the city's defensive wall.

"Better than the ones at Ghospora," said Iulius, approvingly.

"This is Ultramar," said Scipio, which was explanation enough. "You'd be down there with the Chaplain breaking heads if it were not so."

"True," agreed Iulius. "Gallow has done his duty adequately."

"Steady, brother," said Scipio. "Be sure not to shower the man with too much praise."

Iulius Fennion grunted and shook his head. "Always room for improvement, especially with mortal forces. I'll fight alongside them, but don't leave them behind me."

"Then perhaps you should assign the Immortals to the defence of the city," said Praxor Manorian, trying and failing to keep the self-interest from his voice. Both Scipio and Iulius shared a look that took them back to Black Reach.

"That's not up to me, brother," said Iulius diplomatically, and Scipio was surprised, for the sergeant of the Immortals was not known for his sensitivity. Blunt and pugnacious, Iulius Fennion was a plain-speaking warrior whose devotion to duty and the Chapter were well known. "That's for the captain to decide."

Praxor nodded, but said nothing, knowing that to antagonise Fennion would only begin another argument. Scipio had seen the melancholy settle upon Praxor's shoulders like an ever-increasing weight since Black Reach. Never mind that nearly half a century had passed since that great victory, or that a score of campaigns had been fought since, always Praxor Manorian's mind was mired in his slighting during that brief war. Ordered to defend Ghospora instead of following Sicarius to glory, Praxor had never forgotten the moment he had been left behind, a garrison soldier instead of a crusader.

"As you say, Brother Fennion," said Praxor. "As the captain wills it."

A bellowing roar, like the drakes' said to inhabit the seas of Talassar, boomed overhead, and Scipio looked up to see one of the 2nd's Thunderhawks pass overhead, banking around the high towers of the Domus Invictus, the palace of the Imperial Governor, as it came in to land.

"The *Gladius*," said Iulius proudly, for this was the assault craft of Captain Sicarius.

"Look how the sun shines on the gold of her wings," said Scipio. "As though she is afire."

"Aye, like the Firebird of the Old Earth," agreed Iulius.

"Firebird?" said Praxor.

"Yes, a legendary bird that would be reborn from the ashes of its own death to rise again and be even more glorious than before. 'Tis a good omen, brother."

"If you say so," replied Praxor as the gunship vanished from sight.

The 2nd Company's Thunderhawks were berthed in hardened shelters within the Domus Invictus, but their battle tanks and transports sat in ordered ranks to either side of the wide gate that led within the killing ground of the inner courtyard.

Only eight Rhinos were present instead of ten, for two had been lost in the race to cross the Actium Gorge. Traitor forces had almost cut them off from the bridge and a short but brutal firefight had erupted as the Ultramarines fought their way across the gorge. Though the warriors within had escaped with their lives, two vehicles had been lost in the fighting, much to Techmarine Lascar's chagrin.

They climbed the rest of the way in silence, finally reaching the ramparts, where they found Captain Sicarius and the Lions of Macragge gathered on one of the out-thrust barbicans above the gateway. Sicarius' command squad was a gathering of heroes that had amassed a legacy of victories the envy of any such squad in the Chapter.

From this high vantage point, the Valley of the Sun was well named, for golden light streamed down its length as the sunset blazed on the far horizon. The valley sides were bare stone, the forests stripped by the invading greenskins to feed the furnaces of their ramshackle war machines. Careful cultivation was bringing the trees back, but the taint of the xenos was in the earth, and it would take time to restore the valley's former glory.

Sicarius turned as he heard them approach, and the three sergeants snapped to attention as they stood before him, hammering their fists against their chests.

"Greetings," said Sicarius, returning their salute. "There's not a moment to be lost."

Iulius spoke first. "Has something happened? Did the *Gladius* bring news of the Corsair Queen?"

“No,” said Sicarius with a smile. “Not as such, but if you and your warriors are up for some action, then I think we shall have her soon enough.”

“Always,” said Praxor Manorian, a little too swiftly.

“We stand ready to serve the Chapter,” said Iulius.

“And you, Scipio?” asked Sicarius. “Will you join your brothers on this mission?”

“It might help if I knew the nature of the mission, my lord.”

“Ah, Scipio, you always were the cautious one,” said Sicarius, making it sound like an insult. “But that’s why you are so good at what you do.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Scipio. “I live to serve the Chapter, and whatever the mission, I will join my brothers.”

“Good man,” said Sicarius, beckoning them to join his command squad. In the centre of the barbican was a wide table, upon which was a map of Espandor’s western continent, showing the main agri-settlements and centres of habitation. They were few and far between, for Espandor was not a populous world.

“Here we are,” said Sicarius, pointing towards the icon representing Herapolis. “The largest settlement on Espandor, and centre of Ultramarines rule. If this city falls, Espandor falls, so we are not going to let that happen. The city’s wall is high and strong. Even the portions knocked down by the gargant during the last war appear to be as strong as before.”

“With respect, my lord, a siege?” said Scipio. “We are all ready to serve, but skulking behind the walls is not the warfare we were built for.”

“Exactly!” said Sicarius, jabbing his finger down on the map. “We are the Adeptus Astartes. We do not wait for the enemy to come to us, we take the fight to him and rip out his throat before he even feels our hands at his neck. Look at this map, study the dispositions of the Bloodborn forces and tell me what you see.”

Scipio’s eyes ranged over the map, seeing a dashing flair for manoeuvre warfare that Sicarius so loved. He glanced up and saw an expression on his captain’s face that wasn’t exactly admiration, but wasn’t exactly loathing either. Could it be that he was actually glad to be facing a foe this cunning?

“We’ve slowed them, but we’ve not stopped them,” said Praxor.

“They are marching on Herapolis,” said Iulius. “That’s clear enough to see.”

“That much is obvious,” said Sicarius. “Look closer, look with the eyes of the enemy.”

As distasteful as that was, Scipio put the thought that this was a world of Ultramar from his mind and imagined that Espandor was a world to be conquered. As though the red arrows and timing markers were his own forces, he plotted what had been done and what he would do next. The shape of the invasion became fluid in his mind, his intuitive grasp of infiltration stratagems allowing him to look upon the map with eyes that saw beyond the most advantageous battlefields or ambush sites. He saw the mind behind the army, comparing the timing of each assault with plotted rates of movement of each division.

“She moves between her forces,” he said. “That’s why we’ve never found her. She issues her orders then moves to the army with the most difficult task. She’s a glory-seeker.”

“Scipio has the truth of it,” said Sicarius, clapping a hand on his gold-edged shoulder guard. “She’s a cunning one, this Kaarja Salombar. Oh yes, she’s a cunning one, but she’s used to dealing with plodding amateurs. Cato Sicarius has her measure, but I need to know where she is if I’m to put a blade to her neck.”

“And that’s where we come in,” said Praxor.

“Indeed, Sergeant Manorian,” said Sicarius. “I cannot kill what I cannot find, and as Gaius here is always teaching me, I should not launch a blow until I am sure it will land where I intend it to land.”

“What would you have us do, my lord?” asked Scipio.

“Take your squads out into the wilds and be my silent hunters in the darkness. Find me the Corsair Queen and send word of her whereabouts. I will bring the wrath of the 2nd down upon her and we will have her head on a spike before that day is out.”

Scipio hammered his fist against his breastplate, pleased to have a mission in which he knew his warriors would excel. “We will find her for you, my lord,” he promised, and his brother sergeants echoed his forceful declaration.

“Find her soon,” said Sicarius as the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness fell.



With one claw wedged in the rock, Ardaric Vaanes swung out from his perch, a corbel in the shape of an eagle's head nearly eighteen hundred metres above the ground. The blades of his right fist hammered into the rock and he released his other hand's grip, swinging around and latching onto the wall with his feet. He held himself rigid as he felt the augur sweep of the nearby gunport pass over him, moulding his body to the inner face of the gateway and cutting all but the most essential power emissions of his armour.

Around him, the loxatl of Xaneant's kinband went perfectly still, following his lead and altering their body chemistry to perfectly blend with the mountain stone and reduce their body heat to almost nothing. The reptilian aliens were lethal killers, and with their chameleonic hides, made superlative stealth operatives. The weakest link in this approach was the Newborn, but it had proved itself capable on the *Indomitable*, so he had allowed it to come on the mission.

Twenty metres above him and ten to the right, the Ultramarines gunport above the vast bronze gate thundered as it unleashed another salvo of shells on the Iron Warriors encampment below. The muzzle flash of the guns was blinding and the noise deafening. The recoil dissipated through the mountain and Vaanes clenched his fist and braced himself as the juddering vibrations tried to shuck him off. The sound of these guns from the camp below was incredible, but this close it was next to unbearable.

The shells hammered down on the elaborate earthwork built at the end of the shattered causeway, sending up plumes of fire and pulverised stone, but doing little damage to the edifice. It was wasted effort; once Honsou's men were dug in, it would take more than artillery to shift them. Vaanes was sure that Ultramarines doctrine allowed for sallies only under specific conditions, and this wouldn't match any such conditions.

Using the booming echoes of the guns to cover his movement, Vaanes fed power back into the fibre-bundle muscles of his armour and clawed his way over the gnarled cliffs. With fluid motion, he eased himself towards the battery's embrasure as the long barrels withdrew and its blast shield came down. His movements were sure and swift, an indistinct black shape moving over the rock face like a shadow at twilight.

It had taken his team of killers four hours to climb this far, but Vaanes would not be rushed. This was *his* area of expertise, and though he now questioned why he even fought with Honsou's army, the chance to put his lethal talents into action was too good an opportunity to pass up. Besides, it was the only way they were getting through this gate, and Honsou knew it.

He had chosen his approach with great care, climbing through the areas of the gateway where the sensor shadows of the giant statues provided the most cover from augurs and anti-personnel guns placed to stop an enemy from doing what he was attempting.

Vaanes smiled to himself. Against any opponent save one schooled at the Ravenspire, it might actually have provided security. As it was, this was little more than an exercise for one such as he. It had been many years since he had trained with his brethren, but he had lost none of his expertise. He hugged the rock face below the gunport as the loxatl spread out to encircle it. The Newborn clung to the rocks behind him, its body trembling with the effort of holding itself still.

He nodded to the Newborn and jerked his head towards the blast shield and held up three fingers. He counted down with his digits, and as the last one curled back into his fist, the blast shield began rising with a pneumatic whine of gears and pistons.

Vaanes waited until the blast shield had risen enough to allow entry and swung himself up and over the lower lip of the gunport. He rolled onto his side, skidding along and over the greased rails of the recoil compensators. Four gun barrels, each a metre and a half across, were sliding down the rails into the firing position. He had to move fast. If the guns fired before he was fully inside, the pressure wave would rupture every organ in his body and shatter his bones to powder.

The Newborn crawled alongside him, and he heard the chittering motion of the loxatl as they followed them in. The rumble of heavy motors and chains grew louder as Vaanes reached the exhaust ports that would vent the enormous amount of propellant gasses. The bulky form of the breech was just ahead, a flickering series of warning lights winking through the clouds of hissing steam.

Vaanes rose to his knees and vaulted straight up, hauling himself onto the top of the nearest gun barrel and scooting forward until he reached the louvered shutters that separated the guns' fire control from the weapon itself and prevented the vast amounts of vented propellant fumes from blowing back onto the gunners.

"Follow my lead," he said. "Kill anyone you see, and do it fast. No survivors and no alarms. Understood?"

The Newborn nodded and the loxatl sent a rippling pattern of violet and gold through their scaled bodies. Vaanes had come to recognise that as assent, and extended the claws of his gauntlet. The sound of a muted siren came from beyond the louvers, and the guns reached their firing position with a heavy boom of locking clamps.

Two rapid slashes of his claws and the louvers were reduced to torn strips of metal. Vaanes launched himself through the hole and dropped into the fire control of the mighty guns. The loxatl swarmed after him, spreading over the walls and ceiling like insects from a kicked burrow.

Two dozen or so operatives filled the fire control centre, servitors and Defence Auxilia mainly, but a single Ultramarines warrior with a partially augmented torso was plugged into the command console to authorise each firing. Surprised faces turned towards him, and Vaanes relished the moment those mortals realised their terrible danger.

He launched himself towards the Ultramarine, his claws extended before him. The warrior swung his bolter up, but Vaanes slashed it in two with a casual flick of his left wrist. His right claw punched through the warrior's neck. Blood squirted around the blades of his gauntlet and he twisted his arm to tear the wound open wider. Gunshots burst around him, and Vaanes kicked himself free of the corpse and spun away from the las-fire.

Streams of flechettes shredded the enemy soldiers before they could fire again, and yet more whickering darts ricocheted around the control room as the alien killers rooted out those enemies who had gone to ground. The Newborn smashed a soldier from his feet with a thunderous kick and backhanded another with its fist. A volley of solid rounds hammered its armour, but it seemed oblivious.

Vaanes ran towards the source of the shots, diving forward as a spray of bullets raked overhead. He rolled to his knees, punching out to either side and skewering the shooters on his claws. The bodies slumped to the ground and it was over, the gun battery was theirs.

Vaanes stood and turned to the Newborn.

“You can do what you need to from here?”

“I can,” it said, pushing the dead Ultramarine from the console. “Send the signal.”

From the soaring height of the upper observation deck, Uriel watched the damnable progress of the Iron Warriors with a mixture of dread and anticipation. As horrific as it was to have the servants of the Ruinous Powers treading the soil of Calth, he longed for the confrontation that would end this war.

The images he'd seen while hooked up to Locard's machines haunted him with their potency. As much as he wanted to hate the creature that bore his face, he found he could not, having lived through agonised moments of its life. Locard's words had resonance, and Uriel wondered what the boy might have grown into had he been given the chance of a normal life.

A commissar? A general? Or perhaps he was destined for a life of soldiering in the ranks? It was impossible to tell, but the Iron Warriors had taken away all the boy had ever had and all he was ever going to have. It would have been better to have killed him.

“Has anything else returned to you?” asked Inquisitor Suzaku, approaching from the rear of the observation deck. Her acolyte followed her. Uriel remembered his name was Soburo, and he sensed the man was some way from becoming a full member of the ordos. Suzaku had spoken to Uriel at length following Locard's procedure, and he had elaborated parts of the memory with his own recollections of the halls of the Savage Morticians. “No,” said Uriel without turning. “I have told you all that I know.” Suzaku joined him at the polarised glass wall, staring down at the siege-works below. From the outside, the observation deck would be invisible, and they stood in silence for a moment as they studied the enemy. Clouds of dust obscured the siegeworks as Honsou's artillery began a fresh barrage, but the hateful form of the corrupt battle fortress behind it could clearly be seen. To look upon it for too long gave Uriel a sense of cold dread, and he averted his eyes from its unnatural shape.

Beyond the dread leviathan, the wilds of Calth spread out in undulant dunes and petrified forests of sheared rock. An army of conquest traversed that bleak landscape, travelling from the captured landing fields and assembly yards of Highside City to Guilliman's Gate in their thousands. Somewhere out there, Learchus led an armoured spearhead of tanks and Defence Auxilia. Codex protocol was to detach a number of units to harry the enemy line of advance, to work in the shadows destroying supply convoys, ambushing reinforcements and disrupting communication. Such a task would normally have fallen to Issam and his Scouts, but the deadly light of Calth's sun made it impossible for anyone not clad in Astartes battle plate or sealed within an armoured vehicle to survive.

Fresh from his disruptive activities behind the tau lines on Pavonis, Learchus had immediately requested to lead the many volunteers ready to embark upon this dangerous mission. As Learchus' tank force peeled away from the main column en route to the gate, Uriel had impressed upon him the critical nature of the mission, knowing he might never see his comrade again.

Learchus' voice had been proud as he said, “I will not fail you.”

“I know you will not,” said Uriel, before adding. “Come back safe. The 4th needs you.”

“Count on it,” said Learchus, and the vox-link shut off.

“Will the gate hold?” asked Suzaku, startling Uriel from his reverie. He was surprised to hear a note of unease in her voice. He studied the workings of the Iron Warriors and folded his arms across his chest.

“Yes. Even the Iron Warriors cannot breach this gate with a direct assault.”

“I am sure Rogal Dorn said the same thing at the walls of Terra,” said Suzaku. “Did you know his Legion were tasked with the fortification of the Emperor's palace? As it exists today, the palace bears little resemblance to its former glory. It was a wonder, you know, a landmass of architecture and an object of awe from one side of the galaxy to the other.”

“It still is,” said Uriel.

“Have you seen it?” she asked, before adding, “No, of course you haven't. I have. The orbis and lazulite carvings on Dhawalagiri elevation took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete, and now they gather dust in the vaults. I saw two golden beasts, each a hundred metres tall, locked together in frozen dispute. I believe they once formed part of the Lion's Gate, but it's hard to be certain.”

“You are a student of history?”

“Of sorts,” said Suzaku. “I study the ancient times to learn how to avoid the mistakes of the past.” She smiled wanly and raised a hand to her face. “It has had mixed results.”

Uriel studied Suzaku’s profile, taking in the elegant sweep of her jaw line and the sculpted cheekbones that spoke of augmetic surgery. A faint glimmer of metal at the corner of her eye was all that could be seen of the mechanisms behind her retina.

“I lost the eye on Medinaq,” she said. “Along with most of my face.”

“The reconstruction work is exceptional.”

“I am worth it,” she said without trace of arrogance.

“Are you that good at what you do?”

“Since Medinaq I am,” said Suzaku. “I was trained by Mazeon, and his death taught me a valuable lesson in the price of hesitation.”

As Suzaku spoke, she absently stroked her cheek, as though reliving the injuries that took her eye. Uriel didn’t think she was even aware of the gesture. He returned his gaze to the attacking army and the vast black temple that held court over the host of the damned.

“All this for me,” said Uriel softly. “It beggars belief that anyone could hate so deeply.”

“You think this is all about you?”

“Everything Honsou has done has been in service of his vengeance,” said Uriel. “The destruction of Tarsis Ultra was all about letting me know that he was coming. And that he is here on Calth, the world of my birth, speaks volumes. Why? What do you think he is here for?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Suzaku, turning to face him at last. “I have found that the Ruinous Powers rarely confine their designs to the fate of one mortal. There is always a darker purpose behind their actions.”

“With Honsou behind this army, I am not sure you are correct. He has followed me all the way from the Eye of Terror for the sake of vengeance.”

“In a galaxy where the fate of a single life is irrelevant, do you really think a warlord in command of such a host would care about one death?”

Uriel nodded, picturing the last time he had seen Honsou in the caverns beneath the blasted fortress of Khalan-Ghol. Such hatred would cross a dozen galaxies to be sated.

“I do. I brought down his fortress and walked away from his offer to join him. He hates me like no other. And you are wrong.”

“About what?”

“That the fate of a single life is irrelevant. Every life is vital, no matter how seemingly insignificant. If we forget that then we are no better than the scum out there.”

Suzaku smiled. “Spoken like a true hero,” she said.

Uriel tuned out the rest of her words as a sudden, lurching sense of vertigo seized him. His vision blurred, and for a moment it seemed as though he were on the other side of the armoured glazing. He reached out to steady himself, seeing through another’s eyes as he stared at the ground, thousands of metres below.

As though he clung to a precarious perch on the inner face of the gateway.

“Something’s wrong,” he said as another thudding barrage fired upon the Iron Warriors encampment. From within the observation deck, the noise was muted, but Uriel’s enhanced hearing picked out a subtle difference in the sound.

“What?” said Suzaku, instantly alert.

“One of the gun batteries is not firing,” he said, understanding what his strange sensation of vertigo implied. “The enemy is within!”

The Newborn’s hands danced over the command console, its fingers moving by rote rather than knowledge. With every passing second, Ardaric Vaanes grew more and more uneasy. He had enjoyed the killings, feeling the anticipation of the lingering presence that had been his constant companion since joining Honsou’s army. It revelled in his joy, but Vaanes forced its insidious whisperings down.

The killings were a measure of his skill. He had taken no pleasure in the deaths.

*Keep telling yourself that the whispers seemed to say.*

“How much longer is this going to take?” he demanded. “It won’t take the Ultramarines long to realise one of their guns has stopped firing.

”  
The Newborn shrugged, its face a mask of incomprehension. Its eyes were shut and a green glow seeped from beneath the lids, as though lambent emerald light shone from within. Vaanes had seen light that colour before, and he shuddered at the thought of the bloated monster Adept Cycerin had become.

“Genetic markers confirmed,” said a toneless voice from the command console.

“You’re in,” said Vaanes, coming around the console to see the slates come alive with targeting information and data on the gun they had captured. The scrolling numbers flickered and distorted as the Newborn’s fingers flashed over the input slate.

And the gate’s systems opened up to it.

From the bridge of *Lex Tredecim*, Magos Locard’s eyes flickered and danced behind the synthskin lids. The mechanical torso with which he achieved locomotion sat at rest behind him, his body held suspended on a host of copper wires. A thick trunking cable rose from the floor and plugged into his spinal network through his artificial pelvis.

His body twitched, as though in the grip of a nightmare and his mouth opened in a silent gasp. Spreading his noospheric consciousness throughout the Imperial network was draining work, and tested even his formidable resources. There were other magos based on Calth, of course, and he piggybacked on their reach into the network, travelling the golden highways of data and information as easily as a transit train might cross the surface of Blessed Mars.

It began as a tiny blip in one of the logic engines controlling the guns of Guilliman’s Gate, an erratic systemic fault that almost escaped his notice until he recognised a distorted frequency in the *Mechanilingua* bandwidth. He had seen such aberrant code before, in the scrapcode attack on Calth’s orbital defences. Adrenal shunts deployed in his spine and cognitive enhancers pumped into his floodstream, heightening his awareness and honing his already fearsome analytical powers.

He inloaded the recordings of this data into a secured memory coil, a data prison to store dangerously unstable code, and began running every purgative in his arsenal. At the same time, he erected aegis Mockers in an attempt to prevent the infection from spreading.

“Gate command,” he said, opening a channel to the buried command centre that oversaw every operation within Guilliman’s Gate. “This is Magos Locard aboard *Lex Tredecim*. Advisement: isolate all linked fire control cogitators from battery three-ultra-nine. Its codeware has been infected.”

“Infected?” said a voice his pattern recognition buffers identified as Magos Ultis.

“Indeed,” said Locard as he watched one aegis blocker fall after another, overwhelmed in moments by the rapidly replicating and mutating code. “Repetition/Clarification/Emphasis: shut down and isolate *all* linked fire control cogitators.”

“Understood,” said Ultis. “Shutting down now.”

Locard immediately saw it wouldn’t be enough. The aggressiveness of the scrapcode was unbelievable, like the most virulent plague imaginable. He linked directly to the infected systems, copying and buffering his active systems into a disposable data intercept before immersing himself in the stream of corruption.

The code swirled and howled around him, its chaotic randomness offensive in its assault on the Euclidian laws of mathematics. It bore all the hallmarks of the Dark Mechanicus, the random destructiveness of the code in violation of every one of the sixteen laws of the Mechanicus. It seethed like a living thing, but it was not living; it was artificial, and nothing artificial was ever truly random.

He blocked it, shunted it to redundant systems and directed it into self-destructive cycles, but for every strand he destroyed, another rose up from the numerical debris. Like the hydra of old, it renewed itself with viral rapidity, and no sooner had he purged one system than another infection would arise.

It infected the gateway’s systems at a geometric rate, spreading to the life support mechanisms, the power relays, the ventilation and every other linked system. With mounting horror, he saw its ultimate goal—the systems that controlled the gate itself. So massive was Guilliman’s Gate that no mere manual means of opening it existed. Machine-driven pistons and engines drove the mechanisms that opened the gate, and even now those systems were falling under the control of the code’s originator.

Locard knew he could not defeat this attack, but with every thrust, parry and riposte of data, his understanding of the code’s methodology grew, stored away in the isolated and warded memory coils for future study.

“Magos Ultis,” he said, reading the confusion and panic within gate command. “The operating systems controlling the gate’s opening mechanism are compromised. Alert all stations to fall back immediately.”

“Magos Locard,” replied Ultis, his augmented voice unable to conceal his fear. “I cannot issue such a command. I do not have the authority.”

Locard shut down his link with gate command, already hearing the burbling corruption in Ultis’ voice. The gate was lost, and he broadcast a vox-wide evacuation signal. Every Imperial vox-unit in the vicinity of Guilliman’s Gate would receive the order to fall back, and he only hoped he was in time.

There had been a malign consciousness behind this attack, an augmented mind swollen with forbidden knowledge and tainted with the deceits of Chaos. It had once been a mind much like his own, shaped by the greatest cognitive architects of Mars, but unlike other tainted minds Locard had encountered, this one was not nearly as experienced. There was newness to this mind that spoke of an originating source far younger than any of the fallen tech-priests who had sided with the Arch-Traitor Horus.

“You are skilful,” he said, utilising his fleshvoice for fear he might repeat elements of the corrupt code. “But you are impetuous, and I am a quick study. I know you now, and knowledge is power.”

He shut off his link with the gate, breaking off all connections with the corrupt data he had recorded and stored in his secure memory prisons. He would study it later, but for now, his contribution to the defence of Calth would need to take on a more martial nature.

With a hissed cant of binary, Magos Locard powered up *Lex Tredecim's* weapon systems.

Honsou watched as the green light spread from Cycerin’s pool to the organic-looking orifices in the wall of the Black Basilica. This chamber had once been its command deck, but was now a temple of dark stone and iron. Cowled acolytes of the Dark Machine-God tended to its workings, each without a face, simply a black void beneath their hoods. A vast altar of red-veined bloodstone pulsed like a slow heartbeat, and its surface ran with emerald lightning.

“I don’t believe it,” said Grendel. “They did it.”

Honsou smiled and opened a channel to his army, but he saw no order would be necessary, for every warrior had seen what Grendel had seen.

Guilliman’s Gate was opening.

Uriel pounded along the wide passageways within the gate, desperation lending his limbs extra strength and speed. The gate was opening, and its guns had fallen silent. Of all the stratagems he had thought the Iron Warriors might use, subtlety had not been one of them, and he cursed himself for not anticipating that Honsou would surprise him.

The evacuation of Guilliman’s Gate was already underway, a thousand vehicles of all descriptions falling back in good order along the Underway towards the first of the great caves. *Lex Tredecim's* frontal section blazed with light as its multitude of weapon systems engaged the enemy warriors spilling through the opening gate. Nothing could survive such a blitzing hurricane of las-fire and hard rounds, but as the gate opened ever wider the enemy storm would soon become an unstoppable tide.

The Swords of Calth ran with Uriel, and soldiers of the Calth Defence Auxilia had been despatched to the location Magos Locard had identified as the source of the infiltration. Petronius Nero had his sabre drawn and a haze of nascent heat built around the barrel of Hadrianus’ melta gun. More useful for killing armoured vehicles, the melta was nevertheless a fearsome weapon for building clearances. Fired in a confined space, a blast would burn away the oxygen and suck and the air from the lungs of anyone within it.

The curved passageway was formed from prestressed permacrete, its walls machined smooth and stamped with bas-relief Ultramarines symbols and devotional frescoes. Armoured doors led off its length into armouries, shrines, firing ports and defence galleries.

An overlaid schemata described the route to the enemy’s point of entry, but Uriel needed no such guide, for he was following an altogether more primal instinct. Though he couldn’t explain it, he knew exactly where the enemy had breached the gate, just as he knew who was within; the bastard offspring of the Daemonculaba.

It had been its eyes he had seen through, and he could feel its presence as surely as he could feel the thunder of his own heartbeat. Gunshots sounded from ahead, the actinic crack of las-rounds smacking permacrete and the deafening bangs of bolter fire. Uriel’s squad rounded a bend in the passageway to see a furious exchange of weapons fire and smoke.

Troopers in the blue and silver of the Defence Auxilia fired at a partially opened blast door that gave entry to one of the gate’s many defence batteries. Under the cover of his fellows, a brave trooper surged forward with a satchel charge to blow the door all the way open. A withering salvo of flechettes flashed towards him from within the gun battery. The instant before they struck, the darts exploded into a blizzard of razor fragments and the trooper was shredded into a confetti of blood and flesh.

A controlled burst of bolter fire felled three more troopers and the rest dived for cover.

“Get me close to that door and I’ll kill everything in that room,” said Hadrianus.

Uriel nodded, but before Hadrianus moved, he said. “Just get the door off. I want whoever is in that room alive.”

Hadrianus nodded and spun around the bend in the passage, running bent over towards the door. Uriel and the rest of the Swords of Calth followed, spaced to avoid attracting a concentrated burst of fire with their bolters wedged in tight to their shoulders. Uriel drew his pistol and sword as a storm of flechettes spun out to meet his squad, but the splintering fragments were no match for power armour. Brutus Cyprian and Peleus fired towards the gap in the door, both warriors’ shots drawing screeching cries of alien pain.

Uriel saw a grey fleshed creature fall back, and slapped a palm down on Hadrianus’ shoulder guard.

“Now. Livius, Brutus!” he ordered. “Take that door down.” Hadrianus fired two quick bursts from his melta and the hinges of the door vanished in a flash of instantaneously molten steel. Gobbets of orange metal streamed down the edges of the blast door and Brutus Cyprian ran at it with a roar of ursine power. He slammed his boot into the heavy door, and it bucked inwards with a boom of ruptured metal. It toppled inwards as Cyprian spun away. Uriel and Peleus stood to either side of the door, firing across each other into the room as the enemy soldiers scattered from the breach in their refuge. Uriel saw darting, reptilian creatures bounding towards the massive, boxy shape of the silent gun battery, each with long dewclaws and hissing, draconic faces. Their skin rippled in a rainbow of colours and fresh storms of their dart-like projectiles slashed towards them.

Uriel ducked back as the doorway filled with slashing shrapnel. Peleus swung low and snapped off three precisely aimed shots, felling an alien with each one. To the untrained eye, it appeared Peleus hadn’t even aimed, but Uriel had seen him on the firing ranges of Macragge and knew that his banner bearer was a superlative shot, perhaps the best in the Chapter.

“Go!” he shouted, surging through the door, his bolt pistol bucking in his hand as he shot down another of the alien creatures. Its flesh exploded into wet grey fragments and it died with a brittle screech of pain. Another leapt at him, but his sword swept through its thorax and tore off its limbs in a hissing shower of slithering organs.

Petronius Nero moved through the leaping, darting mass of aliens like a dancer, his blade a slashing blur of silver as he wove an intricate path through his foes. Xenos claws raked at him, but he swayed aside with apparent ease, lopping sinewy limbs with every graceful blow of his sabre.

Peleus and Hadrianus fought with disciplined bursts of fire, fighting in mutual support of one another as they methodically cleared sector after sector. Brutus Cyprian clubbed xenos killers to the ground with his fists as they leapt at him, their hind claws tearing at his armour and jaws snapping at his visor. Another warrior might have panicked, but Cyprian calmly tore each attacker from his body and crushed its neck, stamped on its chest or bludgeoned its skull to destruction on the walls.

More flechettes sparked and ricocheted around the battery as the last of the reptile creatures fought to the death. They weren’t even trying to escape, realised Uriel as he killed another with a brutal lunge: they’re a rearguard. With that thought, he sheathed his swords and leapt onto a projecting stub buttress on the wall. From there he leapt for the breach of the great guns and hauled himself onto its upper surfaces.

Two individuals scrambled over the huge gun battery towards the wedged open blast shield.

One wore the burnished plates of the Iron Warriors, the other the midnight black of what had once been Raven Guard. The figure in black looked over its shoulder and their eyes met through the lenses of their battle helmets.

“Vaanes,” hissed Uriel and swung his pistol to bear.

He slotted the renegade Raven Guard between the open sights of his gun, and Ardaric Vaanes paused in his escape.

The moment stretched, but Uriel did not fire. He couldn’t see Vaanes’ face, but felt his desire to remain behind and face him. No, not face him... face his own forsaken redemption. The sensation was like nothing Uriel had ever experienced. This was an enemy who had betrayed everything the Adeptus Astartes stood for, yet still he did not take the shot.

The claws slid from Vaanes’ gauntlets and he launched himself at Uriel with a shrieking howl. Uriel fired, and the shot shattered the claws of the Raven Guard’s right fist. He threw himself back as the warrior barrelled into him. One claw lanced for his side, and Uriel rolled to avoid it. Energised blades scraped his armour and he slammed the butt of his pistol into Vaanes’ head.

They rolled like common brawlers in the confined space, their fists, knees and elbows weapons as they battered each other with the fury of old comrades that now found themselves to be enemies. Uriel slammed his boot against Vaanes’ hip. The warrior flinched and slammed the flat of his hand into Uriel’s helmet, snapping his head back with a sharp crack. Once again the crackling blades slashed for Uriel, but he rolled aside and launched himself at Vaanes’ legs.

They crashed together and fell from the breach of the great guns, slamming to the floor of the battery chamber with a crack of ceramite. Uriel hammered his elbow down on Vaanes’ throat, but the Raven Guard squirmed free of his grip and the gauntlet blades snapped from his knuckles with a hiss of fizzing energy.

Uriel had kept a grip on his pistol and swung the weapon up, once again slotting Vaanes between his sights.

“Go ahead, Ventris,” said Vaanes with his fist poised to deliver the killing blow. “Get it over with.”

Brutus Cyprian slammed into Vaanes and bore him to the ground, pinning him with his incredible strength. Vaanes struggled in his grip, but against such power, his efforts were wasted. Uriel picked himself up as Livius Hadrianus stepped in with his melta gun raised. “No,” he said. “Shaan will want him alive.”

Hadrianus nodded and Petronius Nero helped Cyprian lift the struggling Raven Guard to his feet. As Uriel let out a pent-up sigh, he looked up towards the top of the gun as he remembered the second figure he’d seen.

The Iron Warrior was crouched on the edge of the gun, its head cocked to one side in rapt wonder. Uriel needed no vision of its disfigured face to know that this was the creature that bore his likeness and carried his genetic material within its abused body. It had its weapon raised, but it did not fire.

**“You are Ventris?” it said, with a voice that was at once grating and vile, yet had a horrid familiarity to its tones.**

**“I know you,” said Uriel. “I know what they did to you.”**

**“You know nothing,” hissed the Iron Warrior and shot Uriel in the head.**

**The cave mouth beyond the open gate was impassably blocked, a mass of collapsed boulders and fallen debris from the cavern roof. Millions of tonnes of rock had been blasted from the ceiling of the cave by the Imperial battle fortress, blocking the route down into Calth as surely as it had never existed. Wrecked tanks and bodies were mixed with the rubble, the ruin of those too eager in their pursuit of the Ultramarines as they fled deeper into their catacombs.**

**“How long will it take to get through that?” asked Grendel.**

**“Through it?” said Honsou as the ground rumbled with the approach of five mighty vehicles. “We’re not going through it, we’re going under it.”**

**Emerging from the oil-soaked holds of the Black Basilica like fat, cone-mouthed maggots, the five war machines were cylindrical and fully twenty metres in diameter with a multitude of conical drills, laser cutters, melta borers and conversion beam augers mounted on their frontal sections.**

**“Drilling rigs like these brought down the walls of Hydra Cordatus and a thousand fortresses before that,” said Honsou. “They’ll have little trouble in clearing a path through the rock of Calth. We’ll be on course inside of a few hours.”**

**Grendel nodded as the Iron Warriors directed the enormous, iron-sheened rigs towards the rubble-strewn ground before the avalanche. Hydraulic pumps lifted their rear sections into the air with grinding squeals of greased metal and the conical cutting sections spooled up in a blaze of noise and light.**

**As the first rig powered into the ground with a juddering roar, Honsou turned to the Newborn, seeing a faraway look in the eyes of his grotesque champion. It had returned from the mission to open the gateway with the loxatl, but Ardaric Vaanes had been taken prisoner by the Ultramarines. Honsou hadn’t yet decided whether that was a bad thing or not.**

**“You saw him?” asked Honsou. He didn’t need to qualify the question.**

**“I saw Ventris,” confirmed the Newborn, watching as hundreds of Bloodborn soldiers crawled away from the dust-filled cavern mouth the avalanche had blocked.**

**“And you didn’t kill him?” sneered Grendel. “You’re getting soft in your old age.”**

**“There wasn’t the chance,” said the Newborn. “Vaanes got in the way.”**

**“I never thought they’d capture a Raven Guard,” said Grendel, jerking a thumb at the Newborn and staring straight at Honsou. “I thought they’d get that thing first. Or is there something you’re not telling us?”**

**Honsou didn’t answer and the Newborn turned to Grendel. “You suspect Vaanes allowed himself to be captured?”**

**“Maybe,” agreed Grendel. “I’m just not sure whose idea it might have been.”**

**“What do you mean?”**

**“Maybe Vaanes allowed himself to get captured because he still thinks he can be saved,” said Grendel. A sly look spread across his scarred features. “Or maybe Honsou here had Vaanes get himself captured to have a man on the inside?”**

**Honsou ignored the insinuation and said, “Or perhaps Vaanes might be hoping for mercy. After all, if there’s one thing we know about Ventris, it’s that he always thinks the best of people. He thinks sinners might still be saved and that makes him weak.”**

**“If he’s even still alive,” pointed out Grendel. “The Newborn shot him at point-blank range with a bolt round.”**

**“He’s alive,” said the Newborn, crouching on the ground behind their group with its head cast down. “I can feel it. I want him to be alive.”**

**“So where did you take that shot?” asked Grendel. “It seems a strange thing to do for someone who says they want to meet their maker.”**

**“I want to meet him, but I want him to suffer first,” said the Newborn. “Without him I would not exist. Without his genetics, I would have been one of the Unfleshed, an aborted monstrosity left to die on Medrengard.”**

**“Sounds like you should be grateful to him,” sneered Grendel.**

**“Grateful?” roared the Newborn, surging to its feet. “My life is fragments. I am the broken shards of two people and I live in pain with every moment that passes. Grateful? No, Ventris cursed me to the agony of a life I didn’t ask for. He made me what I am and there is not enough pain in the world for what he will suffer in return.”**

**“That’s my boy,” said Honsou with a crooked smile.**

## TWELVE

The last rays of afternoon lit the distant fortress with a golden light, and though its walls were centuries old and all that remained of its gateway was a torn breach of collapsed stonework, Tigurius had never been happier to look upon the ancient shrine fortress of Castra Tanagra.

Raised when Roboute Guilliman was young, its walls had withstood the fury of a greenskin invasion in the aftermath of the Great Heresy, and the primarch himself had stood upon its walls in defiance of the savage invaders. Built in a circular fashion, with one of its four towers built into the cliff-face, Castra Tanagra was an elegant structure, its curving walls twenty metres high and built from blocks of black marble quarried from the canyons of Prandium.

Marneus Calgar led the survivors of the *Caesar* along the rocky valley towards the breach, the place where legend told that Roboute Guilliman had faced the brutish, ogre-chief of the greenskins and bested him with his bare hands.

“Castra Tanagra,” said Severus Agemman in wonder. “I haven’t been here since I was young.”

“You were never young, Severus,” replied Lord Calgar. “You were hewn from the rock of Macragge and given life in a thunderstorm.”

Agemman smiled, the fatigue of the climb into the mountains falling away from him at the sight of the ancient fortress. “Aye, that’s true enough, my lord,” he said. “Just as you were there to put the bolter and blade in my hands.”

Tigurius smiled to see the wonder on their faces, like children on the anniversary of their birth. Every neophyte of the Chapter was expected to make the pilgrimage to Castra Tanagra before his elevation to the fighting ranks, but the demands of war meant that few ever returned to study its majestic form.

Its walls were carved with images from the first days of the Imperium, glorious, heroic frescoes depicting Astartes in their thousands crusading across the heavens with the Emperor at their head. Whatever images had been carved at the feet of these Astartes had long since been hacked away, and none now lived who recalled what had been removed. Tigurius remembered touching the defaced marble, seeing a faint echo of row upon row of robed mortals. Each had borne an item of artistic endeavour—a quill, a paintbrush, a scroll, a sculptor’s chisel or a composer’s baton.

Why anyone would feel the need to remove such carvings was beyond Tigurius, but he remembered a potent sense of shame as he had visualised the now invisible rows of artists, writers and chroniclers.

The pace of the march increased at the sight of the fortress, and within thirty minutes its walls loomed above them, gleaming like oil-sheened marble. Weeds and mountain gorse grew thick around the base of the walls, but none grew within the shrine fortress, as though an invisible barrier traversed the threshold. Darkness was drawing in, and the mountains were biting cold at night. They had precious little in the way of blankets or shelter, and though the Space Marines would need no such protection, the crew of the *Caesar* required protection from the elements.

Though Castra Tanagra was a holy place to the Ultramarines, the damage done to it during its last battle had never been repaired, for Roboute Guilliman had decreed that it forever stand untouched as a memorial to those that had lost their lives here.

Agemman cast a critical eye over the breach in its walls.

“We’ll have a devil of a time defending this place,” he said. “That breach is too wide, and I’ll wager none of the tower guns function.”

“I think you might be right,” agreed Calgar. “Yet we have the veterans of the 1st to stand upon its walls. What force in all creation could storm such a fastness?”

“Spare me the flattery, my lord,” said Agemman. “We’ll hold the daemons at bay, but there is no way out of this valley if we should be overrun. We will either triumph here or we will all die. There is no middle ground.”

“Then we had best not falter,” said Marneus Calgar, stepping over the tumbled rocks of the breach. Agemman went after him, and Tigurius followed the First Captain into the fortress. He clambered over the cyclopean blocks, feeling the weight of ages and history woven within them, but no sooner had he set foot within its walls than he felt a powerful sense that they were not the first to reach Castra Tanagra. “Wait,” he said, holding up a raised palm. “We are not alone.”

Within the walls, Castra Tanagra was much as Tigurius imagined it had looked back in its heyday. The smooth marble walls of the inner keep were untouched by the passage of centuries, and the shimmering stained glass in its high towers shone vividly in the late sunlight. While the mortals gathered by the breach, 1st Company Terminators moved through the wide esplanade with their storm bolters at the ready, scanning for any threat and ready to eliminate it without mercy.



“What do you feel?” asked Calgar, the ammo feeds on the Gauntlets of Ultramar clattering in readiness. “Who else is here?”

Tigurius stretched out his consciousness, finding it difficult to gain a clear impression of anything within the walls. The gilded door to the main keep was shut fast; its brazen surfaces acid-etched with heraldic symbols of the ancient Legion’s many heroes.

“It’s hard to be sure, my lord, but I sense the pulse of many souls within the keep.”

“The enemy?”

“I do not know,” said Tigurius, “but I do not believe so.”

Calgar nodded to Agemman, who slammed a booted foot against the door. It slammed open, and a Terminator stomped through, a walking tank with his head lowered and his weapon raised. Another followed him, and another. Then Agemman went in, followed by Lord Calgar. Gunshots echoed within the keep, and Tigurius identified the weapons as Mark IV Konor-pattern lasrifles. A storm bolter fired, deafening compared to the lasrifle, and Tigurius heard screams. These were not battle shouts or the howls of daemons, but the terrified voices of mortals. Before any more shots could be fired, Tigurius pushed inside the keep, his enhanced vision easily piercing the darkness within.

“Hold!” he shouted, his staff flaring with a brilliant white light. “Ultramarines! Stand your weapons down.”

The first to reach the sanctuary of Castra Tanagra were not the enemy. They were citizens of Talassar.

They were citizens of Talassar.

The two Rhinos were halted in the shade of the trees at the edge of a deep gorge, their engines growling in protest. Clogged oil smoke jetted from their exhausts, a toxin-laden breath that reeked of impurities and particulates. Scipio Vorolanus caught the tang of burning fat and oil in the mix, and knew these engines wouldn’t last long suffering such abuse.

He could feel the prickling anger of Laenus beside him. The youngster had a gift for machines, and to see warriors who should have known better treating a precious Rhino with such disregard angered him greatly. Laenus was a fine warrior, but Scipio knew he was likely bound for the forge and a new career as a Techmarine.

“Can’t they see the engines will seize up like that?” demanded Laenus, shaking his head.

“We can only hope the rest of their discipline is as lax,” pointed out Scipio, watching as the crew doors in the side of the vehicles slid open and a squad of Space Marines emerged. Their armour was a vivid orange, slashed with tiger stripes and Scipio felt his lip curl in disgust at the sight of them.

“The Claws of Lorek,” he hissed to himself. “Renegades.”

He felt the same anger in the warriors of the Thunderbolts, their posture in the thick gorse surrounding the tumble of boulders becoming more taut and poised. Their hatred of these warriors was tangible, and Scipio saw more than one finger slide around a trigger.

Hate could be a useful emotion in battle, empowering a warrior with strength and determination, but it was a careless master.

“Hold,” he said, keeping his voice low and authoritative. “Wait until my signal. We do this as the Codex dictates.”

At the mention of their primarch’s holy tome, his squad members released their triggers, and Scipio relaxed a fraction. Since leaving Herapolis thirteen days ago, they had moved directly eastwards, following the course of the Konor River as it flowed from the mountains onto the verdant forest plains of Espandor.

Thin lines of smoke ran from one line of the horizon to the other. Iulius Fennion had led his men north-east, Praxor Manorian south-east, and Scipio had taken the direct route into the heart of enemy territory. The Bloodborn forces of the Corsair Queen were numerous and fierce, but they were incautious, and advanced as though they had already conquered the planet. Their armies were without vanguards, outriders or rearguards, simply a mass of soldiers, vehicles and nameless horrors moving toward Herapolis.

