

A WARHAMMER 40,000 OMNIBUS



BLOOD RAVENS

THE DAWN OF WAR OMNIBUS

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE SAGA OF the Blood Ravens has taken them from the smouldering remains of one planet to the next. Destruction seems to follow in their wake, just as war appears to lure them ever onwards. They have been confronted by the ugly and brutal threat of the orks, the enigmatic grace of the eldar, the dark portents of daemons, and by the insidious power of Chaos Marines. Held constantly in the luminal space between combat and death, the Blood Ravens find their numbers dwindling and their future uncertain. Desperate times call for desperate measures; this loyal and honourable Chapter finds itself stretching the protocols of the Codex Astartes in order to survive, for without survival they cannot enact the Emperor's righteous wrath on his enemies. Hence, their identity in the present and the future is the subject of constant self-reflection and wilful resolution. There is an angst that underlies their psychology. Indeed, we might say that the quest for identity and self-knowledge is what really drives the Blood Ravens to cut their way through the galaxy.

Yet all of this began with a RTS computer game, *Dawn of War*, which I was lucky enough to be asked to novelise in 2004. I can imagine that it must have been a real challenge for Relic/THQ to re-fashion Warhammer 40,000 into a computer game (a challenge that they met with spectacular success), but I can also say that it was a singular kind of challenge to mediate between the twin demands of that game and the established universe of Warhammer 40,000. Given that each medium has its own unique characteristics and demands, fidelity to each was an intriguing creative task; it was one that I was excited to take on. One of the immediate challenges was the prosaic and logistical matter of timetables, since the production cycle of the computer games industry can move incredibly quickly. The first *Dawn of War* novel was written in a heart beat.

Given the unusually complicated demands of that novel, which was my first, I was delighted to see that it proved extremely popular. Its first print run sold out quickly and its reprint appeared in English, Spanish and German. The novel also sparked a lively debate about questions of fidelity to the established background material, which has been thought-provoking for me and others, especially given the intriguing position of the novel between two genres of game. So interesting were these debates that I have made a number of small refinements to the manuscript in preparation for this omnibus - I wonder whether interested readers will find them.

One of the most exciting things about the *Dawn of War* game in terms of novelisation was the way that it provided the genesis of some potentially interesting ideas as well as the shells of some promising characters. Central amongst these, of course, is our hero Captain Gabriel Angelos and the Blood Ravens Chapter itself. Taking these seeds and making them grow into more fully realised characters was a fulfilling task, and it was one of the most enjoyable aspects of writing *Ascension* and *Tempest*, which evolve almost independently from the computer game: Gabriel grows in depth and sophistication as the series develops, and building the background and substance of the Blood Ravens as an interesting and unique Chapter of Space Marines was an amazing opportunity.

Of course, given the multitude of tasks (especially for the first novel), some things fell through the cracks. For example, a number of readers have asked me to explain why Librarian Isador Akios behaves as he does in *Dawn of War*, since they thought it was not sufficiently explained in the game or the novel. With this in mind, I have written an extra short story for this omnibus that seeks to unpack his psychology; it provides a little more insight into his background and, through a consideration of his relationship with Gabriel, it also explores the unusually angst-ridden character of the Blood Ravens themselves. In some ways, Isador's character flaws are metaphors for the concerns of his proud Chapter. The new story should be read after *Dawn of War* and before *Ascension*. In many ways, it is the nature of the Blood Ravens Chapter that plays a central role in this saga - hence the title of this omnibus. Some readers will recognise fragments of my inspiration behind these scholar-warriors. There are not only aspects of various warrior traditions from our own history (such as the First Nations' spirit warriors, Egyptian warrior-priests, the Japanese samurai, and also some elements of medieval European knights), but there are also aspects of other Space Marine Chapters. This last factor is especially interesting for me, since one of the key characteristics of the Blood Ravens Chapter is that it has somehow lost the knowledge of its origins - uniquely amongst the Chapters, the Blood Ravens do not know the source of their gene-seed. In these circumstances, juxtapositions and comparisons with other Chapters become particularly interesting. Some readers have noticed similarities (and differences) with the Relictors, the Raven Guard, the Blood Angels, the Grey Knights and, of course, the psychically powerful scholar-warriors of the heretical Thousand Sons. I'm not going to give anything away here, but there are plenty of clues in the novels for those who can find them.