The Thunderbolts had avoided conflict until now, for Scipio could not afford to draw attention to their advance until the Corsair Queen’s location was positively identified.

His warriors were eager to be unleashed, and Scipio didn’t blame them; the behaviour of these fallen Adeptus Astartes spoke of colossal arrogance.

Scipio and the Thunderbolts would make them pay for that arrogance.

The Space Marines below had patrolled this way before, one of the few units based in the great river city of Corinth that behaved with a modicum of tactical sense. Yet they had allowed their routes to become predictable, for this route through the foothills around the city was the most obvious and least difficult to traverse. These warriors had made this circuit three times already in the past four days, always stopping here to indulge in some unclean ritual at a makeshift shrine they had set up inside the first Rhino’s hull.

Eight warriors gathered around the open ramp at the rear of the Rhino, and a dark light, blood-red and somehow unclean, spilled out, bathing their armour in a russet glow.

Scipio nodded towards Brother Helicas, who shouldered his missile launcher and eased himself around a boulder. The rest of Scipio’s

warriors pulled their bolters in tight and braced themselves, left foot forward and right foot back, turned ninety degrees to their bodies.

“Now!” cried Scipio, and Helicas stood to his full height to fire his missile launcher.

The warriors below turned at the sound of the weapon, but by then it was too late. The missile’s motor ignited with a dazzling flare as it slashed downwards and slammed into the plastron of a tiger-patterned warrior. The warhead detonated within his chest cavity with a thunderous crack, hurling him into the Rhino and smashing the shrine to shards. Another warrior was cut down by the shrapnel of the dead man, his throat opened by a lethal fragment of armour.

The other warriors scattered as the muffled echoes of the detonation faded.

A precisely delivered volley of bolter fire hammered the six surviving warriors, and another two fell, cut apart by the explosive shells. Scipio revved his chainsword and burst from cover as another missile streaked downhill, exploding in the midst of the enemy. None were killed, but three were hurled from their feet by the blast.

The warriors they had fought on the Anasta Road were corsairs, poorly armoured and badly led, but these warriors, for all their faults, were Space Marines. They began returning fire immediately, suppressive bursts on the timberline. One of Scipio’s warriors fell, his shoulder exploding in bloody shards as a round impacted beneath the protective pauldron.

A dart of blue-hot plasma seared out from Coltanis’ weapon and burned through another enemy warrior, his body flopping to the gorse in two barely connected halves. The others ran for the cover of the Rhinos, but Scipio had anticipated that and angled his course to take him around the back of the nearest vehicle. Its engine rumbled as though enraged, gouts of reeking chemical smoke spitting from its corroded exhaust vents.

Gunfire spat back and forth, and Scipio spun around the Rhino and all but collided with an enemy warrior. They stared at one another for a fraction of a second before Scipio brought up his pistol and put a round through the warrior’s eye lens. He fell back, but another was right behind him and swung a viciously toothed axe for Scipio’s neck. He ducked and the chainaxe bit into the iron hide of the Rhino.

Scipio shot the warrior in the kneecap. The bolt ricocheted clear, but it staggered the renegade. He drove his sword up into the traitor’s gut, the adamantine teeth screaming as they tore through armour and bit the soft meat beneath. Blood sprayed around the blade as Scipio drove it deeper into the renegade’s body, feeling the spine within split.

The warrior sagged against him, and Scipio hurled the body away. The last renegade threw himself at Scipio, but a withering storm of bolter fire blasted away his head and most of his torso as the Thunderbolts closed the noose on the Claws of Lorek.

Scipio turned and nodded his thanks to his squad, ripping up a clump of grass to wipe the renegade’s blood from his sword blade. When the blade was clean, he sheathed it and removed his helmet to take a deep breath. The sooty, chemical stench of the Rhinos tainted the air, but it felt good to taste Espandor’s atmosphere once again.

Swiftly, he set sentries around the engagement site and called Laenus over.

“Did they broadcast any form of signal?” he asked.

“No, my lord,” said Laenus. “None I could detect anyway.”

“Good enough,” said Scipio, turning towards the Rhinos. One was a wreck, black smoke belching from its opened hatch, the other seething and rumbling like a bull facing the slaughterman. He ordered the destroyed Rhino pushed into the gorge, and beckoned his warriors over to him.

The wounded warrior, Brother Nivian, had cut his mangled limb from his shoulder with a combat blade and carried it slung under his other arm.

“Are you combat fit?” asked Scipio.

“I can fight,” asserted Nivian. “Just give me a pistol or a sword.”

Scipio nodded and handed over his pistol, taking Nivian’s bolter in return.

“Laenus,” said Scipio, indicating the surviving Rhino. “Can you drive that thing?”

Laenus stared at the Rhino, loathing written all across his face, as though Scipio had asked him to deface a statue of the Emperor himself.

“It’s unclean,” he said. “But yes, I can drive it.”

“Good, because we’re going to need it if we’re to stand any chance of getting any closer to Corinth.”

He could see the distaste among the Thunderbolts at the thought of travelling within a vehicle of the enemy, but he cut off any objections by saying, “The Codex Astartes tells us that all warfare is based on deception, so we will make use of whatever opportunities the enemy provides us.”

He could tell they still didn’t like the idea, but their likes and dislikes were immaterial. They had a mission, and if finding the Corsair Queen quickly prevented any rash decisions on the part of Captain Sicarius, then this was a discomfort he and the Thunderbolts were going to

have to suffer.

He chided himself for the disloyalty of the thought, and hammered a fist on the Rhino's side.

"Mount up," he ordered. "We need to be in position by nightfall."

The leader of the civilians was a stocky man named Maskia Volliant, the praefectus of a small mining community named Tarentum. A gruff man wrapped in tough-wearing leather and furs, Tigurius thought he looked like a man used to hard work, his face deeply lined and his hands callused from years of manual labour.

He had led his people to Castra Tanagra after witnessing the destruction of the lowland cities at the claws and fangs of the daemonic hordes, nearly six hundred men, women and children. They huddled in the shrine temple's keep, hoping against hope that this nightmare would end.

"We thought you were the daemons," said Maskia. "We heard your approach and thought they'd come to finish us off."

"We are no daemons, fool," snapped Agemman, angry that one of his suits of Terminator armour had fresh las-burns from the first volley of fire. "We are the very salvation you sought by coming here."

"I apologise, my lord," said Volliant, cowed by the First Captain's anger.

"An understandable mistake," said Marneus Calgar, placing a hand on Agemman's shoulder guard. "And no harm has been done."

Agemman looked ready to dispute that, but a stern look from the Chapter Master stilled his tongue. The same Terminator whose armour bore a burn scar had been assigned penitential duties for lax targeting discipline. Fortunately his shot had been pulled wide at the last moment, and no one had been killed, but it was a shot that should never have been fired in the first place.

Calgar dropped to one knee before Maskia Volliant, bringing himself level with the man's face, and said, "Tell us how you came to be here, Master Volliant. When we reached Talassar we detected no life signs. How is it that all of Talassar has been devastated and yet you live?"

"I don't know what to tell you, my lord," said Maskia. "We're just a small settlement in the high plateau around the Capena Spire. About a thousand souls, all told. We saw the lights in the sky a few weeks back, and when we lost contact with Colonia Serdica—that's the refinery city we send all our ores to—we tried to contact Perusia."

"Perusia," said Agemman. "That's where Sicarius is from."

"I know," replied Calgar. "Go on, Maskia. What happened next?"

"We kept hearing things over the vox, dreadful things. We heard alerts had been called all over Talassar that we were under attack. We couldn't believe it at first. I mean, who in their right mind would attack a world of Ultramar? We'd heard the rumours about Tarentus, but nobody really believed them. There was all this talk of monsters and daemons, but we couldn't get a straight answer from anyone. No one seemed to know what was happening, and after a while all the relay stations went quiet and we couldn't raise nobody on the vox. Perusia was the last to go dark, and we figured that they was too busy fighting to answer our calls, but when day after day went by we knew they weren't busy, they were dead."

"That doesn't answer why you're here," said Agemman with a scowl. "This is a holy site of the Ultramarines. You shouldn't be here."

"Begging your pardon, my lord," said Maskia. "We didn't have nowhere else to go. About a week after Perusia went dark, we saw the same lights in the sky and our surveyors plotted out where they were. All the other settlements along the Capena gorge were going dark one by one, so we knew it was only a matter of time until we were next."

"So you came here," said Marneus Calgar.

"Yes, my lord," said Maskia. "Some folk didn't want to go, and there wasn't anything I could say to make them. Their families had claims there going back thousands of years and they weren't about to give them up, not for daemons or nothing."

"Then they will be dead by now," said Agemman.

Agemman's hostility towards the civilians irritated Tigurius, and he made his way outside. The night air was crisp and the wind blowing down from the south had a fearsome bite to it. Some of the *Caesar's* survivors had taken refuge within the keep, but many others had joined the warriors of the 1st Company on the walls of Castra Tanagra, armed only with lasrifles and courage.

He climbed the worn marble steps to the ramparts and made his way along the fighting men of the 1st Company. Looking out over the darkness of the mountains, he was reminded of the high peaks of Iax, the world he once called home. Known as the Garden of Ultramar, it was a bountiful world that was said to have been a favourite of Roboute Guilliman.

Tigurius nodded to a Terminator sergeant, but said nothing as the man turned back to watching the approaches to the fortress. Tigurius knew he was not well-liked, for his powers forever set him apart from his battle-brothers. He had long ago made peace with his isolation from the shared brotherhood of the Chapter, finding his own place within its ranks and allowing his duty to define him.

He paused beside a curved embrasure, resting his hands upon the cool marble of the merlon, feeling the ancient power within the stonework. Until now he had always attributed that to the craft of its builders and the legacy of the primarch, but now he wasn't so sure. He hadn't been able to tell that there were survivors within the keep until he had set foot within the fortress' walls. Even then his powers of discernment had been dulled, as though an enemy psyker was disrupting his abilities.

Tigurius placed his other hand on the stonework and let his consciousness flow out into the stones of the fortress, sinking down through the heavy weight of its body and into its ancient foundations.

He heard footsteps behind him, and returned to his mortal senses.

Marneus Calgar stood beside him, his iron gaze cast out over the magnificent vista of the high, snow-shawled mountains.

"I should come here more often," said Calgar.

"When we drive off the daemons I will come with you," said Tigurius.

"Tell me, Varro," said Calgar, suddenly serious. "What do you see?"

"I see that we are trapped in a valley with no way out, awaiting an army of daemons to descend upon us. And there is little hope of relief."

"I wish I hadn't asked," said Calgar.

"Yet as grim as things are, there is a remarkable lack of fear amongst the new garrison of the shrine fortress. These are the finest warriors of Ultramar, my lord, and there is power here, wrought into the very bones of the fortress. It is no accident that we have come to this place."

Calgar said nothing, his gaze drawn to a wavering tear of lightning that had appeared at the end of the valley. It drew wider with every passing second, and they smelled the rank stench of the daemoniac on the wind.

"I hope you are right," said Calgar.

When Uriel opened his eyes, he felt as though the world had lurched out of focus. His right eye burned with fire, a hazy rippling static filling his head with a noise like a thousand angry wasps. He sat up, suddenly aware he was lying on a metallic slab like a mortician's table. Bright light speared into his eyes and he swung his legs out.

"Easy there!" said a gruff, comradely voice.

Uriel shook his head, and immediately regretted it. Hammer blows of pain and bright lights exploded within his skull and he reached out to steady himself. A strong hand grabbed him, keeping him upright. He held on to it, feeling as though his balance were shifting in and out of kilter.

"Be still," advised another voice, one with a soft mechanised burr to its syllables. "It will take a moment for the ocular implant's nerve fibres to mesh with your own organic tissue. Be not afraid, the discomfort and nausea will pass."

"What is happening to me?" demanded Uriel, fighting down a wave of sickness. Shapes moved around him, but he couldn't make any of them out. They were familiar, but what they were took a moment to return to him, as though the vast amounts of information required to process his visual input were somehow blocked. He leaned against the slab, taking shallow breaths to calm himself.

"You took a bolt pistol round to the head," said the voice. "Fortunately the angle at which your helmet was positioned as the round struck deflected much of the kinetic energy."

Uriel reached up to his right temple, feeling cold metal where he expected flesh. He recoiled from the touch as his balance returned. He remembered fractured images of facing the creature that wore his face, its words of hate and the booming thunder of a gunshot.

After that, all was confusion. His vision flooded with red, then grey, then black. He remembered shouting voices, desperate cries and blaring warning bells. Selenus' voice cut through it all, the crisp declarative commands of the Apothecary bringing order to the chaos. Soothing warmth seeped into his limbs and he remembered the soporific effects of a strong pain balm spreading through his system.

Then this. Grainy static-laced vision and a numbing loss of awareness. He gasped as the floor suddenly snapped into focus and he saw the cracked tiling clearly, every split in the ceramic and every imperfection in the mortar bedding as clear as though he studied it through a microscope.

He reached up again, this time more carefully, and explored the side of his head with his fingertips. His close-cropped hair had been shaved on the right side and he could feel a number of raw scar sutures running from the edge of his eye socket to his ear.

Uriel looked up to see Pasanus, Magos Locard and Apothecary Selenus standing before him. He was in a long medicae bay of some kind, one dedicated to augmetics by the look of the patient stations, workbenches, tools and half-built limbs lying scattered around.

"How much do you remember?" asked Pasanus, his friend's face in sharp focus, as though he had been looking at him through misty glass until now.

"I remember the fight to retake the gun battery," said Uriel. Suddenly animated, he said, "Vaanes! I fought Ardaric Vaanes! Is he...?"

“In a holding cell that even a Callidus couldn’t escape,” Pasanus assured him. “Shaan and Suzaku are interrogating him now.”

“He will not talk to them,” said Uriel.

“He isn’t,” said Pasanus. “He says he’ll only talk to you.”

Uriel nodded. He should have expected no less from the renegade, yet he wasn’t sure how he felt about confronting a warrior he had once called a battle-brother and who had gone on to abandon him to his fate. Yet Vaanes was here, and his last words haunted Uriel.

“I will deal with him later,” he said, putting the matter aside for now. “We have more pressing concerns just now.”

Pasanus appeared to accept this, and Uriel shuddered as a snapshot of the battle in the gun battery flashed into his mind.

“I saw that thing, the warrior with my face,” he said. “It was him who shot me.”

“Just as well he’s as lousy a shot as you are,” said Pasanus, and Selenus grunted in displeasure at the easy familiarity.

“This doesn’t feel like he was a bad shot.”

“You’re alive aren’t you?” pointed out Pasanus. “You were too close for the bolt to arm fully, but you’ll have a nasty scar, mind.”

“The scarring will fade,” said Locard, irritated that his work was being impugned. “Apothecary Selenus and I tried to save your eye, but the damage was too extensive. I have replaced it with a superior implant, one of my own designs in fact.”

“Show me,” said Uriel.

Locard held out a mirror, and Uriel stared at the pale, aquiline countenance looking back at him. The features were thinner than he remembered, the one eye remaining to him hooded and filled with a heavy burden. Locard’s work was good, the augmetic moulded within his eye socket to match the shape and positioning of his left eye. Where one eye was stormcloud grey, the other shone with a cold, metallic blue.

“This is fine work,” said Uriel, though the idea of losing an eye pained him.

“It is,” agreed Locard, “and far more efficient than its predecessor. You now have access to a wide variety of visual spectra, heightened spatial awareness, a more efficient bolter-link targeting mechanism, and best of all, visual image capture and storage capability.”

“My thanks,” said Uriel, trying not to sound ungrateful. As he became more aware of his surroundings, he realised he was within the lower decks of *Lex Tredecim*. The vehicle was moving, and his enhanced balance told him they were moving down at an angle of four degrees. No sooner had he formed the thought, than a stream of information scrolled into view on his right eye.

*Three thousand five hundred and seven metres beneath mean surface level.*

*Local Positioning: Four Valleys Gorge. Accuracy level 94%.*

*Ambient External Temperature: 23 degrees Celcius.*

*Ambient External Light Level: 85 Lux.*

*Contour Gradient—*

Uriel shut off the stream of information with a thought, without even knowing he could. He knew the Four Valleys Gorge well enough. One of the largest underground vaults in this region of Calth, it was an artificially created compartment that linked to the Cavernas Draconi, a natural cavern system believed to be the oldest on Calth. Local legends told that the Cavernas Draconi caves were the first hewn by the mythical serpent said to have honeycombed the bedrock of Calth in ancient days.

“Four Valleys Gorge,” he said. “We are pulling back. The gate fell?”

“It did,” said Pasanus wearily. “They used some machine infection to turn its systems against us.”

“A somewhat simplistic explanation,” added Locard, “but it will suffice for now.”

Uriel took Locard’s word for it and turned to Pasanus and Selenus. “What is the status of our forces? Are we in any shape to fight?”

“We are, right enough,” said Pasanus. “We hold the high ground in the valleys, as well as all the strong-points. Those bastards will be walking into a killing ground when they get through the avalanche the *Lex*’s big gun brought down. The Defence Auxilia are prepped, we’ve got our warriors and those of Captain Shaan deployed where they’re likely to hit us hardest, and Inquisitor Suzaku says she has a specialised pair of savants who’ll be able to warn us of any warp trickery.”

Pasanus paused and glanced towards Magos Locard. “And the magos has his battle servitors and skitarii poised to take the brunt of the hard knocks.”

Uriel frowned and said, “The enemy turned our machines against us at the gate. Can they do that again? Your servitors and Praetorians are

not going to attack our warriors are they?"

Locard rubbed his hands together, as though relishing the opportunity to expound on his ingenuity. He shook his head and a pict screen illuminated with a squalling blurt of interference that roiled like a caged raptor. Locard studied it for a moment before shutting off the volume and turning to Uriel.

"There is a priest of the Dark Mechanicus amongst the enemy, a skilled one to be sure, but I have his measure now," said Locard. "I have some of his tainted code to study, and if he comes at us again with his debased infections, he'll have a nasty surprise."

"Can you guarantee that?" said Uriel. "I will not place your forces in the battle line if you cannot say for sure that they will fight for us and not the enemy."

"The machines are safe," said Locard. "I give you my word as a priest of Mars."

Pasanus held out Uriel's weapons, and he gratefully took them, buckling on his sword belt and holstering his pistol. Armed once more, he felt like a true warrior of the Emperor, and he ran a hand across his close-cropped scalp.

"We will not have much time before the Iron Warriors attack," he said, heading for the medicae bay's doors. "I need to get out there and see the ground."

Pasanus and Selenus followed him, and Uriel paused as a stray thought occurred.

"Any word from Learchus?" he asked.

Pasanus shook his head. "No," he said. "Nothing. We've heard nothing."

## THIRTEEN

The daemons attacked as the sunlight began to set over the Lirian Mountains, bathing the Capena Gorge in a ruddy glow. Tigurius fought down the sickness in his gut and forced himself to concentrate on the surging horde. They came from the motionless bolt of lightning in a tide of daemoniac flesh, a host of bestial monstrosities of all description.

"Front rank, open fire!" came the shout from the walls, and Tigurius looked up to see the strained faces of the mortal defenders of Castra Tanagra. A haphazard mix of civilians and Chapter serfs, they stood shoulder to shoulder, united in the defence of this world, and he took heart from their courage. Their lines were bolstered by the presence of veteran Space Marines and First Captain Agemman. The Regent of Ultramar was a thunderous presence, a rock upon which the defence of the walls rested.

A synchronous volley of gunfire reached out to the daemoniac horde. Bolter shells, las-fire and hard rounds ripped through their enemies, but for each monster destroyed, there were many more to take its place.

Tigurius moved to the centre of the great breach, where Marneus Calgar and his honour guard had positioned themselves. The Chapter Master was a magnificent sight in the Armour of Antilochus, with the Gauntlets of Ultramar wreathed in killing fire at his sides.

"Ready to do this again?" asked Calgar, as Tigurius took his place at his side.

"I am," replied Tigurius, though in truth he was bone weary. The past two weeks had been gruelling for all of them, but Tigurius had felt the exhaustion more keenly than most. His powers were anathema to the daemons, but every usage took more and more out of him, more than even his prodigious physique could easily restore. Denied the meditative calm of the Librarian, each battle took longer to recover from, and the daemons were giving them little enough time between each attack.

"I know that is a lie," said Calgar. "But you are needed. Now more than ever."

Tigurius nodded. Hundreds had already died in defence of Castra Tanagra, and scores of wounded filled the keep, which had become a makeshift Apothecary. Those too old or too young to fight tended to the injured soldiers, but without much in way of medical supplies, most would likely die.

It was a depressing thought, and Tigurius returned his attention to the daemons.

They were scaled and hideous, howling with maddening hunger and lust, their bodies lambent and filled with unnatural energy. They were wasted, wind-borne things, sustained by the energy of the daemon lord that dwelled in the corrupt star fort above them. Some were armed with black bladed swords that could cut flesh and armour with equal ease, but most needed only their claws and warp-strength to tear and rend.

But facing them were the greatest warriors in the galaxy.

A solid wall of Ultramarines filled the breach as surely as any barrier of stone, each warrior clad in fabulously ornate armour and bearing a

glittering blade of antiquity.

No two of these weapons were alike, for each had come from the most hallowed reliquaries of Macragge. Such weapons had been crafted by master artificers and borne by the greatest heroes of the Ultramarines. Tigurius counted two weapons from the days of Apostasy, and at least one from the age in which Roboute Guilliman walked among his warriors.

The daemons charged through the withering hail of gunfire, leaping and bounding over the rocks to reach their victims. Most headed to the breach, but thousands more scaled the marble wall with vorpal talons piercing the rock. The power woven into the walls burned them, but still they climbed. Their unclean flesh sizzled and melted, but the pain only seemed to drive them to greater heights of fury.

“Warriors of Ultramar!” cried Marneus Calgar, his head bared to the elements. “Courage and honour!”

Every defender took up the defiant war shout, and the honour guard braced themselves for the charge of the daemons, lowering their weapons to face their enemies. A pack of ravening hounds bounded over the rubble stacked in the breach and a blazing torrent of bolter shots plucked three from the air as Marneus Calgar opened fire. His gauntlets swept left and right, weaving a pattern of destruction that left little unscathed.

Only six hounds survived to reach the interior of the breach and Tigurius thrust his staff towards them, chanting the Litany of Hatred as he did so. Forking blasts of azure lightning leapt from the horned skull at its tip, and three of the beasts vanished in explosions of black ash. Another died as a golden-bladed lance plunged into its chest, a second as a silver polearm clove its spine.

The last beast leapt towards the Chapter Master, but it met Lord Calgar’s fist in midair. The flickering, energy-wreathed gauntlet smashed its face and powered on through its body. The beast was ripped asunder, its howl ringing in Tigurius’ ears as its essence was destroyed. Monstrous pack-masters scrambled over the barricades, scaled daemons with blunt, wedge-shaped heads and vicious, fanged gashes for mouths. They bore black swords and fell upon the honour guard with piercing shrieks of hatred.

Tigurius smashed his staff into the nearest. Blue fire spread from the wound, and the creature howled as its dissolution consumed it. Lord Calgar smashed his fists into the daemons, each blow precisely weighted and delivered with a fluid economy of motion. For a man encased in bulky plates of Terminator armour, Marneus Calgar moved like a warrior clad in only his training robes. Swords swayed past his head, and claws snatched at empty air, where moments before his body had been vulnerable to attack.

Tigurius was a sublime warrior, his instincts honed by his formidable psychic powers, but even he could not match the Chapter Master’s preternaturally swift reflexes. As though he moved a heartbeat ahead of the rest of the battle, Marneus Calgar was the greatest warrior imaginable. No weapon could touch him, no beast could wound him, and those that tried were destroyed. His fists were weapons of ultimate destruction, and they pummelled daemons with every blow.

Nor were his honour guard any less lethal. Their skill had been forged over centuries of warfare, tempered in the most vicious conflicts and honed by the greatest warrior masters in the galaxy. Only to such superlative warriors would the safety of the Chapter Master be entrusted. They fought as a cohesive unit, advancing and killing as one. Decades of training together had created a killing machine that was as efficient as it was deadly. Their ancient blades clove into the daemons, pushing them back with every counterattack.

Hissing daemons with leathery skin the colour of drowned flesh swarmed through the breach. Their elongated arms were tipped with claws like blades and they moved in loping bounds that carried them easily over the tumbled blocks of marble. Horned beasts with hideously distended jaws followed them. Their speed was incredible, like flickering ghosts that shifted in and out of focus and moved from place to place in the blink of an eye.

They swarmed Marneus Calgar and his honour guard in a frenzy, and warp-tainted fangs snapped against Astartes-forged armour. Plates buckled and crumpled, but held. Marneus Calgar hammered the daemons, arcing flares of energy erupting from his fists as he smote them hip and thigh. One honour guard was dragged down, a daemon snapping its jaws over his helmet and shearing the faceplate and the front half of his skull from his body.

Tigurius lanced his staff into the daemon’s back and its flesh erupted in fire as he sent a pulse of psychic power along its length. He spun away from a leaping daemon, twisting his staff and striking left and right. Each impact saw a daemon destroyed, but his strength was fading and each kill took more out of him. Yet, imperceptibly, Tigurius could feel the tide of the battle turning in the favour of the Ultramarines.

The daemons could not gain a foothold, and with every passing moment, their power ebbed; leeched away by the effort of sustaining their presence in the face of the defenders’ implacable courage. Marneus Calgar could sense it too, and he surged into the daemons with a roar of hatred, a living battering ram of destruction and desolation.

The honour guard followed their master, forming a spear with him as its point. Tigurius drew upon his deepest reserves to keep pace with the Chapter Master and his warriors, hurling the monsters back with withering bolts of lambent fire. Together, they clove into the daemons and drove them back from the breach until not a single creature remained.

Tigurius drove his staff into the ground, as much to hold himself upright as it was a gesture of defiance. His strength was all but gone, and weariness swamped him. His eyelids drooped and a grey haze gathered at the corner of his eyes.

He saw Marneus Calgar walking back towards him, his armour splashed with black ichor.

The Chapter Master had his fist in the air, and Tigurius heard cheering. “We did it, Varro,” said Calgar, and Tigurius could see the powerful life energies radiating from him. Where Calgar was triumphant, men would feel their hearts lifted and their courage swell. His presence was

worth a thousand men on the battlefield and Tigurius tried to smile in response. “We have survived this attack,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper, “but they will be back tomorrow.”

“Let tomorrow look to itself,” said Calgar as the cheering grew louder. “Tonight we are alive and the moon is shining down upon us. Every attack we turn back leaves us stronger, and every defeat weakens our enemies.”

“These monsters are just the daemon lord’s chaff,” said Tigurius. “When we are at our lowest ebb, that is when M’kar will come for us.”

“And when he does I will kill him,” said Calgar.

“It’s not that simple,” said Tigurius.

“Yes, Varro, it is,” said Calgar, throwing an arm around Tigurius. “The daemon lord will come and either I will destroy him or he will kill me. It is that simple.”

“No, my lord,” insisted Tigurius. “It is not.”

A Rhino was never a comfortable vehicle to ride within, but the one Scipio Vorolanus and the Thunderbolts had captured from the Claws of Lorek was especially hateful. Its innards reeked of pollutants and lack of cleaning, and its air filters coughed out fumes that had passed over the engine block. Not only that, but the floor was awash with spent casings, discarded ration packs and bones.

All that they could cope with, but where an Ultramarines Rhino would bear reliquaries and shrines to the Emperor and primarch, the Claws of Lorek bore daubed crude sigils of unknown provenance that Scipio had ordered burned from the metal. Despite Laenus’ misgivings, the Rhino’s engine had not failed, though it was surely only a matter of time.

They had crossed the mountains, skirting the more heavily travelled highways, and made their way along shadowed logging roads that drove through the timber lines of the high valleys. They had met no other enemy forces, but that was about to end.

The road they were following was paved, but much to Scipio’s disgust, it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. It wound downwards through the trees, and, if his directional awareness had steered them true, leaving this stretch of road would bring them almost to the gates of Corinth.

“Remember,” he said, turning towards the Thunderbolts, who sat on the crew benches along the sides of the Rhino. “This is not a mission of aggression, but one of intelligence gathering. We’re here to ascertain if the Corsair Queen is here. Nothing more.”

They muttered their assent, though Scipio saw reluctance in their stiff posture and slow response. He understood, for he no longer looked like one of them. His armour was stacked in the weapon stowage bays, and he wore a scabrous collection of rags pulled together to form a loose robe of sorts that covered his Ultramarines and 2nd Company tattoos. His head was bare and he had removed the long service studs from his forehead. Their reluctance was understandable, for who among them did not want to bring the fire of the Ultramarines down upon these invaders?

Scipio grabbed a stanchion as the Rhino lurched sideways, its tracks biting the roadway as it cleared the trees.

“Sergeant Vorolanus,” said Laenus through the grille separating him from the crew compartment. “Corinth ahead.”

Scipio nodded and swung himself over to the commander’s hatch and twisted the locking wheel. It was stiff and rusted, but soon budged and began turning. He climbed out, bracing himself on the top armour and looked out over the great river city of Corinth.

“Guilliman’s Oath!” he swore, seeing the smoke-wreathed ruin of what had once been Espandor’s second city. Named for the great victory won by the Ultramarines against the greenskins, Corinth had once been a golden city of culture and learning. As rustic as Espandor’s inhabitants were sometimes perceived, Corinth gave the lie to that cliché, with many fine temples of silver marble, bathhouses, thriving markets and wondrous theatres. It had produced some of the finest architects of Ultramar, and many of the structures within the Fortress of Hera boasted Corinthian design flourishes.

All that was gone now, for Corinth had burned.

The sky above the city was stained with ash and smoke, the clouds weeping a soft rain upon the city that had hosted Marneus Calgar for a month in the days following his inauguration as Chapter Master. Its once mighty temples had been cast down, razed to the ground by those who hated the Emperor, and its fine counting houses, palaces and exquisite mansions were hollowed-out ruins, their magnificent interiors gutted by fire and looted by Bloodborn warriors.

Hatred filled Scipio, for this was not the wanton destruction wrought by the savage greenskin or mindless beasts, this was methodical vandalism and pillage. People who should know better had done this.

A sweeping bow of the River Konor bisected the city, its glittering waters now fouled with slicks of oil and nameless pollutants spilling from the banks. Three bridges had once spanned the mighty river, but stumps of blackened stone now jutted from the water like jagged sandbars. Sergeant Learchus of the 4th Company had blown these bridges to stall the advance of a greenskin invasion, a stratagem that had saved the citizens of Corinth, but cost the city part of its heritage. Lashed to the remains of the centre span, a wide pontoon bridge swayed in the current, supported on hollow promethium drums, and it was towards this temporary structure that Scipio’s captured Rhino drove.



The Rhino skidded and revved its way downhill, passing the last of the trees as the logging road approached a junction with a much wider highway. Hundreds of soot-coughing trucks and troop carriers made their way along the road, but Scipio could see no order or purpose to the traffic, just a honking mass of armour, looted vehicles and columns of infantry jostling for position on the road.

“What do you want me to do, sergeant?” said Laenus from below.

“Get on that road,” said Scipio. “I have a feeling they’ll make way.” He was proved right, as the Bloodborn trucks slowed to allow him to join the flow of traffic. Bloodborn soldiers quickly ran from the road, dropping to their knees and drawing their combat blades in salute. Scipio stared with hatred at his mortal enemies, men daubed in colourful war paint and dressed in outlandish, garish costumes more suited to the Theatrica Imperialis than a field of battle. They mistook his hate for contempt and lowered their gaze.

Clearly the Astartes were to be feared, even among the Archenemy. The Rhino rumbled along the road, moving against the flow of traffic, but making better time than those going with it. Trucks moved aside, infantry scurried away and armoured vehicles revved their engines furiously as they fought to clear the way for them, believing them to be champions of their foul gods.

Laenus turned them onto the pontoon, and Scipio’s stomach flipped as the bridge creaked alarmingly at their weight. Timber spars and lengths of flakboard had been lashed and nailed to the drums, and he could see spumes of water through the wide gaps. Moving with the flow of the water and the sway of the bridge, their Rhino ground its way across the bridge, reaching the halfway point and approaching one of the ruined gates of Corinth.

He had begun to allow himself a morsel of hope that they might make this crossing without incident, when he saw two Rhinos come through the gate and turn onto the pontoon.

Their hulls were dull, reddish brown, but it was impossible to tell whether it was paint or blood that coated their surfaces. The engines of both tanks growled like a hungry predators, and a warrior in armour the same colour stood tall in the commander’s hatch of the lead Rhino. His armour glistened with fresh-spilled blood and he carried an axe in one heavy gauntlet. Thankfully, the warrior was wearing a helmet, Scipio didn’t think he could face seeing one so like him, and yet so corrupt, face to face. To look a fiend like that in the eye and not kill him would be beyond him. “Sergeant?” asked Laenus.

“I see him,” said Scipio, keeping his voice low. “Just keep driving,” The Rhino drew level with them and the warrior of the blood god held his axe out towards Scipio in a gesture of salute. Scipio responded in kind, holding his clenched fist out and slamming it to his chest with what he hoped was a suitably bestial roar. His roar was answered and the enemy Rhinos passed onwards.

Scipio closed his eyes and let out a breath as they disappeared into the juddering stream of traffic. It had taken all his determination not to pull his pistol from beneath the hatch and put a bolt round between the traitor’s eyes. He looked up as he felt the Rhino’s tracks bite onto solid ground once more. Gravel and broken stone crunched under the tracks as they pulled uphill towards the shattered gatehouse. The Rhino passed beneath its broken archway and drove into the enemy-held ruins of Corinth.

A shiver travelled the length of Scipio’s spine.

“The belly of the beast,” he whispered, seeing heavily-armed Bloodborn warriors filling Corinth’s streets and thoroughfares. “The Emperor watch over us all.”

Though Calth, Espandor and Talassar saw the brunt of the Bloodborn invasion, the battles being fought across Ultramar were not simply confined to those worlds. On Quintarn, the 5th and 6th Company clashed with the battle engines of Votheer Tark and a thousands-strong Bloodborn army. Where other planets would have their destinies decreed by the champions, fate had chosen to turn the wheel of the galaxy on its endless cycle. The war raging across the fertile plains of Quintarn was made up of grinding clashes that saw armies hammer one another and withdraw without any clear victor emerging.

Votheer Tark was no general, more a mass of furious neural connections welded to a fragmentary artificial consciousness infected with scrapcode and a minor daemonic entity. As such, the Ultramarines captains had little difficulty in outfighting his battle engines. But where the Ultramarines had a clear edge in tactical nous, Tark had a scavenger-like ability to turn almost anything into a deadly machine of war.

The Ultramarines were superior fighters, but Tark’s quantity had a quality all of its own.

Tark’s Dark Mechanicus adepts plundered entire agri-cities of their machinery, turning devices of cultivation and growth into weapons of destruction and eradication. Vast threshing machines were up-armoured and fitted with all manner of weapons and sent into battle alongside stalk-legged tanks with flame units that had once been pesticide sprayers slung under their distended bellies.

There was no shape to the battles on Quintarn, simply a heaving mass of bizarre hybrid tanks clashing with the orderly battle lines of the Ultramarines and what remained of the Quintarn Defence Auxilia after Tark’s initial invasion. Such brutal battles won little glory and made few heroes, for who would later boast of the artificially-motivated machine tank they had brought down? Galenus and Epathus led perfectly coordinated battles, fighting in complete accord with the Codex Astartes, but against such a monstrous foe, their stratagems left little room for retaking the initiative.

Despite that, some warriors found themselves in their element.

Antaro Chronus, Brother-Sergeant of the Ultramarines Armoury excelled in armoured warfare, and led numerous countercharges in the

midst of battles in danger of becoming bloody stalemates. Though he had four tanks blown out from under him, each one was able to slay its killer and several more before finally giving out.

Despite such valour and fortitude, the war on Quintarn was going badly for the Ultramarines. While Tark's losses could be easily replaced, every Imperial vehicle put out of action greatly lessened the Ultramarines strength. As galling as it was to admit, the enemy force on Quintarn was too strong.

Only when three of Votheer Tark's forge-complexes were destroyed did the tide turn in favour of the Ultramarines. These hideously transformed agri-cities were the assembly yards of the Dark Mechanicus, and it had been assumed that these nightmarish forges had fallen victim to their creators' dark practices.

That notion was overturned with the arrival in the heart of the Imperial fortifications of Torias Telion and forty-three Ultramarines Scouts.

Neither captain had been aware of Telion's presence on Quintarn, but the grizzled Scout-sergeant stayed only long enough to replenish his warriors' supply of ammunition, food and explosives before setting off into the wilds of Quintarn once more.

The sudden appearance of Telion's Scouts divided the Ultramarines commanders. Some welcomed his presence, while others demanded he attach himself to the order of battle. Captain Galenus wanted to admonish the grey-bearded Telion for failing to acknowledge the chain of command, but the cooler heads of Chaplain Cassius and Captain Epathus won out.

As the tanks of the 5th and 6th Companies made ready for war once again, they went knowing that Torias Telion was watching over them.

## FOURTEEN

Four Valleys Gorge was bathed in stark light from the solumen generators worked into the roof, casting deep shadows and illuminating the vast cavern mouth that led back to Guilliman's Gate and the surface of Calth. This giant compartment was a place of transit, where voyagers from the surface would descend into the rock of the planet and begin their journey onwards into the Cavernas Draconis.

Three wide valleys led from the gorge, one each to the west, south and east. Castra Occidens barred the western valley, Castra Meridem the southern, and finally Castra Oriens the eastern. Before them, numerous graceful structures had sprung up along the wide roads to offer the myriad services travellers into Calth might require. Hostelries, accommodation, fuel and shrines dotted the gorge, a pastoral landscape at odds with its subterranean location.

Forests sprawled over the northern expanse of the compartment and a waterfall tumbled from a cleft in the rock below its vaulted roof, nearly seven hundred metres above the cavern floor. On any normal day, the gorge was a wondrous meeting place of travellers, friends old and new, or pilgrims making their way to pay homage at one of the many secluded shrine temples carved into the tunnels of Calth's depths. Soon it would be a battlefield.

Uriel watched the cohorts of skitarii from the cupola of his Rhino as they took up dug-in positions to the west of the main entrance of the compartment. These savage servants of the Machine-God would be invaluable when the Iron Warriors attacked. He and the Ultramarines held the centre of the valley, deployed in the hills and fortified structures before Castra Meridien. The great fortress was built of green marble, its walls smooth and lined with black veins, its gate a layered portal of dark armaplas and steel.

On the ridges between the fortresses, numerous artillery pieces in the colours of the Calth Defence Auxilia were primed and ready to fire, while the slopes beneath them were thronged with blue-jacketed soldiers in prepared positions and backed by scores of armoured vehicles. Four Valleys Gorge was a death trap, the roads covered by intersecting fields of fire and the avenues and intersections between the structures transformed into killing grounds. The mighty form of *Lex Tredecim* hunkered in the dead ground before Castra Meridem, hidden from view to offer unprecedented levels of battlefield coordination.

Pasanius and Clausel stood beside his command Rhino, each with their arms folded and surveying the battlefield with practiced eyes. Clausel had attached himself to the Firebrands, and Pasanius had welcomed the addition.

"We're as secure as we can make this place," said Pasanius. "Though we've said that before. We're all ready, and awaiting your orders."

Ultramarines squads had dug in next to their Rhinos behind raised banks of earth, ready to sally out and face the invaders. Stark light dappled the ground through the canopy of trees, and Uriel found the absence of bird-song unsettling, as though the creatures of Calth knew well the terrible foe set to unleash hell upon this place.

"I keep thinking there is something I have missed," said Uriel scanning the ground.

"I have reviewed your deployment plans," said Chaplain Clausel. "All is in accordance with the Codex."

"That is what worries me," said Uriel. "Honsou has shown us that he can think like us, and if he can think like us, he can pre-empt us."

"You doubt the wisdom of the Codex?" asked Clausel. "I thought you had learned to trust its teachings on Pavonis. Was I mistaken?"

“No, Chaplain, not at all, but it is never good when the enemy knows how we will react to any given situation.”

“True enough,” said Clausel. “Then perhaps it is time to think like the enemy.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Custodes of the Emperor once practised a form of internal security known as Blood Games, where warriors of their own brotherhood would attempt to breach the security of the Imperial Palace,” said Clausel. “Having his own Praetorians hunting for weaknesses or breaches in his defences pulled the web of security ever tighter around the Emperor.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Clausel swept his arm out over the layered defences of Four Valleys Gorge and said, “That you look at these defences and ask yourself how *you* would defeat them.”

Uriel studied the overlaid fields of fire, the defence in depth and the numerous enfilading positions. Nothing was out of place, everything was in its proper position, and the layout of the thousands of defenders could have come straight from a field instruction manual.

“That’s just it,” he said. “I don’t know how I would do it. These defences should be impossible to breach through any standard doctrinal approach.”

And that was the problem. Honsou paid scant regard for any doctrinal approach to warfare, fighting from the hip and with a frighteningly intuitive grasp of the nature of any combat. His situational awareness of the *shape* of a battle was unmatched, and he could read its ebbs and flows better than anyone Uriel had met. To know when to consolidate, to advance, to flank and when to gamble; these were the qualities most leaders of men had to learn in the bitter fires of bloodshed, but which Honsou possessed innately.

However Honsou gave battle, it would be in a manner none of them could foresee.

It began with screaming artillery shells arcing from the great tunnel of Guilliman’s Gate. It had taken the Iron Warriors a day to get through the rubble brought down by *Lex Tredecim*’s guns, but now the fight for Calth was well and truly underway.

The shells impacted in the centre of the cavern, falling amid the forward positions of the Defence Auxilia. Earth boomed upward in a series of percussive explosions that marched outwards in waves. Heavily dug in within foxholes and redoubts, few were killed by these blasts, the thick layers of packed earth dispersing the force of the explosions. Only those positions unlucky enough to be struck by a direct hit were pounded into the earth.

Even as the first echoes faded, a second and third volley of shells slammed down, spreading the destruction wider and fanning outward in an explosive arc. Smoke and incendiary shells were mixed with the high explosives, and the valley began to fill with choking grey banks. Uriel blinked his vision into thermal imaging, and saw the landscape laid out in sweeping patterns of heat traces. The valley was an almost uniform grey, with only minor temperature gradients except where the shells had landed, but he saw the bright heat traces of enemy infantry moving from the mouth of the valley under cover of the smoke.

“Incoming infantry,” he said over the artillery vox-net. “Set fire to target grid rows Primus and Secundus. Set warheads for airburst.”

No sooner was the order issued than the guns of the Defence Auxilia opened fire with a thunderous volley. Whirlwinds concealed in banked up berms below let loose rippling salvos of rockets that fell upon the valley mouth and wiped out the enemy soldiers in a flashing series of air-splitting detonations. The shells burst thirty metres above the ground, sending an expanding cloud of razor shrapnel slicing down onto the Bloodborn warriors. Scores died instantly, shredded into bloody rags by the slicing clouds of fragments.

The artillery duel continued for several minutes, with Honsou’s warriors unable to gain a foothold in the cavern or push out further than a hundred metres. Where the Iron Warriors artillery was restricted to a narrow field of fire, the defenders of Calth had no such problem and they pounded the invaders remorselessly.

“It seems you overestimated this Honsou’s ability,” said Clausel, watching the bombardment of the enemy forces with righteous relish.

Uriel nodded absently. This direct assault wasn’t what he’d expected at all. It was too obvious, too unimaginative and too lacking in flair for a warsmith like Honsou.

“That is what worries me,” he said.

Over the course of the day, the Iron Warriors pushed out further with each passing hour. Though it cost them hundreds of warriors for every foot gained, their bridgehead at the mouth of the valley was getting wider and wider. In the gaps between shelling, heavy diggers drove the vast piles of debris and loosened earth into heavy berms, behind which increasing numbers of warriors took shelter.

Mobile artillery pieces rumbled from the tunnel and rucked up behind prepared positions, and the arcs of enemy fire widened to encompass the entire gorge. It was warfare at its most brutal and methodical, pushing forward and winning ground without care for the number of lives it cost. The bravura of the strategy was fearsome, and only the most determined of wills could force men to march into the teeth of such withering enemy fire without protest.

High berms curved in a wide arc from one side of the tunnel mouth to the other. Hundreds of heavy, rectangular blocks formed from mesh-wrapped canvas and containing rubble dug from the floor of the gorge were slid over the lip of the earthworks to form an irregular covering that was as impervious to artillery strikes as it was hideous to look upon. Vile banners were planted on the ridge and molten metal poured down its slopes to form armoured plates of brazen iron. Uriel looked at the sloping line of ugly blocks and realised with horror what the Iron Warriors were building.

“It’s a fortress wall,” he said. “They’re laying siege to us.”

On the walls of Castra Occidens, Inquisitor Suzaku watched the intricate ballet of military manoeuvres below with a mix of professional interest and studied boredom. As a warrior of the holy ordos, she had, of course, been schooled in the art of war, but so much of her work was done in the shadows that such obvious displays of power were almost alien to her. She disliked working in the open, knowing that a great deal of her organisation’s power rested in the fear of its unknown nature.