One of the big questions with which the Librarian-rich Blood Ravens constantly engage (and with which they force us to engage) concerns the status and meaning of knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge in the universe of Warhammer 40,000. Indeed, in

some ways, it might be the answer that a Space Marine or Librarian gives to this question that finally determines whether he is a loyalist or a heretic. This leaves us with an open question: does the scholarly nature of the Blood Ravens mean that they must constantly challenge the boundaries of loyalty and constantly reaffirm it with the strength of their wills? Posing this question opens the door for the realisation (which is voiced by Chaplain Prathios in a couple of places) that, regardless of all the cool weapons and all the awesome power armour, the core of a Space Marine is the mind and soul of a human being, and it is that (not the armour itself) that finally determines a warrior's conduct and destiny. Of course, the mind and soul may be altered by training, hypnotherapy and continuous exposure to the horrors of war, but they cannot be removed altogether. If Space Marines have no freedom of choice, then their loyalty means nothing... only war.

Is there anything else?

Finally, I'd just like to thank Marc Gascoigne, Lindsey Priestley and Reverend Christian Dunn for their support, encouragement and faith. They deserve as much credit as I do, and I'm sure that I deserve more criticism than them.

*Cassem Goto
August 2007*



DAWN OF WAR



PROLOGUE

Tartarus: 999.M38

SHEETS OF WARP energy cracked through the night, bathing the mountain top in dark, purpling light. Clouds roiled and rolled across the sky, spiralling around the peak as though being drawn into an immense tornado. Lightning flashed through the barrage of rain, silhouetting monstrous forms against the heavens. The discharge of force weapons crackled brightly, sending sparks of blue spraying through the rain. In the strobes of visibility, blades shimmered and combat was joined in an odd, staccato rhythm. The sky was weeping with energy, spilling oceans of unearthly fluid from one dimension into another, ripping the fabric of the atmosphere into serrations through which the immaterium could drip, ooze, and flow. The unclean energies sizzled and hissed as they broke through into the air, as though celebrating their liberty. Unaccustomed to the viscosity of air and the strictures of gravity, the sickly flows congealed quickly into pods and droplets, falling from the sky like mutant rain, lashing into the mountain top with toxic ferocity.

Macha stood on the second summit of the mountain, just lower than the main peak. Her arms were outstretched, as though trying to embrace the rage of the storm, her head held high, her eyes closed delicately in concentration. The wind whipped her long hair into a torrent behind her and, in the sudden flashes of lightning, she was deathly beautiful. Power radiated from her body, glowing with a faint blue like a holy aura. The intensity grew, focussed on a point just in front of her chest, where the light condensed into a brilliant ball of blue fire.

With a sudden flick, Macha's eyes were open and the ball of energy erupted into life, blasting through the air towards the eye of the storm. The light hissed and crackled as it scorched through the hellish rain, before it was finally swallowed whole by the spiralling clouds. It was gone. Vanished. And, for a moment, it seemed that it was lost.

A tremendous explosion shook the mountain top, sending avalanches of rock and slides of blood-drenched earth cascading down its crumbling sides. The sky was lit with blast-rings of blue fire, rippling out from the eye of the storm and incinerating the droplets of warp rain, which sparked with moments of death in the concentric bands of flame.

In the sudden flood of light, Macha could see the scene around her and she shivered. Looking back towards the base of the mountain, there was a bed of corpses, like rocks in the river of bloody soil that gushed down towards the valley. Some of her eldar warriors were still on their feet, battling desperately against foes that seemed to flicker in and out of existence. Towards the peak of the mountain were even more corpses, piles of them where entire squads had been annihilated with single blasts from the daemon. But there was the craftworld's avatar, towering over his brethren and locked in combat with the daemon on the crest of the mountain. His ancient weapon, the Wailing Doom, flashed in his hands with incredible speed, smashing great chunks out of the daemon's form while the rest of the dwindling eldar forces struggled to keep the daemon host at bay.

Then the light died and the scene was plunged into darkness once again.

Something shifted in her mind, and the eldar farseer strained her eyes into the night, struggling to fit images to the gyring confusion of thoughts that jostled for her attention. There was something else out there on the mountain, something moving with a hidden purpose. Macha could see flickering pictures in her head, a collage of past, present and future all blurred into one curdling image-pool. There were dark figures in those pictures - giant, pseudo-human warriors - and her heart shuddered each time her thoughts lingered on them. These clumsy humans were more fearsome than any daemon, in their own way, and Macha's soul was filled with dread by their sudden addition to the mix.