The stares she was attracting standing on the firing step were curious and respectful, but there was none of the fear she was used to seeing. Beside her, Soburo sensed her unease, turning towards her with a slight smile on his face.

Soburo was an empath, and a good one too.

“They don’t fear you,” he said. “That must be unusual.”

“It is,” confessed Suzaku.

“Perhaps Ultramar’s citizens are truly innocent and have no need to fear the Inquisition.”

“That would make it a *very* unusual place indeed.”

“Unique, I would have said,” replied Soburo, adjusting the holster at his hip. Like Suzaku, Soburo was dark skinned and white haired, though he was considerably taller and more solidly built. He had the makings of a good acolyte, but Suzaku didn’t think he had the steel to be a full inquisitor. His empathic skills gave him compassion and understanding, traits not always desirable in an inquisitor. This campaign would answer many of Suzaku’s questions regarding her acolyte’s suitability.

A cold wind whipped across the walls of the fortress, a bulwark of black stone and high walls, and Suzaku pulled her stormcoat tighter about herself. The fortress was typical Ultramarines architecture: strong, stolid and unchanging. Suzaku had seen mason’s marks dating back to the years following the Great Betrayal.

Her entourage clustered around her, a motley assembly of robed savants, calculus-logi and armoured warriors. Her bodyguards had once been storm-troopers of the Jacintine Marauders, but had since been augmented with numerous bio-warfare implants to turn them into fearsome cybernetic killers. They had names, she presumed, but Suzaku knew them only by their call signs. Her stunted savant Milotas studied a data-slate worked in the form of a mirror, a streaming flow of paper unfolding from its base as he muttered catechisms pleasing to the statistical spirits within.

Only the twins stood apart, a pair of abnormally tall and slender males, with reed-thin limbs held fast by leather straitjackets secured with silver buckles and locks of cold iron. Both were albinic, with translucent skin and eyes the colour of winter. Suzaku had rescued them from their home world, where their disorder had seen their kind hunted almost to extinction by superstitious savages who sought to slaughter them for the supposedly medicinal effects their internal organs could produce when ingested.

Given the mental torments they had endured in Suzaku’s service, Soburo had often remarked that it might have been a kindness to let them die. In her more reflective moments, Suzaku was inclined to agree, but their prodigious psychic abilities were too useful to waste with mercy. Carefully controlled, the twins could read the twisting currents of the immaterium and warn of impending warp intrusion. But, like all psykers, they needed to be watched for signs of corruption, and her fingers flexed on the butt of her pistols.

“They’ve been twitchy ever since we got here,” said Soburo.

“Stop doing that,” said Suzaku. “Don’t read my thoughts.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s hard not to,” said Soburo. “You don’t cover your feelings well.”

“Then steel yourself against them,” warned Suzaku. “Concentrate on the white eyes. Guide them and read their emotions.”

“Of course,” said Soburo, suitably chastened.

Suzaku looked up as she saw a cloud pass beneath the roof of the giant cavern. The weather below Calth could change in moments, and it was a common saying among the populace that if you didn’t like the weather, wait five minutes and it would change. She still found it strange that clouds could form within such underground spaces, but Locard had told her that the weather patterns were enhanced by technology crafted in a more ancient time. Some, he had whispered, were rumoured to be of xenos manufacture, but no member of the Martian Priesthood had ever been permitted to examine them.

She pulled the collar of her stormcoat up and shivered, feeling her teeth tingle with the cold. The temperature had dropped significantly, and her breath feathered the air as crackling frost formed on the marble of the ramparts.

Realisation hit her like a blow. This was no natural change! Suzaku looked over to see Soburo trying to form words though a mouth frozen rigid with cold.

“Soburo!” cried Suzaku.

“Warpcraft...” hissed Soburo through teeth cracking with the baleful energies filling his body. “Powerful. Dark! Oh no... it’s blood magic. Here!”

He dropped to the ground, his eyes misting over and a deathly cold enveloping his body. Suzaku dropped to the ground beside her acolyte, and reached out to touch him. She flinched from the freezing air surrounding him. A shadow loomed, and she looked up to see the twins standing over her.

“We sense all, mistress. All the currents,” said one.

“Flow like a river through our mind,” finished the other. “The blood of innocents runs.”

“Like rain in the streets.”

“Like a surge tide in spring.”

“It comes to wash away the enemies of the Bloodborn.”

“No riddles,” demanded Suzaku. “What manner of warpcraft do you sense?”

“The gates of the empyrean open.”

“The terrors of the beyond answer the summons.”

“What was dreamed of in nightmares past.”

“Will bear bloody fruit in the minds of the living.”

Suzaku saw all trace of whiteness vanish from the twins’ eyes as their irises filled with blood. Soburo cried out in pain.

“And the dead shall outnumber the living,” said the twins in perfect unison.

The silver buckles securing their arms blazed with heat, running molten down the leather straitjackets and the iron locks shattered with a sharp crack. The twins’ skin blackened and their faces twisted into daemonic masks of bloodlust. Their restraints peeled away from their bodies like a pair of serpents shedding their skin to reveal the monsters beneath.

Suzaku’s pistol was in her hand a second later and she put a bullet through the first twin’s howling features without blinking. The second tore free of its straitjacket and reached for her with skeletal arms that now ended in elongated talons. She swung her weapon around, but before she could fire, a roaring chainblade implant in the fist of one of her Jacinitine bodyguards erupted from its chest.

The blade tore up and out through its collarbone, and the pale-skinned psyker fell in a gory heap to the ramparts. The frost on the battlements faded, and Suzaku swiftly opened a vox-channel to the Ultramarines.

“Captain Ventris,” she gasped, her lungs still aching with the bitter cold. “Be on your guard, the enemy are employing powerful sorcery. The mortal soldiers are the least of your concerns. In all likelihood, you will be facing warp creatures drawn from beyond the veil.”

“Daemons?” asked Captain Ventris, his voice distorted by a sudden swirl of static.

“More than likely,” said Suzaku. “Blood magic summons only the very worst creatures.”

“Understood. Ventris out.”

Suzaku shut off the link as Soburo climbed unsteadily to his feet. Suzaku was about to offer him a hand up when she saw the lingering redness in her acolyte’s eyes. The taint of the warp was insidious, and even the slightest trace would grow to consume one touched by its corruption. She stepped back and raised her weapon.

Soburo saw the pistol and read Suzaku’s feelings of regret and cold necessity in an instant. His open features fell, but he had been schooled well by the adepts of Talasa Prime, and nodded in weary acceptance.

“Do it,” said Soburo. “You know you have to.”

Suzaku nodded and eased back the hammer of her pistol with her thumb.

“*Now* they will fear you, sister,” said Soburo.

Suzaku’s shot was swallowed by crashes of thunder as seething clouds of darkness swelled in the air of the gorge. Changing weather patterns on Calth were nothing new, but the speed with which the darkness grew overhead was far from natural. Crackling thunderheads

boiled into existence, trailing sickly light back to the hideous wall and Bloodborn icons.

The solumens were snuffed out one by one and the vast compartment was plunged into near darkness as icy squalls howled from the northern tunnel, like the frozen winds of an ice-locked deathworld. Phantom shapes, glimpsed only from the corner of the eye, moved in the winds and cloud, reptilian and winged with pale skin and slitted yellow eyes.

Bolts of lightning leapt between the clouds and the air of the cavern filled with a sickening, actinic frisson. Fear spread like a contagion, the howling clouds awakening phobias, repressed terrors or forgotten fears long thought banished in childhood.

Booming drums echoed from the compartment's walls, like a diseased heart gasping for its last futile beats of life. A hideous chanting joined the drums, a low, rhythmic utterance that swelled in volume in time to the booming heartbeat echoing from the clouds. It cut through the thunder, now accompanied by the clash of swords on shields and the scrape of combat blades affixed to rifle barrels. No man or woman in the Defence Auxilia failed to imagine those grisly blades plunging into their bellies or tearing out their throats.

Sergeants and captains sought to steady their warriors with words of duty and courage, but their words were laden with fear and only served to drive icy splinters deeper into the hearts of the Defence Auxilia.

With a titanic crash, the clouds overhead unleashed their fury. A deluge of black rain fell and surging flares of lightning slammed down on the ridges between the three fortresses. Like hammer blows from orbiting warships, the ridges vanished in sheets of fire as a dozen artillery pieces exploded. Secondary detonations swiftly followed as magazine stores were touched off. Corkscrewing shells arced up over the battlefield, falling randomly amid the defenders as yet more forking blasts of light hammered the defenders.

Battery commanders ordered their mobile artillery into the shelter of hardened hangars cut into the rock, but it was too late for many of them.

Twisting bolts of fire made a mockery of thick plates of armour and plasma jets filled each tank with searing fire that incinerated their crews in a heartbeat. No sooner had much of the Imperial artillery been effectively silenced than the booming chants from beyond the wall rose to new heights.

With rabid yells and a blare of discordant war horns, thousands of Bloodborn soldiers and battle tanks surged over the wall into Four Valleys Gorge.

## FIFTEEN

Uriel watched the sheeting flames engulf the artillery positions. Their defences had been planned out with the expectation of facing a conventional army, one that fought with logical tactics and which reacted to changing circumstances with reasonably predictable methods. That had been a mistake, for the forces of the Ruinous Powers were anything but predictable, their very existence derived from the fluid chaos of the immaterium.

Lit by the fires of burning tanks and the strobing flashes of lightning, the Bloodborn charged down the slopes of the gorge towards the Imperial defenders. Uriel had expected a riotous mob of ill-disciplined rabble, but straight away he saw that these were trained soldiers, not simply piratical killers. They moved from cover to cover, one group advancing as another fired suppressive bursts of automatic gunfire.

Tanks crashed through unmanned barricades and opened fire on Defence Auxilia positions with their main guns crashing back on recoil compensators. A rippling series of explosions erupted from the defenders' lines. Weapon fire answered the charge of the Bloodborn, but it was uncoordinated and desultory. The soul-crushing despair conjured by the enemy's warpcraft and the black rain still held many in its paralysing grip, and only slowly could its claws be torn free of the heart.

To their credit, the Defence Auxilia troops were recovering their wits and courage far quicker than most mortals afflicted by such sorcery, but Uriel saw it wouldn't make any difference unless he acted now.

"Ultramarines!" ordered Uriel, standing tall in the Rhino's cupola. "Forward. General advance. Gladius formation."

His Rhino reversed from its sheltering berm and gunned its engine, throwing up clods of dark earth and water as its tracks fought for purchase on the sodden ground. The vehicle surged forward, picking a swift path through the trees towards the forward lines of battle. Uriel had hoped to keep his warriors in reserve long enough to pinpoint the weakest point in the attack and split the enemy advance, but events were moving too fast for that now.

The Rhinos of the 4th Company smoothly moved into position behind him, the blade of the gladius, with two Land Raiders forming the quillons and the company's Thunderstrikes the hilt. Uriel gripped the handles of the storm bolter, allowing the mechanisms of his new augmetic eye to link with the machine spirits of the vehicle.

"Exceptional work, magos," said Uriel as a targeting reticle appeared in the centre of his vision, the eye's internal mechanisms compensating for the movement of the tank and the low light conditions. He squeezed the trigger, working the weapon over a group of enemy soldiers running for the cover of a ruined wayshrine. Two bursts cut them down and he swung the weapon to bear on another

group. Guided by the reticule, another precisely-aimed burst killed six enemy warriors.

The Defence Auxilia were firing back in earnest now, and not a moment too soon; the enemy were almost upon them. Gunfire blazed back and forth in desperate bursts, splintering timber and tearing through sandbags. The Bloodborn were an army of monsters, their bronze and iron masks rendered into screaming daemonic horrors. Those that eschewed helms had disfigured their features with blades and claw into grotesque visages worse than any mask.

No two were alike, yet for all their individuality, they fought as a cohesive whole. They were well led and had been trained for just this sort of fight. Uriel worked the storm bolter over a dashing group of enemy soldiers, dropping them with one pull of the trigger as his Rhino slewed to a halt in the shadow of an empty tank berm.

He dropped into the Rhino, pulling the hatch shut behind him as the armoured doors on the side of the vehicle slid open. Petronius Nero was the first out, followed by Ancient Peleus, who immediately unfurled the banner of the 4th Company. The Swords of Calth debarked from the Rhino with speed and efficiency, and Uriel led them towards the nearest barricade as he took in the flow of the battle.

He was aware of the precise locations of every one of his warriors, their arcs of fire and the position of the enemy forces within range. Information gathered by his new eye was filtered through his enhanced mind to provide him with the most precise tactical appraisal of the battlefield imaginable. In seconds he had mapped out the fluid lines of combat.

“Sergeant Aktis, suppressive fire on the ruined wayshrine to the east, the enemy have heavy guns set up there. Nestor and Theron, hold the barricades to your front and keep pouring fire on those woods. Pasanius, push forward on the left. There are Bloodborn massing in the ruins to your front. Drive them out and push east to force them into the fire arcs of Aktis. All other squads support Defence Auxilia forces and be ready to plug any gaps.”

Uriel switched networks and said, “Land Raiders *Artemis* and *Capitalinus*, ignore the infantry. Target enemy battle tanks. Split them down the middle.”

“And what of us?” asked Brutus Cyprian, tapping the Ultramarines icon on side of his bolter. “Are we not to get into the fight?”

“Far from it, Cyprian,” said Uriel, risking a glance over the top of the barricade as a flurry of wild shots sparked from the metal. Thunderous, volleys strafed the hillsides and slashing missiles exploded amid the blackened stumps of brickwork and steel on the eastern slopes. Uriel saw Pasanius and Chaplain Clausel leading their warriors through a storm of gunfire towards the ruins sheltering a fifty-strong platoon of Bloodborn.

“Incoming armour,” said Livius Hadrianus, hefting his melta gun to his shoulder.

Enemy tanks, bastardised machines of leaking oil and iron spikes, ground over the torn earth of the hillside, their heavy guns traversing to target the Ultramarines positions.

“Forget them,” said Uriel, seeing a mass of Bloodborn soldiers advancing alongside the tanks. “We take the infantry.”

Driven from their original course by the gunfire of Tactical Squads Nestor and Theron, the Bloodborn soldiers thought to advance under the protection of their heavy armour. That was a foolish mistake.

Uriel watched a corrupted Leman Russ explode as a searing las-bolt punched through its turret and blew the weapons from its sides. A dozen Bloodborn were cut down by scything shrapnel, and the ground shook as two Ultramarines Land Raiders swept through the gaps in the defences torn by the artillery duel to engage the enemy tanks. Thunderous streams of shells flew back and forth between them, but the armour of the Land Raiders was proof against all but the most lethal impacts. “Now,” shouted Uriel. “Swords of Calth! With me!” Uriel scrambled over the barricade and leapt forward with his sword sparking to life and hissing in the black rain. The ground underfoot was sludgy and slick, but with the new systems incorporated in his eye he found he could keep his balance as easily as if he was marching across a parade ground. Storm bolter fire from the Rhinos slashed overhead, suppressing the enemy while the Ultramarines moved to attack.

The rain dulled everything to shadows lit by strobing flashes of gunfire and explosions. Burning tanks and blooming flares of missile detonations lit the unnatural twilight, but the senses of the Space Marines easily penetrated the hellish inferno. Bolter fire cut down four Bloodborn soldiers who emerged from the cover of a burning tank, and a searing tongue of flame engulfed the rear of the pack. Perhaps twenty or so of the Bloodborn survived to fall upon the Ultramarines.

Viewed from a distance, the Bloodborn were hideous travesties of soldiers, but up close they were much, much worse. They stank of sweat and grease, their tattered uniforms stiffened with ordure, as though they deliberately tried to make themselves as repugnant as possible. Yet for all their disgusting masks and filth-encrusted uniforms, they were mortal. Inquisitor Suzaku’s warning had led him to expect the very worst the Ruinous Powers could hurl at them, but these warriors were mortal and fragile. When the daemons came, and he had no doubt they would, that would be a different matter.

A warrior with a snarling daemon mask hurled himself at Uriel. A serrated bayonet slashed at him, but Uriel blocked it easily, rolling his wrist and plunging his sword into the man’s throat. He spun low and slashed his blade through the legs of another, rising up to backhand another with his fist.

Enemy warriors surrounded them, but the Swords of Calth fought in a wedge that pushed hard into their ranks. Their presence was like a lode-stone, attracting more howling killers with every moment.

“So many of them!” shouted Livius Hadrianus.

“Just more for me to kill!” replied Brutus Cyprian, crushing a Bloodborn warrior’s face with the butt of his pistol.

“Would that it were more,” answered Hadrianus.

“They will have a bounty on every one of us they kill,” said Uriel.

“How do you know?” asked Petronius Nero, his sword cutting down Bloodborn warriors with graceful strokes. Where Nero was an artist, Cyprian and Hadrianus fought without finesse, bludgeoning the enemy with hacking swipes of their chainswords and pistols.

“Because that is what I would do if I were their commander,” answered Uriel, taking Clausel’s last words to him to heart.

Selenus fought beside Uriel, firing short bursts of pistol fire in support of the rest of the squad. The Swords of Calth moved as one, pushing forward and killing everything in their path with grim efficiency. Uriel lost count of how many enemy soldiers he had killed, his sword red from quillons to tip. The line had held, and the Bloodborn were battering themselves to destruction against Uriel’s warriors.

Booming detonations echoed from the sides of the compartment as enemy vehicles exploded, picked off by Aktis’ Devastators or the powerful guns of the Land Raiders. Hot winds blew through the cavern compartment reeking of burned metal and cooking meat. The thick smoke made it hard to see much of anything. The tide of this engagement was turning, and Uriel felt the will of the Bloodborn to push into the teeth of the Ultramarines defence eroding with every passing second.

“Ancient!” he shouted. “Lift the banner high!”

Peleus nodded and sheathed his pistol, lifting the company standard high in both hands for all the defenders to see. Even in the dark rain, the banner of the 4th caught the firelight and a great cheer burst from the Defence Auxilia at the sight of it. In a lull between kills, Uriel looked over his shoulder, heartened to see the ranks of mortal soldiers once again manning their positions and firing into the enemy with their customary diligence.

A huge fireball rose from the ruins to the east. Uriel saw burning bodies tumble from the shattered towers and ramparts. Above him on the hillside, Bloodborn warriors were falling back from the forests and onto the road. Behind them, Pasanius, Clausel and the Firebrands took up firing positions at the timberline and began picking them off with carefully aimed shots. Not that there were many left. Pasanius’ warriors had driven the Bloodborn into the sectors of Theron and Nestor, and withering flanking fire had left few alive.

“The enemy retreats!” shouted Nero.

“Do we pursue?” asked Hadrianus, eager to be unleashed.

Uriel dearly wished to finish the enemy, to take this opportunity to drive them from Calth once and for all, but to recklessly pursue the foe was not something the Codex Astartes favoured. In any case, the question was rendered moot by what came over the crude fortress wall built at the end of Four Valleys Gorge.

A host of mechanised cyborg machines armed with revving chainblades, heavy calibre weaponry and protected with thick plates of armour. Nightmarish howls of scrapcode spewed from splintered augmitters affixed to their chests and heads. They moved like chittering insects on multiple legs, a hideous blend of organic and machine parts animated by daemoniac wills into hellish living weapons.

This was the daemoniac threat of which Suzaku had warned him.

Like a plague of locusts, they swarmed towards the Ultramarines in their thousands.

Honsou pulled the bars of the restraint harness down over his head and locked it in place with a hard snap of metal on metal. He disliked being so confined, especially when Cadaras Grendel hadn’t yet pulled his harness down, but he was the leader and a leader had to lead. All around him, Iron Warriors followed his example, and in moments forty of his best fighters were arranged around him. He didn’t like the idea of going into battle like this, confined in a long metal tube, but supposed it was no different to a boarding torpedo or a dreadclaw assault pod. Nor were the Iron Warriors alone, for the Blade dancers of Xiomagra came on this mission too.

Grendel and the Newborn took their places opposite him, and he nodded to his lieutenant and champion as they locked themselves in place. Grendel wasn’t wearing his helmet and his scarred face glared at him across the compartment.

“I don’t like this,” he said, looking over at the Blade dancers. “Bad enough that we’re errand boys for M’kar, but do we have to take these effetes with us?”

Honsou leaned forwards. “Say that to their faces,” he said. “I dare you.”

Grendel said nothing, remembering his earlier humiliation at the hands of Xiomagra. Truth be told, Honsou wasn’t keen on them coming along either, but there was space for them, and it was likely their extra blades would come in handy.

The Blade dancers sat silently at the rear of the compartment, heads bowed and their long swords held, point down, before them. Honsou thought that looked dangerous, given the vibration and rumbling this journey would entail, but smiled at the idea of one of Xiomagra’s warriors getting their head cut off by accident. He’d keep his eyes on them in case that happened.



He shook his head and returned his attention to the fore as the Newborn spoke.

“I agree with Grendel, but not because I do not trust the Blade dancers,” it said.

“Oh, then why?” asked Honsou.

“It feels... wrong to quit the field of battle like this. To leave the fighting when the outcome is not decided.”

“There’s the Ultramarine in you again,” laughed Grendel.

“The outcome doesn’t matter,” said Honsou. “It never did. Not yet, anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Grendel, as the whining roar of the vehicle’s engines and main generators powered up. “I thought you said this mission was secondary.”

“I lied,” said Honsou, “It needs to be done, the sooner the better. While the Ultramarines attention is fixed on this gorge, we can be elsewhere.”

“And you know where this shrine is?” Grendel asked the Newborn.

“I do,” said the Newborn. “In a cave of dragons. The walls are covered with murals and mosaics of them. They’re crude, like children’s paintings. There’s a wall of rock and a secret way through to another cavern beyond. No one knows it’s there, at least not anymore.”

“And that’s how we’re going to find it?” said Grendel with a sneer. “It’s hardly exact coordinates is it?”

“It’s close enough,” said Honsou. “We’ll tunnel down into the caverns below and take it from there. See where fate leads us.”

“Great,” snapped Grendel. “And here was me worried you didn’t have a plan.”

“I always have a plan,” smiled Honsou.

With a grinding rumble of greased runners and a shrieking whine of hydraulics, the back of the compartment began rising and red lights began flashing along its length, Honsou felt the familiar excitement of going on a mission where the odds were stacked against success. Whining, high-pitched shrieks of drill bits and lasers biting rock echoed through the troop compartment as the burrowing war machine tore into the rock of Calth. Far beyond the tunnel mouth, the battle of Four Valleys Gorge raged on, but Honsou and his warriors would play no part in it.

“No doubt Obax Zakayo would have said this mission was foolhardy and reckless,” shouted Honsou as the compartment shook violently with the force of their descent.

“And he would have been right,” said Grendel.

“Aye, maybe so,” said Honsou. “But it feels good to be doing it.”

The holo-sphere lit up with traces of enemy movements and troop dispositions as Magos Locard processed the thousands of inputs he was receiving from the myriad augurs and surveyor equipment available to him through the surfaces of *Lex Tredecim*. A Capitol Imperialis was a vast network of command and control capabilities, but one crafted by the Adeptus Mechanicus was far more.

Equipped with machines designed to detect elements, wavelengths and physical phenomena far beyond anything required by the Imperial Guard, its sensor feeds would have overwhelmed such mortal strategos or military adjutants. Thirty multitasked servitors moved through the command bridge of *Lex Tredecim*, gathering information and feeding it directly into the holo-sphere.

Right now he was tracking the movement of the thousands of bastardised Praetorian battle servitors pouring over the makeshift fortress wall the Iron Warriors had erected. Though many of the emotions mortals took for granted had been supplanted with superior logical faculties, he still felt deep and bitter loathing for the corrupted magos who had so perverted these perfect specimens of the Omnissiah.

Only a sputtering fragment of the once mighty fire of the Machine-God flickered dully within these aborted nightmares. A parasitic will drove their fibre-bundle muscles and gave animation to their mechanised frames. What were once beautiful and magnificent in their logical arrangement were now aberrations to be hated and, most importantly, destroyed.

Locard opened a vox-link to Commander Trejo, master of the skitarii host he had brought to Calth. Positioned to the west of the main entrance to the gorge, they were ideally placed to counterattack.

“Commander Trejo, are you seeing this?”

“I am, magos,” growled Trejo, his thick down-hive accent still discernable even after extensive augmetic surgery to his jaw. “Unleash us, I beg you.”

“Consider yourself unleashed,” he said. He didn’t need to add against which force. The hate the Adeptus Mechanicus had for these corrupt machines was felt no less keenly by its servants. “Serve the will of the Omnissiah.”

“Understood. Trejo out.”

No sooner had the link shut off than the gold icons representing the skitarii host moved eastward, accompanied by its supporting battle servitors. The Ultramarines were already embroiled with the enemy machines, and as much as he wished to see the corrupted engines destroyed, it was more fitting that it be at the hands of a righteous servant of the Machine-God.

And there were none more thorough in their righteous vengeance than Trejo.

A warning icon flashed on the holo-sphere, a seismic tremor surveyor, and Locard swept a haptically-enabled hand over the display, bringing the readouts to the fore. Regular bursts of energy spiked in the rock. That, in itself, was nothing unusual, especially in a planet so riddled with caverns and tunnels, but these readings were too regular and too artificial than any general movement he might have expected during the course of a battle.

With swift gestures, he refined the search parameters of the seismic surveyors, filtering out local movement of tectonic plates and the impacts of heavy artillery. Five traces were moving from within the tunnel at the far side of the gorge, and there could only be one explanation for such specific tracks.

“Identify,” he said, running the seismic traces and vibration analysis through *Lex Tredecim*’s logic engines. “Refine to error margin of no less than ten per cent.”

As he suspected, the answer was not long in coming, the traces so specific and unmistakable that he hadn’t really needed the cogitators to tell him what he was looking at.

A fresh pane opened in the holo-sphere, filled with a glowing image that slowly rotated in three dimensions. Long and cylindrical, its entire length was hooked and barbed, like a vicious undersea predator with a conical beak.

He dismissed the pane with flick of his fingers and called up a ghostly topographical representation of Four Valleys Gorge. Defence Auxilia units were picked out in white, Ultramarines in blue and Adeptus Mechanicus forces in gold. Locard had assigned the Raven Guard green icons, but, for reasons he could not fathom, they did not appear on the holo-sphere. Curiously, the lone silver icon representing Inquisitor Suzaku was moving from Castra Meridem towards the front lines.

The seismic traces were moving deeper into the planet’s bedrock, but Locard knew that wouldn’t last long. His fingers danced in the air as he inloaded numerous likely scenarios for their movement patterns based on the rock density of Four Valleys Gorge.

“Project probable emergence points based on current trajectory of incoming tracks,” he hissed. “Interrogative: where are they going to surface?”

Flickering light illuminated the horror of the death machines, the fright masks of the daemon-possessed Praetorians and the hideousness of their mutant flesh. Organic and artificial components blended together in a grotesque fusion that reminded Uriel of gangrenous wounds.

The black downpour was unending, and the ground was a quagmire through which every step was an effort. Hundreds of bodies lay in stagnant pools of oil-like rain, and the mud was slippery with blood from the slaughter. Thunder crashed overhead and visibility was cut to a hundred metres or less. Juddering shapes moved in the shadows, hunting packs of weaponised servitors armed with shock prods and electrified shears that crackled and fizzed in the rain. Others fired clattering weapons like energised rivet guns, while yet more were armed with blazing las weapons that fired stuttering bursts of wild energy.

The daemon machines stalked the ruins and burning forests of Four Valleys Gorge, darting between cover as they advanced on the Imperial lines. Hundreds of them littered the muddy ground, their armoured bodies pounded to ruin by artillery rounds landing dangerously close to the Imperial lines, but hundreds more came on in a mad rush.

The Rhinos spat bolt rounds towards the enemy and both Land Raiders fought on despite heavy damage. Their armoured hides were scored and burned, *Artemis* limped on a damaged track unit, and *Capitalinus* had lost one of her side sponsons. Both still engaged the enemy, but their ammo and power reserves were dangerously low. Daemon engines broke against the Ultramarines lines in a storm of blades and machine curses. Explosions, gunfire and mechanised howls of bloodlust blended into a terrible, drawn out scream of eternal hatred.

Uriel swept his sword through what little flesh remained of a corrupt battle servitor, spilling a foul-smelling ichor that reeked of engine oil and infected blood. The machine screeched with a crackling blurt of pain and collapsed, its grossly swollen limbs falling limp as it died. An explosion and discordant burst of static further along the Ultramarines lines signalled the death of another machine. Uriel didn’t need to see the status icons at the edge of his visor to know that Ultramarines were dying too. The Swords of Calth fought at his side, close combat weapons sheathed in favour of bolters. Coordinated volleys of bolter fire were all that could bring down these monstrous engines. They were heavily armoured and could take horrendous amounts of punishment before going down.

“Enemy, right!” shouted Apothecary Selenus, as a screaming pack of hulking beetle-like machines burst from the cover of what had once been a Hellhound, but was now simply a blazing wreck. Their carapaces were glossy and slick with rain, their shark-like heads bullet-shaped and sheathed in horned metal.

Ancient Peleus levelled his pistol and put two swift rounds through the visor of the nearest daemon engine, and it crumpled without a sound. Cyprian and Selenus took out the next, firing sustained bursts into its chest until its armour caved and the mass reactive rounds

cut it in two. A third fell to Hadrianus' melta gun, and Uriel emptied his bolt pistol into the chest of a fourth. It staggered, but kept coming, its body a mass of bloody craters where his bolts had detonated. Three others survived to reach the Ultramarines, and Nero switched to his sabre in a heartbeat.

The daemon machines clashed with the Swords of Calth and Livius Hadrianus was punched from his feet by a crushing sweep of a bulky chainsaw arm. Sparks flew from his armour in an orange fan as the teeth bit into his chest, but before the blade could penetrate, Brutus Cyprian blew it apart with a controlled burst of fire.

Petronius Nero ducked beneath its flailing limbs, seeming to anticipate its every move as he rammed his blade between a slender gap in its armour. He twisted the blade and the monster dropped with a strangled cry. Hadrianus rolled onto his back and vaporised a screeching machine with a snap shot of his melta gun.

Cyprian dragged him to his feet as the battle swirled around them. Uriel and Nero closed on a monster with the face of a snapping wolf, its silver mask animated with a baleful light. Unfettered bloodlust burned in its red eyes, and it howled with an artificial voice that was utterly inhuman in its hatred.

"Go left," said Nero, and Uriel obeyed the swordsman's command instantly. It slashed with a pneumatically-powered hammerfist, and Uriel ducked beneath the blow, rolling to his feet and slashing his sword at the cables connecting the fist to the crackling generators on its back. Nero deflected a sweeping blow from a set of enormous shears and drove his sword up into the soft tissue beneath the monster's shoulder. His blade tore up and out, cutting the metal-sheathed tendons motivating the arm. The weapon fell limply to its side and it stabbed at Nero with one of its spiked legs.

The swordsman swayed aside, and Uriel took advantage of the distraction to leap onto the beast's carapace. It bucked and tried to throw him off, but Uriel gripped its horned spine and swept his blade down, cleaving the daemon from brainpan to clavicle with one blow. The beast flopped onto its front in the mud, and Uriel jumped clear before it hit. Nero looked over at him and shook his head. "That was a risky manoeuvre," he said. "What if it had rolled when it fell? You would have been crushed *and* impaled."

Uriel nodded and said, "I know, but it is dead, and that is all that matters."

He regrouped with his squad, pleased that everyone had made it through the attack unhurt. Even Livius Hadrianus had escaped serious injury, though blood pulsed weakly from the gouge torn in his plastron. The rest of his command squad were spattered in mud, but were magnificent in their defiance. Though the black rain had been unceasing since the battle's opening, the fabric of the 4th Company banner was unsullied by so much as a single stain.

Ten Ultramarines warriors were out of action, and three of those would never fight again. Their line had held the first surge of the daemon engines, but looking out into the rain- and lightning-filled gorge, he saw them massing for another attack.

"They'll be back at us before long," said Nero, echoing his thoughts and swinging his blade to loosen the muscles of his shoulders.

"Let them come," answered Cyprian, punching a fist into his palm, "I could use a fight worthy of my strength. The Bloodborn are no sport. Thank the primarch for that, but still..."

"Even you have your work cut out with these creatures," said Hadrianus, fitting a fresh power cell into his melta gun. "Care to wager on that?"

"No. I'd hate to see one tear your head off just to be proved right."

"They wouldn't dare," warned Cyprian.

"No one could pull your head off, Cyprian," said a voice. "You've no neck to tear it from."

Uriel knew that voice well, and smiled to see Pasanus lead the Firebrands alongside the Swords of Calth. Tactical Squad Nestor held position to Uriel's left, and Chaplain Clausel led Pasanus' squad into position on the right. His friend's warriors were battered from their fight against the Bloodborn and the daemon engines. None had fallen, though all now sported impressive gouges torn in their armour.

"Good to have you with us," said Uriel, surprised at how much he missed having Pasanus at his side in battle. As coordinated a fighting unit as the Swords of Calth were, they had not the decades of familiarity shared by Uriel and Pasanus.

"You need me here," said Pasanus. "You'd miss my earthy counsel and sage advice. After all, this is no different to the Guard. It's the sergeants who really run things here, eh? Isn't that right, Nestor?"

Sergeant Nestor nodded and said, "As you say, Sergeant Pasanus."

Pasanus gestured out into the shell-cratered wasteland and said, "Looks like this is where they're going to hit us hardest when they come at us again, so I rounded up some help."

Three towering shapes marched between the Rhinos, armoured behemoths of ceramite and steel and flesh, with an arsenal of deadly weapons carried in their mighty fists.

"I brought Dreadnoughts," said Pasanus.

Thus far in the battle, the 4th Company's Dreadnoughts had fulfilled a fire support role, but this fight was sure to get up close and personal very quickly. Having their ancient strength in the battle line would bolster the resolve and courage of every warrior who fought in their shadow.

The 4th Company had once boasted four Dreadnoughts, but Brother Barkus had been lost on Espandor in the defence of Corinth. His death had been a grievous blow, for he had served the Chapter faithfully for nearly a thousand years and carried wisdom and courage within his breast that would likely never be seen again.

Brother Speritas and Brother Zethus dwarfed the Space Marines, their armoured sarcophagi emblazoned with golden laurels, mailed fists and Ultramarines icons rendered in glittering quartz. Both had swapped their weapon loads to ones designed for close quarters battle. Speritas mounted a vast flamer on one fist, its burner nozzle flickering with blue fire, while on the other was a crackling pneumatic hammer weapon capable of pounding its way through metres of adamantium in seconds.

Zethus, always the subtler warrior, mounted a crackling energy fist and an assault cannon.

Both Dreadnoughts had fought alongside Uriel in the Pavonis campaign, though he had never known them in life. The 4th Company's final Dreadnought, however, was one Uriel had known for many years.

Techmarine Harkus had been mortally wounded on Pavonis, but his grim determination to live had seen his wrecked body held in stasis and returned to Macragge where he had been accorded the honour of being interred within one of the Chapter's most sacred relics. His forge had been rebuilt on Macragge, and one arm had been replaced with a multi-functional servo-arm equipped with lethal drills and energy cutters.

"Brother Harkus," said Uriel with a bow. "You honour us with your presence."

"It has been too long since I fought with my battle-brothers," said Harkus, marching past Uriel to take his place in the battle line. Uriel watched him go.

"Talkative as ever I see," said Pasanius.

"Harkus was never the most forthcoming of warriors," said Uriel. "Even when he walked among the 4th in the flesh."

"Aye, well it seems his interment has done nothing to change that," observed Pasanius.

"No, but I do not value him for his loquaciousness," said Uriel.

"True enough. That drill arm looks handy," said Pasanius. "And his plasma cannon will do some real damage."

Uriel looked out over the ruins and blasted wasteland of the gorge, as the maddening drums sounded from behind the wall the Iron Warriors had constructed. Its builders had not been idle during the fighting. Fresh bastions and redoubts had been built into its structure, and his enhanced vision saw that it had been pushed out from the tunnel mouth, swallowing yet more of Calth's precious land.

Bilious anger rose in Uriel's throat at the sight of so much destruction on a world he had naively assumed was proof against all attacks. The fire-blackened ruins wept black tears from broken windows and the burning forests threw up sparks as the daemon machines burst from the tree line. At the same instant, a line of banners appeared at the ramparts of the walls and a host of Bloodborn warriors charged from the gates.

The ground shook with a bass rumbling, like the first tremors of a violent earthquake, and Uriel gripped the exhaust vent of the Rhino next to him. Warriors looked around in shock, casting anxious glances towards the cavern's ceiling as splintered stone and dust drifted downwards. Cave quakes were not unknown on Calth, but the sustained rumble and deep vibration told him this was no natural earth tremor.

"Guilliman protect us!" hissed Brutus Cyprian, and Uriel saw the vast shadow of the Black Basilica loom over the walls, its enormous bulk a deeper darkness than the bleakest night. Streaking shells arced overhead from those few Defence Auxilia artillery pieces that had survived the sorcerous lightning, but bursts of crimson lightning flared with every impact and obliterated each warhead without effect. Its frontal cannon thundered and a hundred-metre section of the defence line vanished in a blazing tsunami of fire.

The vox-bead in his ear chirruped, and Uriel recognised the cog icon of Magos Locard in his visor. The message icon blinked a furious red, and he opened the link.

"Magos," he said, "this is not the best time."

"Captain Ventris, I must inform you that five enemy war machines are tunnelling beneath your position right now," said Locard. "My projection is that they will emerge some three hundred metres behind your current location. I cannot discern their payload, but from the weight to speed ratio, I suspect traitor Astartes."

"As though this battle isn't going to be hard enough to fight on one front," cursed Uriel.

"I have despatched Commander Trejo's skitarii to your location," said Locard. "They should be with you momentarily."

"Understood. Ventris out."

Uriel turned and said, “Ultramarines, stand to! Even squads pull back two hundred and fifty metres and watch for emerging underground transports in our rear echelons. Odds maintain position and stand ready for battle. Courage and honour!”

And the slaughter began anew.





# THE CHAPTER'S DUE

## SIXTEEN

Though artillery hammered them and the Defence Auxilia shredded hundreds with flanking fire, the charge of the Bloodborn and the daemon engines could not be stopped. Unleashed with disciplined precision, the host of enemy crashed into the Ultramarines lines with a booming of thunder that rang in time with the drums. The 4th Company braced to receive the charge, and their line bent back like a bowstave pulled to the point where the heartwood snaps.

Barking guns, shrieking saws and crackling blades lit the conflict with a stuttering, flickering light, like welding torches in a shipwright's yard. Daemon engines let loose whooping alien squeals and howls, gouging a path through the centre of the line, hurling men aside like straw dolls. Each breakthrough was met by a fluid reserve, a battering ram of shield-bearing veterans who marched into the teeth of every assault with stoic courage.

Shredding gunfire swept across the front lines from the scores of weapons mounted on the Black Basilica: thumping automatic cannons, explosive shells and dancing arcs of sheet lightning, A hellish wall of fire leapt from the ground like a great curtain, burning armour and flesh alike. The booming grind of its tracks split the air as it pushed up to the arc of the fortress walls; a black behemoth crawling forward with relentless, grinding inevitability.

The Bloodborn swarmed through the conflict like ants in the midst of a battle between giants. These mortal warriors could not hope to best the Ultramarines in contests of skill or strength, but they mobbed them like hounds attacking a bear, hoping to drag their foes down by weight of numbers.

And it looked like it was working.

Uriel held the Ultramarines together in the face of a furious storm of blades and daemonic fury, but ultimately there was little that could be done to stem the blood-hungry tide.

Then the skitarii came.

Yes! Trejo had led the skitarii of Magos Locard's expeditionary forces for nearly a decade, and had risen through the ranks for another twenty-two before that. In that time, his body had been augmented, up-armoured and weaponised thirty-six times. Little now remained of his original body, but he cared nothing for that. All that mattered was that he was bigger, faster, tougher and meaner than ever before.

He and a thousand warriors swarmed over the mud-slick western slopes of Four Valleys Gorge, a surge tide of screaming killers as outlandishly attired as anything in the army they charged. They wore a riot of gleaming plates buckled over engorged musculature, with alien pelts and skulls adorning the shoulder guards of their armour. Each man was a feral killer, honed with technological mastery and bred to be a superlative taker of lives.

Trejo's steel jaw foamed with alchemical anger, the red mist of the berserker shackled to the rigidly logical thought processes of a Mechanicus warrior. For all its wildness, his was no rampaging mass of warriors. Mixed in with the skitarii were hundreds of Praetorians, tracked battle servitors armed with the deadliest weaponry known to the Martian Priesthood.

Streaming lines of vivid fire lashed the enemy flanks, tearing great gouges in the body of the Bloodborn. Banners telescoped from backpacks and a forest of firearms lowered towards the enemy, a mix of plasma weapons, rotary cannons and laser lances. Swords and axes blistering with blue light were unsheathed and implanted high-energy beamers unleashed a blizzard of energy and solid rounds that ripped through the Bloodborn in a murderous storm.

The enemy reeled from this sudden thrust into its vitals, but the Bloodborn were trained soldiers led by cool-headed officers, and they realigned their flanks to meet this new attack with commendable speed. They moved swiftly, but not swiftly enough, and Trejo's enhanced tactical awareness immediately saw the weakest point of the new formation. He had no need to issue orders; a neural command unit linked his mind with the cortical subnet of every warrior in his force, and the fiercest warriors of his host smoothly moved into a lethal speartip the instant before they hammered home into the mass of enemy.

Stimm dispensers and adrenal shunts flooded their bodies with volatile chemical fuel, heightening aggression and reflex speed to levels almost the equal of the Adeptus Astartes. Screaming blades tore through the Bloodborn as the skitarii force smashed home, a mechanised host of savage fighters who killed without remorse, without fear and without pause. The wedge of skitarii punched deep into the Bloodborn, the fight a seething mass, thousands deep, that tore at one another with mechanised weaponry, unbridled ferocity and clinical precision.

The mud sucked and clung to his feet, and the rain washed his body of blood as Trejo hurled himself into the nearest mass of enemy warriors, las-rounds spanked from his armour and a solid round ricocheted from his jaw. He gave a bark of laughter, harsh and merciless,



as he landed in their midst.

Trejo slammed his steel mask face into the nearest Bloodborn soldier, shattering the man's skull as he shot another three dead with his shoulder-mounted plasma gun. His sword plunged through the chest of another as his weaponised arm barked and cut down another handful with explosive rounds. He let loose a howl as he moved deeper into the enemy ranks, his Praetorian escort blazing with rapid streams of solid rounds that hurled enemy warriors in all directions.

The dispenser on his other shoulder coughed a handful of grenades over the heads of the enemy in front of him, and he saw a pair of daemon engines vanish in a sheet of white-hot fire. Eye-watering squalls of dark energy shot skyward, and Trejo relished their deaths as much as he mourned the corruption and loss of once-proud mechanisms. The bloodshed raged around him, impossible to read without specialised vision implants, and Trejo knew his charge had torn a bleeding chunk from the enemy. He grimaced at the vulgarity of his viscerally biological metaphor. The Bloodborn fled before him, trampling one another in their haste to be away from his bloodstained glory. He laughed his harsh grating laugh as he watched them go. A vile machine squirt of corrupt binary made him spin as his sensor-sphere registered the presence of three daemon engines behind him.

Two of his Praetorians exploded and the third was hacked in two by a chainblade as long as two large men. A titanic daemon engine reared up behind him, four metres tall and crafted like a giant metallic scorpion. Its tail lashed over its back and he swung his sword up in time to block the downward slash of its lightning-sheathed stinger. His blade spat bright sparks and a squall of discharge.

His shoulder gun punched a bolt of plasma into its guts, and a looping coil of machine parts and cabling flooded out in a wash of cauterised metal and plastic. The beast seemed not to care, and another machine slammed a metal leg into his side. Trejo felt his reinforced ribs shatter. Pain balms flooded his system, not swiftly enough to spare him the agony of jagged metal puncturing his plasteel lung, but quick enough to keep him on his feet. He rolled aside as the third machine came at him, and he cursed as his internal heat gauges told him his plasma gun hadn't yet cooled down enough to fire safely.

"The hell with that," he said and fired a sustained burst anyway.

Four blue-hot darts sawed through the machine's body, and it blurted its mechanical death scream in a hash of binary. Scalding steam vented from the plasma gun and three of its coils exploded, bathing his shoulder in searing plasma. His armour melted under the intolerable heat, and he staggered away from the machines as they came for him.

A furious blizzard of gunfire bisected a daemon engine, and Trejo flinched as a burning piece of shrapnel sliced the skin of his forehead. Blood spilled into his eyes and the giant scorpion engine roared with daemonic fury as a blaze of gunfire enveloped it. Sparks flew from its armoured carapace, but this only drove its unnatural rage to new heights.

Trejo backed away, and felt a sudden presence beside him. Only a split-second reading of its Imperial biometrics kept him from cutting it down with his sword.

He wiped the blood from his eyes and saw it was a woman in a dark stormcoat, its long tails whipped by the wind so that it looked as though she wore a billowing cloak of midnight velvet. Her hair was pure white, blown out behind her in a howling wind that had nothing to do with the unnatural storms conjured by the enemy.

Imperial storm-troopers flanked her, shooting the daemon engine with implanted weaponry at least the equal of that carried by Trejo's skitarii. He didn't recognise the insignia on their shoulder guards, but the multi-spectral grafts in his eyes saw the invisible electoos beneath the woman's skin.

"Inquisition," he growled.

She heard him even over the thunder and drums and rain, meeting his augmetic gaze with ice blue eyes that brimmed with barely-contained power. She said a single word that sent a jolt of fear into Trejo's flood-stream.

"Malleus," she hissed.

She carried an ivory staff veined with green like marble, and jabbed it towards the daemon machines. "Keep them away from me," she said. "It will make your job easier."

Trejo racked the arming mechanism on his implanted arm-cannon and nodded, unwilling to speak to an agent of the holy ordos any more than was necessary. He summoned more Praetorians and skitarii huscarls with a terse data burst as two storm-troopers with long barbed mancatchers pushed a pair of chanting acolytes towards the woman.

Swathed in robes belted with knotted silver cords, their heads were bare to the elements. Rain poured over their shaven scalps and ran down their upturned faces like black tears. Trejo saw their eyes were sealed, sutured and las-burn closed, and collars of cold iron crackled and fizzed with chained energies about their necks.

He backed away from the woman as the collars popped from the acolytes and a biting metallic flavour flooded his mouth, filling it with acrid saliva. He spat, but couldn't get rid of the taste, and sent a coded squirt of data to his warriors to keep away from this witch woman.

The scorpion creature loomed over her, but she didn't flinch.

She spared Trejo a quick glance as her staff flared with aetheric fire.

"Best keep your distance," she said, her eyes weeping blue fire. "This won't be pretty."

Vast geysers of molten earth erupting skyward announced the emergence of the drilling rigs Locard had warned him about. Uriel had felt the thunderous tremors of their imminent penetration of the ground, but wasn't prepared for the sheer violence as they burst through. Like enormous artillery strikes, the ground heaved and bucked before finally imploding downwards as the supporting bedrock was pulverised.

A shooting spume of rock and dust exploded outwards as four conical snouts emerged from beneath the ground and the Shockwaves of their arrival flattened everything for a hundred metres in all directions. The one nearest Uriel ripped upwards through a burning supply station, its iron skin blackened, dented and scored after its journey beneath the surface. Superheated steam vented in scalding jets from its sides, boiling alive those unfortunate enough to be too close.

The tunneller reared up like a missile emerging from an underground silo, throwing off clods of rock and dirt and dust as it leaned like a foundation-sick tower. It wobbled for a moment, before passing its centre of gravity. The tunneller fell slowly and without grace, slamming into the ground with a thunderous reverberation of metal on stone as it demolished the vast supply station. "Quick!" shouted Uriel. "Before they debark!"

The Ultramarines had turned to meet this new threat at the appearance of the skitarii. Leaving a token force of Space Marines to bolster the flood of Defence Auxilia soldiers, Uriel led the Swords of Calth and the Firebrands towards the tunneller. Raking blasts from the guns of the Black Basilica were gouging great holes in the defence line, and its main gun was pounding the walls of Castra Occidens with murderous bombardments that had already flattened one portion of the wall and would soon reduce the entire fortress to rubble. *Lex Tredecim* had not yet entered the fight, but Uriel wasn't surprised. The Mechanicus were loath to commit such precious items of technology to battle without overwhelming support, and Locard, for all his past affiliation with the Ultramarines was still, first and foremost, a priest of Mars.

The rain was dispersing the clouds of steam and Uriel's guts tightened at the sight of the yellow and black chevrons on its leading edges. There could be no mistaking the brutal practicality of the Iron Warriors iconography, and he felt a knot of apprehension at the thought of coming face to face with Honsou once again.

One of the tunnellers exploded as a particularly accurate salvo of armour-penetrating shells ripped through its armour and blew it apart from the inside. The pressurised air of its interior caught light and vaporised its occupants in a raging firestorm that left nothing but ashes and fused bone in its wake.

The assault doors blew down with a dull bang and deployment ramps extended to the ruins on the ground. Raking blasts of las-fire blistered the side of the tunneller and a missile exploded against its armoured plates. A company of Defence Auxilia were closer than the Ultramarines, and a captain in a white cloak and bronze breastplate led a charge of blue-jacketed soldiers onto the ramp to meet the invaders.

Assault launchers fired and swept the ramp with whickering blasts of fragmentation bursts. The captain was the first to die, shredded to torn scraps of meat, and a dozen others perished with him. A secondary wave of explosions tore up half his company and the rest fell back amid streams of gunfire from automated turrets.

Squads of enemy infantry poured from the interior of the underground transport, but they weren't Iron Warriors. A hybrid mix of traitor Astartes and xenos mercenaries fanned out onto the soil of Calth, firing as mismatched an array of weaponry as Uriel had ever seen. He recognised carnivorous kroot mercenaries and yet more of the Bloodborn, but leading the assault were warriors from at least two Chapters of fallen Astartes.

"Emperor's mercy," hissed Livius Hadrianus at the sight of them, "I see them, yet I can still barely believe such a thing."

First down the ramp were warriors in the blood-red armour of the same berserkers they had fought on Tarentus. Librarius records had identified them as the Skulltakers, a renegade Chapter last seen in the vicinity of the Ghouls. The Claws of Lorek in their tiger-striped armour advanced behind them, firing into the Defence Auxilia as they came. Deadly accurate bolter fire turned men into hollowed-out sacks of blood, and the berserkers scooped up handfuls of viscera as they charged past glistening piles of remains.

"The Emperor has forsaken them," snarled Brutus Cyprian, hefting his boltgun and slamming home a fresh clip. "And don't speak of mercy this day."

Uriel's warriors were itching for this fight, but even as he drew a bead on the lead berserker, he knew this assault made no sense. Sudden, devastating surprise attacks were just the kind of shock tactics the Space Marines excelled at, so why send such dross as xenos mercenaries to do the job?

That was a question for another time, and he pulled the trigger. A berserker dropped, the side of his helmet blown off, but it was the last shot Uriel would get.

The berserkers fell upon the Defence Auxilia in a frenzy of chopping blades. It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter of children before a rampaging tide of killers. Though scored, dented and ill-kept, the armour of the Skulltakers was proof against most weapons the Defence Auxilia could bring to bear at close range. Revving chainaxes tore off mortal arms at the shoulder and ripped through pelvises and spines with equal glee. Blood sprayed and guts were spilled to the ground, mixing the death-stink of opened bellies and bowels.

"Squads, brace for firing," ordered Uriel.

Petronius Nero said, “Captain, the risk of collateral damage is high.”

“I know,” said Uriel. “But the Auxilia troops engaged with the Skulltakers are already lost. Death at our hands will be a blessing upon them.”

Nero nodded and pulled his bolter tight in against his shoulder.

“All squads, fire!” shouted Uriel and a wall of bolter fire hammered the ongoing slaughter. A handful of berserkers dropped, as did many of Calth’s defenders. It pained Uriel to give such an order. His whole life had been spent in the defence of humanity, but what he had told Nero was true; this was a far easier death than any the berserkers would offer.

The Swords of Calth ran towards the enemy survivors as the xenos mercenaries began spreading out and the Claws of Lorek pushed into the ruins.

Pasanius ran over to him, the black rain streaming from the dulled metal of his arm. His flamer tank was dented with bullet impacts and the burner nozzle was sticky with oil-dark blood and skull fragments.

“Where do you want the Firebrands?” asked Pasanius.

“I want you and Clausel to hook right,” said Uriel. “Keep those kroot contained. If we lose them, we will forever be looking over our shoulders.”

“Done,” said Pasanius, loping off with his fist raised to shoulder height to rally his squad.

Uriel turned towards his standard bearer. “Ancient, make sure none of those bastards gets anywhere near our banner,” he said.

“Not while I draw breath,” Peleus assured him.

Uriel nodded. “Let’s go,” he said.

Gunn Slav worked the chain to the magazine, hauling on the rusted block and tackle to raise another crate of shells for the gatling cannon on the starboard cliff of the Black Basilica. His hunched back and grossly swollen shoulder muscles gave him a simian stature that kept him from the battle lines, but made him an ideal loader for the diabolic guns. It was a task he relished, for it allowed him a chance to strike back at the Imperium that had cast him out as a mutant and wanted nothing more than to see him burn. His physique was massively out of proportion, twisted and ungainly, but incredibly powerful and enhanced by muscle boosters and a hissing, pneumatic lifter harness.

It had been so long since he had escaped from the gibbet outside Confessor Malachai’s temple that he no longer remembered how long he had served in the armies of the Eternal Powers. He remembered the long flight into the wilds of his home world and the baying of his hunters, but beyond that, there was little other than their vengeful shrieks turning to terrified screams as the star warriors descended from the skies to butcher them.

He’d almost died too, but one amongst the star warriors had seen a use for him, and he had served them with absolute loyalty ever since the day they had reduced his home world to a smoking wasteland. His old name was a thing to be shed, like a diseased skin, for it was an Imperial name. His masters hadn’t deigned to give him a new one, and simply called him gun slave. In their guttural accent, the second part of his name was rendered as *Slav*, and that had become his new identity; one he bore with perverse pride.

Cowled in dark robes, he moved back and forth across the upper ramparts of the Black Basilica with a shuffling gait. The thunder of the clouds and the hot rain were a benediction upon him, the booming echoes of drums the sound of joy unfettered. It was his duty to ensure that every one of the Basilica’s tier guns was supplied with ammunition.

He clamped his misshapen fingers around the edge of the ammo crate and dragged it towards the blackened machine creatures that were as much part of the guns as any of its moving parts. Skull-faced, gibbering things, they leered at him as he eased the gleaming belts of shells into the clattering feeder breech. Each shell was as long as Slav’s forearm, touched by the gods of the warp and an instrument of vengeance. The breech snapped shut, nearly taking off his fingers, and Slav grinned.

“Not this time, my bonny,” he gurgled through a toothless, malformed mouth.

He half-limped, half-slithered back to the blast shield covering the magazine chute at the rear of the Basilica’s upper tier. The vast cathedral was moving again, crushing the land beneath it as it advanced with inexorable inevitability. The flanking guns were howling for more ammo, crackling bursts of impatient binaric squalls.

An armoured trapdoor in the armoured decking of the tier, the blast shield was secured by thick bolts and a heavy locking wheel. So vast was the door, that not even the enlightened Astartes who served the true gods could open it without specialised lifter equipment. Yet to Slav, lifting the door open was as effortless as breathing.

He hauled the door open and looked down into the blackness of the Basilica’s interior. A powerful stench of nameless odours drifted up to him, a noisome mix of stagnant oils, sour milk and burned meat. To some it was unpleasant, but Slav had become used to it over the years he had served as crew. He never stopped to wonder what that stench might be. It just was.

He heard a muffled thud of something heavy landing on the deck behind him, but didn’t pay it too much attention. There were always

strange noises here, and it didn't pay to seem too keen on what was causing them. Besides, the ammo elevator was grinding its way up the shaft, laden with fresh crates of copper-jacketed shells, high-yield energy batteries and concentrated promethium canisters.

Then he heard the gurgling screams of the skull-faced things. Slav turned around, shifting his entire bulk to do so. He frowned. Things were not as they ought to be. For one, the guns on the upper tier weren't firing. That fact was easily explainable.

Warriors in black armour, like shadows come to life, were carving them up with gleaming bone-white claws of shimmering light. More were climbing over the high ramparts of the Basilica's upper tier. Slav's mind couldn't process what he was seeing. How could they have climbed the sides of the Basilica? It was impossible for numerous reasons, not least of which was that its sides were blistered with defensive guns and it was behind the wall the Bloodborn's masters had built.

There were ten warriors, powerful and clad in armour of such blackness that they were like the basalt statues that stood at the mouth of the temple of the Encarmine Abyssal.

These were Adeptus Astartes. The enemy. The hated. Slav's blood ran hot, his stunted cognitive functions finally processing that he was faced with an enemy he could kill. He didn't have to watch as the skull-faced gunners killed with the shells he delivered to them.

He roared with hatred and lumbered across the deck, but before he had taken more than half a dozen steps one of the black figures turned and aimed a weapon with a dull black and non-reflective surface towards him. It spat bolts of fire, each one of them punching through his chem-bulked body and ripping bloody chunks of meat from his flesh. He felt the pain, but didn't care. His nervous system was so dulled with implants and booster-drugs that his pain response was almost nil. He charged into the warriors, but they were slippery like the shadows he had first taken them for, easily evading his clumsy rush.

Their claws slashed at him, pecking like carrion birds at a fresh corpse. Polluted blood frothed from his wounds, but he had enough to spare. Let them take all the blood they wanted, Slav would kill them all before they could drain him. His powerful limbs found one of the pecking birds and pummelled it with a fist like a boulder. The warrior flew back, slamming into the parapet of the upper tier and flipping over the edge.

Something landed on his shoulders. A heavy weight and a sudden sensation of tearing blades and burning skin. The pain was meaningless, but he reached up to grasp its source. He felt his hands close on hard plate and squeezed, feeling it crack beneath his grip.

Then, a pain he couldn't ignore.

Stabbing claws punched down into his neck, tearing down through the multiple layers of fat, muscle and sinew to the hard bone of his spine. He twisted his entire body, clawing at the black figure crouched on his shoulder and cutting him over and over.

"Slav kill you!" he shouted, but then he felt one last white-hot snap, like stretched elastic pulled past its breaking point. He had a split second of tortured anguish before the snap rendered everything moot as the pecking bird's claws finally sawed through his spine.

Captain Aethon Shaan dropped lightly to the decking as the hulking ogre mutant died, its spinal cord sheared between the bone fins of its shoulder blades. It had taken effort to cleave through the bone, and even then the creature had taken its own sweet time to die.

He sheathed his lightning claws and watched as his men finished the job of killing the enemy gunners. The task was inglorious but necessary, as time was now of the essence. It had taken them no small amount of time to work their way through the shell-cratered ruins, past the hordes of Bloodborn and daemon engines and over the wall.

The daemon engines had been the hardest part, the time when they had come closest to detection, for the entities animating the hybrid machines perceived the world with senses beyond the mortal five. Shaan smiled at the thought of utilising only five senses.

Fereld Laotz swung himself over the iron rampart, his movements sheepish as he rejoined his fellows after almost being knocked flying by the monster's fist.

"That was careless," said Shaan. "When we return, assign yourself a measure of penance."

Laotz bowed. "How long, my lord?"

"I leave that to you," he said, knowing Laotz would assign himself the correct amount of penance, and a little more just to make sure.

The matter of his warrior's laxity dealt with, he turned back to the opened hatch at the rear of the decking. Revys Kyre, his senior sergeant, approached him, staring down into the ink-black shaft.

"Drop the charges down and let's be on our way," said Kyre. "It won't take long for the masters of this abomination to realise their guns have gone silent. A counterattack is surely only minutes away at best."

"I know," said Shaan. "But who knows what's down there; another blast door, an energy shield. Some infernal warpcraft protection. No, we need to do this the old fashioned way."

"You always want to do things the 'old fashioned way', captain," grumbled Kyre.

"Then you should know better than to try and dissuade me," said Shaan, dropping into the darkness of the magazine chute.

**Shaan fell. He fell until he felt as though he was falling into an abyss so deep that it had no bottom. That was impossible of course—the Black Basilica was no more than a hundred metres high, yet still he fell. The blackness was absolute, impenetrable and solid, like a living thing enfolding him in its warm embrace.**

**He was used to darkness, but this sensation was unpleasant and alien. Shaan endured it until his spatial senses found solid ground. He tucked his legs under him and rolled as he hit an angled blast deflector, coming to rest on one knee with his lightning claws deployed. Reflecting traceries of energy illuminated the chute, a strangely angled shaft that reached up into impossible darkness, though its opening must surely be just above him.**

**A pneumatic elevator was limned in blue white light, greased rails carrying it at right angles to the verticality of the shaft. It passed through a fire-lit opening in an iron wall, and a heavy adamantium blast shutter clattered downward to seal off the magazine from the outside world. Quick as thought, Shaan ghosted over the rails towards the shutter and leapt forward onto the rattling elevator platform, pressing himself flat and bringing his legs around as the shutter slammed down.**

**He slid from the platform, finding himself in a wide chamber reminiscent of the hell-forges that had once held the people of Deliverance in thrall to their slavemasters of Kiavahr. In such a place had the Primarch Corax learned his craft as a silent killer, a hunter in the shadows. Bellowing furnaces roared and seethed with crimson light and the walls were lined from floor to ceiling, stretching for hundreds of metres above him in defiance of what logic told Shaan should be possible.**

**Malformed lifter servitors and scabrous slaves ferried iron crates of munitions while hissing gorgon-like overseers in hooded cowls of black directed their labours. Enforcing the will of the overseers were black-armoured templars bearing crackling energy whips. Curved tulwars were sheathed over their shoulders and they screamed from faces that were composed entirely of vox-augmitters.**

**Presiding over this hell was a monstrous face made up of cables and pallid flesh that seemed to have grown out of the far wall. Bloated and monstrous, what humanity was left to its features was blubbery and childlike. Screaming binaric hymnals spewed from its flabby lips and streams of polluted data streamed across the ceramic orbs of its eyes.**

**Shaan took in this horror in a heartbeat, but there were no shadows to be found here and he was starkly visible in this sweltering munitions factory-cum-armoury-cum-magazine. The fleshy face worked into the wall let loose a screaming blare of binary and every denizen of this fiery chamber turned towards him. The templars howled with every one of their multi-cadenced voices and the gorgon priests extended hooking blades from the wide sleeves of their robes.**

**As one they surged towards the captain of the Raven Guard.**

## **SEVENTEEN**

**Blood squirted around the blade of Uriel's sword as he tried to wrench it from the breastplate of a frothing berserker. He twisted the weapon, slicing off the warrior's fingers as he pulled himself along the blade. Uriel had already cut one of the berserker's arms from his body, but that hadn't stopped him. Only the destruction of his primary heart had slowed him down, and even then the berserker's second heart and distilled hate had sustained him.**

**Silver flashed past Uriel's head and Petronius Nero's blade neatly lopped the berserker's head from his shoulders. The berserker fell and Uriel slid his sword clear, pushing onwards through the rain and gunfire surrounding him.**

**"Incoming!" shouted Ancient Peleus, jabbing a fist to the south-east.**

**Uriel spotted it a second later. Streams of fire were converging on their advance from the tunneller's automatic gunports. Explosive gouges punched up from the ground as heavy, pounding shells tore through the rock towards them.**

**"Swords of Calth!" he shouted, angling his charge towards a derelict shrine with thick marble walls. He dived into cover as the shells sawed through, feeling the pummelling impacts even through a metre of stonework.**

**Locard's warning and the arrival of the skitarii had come on the verge of being too late.**

**The Defence Auxilia were struggling to realign their defences to ring fence the threat, but it was too late for those units closest to the threat. With the plethora of shattered buildings and wrecked tanks, the Skulltakers and the Claws of Lorek had cover enough to reach striking range of three platoons of Defence Auxilia. They had torn through them in a matter of minutes, punching a hole through the battle line and exposing the guts of Four Valleys Gorge.**

**Uriel had seen the danger and led his warriors into the fire of that crucible.**

**It was a confused mass of tar-black smoke, howling fires lit by incendiaries and horizontal streams of gunfire. The ruins of this battle were an inferno as nightmarish as any conjured by the poets of old. Uriel risked a glance around the edge of an intricately carved quoin, and**

even with his newly implanted eye, it was difficult to make much sense of this fight.

“What do you see?” asked Pasanus, leading the Firebrands into cover with the Swords of Calth, his flamer slung and his chainsword bared. His friend loved the primal destruction wrought by the flame unit, but relished the total destruction of a killing blow even more.

“Hard to say,” said Uriel. “The Claws of Lorek have torn through the closest units of Defence Auxilia troops, and the berserkers are spilling out like termites from a kicked-over nest.”

“Nice image,” said Pasanus. “What about the berserkers?”

“Who knows?” said Uriel contemptuously. “They are attacking at random and killing whoever gets in their way. I cannot see what their plan is in order to devise a means of countering it.”

“You’re assuming they *have* a plan.”

“True.”

“And the xenos? Where are they?”

“Gathered in the ruined arboretum with the Claws of Lorek. I think.”

“Our forces?”

“Squads Nestor and Dardanus are shooting from the east and west, pouring suppressive fire onto the enemy. Protus are ready to launch a counterattack if I can figure out where to unleash them.”

“And you have Zethus,” said the Dreadnought’s booming voice as it emerged from the smoke. Its power fist was smeared in blood that sizzled on its oversized chisel-like digits, and acrid smoke billowed from the slowly rotating barrels of its assault cannon.

“Brother Zethus,” said Uriel. “I would value any tactical insights you might offer.”

“Captain Ventris,” answered the Dreadnought. “Our Tactical squads have the enemy suppressed for now. The charging berserkers will soon force their fire to be redirected. When that happens, the Claws of Lorek will roll up the Defence Auxilia line. They must be broken before than can happen. Give them a target that will allow Nestor and Dardanus to pick of the berserkers.”

“A target?” said Uriel.

“Me,” answered the Dreadnought.

Uriel nodded and said, “As always, brother, your subtle wisdom is a joy to behold.”

The Dreadnought had no mode of expression other than its artificially rendered voice, but his humour was evident as his booming augmetic laughter echoed from the remains of the shrine.

Zethus angled his sarcophagus down towards Uriel and said, “Be ready.”

The Dreadnought reared up, and its assault cannon roared to life, the barrels spinning in a blur as its power fist blazed with killing light. Zethus didn’t move from cover, he moved two steps forward and smashed straight through the shrine’s walls with a thunderous jab of his fist. Marble blocks tumbled to the ground as he strode towards the swelling wedge of traitor Astartes.

“Time to die, rebel dogs!” blared Zethus, the assault cannon unleashing a hurricane of solid shot towards the enemy. Shell casings fell in a glittering rain from the weapon’s ejection port and the arboretum exploded in a blizzard of impacts. Deafening cracks rang from shattered armour plates and stone walls disintegrated under the punishing volume of fire. Zethus strode onwards, raking a solid wall of shells over the enemy position. Smoke and dust billowed from the razed ground as Claws of Lorek scattered before the Dreadnought’s advance.

Kroot warriors fled, hugging the ground or seeking cover in the trees, their flimsy bodies bursting apart in the storm. The Claws of Lorek weathered the inferno of shells, their armour able to withstand a measure of Zethus’ fire, and Uriel saw a number of the orange- and black-armoured warriors taking aim at the Dreadnought with weapons capable of breaching its armour.

“Peleus!” shouted Uriel. “Heavy weapons.”

“I see them,” confirmed his standard bearer, resting his bolter on the edge of the breach torn by the Dreadnought’s advance. Peleus sighted along the top of the weapon and pulled the trigger six times. Five warriors pitched backwards. The sixth ducked back into cover, taking his tankbusting weapon with him. It was an impressive display of skill, but Peleus had been tutored by Torias Telion, and Uriel expected nothing less.

Then Zethus was amongst the enemy, his power fist slamming left and right and hurling broken bodies through the air. The integral storm bolter filled the space around it with explosive impacts, and its augmitters blared with the Battle Hymn of the Imperium as it fought with merciless precision.

“That’s it,” said Uriel. “Swords of Calth, with me!”

Uriel’s command squad rose and charged from the ruins, pushing forward alongside Pasanus’ Firebrands. They moved swiftly, taking

shots of opportunity as they arose, picking off lone berserkers drunk on slaughter. Uriel saw the kroot pressing forward, slinking away from the fight with the Dreadnought. His warriors needed no encouragement to rake their taut xenos bodies with gunfire. Only a scant few escaped into the burning woodland.

Zethus was surrounded by enemy warriors who stabbed and shot him with desperate fury. Most of their weapons were useless, but Uriel saw one of the traitors was armed with an oversized fist that could tear through Zethus' armour. The warriors fighting to reach the Dreadnought turned at the sound of Uriel's charge, and the two forces met with bludgeoning force. Uriel's sword cut a traitor in half as Nero lanced his sabre through another's throat and expertly tore it up through his skull.

Pasanius hit the enemy like a blow from a thunder hammer, scattering warriors with the force of his charge. His sword swung out and hacked one of the Claws of Lorek in two. His new arm drove his blade with greater force than even Uriel could muster, and though its edge was nowhere near as lethal as the blade of Idaeus, it tore through armour with equal savagery.

Uriel shoulder charged his way through the Claws of Lorek. They fought back with strength born of desperation. They knew their surprise assault was in danger of collapsing, and fought to regain the initiative. With Pasanius on one side and Petronius Nero on the other, Uriel cut a path through the enemy towards the melee swirling around Brother Zethus.

The warrior with the power fist drew back his arm to strike Zethus as Uriel slashed his sword across the small of his back, the blade cutting deep and separating the upper half of the warrior's body from his lower. Zethus spun to face Uriel; his own fist raised, but dismissed him in an instant as he registered the colour of his armour.

The battle raged on for several brutal minutes, but with the charge of Uriel and Pasanius, the fate of the Claws of Lorek had been sealed. Relentless volleys of bolter fire from beyond the fight told Uriel that his Tactical squads had contained the threat of the berserkers. Newly realigned artillery batteries dropped shells on the tunnellers. In moments, all four were gutted hulks, blazing from their powerful drive engines to their blackened drilling rigs.

Uriel's visor streamed status updates from his squads, confirming what his instincts had already told him. He shook his sword clear of blood as the Swords of Calth set about executing any surviving enemy warriors with quick, efficient slashes of their blades. Despite this portion of the battle having been won, furious exchanges of gunfire and blades still echoed from the fighting further north.

The Battle for Four Valleys Gorge was far from over.

Pasanius approached Uriel and removed his helmet. Uriel saw he was beaming with undisguised pleasure at the devastation they'd wrought. His armour was scored and slowly coagulating blood flowed from a deep cut on his thigh.

"A hard fight, my friend," said Uriel.

Pasanius chuckled. "I've known tougher," he said. "Remember the fight to get into Honsou's fortress?"

"I would rather not."

"Ah, but it's been too long since I swung a blade," said Pasanius. "I know it's my own fault, but that *felt good*. Every day I spent in penance, knowing I was missing the fighting on Pavonis, was torture."

"I am sure it was. And what better way to end that penance by killing traitors."

"Ach, these lads? They aren't first generation," said Pasanius kicking a dismembered corpse at Uriel's feet, a warrior he didn't remember killing. "They're a founding from way down the line. Copies of copies of copies. You don't dilute Astartes blood for thousands of years without seeing it become thin and weak."

Uriel wanted to say that Pasanius was wrong, that the dead didn't care whether they were killed by inferior copies of the first Astartes or the genuine article. He looked away, watching as the structure of the nearest tunneller finally gave out under the punishing barrages of artillery. Sparks and blazing wreckage lit the walls of the cavern with a brilliant orange glow, and Uriel saw smoke rising from each one of the wrecks.

He took a deep breath, knowing how close they had come to losing this fight, when a sudden thought caused his skin to grow clammy and sticky. He scanned the scarred battle lines where the tunnelling war machines had emerged and pressed his hand to his ear.

"Magos Locard, confirm how many incoming tracks you were reading," he demanded.

The vox-bead in his ear hissed until Magos Locard answered.

"The seismic augurs detected five tracks, Captain Ventris," said Locard.

Uriel shut off the vox-link and said, "Pasanius, come on!"

He set off at a run towards Castra Meridem where the massive form of *Lex Tredecim* was concealed in a patch of dead ground.

"Where are we going?" shouted Pasanius.

"Five tracks!" cried Uriel. "Locard detected five incoming tunnellers!"

“And?”

“I only count four wrecks here,” said Uriel. “So where in Guilliman’s name is the fifth?”

Aethon Shaan leapt for the far wall of the Black Basilica, dispensing a magnetic charge from the dispenser on the upper surfaces of his gauntlet.

He kicked off the wall, somersaulting over the heads of three of the whip-armed templars as the crackling barbs lashed out at him. Shaan landed behind them, punching his claws through the back of the first and breaking the spine of another with a thunderous kick.

A tulwar arced towards his head as the templar creatures swarmed him. He swayed aside and deflected the return stroke with a graceful backhanded blow that shattered the blade and sent fragments into the augmitter face of the warrior. Its permanent scream was instantly cut off as Shaan dropped below their slashing blades and jabbed out at groin height with his tearing claws.

Enemy warriors fell and he launched more magnetised grenades from his gauntlet.

A whip cracked and Shaan’s right arm was jerked back, pulling him off balance. One of the black-armoured templars darted in to stab him, but Shaan lowered his shoulder and the blade shattered on his pauldron. Another whip snagged his left arm, pulling his limbs wide, but Shaan flicked his wrists and sliced through the energy whips.

Shocking, electric feedback surged along Shaan’s arms and he gritted his teeth against the pain as his nervous system overloaded. He dropped to one knee as two of the templars rushed in, their vox-augmitter faces blaring unintelligible hatred. Powerful arms encircled him, the grossly swollen musculature of a lifter servitor, but before they could close, he vaulted upwards, pushing up with all his strength and cracking the top of his helmet into its jaw. The cybernetic slave’s head snapped back with a horrid crack and it toppled back with its neck broken by the force of the blow.

Shaan squirmed free of its grip and dived to the side as yet more templars and lifter servitors closed in. He launched a flurry of grenades deep into the depths of the ammunition racks, and leapt from crate to crate as he made his way towards the end of the chamber and the bloated, screaming face meshed with the iron wall.

It screamed in debased binary, but whether it was a warning or scream of fear was impossible to tell. A whip slashed his side and he bit back a scream as it hissed through his armour and bit deep into his pale flesh.

Shaan landed lightly and rolled to his feet on the iron plinth before the oversized face in the wall. The gorgon overseers had rallied around it, their arms transformed into blades. They stabbed at him with blinding speed. They were fast, but Shaan was faster, and he met their every thrust and lunge with powerful ripostes. One by one, he cut them down, fighting his way through them with a skill known only to those trained on the Ravenspire.

The last of the gorgon priests died with a squeal of scrapcode. Shaan leapt over its corpse towards the face. He punched his clawed gauntlet through the bridge of the nose and tore upwards. The entire structure of the armoury shook and bilious white fluid erupted from the ruined face. The templars shrieked in harmony with the death of the face and two dropped dead on the spot. The lifter servitors halted in their tracks.

He’d killed the master of the armoury, but he’d boxed himself in. A cardinal sin, he knew, but he had gambled in the timing of his attack and that calculated risk was about to pay off.

As the remaining templars closed in, precision bolter fire cut them down from behind. Each shot was taken with great skill, for a single rogue shell would be the death of them all. The walls still shook with the agonised death throes of the face, and Shaan retracted the claws on his gauntlets.

Revys Kyre and the rest of his Raven Guard spread throughout the armoury, needing no direction in how best to plant their own charges.

“You took your time,” said Shaan. “Another few seconds and I might actually have been in danger.”

“The blast shutter was tough to cut through,” said Kyre.

Shaan turned towards the racks of shells, power packs and canisters of fyceline and promethium.

“Right, let’s get the charges set,” said Shaan. “The old fashioned way, eh?”

“The old fashioned way is messy,” said Kyre, seeing the gash in Shaan’s side. “I prefer clean and quick. In and out before the enemy even knows we’re here.”

“That wasn’t going to happen this time.”

“I suppose not,” agreed Kyre. “But we should get done here before it gets messier.”

Shaan grinned. “Oh, it’s going to get a whole lot messier before we’re done.”



Locard watched the lines of battle ebb and flow across the holo-sphere, staring into the confused morass of icons as though willing the blue and white icons to push the hateful red of the enemy back. The gold of Trejo's skitarii were so hopelessly embroiled with the daemon engines and Bloodborn that it was next to impossible to tell what was happening. Even real-time pict-imagery was useless. Locard was no warrior, and could not tell which force had the upper hand in the seething brawl of machines.

"Add encrypted Mechanicus layer," he commanded, and one of the data servitors on *Lex Tredecim's* command bridge chimed as it confirmed his order.

A soft static burr overlaid the battle imagery on the outside of the holo-sphere, noospheric data streams passing back and forth at incredible speeds between the skitarii, Praetorians and *Lex Tredecim's* battle cogitators. Passing information in this manner allowed a level of coordination unimaginable to any other armed force in the Imperium. Locard processed the information in his hindbrain implants, but kept himself aloof from the myriad communications passing between the Praetorians and skitarii. Lingua-technis battle-cant was a robust, belligerent machine language and was painful to those unused to such primal binaric arrangements.

Beyond the layer of Mechanicus control, more easily accessible information was displayed on a lower layer of the sphere, and Locard focussed his attention on this. Ultramarines forces made surges into the mass of enemy forces, but were more often than not forced to pull back for fear of being encircled and cut off. The one beacon of light in the midst of the daemon engines was the pulsing silver icon of Inquisitor Suzaku. She and her acolytes were emptying machines of their daemoniac hosts with powerful psychic mastery, and Locard swung his imagers to watch her.

Guarded by her augmetic storm-troopers, Suzaku directed the energies of two bound battle-psykers with shimmering bursts of pyrotechnics that even his multi-spectral picters couldn't interpret without hazing the sphere with static. Gunfire and chattering machines with slashing blade limbs came for her, but those soldiers nearest her had quickly recognised the value of her presence. Ad hoc squads of Defence Auxilia had formed on her flanks to protect her.

"Keep her safe," whispered Locard, though there was no need to keep his voice low. The ordos and the Adeptus Mechanicus had a relationship that could best be described as prickly, but Locard would have gladly seen an entire cohort of inquisitors coming over the hill right now.

The Raven Guard had finally appeared on the holo-sphere, on the Black Basilica of all places, but where else should he have thought to look save where he had least expected to see them?

"I should be quite interested in how you avoided detection," he said, knowing the Raven Guard would never divulge such secrets.

Yet the more he watched, the more it seemed like as though the tide of battle was, ever so slowly, turning in favour of the Imperial forces. Trejo's stabbing wedge of skitarii and Praetorians were pushing deeper into the mass of Bloodborn, while platoons of Defence Auxilia began forcing the enemy back over the original front line. Each foray of the Ultramarines cut deeper into the daemon host and within moments it seemed a statistical probability that they would link with the Mechanicus forces.

Every arm of this Imperial defence was working together, and a probability curve of victory appeared on the holo-sphere as the variables in its calculation became more manageable.

When the counterattack came, it was so sudden that Locard almost missed the first signs.

The constant stream of noospheric data streams suddenly doubled in its intensity as a stabbing lance of scrapcode flooded the weave of the network. Bleeding red streams of corrupt data packets exploded in the noosphere, non-Euclidian geometries and unnatural integers fouling the speedy transfer of information and sending infected data shrapnel deep into the network.

The attack surged with bludgeoning force, invading the network in a blitzkrieg fashion, seeking to overwhelm the Mechanicus network with its sheer bulk and strength. Several servitors began convulsing, as though in the grip of mechileptic fits, tearing themselves free of the network in their struggles. Emerald light erupted from a number of work stations, and warning streams of binary streamed across the holo-sphere.

Locard shifted his internal consciousness to the blaring cants of the Praetorians. One by one they halted in their tracks, guns falling silent and crushing weapons locking in place as they attempted to process the conflicting instructions flooding their cyborganic brains.

"Cleverly done, my friend," said Locard, shutting down the active receptor feeds to the Praetorians and activating his specially designed data purgatives. "But unsubtle."

Locard's hands danced across the surface of the holo-sphere, calling up his researches into the corrupt scrapcode from the data prisons in which he had contained some of the original infection.

"Your structure is chaotic and primal, but the code isn't entirely random. Nothing ever is. There is an order to the universe that not even the Primordial Annihilator can undo," said Locard. He unlocked the info-emetics he had crafted from the original scrapcode attacks on the defence platforms and starships in orbit, allowing it free rein in the noosphere.

Immediately it fell upon the attacking waves of scrapcode, golden lines of pure data slicing through the fog of infected binary and collapsing entire swathes of corrupt data. Locard let out a relieved breath, though he had no real need to intake oxygen through such a primitive method. His blood filtration systems and augmetic lungs could supply him easily enough.

"Strange how easily we revert to our primal biologies," he said with a nervous bray of artificial laughter. "Addendum for further study."

Then the scrapcode fought back.

Like a brawny axeman fighting a duellist, the scrapcode retaliated with a brutal flex of muscular code. Though Locard's info-emetics were landing graceful blows, the scrapcode's strength was greater. The leading edges of its corruption flared and died in the face of Locard's designs, but there was simply too much force and will behind it.

Locard glanced nervously at the holo-sphere, diving down through the layers to the crudity of the pict feed. The Praetorians were shutting down in the face of the cyber-attack, their aegis shields protecting them from the infection, but forcing them to inaction.

Already those shields were collapsing, eroding with horrifying swiftness in the face of such hideously powerful infection. The let-up in the attack had given the Bloodborn the lull they so desperately needed and they hurled themselves at the Imperial forces like cornered wolves.

Locard glanced at the graph of victory probability. The projected line was curving towards defeat, its projection becoming ever more unsound with this new variable dragging it down. Without the heavy firepower and monstrous combat prowess of the Praetorians, it was unlikely the Imperial forces would prevail, but should the scrapcode turn them into corrupt warriors of the enemy, the consequences would be disastrous.

"Come on, come on..." he hissed, watching the dance of numbers as his info-emetics did battle with the scrapcode. His designs were working as he had known they would, but there were simply too many streams of bad data to purge for them to be effective.

As galling as it was to admit, it seemed his promise to Captain Ventris that he could guarantee the loyalty of the Praetorians would prove to be a costly error in judgement.

Using their lightning claws as friction brakes, the Raven Guard slid down the high flanks of the Black Basilica, leaving torn gouges and fans of sparks in their wake. Aethon Shaan dropped lightly to the ground amid a cluster of debased machine priests. He killed the first and second with flicks of his razored gauntlets as the rest of his warriors landed behind him with heavy splashes in the sucking quagmire surrounding the monstrous behemoth.

Thunder crashed overhead and a streak of vivid lightning cast a flickering glow over the nightmarish landscape around the Black Basilica. At the edge of the wall, scores of heavy-limbed ogre creatures beat the stretched skin of giant steel drums with iron bars. Blasted craters filled with promethium blazed with orange light and sent up tar-black columns of smoke that reeked of burnt fat. Capering monsters in bloody armour danced to music only they could hear, and black-robed priests cursed weapons with dark rituals.

A trio of machine priests with monstrously oversized shoulders and overgrown augmentations like black angels' wings swung to face them. Their eyes blazed with jade light, and a horrific scream, deafening beyond all measure erupted from their forms.

"So much for getting out the way we got in," said Kyre.

"I said this would get messy," said Shaan.

"I thought you meant for them."

"I did," said Shaan.

This was a land of the damned and, like airborne troops landing in the middle of an enemy force, the Raven Guard needed to maintain the initiative and prevent their foes from getting off the back foot. They had hit hard, but with the enemy now aware of their presence, they needed to keep hitting hard to get out of here alive.

"Egress in force," ordered Shaan. "Do as much damage as you can on the way out. Go!"

Like a flock of startled crows, the Raven Guard split apart and dispersed into the darkness of the unnatural storm cover. Each warrior would make his own way out, moving from shadow to shadow and always choosing his path with an eye to the damage he could cause. They had come in with the darkness as their ally, but that was now stripped from them as the lightning flashed again and again, as though conspiring to unmask them in retaliation for the havoc they had wreaked here.

Shaan set off towards the wall, weaving in and out of cover. He lobbed a grenade into an ammo pile and it exploded in a blaze of light, scattering the men reaching for the weapons stacked there. They flew through the air and Shaan fired a burst of shots from his pistol into a pack of pursuing Bloodborn hunters. Two fell and the rest went to ground.

He broke left, diving behind a bullish earth-moving machine, its flanks oily and streaked with blood where it had rolled over something living. Shots sparked from the track guards and he rolled aside, leaving a grenade planted on the engine block. It detonated with a dull *whump* as he darted from cover, heading straight for a pack of soldiers with their lasrifles raised. Another grenade zipped from his gauntlet and burst in the air before them, felling those at the front with a scything blast of fragments. He leapt toward the dazed survivors, unsheathing his gauntlet blades and tearing them up with three crosswise strokes.

Their bodies hadn't even fallen when a spraying burst of las-fire pummelled his side. Pain flared as one particularly lucky shot struck the gap torn in his armour by the templar's electro-whip. His skin burned and he felt the organ beneath cauterise. He stumbled, narrowly avoiding a chattering blast of solid rounds that ripped through a timber structure filled with building materials.

He skidded around its remains, falling to one knee and pulling himself upright with a grunt of pain. The Iron Warriors' wall was less than thirty metres away, but the ogre-creatures now turned from their drumming and formed a solid wall of muscle and iron between him and escape. The drumming stopped, but that was the only good news. Speed and space were his weapons in this raven's flight, and he was rapidly running out of both.

Fortunately he had another weapon he could use.

Shaan stopped moving and walked calmly towards the brutish creatures, his hands raised in surrender.

"You really are extremely ugly things," said Shaan. "Quite repulsive in fact."

One of the creatures said something in its debased tongue, but to Shaan it was little more than a guttural drawl of meaningless syllables. He glanced over his shoulder. Thirty Bloodborn soldiers advanced towards him. They weren't shooting, which was stupid of them. They wanted a prisoner, but that wasn't going to happen.

"The thing about finding enemies in your midst is that you can never really be sure how long they've been amongst you," said Shaan. "You just don't know what they might have sabotaged before you caught them."

As the last word left his lips, he sent the detonation pulse to the explosives planted throughout the magazine of the Black Basilica.

Despair swamped Magos Locard. His info-emetics were working, they were doing what they were designed to do, but they were a guttering candle holding back a blizzard. Within minutes, the aegis barriers of the Praetorians would fall and they would turn their guns upon their erstwhile allies. The four valleys of the gorge would fill with blood and the way into Calth would be wide open.

He uncoiled a mechadendrite from his torso and plugged into the vox-net, ready to warn all Imperial forces that the Praetorians should be considered as enemy combatants, when the darkness of the cavern was banished in an instant of vapour-white brightness. Blinding light washed every colour from existence and a thundering vibration passed through the rock.

The seismic reader went off the scale for a second. "What new warpcraft are you to plague us with now?" he demanded, frustration and desperation breaking his last veneer of control.

He looked at the holo-sphere, but quickly realised he didn't need remote picters to see what had happened. A searing column of fire rose from behind the Bloodborn wall, sucking up debris, enemy soldiers and loose rock into a billowing mushroom cloud of superheated vapours and fire.

"The Black Basilica," hissed Locard. "The Raven Guard!"

Behind the wall was an inferno of cataclysmic proportions, the fireball sweeping out over the walls like a raging ocean impacting a wholly inadequate sea barrier. The battle raging throughout the cavern ceased as the force of the blast threw down men and machines, and the Shockwave pummelled the earth. Chunks of rock dropped from the roof and billowing clouds of dust gusted outwards from the explosion.

Turning from Shaan's handiwork, Locard saw the power of the scrap-code die away, like a burning refinery pipe with the supply of promethium shut off. In contrast, his info-emetics surged to life, burning away the corrupt code infesting the operating systems of the Praetorians.

Locard brought up the noospheric layer of the holo-sphere and closed his eyes as he saw how close the aegis barriers had come to failing. Less than three per cent of their integrity remained, which equated to little more than fifteen seconds of resistance to the infected lines of code. Then, like a chrono-gladiator whose death-clock had just been extended by a last-minute kill, the aegis barriers began to rebuild as Locard's emetics began systematically purging the infernal code of the dark magos.

When the barriers had rebuilt to fifteen per cent, Locard sent a manual reactivation code to the Praetorians. In moments, every one of those battle servitors would, once again, be killing the enemy with relentless, mechanical efficiency.

"Emperor bless you, Captain Shaan!" said Magos Locard.

## EIGHTEEN

Night was falling, and the traitor's screams had ceased. That meant he'd either passed out from the pain or was dead. Scipio Vorolanus didn't much care which, but it was getting tiresome hearing their bastard tongue crying out to their fallen gods to save them. He looked up into the darkening sky seeing the starlight through the clouds and wondering how his battle-brothers fared.

How went the war on Calth? Had the Chapter Master destroyed the daemon lord? Were five companies of Ultramarines even now racing towards Espandor to end this threat once and for all? Scipio idly traced patterns in the dust, battle formations and defence layouts as prescribed by the Codex when facing an enemy of superior numbers and inferior quality. He drew the diagrams without thinking, so

ingrained in his consciousness that they were second nature.

The bombed-out fabrik in which the Thunderbolts sheltered was located in an unfrequented quarter of the city, one that had suffered badly during the invasion. Most of the structures had no roofs or basic amenities left to them, and were thus unsuitable billets for the Bloodborn. The captured Rhino sat beneath a flapping sheet of tarpaulin, with Laenus trying to coax some life into the tortured engine. His warriors sat cleaning their weapons or eking out the last of their rations. One way or another, they were going to have to end this soon, for Scipio would not have his warriors eating food from the cesspool Corinth had become.