She could feel their presence on the mountain, but there was no sign of them. Even her perfect eldar eyes could not pierce the enveloping shroud of warp energy and driving darkness, and the constant discharge of weapons riddled the mountainside with squirming shadows and pushed the unknown deeper into invisibility.

Kaerial, we are not alone on this planet. Look to the blind-side of the ascent. Macha's thoughts wove their way through the tortuous eddies of psychic energy that swirled around the mountain, and she guided them home - into the soul of Kaerial, the wraithguard commander who was holding the rear line of defences at the bottom of the slope.

Understood, farseer, came the simple reply, and the wraithguard loped off in search of prey. Towering over the battlefield in their psycho-plastic armour, the wraithguard were un-living warriors: artificial constructs housing the spirit stone of once mighty eldar warriors, giving their eternal souls the chance to wreak vengeance on those who slew them.

THE SHAFT OF las-fire lanced through the air and Jaerielle slid to his knees just in time, skidding a trough into the blood-slicked earth as the blast seared over his head. Without a moment of hesitation, he clicked the trigger of his shuriken catapult, loosing a hail of tiny projectiles into the bank of advancing Chaos cultists, felling four or five at once. As he sprang back to his feet, the rest of the Guardian Storm squad were already around him, braced into firing positions to protect their commander.

But the cultists kept coming, undaunted by the efficiency of the eldar defence, pressing on with sheer weight of numbers, even as hundreds fell and were trampled under foot. Their weapons were crude and increasingly scarce, but a spear will kill as well as a lasgun from close range, and the cultists were closing in on the eldar from all sides. The intervening air was alive with shuriken, flicking and flashing through the night with unerring precision, each one burying its monomolecular shock deep into the mutated flesh of the advancing hordes. Line upon line of cultists fell, but the crowd was edging gradually closer.

Jaerielle checked behind him. Nothing had yet breached his defensive line, and the farseer stood on the crest of the rise behind them, haloed in a glorious phosphorescence, untouched by the dirty business of close-range combat. Sizzling jets of blue flame

burst from her body at regular intervals, plunging into the eye of the storm that raged above them. She needed more time to seal the tear in the immaterium, and the Storm squad would make sure that she got it. And beyond her, on the very summit of the mountain, Jaerielle could see the avatar of Biel-Tan locked into combat with the daemon prince; lightning and warp-tears flashed around the two figures, framing their magnificence for all the world to see. As he watched, a fire grew in the soul of Jaerielle and a thirst for blood doused his thoughts.

Snapping his head back round to the advancing cultists, Jaerielle licked his lips and leapt forward into the fray.

'For Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God!' he cried as he drew his long power sword and pushed its impossibly sharp blade through the abdomens of three humanoid cultists.

The call was returned by the rest of the Storm squad, but it was no dissonant cacophony of battle-cries. The Guardian eldar summoned their call from the depths of their souls, chanting it out in tones both too high and too low for human ears to make out. In an exquisite and rumbling harmony, the name of their god of war flooded out across the battlefield, energising each of the eldar warriors who heard it, rallying them into a renewed quest: blood for the blood god. Soon, the call was reverberating around the whole mountain, pulsing through the rock itself, making the earth move with its sonorous power. On the peak of the mountain, acting like a conduit for the chants of the Biel-Tan eldar, Khaine's avatar threw back its head and let out a scream of power, repulsing the warp clouds above it as though they were feathers in the wind, staggering the daemon prince in a moment of awe. The name was thrown up to the shrouded stars: *'Kaela Mensha Khaine!'*

And the eldar god smiled back at his precious children.

The power sword swung and arced with grace and accuracy, defining a spiral of death around the spinning and dancing figure of Jaerielle. He had discarded his shuriken weapon and now clutched his blade in both hands as he flittered his way through the crowd of Chaos cultists, separating limbs from bodies as though it were an art. From around the perimeter of his elongated helmet spat tiny toxic shards, peppering the faces and necks of cultists who strayed too close, melting them from within - the mandiblaster helmet, still edged in a deep red, was all that Jaerielle had kept from his time as an Aspect Warrior of the Striking Scorpions. It was a mark of unusual and great honour to be permitted to keep it, and he was glad of it now.

All of the Guardians of the Storm squad had served their warrior cycle in one of the dozen combat temples, making them perfectly suited for this kind of battle. Jaerielle could see his sister, Skrekrea, slipping elegantly through the forest of primitive blades and random smatterings of fire, dispatching cultists with splendid ease. She had been a Howling Banshee once, and her elaborate mask was still fitted with the sonic amplifiers employed by Aspect Warriors of that temple. Like her brother, she had served her Aspect with such devotion that the Exarch had made her a gift of the mask when she left the temple, hopeful that one day she would return.

The terrible, shrill howl, from which the Banshee aspect drew its name, was beginning to rise in volume, emanating from the lithe form of Skrekrea as she swooped and lashed with her sword. The cultists nearest to her were beginning to feel the effects of the sound: their movements were slowing into confusion. Some had already come to a halt, shaking their heads in pathetic attempts to rid their ears of the invasive noise.

Suddenly, Skrekrea spun to a halt, raising her sword before her face, pointing into the stars. The screech from her helmet reached its crescendo and all around her the cultists fell to the ground clutching at their heads, blood coursing from their ears and oozing over their desperate fingers.

Jaerielle did not even pause to watch the impressive sight - he had seen Skrekrea in battle hundreds of times before and well knew what she was capable of. In truth, she was not an exceptional warrior. Frqual was a different story. A former Fire Dragon, he was a blur of motion, spilling great jets of fire from his flamer and incinerating swathes of cultists with rapid bursts from his fusion gun. Grenades sprayed out from unseen holsters around his legs, scattering into the oncoming horde and blasting great craters out of the mountain itself.

Frqual was an eldar Guardian on the edge, slipping in and out of the service of the Fire Dragon temple so frequently that it was difficult to keep track of when he was formally an Aspect warrior and when merely a Guardian. Never parted from his weapons, he lived to fight and relished the blood that soaked his long memory. He teetered on the edge of damnation, constantly questing for battles and contests. Jaerielle was sure that he would become an exarch one day, completely lost to himself but honed as the perfect embodiment of eldar warcraft. In general, the eldar could not afford such recklessness - they were once the dominant force in the galaxy, but now they were a dwindling race. They had to pick their battles carefully.

Tartarus was not a battle that they could avoid - the farseer had been preparing for it for centuries. Guardian squads had been formed specially, and the Aspect temples had even consented to arm some of their most exalted former members, as well as dispatching their own Aspect warriors into the fray.

The ancient tomes in the Black Library told of the return of the daemon prince, and it fell to the eldar to vanquish him every three thousand years. They could trust nobody else with this task, especially not the short-sighted humans who had bungled into space so very recently.

A spear thrust straight at Jaerielle's stomach, and he rolled easily outside it, drawing his own blade almost casually back along its path, slicing the cultist neatly in two at the waist. These humans are quite pathetic, thought Jaerielle, as he thwarted their futile attacks as though they were in slow motion. Their minds are weak, he added in a haughty internal narrative, for they have fallen to the paltry temptations of this daemon prince. And their bodies are weaker, he noted as another head was parted from its shoulders. The comparison with his Storm squad spoke for itself. Humans - if only there weren't so many of them.

'HOLD,' WHISPERED TRYTHOS, as he held up a giant, armoured fist, signalling to his kill team in case the vox beads in their helmets had failed. 'There is movement ahead.' He pointed sharply at two of the massive Space Marines, enshrined in ancient black power armour, indicating that they should go on ahead to scout. The auto-reactive shoulder plates of the Space Marines glinted against the distant lightning, and the insignia of the Undying Emperor shimmered in the darkness.

'You'd better be right about this, inquisitor. This planet is crawling with filthy xenos creatures, and the forces of Chaos are strong here. The local population have lost their minds to this daemon—'

'—not to mention their souls, captain,' interrupted Inquisitor Jhordine as a noise behind them made her turn. 'I *am* right about this, captain, as we are about to see.' The inquisitor was dwarfed by the huge Space Marine, who stood over two metres in height, and she did not wear the impressive power armour of the Space Marines, but the Deathwatch kill team were the militant arm of the Ordo Xenos, the branch of the Imperial Inquisition charged with combating the alien, and her authority over these Marines was unquestioned.