Each warrior was stripped of his armour and wore only their khaki undersuits, over which they draped ragged clothing taken from the dead or those they had been forced to kill. It had been a week since they had come to this conquered city though it felt like a lifetime. In that time, they had killed twenty-seven Bloodborn soldiers in their attempt to determine whether or not the Corsair Queen was based in Corinth.

The Bloodborn warriors they had captured all seemed to believe she was here, gathering her forces before launching her attack on Herapolis, but none of them had seen her. Even if one had claimed such knowledge, Scipio wasn't sure he could trust their word. Only after seeing Kaarja Salombar with his own eyes would he risk contact with Captain Sicarius.

To that end, he and Brother Nivian, who had lost his arm in the fight to capture the enemy Rhino, had ventured out into the city. Posing as renegade Astartes, they had walked the thoroughfares of the captive city, appalled at the degradation, needless vandalism and disrespect. Silver-skinned temples were now latrines, and civic buildings of law, justice and commerce were hung with corpses tortured for the fleeting amusement it would bring.

Yet it was the wanton lack of discipline among the Bloodborn offended Scipio the most. He knew this aspect of the enemy should have cheered him, but it was galling to see that the armed force holding Ultramar in its grip was so slovenly. Drunkenness was epidemic, and infighting was rife. Brawls broke out every hour and the streets were littered with dead bodies, their throats cut or faces shot out.

"How can anyone wish to live like this?" Nivian had asked, as they watched a group of masked Bloodborn set upon two of their own number for no apparent reason. Scipio had no answer, and they had turned a corner as the drunken Bloodborn stamped their former friends to death.

The city had fallen to wrack and ruin, its streets littered with debris and the detritus of an army that cares nothing for its billet. The stench rising from the river was appalling, and it took every ounce of Scipio's willpower to keep himself from drawing his sword and killing every Bloodborn he saw.

How could such a force be so great a threat to the Imperium? It was beyond Scipio's understanding. Where was the infrastructure, the organisation and the routine that would allow an army to function? On worlds taken by the Ruinous Powers, how could any society function without rules? Surely the worlds of the Archenemy must have some form of order imposed from higher echelons of command. How else would their armies be fed, equipped and mobilised for war? All the drunken debauchery Scipio saw only convinced him that there was an organising level of command of which he was not yet aware.

Nivian's injury allowed them to more convincingly portray themselves as part of the host, and wherever they went they were accorded the respect of the Bloodborn. Shouted oaths and cursed blessings were heaped upon them, and each one made Scipio feel unclean and tainted. Every time they saw another Astartes, they hid, ducking into the tumbled remains of a ruin or along a filth-choked alleyway.

Yet their efforts had, thus far, been in vain. They had seen signs of higher command structures, but no sign of any overall commander. Nivian, Laenus and Helicas had urged him to move on, but there was something to the energy of the Bloodborn that convinced Scipio that Salombar was here. He had nothing to base that on save suspicion, for why else would so many enemy units be gathered here?

Yet a suspicion wasn't enough to send word to Captain Sicarius.

The nagging fear that he had failed in this mission tore at him. Scipio Vorolanus had never failed at anything in his life. From the recruitment tests on Tarentus to the fires of Black Reach, he had excelled in every task. His status as a veteran sergeant was unquestioned, and many had tipped him to rise further in the ranks of the 2nd Company. All that could be jeopardised by this mission's failure, though Scipio hated the ambition he now recognised in himself.

Anger touched him, and he rose from the packing crate he sat upon and made his way over to where Helicas held the captive. The man was slumped on his side, blood pooling around his head with a speed that told Scipio he wouldn't be getting up again. His body was dressed in a patchwork uniform of many colours, looking more like a court harlequin than a soldier. A bright blue sash was tied around his waist, an affectation Scipio had learned denoted an officer, or as the corsairs called it, a Haexen.

"Any word from the other sergeants?" asked Helicas.

Scipio shook his head, irritated that he had been asked this question yet again. He took a deep breath and said, "No. It's too dangerous to make contact now we're in the city. Too easy for the enemy to triangulate our position."

"Of course, it's just that we're not getting anywhere with these prisoners. And your foot recon doesn't seem to be getting us any closer to the Corsair Queen."

Scipio ignored the unsaid wish for action. "He didn't tell you anything before you killed him?" asked Scipio, though he already knew the answer. If Helicas had learned anything, he would have told him.

"Useless bastard," hissed Helicas, as though offended at the dead man's obstinacy. He turned away from the body and wiped his bloodied

fists on a dirty rag soaked in counterseptic. “Just like all the others, sergeant. Kept telling me that the Corsair Queen’s here, but that he didn’t know where. Never seen her and wished me a thousand deaths in the same hell as my mother, where she’s apparently burning for mating with dogs.”

“Lovely,” said Scipio, keeling beside the dead man. In death, his features had softened, the lines of hatred fading from his face to leave it almost serene. But for the hateful icons burned into his cheeks, now obscured by caked blood and bruises, he could have been one of any number of Imperial citizens.

“Take off the uniform and he could be a citizen of Ultramar,” said Scipio.

“Empathising with the enemy, sergeant?” chuckled Helicas. “Never a good sign.”

“I’m not empathising, I’m lamenting,” said Scipio. “He could have been one of us, but he took a different road and now he’s dead.”

“Then he made poor life choices.”

“That he did,” agreed Scipio. “But I wonder was he corrupt from birth or did he grow to become a traitor? Where was that one moment when he decided that he was no longer a servant of the Emperor and pledged his life to the Ruinous Powers?”

“Does it matter?”

“I think it does, Helicas. To recognise that moment would allow us to prevent it. The Bloodborn are damned beyond redemption, that much is certain, but how many others, right now, are teetering on the brink of loyalty and treachery? How many of these men were born evil, and how many were made evil by the worlds around them?”

“I’m just a line warrior, sergeant,” said Helicas. “It’s the job of captains and Chapter Masters to think like that.”

“It’s everyone’s job to think like that,” snapped Scipio. “Or at least it should be.”

He shook his head, seeing that Helicas didn’t understand. As a gunner and soldier Helicas was efficient and thorough but, by his own admission, he was no thinker.

“Sorry, sergeant,” said Helicas.

Scipio felt ire and sadness blend in the forefront of his mind, and said, “An Astartes *should* be a thinker, for our bodies and minds have been crafted to be superior to mortals. It is a waste for any of us not to try and achieve our full potential as individuals. Isn’t that what Ultramar offers its inhabitants, a chance to better themselves and thrive in an environment that fosters productive people?”

The Thunderbolts turned their attention upon him, and Scipio warmed to his theme. “I have fought on hundreds of different worlds and seen a thousand different cultures. On the worst worlds, I was struck by the impossibility of change, of the wasted potential I saw in the abject poverty and desperation of the populace. The Imperium has billions of lives to spend in its betterment, but most people simply rot away in the forgotten reaches of ash-blown, oil-stained worlds of wretched despair. What chance do those people have? How many people are driven into the arms of the Archenemy by the grinding horror of their daily lives?”

“I don’t know, sir,” answered Helicas, missing the rhetorical nature of the question, and Scipio saw the man’s discomfort at being spoken to like this.

Scipio rose to his full height, looking hard at his warriors. He saw their frustration and felt their desperate need for action. He recognised it because he felt it too. A plan began to form in his mind, and though it bore all the hallmarks of one hatched by Captain Sicarius, he relished the idea of fighting back. And he knew just how to do it.

“We have been passive for too long,” he said, marching over to the Rhino and pulling the tarpaulin clear. “But that is over now.”

Nivian took a step forward from the Thunderbolts, Scipio’s bolt pistol clutched in his one remaining hand. “What are you suggesting, sergeant?” he asked.

“If we cannot find the Corsair Queen, then we will make her come to us.”

The walls of Castra Tanagra were quiet. Death had a habit of making it so. Tigurius walked along the walls of the shrine fortress, weary beyond words and soul-sick from the ever-present daemons. They gathered like a fog on the edge of sight, bathed in the energising light from the hateful, ever-present bolt of lightning that crackled on the horizon. A capering miasma of hideous forms and reptilian hunger, the daemons stared hungrily at the defenders within the fortress.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said. “This is all wrong.”

Men and women huddled in the lee of the ramparts, wrapped tightly in their cloaks and blankets. The mountains were cold and an icy wind was blowing down from the Capena Spire. Winter on Talassar was harsh, and the cold weather was coming earlier this year. Flecks of snow floated in the air, and puffs of breath could be seen before every face.

Thirteen hundred souls filled Castra Tanagra, just over half that had begun this fight. Hundreds more were dead or too wounded to fight.

Yet those who remained on the walls fought with defiance and courage. They were magnificent, but with every attack, the numbers defending the walls diminished and the spectre of defeat loomed ever larger.

Tigurius glanced over towards the drum-tower keep, its many halls filled with wounded and dead. He felt the pain bleeding from its interior like a black fog, and tried to shut out the despair it carried as he continued onwards.

Soldiers nodded to him as he passed, but none spoke to him, for he was Adeptus Astartes, and he was touched by the same powers that assailed them daily. Even the Ultramarines spoke to him only when they needed to, and loneliness touched Tigurius. He had long ago accepted that he would walk a solitary path in life, but to be facing his end in a forgotten citadel with few men he could call friend touched a raw nerve in the Librarian, and a spike of resentment flared momentarily.

He glanced down into the courtyard, seeing Marneus Calgar surrounded by the company sergeants of the 1st Company tasked with defending the eastern curve of the walls. The Chapter Master had been instrumental in the continued resistance of Castra Tanagra, fighting the daemons with such furious courage that any who saw him redoubled their efforts. Calgar looked up and waved, the Gauntlets of Ultramar cracked and dulled after so many blows. Tigurius returned the gesture and turned away, a bilious wave of nausea rising in his throat.

It was cold here, and though his battle plate protected him from the environment, an icy chill reached deep into his heart. He turned away and made his way further along the wall towards Agemman. The First Captain shared easy banter with one of his veterans, but that ended the moment he saw Tigurius.

“Librarian,” said Agemman, his face hardening to granite as Tigurius reached him. “What brings you to this section of the wall?”

“The psychic wards require strengthening,” said Tigurius, tapping golden carving worked into the sloping edge of the parapet. Its lustre was now dulled and almost invisible. “Every time the daemons attack, they sap the power from the wards the fortress’ builders wrought into its bones.”

Agemman looked at the golden sigil with a frown.

“I had assumed it was simply decorative.”

“Not so, First Captain,” said Tigurius. “They are vital to our continued survival.”

Agemman shrugged and turned away.

Anger touched Tigurius at Agemman’s boorish behaviour, and though he knew it was his exhaustion talking, he couldn’t help the barb that flew from his lips. “Without these psychic wards sapping the strength of the daemons, this would be a much harder fight.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Agemman, turning back to him.

“I am saying that we must pull back to the keep. The wall is too long to hold with so few men. The Codex says—”

“I know what the Codex says,” snapped Agemman. “I wrote enough of it.”

“By Codex principles, you don’t have enough warriors to defend a wall this long,” said Tigurius, as though Agemman hadn’t spoken. “Logic says you must pull back to the keep.”

Agemman looked set to argue, but he knew the teachings of the Codex backed Tigurius.

“Does Lord Calgar give this order?”

“Not yet, but he will.”

“Then I will wait for his order to withdraw. It sits ill for the 1st to retreat.”

“Would defeat sit better?”

Agemman scowled at him and waved a gauntleted hand towards the sigil inscribed on the merlon. “Do what you must, Librarian, and then begone. I tire of your company.”

“If you do not retreat, this wall will fall,” said Tigurius as the temperature plummeted once again. Tigurius’ breath misted before him and he tasted metal. Angry voices rose from the courtyard, and Tigurius saw several fist-fights erupt among the mortal soldiers.

“What?” said Agemman, turning back with a furious look on his face.

“Without my powers you will not hold this wall,” repeated Tigurius. “You should be begging me for my help.”

“I beg of no man, warlock,” hissed Agemman, his face inches from Tigurius and bristling with barely-restrained aggression. “This wall is held by warriors of the 1st Company, and there are no better fighters in the galaxy,”

“That will not matter. If you fight you will fail.”

“You insult the honour of the 1st!”

“There is no honour in stupidity,” said Tigurius.

Agemman’s hand stabbed out and took Tigurius by the throat, his fingers closing like a Dreadnought’s claw upon his windpipe. Tigurius expelled a gust of misty breath and clenched the muscles in his neck as frost limned the edges of Agemman’s pauldrons. A killing light glittered in the eyes of the First Captain. A raging fury that sought only to destroy.

Tigurius felt as if his entire body was immersed in an icy lake, his limbs leaden and numb. His thoughts were gelid, slow and dull-witted. So strange that his life would be ended at the hands of one of his battle-brothers; *that* was a future he had never suspected. Agemman forced him to his knees, choking the life from him with every second.

Gunshots echoed from the walls, and the bloodshed in the courtyard spread from the epicentres of violence like an airborne infection. Tigurius dropped his staff and clamped his hands on Agemman’s wrists as the crystals woven into his armour’s hood pulsed with life.

Warmth flowed into his mind, melting the cold grip of unreasoning anger that held him in its grip. He saw with total clarity, and his body threw off the unnatural belligerence driving him to violence. Tigurius opened his mind to the psychic light around the fortress, seeing a red mist seeping into the shrine fortress through the cracks in the stonework and pouring over the walls like a creeping fog. Wherever it touched, it lit the fires of resentment, jealousy and bitterness. It withered the nobility of humanity and fanned the flames of anger and hatred.

Tigurius pushed against the red mist, driving it out of his own body and sending golden light into Agemman, purging his spirit of the enemy’s warcraft in a heartbeat.

The First Captain sagged against Tigurius, the furious light in his eyes replaced with horrified understanding. His grip slackened and Tigurius pushed himself to his feet as Agemman slumped against the wall for support.

“Varro...” said Agemman. “I... Emperor’s blood, forgive me! I...”

“Apologise later,” rasped Tigurius. “The daemons will be coming.”

Agemman nodded, recovering his composure with a speed that reminded Tigurius why he was the Regent of Ultramar and Captain of the 1st Company. Tigurius reached out and placed his hand on the dulled sigil on the wall, feeling its strength eroding in the face of the enemy warcraft.

Barely any hint of power was left.

“Stupid,” he hissed. “Should have felt it, should have known. Too tired...”

Tigurius closed his eyes and allowed his consciousness to flow into the sigil, spreading through the walls to the others worked into the stonework. He poured his energy into the wards, replenishing them with power and strengthening them against attack. All along the wall, the sigils blazed with light, and the red haze over the fortress faded like morning mist.

Lingering traces of it remained, but Tigurius knew they were few and far between, remaining only as long as it took the more aggressive mortals to realise the horror of their behaviour. The icy temperatures retreated, and Tigurius let out a shuddering breath as he felt the malign power of the enemy dissipate. Confusion and shame filled the fortress, but Tigurius forced himself to ignore it as he felt a wave of revulsion fill his belly with bilious acid. He opened his eyes and his heart lurched at the sight before him.

Thousands of daemons, horned, blood-hued and scaled, charged towards Castra Tanagra with smoking black swords carried over their shoulders. Capering monsters with livid skin and pincer arms followed them, and in their wake came lumpen monstrosities that looked like corpses fresh from a plague pit. Daemonic vigour empowered them, and Tigurius saw they would never be able to hold the wall against such a horde.

“First Company,” shouted Agemman. “Stand to! Courage and honour!”

“No,” said Tigurius, recovering his staff from the ramparts. “Be ready to fall back.”

Agemman’s jaw clenched, but he nodded curtly, and Tigurius hauled himself along the wall towards the edge of the breach. Marneus Calgar had already marshalled his warriors and a wall of lowered blades stood ready to face the daemons. Tigurius leapt from the ramparts and landed behind the breach with a thunderous crack of stone. He ran over to the Chapter Master and said, “You aren’t seriously going to face this charge are you?”

“What else is there?” said Calgar. “I did it at Zalathras, and I can do it here. You remember that battle? Day and night I fought the greenskins and not one of them got past me.”

“This is not Zalathras, and these are not greenskins,” said Tigurius. “You must withdraw to the keep. It is the only way.”

Calgar glanced at the walls, thinly held by the warriors of the 1st Company and those few mortal soldiers from the *Caesar* and a handful of civilians. He saw the truth of Tigurius’ words in an instant.

“Can you give us the time we will need?”

“I can,” promised Tigurius. “Now go!”

Calgar nodded and broadcast a force-wide communication. “Everyone back to the keep! Fall back by squads, but leave no man behind. Courage and honour. Calgar out.”

All along the length of the wall, men and women streamed back towards the safety of the keep while the warriors of the 1st remained on the walls. Crisp volleys of bolter fire boomed and missiles streaked from their launch tubes.

“Go, my lord,” said Tigurius. “I will keep the daemons at bay long enough.”

The Chapter Master placed a hand on his shoulder. “I will stand with you, Varro.”

Tigurius took a deep breath and strode into the breach, planting his staff in the ground beside him. Its power was enormous, with a connection to the immaterium that was unmatched by any other such talisman. He would need all the help he could get. The daemons were almost upon the fortress, a raging tide of nightmares made real and dragged from the warp by a power beyond comprehension. To maintain a horde such as this required a vast reservoir of power, and Tigurius knew that when the Thrice Born chose to take the field of battle, there would be a slaughter unlike anything the Ultramarines had witnessed since the Battle for Macragge.

Tigurius hoped this battle would not have the same consequences for the 1st Company.

He drew upon his every reserve of power, using his staff to drink deeply of the warp’s energies. Strange tides flowed into him, cold and deep, but he welcomed the surging power, shaping it into lambent fire that lit his flesh and blazed from the skull atop his staff.

The daemons were almost upon him. He could see the dead lights in their eyes and feel the furnace heat of their unnatural bodies. Darkness empowered them, but the light would destroy them. The fire raged within Tigurius, a seething conflagration that would consume him if left unchecked.

Tigurius raised his staff as the daemons scrambled towards him and slammed it down.

White fire exploded from the impact, and a searing wall of white flame erupted from the rock of the mountains. Those daemons closest to Tigurius were blown to cindered ash, their forms utterly destroyed without hope of renewal. Like a match dropped in a ditch of promethium, the flames raced around the circumference of Castra Tanagra billowing over the walls like a living thing. The gold sigils blazed with light, magnifying the killing power of the brilliant fire. Its touch was death to the daemons, and they screeched and howled in rage as its cleansing fires burned with blinding light. The mindless things of the horde hurled themselves at the walls, only to shriek in deathly agony as the fire burned them and spread across their bodies to devour them.

Tigurius fought to hold onto the power flowing through him, feeling the fire draw upon his own vital essences as it burned. He looked up at the walls, seeing the warriors of the 1st Company falling back. Agemman was the last to quit the walls, and Tigurius felt his shame.

The daemons hurled themselves at the fire, and the mountains shook with their death screams. As each was destroyed, Tigurius felt his grip on the energy empowering it falter. He could not hold onto it much longer without dreadful consequences, and he felt the enormous power in orbit around Talassar turn its baleful gaze upon him.

It was as though he looked into the darkest abyss, a vast emptiness from which there could be no return. Tigurius quailed before the horror of ultimate oblivion, and knew there could be no victory against such power.

The last of his strength was gone, and Tigurius felt himself falling into the abyss.

Powerful hands caught him, and he felt himself being carried away. Blades were clashing and bolters were firing, but all Tigurius could feel was the cold emptiness of the void.

His eyes slowly closed and he heard a voice calling to him.

“I’ve got you, Varro,” said Marneus Calgar. “I’ve got you.”

The Rhino ground its way through the streets of Corinth, its hatches shut tight and its engine belching what must surely be its last, consumptive exhalations. Scipio touched a beaten iron plate on the back of the driver’s compartment. Laenus had scratched a crude representation of the Mechanicus cog, swearing it was all that kept the vehicle running.

Scipio wasn’t about to contradict him, and gave thanks to whatever power was at work.

He looked out through the commander’s periscope. The glass on the outside was scuffed and cracked, though they had cleaned it as best they could. The Bloodborn soldiers were few and far between, most lying in drunken stupors in their billets or slumped against walls daubed in profane graffiti. Those soldiers still on their feet gave them a wide berth, bowing and hammering their fists against their chests.

Scipio saw only a few traitor Astartes, but even they appeared distracted.

Yet for all the disorder, there was a definite shift towards a more sophisticated layer of organisation the deeper into the city they penetrated. The praetor of Corinth had dwelled in a utilitarian structure of understated grandeur, its columned portico and domed roof rearing up in the distance. Sunlight gleamed from the silver ramparts of its gatehouse, and Scipio hoped that Salombar might be vainglorious enough to make her lair within, as it was certainly the grandest structure still standing.



The arterial roads leading into the heart of the city were patrolled, and a number of timber sawhorses were set up to block the approaches to the inner precincts. Only Bloodborn warriors manned these checkpoints, and at the sight of an Astartes Rhino, the sawhorses were quickly moved off the road.

“Slovenly,” said Scipio as they passed through. “They don’t even check who’s inside.”

“I’ll take slovenly enemies over efficient ones any day,” said Helicas. His missile launcher was standing upright between his knees, the blue and red warhead already loaded. It was a violation of every safety protocol in the Codex, but when the time came to fight, Scipio didn’t want any delay in getting support fire laid down.

“You’re sure this is a good idea, sergeant?” asked Coltanis, his plasma gun held across his lap. Scipio turned to face the warrior. Clad in his full battle armour, Coltanis was every inch a warrior of Ultramar. The gold of his pauldron trims gleamed in the unkind light of the troop compartment, but the lustre of his plate was clear.

“No, but I’m all out of other ideas, and it’s time we took charge of this situation. I’m tired of skulking in the shadows. That’s a job for Scouts,” He was met with growls of approbation, for his words reflected every warrior’s sentiment exactly. They were the best fighters in the galaxy in a city full of enemies. It was time to let slip these dogs of war. Though he and his squad often acted as the eyes and ears of the 2nd Company, it was in the crucible of combat they were at their best.

Each of the Thunderbolts was clad in his power armour, and Scipio felt renewed to once again be encased in plates of ceramite and armaplas. To be an Ultramarines warrior did not require armour, but to be clad in the blue and gold gave Scipio a sense of purpose and belonging that he lacked whenever he went without. He touched the skull icon upon his plastron, closing his eyes and offering a benediction to the warrior spirit within his armour.

None of the prisoners they had taken had given them any hint that the Corsair Queen was in Corinth, but that very absence of corroboration gave Scipio hope that his suspicion was correct. Kaarja Salombar *was* in Corinth, he was sure of it.

Now he would put that theory to the test.

“Sergeant, you might want to take a look at this,” said Laenus from the driver’s seat.

Scipio pressed his eyes to the periscope once again.

He saw another roadblock, but this one was manned by traitor Astartes in the orange and black of the Claws of Lorek. Six of them, each with a weapon slung at the hip. Their leader marched into the centre of the road and held up his hand for them to stop.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Laenus.

Scipio spun the locking wheel on the commander’s hatch and said, “Punch through, and if you can crush any of those bastards underneath, so much the better.”

He pushed open the hatch and activated the power feed to the pintle-mounted bolters.

“This is it, Thunderbolts,” he said. “Time to strike.”

Stripped of his armour and bound to a bare steel excruciation chair, Ardaric Vaanes was a pitiful sight. His body was pale, bleached of all colour by virtue of his Chapter’s heritage, and Uriel found himself unable to think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound trite.

“They say you will only speak to me,” he said at last.

Vaanes looked up, and Uriel tried to read his expression. Part hate, part relief, and part... part some other emotion he couldn’t identify. So swift did it cross the renegade’s face that he wasn’t even sure he’d seen it, but there had been something he had tried to hide.

“They were right,” said Vaanes. “I know there will be others listening, but I wanted to speak to you face to face once again.”

The interrogation chamber was a square box deep inside *Lex Tredecim*, four metres by four metres, with a wide spectrum of recording devices invisibly incorporated into its walls, floor and ceiling. Nothing the captive said, did or felt would be missed.

“Where are Honsou and his Iron Warriors?” said Uriel, stepping in close to the renegade Raven Guard. “They did not take the field of battle, and Honsou is not a man to miss such slaughter.”

“The battle’s over?”

“This stage of it,” answered Uriel. “The Black Basilica is gone and with it your corrupted magos. He tried to take control of the Praetorians, but he was defeated, and your forces were pushed back to their bridgehead.”

“Of course you realise that the battle was just a sideshow?”

“The fifth tunneller,” said Uriel. “Honsou and the Iron Warriors are in it, are they not?”

Vaanes nodded. “Him and Xiomagra’s Blade dancers. Honsou wasn’t even sure you’d notice it.”

“He always was good at underestimating me.”

“We all were.”

“So where is he going? Do not lie to me, or I will hand you over to the people beyond that door. They want you executed right now,” said Uriel.

That was only partly true. Namira Suzaku had pushed for Vaanes’ execution, but Aethon Shaan, battered and burn-scarred from his battle aboard the Black Basilica, had been adamant. Vaanes was to be returned to Deliverance for judgment by the Raven Guard.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” replied Vaanes. “The Imperium has always been pretty unimaginative with its punishments. You should see the many and varied ways a warlord of Chaos keeps order. It’s not pretty but it keeps the underlings in line.”

“And that is to be admired?”

Vaanes shook his head. “You’re not listening to me. You’re just hearing what you want to hear, so if you’re going to kill me, just do it and stop wasting time. I thought I could talk to you because you might actually use your brain instead of jumping for the nearest executioner’s spike.”

“Then tell me where the fifth tunnelling machine has gone.” Vaanes said nothing, and Uriel stepped towards him.

“I’ll tell you, but first you have to offer me something,” said Vaanes.

“You are a traitor,” spat Uriel. “Why should I offer you anything?”

“How can you ask me that?” said Vaanes. “Aren’t we old comrades in arms? Didn’t we cross a world of the damned together? Didn’t we storm a fortress of the Iron Warriors? Do you know how many people can say that who are still breathing?”

“Aye, we did all those things,” said Uriel. “And I offered you a chance for redemption once the foe was defeated, but you refused it.”

“Redemption? It’s not for the likes of me, Uriel. I tried it, but it didn’t take.”

“So you chose damnation instead?”

“I thought I had, but turns out that’s not for me either.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This,” said Vaanes, twisting in the steel chair to show the curve of his deltoid muscle. Uriel leaned down, seeing a stark black raven tattooed on Vaanes’ skin. “This is why I surrendered to you.”

“A Chapter tattoo you’re not fit to bear,” said Uriel. “What of it?”

“You don’t understand, I know. I’m not sure I do either.”

“And what do you mean you surrendered? We captured you.”

“You think you could capture a warrior trained on the Ravenspire?” laughed Vaanes. “I *let* you take me.”

“Say I believe you, and I do not, why would you do that?”

Vaanes looked away and sighed. “I don’t know that either, not for sure, but when I saw you I knew I didn’t want to go back to the Iron Warriors.”

“So why did you fight so hard?”

Vaanes shrugged. “I couldn’t let the Newborn see me go down without a fight.”

“The Newborn?”

“The thing they made out of your genetic material on Medrengard.”

“It doesn’t have a name?”

“It never seemed to want one,” said Vaanes. “I think it had a name once, but it doesn’t want to remember it. We never gave it one, because... well, no one cared enough to.”

“I know its name,” said Uriel. “I’ve seen what they did to it. I felt its fear and its pain.”

“So it wasn’t all a one way street after all,” said Vaanes. “It learned of you too. How do you think the Iron Warriors have been one step ahead of you all this time?”

“It knows my thoughts?”

“Something like that. It thinks like you, straight up and down, and no matter how much Honsou and Grendel fill its head with their talk of Chaos, it can’t escape what you gave it.”

“And what’s that?”

“Nobility,” said Vaanes, and Uriel saw the earnest need to be believed on the renegade’s face. “It wants to be better than it was created to be, but everything around it beats it and crushes any attempt it makes to lift its head out of the horror. If I’d thought about it at all, I’d have felt sorry for it, but I’ve seen the things it can do, and pity is the last thing the Newborn needs. It’s a monster, but it didn’t have to be.”

“And what about you?” asked Uriel. “Are you still a monster?”

“I don’t know, probably,” said Vaanes, nodding towards the tattoo on his shoulder. “But maybe not. I gouged that tattoo out a long time ago. But now it’s back. You tell me what that means.”

“It means nothing,” said Uriel, gripping Vaanes beneath the chin and tilting his head back. For a split second he wanted nothing more than to wrench it to the side and snap the renegade’s neck. He could do it, he could kill this enemy before him right now, but he did not. Killing a prisoner was without honour, and was beneath him.

He released Vaanes and turned away. “What is it you think it means?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t there until we made for Calth. Perhaps it’s a sign I’m not beyond redemption. Perhaps its Corax making sure he leaves his mark on my corpse. Who knows for sure?”

“Redemption isn’t something you get offered more than once,” said Uriel. “You made your choice and now it’s time to face the consequences. We caught you, and now you are going to pay for all the lives you have ended. On Tarsis Ultra, on Tarentus.”

As Uriel spoke, Vaanes looked away, unable to look him in the eye as he listed his crimes. Perhaps this was merely guilt, not remorse. Was there a difference?

“What is it that you want, Vaanes?” said Uriel.

“I want to die,” said the renegade. “I’m not strong enough to walk the path of righteousness, and I won’t damn my soul to the warp. There’s no middle ground for the likes of me, so when this is done, promise you’ll kill me and I’ll show you where they’ve gone.”

Uriel looked deep into the hooded eyes of the man he had fought beside and watched turn his back on all that he once stood for. Within Vaanes there was the core of a great man, but one cursed with some deep-rooted flaw that had seen him undone.

“What happened to you?” said Uriel.

“I’ll never tell you,” said Vaanes. “Now do we have a deal?”

Uriel considered lying to Vaanes, after all, what was a promise made to a traitor? No oath could be considered binding made to one such as he, but even as he formed the thought, he knew that to lie to Vaanes was to diminish himself.

He nodded. “Tell me where Honsou has gone.”

Vaanes saw his truth and nodded gratefully. He let out a long, shuddering breath, and to Uriel it seemed as though a great and terrible burden was suddenly lifted from his shoulders. Vaanes sat up straighter in the chair, looking more like a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes than ever before.

“No,” said Vaanes. “I’ll show you.”

## NINETEEN

Bolter shells and las-rounds smacked off the armoured flanks of the Rhino, ringing from its armour like steel rain. One shell had punched through a corroded track guard and ricocheted around the interior of the troop compartment, but most of its force had been spent and the armour of the Thunderbolts protected them from harm.

Scipio worked the twin bolters in the cupola from side to side, only shooting when he was sure of taking down multiple foes. Not that there was any shortage of targets since they had blown through the roadblock. Scipio had taken down three of the enemy warriors with concentrated bursts of fire, and Laenus had crushed another beneath the Rhino’s tracks.

No sooner had they penetrated the inner precincts of the city than Scipio had been forced to revise his earlier opinion of the Bloodborn army. The central plaza of Corinth was now packed with prefabricated structures laid out with military precision. Colourful pennons flapped in the wind, and a garish blue banner trailed from one of the palace towers. What had once been an open space where the citizens of Corinth had taken the air, visited a museum or gallery, was now an armed camp. Almost every square metre was taken up with ammo

stores, weapon dumps, barracks or training facilities.

Here was organisation and discipline to rival any Imperial Guard regiment. *This* was an army of conquest, and the sight of such logistical competence chilled Scipio to the bone. Their battered and smoke-belching Rhino crashed through barracks tents, shooting ranges and mess halls, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. Burning canvas from crushed tents trailed behind them like the sail of an ancient fire ship sent out to its doom amid an enemy fleet.

The metaphor was an apt one, thought Scipio.

Bloodborn warriors spilled from a barracks building, men and women clad in a riot of colours and armour. Scipio spotted several blue sashes of officers and he felt a surge of exultation. These were corsairs of Kaarja Salombar!

Scipio turned the bolters on them, firing a long burst of explosive rounds. Seven men dropped, torn up by the volley, and the others scattered. Surrounded by so many temporary structures, the Bloodborn were finding it hard to draw a bead on the Thunderbolts' Rhino, but those that could were unstinting in their return fire.

A las-round grazed Scipio's shoulder and a hard round spanked from the hatch rim on his left. Zipping tracers whipped past his head, and Scipio swung the bolters around, sending a series of sawing blasts through a row of Bloodborn tents as their occupants ran for weapons and armour.

"For Guilliman and the Emperor!" he yelled, working the fire of his guns over the enemy. It felt good to be fighting again, to be taking a measure of revenge for the suffering these warriors had inflicted on the people of Espandor. The Rhino lurched forward and Scipio heard the awful squeal of grinding mechanisms and the unmistakable sound of an engine seizing up.

He risked a glance over his shoulder to see flames and thick ropes of black smoke pouring from the rear of the Rhino. Laenus had worked wonders coaxing every last shred of life from the vehicle, but its spirit was done and could go on no more. That it had taken them this far was a miracle. It was time to disembark and continue the fight on foot.

Scipio scanned the terrain, modified as it was by the Bloodborn constructions and additions. He already had a destination in mind, but whether the captured Rhino would reach it was another matter entirely.

"Laenus, point us towards the gatehouse before the praetor's palace!"

"I don't know it'll get that far, but I'll try," shouted Laenus.

A line of colourfully-clad Bloodborn warriors had formed a firing line ahead of the Rhino, and Scipio dropped inside as a volley of las-fire hammered the front of the Rhino. A missile slammed into the Rhino's glacis, but Helicas and Coltanis had fixed sheet steel plating over the vehicle's front and the missile corkscrewed away without detonating. More fire teams were preparing to shoot, and the Thunderbolts had seconds at best before the Rhino was reduced to a smouldering wreck.

"Everyone out!" shouted Scipio.

Nivian hauled open the door and Coltanis leapt out of the moving vehicle. Scipio followed, and the rest of the Thunderbolts hit the ground running right behind him. Laenus was last to exit, but the Rhino kept going, spewing smoke and flames as it careened towards the Bloodborn. The enemy parted to let it roll through, but no sooner had the Rhino ground to a halt when its engine block exploded, cutting down the Bloodborn and shooting plumes of burning fuel in all directions.

Perhaps the Emperor was watching, perhaps it was simply a fortuitous coincidence or perhaps the warrior spirit of the Rhino was exacting a measure of revenge for its harsh treatment. Scipio would always believe it to be the latter.

Using the smoke and confusion as cover, Scipio led the Thunderbolts through the crowded mess of burning tents and timber-framed barracks. Fires were spreading through the plaza, and screams echoed from the buildings on the edge of the plaza. Amid the grey and brown of canvas and prefabricated steel, the brilliant blue of the Ultramarines armour was a blaze of colour amid the drabness.

A volley of shots reached out to them, and Scipio felt the impacts on his back and shoulders. He swung to face the source of the shots and sighted down the length of the gun at a group of corsairs led by a woman with crossed blue sashes across her chest and a cockaded bicorn hat. Ludicrously impractical on a battlefield, it gave Scipio a point of aim.

"Mark your targets," he shouted. "Ammo is scarce, so make every shot count."

He fired and the corsair woman pitched backward, her shoulder and head vanishing in an explosion of bone fragments and red mist. A quick burst of fire killed half a dozen more and sent the rest diving for cover. "With me!" shouted Scipio. "Make for the palace gatehouse." Scipio set off towards their objective, running with his bolter at his shoulder.

Its golden roof shone like the brightest sun, and the colourful facade of its painted stone seemed like the grandest most magnificent thing Scipio had ever seen. Though the Bloodborn had defiled its lower reaches, it was easy to imagine the building in its prime.

A high wall of polished grey granite surrounded the palace, embellished with high towers of fluted marble and statues of heroic Ultramarines whose lineage could be traced back to Espandor. At the southernmost curve of the wall was a gatehouse flanked by two drum towers. The silver-topped ramparts of these towers were now home to grotesque anti-aircraft guns with multiple black steel barrels aimed skyward.

Bloodborn warriors were moving to intercept them, but again the crowded nature of the plaza was Scipio's ally. The Thunderbolts formed a fighting wedge on Scipio, and they plunged into the heart of the enemy with unmatched fury. Masked warriors came at them with bayonet-tipped rifles or curved swords and pistols. Scipio switched to his chainsword, cutting through the Bloodborn with brutally mechanical strokes of his roaring blade.

Nivian fired the pistol Scipio had given him, while Coltanis targeted enemy support teams and destroyed them with controlled bursts of plasma fire. They forged a path through the enemy, never stopping and never allowing the Bloodborn to steal the momentum of their charge.

Scipio saw six Rhinos and a Land Raider thunder into the plaza, garishly painted vehicles in orange and black. Another two in the rust-brown blood of the Skulltakers kept going, crushing Bloodborn soldiers in their desire to reach Scipio's warriors.

The plaza was in uproar now, flames and gunfire and the screams of the dying filling the air. The gatehouse had once boasted an armoured portal of banded Espandor oak and iron, but nothing now remained of it save twisted hinge mechanisms and blast marks. A corsair skiff was manoeuvring through the gateway, its gunners turning the prow cannon on the Thunderbolts.

"Coltanis," shouted Scipio. "Take it out!"

"Plasma's still charging," came the terse reply from his specialist gunner.

There was no avoiding the cannon, and Scipio just hoped its gunner was too hurried, too unskilled or too inaccurate to prove a threat. The weapon blazed with light and noise, and Scipio hurled himself to the side as a hurricane of high-energy las-bolts tore up the cobbled plaza. Stone fragments pinged from Scipio's armour and he felt a fiery pain down the side of his thigh where a beam had struck him and melted part of his armour.

He rolled to his side, seeing that two of his warriors were down. Seius and Asellio, their armour rent by molten gouges from which no one, not even a Space Marine, could survive. Howling Bloodborn warriors and corsairs were charging towards them, and the skiffs gunner was lining up another shot.

A blue-white bolt of energy shot up from the ground to punch through the underside of the skiff. It blazed up into its body and struck the energy cells at the heart of its anti-grav mechanisms. A seething plume of fire exploded out of the gateway, funnelled into a cone of orange flame that rolled over the Ultramarines and set nearby Bloodborn warriors aflame.

Scipio pushed himself to his feet, knowing they had been handed another boon.

"Good shooting, Coltanis," said Scipio, running into the flame-wreathed gateway. He vaulted the wreckage and stepped over a dozen charred and blackened bodies. The Thunderbolts followed him, their armour protecting them from the lethal flames as Scipio kicked down the door to the leftmost tower. Ten corsairs filled its lower chamber, but Scipio's first volley cut down four of them. They fired back, and he grunted in pain as one shot penetrated his chest armour. Then Laenus and Nivian were at his side.

The Bloodborn died in a hail of shots, and Scipio pounded up the stairs of the tower, making his way towards the roof. A mix of Bloodborn and Corsairs filled the tower, forty in all, but in the cramped confines of the stairs and side chambers, they were no match for the Space Marines, who slaughtered them all with grim efficiency.

Scipio heard shouts from below, but by now they had reached the roof of the tower. The gunners manning the anti-aircraft batteries had depressed the barrels of their quad-guns, but too late to make any difference to their fate. The pursuers below could only be traitor Astartes. Who else could survive the flames in the gateway?

Scipio looked out over the chaos of the plaza. Fires raged unchecked through the centre of the city, and though it grieved him to set a city of Ultramar ablaze, he knew it was in service of a greater good. Thousands of Bloodborn and corsairs garrisoned the city. More were pouring into the plaza with every passing moment.

"Coltanis, Helicas," he said. "Watch the doorway to the stairs. We're going to have enemy Astartes coming through there any moment."

Scipio pointed to the giant anti-aircraft guns and said, "Laenus! Take Natalis, Isatus and Bradua and get those guns turned around. We'll be needing them before long."

Laenus nodded and set to work on the big guns. "Sergeant!" cried Nivian. "You're going to want to see this," Scipio ran over to the palace side of the towers and followed Nivian's extended arm.

Surging from the palace were three heavily laden skiffs, up-armoured from the one they had destroyed in the gateway and adorned with streaming banners, gilded decorations and outrageously flamboyant iconography. They offended the eye with their lurid colours, but it was the figure standing on the command deck of the centre skimmer that caught Scipio's eye.

It was a woman, barely clad in strips of lacquered leather and vivid fabrics that caught the light and made her shimmer with colour. With more than a hint of inhuman eldar to her lithe frame, and a wild mane of azure hair flowing around her shoulders, there could be no mistaking the identity of the woman.

"Kaarja Salombar," hissed Scipio. "The Corsair Queen."

Nivian stood alongside him. "Looks like we've got her riled up, sergeant."

Scipio smiled. “I think you might be right, Nivian.”

His helmet vox, so long inactive while they hunted their prey, crackled as he activated it once more and broadcast on the emergency frequency Captain Sicarius had chosen for the execute signal.

“This is Scipio Vorolanus,” he said, ducking down as a blizzard of gunfire struck the parapet. “Location: the centre of Corinth. Code Suzerin! Code Suzerin! I have a visual on the Corsair Queen. Repeat, I have a visual on the Corsair Queen.”

The vox fizzed and popped, and Scipio feared that his message hadn’t got through when a voice he recognised as Sergeant Daceus of the Lions of Macragge broke through the static.

“Acknowledged,” said Daceus. “Hold position and be ready. Out.”

“Here they come!” shouted Helicas as the traitor Astartes burst onto the roof of the tower.

The Cavernas Draconis cut through the upper mantle of Calth in a warren of tunnels that no one had yet fully mapped. New tunnels were being cut every year and, since cave-ins were far from uncommon, most maps were obsolete within a few years of their commissioning.

Four Rhinos descended into the heart of Calth, delving into this labyrinthine network of caves with a traitor as their guide. The battle to take Four Valleys Gorge had fallen silent for now, the Bloodborn forces content to lick their wounds and regroup after the devastating destruction of the Black Basilica. Chaplain Clausel commanded the Ultramarines forces, a role he had accepted with stiff formality after Uriel had transferred command.

Two Ultramarines Rhinos led the way, one containing the Swords of Calth, the other Pasanius’ Firebrands. Following them was a liquid black Rhino in the livery of the Raven Guard and a maroon coloured vehicle with the skull-stamped “I” of the holy ordos emblazoned on its side. Namira Suzaku preferred to work in the shadows, but when she operated in the open, she wanted it known.

Ardaric Vaanes was secured in the lead vehicle, sitting next to Uriel and chained to the bulkhead stanchions with unbreakable fetters. Two of Suzaku’s acolytes sat opposite Vaanes, each holding a man-catcher fixed around his neck. With a flick of a switch, the spiked collars would contract and crush the renegade’s throat, and their thumbs hovered eagerly over those switches. Uriel’s higher self told him not to trust Vaanes, but his gut was telling him that the warrior might yet be seeking to salvage what shreds of honour were left to him.

Captain Shaan and Inquisitor Suzaku had been hard to convince, but with time against them, they had reluctantly concluded that there was no choice but to accede to Vaanes’ demand that he lead them into the depths. They had set off immediately, driving through the shattered remains of Castra Occidens and into the softly-lit tunnels that led deep beneath the planet’s surface.

They travelled for nine hours, stopping only once to refuel in one of Calth’s cavern cities, a sprawling agricultural community named Apamea Ragiana. Set within a range of rolling hills and thick forests, the town nestled in the lee of a towering cathedral of the Emperor, its spire a mighty representation of a soaring eagle.

Journeying onwards, the small convoy left the main thoroughfares through the caverns and split off onto the side tunnels more commonly frequented by mining rigs and prospecting teams. Ever onwards they travelled, and the temperature slowly climbed the deeper they went, each turn of a passage or corkscrewing loop downwards taking them further and further away from signs of civilization.

The tunnels became progressively more rugged the deeper they went, eventually casting off all signs of artificial construction and resembling clefts split in the rock by tectonic movement. Something about these tunnels was familiar to Uriel, as though he had travelled these ways before. His eidetic memory sifted through the times he had returned to Calth since becoming a warrior of the Ultramarines, but he could recall nothing save blurred memories of clambering over rocks and across treacherous ledges. “Take the right-hand tunnel and follow it for three kilometres,” said Vaanes, his voice strained with the effort of speaking.

“Where are you taking us?” said Uriel, watching the pict-slate display of the caverns beyond the armoured hull of the Rhino. “These caves have been abandoned for centuries.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Vaanes.

“If you think you are leading us into a trap—”

“You’ll what? Kill me?” laughed Vaanes, though the effort made him wince. “If that’s all I wanted, I’d have had you kill me up on the surface. Why bother with this charade?”

“To help Honsou kill me?” suggested Uriel.

“He doesn’t need my help for that,” said Vaanes. “And it’s not just about you, Ventris. Honsou wants to destroy everything you love, and he doesn’t care how it happens. There’s a daemon lord that thinks it’s running the show, but that’s only because Honsou’s letting it think that. It wants to destroy Ultramar just as much as he does.”

“Why?” said Uriel. “I mean, why specifically Ultramar?”

“You think it confides in me?” snapped Vaanes. “It’s a daemon lord, what other reason does it need?”

Uriel shook his head. “I do not pretend to know the minds of daemons, but this is the third time it has attacked Ultramar. There must be a reason it hates us so much.”

“Perhaps Roboute Guilliman looked at him the wrong way.”

“Don’t say his name,” hissed Brutus Cyprian. “You’re not fit to speak of the primarch.”

“Touchy, isn’t he?” smirked Vaanes.

“He is right,” said Uriel. “You are not worthy to speak his name.”

Vaanes shrugged and lapsed into silence. The journey continued for another hour, taking numerous turns down into the rock until the Rhinos emerged into a wide, cylindrical cavern some three hundred metres wide with ridged, volcanic walls of glistening black rock. The heat was incredible, and steam gusted from cracks in the glassy floor. Moisture dripped from the ceiling and walls, pooling in sinkholes and running along heat-carved channels.

Vaanes leaned down to study the pict display, noting the childish representations of dragons on the walls, murals hacked into the rock or painted with broad sweeps of blue and green paint.

The renegade sat back and said, “We’re here.”

Uriel frowned and popped the hatch of the Rhino, climbing out to survey the cavern in which they found themselves. Moisture immediately beaded on his armour and he felt the awesome humidity on the skin of his face.

“I know this place,” he said, his mind opening up with childhood memories.

He climbed out and dropped to the rock of the cavern, remembering running through here as a youngster with his friends. The walls were covered in images of dragons, large and small, elaborate and simple. From where they had entered the cavern to beyond sight, every square metre of wall was covered in them.

The passengers of the Rhinos debarked and gathered around Uriel, looking to him to explain why they had stopped.

“What is this place?” asked Suzaku, looking at the thousands of carved and painted dragons. Uriel turned to the inquisitor. She had changed since the battle of Four Valleys Gorge. Her acolyte had been killed during the fighting, and he supposed they must have been closer than he had imagined. Perhaps she wasn’t as cold and aloof as she made out.

“The Dragon’s Gullet,” explained Uriel. “That is what we used to call this place.”

Pasanus smiled, looking up at the ceiling, a look of forgotten wonder creasing his open features in a wide smile.

“We thought this place was the mouth of a buried dragon,” said Pasanius. “It became kind of a dare for children to come down here and paint a picture of what they thought the dragon looked like on the walls. Calth’s children have been doing it for centuries.”

Pasanus gave Uriel a knowing look. “And if I remember right, you got the highest one.”

“It’s probably been bettered since,” said Uriel.

Vaanes laughed. “I can’t imagine you as a child, Ventris. I just bet you were a barrel of laughs with that oh so serious manner of yours.”

“Shut your mouth, Vaanes,” said Pasanius.

“As much as I enjoy reminiscing over childhood memories, I don’t see how this gets us closer to defeating Honsou,” said Aethon Shaan.

Uriel walked away from the group, casting his mind back over a hundred years ago to when he ran these caves as a youth. He remembered the games, the dares and the contests of strength, speed and endurance played by the boys and girls of Calth in preparation for the selection games when warriors from the Ultramarines would judge who was worthy to be taken to Macragge.

“It was a test of courage to see how high up the walls you could get your dragon,” said Uriel, letting the trickle of memories build as they seeped from his life before the Adeptus Astartes. Shaped before his cerebral architecture was remade by ancient science, these memories came slowly, only gradually coalescing in his mind.

“I wanted to be the dragon painter everyone talked about for years to come and climbed over a hundred metres up the wall with two pots of paint hanging from my belt.”

“Here?” said Suzaku, looking up at the walls. “Which one is yours?”

“Mine is about three kilometres further in,” said Uriel, waving down the tunnel. “It was insane: the rocks were slick with water and razor sharp. If I had fallen it would have killed me, but I saw a jutting corbel of rock I thought it would be a safe perch to paint from. I almost fell three times, but I made it, though my hands were raw and bloody with the effort. My arms were shaking and I could barely hold the brush, but I painted a red-gold dragon with wide wings and a barbed spine higher than anyone else had ever managed. I finished my dragon, and was getting ready to climb down when I saw a deft in the wall that led deeper into the cavern, a lightless tunnel that twisted into the rock for hundreds of metres until...”

“Until what?” said Shaan.

“Throne of Terra!” hissed Uriel, running back to his Rhino. “I know why Honsou is here.”

Three kilometres further along the tunnel, they came upon a scene of devastation. The floor of the cavern had collapsed in a vast sinkhole and portions of the wall had fallen inwards, forming a steep, nibble-strewn slope that led up to a scorched wound torn in the rock. A giant tunneller reared from the sinkhole, its iron flanks buckled and dented. Steam and hot gasses vented from its blunted snout and pulverised rock dust cascaded from its body.

Its hull doors hung open. Whoever had penetrated this deeply into Calth was long gone.

And Uriel knew exactly where they’d gone.

The Rhinos slewed to a halt at the base of the rubble slope and Uriel vaulted from the troop compartment with the Swords of Calth behind him. The Raven Guard were already ahead of him, ghosting up the rubble towards the gouge in the rocky walls. Uriel scrambled up the slope towards the corbel of rock he had once clung to as a young boy.

“What is beyond here?” demanded Shaan, as Uriel reached the rock face.

“Something forgotten,” said Uriel, twisting to look at Vaanes as Suzaku’s acolytes laboured to manoeuvre him up the slope. “Something I never told anyone.”

“You didn’t need to,” said Vaanes. “You knew it, so the Newborn knew it, even if it didn’t know why.”

Uriel almost smiled as he saw the faded image of a red-gold dragon painted on the walls next to the hole blasted in the rock. Pasanus knelt beside the painted dragon.

“Not bad,” he said, tapping the rock. “Looks like yours is still the highest.”

“Calth must not breed them as tough as you anymore,” said Vaanes.

Uriel ignored him and examined the blasted hole in the rock. Shaped charges had blown the cleft wide enough for three Space Marines to walk abreast. He took a step towards the cave mouth, but before he could enter the tunnel, Aethon Shaan took hold of his arm.

“Let us go first,” he said. “Walking the darkness is Raven Guard work.”

Uriel wanted to tell him that this was Calth, which made it Ultramarines work, but he saw the sense in Shaan’s words. Reluctantly, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “Go.”

Shaan turned to his immediate subordinate and said, “Kyre, wing left, claw low. Raven’s shadow, high and dark.”

Kyre nodded, though Uriel had no idea what Shaan had just ordered.

The dark-armoured warriors slid into the tunnel, and within moments Uriel had lost them in the gloom. He blinked, enhancing the vision mode in his augmetic eye, but the Raven Guard were invisible.

“How do they do that?” said Pasanus at his side. “Even old Telion isn’t that good.”

“I’ll tell him you said that,” replied Uriel, setting off after the Raven Guard.

He entered the tunnel, with Inquisitor Suzaku and her retinue sandwiched between his Swords of Calth and the Firebrands. The glow of Pasanus’ flamer bathed the black walls in a bruised colour, flickering from the humid moisture dripping from the walls and throwing their shadows out before them.

Uriel remembered scrambling along this tunnel in the dark, and the thrill of exploration returned to him, though a hundred and sixteen years separated him from that young boy. He remembered returning home, filled with pride at his achievement, yet knowing that to boast of it would lessen the accomplishment. What he had seen beyond the walls of the Dragon’s Gullet was his secret and his alone. Or so it had been until his enemies had wrought that abomination with his gene-seed.

The tunnel narrowed, its sides tapering inwards and smooth, sheared apart thousands of years ago by the awesome underground forces that shaped Calth’s subterranean world. Then, like stepping from a darkened room into the light, Uriel emerged from the tunnel. As it had one hundred and sixteen years ago, the breath caught in his throat.

The cavern was lit with a bioluminescent glow like a forgotten seabed, jade green and misty. Hundreds of metres wide and tall, it was no natural formation, but a compartment hewn from the rock nearly ten thousand years ago by artificers with great skill and even greater determination.

In the centre of the cavern was a building of pale, polished marble. It was a magnificent structure, square in shape and topped with a glittering dome apparently fashioned from a single vast sapphire. Each, facade of the building was reached via a triumphal set of steps



carved from the rock of the cavern floor, and entrance was gained through vast porticos supported by pillars as thick as the legs of the largest Mechanicus battle engine. Each pediment was carved with colourful murals that had survived the passage of centuries without the lustre of their imagery diminishing. The murals were broken up into panels, each depicting a noble Ultramarines captain leading his warriors in battle against wicked, red-armoured foes.

The eastern facade was smashed and broken where a portion of the cavern roof had collapsed. Cyclopean blocks larger than a Land Raider were strewn like child's bricks and two of the pillars lay tumbled like fallen giants. As magnificent as it was, there was an air of melancholy to the building that had nothing to do with its ruin. Sadness hung over its sepulchral architecture like a mourning shroud or unending grief.

Though he hadn't appreciated it as a child, Uriel now knew why this should be so.

This was a tomb, the resting place of a great hero.

Pasanius squinted at the murals, matching the imagery to his knowledge of the Chapter's history. Uriel saw the realisation of what he was seeing in his friend's eyes.

"Is this what I think it is?" said Pasanius.

"The lost tomb of Ventanus," said Uriel. "The Saviour of Calth."

Uriel's eyes widened. "That's... that's the tomb of the Saviour of Calth?"

Looking down from the shadows of the giant portico, Cadaras Grendel watched the Ultramarines and their mortal helpers enter the huge cavern. He grinned, imagining the despair that must have seized them knowing they were too late.

Grendel shouldered his melta gun and spoke into the vox-mic at his throat.

"He's here," he said. He didn't need to elaborate.

"Ventris?" asked Honsou, his voice grainy with fuzzy static.

"Who else do you think I mean?" snapped Grendel. "Him and that big sergeant. Sixteen of them, all told. There's some mortals with them, and... damn me... they've got Vaanes too."

"Vaanes? Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," said Grendel. "You think I wouldn't recognise that arrogant bastard when I see him? He's here, but he's a captive."

"Don't be too sure about that," said Honsou. "Send Xiomagra's Blade dancers to take the Ultramarines, but I want you to kill Vaanes."

"I can do that," chuckled Grendel. "How are you getting on in there?"

"We're still setting the charges to blow this place off the map, but we'll be done soon."

Grendel nodded and shut off the vox, turning to face the lithe warrior woman in rippling silver armour standing behind him. She and her fifteen warriors had their swords drawn, long, elegant blades with subtle curves to their length.

"You heard the man," said Grendel, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Go kill them."

Xiomagra glided past him, her movements so supple that Grendel wasn't consciously aware of her moving her limbs. He glimpsed her cat-like yellow eyes flash with anticipation for the fight to come before the liquid metal of her helmet rose up to swallow her features. She held the black bladed sword up before Grendel.

"The Law of Swords compels me to obey," said Xiomagra, "but know this: if your master falls, yours will be the next soul claimed by this blade."

"I'll be waiting," said Grendel, aiming his meltagun at her. "I'm not frightened of you."

"You should be," said Xiomagra.

Before Grendel could answer, the Mistress of Blades leapt gracefully down the steps of the tomb with her troupe of Blade dancers flowing behind her.

"Time to kill me a Raven Guard," said Grendel.

Helicas sent a missile through the doorway, and it exploded in the chest cavity of a warrior in the rust-red of the Skulltakers. Bone and armour fragments scythed down the warrior behind him, and the Shockwave of detonation hurled the rest down the stairs. The explosion had bought them a few seconds more, but with no time to reload, Helicas discarded the launch tube and took up his bolter.

Scipio fired his bolter into the doorway, hearing the cracking echoes of booming detonations as his shots found targets. Coltanis held his fire until another hulking form threw itself through the doorway. The berserker died with half his torso missing as a blinding dart of plasma obliterated his body with a hiss of boiling blood and melting ceramite.

More warriors pushed up through the shattered remains of the passageway onto the tower's roof, only to be met with a storm of bolter fire and sword blows.

Scipio swapped weapons and drove his chainsword through the neck of a berserker, wielding the weapon two-handed to ensure the wound was fatal. He wrenched his blade free and kicked out at the warrior behind his victim, pushing him back down the stairs.

"This tower will forever be Ultramar!" he shouted.

Furious volleys of gunfire from below aimed to prove him wrong as the Bloodborn surged and broke around the gatehouse like a garish tide. Hurling grenades exploded against the tower's silver ramparts, and hundreds of lasrifles chipped away at the stonework as the enemy sought to unseat them from their pedestal. Fragments of stone filled the air and the sound of gunfire was a constant roar in his ears.

Scipio thrust his sword at a charging berserker. The blade lanced into the warrior's throat and a fan of arterial blood sprayed out. He hurled the dead traitor back, tripping another enemy who was promptly shot by Helicas. The narrow stairs were hampering the enemy's attempts to reach them, but such was the weight of numbers pushing up from below that there was a desperate inevitability to their battle. Another plasma blast tore through the attackers, and the reek of burning meat caught in Scipio's throat.

A pall of black smoke hung over Corinth's central plaza, the flames from their assault still spreading and taking more of the Bloodborn encampment with it. Though they numbered only ten warriors, they had cut a devastating swathe through the enemy.

Nivian fired the pistol Scipio had given him, using it as a club when the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber. With only one arm, it was impossible for him to reload. The four Ultramarines fought with all the strength bred into them by the Chapter's gene-smiths and the courage that came naturally to every warrior of Ultramar. They fought harder than any of them had fought before, digging deep into their inner reserves of strength to hold the foe at bay.

Time and time again the traitor Astartes came at them, and time and time again they hurled them back. Bloodborn soldiers with grapnels and ladders attempted an escalade, but Nivian, even with one arm, had the strength to cast them down. Scipio lost track of how long they had fought, but the sun was setting as the last berserker fell to a combined pummelling of bolter shells. Behind the dead warrior, Scipio saw the orange and black Claws of Lorek falling back down the tower stairs.

"For courage!" shouted Scipio.

"For honour!" cried Helicas.

"For Ultramar!" bellowed Nivian and Coltanis.

Scipio had never been prouder to be their sergeant. Fresh waves of gunfire drove them into the cover of the parapet, but Scipio knew they would have to weather that fire in moments when the traitor Astartes tried to force their way onto the tower once again. He glanced at the chronometer in his visor, amazed to find that nearly thirty minutes had passed since they had taken the gatehouse.

"Helicas, get that missile launcher ready to fire again," he ordered. "Nivian, give me that pistol so I can put a fresh magazine in for you, they'll be back at us soon."

"Let them come," said Nivian, handing over the weapon.

"Damn, you've made a mess of my gun," said Scipio. "The armourers will have my hide for this."

"Sorry, sergeant, those berserkers have got hard heads. Took a bit of cracking open."

Scipio smiled and reloaded the pistol, as a deafening roaring cut through the protective autosenses of their armour to eclipse the constant snap and rattle of gunfire. Like stuttering blasts of lightning on a clear day, the top of the tower was suddenly illuminated by blazing tongues of fire from the anti-aircraft guns.

A thousand shells a minute roared from each gun's quad-mounted barrels, ripping great gouges in the enemy clustered around the tower. Hundreds died as Laenus and Bradua rotated the turret of their gun, whole sections of the camp disintegrating under the furious storm of fire. Explosions erupted in parallel lines throughout the Bloodborn encampment as the fire of weapons designed to bring down armoured flyers was turned on soft, fleshy bodies.

Natalis and Isatus worked the fire of the second gun over the Bloodborn, cutting two skiffs in half in a whickering storm of shells. The heavier skiff of the Corsair Queen slewed away from the collimated lines of fire, turning its prow and aft guns on the tower. Whickering shells ripped through the stone of the parapet and tore through the anti-aircraft gun's mantlet. Natalis died instantly, his body obliterated in a blaze of fire and blood. Isatus was blown from his perch on the gunner's seat and flew through the air to land in the midst of the Bloodborn.

Scipio cried out, but there was nothing to be done for his two warriors.

Laenus turned his fire to intercept the Corsair Queen's skiff, but she had anticipated such a response and swept towards the tower, into the dead zone below the gun's angle of declination. Denied his original target, Laenus turned his fire on the ammunition stores at the edge of the plaza. Blooms of bright fire erupted from the smashed structures and the explosions consumed a score of fire teams nearby. Scipio's heart lurched as he saw dozens of other fire teams readying large-calibre mortars. Behind them, half a dozen mobile artillery tanks were moving into position on the edge of the plaza.

"Emperor's blood," he swore, now understanding why the traitor Astartes had pulled back from the roof entrance. The mortars boomed with metallic coughs and Scipio heard the whining screech of their shells.

"Incoming!" shouted Scipio.

He rolled onto his front and pressed himself tight against the inner face of the parapet as a wave of mortar shells screamed down. Most of the first volley was too long, coming down on the inner face of the palace walls. Thunderous impacts threw up bodies and cobbled stone and the tower shook with the force of the detonations.

Two shells scored direct hits on the tower, and Scipio was thrown into the air by the percussive blasts. His vision crazed as his helmet cracked against the rampart, and shards of armoured glass embedded in his face. Shrapnel whickered through the air and he grunted as a palm-sized fragment of red-hot metal lodged in his arm above the elbow. He wrenched it out as another shell exploded, sending a fan of metal ball bearings slashing downward.

Laenus screamed as his armour was perforated, and he fell from his perch on the gun. He crawled to the edge of the parapet, leaving a trail of bright blood behind him. Nivian and Coltanis cried out as their armour was battered by a blizzard of shrapnel.

Scipio's armour registered multiple breaches and he felt his skin burn from sizzling fragments. He tore off his shattered helmet and hurled it aside. Acrid smoke wreathed the gatehouse and the air reeked of burnt propellant. Blood stained the dressed stone of the ramparts, and Scipio coughed a mouthful of red-frothed spit.

Another shell slammed into the roof, punching into the guts of the tower and a blazing plume of fire and smoke geysered skyward from the detonation. Stone fell from the gatehouse and the structure groaned alarmingly as another shell slammed down on the second tower. Shell after shell arced down onto the tower, most blasting through to explode inside, but some detonating above it and tearing it apart. Incendiaries exploded over the roof, and Scipio dived beneath a tilted slab of cracked stone as the fireball swept over him.

Scipio lost sight of his men, knowing they were either buried in the rubble or vaporised in the firestorm of explosions. He rolled out from cover, drawing his sword as a thunderous roar sounded above him.

"If I am to die, it will be on my feet," he snarled, clambering onto the tilted slab and raising his sword high. Choking clouds of smoke obscured the sunset, but a hot wind was punching a hole between the ground and sky. And in that hole, Scipio saw a sight that could have come straight from Chapter legends.

Four Thunderhawk gunships in the livery of the 2nd Company *Gladius, Spatha, Pilum* and *Xiphos*.

They swooped in like avenging angels in Ultramarines blue, and Scipio Vorolanus had never seen so sweet a sight.

Sicarius.

Despite the fact that this was a shrine dedicated to a hero of the Ultramarines, Honsou was impressed by the monolithic character of Ventanus' tomb. From the outside it was impressive, but its designer—no doubt the Ultramarines would claim it to be their primarch—had known that the true measure of a building was in its interior functionality.

Though a portion of its supporting facade had collapsed, the great gem of a dome remained intact, its roof unbowed. The interior floor plan of the tomb was circular, laid out like a grand amphitheatre or council hall. Though instead of steps or seats, the tiers around the central open space were for the dead.

Hundreds of stone sarcophagi were laid out in concentric circles around the central floor of the tomb, each one a member of some lost Chapter of the Ultramarines back when they were organised as a Legion. In the centre of the tomb, directly beneath the dome's cupola was a gleaming sarcophagus of black marble, machine-finished and miraculously free of dust after centuries of isolation.

Bare of ornamentation apart from a silver plaque bearing the name of the warrior entombed within, this was what M'kar had sent them to destroy. This was the final resting place of Captain Ventanus of the Ultramarines. M'kar hadn't elaborated much when it had told Honsou that this shrine was to be cast to ruin, only that he was to ensure that the body of Ventanus and all his wargear were consumed utterly.

"It seems a shame to destroy this place," said the Newborn, following Honsou's gaze towards the Iron Warriors spread throughout the structure. Demolition teams wired massive amounts of explosives together in chains that would bring the structure crashing down in an avalanche of fire and debris.

Honsou shrugged. "What do you care?"

“I don’t, not really. I just appreciate the architectural splendour of this place.”

“You are a judge of architecture?”

“No, but I can still know a harmonious space when I see it.”

Honsou laughed. “Listen to yourself. You’re a creature of the warp and a killer, yet here you are lamenting the destruction of an enemy structure because it looks pretty?”

“I suppose I am. Is that strange?”

Honsou didn’t answer, returning his attention to the demolition teams. Rigging the building for destruction was taking longer than he would have liked. The architect, Guilliman or not, had known his trade. This was a damnably stable structure.

But there were no better artists of demolition than the Iron Warriors, and one thing Honsou knew was that any building would come down if you packed it with enough explosives.

“Aren’t you concerned that Uriel Ventris is outside?” asked the Newborn.

“Should I be?” asked Honsou. “I think the Blade dancers and Grendel can handle his motley band of brave heroes.”

“What if they cannot?”

“Then I have you to protect me,” said Honsou.

The Newborn cocked its head to one side and looked at him quizzically. “I think you want Grendel and the Blade dancers to fail.”

“Maybe I do,” admitted Honsou. “It does seem a shame to come all this way and not kill Ventris myself. Anyway, why the concern? I though you wanted to face your maker again?”

“I do,” said the Newborn.

“Then let’s hope we both get what we want.”

Vaanes had called them Blade dancers, and the name was an apt one. Uriel watched the enemy flow from the tomb like a troupe of acrobats. His eye designated seventeen individual threats. Slender of limb and clad only in loose plates of silver and lacquered leather, it seemed an absurd force to send against twenty-seven Astartes and an inquisitor of the holy ordos. A mix of sexes, each blade dancer carried a glittering sword, while their leader, an androgynous figure in silver armour, bore swords of dark and light.

A warrior in the burnished iron and scratched yellow of the Iron Warriors came too, moving slowly compared to the sword troupe. There was a familiarity to his movements, but Uriel saw immediately that it wasn’t Honsou. He didn’t know the warrior, but intended to kill him just the same.

“Swords of Calth, fire right!” ordered Uriel. “Firebrands left.”

Bolters were raised in unison as the Ultramarines advanced. Shaan split his Raven Guard, leading one squad over the blocks to the right. Revys Kyre led a second group behind and further out from his captain’s squad.

“Fire!” shouted Uriel, and the bolters of his warriors thundered.

Not one of the troupe was felled.

Their shots had missed, and Uriel was astounded. The dancers moved like quicksilver, flowing out of the path of the shells as though they moved in slow motion. Another volley was similarly ineffective, but the third put down two of their lithe foes. Their shots echoed from the walls of the cave, but then the dancers were among them.

Swords flickered like steel tongues of striking snakes, lashing out with the speed of whips and slicing into armour with terrible ease. Two of the Firebrands fell, their heads sliding neatly from severed necks, and Uriel saw Livius Hadrianus drop his melta gun as a whipping blade cut into the meat of his shoulder. Brutus Cyprian roared and put his fist through the face of Hadrianus’ attacker, spinning on his heel and ramming his elbow into the chest of another dancer, pulverising her ribcage and hurling her back through the air. Uriel deflected a blow meant to open his jugular and desperately fended off a blistering series of ripostes and counter-strikes that left him in no doubt that he was monstrously outclassed. Ancient Peleus planted the banner beside him, firing precise shots into the swirling melee. Only a superlative marksman would dare to take such shots, and each one dropped a sword dancer.

Inquisitor Suzaku danced through the battle, as elegant as any of her foes. She fought with an ivory staff lined with green threads, and its tip crackled with arcs of psychic energy. With the exception of her warrior bodyguard, the remainder of her retinue stood clear of the battle. The acolytes with Vaanes secured by the mancachers kept a wary distance, unwilling to let a traitor anywhere near this desperate struggle for survival.

Selenus ducked and wove a path through the fighting to reach the fallen warriors, killing a sword dancer with a spray of automatic bolter fire as he dropped to his knees beside the Ultramarines wounded. Two of Pasanius’ squad stood over him as he ensured the gene-seed of

the dead warriors was retrieved.

Alone of the Swords of Calth, Petronius Nero could match the skill of their attackers. Hadrianus and Cyprian fought back to back to fend off the swordsmen, but Nero slid through their ranks, his sword as much of a blur as those of his opponents. Where he normally fought with an element of showmanship, there was none of that now, only the efficient kill strokes of a master bladesman. No sooner was one foe slain than Nero had moved onto the next.

Uriel was in awe of the warrior's skill, fighting with every ounce of his ability just to stay alive. He ducked a decapitating sweep and slammed into the warrior, taking them both to the ground. It wasn't finesse, it wasn't a move taught by the sword masters of Macragge, but it did the job. He smashed his helmet into the face of the sword dancer, pulverising the features beneath the silver mask. He scrambled clear as another dancer landed lightly next to him and plunged a sword into his chest.

Uriel rolled before the tip could penetrate more than a handspan, slamming the flat of his palm against the blade and snapping it off at the hilt. He kicked out, shattering the swordsman's kneecap and gripped his lacquered straps as he dropped. He dragged the warrior down and pounded his head on the rocks, hearing the wet crack of a skull shattering.

Quickly, Uriel got to his feet as the Iron Warrior reached the fight. At first Uriel thought he was wearing a monstrous fright mask, then realised the man's face was hideously burned and blackened by fire. He carried a melta gun and fired it into the mass of fighting warriors with a gleeful bellow of hate. A thunderclap of superheated air boomed in the midst of the battle, and two of the Firebrands fell with half their bodies blasted to stinking vapour.

Pasanius roared in hatred and fought his way towards the Iron Warrior, clubbing sword dancers out of his way with his bare hands in his fury to reach this scarred killer. He hurled himself at the Iron Warrior, and Uriel lost sight of them as two sword dancers came at him. One was the silver-armoured leader, a woman of such repulsive beauty that Uriel could barely look at her. Twin swords wove a dazzling pattern of light in the air above her, and right away Uriel knew he couldn't fight her and win.

No sooner had he formed the thought than the Raven Guard struck.

Though they had made no overt attempt to hide, Uriel had quite forgotten they were there, like shadows blending with the gathering darkness. Black lances thrust into the vitals of an unsuspecting foe; they struck from the flank and rear, clawing their way into the sword dancers with glittering gauntlet blades. Shaan moved like a predatory hunter, all jerks and stabs and quick barbs. Warriors fell around him, mortally wounded and maimed.

Revys Kyre fought with more refinement, directing his blows with carefully measured precision, always aware of the space around him and where his next step would carry him. The sword dancers died in droves as the Raven Guard cut through their ranks and the Ultramarines capitalised on the suddenness of the flank attack. Within moments the momentum of their graceful attackers had been crushed, and they were fighting for their lives. There could be no surrender, and only annihilation would end this fight.

Uriel threw himself at the two sword dancers before him, hoping his sudden leap might surprise them. They merely sidestepped, their swords licking out to caress his breastplate and shoulder. Blood welled from the slashes, and Uriel felt the hot sting shoot into his limbs, as though the blades themselves were burning. He blocked a sword thrust to the groin and rolled his wrists over the blade, lancing its tip through the eyes of one attacker.

"You are the leader," stated the remaining sword maiden, swirling her blades above her head in what Uriel supposed was a ritual of challenge. "Uriel Ventris?"

"I am," he said, pulling his own blade high and stalling for time. "Who are you?"

"Xiomagra, Mistress of the Blade dancers," she said. "The swords require your name before you die."

The Gladius touched down just over the blasted wreckage of the gatehouse, its jets screaming and its guns battering a bloody path through the Bloodborn. The assault ramp slammed down hard and there he was. Sicarius. Regent of Talassar and Knight Champion of Macragge. His scarlet cape swirled around him in the hot thermals of the Thunderhawk's landing, and the gold of his armour glittered like morning sunlight. The Lions of Macragge followed him onto the ground, their guns firing into the mass of Bloodborn soldiers surrounding the landing zone.

Scipio leapt from the tilting perch of the slab and clambered over the rubble and debris from the artillery impacts. Helicas lay face down over his missile launcher, the tube crumpled and useless. Coltanis was next to him, and Nivian sprawled over the remains of the parapet.

"Up! Up!" he shouted. "Sicarius is here."

Helicas was first to rise, dragging himself free of the rubble and helping Coltanis to his feet. His weapon specialist retrieved his plasma gun, checked its mechanisms, then pulled the groaning Nivian back over the parapet.

"I'm not dead," said Nivian, as if unable to believe the fact without hearing the words.

Scipio looked over at the anti-aircraft gun, its wreckage sagging and blackened where a high explosive shell had struck. As much as he wanted to look for Laenus and Bradua in the wreckage, it seemed impossible that they could have survived.

*Spatha*, *Pilum* and *Xiphos* roared as they slammed down next to the *Gladius*, and Scipio's heart filled with pride as the warriors of the 2nd Company charged into battle. Nearly a hundred warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, a force unlike any in the world, thrust into the Bloodborn mass and the slaughter was glorious.

"Come on," yelled Scipio. "This is our moment! We earned this fight!"

With the remnants of his squad, Scipio ran back down the tower they had fought so hard to capture. The steps were littered with broken bodies and the walls smeared with bright blood. They met no resistance on the way down, and emerged from the shattered doorway at the bottom to a scene of magnificent carnage.

The 2nd Company was pushing a fighting wedge into the shocked Bloodborn troops. The sight of so many Astartes had thrown the enemy, though they were regrouping faster than Scipio would have believed had he not seen it with his own eyes.

"Thunderbolts, on!" he cried, fearful of missing out on fighting alongside the entirety of his company. Not since lost Damnos had the 2nd had fought as one, and such battles were the stuff of Chapter legend. To miss such a conflict would be a burden a warrior would carry for the rest of his life.

Twin roars of assault cannon fire announced the presence of Brothers Agnathio and Ultradus, the two Dreadnoughts emerging from the belly of *Pilum* and forging a second front with Tirian and Atavian's Devastators following behind.

The tip of the spear was Sicarius, the magnificent warrior slaying foes by the dozen with his tempest blade. Ixion's assault squad formed his right flank, Strabo his left. Together they were a lethal arrowhead of blades cutting through the Bloodborn towards the domed palace and their prey. Mortar shells landed amid the assault, but they were poorly aimed and only a handful of warriors fell. All but one returned to the battle, and the assault cut deeper and deeper.

The Corsair Queen's forces regrouped around her, a mass of soldiers formed up in close order with their weapons raised in disciplined lines. As ferocious and shocking as Captain Sicarius' assault had been, Kaarja Salombar's forces were ready for him.

Scipio saw her armoured skiff take a direct hit from one of Tirian's las-cannons, but a pulsing wave of energy dissipated its power enough to render the impact meaningless. The skiff darted into cover, but not before its prow cannon unleashed a withering hail of high-energy bolts. A dozen Space Marines went down, and none of them got back up again.

Scipio and his squad reached the *Spatha*, and his face lit up as he saw Iulius Fennion forming up the Immortals. They marched down the assault ramp, bolters at the ready. Scipio called out to Iulius, who turned at the sound of his name.

"Scipio!" said Iulius. "Damn me, but you've outdone us all with this."

"If you want a job done right, you send for the Thunderbolts."

"Then call in the Immortals to finish it off," laughed Iulius.

"Where's Manorian?"

"Praxor? The other side of the gatehouse," said Iulius. "Keeping the rest of these bastards from stopping us killing the bitch."

"One squad against a whole city?"

Iulius shrugged. "I know, it's Ghospora all over again. Almost seems unfair to our enemies. But enough of Manorian, Captain Sicarius is calling for you to join him. He says he has a queen to kill and wants you beside him when he takes her head."

Xiomagra came at Uriel in a blur, her twin swords raining blow after blow upon him. He blocked and parried desperately, knowing he was hopelessly outclassed. Twice he attempted to counterattack, but each time she contemptuously flicked his attack aside and plunged a blade into his flesh. Uriel bled from a dozen wounds, yet the sword maiden was untouched. They traded strikes back and forth, none of Uriel's connecting, all of hers drawing blood. She was toying with him, savouring his slow death and relishing the growing desperation in his technique.

Anger filled Uriel, and he thrust his blade towards her heart.

It was the move she had been waiting for and she swayed aside, flicking his sword from his grip with a casual flick of her silver blade. Uriel turned in time to see her black-bladed sword arcing towards his neck and knew her playing with him was over.

A curved sabre alive with flickering energies flashed in front of him, intercepting the blade in a shower of azure sparks.

"I've got you, captain," said Petronius Nero, rolling his blade around and cutting away one of Xiomagra's shoulder guards. Uriel watched as the Mistress of the Blade dancers took the measure of his champion, her eyes widening in surprise.

"I am Petronius Nero," said the swordsman. "You tried to kill my captain. Prepare to die."

Nero and Xiomagra flew at each other in a dazzling display of sword-play, each a master of their art. Xiomagra fought with her twin blades as fluid extensions of her limbs, Petronius Nero with his sword and shield working in perfect harmony. They came together, clashed in an

unimaginably quick flurry of blades that was too rapid to follow, then broke apart. It was impossible to see who had the upper hand, but just as suddenly as the bout had begun, it was over. Nero, calm and icy in the face of Xiomagra's flourishes, swept his blade over Xiomagra's and slashed the tip across her throat.

Blood arced in a jetting spray as Nero swung his sword in a curt salute to his foe, and Xiomagra collapsed, hands clawing at her throat as she vainly tried to stem the gushing flow of her lifeblood. Nero turned away and rejoined the battle, not even bothering to watch Xiomagra's last moments.

Before Uriel could set off after his champion, he was smashed from his feet by a blur of iron and yellow. A heavy figure in armour bore him to the ground and a fist cannoned into his helmet. Uriel's head slammed against the rocks. The vision in one eye blurred momentarily.

He put his arm up to ward off another blow and saw the scarred Iron Warrior kneeling over him. The warrior's melta gun was gone, and he pummelled Uriel with his spike-knuckled fists. A hammerblow of a right hook smashed the front of Uriel's helmet and a swift jab splintered its lenses. Another cracked the gorget seals around Uriel's neck and the warrior tore off his helmet to look him in the eyes.

"I've heard all about you, Ventris, but you're not so tough," spat the warrior as he kept up his barrage of punches. Blood burst from Uriel's cheeks and lips as he fought to get his hands up to block the hail of strikes. The warrior had his arms pinned by his sides, and Uriel couldn't shift his weight. His hand found the combat blade at his hip, and his hand curled around the textured grip of its hilt.

"Grendel!" shouted a voice, and the warrior looked up, his eyes widening in surprise.

Uriel took advantage of the momentary distraction to haul his combat blade clear of its sheath. He plunged it into the joint between warrior's thigh and calf as a swift-moving shape slammed an open palm into the hideously scarred face.

The warrior his saviour had named Grendel pitched backwards and Uriel scrambled clear. With a brawler's speed Grendel rolled upright and blocked a downward slash of an elbow, leaning low to punch his attacker in the gut. Uriel came to his feet as the warrior sent a thundering right cross into his attacker's jaw.

Ardaric Vaanes rode the punch and spun inside Grendel's guard, locking his arm around his opponent's neck and twisting. Grendel's armour and powerful neck muscles were too strong and he easily threw Vaanes off.

Uriel stared open-mouthed at the renegade Raven Guard as he fended off brutal chops of Grendel's hands. Any one of those blows would break a limb, even a steel-strong Astartes one. The spiked collar was gone from Vaanes' neck, yet it had left its mark. A bloody ring of puncture marks dotted his throat and dried blood coated his neck and the shoulders of his prison-issue uniform. Suzaku's two acolytes lay sprawled unconscious behind him, and Uriel cursed, knowing he should not have expected any warrior of the Adeptus Astartes to be held by such tinker toys.

Grendel landed a blow on Ardaric Vaanes and drove him to his knees with its power. Uriel heard the dry-wood snap of bone and saw Vaanes grimace in pain as ribs broke.

"I always wanted to kill you, Vaanes," roared Grendel.

"The feeling's mutual," retorted Vaanes.

Though faced with two warriors who were enemies, Uriel knew there was only one way to intervene in this fight. He ran in and threw himself at Grendel, slamming an elbow into the side of his head. Grendel staggered, but swung around and drove his fist into Uriel's jaw. Uriel rolled with the punch, but the impact was enormous, like being hit by a siege hammer. He ducked a hooking follow-up punch and moved to the left as Vaanes circled to the right.

They came at him together, Uriel sending a flurry of blows towards Grendel's midriff as Vaanes attacked high with graceful fist strikes and slashing elbows. Grendel blocked them all, sending hammering blows back in return. He grabbed Uriel's arm and twisted, driving him to his knees and slamming his thigh into his face. Uriel tumbled away, just managing to grab hold of the combat blade's hilt. It came free in a wash of blood as Grendel blocked a roundhouse kick from Vaanes, twisted his leg and flipped him over onto his back. Vaanes landed on the balls of his feet and grunted as the splintered ends of his ribs ground together.

Grendel laughed. "I knew you were always going to be trouble. Bad enough I have to fight alongside a bastard half-breed, but a renegade? You're just an Astartes too damn stupid to choose who you fight for."

"I know who I fight for," snarled Vaanes, leaping into the air and sending his fist slashing towards Grendel's throat. The Iron Warrior batted the blow aside, but Uriel watched amazed as Vaanes' entire body seemed to bend around Grendel and he drove his fist down into the Iron Warrior's temple. Every ounce of Vaanes' hatred and self-loathing was bound to the blow and Uriel saw Grendel's skull shatter, blood squirting from his mouth and nose as his head snapped sideways with a sickening crack.

The Iron Warrior crumpled, dropping to his knees and falling flat onto his face with a heavy slam of metal on rock. Vaanes slumped over the corpse, breathless and his ashen face streaked with sweat. Uriel retrieved his bolter, and swung it round onto Ardaric Vaanes.

"Why?" asked Uriel.

Vaanes looked up, his face anguished and shorn of its mask of arrogance.

"You can't fight what you are," whispered Vaanes, and Uriel knew those words were not spoken in answer to his question.

“The question Grendel asked?” said Uriel. “You didn’t answer him. Who *do* you fight for?”

Vaanes smiled weakly. “Not for Honsou.”

“That’s not good enough,” said Uriel as the battlefield fell silent.

“No? Very well. I fight for myself,” said Vaanes. “I suppose that’s why I didn’t make a very good Astartes. I never felt it, you know? The brotherhood you need to be part of something bigger than yourself. Even surrounded by my battle-brothers I always felt alone.”

“What happened to you, Vaanes?” said Uriel. “You could have been one of the greats.”

“I’ll never tell you,” he said. “It’s the Raven Guard way.”

“You know nothing of the Raven Guard,” spat Aethon Shaan, appearing at Uriel’s side. Shaan’s surviving six warriors surrounded Vaanes, like carrion birds around a fresh corpse.

“Kill me,” said Vaanes. “It’s what you promised.”

A booming detonation sounded from inside the tomb of Captain Ventanus, and a cloud of smoke blew out through the collapsed facade. The noise rolled around the cavern, and Uriel turned back to look at Vaanes.

“No,” said Uriel. “This isn’t over yet.”

## TWENTY-ONE

Blasted shards of fire-blackened stone tumbled from the shattered pediment of the eastern portico. Smoke hung low on the marble-flagged steps as Uriel made his way between the two vast columns that were all that remained of the tomb’s facade.

The Saviour of Calth was venerated in hundreds of temple shrines throughout Calth, but this was the lost resting place of Captain Ventanus himself. The symbolism of what Honsou was attempting was not lost on Uriel.

Honsou needed to be stopped, though Uriel had precious few warriors remaining to him to do it. Though none of the Swords of Calth had fallen, only five of the Firebrands had survived the fight with the Blade dancers.

Fortunately Pasanius was one of those survivors, though the breastplate of his armour was now little more than molten scraps dripping ceramite to his skin. All the signs pointed to a direct hit from a melta gun, and that Pasanius was still alive spoke volumes of the sergeant’s legendary resilience.

“Take more than that toy to put me down,” was all Pasanius had said when Apothecary Selenus had attempted to treat him. “Now leave me be. You heard the captain, this fight’s not over yet.”

Inquisitor Suzaku was alone, for the warriors charged with her protection had been slain at the hands of the Blade dancers. She bled from a terrible wound in her side, her dark skin ashen from blood loss, but she had pressed on regardless. Uriel was impressed at her determination to see this through.

Six Raven Guard still followed Captain Shaan, and Revys Kyre escorted Ardaric Vaanes. Uriel had expected Shaan to kill Vaanes, but the Raven Guard captain had surprised him.

“His fate is not for me to decide,” he said. “The Master of Shadows, it is for him to choose the fate of fallen ravens.”

“And what if he tries anything?” asked Pasanius.

The claws snapped from Shaan’s gauntlets. “Then I’ll take his head myself.”

“Good enough,” replied Pasanius. “I can live with that.”

Uriel led the way into the tomb, its interior filled with settling clouds of dust. Shafts of bioluminescence filtered through cracked walls of the tomb, catching the glittering fragments of rock dust floating in the air. Soft light from the cracked dome bathed everything in a pale blue glow.

The tiered interior of the tomb was laid out like an assembly chamber, with the tiers filled with the tombs of the slain. Those closest to the centre were broken open, while looping coils of copper wiring connected the others to what were unmistakably demolition charges.

Rubble and shattered stone filled the open space at the centre of the tomb. A once-mighty sarcophagus lay broken in a scattered heap of debris. Two score Iron Warriors surrounded its remains, like statues of brazen metal automatons with bolters held at their sides. The hideous creature cloned from his stolen genetics stood with clenched fists at the base of the rubble. Uriel felt its curious mix of hatred and



awe.

“Hold fire,” ordered Uriel, keeping his voice low. He felt the instinctual aggression of his warriors come to the fore at the sight of the Iron Warriors, but the traitors outnumbered them two to one. They made no aggressive moves, and Uriel was content to let that continue for now. “No one fires except on my say so. That goes for you too, Shaan.”

Shaan nodded, though Uriel shared his distaste for this course of action. It felt unnatural to see traitors before them and not to be firing a bolter or drawing a sword, but this moment had been coming for too long to be ended without some form of reckoning.

A warrior in iron armour squatted atop the pile of rubble, and Uriel felt his heart quicken at the sight of him. Honsou.

Uriel marched between the concentric rows of tombs and halted at the edge of the central floor space. Honsou turned to face him, and Uriel saw sections of deep blue armour at his feet, plates of ancient ceramite and gold. His anger grew hotter as he realised whose tomb Honsou squatted upon, The Iron Warrior looked up and quickly scanned their numbers, grinning with a sardonic upturn to the corner of his mouth.

“I see you brought Vaanes back to me,” said Honsou. “I thought you’d have killed him.”

The last comment was addressed to Aethon Shaan, who glared at Honsou with undisguised hatred. The Raven Guard held a deeper enmity than most for the Iron Warriors, for their earliest Chapter history bore grim testimony to the betrayal of Corax’s Legion at the hands of Perturabo’s.

Shaan didn’t waste words on Honsou, but the Warsmith wasn’t done yet. “Vaanes betrayed you once, and he betrayed me too,” said Honsou. “Inconstancy is in his blood, so what makes you think he won’t betray you again?”

“He won’t get the chance,” snapped Shaan.

“We’ll see,” replied Honsou with a wry chuckle. He turned his attention back to Uriel and said, “Ah, Ventris. I’ve waited a long time to see you again.”

“I hoped I’d killed you on your daemon world,” said Uriel.

Honsou laughed and tapped the side of his head, where crude augmetic work covered a hideous knot of scar tissue.

“Better men than you have tried,” he said. “But you’re the only one who came close.”

“And this is you returning the favour?”

“Hardly, though your death will be a bonus,” said Honsou, rising from the wreckage of the shattered sarcophagus. He descended to the floor of the tomb, holding something in his hand, something stolen from Ventanus’ resting place, but Uriel couldn’t see what it was. He heard Pasanus gasp, now seeing that Honsou’s silver arm was no normal bionic replacement. It was the hideous arm of living metal that had been sawed from his friend’s shoulder in the caverns of the Savage Morticians.

Honsou saw their recognition and lifted his arm. “I never thanked you for this. It’s saved my life a number of times.”

“Just another reason to kill you,” snapped Pasanus.

“That’s the arm?” said Suzaku. “The one tainted with the necrontyr living metal?”

“Is that what it is?” said Honsou, as though they were not mortal enemies, but friends sharing a spirited debate. “I always wondered how it worked. Even Cyserin couldn’t fathom it, and he used to be a priest of Mars.”

“Why are you here?” demanded Uriel, fighting for calm as memories of all the destruction Honsou had unleashed flooded his consciousness. “Why this place?”

“Honestly? A daemon sent me to destroy it, though for the life of me I can’t think why. I mean it’s not as though there’s anything useful here. Just some bones, some broken plates of armour... and this.”

Honsou held up the item he’d taken from the tomb of Ventanus. It was a dagger, a long-bladed poniard with a golden hilt. Its blade was triangular in section and fashioned from some strange stone, like chipped flint with a glitter sheen to its edge.

“It’s a pretty enough piece,” said Honsou, turning the weapon over in his hands. “Nice hilt, though the blade looks like something cave-dwelling savages might make. Curious, is it not?”

“Fascinating,” hissed Pasanus. “You’re going to pay for all the lives you’ve taken.”