A stutter of fire erupted from behind the team, further down the slope towards the valley floor. Out of the mists and the darkness emerged a group of loping figures. Tall and slender, with massively elongated heads, they appeared to have no faces, but bright jewels inset into their armoured forms seemed to glow with life. Taking giant strides in smooth, soundless movements, they were rapidly closing the gap between them and the Space Marines.

'Eldar wraithguard!' called Trythos, turning to face the new threat as his team brought their weapons to bear in instantaneous reflex.

A volley of bolter fire punched out of the line of Deathwatch Space Marines, smashing into the advancing line of wraithguard. Great chunks of psycho-plastic splintered away into the darkness, but the strange creatures just kept coming, as though they couldn't feel the impacts. Their weapons flared with life, returning fire with a hail of projectiles that hissed smoothly through the air, ricocheting off the power armour of the Marines.

'Go for the jewels,' called Jhordine, drawing her own plasma gun and taking aim. 'The jewels are their heart stones.'

The inquisitor squeezed off a pulse of plasma that burst against the glowing gem stone on the chest of the leading wraithguard. The creature stopped short and a keening cry erupted from its mouthless head, before it suddenly broke into a run, spraying projectiles from its weapon as it charged towards the team.

Trythos matched the giant creature stride for stride, pounding out into the space that separated the two groups and intercepting the charge. As he ran, Trythos swung his power axe above his head, circling it in crescents of coruscating power. From behind him came the chatter of bolter fire and shells flashed past his head, peppering the charging wraithguard with impacts.

Then they were upon each other, but the wraithguard was not equipped for combat at this range. It was an uneven match. Trythos turned his charge into a dive, swinging his axe into an arc as he cleared the last few metres that separated him from the creature. The wraithguard tried to turn the Deathwatch captain aside with his long elegant limbs, but Trythos smashed through them with the servo-assisted power of his armour, shattering the psycho-plastics like wax, driving his power axe towards the gem stone on the wraithguard's chest.

The axe cracked into the jewel with a metallic ring that echoed with an incredible volume. The force weapon sputtered and sparked with power as the pressure against the gem increased, but the stone would not break. Trythos drove the head of the axe forward with all of his strength until a huge explosion threw him back from the shattered wraithguard.

As he hit the ground, Trythos saw another blast of energy smash into his kill team, this time coming from further up the mountain. His squad had split, with half of it continuing the assault against the wraithguard, and the other half turning to face the new threat. A heavy foot crunched into the ground next to his head, bringing Trythos back to the present with a start. He rolled to his feet and shouldered the shaft of his axe, preparing for a strike against another of the wraithguard. But something was wrong - the shaft was light and unbalanced. The axe head was ruined and broken, shattered and rent by the force of the impact against the eldar stone. A burst of bolter fire from his battle-brothers gave him a split second of cover; he snatched his boltgun from its holster and loosed a tirade of shells against the wraithguard as they closed around him.

THE AVATAR SWEEPED his immense sword with incredible ferocity, hacking it into the gradually solidifying form of the daemon prince, who winced slightly under the impact. The sword seemed to hum and glow with a life of its own, crying out for blood, wailing with doom. Its impacts resounded simultaneously in multiple dimensions, slicing into the substance of the prince on both sides of the breach in the immaterium.

The daemon roared in frustration as the rivers of blood cascaded freely down the mountainside. It was being violated even as it was being born into the material world, but the avatar was relentless in its assault. The daemon's cultists rushed at the towering Avatar of Khaine, but the ancient warrior hardly even noticed them, swatting them away in droves with the back swing of his blade or treading them into the ground under his feet.

The storm was spiralling in and out of the material realm, sucked into focus by the ungodly presence of the daemon prince. The clouds of warp energy just poured into the daemon's growing form, filling it with power and chaos. The prince lashed out in frustration, raking claws and talons across the body of the avatar, ripping into the warrior's metallic skin and sending spurts of molten blood jetting into the night. The avatar screamed his defiance to the gods, stepping inside the wildly flailing limbs of the daemon and driving his sword home where the monstrosity's heart should be.

Standing on the lower summit, her arms outstretched and open to heaven, Macha unleashed another blast of blue fire into the storm, desperate to seal the breach before the daemon could fully materialise. If the prince were permitted to take solid form, not even the Avatar of Khaine would be able to confront it.