Uriel placed a restraining hand on Pasanus’ shoulder. With the odds stacked against them, he needed Honsou’s warriors to lower their guard before making any hostile move.

“Why Tarsis Ultra?” he asked.

Honsou looked confused for a moment, as though the name were unfamiliar to him.

“Ah, the world we used the virus on,” he said. “One *your* Mechanicus devised I might add. Very nice work too. Did a thorough job from what I understand. I needed to get your attention, didn’t I? After all, what’s the point of wreaking havoc if the person you want to suffer doesn’t know why they’re suffering?”

“You are a monster, Honsou,” snarled Uriel, drawing the sword of Idaeus with cold deliberation. “And I will relish cutting you down.”

Honsou laughed and gestured to the Iron Warriors arrayed around him. “Why is it you always think we’re going to duel? I have you outgunned and outnumbered, and every square inch of this tomb is wired to blow it back to the age of the Warmaster.”

“You are a coward,” said Uriel, hoping to anger Honsou to rashness, but instead the Warsmith gestured to the warrior next to him, the thing Vaanes had called the Newborn.

“Why should I fight you when I have a champion to do it for me?”

The Newborn removed its helmet, and Uriel felt a sickening repulsion at the sight of the dead face before him. Its skin was a leathery and inflexible mask, but there was no mistaking the bone structure beneath that gave it the lie of resemblance. Nor was there any doubt as to the heritage of the stormcloud eyes that smouldered with hatred and desperate need.

It took a step forward and cocked its head to one side.

“Your face is different,” it said. Uriel saw its fleshless lips moving behind its dead skin mask, feeling his gorge rise at the sight.

“Thanks to your bolt round.”

“Did it hurt?”

“It did,” confirmed Uriel.

“Good,” said the creature. “Since I was spat out in that cavern I have lived with pain. My life is broken memories sewn together, my body a monstrous thing neither alive nor dead.”

Petronius Nero drew his blade and said, “Let me kill it, captain. Champion to champion.”

Uriel shook his head. “Not this time, Petronius. This is a battle I must fight on my own.”

Honsou pressed the poniard he’d stolen from the tomb into the Newborn’s hand. “Here, use this. Seems appropriate that he dies with his hero’s blade in his heart.”

The Newborn looked at the weapon and nodded. “I never asked for this,” it said. “I should have died, and that would have been a mercy. But you breathed life into my broken form. And for that I will kill you.”

Uriel felt the anguish in its words, the tortured pain of a monster set to kill its creator.

“You don’t have to do this,” said Uriel.

“Yes,” said the Newborn, walking towards him. “I do. I end your life and then my own.”

“You were a young boy once,” said Uriel, stopping the Newborn in its tracks. “I know because I lived your memories. As you saw mine, I saw yours. I saw it. You were training to be a commissar. You were taken by the Iron Warriors and turned into a monster, but that’s not what you *are*. They twisted your outward form, but they can’t change what you are inside, no matter how much they try and fill your head with their warped thoughts.”

“You saw my life?”

“Parts of it, yes,” said Uriel.

The Newborn stared at him, as though trying to decide if he were lying.

“It doesn’t matter what you say to it,” said Honsou. “It doesn’t matter what it was, it’s a thing of the warp now.”

The Newborn reversed the blade Honsou had given it and dropped into a fighting crouch.

“Come, father,” it said. “Come and die with me.”

The palace grounds had become a bloodbath. Desperate Bloodborn soldiers were fighting for their lives as the 2nd Company cut into their numbers with all the brutal efficiency for which the Ultramarines were famed. Tactical squads advanced in rigid echelon formation, firing on the move with relentless barrages from their weapons. Assault squads struck into the gaps, tearing them wider and breaking the Bloodborn into isolated pockets to be slaughtered piecemeal.

Scipio Vorolanus led Coltanis, Helicas and Nivian through the raging battle, firing his bolt pistol in economical bursts. He’d picked up a new weapon from the *Spatha*’s stowage racks, and it felt good in his hands. Helicas had procured a heavy bolter, and whenever their

advance stalled he unleashed a sawing blast of shells into the enemy. Nivian held onto Scipio's battered pistol and fired one-handed while Coltanis had replenished the energy cells of his plasma gun.

Explosions burst amongst the Bloodborn and the Ultramarines, for the enemy soldiers beyond the walls and gatehouse were fighting furiously to come to their queen's aid. Scipio had no fear that any would get through, for Praxor Manorian always seemed to feel the need to prove his worth over and above anyone else. If there was any squad that could hold the gatehouse, it was the Shield Bearers.

The Corsair Queen's skiff was trying to retreat to the palace, but in their desperation to save her, the Bloodborn forces inside the walls had hemmed her in. Wedged in place by the press of bodies, the skiff fired over their heads into the Ultramarines, but so thickly enmeshed with the Bloodborn were they that it was impossible to avoid hitting their own men.

Traitor Astartes were battering their way through the Bloodborn to take up position with Kaarja Salombar, and Scipio saw the vivid blue of her hair through the blazing muzzle flashes and explosions. To see the object of their quest so close was intoxicating, and he led the Thunderbolts on with even greater vigour.

Scipio saw a flash of crimson ahead, and the sight of Captain Sicarius lifted his heart. The captain of the 2nd was an unstoppable force, a sublime warrior beyond compare whose blade seemed able to find the weak point in any armour, the vulnerable point in any defence. Every stroke of his tempest blade and every shot from his plasma pistol saw a host of Bloodborn soldiers killed.

He fought with a wildness that many found unsettling in a captain of the Ultramarines, but the more Scipio studied his swordplay the more he saw a studied precision to every blow. The Lions of Macragge fought beside their captain, a fighting unit without equal in a Chapter of heroes. Daceus protected the captain's right flank, while Prabian secured the left. Vandius carried the company standard, its blue, gold and green snapping proudly in the wind.

Sicarius paused to recharge his pistol and saw Scipio's men approaching.

"Sergeant Vorolanus. By the four winds it's good to see you!" cried Sicarius, taking Scipio's hand. "You've won me a great victory here, Scipio. A great victory for the 2nd!"

"Thank you, my lord," said Scipio.

"You've taken some losses, but by the Emperor I'm proud of you. All of you!"

"The Thunderbolts never fail, my lord," said Scipio proudly.

"No they don't," agreed Sicarius. "Now, you've done us a damn fine turn, Scipio, but this fight's not done yet. Are you with me?"

"Always, my lord," promised Scipio, and his men echoed his sentiment.

"Then follow me!" shouted Sicarius, plunging once more into the fray.

To fight alongside Captain Sicarius was a great honour, for this was the warrior who had saved Black Reach, who had defeated the reavers of the Halamar Rift and freed the Zeist sector from the insidious domination of the tau. He was, by any definition, a hero, and Scipio felt guilty for ever having doubted his course.

Their advance was unstoppable, but as the last of the Bloodborn melted away in the face of their rigid ferocity, the Lions of Macragge reached the point where they were faced with tougher opposition than mere mortals.

Just ahead, within twenty metres, was Kaarja Salombar, standing atop her beleaguered skiff with a gold-plated pistol and long curved sabre raised overhead. A host of traitor Astartes, thirty berserk Skulltakers and tiger-striped Claws of Lorek, stood between her and the Ultramarines.

Salombar saw Sicarius and smiled in genuine pleasure. She aimed the tip of her sword towards him, and the brazen nature of the challenge was unmistakable.

"Now I get to kill a queen," hissed Sicarius.

The Newborn leapt for Uriel, faster than he would have believed possible for a warrior in power armour. The blade of the poniard slashed for his throat, but Uriel swayed aside, bringing his sword up to block the reverse stroke. The Newborn's face was a blank mask and as Uriel backed away, it reached up to tear it off.

Its patchwork covering had been hideous, but the vile, skinless face beneath was even worse. It glistened with exposed musculature, wet and raw. It stared at Uriel with eyes bleeding madness, pain and a lifetime's worth of suffering. Its mouth pulled wide in a grimace of a trapped animal. As much as Uriel wanted to lower his blade and reason with the Newborn, he knew there was no way he could reach it. Events on Salinas had shown him the impossibility of trying to save warp-touched creatures.

The Newborn came at him again, slashing with the flint-bladed dagger and scoring the surface of Uriel's armour. He heard bolters pulled into shoulders and shells racked into breeches with Ultramarines precision.

"No!" he said. "This is between us."

The Iron Warriors watched with their bolters still slung insouciantly at their sides. They knew they had the upper hand and were dismissive of the ragtag force arrayed before them. They had also seen the Newborn in action and knew the contest before them could only end one way.

Uriel sent a long, slashing blow towards the Newborn's side, but it swayed left and rolled beneath his guard to thrust its dagger at his groin. Uriel spun to the side and the blade skidded from his thigh. He hammered his elbow down, thundering it into the Newborn's face, Blood burst from its cheek and it fell back, vaulting to its feet as Uriel stamped down.

In a contest between a swordsman and a knifeman, the advantage lay with the warrior bearing the longer blade. Yet that advantage counted for nothing against the Newborn's speed. Time and time again, Uriel thought he had a killing stroke, but each time his opponent would somehow manage to avoid the deathblow.

“Stop playing with him!” ordered Honsou. “Finish him.”

The Newborn nodded and closed on Uriel with the poniard held out before it.

Uriel raised his sword, but before he could raise his guard, the Newborn was upon him, ripping the sword from his grip and slamming the dagger's pommel into his cheek. He tumbled backwards, hearing a commotion from behind him. He hit the ground hard and rolled, but before he could move, the Newborn was on top of him with the grey dagger held above him.

“Now the pain ends,” said the Newborn, its voice choked with emotion.

Two bolter shots broke the sepulchral hush of the tomb and a pair of explosions punched through the Newborn's chest. Bloody craters big enough for an Astartes fist blew its body open, and Uriel could see Pasanius and a smoking bolter through the exit wounds. The Newborn shuddered, but didn't fall. The dagger slipped from its hand, landing with a clatter of stone on stone beside Uriel.

Bright blood and sickly yellow light oozed from the wounds. As Uriel watched the horrific injury, new ribs formed and slithering organs, arteries, sinews and muscle grew around them.

“You see the pain I am in?” it said. “The memory of every wound stays with me.”

Uriel swept up the fallen dagger as the Newborn's hands closed on his throat.

“Samuquan!” gasped Uriel. “That was your name. You were called Samuquan!”

The Newborn's grip slackened a fraction and its eyes widened in horror as a flood of memories were unlocked in a single, tumultuous moment. Its hands fled to its face and a strangled sob tore from its throat, but instead of freeing it from its domination, Uriel saw only fresh fury in its eyes. The realisation of what it was and what had become of it.

“I'm sorry,” whispered Uriel, and rammed the dagger into the Newborn's chest.

He drove the blade up into its innards, through the knitting flesh of the bolter wounds, with all his strength. As the blade struck, Uriel felt a hideous sensation of finality flow from the weapon, an awful sense of a thread being severed between the material world and whatever realms lay beyond. The Newborn howled and fell back, pulling itself off the blade.

It climbed to its feet and then dropped to its knees, clutching its head and screaming. Uriel felt its pain as a piercing ache in his head, knowing in that instant of connection it was reliving every degradation since its capture. The young boy he had been now saw the monster he had become, and its already fragile mind collapsed under the weight of shame and horror. The light oozing from its body vanished, and the regeneration of its wounds abruptly halted.

The child that had been Samuquan looked at Uriel and said, “Thank you,” It slumped onto its side, its legs curling up and hands folding inwards into a foetal position. Its eyes closed and a soft death rattle issued from its lips. Uriel stared at the dagger in amazement, not knowing how it had cut the life-thread of the Newborn or how Captain Ventanus had come to own such a weapon.

He heard the clatter of Iron Warriors bolters and rolled to the side as a roaring volley blasted from two score weapons. With the death of the Newborn, the uneasy and unnatural truce between the Ultramarines and Iron Warriors was ended in the thunder of bolters.

The tomb was filled with barking echoes of gunfire as the Iron Warriors and Imperial forces opened fire. Uriel scrambled back to his warriors as shells tore up the ground towards him. He jinked right, keeping low to avoid the streams of fire, and rolled into the cover of a cracked sarcophagus as its corner exploded into fragments of pulverised stone.

He risked a glance around the edge to see the Iron Warriors fanning out to surround them.

“Shaan!” shouted Uriel, gesturing to the flanking forces.

“We're on it,” said the Raven Guard, leading his warriors into the lines of sarcophagi.

Pasanius dropped into cover beside Uriel, now armed with his flamer.

“Thank you,” said Uriel, loading a fresh clip into his bolt pistol.

“Someone’s got to look out for you every time you do something foolish.”

Pasanius leaned over the edge of the sarcophagus and sent a blazing gout of promethium into the Iron Warriors. Three of the enemy set alight, but only one fell, the others walking through the fire unscathed.

The Firebrands and Swords of Calth returned fire from cover as best they could, but this was an unenviable tactical situation. Sheer weight of enemy fire was keeping most of his men pinned down while the Iron Warriors moved to flank them. Their enemies were risking nothing in such tactics, and were giving the Ultramarines no chance to heroically charge or meet them in close combat.

“Come and face us like men, you cowards!” shouted Pasanius, but Uriel knew Honsou would never rise to such bait. He looked for his nemesis through the blazing storms of gunfire, finally spotting him behind a sarcophagus twenty metres to the right. Seven warriors flanked him, and there was no way to reach him alive.

Uriel’s frustration was almost unbearable. To have come this far and have everything ended in such ignoble defeat! More of the Firebrands went down, felled by a methodical burst of overwatch as they tried to return fire. Brutus Cyprian grunted as a bolter round blew out his kneecap, and Ancient Peleus fell back as a round clipped the side of his shoulder guard. Selenus low-crawled over to them, but Peleus waved him off. Their circle of resistance was shrinking with every passing second as the Iron Warriors closed in.

Inquisitor Suzaku crawled through the smoke and dust towards him. Blood soaked her side and a fresh cut on her forehead bled onto her face.

“If your Codex has any plan for dealing with this, I’d love to hear it,” she said.

“Nothing springs to mind,” admitted Uriel, snapping off a shot toward Honsou. It was hastily taken and poorly aimed, flying wide of the mark and ricocheting from the shoulder guard of the warrior to Honsou’s left.

“So what now?” asked Pasanius.

Uriel had no answer for him, but then the Raven Guard struck with their last stab of defiance. Screams of pain echoed from the walls as Shaan’s Raven Guard tore through Iron Warriors flanking squads. Yet as devastating as these strikes were, the Iron Warriors were no fools, and reserve squads gunned down the black-armoured warriors before they could make their escape.

Uriel saw Revys Kyre go down with three bolt impacts blowing open his plastron and throwing him back over a sarcophagus. Aethon Shaan fell as a bolter round pulped his hip, but even carrying such a grievous wound, he managed to throw himself into cover. Crimson blood spilled down the carven faces of the sarcophagus, flowing around the images of heroic Ultramarines facing their damned foes and pooling on the cracked floor.

It was a noble attempt to break the enemy, but against such numbers it never really had any chance of success. Uriel wracked his brains for a way to turn this battle around, but he could think of nothing.

Gunsmoke filled the tomb, a choking acrid fog through which blocky shapes moved and spears of fire lanced back and forth. Glittering motes of light danced in the smoke, and Uriel caught an actinic, greasy sensation in the back of his throat, like the instant before a lightning strike. He pulled away from the sarcophagus as the blood-spattered carvings of Ultramarines in battle seemed to shimmer with the same bioluminescence as the cave beyond.

He reached out, feeling the marble of the sarcophagus grow warm to the touch. A spectral mist oozed from the cracks in the stonework, pouring out as though a canister of blind gas was contained within.

“What the—” began Pasanius, seeing the same thing.

“What is this?” hissed Uriel. “Warpcraft?”

“I don’t think so,” said Pasanius. “Look!”

Uriel glanced around the edge of their cover, squinting through the smoky fog filling the tomb as every one of the sarcophagi pulsed with the same light. Wisps of ghostly mist poured from the damaged tombs like steam, twisting in the air like insubstantial tendrils.

A thunderous gunshot ripped through the sound of bolters, and an Iron Warrior vanished in a fiery explosion of ceramite and flesh. Louder than any boltgun, the shot had the weight and echo of something much larger. Another shot rang out, followed by another, and two more Iron Warriors disintegrated in bloody explosions.

A dozen shapes moved in the upper reaches of the tomb, obscured by the strange mist, yet with the unmistakable broad-shouldered bulk of Astartes. Uriel’s first thought was that these were Ultramarines reinforcements, but these half-glimpsed warriors were armoured in sable black ceramite, their plates bedecked in shimmering images of bones and skulls. The blue haze of the dome’s light made it hard to be certain, but Uriel swore that ethereal fire crackled around the feet of these warriors as they marched with funereal slowness down the tiered steps towards the battle.

Their guns fired again, hurling blazing comets from their barrels and leaving bright contrails in their wake. Each shot saw an Iron Warrior slain, and Uriel’s heart leapt as the tide of the battle had suddenly changed. The enemy were taken by surprise, but they still had the edge in numbers. The outcome of the battle now hung on a knife-edge. All it needed was a push to tip it over.

**“This is our moment!” shouted Uriel. “For the Emperor and Roboute Guilliman!”**

**Uriel vaulted the shimmering sarcophagus, his sword flaring to life as he charged towards the stunned Iron Warriors. Petronius Nero, Ancient Peleus and Livius Hadrianus followed him, and Pasanus led his remaining Firebrands. Inquisitor Suzaku, too badly hurt to charge, fired her pistol from behind the sarcophagus as Captain Shaan and three Raven Guard plunged into the shimmering fog pouring into the tomb.**

**Uriel pounded across the tomb to where he had last seen Honsou, losing sight of his fellow warriors in his haste to confront his most hated foe. He blundered through the mist, colliding with an Iron Warrior in a clatter of armour. Uriel reacted first and swept his sword down through the traitor, cleaving him from shoulder to hip. The Iron Warrior fell, and Uriel saw a bolter gouge in his right shoulder. This was one of Honsou’s bodyguards, and as the mist parted for an instant, he saw the master of the Iron Warriors before him.**

**Their eyes met, and Honsou gave him another of his infuriating grins.**

**Before Uriel could make his move, a shape flowed from the shadows behind Honsou and leapt at the Iron Warrior.**

**Even as the attacker struck, Uriel knew who it was.**

**Ardaric Vaanes slammed into Honsou and bore him to the ground.**

**The renegade Raven Guard spun to his feet, faster and more agile without his armour, yet horribly vulnerable in the face of Honsou’s lethal power. Honsou got to his feet just as Vaanes sent a lethal chopping blade of a hand to his face. Honsou lowered his head and turned to the side. Vaanes’ blow struck the mass of metal on the side of his face. Rolling with the impact, Honsou went low and drove a thunderous uppercut into Vaanes’ belly.**

**Vaanes bunched the muscles in his stomach enough to keep his internal organs intact, but was still driven staggering back by the force of the blow. Honsou followed up with a brutal kick to the thigh that drove Vaanes to his knees in pain.**

**“What did you think, Vaanes?” roared Honsou, driving a fist into Vaanes’ spine. “That you could just turn your back on me?”**

**Vaanes pulled himself along the floor, but Honsou followed him, driving kicks into his ribs and fists into his head. Honsou’s fury was monstrous, and Uriel was tempted to leave Vaanes to his fate, but that was not the Ultramarines way.**

**Vaanes had saved his life in the fight with Grendel, and even if he were to meet his end at the hands of his former battle-brothers, it was a better death than this.**

**“I made you!” roared Honsou. “I should have killed you when I found you skulking in that shithole you called sanctuary. Grendel wanted to do it, and I should have let him.”**

**Uriel dropped to the ground behind Honsou and said, “Grendel is dead.”**

**He swung his sword for Honsou’s neck, but the Iron Warrior was quicker than Uriel expected. The silver arm he had taken from Pasanus came up and Uriel’s blade cut into its brilliantly reflective surface. It bit a handspan, but no further. Honsou met Uriel’s angry gaze with one of wry amusement.**

**“So Grendel’s dead?” said Honsou. “Saves me the bother of killing him.”**

**He wrenched his arm back, taking Uriel’s sword with it and slammed a brutal jab into Uriel’s face. It was like being hit by a Dreadnought, and Uriel staggered back from the blow. Honsou pulled the sword from his arm, which rippled like mercury and closed up over the wound as though it never existed. He hurled Uriel’s sword away to the back of the tomb.**

**“Always with the duel,” said Honsou. “I told you I don’t fight like that.”**

**“No, you get others to fight for you. Others to die for you,” said Uriel through broken teeth and blood.**

**“Best way to stay alive,” said Honsou slamming a fist into the weaker armour at Uriel’s stomach. The plate cracked, but the ancient armour of Brother Amadon held firm. “You should try it sometime, except there won’t be any other times for you.”**

**An arm curled around Honsou’s throat thick and powerfully muscled. Honsou was hauled back, and Uriel recognised the raven tattoo on the deltoid muscle of his attacker. Honsou easily tore Vaanes’ arm from around his neck, hauling the battered warrior around before him. Holding onto Vaanes’ arm, he pushed the Raven Guard to the ground and planted his foot in his chest.**

**“This is where we part company, Vaanes,” said Honsou. “Let’s see you fly away now.”**

**With horrifying ease, Honsou ripped Vaanes’ arm from its socket. Blood poured from the torn shoulder, a spray of crimson arcing across the remains of Ventanus’ tomb. Vaanes roared in pain, but that was cut short as Honsou stamped down on his bare chest. The ossified shield protecting Vaanes’ internal organs shattered and long, dagger-like shards of bone pierced his heart and lungs.**

**Uriel threw himself at Honsou, but the Iron Warrior had been expecting the move. He grabbed Uriel and spun around, using his own momentum to slam him against a nearby sarcophagus. He felt his body break, and bit back a scream of pain.**

**Honsou loomed over him as the booming echoes of the mysterious attackers’ weapons felled another group of Iron Warriors. An explosion**

slammed into the tomb next to Uriel and Honsou flinched as a blizzard of stone fragments sprayed them. A giant figure in blue-black armour emerged from the smoke, a giant bearing a golden bolter and with an emerald cloak billowing behind it.

It fired once, and Honsou raised a warding arm as he was punched from his feet by the enormous impact. He slammed into the ground and skidded over onto his side. Blood poured from a great gouge torn in his chest. Uriel tried to get to his feet, but the pain was too great. The giant figure reached down and Uriel felt the heat of its nearness, as though the flames slowly appearing on the plates of his armour were those that had escaped the inferno raging within his flesh.

Uriel looked into the visor of this giant, seeing an azure light burning there that spoke of ancient heroism and noble deeds of valour beyond anything Uriel could comprehend. This warrior was unlike the others that had come to their aid, for his armour retained traces of its former allegiance, gold trims, a pale eagle on the shoulder and a faded, barely legible, inverted omega symbol. In the centre of the “U” was the symbol for a captain, but it was old, ancient even, a standard of rank insignia that had not been used for ten thousand years.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” said Uriel. “I mean...”

The figure leaned into him and a ghostly whisper passed between them, a word or a name, Uriel couldn’t be sure. He didn’t even know if it had been said aloud or whether it simply appeared in his mind. Whatever it was, it meant nothing to him, but when the figure pressed the dagger with which he’d killed the Newborn into his hand, Uriel realised what he had been told.

“I understand,” he said, now knowing the real reason M’kar had sent Honsou to this place.

The spectral figure nodded, and Uriel felt its potent sense of a duty discharged, a burden and a responsibility passed on, as though it had been waiting for this since the moment of its death.

Uriel pushed himself onto his side, grimacing as torn muscles pulled and cracked bones protested. Pasanius and his two surviving Firebrands marched towards him, while Apothecary Selenus tended to a terrible wound in Livius Hadrianus’ stomach. Brutus Cyprian watched over his friend, clutching his own shattered kneecap while Peleus helped him remain upright. Petronius Nero propped Inquisitor Suzaku against a sarcophagus and bound her wounds as best he was able. The inquisitor’s skin was ashen, and she looked around the tomb as though unable to believe what she had just witnessed.

Aethon Shaan limped onto the floor of the tomb, and Uriel nodded his thanks and relief to the captain of the Raven Guard. He looked to the upper reaches of the tiers, searching for any sign of their spectral allies. There was no sign of them, nor had he expected to find any. They had vanished as suddenly as they had arrived, leaving only ruptured Iron Warriors corpses behind, and that was good enough for Uriel.

He turned back to the giant warrior, and wasn’t surprised to find him gone. The words he had spoken remained indelibly etched in Uriel’s mind, impossible to forget and laden with echoes of ancient days. He looked at the flint-bladed dagger in his hand and knew what he had to do with that knowledge.

Pasanius gave him a hand up and nodded to the far side of the tomb.

“One last thing left to do,” he said.

Uriel nodded and turned to face Honsou. The Warsmith of the Iron Warriors hauled himself upright, his chest plate cracked and blackened, and his skin ravaged with scars from the blast that had felled him.

He looked up at the warriors facing him and grimaced.

“You look as bad as I feel,” he told Uriel.

“This is where you die,” said Pasanius.

“Perhaps,” agreed Honsou. “But if you think I’m going to let you kill me, think again.”

“Your warriors are dead,” said Uriel. “There is no escape for you. It’s over.”

“Maybe so,” said Honsou, holding up the detonation trigger for the demolition charges wired throughout the tomb. “But who said anything about escape?”

And the world lit up in fire and thunder.

## TWENTY-TWO

Scipio hurled himself into the traitor Astartes, his sword chopping through a howling berserker’s breastplate as his pistol blew out another’s helmet. Coltanis unleashed a blinding streak of plasma, and Helicas let loose a blazing volley of heavy bolter shells before slinging the weapon in favour of his combat blade. Nivian fought at Scipio’s side, keeping his vulnerable flank towards his sergeant.

The warriors of the 2nd Company slammed into the enemy with the cold fury reserved only for traitors. These warriors represented the very worst of what had become of the Astartes since the dark days of the Great Betrayal. Worse than the traitors who fell to darkness in those times, these warriors knew the cost of what they embraced, yet took that road anyway.

They deserved no mercy, and they would receive none at the hands of the Ultramarines.

Captain Sicarius led the way, hacking a path through the mass of ceramite-clad warriors with the passion of a zealot. His blade was a crimson slash in the world, reaping souls with every sweep. Only the berserkers stood in his way, too blinded by their rage and frenzy to know better. The Claws of Lorek and those few Bloodborn warriors not quick enough to flee the charge of the Ultramarines moved aside for Sicarius, knowing better than to stand before him when he had been marked for death by the Corsair Queen.

She leapt from the prow of her skiff as a slew of missiles slammed into it. The first three exploded against the energy field. It blew out with a squealing bang of overload, and the remaining warheads punched through the thin skin of the skiff and ripped it apart from the inside. The wreckage collapsed to the cobbled ground, a twisted mess of mangled metal with the prow section jutting up towards the sky like the last sight of a sinking ship.

Kaarja Salombar turned in a graceful somersault, firing her pistol as she pirouetted gracefully through the air. Two Ultramarines went down, molten craters where their faces used to be. Salombar's pistol was of antique design, but fired lethal bolts of bright green energy. She landed before Sicarius, an exquisitely curved and graceful woman clad in lacquered leather armour, coloured plates and spiked shoulder guards. Her blue hair swept out behind her like a comet's tail, and her heart-shaped face was feline and graceful.

A host of warriors in brightly coloured, patchwork uniforms rushed to her side, each armed with a crackling sword with a curved blade and combination punch dagger and pistol.

They were big, fast men, gene-bulked for strength and augmented for resilience. Writhing tattoos covered every portion of their skin, and Scipio saw the rippling haze of energy fields clinging to their bodies.

"I've waited too long for this," said Sicarius, and hurled himself towards the Corsair Queen. She met him, blade to blade, and right away Scipio saw she was the faster. The tip of her sword slipped around the tempest blade and buried itself in the gap between Sicarius' breastplate and pauldron. She spun away to avoid his return stroke and ducked a riposte meant to remove her head, it was like trying to catch smoke, her movements so inhumanly swift that not even Astartes reflexes could match them.

She danced around Sicarius, and though he was a superlative swordsman, she made him look clumsy and uncoordinated, like the rawest recruit ever to come to Macragge. Scipio tore his gaze from the duel as one of the Corsair Queen's followers came for him.

He turned aside the slashing sabre and spun away as the punch dagger followed it up. He fired his pistol into the man's face, but a blaze of light erupted from the impact point, leaving his target unharmed. Scipio's momentary surprise almost cost him his life, as the punch dagger stabbed into the weaker, damaged sections of his armour and ripped into his side. He twisted away before the pistol element could fire, and the bullet was deflected away. Scipio slammed his weapon into the man's face, a pugnacious and scarred mess of tattoos and steel piercings. Energy shield or not, the powerful impact hurled him back and Scipio took a two-handed grip on his pistol and unloaded a full clip into the man.

Furious energy squalled from his shield with each bolt, but eventually its protection was stripped away and Scipio's bolts perforated the corsair and tore his upper body to shredded chunks. All around him, the corsairs and traitor Astartes were swarming over them with passionate war cries, but the Ultramarines were continuing their push. Passion was all very well, but it met its match in the disciplined, unbending precision of the Ultramarines.

Nivian kept back from the swirling melee, knowing he could not hope to survive with only one arm and no blade. Coltanis fired short bursts of his plasma gun, the coils now close to exhaustion, and Helicas simply bludgeoned his enemies with the solid mass of the heavy bolter. Scipio had never been prouder of his men, though it grieved him that so few had survived to see victory within their grasp.

He reloaded his pistol and glanced over to where the Lions of Macragge fought in the orbit of their captain. Prabian cut down enemies without effort, his blows clinical and cold and lethal. Daceus fought with his dogged determination never to fail, while Malcian kept the corsairs overwhelming numbers back with controlled bursts of his flamer.

Vandius fired his pistol while keeping the banner of the 2nd flying, and Scipio saw the blow that would fell him a moment before it landed. The Corsair Queen vaulted over Sicarius' head, firing her pistol into his back and driving him to his knees. Salombar landed beside Vandius, and before the standard bearer could turn to face this new enemy, she slashed her sword clean through his shoulder.

She scissor kicked him in the chest and spun away to face Sicarius, who had risen to his feet in a rage. Scipio saw them throw themselves at one another, but his attention was fixed on the banner. Vandius recoiled from the Corsair Queen's sudden assault, watching in horror as the arm clutching the banner fell away from his body.

"No!" yelled Vandius, his voice brittle with horror.

Scipio understood in a heartbeat that his anguish was not for his injury, but for the fact he had lost his grip on the banner.

Its ebony haft and rippling fabric fell as though in slow motion, and Scipio was moving even before he was consciously aware of it. A corsair moved to intercept him, but he battered him out of the way and skidded under a sword blow as he slid across the ground towards the falling banner. His fingers gripped the pole and he rolled onto his side, whipping it upright as the fabric came within millimetres of touching the ground. A trio of corsairs ran at him, realising the prize he bore, but Scipio was on his feet now, taking aim at the closest. A



bolt blew out the back of the corsair's skull, but his pistol jammed before he could fire again.

A searing plasma shot vaporised the torso of the second corsair and a hammerblow from a heavy bolter wielded like a giant club bore the last to the ground. Before the felled warrior could rise, Nivian stamped down on his chest and put three shots into his skull.

"Nice catch," said Coltanis as Helicas and Nivian surrounded their sergeant in an ad-hoc honour guard. Scipio held the banner high, overwhelmed by the honour of bearing so sacred a relic into battle. Such a responsibility came with duty, and Scipio felt a wave of determination sweep through him.

"Onwards, brothers!" he shouted, lowering his head and setting off at a jog to where Sicarius and the Lions of Macragge fought the chosen warriors of the Corsair Queen. Daceus was down, a short blade jutting from his chest and terrible las-wound in his thigh. Apothecary Venatio fought to save him as Malcian fought three corsairs with his bare hands. They bore him to the ground, stabbing with energy-sheathed daggers, but still he did not give up.

Prabian fought at Sicarius' side, keeping the corsairs at bay with lethal cuts, wide slashes and sudden lunges. None dared come too close to his blade, for it bore death on its edges. Sicarius fought with growing desperation and fury against the Corsair Queen, his armour awash with rapidly-drying blood.

Scipio and his men slammed into the corsairs attacking Malcian and killed them in a flurry of stabbing blades and gunshots. More and more Ultramarines were pushing into the fight, galvanised by the sight of the freshly risen banner and driven into paroxysms of rage at the nearness of its fall. Men had willingly given their lives for centuries to protect this symbol of all it meant to be an Ultramarine of the 2nd Company, and there was no greater honour than to fight beneath its gold and blue iconography.

Scipio ran towards Sicarius as the Corsair Queen spun in to deliver her coup de grace. The tempest blade deflected the first and second blow, but could not hope to block the third. Salombar's sword plunged into Sicarius' chest, and the captain of the 2nd cried out in pain as his heart was split in two. The tempest blade tumbled from his grip, but as Salombar drove him down with the force of the blow, Sicarius saw Scipio coming and gripped the straps of her armour in a death grip.

"Now, Scipio!" shouted Sicarius, holding the Corsair Queen fast.

Scipio held the standard high and brought the sharpened end of the banner pole down between Salombar's shoulder blades. The swirling haze of energy that had protected her from blade and bullet could not save her against a weapon touched by the hand of Marneus Calgar and empowered by the Emperor himself. Scipio drove the banner pole through Kaarja Salombar's body, the golden tip bursting out between her breasts in a wash of thin blood.

Sicarius pulled her close and slammed his helmet into her face as Scipio wrenched the banner free. The Corsair Queen slumped against Sicarius, who recovered his tempest blade and rose to his feet over his vanquished foe. He gripped her by the liquid blue of her hair and she looked up at him, defiant even in death.

She spat on his feet and the tempest blade came down in an executioner's arc, cutting her head from her neck in one blow.

"So perish all enemies of the Second!" shouted Sicarius and the wave of panic at her death spread like a stone dropped in a still lake. Sicarius lifted the head of his vanquished foe and nodded at Scipio.

"With me, Sergeant Vorolanus!" he snapped. "Hurry!"

Sicarius loped through the remains of the battle and clambered onto the wreckage of the Corsair Queen's downed skiff. The gold was melting from its hull and purple flames bellowed from its crackling energy cells and ammo canisters. Scipio followed him up the ramp of wreckage as the bloodied Lions of Macragge formed a protective ring around the hulk, though there was precious little in the immediate vicinity to protect it from. The death of their queen had sent the corsairs fleeing, and the traitor Astartes who still fought were being isolated and destroyed by newly arrived assault squads.

Thousands of Bloodborn warriors remained in Corinth, but Sicarius looked set to take them all on himself as he climbed to the tapered prow of the skiff. Scipio stood behind Sicarius, the intense heat billowing up from the flames below him making the banner flap and furl in a glorious fashion.

With the fires and the banner behind him, Sicarius held the head of Kaarja Salombar for all to see. Her blue hair streamed out from the grisly trophy, unmistakable to all who saw it, and the effect was palpable as a wave of disbelief spread through the surviving Bloodborn.

"Your queen is dead!" bellowed Sicarius, lifting the shimmering blade of his sword over his head. "This is a world of the Ultramarines, and this is where you will all die. I, Sicarius of Talassar, swear this upon the head of your slain queen!"

Sicarius looked down at Sergeant Daceus and said, "Contact Governor Gallow, Daceus. Tell him we need him now."

Daceus nodded, and within moments, thunderous explosions bloomed in the outskirts of Corinth, mushrooming clouds of fire and smoke that could only have come from Imperial artillery. Scipio watched as those explosions marched deeper into the city, the hammerblow of multiple artillery impacts shaking the ground underfoot. The skiff groaned as the vibrations threatened to topple them from their perch.

"Best get down, Sergeant Vorolanus," said Sicarius. "Wouldn't want to spoil the glorious memory of this moment by falling, eh?"

Scipio nodded, turning and making his way carefully to the ground.

“My lord, I don’t understand,” he said to his captain. “Governor Gallow’s forces are here?”

“Of course, you don’t think I’d attack on my own, did you?”

“But how? I sent the execute signal to you no more than an hour ago.”

“Even before you, Fennion and Manorian set off into the wilds, I’d suspected it would be Corinth you’d find the Corsair Queen. I had Saul Gallow deploy his forces from Herapolis a week ago and ordered him to push towards Corinth. All I was waiting for was final confirmation from you.”

Scipio was amazed at the daring of the manoeuvre, but also the danger of it.

“What if you’d been wrong?” he asked, aware of the risk he was taking in second guessing his captain. “What if she’d been at Actium or Nova Ala or even Montiacum?”

Sicarius stepped close to Scipio, and he felt the simmering ire of his captain.

“The question is irrelevant, sergeant,” said Sicarius, taking the banner from him. “I was not wrong, and I have won a great victory for the Second and the Ultramarines. *That* is all that matters, do you understand?”

Scipio’s face hardened. “Yes. It was a great victory, captain.”

All was darkness. No, not quite darkness. Winking red warning runes and a filmy, sea-green illumination swam at the edge of his vision. Uriel blinked the dust and blood from his face. The darkness slowly resolved into blocky shapes and jagged edges of boulders and fluted carvings piled around, on top of, and beneath him.

A smooth face stared back at him, pale and unblemished, its eyes blank and expressionless. It took a moment to realise the face was carved from marble, its immobile features regarding Uriel and his plight impassively. He twisted his neck as his augmetic eye adjusted to the gloom, amplifying the bioluminescent glow from the cavern and gradually lightening his surroundings.

A solid slab of marble pressed down on him, its edges sheared in the fall from the roof. Chunks of blue stone lay strewn around him, the remains of the dome no doubt. Uriel flexed his limbs, relived he could feel and move his extremities. His spine was still intact at least.

He remembered looking into Honsou’s eyes as the Iron Warrior triggered the demolition charges, but nothing beyond that save the brightest flash in the world and a titanic cascade of roof coffers and structural members.

A thin slice of light angled from above his head, and he twisted in the grip of the tonnes of rubble, gradually working his arms loose and flexing his legs to gain purchase. He pushed up on the slab pinning him to the ground and felt it shift a fraction. Bunching his muscles, he pushed with all his strength, feeling the slab grind against others as it shifted. Rubble creaked and groaned around him, and Uriel kept his movements slow for fear he might bring more down on himself.

Gradually the slab moved enough for him to free his legs, and he manoeuvred himself into a sitting position. His armour was terribly damaged, but it had held against the enormous pressure threatening to crush him to death.

“I am in your debt, Brother Amadon,” he said, thanking the spirit of the warrior who had worn the armour before it had chosen him. But for its protection, he would have been flattened to a red paste. Lying on the ground beside him was the napped-flint dagger, and Uriel tucked it into the empty sheath of his combat blade. Though his normal blade was much larger, the slender poniard slotted home perfectly.

Dust trickled down from above and he heard the clatter and rumble of settling stone. How long had he been trapped beneath the ruins of the tomb, and how many others had survived? Was he the only one to live through the tomb’s collapse, or were there others even now desperately scrambling to reach the surface?

Slowly Uriel eased himself into a void within the rubble created by two sheer sided panels of engravings that had landed at an angle to one another. A breath of air touched him, and he walked in a stoop towards its source, seeing another teasing beam of light filtering down into the dust-filled wreckage. He reached the light and looked up, seeing a crooked chimney of rock that led up to an opening in the vast pile of rubble that had once been a tomb.

“Is anyone else alive?” he shouted. There was no answer, but the debris groaned at the sound and a fresh rain of pulverised rock fragments fell upon his face.

Gingerly testing each handhold, Uriel climbed the rock chimney, pulling himself slowly towards the surface. It took thirty careful minutes, but eventually he was able to throw an elbow over the edge of the rubble. A metallic hand reached down to him and he froze as he thought Honsou had waited on the surface just to finish him off.

“Didn’t think that would kill you,” said Pasanus, gripping the edge of his shoulder guard and hauling him all the way out. “I told them you were too stubborn to die under there.”

“Pasanus,” gasped Uriel, embracing his old friend in relief. “You’re alive.”

“Of course I’m alive,” said Pasanus, as though any other notion was foolishness of the highest order. “What? You think all it takes to kill

me is someone dropping an entire tomb on my head? What do you take me for?”

Uriel nodded, spitting a mouthful of dust. “Indeed, what was I thinking?”

“We’d about given up on you, but I told them you’d be too stubborn to let that bastard get you like this.”

“Them? There are other survivors?”

“Of course there’s others,” said Pasanius, shaking his head at Uriel’s question. “You’re the last one out.”

“Thank the Emperor,” said Uriel, letting out a relieved breath.

“Come on, let’s get off this ruin before fate runs out of a sense of mercy.”

They made their way down from the piled heap of broken marble, glass and steel that was all that remained of the once mighty structure. It seemed inconceivable that a building that had stood for ten thousand years could be destroyed, but the evidence was right before Uriel’s eyes.

Only when he reached the solid rock of the giant cavern did he start to feel safe. His fellow warriors were gathered in a small group, with Selenus working on Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus. Peleus looked remarkably unscathed, as though he had just walked from the ruins instead of being nearly buried alive in them. Petronius Nero paced in a tight circuit, the broken stub of a sword clutched in his hand, and Uriel left him to grieve the loss of so fine a blade. Captain Shaan sat apart from the Ultramarines, kneeling beside a shattered body whose identity was all too clear from its wounds.

Inquisitor Suzaku lay on her back next to Cyprian, her limbs and body restrained with makeshift splints formed from sword sheaths and snapped weapons stocks. Her face was ghost-like and gaunt, her eyes sunken in their sockets.

“How are they?” asked Uriel.

Selenus looked up. “Hadrianus will require extensive internal surgery to live and Cyprian will likely lose that leg.”

“And Suzaku?”

“She’ll probably die before we can get her to a medicae facility.”

“Maybe she’ll surprise you,” said Uriel. “I think she’s tougher than she looks.”

“She’d better be,” said Selenus. “I don’t think there’s a bone in her body that isn’t broken.”

Uriel turned back to Pasanius and asked the question he had been afraid to voice.

“Any sign of Honsou?”

Pasanius looked away and shook his head. “No. We’ve scanned the ruins with bio-sensitive auspex and residual heat augurs, but there’s nothing in there.”

“He could be dead.”

Pasanius shook his head. “You know him better than that.”

“I suppose I do,” agreed Uriel.

“In any case, I took a look into the Dragon’s Gullet. That tunneller machine the Iron Warriors came in is gone. Someone took it back through the rock, and it wasn’t any of us.”

Uriel nodded and said, “Get them ready to move, Pasanius. We need to finish this.”

“The war for Calth?”

“No, for Ultramar,” said Uriel.

Ignoring Pasanius’ quizzical look, he turned and walked over to Aethon Shaan. The captain of the Raven Guard knelt beside the corpse of Ardaric Vaanes. The renegade’s body was a mess, bloodied and crushed by his killer and the colossal forces unleashed by the collapse of the tomb. Yet for all the destruction wreaked upon him, there was something to the cast of his aquiline features that Uriel had never seen before.

Peace.

“I am sorry for the loss of your warriors,” said Uriel, placing a hand on Shaan’s shoulder.

Shaan nodded, but didn’t reply, and Uriel sensed the confusion in him.

“I hated Ardaric Vaanes,” said Shaan without looking up. “Every day I dreamed of seeing him brought back to face his crimes, but now that he’s dead I don’t feel anything. I... I feel sad. Why do I feel sad that a traitor’s dead?”

Uriel knelt beside the body and pressed his fingers into the blood-spattered raven tattooed on Vaanes' shoulder.

"Because in the end I do not think he died a traitor," said Uriel. "I think he was Astartes once again."

"Is that even possible?"

"I think so," said Uriel, looking into the face of a man who had once fought beside him across the face of a daemon world in search of redemption. "I hope so."

"The Master of Shadows will demand to know what happened here," said Shaan. "I don't know what I'll tell him when I return to the Ravenspire."

"Tell him Vaanes gave his life in the eternal fight against the Ruinous Powers," said Uriel.

"I think that I will, Uriel," said Shaan, looking up as Apothecary Selenus approached, the mobile scalpels and vacuum seals of his reductor ready to receive that most precious resource of the Space Marines. Shaan nodded and placed a hand on Vaanes' chest and recited the words spoken by Apothecaries down the centuries over the bodies of the fallen.

"He that is dead, take from him the Chapter's due."

The Bloodborn army on Espandor did not long outlive the Corsair Queen. Without centralised leadership and bereft of the influence of the Thrice Born, the different factions within the Bloodborn fell to infighting. None would accept the leadership of any of the others, and with Corinth and Herapolis in Imperial hands, the Bloodborn were cut off from any re-supply. Under the inspirational leadership of Captain Sicarius, most of these isolated factions were surrounded and destroyed by strike elements of the 2nd Company. After the bloodbath of Corinth, these engagements were, by Adeptus Astartes standards, little more than skirmishes.

Within nine days, the Bloodborn threat on Espandor was defeated and Saul Gallow's Defence Auxilia were deployed in mopping up the last elements of resistance.

The Ultramarines regrouped and took their Thunderhawks back into orbit to board *Valin's Revenge*. The strike cruiser had taken its fair share of damage, but like the Space Marines it carried within, it remained unbowed and unyielding.

Once aboard, Scipio Vorolanus rested with the rest of his surviving Thunderbolts and began the process of evaluating novitiates with a view to replacing his losses. Nivian now sported a fresh augmetic arm and Coltanis a wide scar that ran across his cheek and forehead. Helicas had come through the fighting largely unscathed and even Laenus had survived.

They had found him clinging to life amid the ruins of the anti-aircraft gun next to the mangled corpse of Bradua. Broken in body, but resolute in spirit, Laenus' flesh was badly damaged, but the Apothecaries and Techmarines were even now rebuilding his body with flesh grafts and bionic replacements. Scipio didn't think he'd mind too much.

*Valin's Revenge* broke orbit and made best speed towards the coreward jump point.

Scipio asked Iulius Fennion their destination and was not surprised when his gruff-voiced friend told him where Sicarius was taking the company.

"Talassar," said Iulius. "We're going to Talassar."

Wan light filled the chamber of the warp core, a pale, bleaching light that sapped the colour from everything it touched and rendered everything monochrome. The air tasted bad, though M'kar had no need to breathe. Ice formed on the edges of metal stanchions, though M'kar had no need of warmth. The waves of raw warp energy pouring into the *Indomitable* empowered it and filled its limbs with strength. Overhead lumens flickered and buzzed as the power supply surged and faded erratically. A mortal had once dared approach it to say that systems were failing all across the *Indomitable* without regular maintenance, bleating that that the star fort would soon become indefensible.

M'kar had eviscerated the fleshy servant for daring to approach it without first making the nine sacred obeisances of the Eternal Powers, feasting on its soul morsel without even noticing. The fear was a brief moment of pleasure, but the sheer vitality of the wars being waged across the battlefields of Ultramar was the most flavoursome sweetmeat.

M'kar paced the chamber, flexing the hybrid musculature of its borrowed flesh. Somewhere deep inside it, the soul of Altarion still raged against its fate, but the Dreadnought's former identity was awash in a sea of swallowed souls.

The daemon lord's anger grew with every step. It had escaped the prison the Lord of the Ultramarines had crafted for it, but its confinement was no less. Ever since its brethren had been driven from the blue world, the planets of Ultramar were anathema to it, and treading their surfaces was like walking on broken glass. The Lord of the Ultramarines was within its grasp, but the air of Talassar was a poison to it, the light of its sun the deadliest radiation while Calgar's pet seer still lived and empowered the wards of Castra Tanagra.

Its daemon army raged against the fiery walls of the shrine fortress below, leeching the strength of the wards with the force of their own

deaths. Thousands were consigned to oblivion with every passing day, their bodies drained to nothingness by the flames conjured by Calgar's warlock. Their deaths were in service of their infernal master, and each spark of existence was surrendered willingly.

The *Indomitable* might be falling apart, but M'kar cared nothing for the weapons of its mortal followers. The half-breed dreamed of seeing Ultramar in flames, but M'kar wished only to see Calgar destroyed. Ultramar was nothing but the faded remnant of an empire that had shone brightly an aeon ago in defiance of Terra, insignificant in itself, but representative of an old wound that M'kar could not help but pick.

The tides of the warp sang to M'kar through the rift torn in the heart of the star fort, and it could sense the soulfires of the Bloodborn across the vast gulfs of space that separated the daemon from its followers. On the desert world of the triple system, mighty daemon engines did battle with Ultramarines tanks and infantry. The soulfires of the dead found their way to him, and he tasted their growing desperation as the enemy slowly gained the upper hand. On the forest world, the fires of the Bloodborn no longer burned as their master's ancient enemies wiped them out.

Yet it was on Calth where it sensed the greatest confluence of life threads. Many lives had come to their end, itself nothing unusual for a conflict of such scale, but many of these were the bright lines of those marked by fate. M'kar shuddered as it recalled the final days of its last battle on Calth, the sight of its former master being cast down by Ventanus, the very weapon charged with his destruction being turned on he who had borne it to Calth.

The worlds of Ultramar were anathema to its presence, but M'kar had a special hatred for Calth. This world had humbled his Legion. It had resisted the coming of the Word, fought against the true powers of the galaxy and defeated them. The father of the Ultramarines had waged an underhand war with Ventanus at his side and driven the scions of the storm from Calth. M'kar would never again descend to Calth, for that world was the final resting place of its nemesis.

When Calgar was dead, M'kar knew that Honsou would need to be destroyed, for it had seen the power lurking in the half-breed's heart, the potential that could be unleashed were he to attract the attentions of a daemoniac patron.

A sudden wave of power surged through the warp, followed immediately by a cold emptiness. M'kar halted its pacing and turned its senses outward, descending through the aetheric layers of the planet below to witness the battle raging in its name.

Castra Tanagra was wreathed in fire, as it had been for weeks. The flames were of such purity that it burned to look upon them, driving the daemons back and destroying their forms and souls with every second it burned. The walls were empty of defenders, but it made no difference. While the fire burned, nothing warp-spawned could draw near.

M'kar drew as close to the fortress as it dared, feeling the desperation and fear within the keep. Doom hung over the hearts of its defenders like a smothering shroud, but beneath that was a shining light of brighter emotions. Hope, courage and nobility of spirit. Though M'kar could approach no closer, it saw the brightest light burning in the heart of the fortress, and its joy soared as that light gave one last flare of illumination before fading like a dying ember in a fire.

And as it diminished, the fire surrounding the fortress vanished.

## TWENTY-THREE

Marneus Calgar knelt beside Varro Tigurius and watched the colour drain from his face. For three weeks, his Chief Librarian had hovered close to death, but now it looked as though his invisible struggle was at an end. Agemman looked enquiringly at him, and he shook his head.

"My lord," said his First Captain, nodding towards the firing slits cut into the walls of the keep. "The fire at the walls. It's dying."

"I know," he said, holding tightly to Varro's hand. It was cold and grey, lined and thin, like an old man's. "That's not all that's dying."

"The daemons will be coming again. We need to get onto the ramparts," pressed Agemman. "The gunports need manning. If this is the end, then we should face it head on."

"Do it," said Calgar. "I will be with you presently."

Agemman nodded. "He was a good man," he said at last.

"He's not dead yet, Severus," pointed out Calgar.

"Of course," said Agemman, bowing and moving away.

Calgar had carried Varro Tigurius from the breach in the walls with the daemons snapping at his heels. In their hunger to slay him they had hurled themselves through the fire, but its pure light had consumed them instantly. The fire had burned for three weeks, and they had used the time wisely, further strengthening the defences, resting and practising quick reaction drills for the reserve forces. Varro had remained in his deathly state throughout, unmoving and with his pulse slowly weakening as he slipped ever closer towards death.

“You have to live, Varro,” he whispered. “We can’t do this without you.”

He held his Chief Librarian’s hand tightly willing him to live and wishing he could gift him a portion of his own strength. Calgar remained at his Chief Librarian’s side for several minutes until he felt the presence of several people behind him. He looked up from Tigurius, blinking back the tears that threatened to come as he saw nearly a hundred of the civilians they had discovered in Castra Tanagra.

“Maskia Volliant,” said Calgar. “Praefectus of Tarentum, what do you want?”

“Will he live?” asked Volliant. “Lord Tigurius? Will he live?”

Calgar sighed and stood. “I don’t know, Master Volliant. He is slipping away from us, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

“What can we do to help?”

Calgar shook his head. “Nothing, unless you have an extensive knowledge of Astartes physiology and psychic mastery.”

“I can’t say as we have, my lord, but we can keep him warm and stay with him so he don’t die alone,” said Volliant.

The honest sincerity of Volliant’s words touched Calgar and he saw the same desire to help on the faces of everyone around him. *This* was the nobility of spirit that made mankind great, the strength in solidarity that made Ultramar a shining beacon of the very best humanity could achieve.

“I’m sure he would appreciate that,” said Calgar. “I know I shall.”

“Way we figure it, we’d be dead long since if not for him,” said Volliant, as the crowd surrounded the pallet bed upon which Tigurius lay. Calgar moved aside to let them gather, knowing that Tigurius would approve of this spontaneous gesture of gratitude.

“Goodbye, Varro,” he whispered, turning away and making his way to the ramparts of the keep where Agemman and thirty warriors of the 1st Company awaited him. As Agemman had said, the fire with which Varro had kept the enemy at bay was gone, and the daemons were massing at the edge of the cracking gouge of lightning at the end of the valley.

Cold winds blew over the fortress and the first rays of dawn spilled over the mountains.

“The last dawn,” said Calgar. “Reminds me of the final canto of the *Lament of the First*. ‘Praise the sun that brings the dawn of our final doom.’”

“Now there’s a depressing thought,” replied Agemman. “Saul Invictus’ last speech before the tyranids overran them.”

“Sorry, just thinking aloud.”

“I hope that’s not the inspiring speech you’re planning to give.”

“I’m all out of speeches, Severus,” said Calgar.

Agemman nodded and said. “Good. I don’t much care for speeches before battles.”

They lapsed into silence, watching as the new dawn grew bolder, painting the mountains in vivid gold and purple. Calgar thought it beautiful and knew Tigurius would have loved to capture such a scene in water-colours.

“What are they waiting for?” demanded Agemman, gripping the parapet tightly. “Why aren’t they attacking?”

Calgar had been wondering the same thing, but his answer came a moment later as the shimmering rift in the sky suddenly stretched and twisted as though something monstrous were pushing itself through. A swelling roar of terrible adulation swept through the daemoniac horde and Calgar’s heart was seized in a clammy grip as he saw a monstrous form—part machine, part monster—force its way onto the surface of Talassar.

Grossly swollen and fused with mechanised parts, the daemon lord M’kar towered above its host, a mighty fusion of daemon and Dreadnought. The core of its form was unmistakable, the fused remnants of a granite sarcophagus hewn from the rock of Castra Magna clear for all to see. Calgar saw with a sinking heart whose body provided the host for the Thrice Born.

“Brother Altarion,” he whispered. “Forgive me.”

Though dawn had been spreading across the heavens, the sky now darkened and cold winds from the dead of night blew over the ramparts with the reek of seared flesh. M’kar roared and the daemon host charged towards the fortress. They surged without any semblance of order, a riotous mix of scaled beasts with swords, multi-limbed spawn creatures that howled with insatiable hunger and loping hounds with flayed-skin flesh. Pallid creatures with dead eyes and glistening bodies of lacquered armour slithered through the horde, alongside cackling, winged beasts of utter darkness.

The entire valley was filled with daemons, a host pouring from the rift in reality and fed by the vile energies spilling into the world. This was an army like no other they had faced.

This was a tide of daemons to drown worlds.

Calgar took Severus Agemman's hand. "Courage and honour, brother," he said.

"Courage and honour, my lord," replied Agemman.

To be clad in flesh once more, albeit this cumbersome meld of machine and its daemoniac form, was sublime. The air and sunlight were vile and painful, but that was nothing compared to the sheer joy of existence in the material plane. To know the sensation of flesh tearing, blood drinking and the suffering of mortals was a priceless boon worth any price.

The shrine fortress was wide open, the breach in its walls torn wider in the weeks of battle, and its pitiful defenders were as good as dead. The wards that had once formed a web of inviolable protection more impenetrable than any wall of stone were little more than faded memories. The daemons swarmed around it, a snapping, roaring, screeching horde of mindless killing organs.

Gunfire from prepared positions constructed within the walls cut down the first daemons over the walls, but no matter how many had their forms blasted apart, scores more scrambled over the dissipating corpses to attack. M'kar shrugged off a dozen impacts, its baleful aura spreading before it like the bow wave of a starship and sweeping over the defenders.

Fear and despair flowed from the fortress, and M'kar bathed in such potent blights swirling in the aetheric winds. Civilians fled their positions, running in blind panic for concealed sally ports. Blue-clad Astartes stood their ground and maintained their fire, but even they were forced to withdraw in the face of overwhelming numbers.

M'kar let them go. They were an irrelevance. It could sense the soulfire of its nemesis within the keep and drank deep from the well of power flowing from the *Indomitable*. Its arms were swirling masses of light and flesh and metal, inconstant fluxes of potential. With a thought, one arm became a claw sheathed in dark, glittering metal, its edges toothed with tearing barbs. The other became a ferocious siege hammer, a twisted parody of the weapon its Dreadnought host had once borne.

Apt that it should be the weapon to destroy Calgar.

The daemons surged towards the keep, nothing now keeping them from the meat-prey within. Astartes on the ramparts of the keep's roof fired relentless barrages of solid rounds and hurled grenades that exploded in the midst of the daemons. The entire length of the tower erupted in flames as its defenders fired from hundreds of new loopholes and gun-ports.

Scores of daemons were cut down, their warp-spawned flesh torn apart and undone. Some even struck M'kar, insect bites against a Titan. Heavy guns sought it out with powerful las-blasts or missile impacts, but M'kar shrugged them all off.

With the power flowing from the rift aboard *Indomitable* it was as good as invulnerable.

Winged daemons swooped down onto the roof of the keep, clawing at the Astartes there and screeching in delight as they flocked like hunting birds. The top of the keep was obscured by the sheer mass of winged monsters, a darkened umbra lit from within by stuttering blasts of gunfire.

The great door of the keep was fashioned from adamantium and steel, a flat arch with scenes of ancient battles carved into its frame. M'kar smashed it and the surrounding stonework apart with one blow. The door exploded into lethal splinters of razored metal and whole swathes of the keep's walls collapsed around it. The daemon lord forced its way inside the keep as fresh volleys of gunfire ripped into its flesh. Some shots even stung, but the wounds reknitted almost as soon as they were inflicted.

The interior of the keep was a wide open space, filled with confections of angled walls and redoubts, all freshly built and constructed with an order and rigour that could only have come from the scions of Roboute Guilliman. Terrified mortals and blue-clad Astartes huddled behind these barriers, and M'kar laughed at these pathetic attempts to bar its slaughter.

"You cannot hide from me, Calgar!" it roared, and a dozen mortals dropped dead at the damned sounds issuing from its artificial throat. Daemons swarmed over the barricades, tearing at the defenders with yellowed claws and ichor-dripping fangs. Groups of Astartes counterattacked, driving the daemons back and buying the mortals time to regroup, but these were the desperate last twitches of a dying beast.

M'kar smashed through a heavy barricade of stone blocks, scattering mortals and Astartes alike. Ten of the Emperor's lackeys came at it, each with a long-bladed polearm on a golden haft. They circled it and stabbed like savages hunting a plains-dwelling leviathan, and M'kar laughed at the absurdity of their defiance.

Its claw arm snatched three from the ground and snapped them in two as its hammer pulverised another's chest to ruin with a single blow. The other warriors didn't run, but M'kar didn't want them to flee. Its claw arm twisted and reshaped itself into a colossal rotary-barrelled cannon. A two-metre tongue of black fire gouted from the weapon, ripping the Ultramarines to shreds and obliterating the flesh within their ruined armour. There would be no genetic descendants for these warriors.

One warrior had escaped the slaughter and M'kar stepped forward to slam its hammer arm into the Astartes. The body was hurled it across the heavily modified entrance hall, breaking into pieces with the impact. A storm of shots struck its body, but it ignored them as irrelevant. M'kar roared and a blast wave of warp energy exploded outwards, disintegrating those mortals closest to it, and driving hundreds of others insane as their minds collapsed.

The screams of madness and fear rang deep in M'kar's body, empowering it with the suffering it was causing. Its daemoniac horde spread

throughout the tower, spilling up hastily blocked stairwells and taking the slaughter to the heart of the keep. Already M'kar felt the rich seam of life being extinguished, murder by murder.

Nothing could match its power, and a dozen more Astartes died before any foes of merit dared stand against it. Two warriors surrounded by blazing auras emerged from the wide stairs at the rear of the chamber. One was bathed in the red of anger and determination, the other in shimmering gold and white. A host of warriors wreathed in shimmering silver light stood at their sides.

“Calgar,” hissed the daemon with unadulterated relish. “I am Thrice Born, and the prophecy of Moriana speaks of your death by my hands at this time.”

“That will not happen,” said the red-haloed Astartes. “I am Severus Agemman, daemon. First Captain of the Ultramarines, and you will go no further.”

Marneus Calgar's blood chilled at the sight of the Thrice Born, knowing the deaths it had caused throughout Ultramar were his fault. To know that had he been strong enough to destroy the daemon aboard the *Indomitable* all this could have been prevented would be a burden he would carry for the rest of his life.

Right now it didn't look like that would be a long period of penitence.

Clad in the Armour of Antilochus and bearing the Gauntlets of Ultramar, no one stood a better chance of destroying M'kar, yet still he hesitated. The daemon had resisted him once before, and he had had the backing of the holy ordos that time. Without them, what chance did he now have?

Casting off such doom-laden thoughts, Calgar and Agemman marched towards the daemon lord with weapons raised. The interior of the keep reeked of burned flesh, a hideous stench that conjured unbidden images of corpse worlds and hellish regions of space where carrion eaters dwelled in blood.

Angrily he shook off the taint of the daemon's presence, and forced himself to concentrate on all that would be lost should he falter. Centuries of progress, the ideals that humanity stood for something greater than barbarism, and the last chance of salvaging the dream that almost died ten thousand years ago.

“Fight well, Severus,” he said.

“That's the only way I know how to fight, Marneus.”

“Then let's see this done.”

They charged the Thrice Born with their honour guard at their flanks, plunging into the daemoniac host with the last hope of Ultramar resting on their blades. Severus Agemman was a warrior almost without equal within the ranks of the Ultramarines, and he clove a path through his foes with strength and skill the envy of any warrior of legend. His blade sheared daemoniac flesh and his gun blazed with the righteousness of his cause. Claws raked his armour, but he moved with the grace and speed of a warrior clad in thin vestments. There was no warrior Calgar would rather have at his side.

Daemons surrounded Calgar, tearing at the enormous plates of armour encasing him. The Gauntlets of Ultramar pulverised any foe within reach, each punch like the hammer blow of a mighty god as he battered an ichor-spattered path towards the daemon lord.

M'kar was just as eager for this reckoning and crushed its minions as it came towards him, its bulks swelling and billowing with a dark corona of poisonous energies. Black light swam around its monstrous form, the machine parts of Brother Altarion disappearing beneath the swell of unnatural flesh.

A clawed arm snatched for him, but Calgar ducked, no mean feat in Terminator armour, and slammed his right fist into M'kar's body. Where other daemons had simply exploded into their constituent parts at such an impact, the Thrice Born was unmoved. Calgar followed up with a thunderous jab, to similarly little effect, and lurched back as M'kar's clawed arm swept down. Vorpals cut through the shoulder guard of his battle plate, tearing through the ceramite, armaplas and fibre-bundle musculature to gouge the flesh beneath.

Calgar gritted his teeth against the fiery agony searing from the wound and unleashed a series of punishing blows against the daemon lord's midriff.

M'kar bellowed with laughter and a Shockwave of invisible energy pummelled Calgar's body, slamming him down with irresistible force. The daemon's horns curled out from its skull, arcing lightning leaping between their brazen, iron-sheathed tips. Its mouth yawned wide with the fire of destroyed suns shining behind its dagger-like fangs, and Calgar knew these were worlds it would end if he fell here.

His honour guard rushed to protect their fallen lord. M'kar plucked one from the ground and his body vanished in a searing explosion. Another met the daemon lord's gaze and his armour fell to the ground as the flesh within withered to dust in an instant. Three more died as its hammer arm swept out, crushing bodies and splintering limbs.

Agemman appeared at his side and helped Calgar to his feet.

“The keep is all but lost,” he said. “The upper floors are overrun!”



Calgar nodded and flexed his fists once more. “Then we take as many of the bastards with us before we fall.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Agemman.

Ultramarines were pouring into the lower hall of the keep, bolters firing in a near-constant barrage to keep the daemonic minions from spilling out into the rest of the keep. Though most of the civilian populace of Castra Tanagra had chosen to fight, there were hundreds of youngsters and ancients too young to take up arms. The Ultramarines would protect them as long as they could, even at the cost of their own lives.

M'kar crashed through the warriors of the 1st Company, ending lives with slashes of its daemonic claws and slamming blows of its hammer. This was a monster they could only defeat together, and both Agemman and Calgar braced themselves for the fight of their lives.

Agemman fell first.

The First Captain's armour split apart under a ferocious blow that smashed him to the ground with the force of a meteor strike. His head lolled back on his shoulders, and blood filled his eyes. Agemman tried to rise, but his body was broken into pieces and he had nothing left to give. His gaze locked with Calgar's, and the Chapter Master saw the anguish of his failure.

“Forgive me, my lord...” hissed Agemman as he rolled onto his back.

Calgar threw himself at the daemon in a frenzy of grief and anger. The Gauntlets of Ultramar were blurs of blue ceramite, slamming into the body of the daemon like the thundering pistons of a mighty engine. Light bled from the daemon's body with every blow, and Calgar knew this was his last and only chance to defeat M'kar.

The daemon lord snatched Calgar from the ground, the touch of its claws like acid in his veins. The Armour of Antilochus burned beneath its foulness, scorch marks blistering its surface and reducing it to ashes around the daemon's grip. Calgar felt the ancient armour's anger and struggled to free himself.

M'kar had him firm and the blazing light of murder in its eyes shone with triumphant vindication. Calgar saw his death in those soulless eyes, the death of all he held dear and the end of the last great bastion of humanity's better angels. His strength was leeches from him with every passing second, and though it was futile, he drew back his arm for one last strike.

Then the world was swept with cleansing fire that roared from the rear of the chamber and flooded out into the courtyard. It filled the keep with its living fury, roiling like a surge tide and howling like a maddened beast. Where it touched the Ultramarines it gave them strength, and where it touched the daemons it consumed them utterly. Red-scaled beasts with black swords vanished in howling gales of ash, and leaping beasts with fish-belly white bodies climbed the walls to avoid its touch. Nothing escaped. Nothing warp-borne could survive, and the tempestuous firestorm utterly obliterated every daemon within the keep.

M'kar howled in fury, its body burning in the flames. Any hint of hue was seared away but no fire, no matter how powerful could end so exalted a daemon lord. Its grip spasmed, and Calgar's fist struck its fanged mouth with every ounce of strength he could muster behind it.

The daemon lord bellowed in pain and released its grip, turning and fleeing from the agony of the flames. It smashed through the walls of the keep and over the breach, its daemonic horde gathered around it as it drew on their power to sustain itself.

Calgar dropped to the floor of the chamber as the fire died, unable to believe what had just happened. He turned to see what had saved him, and his heart leapt to see so magnificent a sight before him.

Varro Tigurius stood at the far end of the chamber, gaunt and hollow-cheeked, with the pallor of a corpse, but still alive and still breathing. A dozen civilians held him upright between them, bearing the weight of his arms and body as the Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines swayed unsteadily on his feet.

Maskia Volliant, Praefectus of Tarentum, held Tigurius' staff though it was almost too heavy for him to bear. Calgar had never been so proud of his people than at that moment.

“I have severed the link between the daemon lord and the *Indomitable*,” said Tigurius. “It will not be able to draw power from the warp rift anymore.”

“Emperor's grace, but you are a wonder to me, Varro,” said Calgar.

“I had help,” said Tigurius modestly, looking around at the courageous civilians who held him upright. “The Thrice Born will be able to renew the connection to its power source soon. You do not have much time.”

“I understand,” said Calgar. “Remain here and do what you can to keep that link closed.”

“I will, my lord,” said Tigurius, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. “Courage and honour.”

“And to you, my friend,” replied Calgar, kneeling beside the body of Severus Agemman.

The First Captain was alive, but he would fight no more this day. The survivors of the 1st Company gathered around their fallen captain, and Calgar sensed the iron resolve of their controlled fury. He counted forty-nine warriors, most bearing a grievous wound of some description. It was a force of warriors with which worlds could be conquered, rebellions brought to heel and battles won. It was a force of warriors that could now only be wielded in one way.

“You all heard Varro’s words,” said Calgar. “The daemon is vulnerable, exposed, and we have one chance to end this. Right here and right now, the fate of Ultramar is in our hands. You are the best and bravest of your Chapter, and though we may die in these mountains, we will die in service to something greater than blood, something greater than land. We fight for what we know is *right*. I will lead you in that fight, and all I ask is that you fight like the heroes you are!”

The Ultramarines cheered and Calgar turned towards the gaping hole torn in the keep.

Though his body was near the end of its endurance, the pride in his warriors and the people they defended was a bottomless well of strength. The 1st Company formed up around him, and as they marched out into the courtyard and through the breach, every mortal capable of firing a rifle or wielding a sword was drawn towards them like iron filings towards a lode-stone.

Unnatural darkness still held sway over the valley, but high above a bright light was burning through the clouds, and Calgar took solace in the symbolism of the sight.

Ahead, the daemon horde massed before the crackling tear of light in the sky, and the blackened silhouette of M’kar towered over them all. Calgar quickened his march, clenching his fists and lowering his shoulders. All around him, warriors both mortal and Astartes matched his pace as they went into the last battle for Castra Tanagra.

“For Ultramar!” shouted Calgar. “Charge!”

## TWENTY-FOUR

The Ultramarines hit the daemon horde, punching deep into the mass of scaled, slime-covered and rugose-fleshed beasts in an unstoppable mass of power armoured fury. A wordless shout of anger, loss and determination drove them on, their blades, bolters and fists wreaking a fearsome slaughter. And with M’kar’s link to the star fort denied him, there was no reservoir of power to renew them.

Calgar’s fist slammed back and forth with relentless force, slaying a daemon with every blow. A tide of monsters threw themselves upon him, slashing with claws, swords and bladed appendages, each cutting through his armour and scoring his flesh. Blood spilled down the plates of his armour, yet the pain of his wounds was dulled, as though they bled from another’s body.

The thin spear of defenders plunged into the body of the daemons, but like infectious cells within a body, they were quickly surrounded and attacked from all sides. The seething horde of daemoniac monstrosities fell upon the last defenders of Castra Tanagra, cutting them down like flames attacking the last remnants of a defiant glacier.

Calgar fought his way through the daemons towards M’kar, its midnight form utterly black and without shadow or feature. All that gave its form shape and proportion were the burning furnaces of its eyes and mouth. The air shimmered around it, a rippling heat haze of the material world trying to eject an unnatural presence in the warp and weft of its structure.

M’kar did not belong here, and this was Calgar’s last chance to make good on his promise to destroy the Thrice Born.

Daemon and Chapter Master met in a tremendous crash that shook the snow from the highest peaks and spread across the surface of the world like the mightiest peal of thunder. Calgar’s fists pummelled the daemon lord and in return its claws tore chunks from his armour and lacerated his flesh with butcher’s blows.

All around him, screams and gunfire split the cold, morning air. The light from above grew brighter and Calgar felt a hot wind blowing over the high peaks. He smelled scorched metal and a powerful electric haze filled the air with crackling static. He couldn’t afford to pay the strange sensation any mind. Every facet of his concentration was focussed on the desperate fight for survival before him.

He and M’kar traded blow for blow, killing each other by degrees and tearing at one another with the single-minded purity of purpose that only true hate can breed. Calgar knew he was weakening, his reflexes slowing and his strength fading with every blocked attack, every missed strike. He saw triumph in the daemon lord’s eyes and its mouth gaped wider in anticipation of devouring his soul.

“No more life left to you,” hissed the daemon.

Calgar didn’t reply. He had no energy for words. He raised a fist to block a downward sweep of the daemon’s claws, knowing as he did so that he was too slow. The claws ripped into his chest, tearing the breastplate from his body and exposing his bare flesh. A sweep of the daemon’s hammer arm smashed Calgar to the ground, and he rolled onto his side as the fiery agony of his shattered ribcage threatened to plunge him into unconsciousness.

The sky was a shimmering vault of purple, red and gold, the heavens alive with colour as something broke through the clouds in a fiery wash of unimaginably bright light. He blinked at the sight, unable to process what he was seeing. It was too awesome, too unbelievable and too magnificent to be real.

Yet it *was* real.

It was real and it was the most wondrous thing imaginable.

Two Ultramarines strike cruisers falling from the heavens like fire-wreathed comets.

Streamers of fire and molten metal trailed from the enormous vessels as they plunged headlong through the lower atmosphere. Their shields and hulls screamed in protest as forces they were never designed to endure threatened to tear them apart. It was the most reckless, gloriously insane piece of flying Calgar had ever seen.

Flocks of Thunderhawk gunships erupted from the cruisers' launch bays, and for one beautiful moment, the fighting in the valley ceased. Calgar's face lit up with renewed hope as he recognised the blocky, angular shapes of these mighty vessels.

*Valin's Revenge* of the 2nd, and the *Vae Victus* of the 4th.

Hot, metal-tasting air roared through the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk as the assault ramp opened, and Uriel gripped the crew rail as he stepped towards the brink. Far below, the ring of Ultramarines fought the daemonic horde. This was their chance to end this once and for all.

He saw a loathsome wound in the world and the towering form of the Thrice Born before it. Marneus Calgar lay at the daemon lord's mercy, and the words Varro Tigurius had spoken upon Uriel's return to Macragge echoed within his mind.

*The Sentinel of the Tower will fight alongside us when the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more.*

Leodegarius of the Grey Knights had named him the Sentinel of the Tower, a warrior who could overthrow existing ways of life for good or ill. Uriel had not known what that meant until this moment. To use the knowledge he possessed for evil purposes would destroy everything he held dear. What Uriel had learned from the revenant of Captain Ventanus was a potent weapon with which he could save all that he loved from destruction.

"Ready?" said Captain Shaan, stepping onto the ready line next to him. Like Uriel, Shaan wore a bulky jump pack across his shoulders. Behind him were Pasanus and Learchus, also bearing jump packs, though they looked less than thrilled at the idea of this jump. Filling out the rest of the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk were the Guardians and the restored Firebrands. The Swords of Calth were there too, renewed and healed after the high-speed run from the defeat of the Bloodborn on Calth.

"Ready," confirmed Uriel, and leapt from the belly of the Thunderhawk.

After the destruction of the Tomb of Ventanus, Uriel and his companions returned to Four Valleys Gorge, expecting to find a raging battlefield. To their surprise, they had found it much as they had left it. Since the destruction of the Black Basilica, the Bloodborn had hunkered down behind their fortress wall and kept their heads down. Only later did it become clear that without Honsou or whatever commanders had made their lair within the leviathan Captain Shaan's Raven Guard had destroyed, the Bloodborn were utterly leaderless.

The Imperial defenders had been debating how to take advantage of the enemy's lethargy when the decision was made for them. Attacking from the surface, Learchus had led a ragtag column of armoured vehicles and rallied Defence Auxilia through Guilliman's Gate to attack the rear of the Bloodborn army.

Caught between the hammer of Learchus and the anvil of the gorge's defenders, the Bloodborn were doomed. What had begun as a battle ended in slaughter as the Bloodborn were crushed without mercy. Resurgent Imperial forces pushed out onto the surface of Calth and recaptured Highside City, driving the scattered Bloodborn forces before them.

Magos Locard reclaimed the orbital defences, purging their systems of the scrapcode and returning them to Imperial control. With methodical, mathematical precision, he turned the formidable geostationary batteries and missile silos upon the enemy fleet at high anchor, destroying a dozen vessels in under an hour.

Led by the *Vae Victus*, the Imperial fleet that had rallied at Ultima Six-Eight surged back into the fight, and at the end of a six-hour battle, only a single enemy vessel escaped the carnage. No sooner was the battle for Calth won, than Uriel gathered his forces and set a course for Talassar, encountering *Valin's Revenge* en route.

Captain Sicarius brought word of the great victory he had won on Espandor, together with news of the hard-won triumph on Quintarn, where the 5th and 6th Companies had eventually broken the back of the Bloodborn invasion. The battle-barges *Octavius* and *Severian* were already approaching Talassar, and the synchronicity of their arrival was lost on no one.

Even as Uriel and the warriors of the 4th and 2nd Company dropped out of the skies above Talassar, the two Ultramarines battle-barges were battering down the *Indomitable's* defences.

If this was to be the battle to save Ultramar, it would be won by the entire Chapter.

It had been a long time since Uriel had deployed from a flying Thunderhawk, yet he moved smoothly into the optimal drop position: head down, arms tucked in and legs straight out behind him. The valley rushed up to meet him, a patchwork of grey and brown with the last of

the 1st Company painted a vivid blue at its centre. All around him, armoured warriors fell from the sky the combined might of the 2nd and 4th Companies. It was a sight to lift the hearts of all who saw it, and Uriel could not recall a time when two battle companies had gone into the fires of combat quite like this.

He saw the billowing red cape of Sicarius to his right, and though they had never been friends, Uriel recognised the greatness of his fellow captain. Hearing of his incredible victory at Corinth had served to remind Uriel how fearsome a warrior Cato Sicarius really was.

He returned his attention to the ground, adjusting his descent with a twist of his shoulders.

To reach the desired landing point was no mean feat, especially when launched from so high and so fast a vessel. Uriel angled his descent to send him arcing towards his Chapter Master, twisting his body around so that he was falling feet first.

This was as dangerous a combat drop as he had ever attempted, and the shrill warning in his helmet told him he was leaving it dangerously late to fire his jump pack. The warning rune was blinking furiously as he triggered the jets at his shoulders and his rapid descent was brutally arrested in a blazing eruption of jetfire.

Uriel slammed onto the surface of Talassar with a stone-cracking thunder of broken rock. Smoke wreathed his landing and the stone beneath his feet vitrified in the intense heat. His sword leapt to his hand as monstrous creatures with blunt, tapered skulls and curling ram's horns threw themselves at him. Thudding impacts nearby told him the warriors of the 4th and 2nd had joined the fight, and the battle for Talassar rapidly changed character.

Uriel cut his way through the horned daemons with wide sweeps of his sword, aided by roaring blasts from Pasanius' flamer and deadly accurate bursts of Learchus' bolter. Uriel's command squad fought with a fresh sense of purpose and cohesion, welded into a tight-knit fighting unit by the battles on Calth.

Any normal foe would have been broken by so sudden an attack, but daemons were no normal foe. They fought with as much fury and vigour as ever, unperturbed by the sight of nearly two hundred armoured Astartes landing in their midst and two enormous starships overhead, so close it felt like you could reach out and touch them.

Uriel saw the Thrice Born looming over Lord Calgar and leapt to his Chapter Master's defence. He threw up his sword and turned aside a sweeping blow that would surely have disembowelled Marneus Calgar. The daemon lord turned its searing gaze upon Uriel, and he felt the awful power of its ancient malice. It had dwelled in rage for ten thousand years, sustained by its hate for the worlds and warriors of the Ultramarines.

He now understood the core of that malice, for he knew his Chapter history as well as any warrior of the Ultramarines. He knew of the cowardly attack of the Word Bearers Traitor Legion on Calth in the days of the Great Betrayal of Horus, the battles fought by Roboute Guilliman and Captain Ventanus to save that world after its sun was poisoned for all time.

What the legends hadn't related, what none of the Chapter had known, was what had become of one of the Word Bearers' mightiest Dark Apostles, a dread figure of dark legend named Maloq Kartho. Though no trace of that warrior's former appearance now remained within the body of the Thrice Born, Uriel saw clearly how Maloq Kartho's dark patrons had rewarded his hateful deeds on Calth.

*That* had been Captain Ventanus' last gift to Uriel: the true name of M'kar.

The daemon that had once been Maloq Kartho of the Word Bearers loosed a soul-hungry bellow and swept its clawed arms down to lift Marneus Calgar from the ground. Lord Calgar struggled in the grip of the daemon lord, but he was powerless to resist being drawn up towards its blazing fangs. Uriel saw the Thrice Born had cast off any notions of a grand victory here, and was contenting itself with the murder of the warrior who represented its most hated foes and had thwarted its insane ambitions for centuries.

Uriel snatched the flint-bladed dagger from the sheath at his side.

"I name thee Maloq Kartho!" he shouted. "Your true and mortal name!"

The daemon lord threw back its head in pain as a paroxysm of rage shook its body from the tip of its blackened horns to its splay-clawed feet. The dagger grew warm in Uriel's hand, as though recognising a target for the lethal malice bound within its blade by unknown smiths of long ago. A shudder of unadulterated terror passed through the M'kar as it turned its gaze upon Uriel and saw the glinting dagger he carried. Its eyes widened in recognition.

"The shard of Erebus!" cried the daemon lord.

As much as Uriel wanted to strike back at the daemon lord for all the suffering and death it had caused, he knew that was not the role fate had assigned him.

He was the Sentinel of the Tower, not its Master.

Uriel hurled the dagger, hilt-first, towards Marneus Calgar.

The Chapter Master caught it deftly, the slender weapon absurdly small in his mighty gauntlets. But just as the Gauntlets of Ultramar were capable of great destruction, so too were they capable of feats of great dexterity. Held less than a metre from the daemon lord's face, Lord Calgar lunged forward and plunged the ancient dagger into M'kar's throat.

The effects were instantaneous and incandescent.

Blazing starfire spewed from the mortal wound dealt to the daemon lord, a flood of immaterial energy that raged in the air like a slick of polluted light. M'kar released its hold on Lord Calgar, who landed heavily on the ground before the dying daemon lord. Uriel ran to the wounded Chapter Master and, with the help of Pasanius and Learchus, dragged him away.

“What was that blade?” gasped Marneus Calgar.

“I do not know,” said Uriel. “It came from the tomb of Captain Ventanus.”

“Ventanus? The Lost Chapter?”

“The same,” confirmed Uriel.

The fighting in the valley had ceased as the daemon lord wrestled with its undoing, fighting with the last of its strength to withstand the alien sentence of the ancient dagger. Against the craft of its unknown makers and the revelation of its true name, there was nothing it could do, and every attempt to maintain its existence was for nothing.

All around them, the daemon host howled in mindless rage as M'kar drained them of their essences in its attempt to fight its own dissolution. One by one, the daemons disintegrated as their hold on the material world was broken and they were cast back into the warp. Within moments, the valley was empty save the for defenders of Castra Tanagra.

M'kar's form shrank, its outline blurring and compressing as every shred of its existence was consigned to destruction. This was true death: oblivion and the terror of non-existence. And the daemon lord knew it. With a last shriek of terror, M'kar's body exploded outwards in a wash of light scraps and horrified awareness of the nothingness that awaited it.

In the same instant, the vertical tear in the fabric of the world disappeared with a thunderclap of displaced air. The darkness obscuring the mountaintops and snow-shawled valleys of Talassar was dispelled, and the sun shone down on a world freed from the clutches of the daemonic. A cleansing wind blew down from the eastern peaks, carrying with it the promise of new days, fresh hope and the sweet beauty of lives lived on the edge of death. No sun was brighter, no wind as fresh and no day would ever be as memorable.

“It's over?” said Pasanius, looking at the scorched rock where the daemon had met its end.

“Yes,” said Uriel, his heart lighter than it had been in many a year. “It's over.”

The battle-barges *Octavius* and *Severian* completed the victory on Talassar, destroying the *Indomitable* in a series of furious barrages from their bombardment cannons. Volleys of torpedoes from the combined Ultramarines fleets hammered the corrupted star fort, tearing it apart in thunderous blooms of fire-venting plasma. Smaller vessels added their own broadsides to the assault, reducing the once-mighty structure from a miracle of engineering to a twisted mass of molten wreckage.

The star fort's warp core collapsed and its reactors went critical as systems already on the brink of failure finally gave out and turned the *Indomitable* into a miniature supernova. Blasted from its position in the heavens, the star fort fell from orbit, spiralling lower and lower until the gravitational pull of Talassar ensnared it and dragged it to its final doom.

Like the brightest star falling from the heavens, the *Indomitable* plunged through the atmosphere, trailing scads of molten metal and burning oxygen. All traces of its corruption were burned away as it plunged downwards, gathering speed and growing in brightness until the skies above Talassar were shining with its dying radiance.

The victors of Castra Tanagra watched it fall, silent in the face of such an awesome sight.

The remains of the *Indomitable* plunged into the sea of Talassar, sending up a kilometres-high plume of water. The impact created a monstrous tsunami, but such was the scale-defying vastness of Talassar's world-ocean, that it was little more than a series of harsh breakers by the time it reached the cliffs of Glaudor.

As Uriel watched the *Indomitable* vanish over the horizon, a memory of words spoken by someone impossibly distant and unimaginably old surfaced in his mind.

*His destiny is woven into the tapestry of a great hero's death, the fall of a star and the rise of an evil long-thought dead.*

It was a memory he knew did not belong to him, and Uriel recognised the sensations of his link with the Newborn, the boy Samuquan. He would never know where those words had been spoken, but as Uriel felt the ghostly shade of a dark-armoured figure at his side, he knew whose death had been foretold.

His name had been Ardaric Vaanes.

It took another six months to completely purge the taint of the Bloodborn from Ultramar, the last remnants of the invading armies fighting to the end even though their infernal master was no more. Uriel led assaults on Quintarn alongside Galenus of the 5th and fought alongside Sicarius in numerous strikes against enclaves of Bloodborn corsairs that had gone to ground in the forests of Espandor. Many were the battles fought to carve the last traces of the Bloodborn infection from the flesh of Ultramar, and only when Marneus Calgar led the

last assault on Tarentus against a coven of Bloodborn cultists alongside Varro Tigurius and Severus Agemman was the invasion finally ended.

It had been the most devastating attack on Ultramar since Hive Fleet Behemoth, and many were the names to be carved in gold upon the slabs of Formaskan marble in the Temple of Correction. Across the Chapter, three hundred and forty-seven Ultramarines had fallen in battle with the armies of the Thrice Born.

Their memories were honoured at a ceremony held six months to the day after the final defeat of M'kar on Talassar.

They assembled in the shadow of the great primarch, every warrior of the Ultramarines declared fit to stand by the Apothecarion. Six hundred Astartes gathered before the shimmering form of Roboute Guilliman, enthroned within his golden sepulchre and held in stasis for all time. The golden doors of the temple had been shut to the thousands of pilgrims beyond, for this was a ceremony for the Chapter only, a private affair, though some non-Ultramarines were accorded the honour of being present.

Inquisitor Suzaku was one of the few mortals in attendance, the soldier of the holy ordos having survived her ordeal in the depths of Calth. She had yet to fully recover from the grievous wounds she had suffered at the hands of the Blade dancers and Honsou's Iron Warriors, but she had graciously welcomed this opportunity to remember the dead. Magos Locard and Commander Trejo of the skitarii stood at her side, these servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus honoured for their part in the defence of Calth. Both wore golden “U” stamped medals to forever remind them of their friendship with the Ultramarines.

Captain Aethon Shaan of the Raven Guard stood next to Uriel, symbolically taking his place alongside the 4th Company of the Ultramarines. A number of black flags, each one a dead son of Corax, were placed in line with the ranked-up warriors. For their service to Ultramar, these heroic warriors were granted a place of honour in the battle formation.

Marneus Calgar stood on a plinth of dark marble below the father of the Ultramarines, his armour restored to its former glory by the very best of the Chapter's artificers and hammered anew in the Dreadnought forge of Techmarine Harkus. The Chapter Master was now a solemn figure, one of greater humility than before, yet one uplifted by the courage and honour shown by his warriors and people in the defence of their home.

Gold-armoured Terminators flanked him and an honour guard bore flickering torches that bathed the interior of the Temple of Correction with a warm glow that made its vastness seem somehow smaller, more intimate and more personal.

Lord Calgar lifted his voice so that all could hear his words.

“They shall be pure of heart and strong of body, untainted by doubt and unsullied by self aggrandisement. They will be bright stars in the firmament of battle, angels of death whose shining wings bring swift annihilation to the enemies of man. So it shall be for a thousand times a thousand years, unto the very end of eternity and the extinction of mortal flesh.”

Uriel's heart stirred at the ancient words of Roboute Guilliman, words that had stood as the bedrock of the Adeptus Astartes since the earliest days of the Imperium.

“Comrades, we have won a great victory and we gather here to honour the dead, to remember the sacrifices they made and ensure their legacy is not forgotten. It has been a long and painful fight, with much blood shed in the defence of our way of life. We are unique in Ultramar: we are a brotherhood of warriors and mortals, bound together by chains stronger than adamantium. But Ultramar is more than just the strength of its blades. The strength of Ultramar is humanity, and the strength of humanity is Ultramar. If one turns from the other we shall lose all that makes us strong.

“Three hundred and forty-seven Ultramarines lost their lives in this war, but this victory is theirs, for what is the terror of death? That we die with our work incomplete. The joy of life is in knowing that our task is done.”

Calgar nodded to each of his company captains, and Uriel bent to lift a cloth-wrapped bundle at his feet. The captains of battle marched from their companies towards the gleaming black walls of the temple as the Chapter Master spoke again.

“The warrior who acts out of honour cannot fail. His duty is honour itself,” said Lord Calgar as Uriel unwrapped a rock hammer, a chisel and numerous sheets of gold leaf from his bundle. “Even his death is a reward and can be no failure, for it has come through duty. We remember the dead, but we are Adeptus Astartes, and we do not waste our tears. We were not born to watch the world grow dim, for our lives are not measured in years, but by our deeds.”

Marneus Calgar lowered his head as each captain knelt by a blank area of the marble slabs and began to carve the names of the fallen.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking

the plunge to become a full-time writer. In addition to sixteen previous novels for the Black Library, Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy stories and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

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