Something clawed at her mind, breaking her concentration for a fraction of a second. For a moment she thought that the daemon was whispering into her soul, trying to lure her away from her purpose, but the voice was too weak, plaintive, and familiar. It was weeping into her thoughts and tears started to roll down her face as she realised what it was. Kaerial was gone. His spirit stone, which had been housed in wraithbone armour for centuries after his physical death, permitting the great warrior to go on living for the sake of the Biel-Tan eldar, had been destroyed. His death knell rang through the warp like a beacon of lost hope.

The farseer's pain was transformed into anger almost immediately, and she focussed her rage into a searing ball of energy that rocketed up towards the main summit of the mountain as she screamed her fury into the darkness. This time it smashed directly

into the form of the daemon itself, sending it staggering back towards the precipice at the edge of the peak, pursued at each step by the frenzy of the avatar's wailing blade.

Tendrils of energy darted out of the daemon's limbs, questing for purchase to prevent its fall from the summit, from the epicentre of the warp storm that fed its manifestation. They lashed and whipped around the mountain top, vaporising clutches of cultists and lapping at the warp-shields that burned around a group of eldar warlocks, who returned fire with jabs of their own lightning, riddling the daemonic form with javelins of blue flame.

Macha smiled to herself: this was it. She threw back her head and screamed into the sky, channelling the energies of her gods into her chest for a final killing blow. The coruscating ball of energy pulsed in the air before her, eager to be loosed against the forces of damnation.

Then a blast of las-fire punched into the back of Macha's shoulder, pushing her forward, stumbling to regain her balance. The ball of flame hissed and then blinked into nothingness, as Macha turned to locate the origins of the blast.

A group of Chaos cultists had burst through the defensive line of the Storm squad. The grossly mutated humans bore Chaos brands on their skin, which seemed to be the wrong size for their bones. Two of them brandished primitive lasguns, which whined with energy and heat as they discharged them frantically in the direction of the farseer.

With a cursory brush of her hand, Macha sent a torrent of lightning crashing into the pathetic humanoids. She watched in curiosity as they turned themselves inside out and then imploded into tiny tears in the material fabric of the world, sucked through into the immaterium where their daemon lords waited to consume their souls.

The Storm squad were in some disarray. There were new enemies emerging from the darkness, popping directly out of the warp as the storm drew the fabric of reality perilously thin. But Macha had no time for these bloodletter daemons.

Kaerial... she began before she remembered. Vrequir, you are needed.

Turning back to the battle on the crest of the mountain, she could see that the daemon prince had found his footing once again.

THE CREATURE SEEMED to slip and slide around his blade, as though it were not wholly solid. Jaerielle spun with his sword, taking clutches of clumsy cultists with each turn, but the dancing, devilish form seemed to evade his every move. It glowed with a dark light, making it shimmer in the rain-drenched night. Its finger tips leaked energy, as though it flowed through its body like blood or cascaded down its arms with the rain. With sharp flicks of its wrists, the bloodletter splattered sizzling droplets of warp energy against the eldar warriors and cut into their armour with its scything finger nails.

Great plumes of flame jetted out from Frqual, engulfing the slippery form in chemical fire. But it just laughed, bathing in the flames and licking at them with its forked tongue. With a sudden movement it spat something back in the direction of Frqual. The old Fire Dragon's reflexes were the sharpest of any of the eldar in the squad, but the viscous liquid splashed into the face of his helmet before he could even flinch. A fraction of a second later, and Frqual was lying prone in the bloody mud, a yawning hole cut straight through his helmet where his head should have been.

'Frqual!' cried Jaerielle and Skrekrea in unison, each working their blades into intricate ritual patterns through the thick, humid air. Their elaborate movements came to rest in the pincer stance of the Striking Scorpions, with their blades held over their heads, pointing directly at the foe caught between them.

A flurry of gunfire told Jaerielle that the wraithguard had arrived to reinforce the Storm squad. They could deal with the cultists, leaving him and his sister to deal with this bloodletter before it found its way to the farseer.

Jaerielle moved first, lunging at the figure's naked legs with his sword, sweeping his blade in a lateral arc. But the bloodletter was too fast, springing into the air in a breathtaking pirouette, kicking its unearthly weight off Jaerielle's blade itself. But the eldar was ready for this, and the mandiblasters around his helmet fired instantly as the daemon-form flashed past his face.

At the same time, Skrekrea brought her blade across in an opposing arc, slicing in front of Jaerielle at about head height, catching the bloodletter full in its stomach. For a moment, Skrekrea's blade cut deeply into the white flesh of the bloodletter's gut, but then it caught as the flesh seemed to regenerate around it, leaving it stuck as a protrusion from the daemon itself. A blast of warp energy fed back along the blade and into the hilt, throwing Skrekrea from her feet and sending her sliding into the swampy earth. Again Jaerielle was ready. He let the natural arc of his sword turn him into a spin and he came round again with his blade held high, slicing perfectly through the neck of the bloodletter. For a horrible moment, nothing happened. But Skrekrea pulled herself up onto her elbows, dripping with blood and soil, and let out a banshee howl that smashed into the frozen form of the daemon-creature, blowing its severed head from its rapidly disintegrating shoulders and casting it into the ravening hordes of cultists who snatched at it like a prize.

SUDDENLY THE WRAITHGUARD just stopped attacking and turned away, leaving Trythos clutching the shaft of his axe. He fired a volley of bolter shells into the retreating squad, then turned to rejoin his kill team, who were already in the midst of a new battle further up the mountainside.

Inquisitor Jhordine was standing forward of the team with her staff of office held proudly aloft. Next to her stood the Librarian, Prothius, who was spinning his force-staff in a frenzy of spluttering power, sending spears of fire lancing through the darkness ahead of them. The Librarian stood out from his brother-Marines as psychic power played around his form, and he muttered the forbidden words of an ancient mantra - only the Librarians of the Space Marines were sanctioned to use such ungodly forces. But Prothius and Jhordine suddenly stopped fighting, their adversary apparently gone.

'What's going on?' asked Trythos as he drew up to Jhordine.

'I'm not sure,' she said, scanning the darkness for signs of a trap. 'The eldar are cunning creatures, and it is not like them to abandon a fight.'

'Perhaps they knew that they were outclassed,' offered Trythos.

'No. They were not outclassed,' put in Prothius.

'And they would never admit it, even if they were,' concluded Jhordine.

'So, we proceed with caution,' said Trythos, waving the Deathwatch kill team into formation for an ascent of the south side of the mountain.

'Yes, extreme caution. There are greater powers at play on this mountain than even the Deathwatch can handle,' added Jhordine with a note of foreboding.

PROTHIUS WAS THE first to crest the rise and, perhaps, the only one of the Space Marines to understand what he saw. The others just stopped and stared. Jhordine, the last to complete the climb, without the advantage of the Marines' augmented physiologies, broke the silence immediately.

'So, I was right. There it is.' Her voice was barely more than a whisper, but they all heard her.

'Yes, inquisitor, you were right,' responded Prothius. 'Now, what do you intend to do to it?'

The avatar had lost his footing and was pinned to the rock at the summit, with the daemon prince's tendrils lashing him down. He thrashed and twisted to get free, but the other-worldly strength of the daemon held him fast. The magnificent sword of the avatar lay on the ground where it had fallen, a great crack ripping through the rock from its point of impact. From a lower summit to the east came blasts of blue power, emanating from an eldar sorcerer of some kind, who stood alone on a rocky outcrop, held clear of the turmoil of battle around her.

The whole side of the mountain was a death scene, lit by the eerie light from the storm and from the flashes of energy that darted through the combat, all reflected into ugly reds by the blood-slicked earth. As far as the Space Marines could see, from peak to valley, there were corpses of eldar warriors and strange misshapen humans. The remnants of each force still fought in pockets over the face of the mountain - fighting was particularly fierce just below the sorcerer and around the summit itself. 'Why are they fighting?' asked Trythos.

'I don't know, captain, but the eldar must have their reasons to fight this daemoniac foe. They are an ancient race, and their ways are mysteries to us, even in the Ordo Xenos of the Inquisition. But they are a dwindling race, and they do not fight without reason, no matter how unfathomable that reason might be.'

'If they are dwindling, should we not help bring them to extinction: suffer not the alien to live,' said Trythos with some bravado.

'Not today, captain. We are not here for annihilation, but for knowledge. We are here because of that,' explained Jhordine, pointing towards the fallen weapon of the avatar. 'Over many millennia, the eldar have created a weapon to slay daemons and banish the forces of Chaos from this world - that is the Wailing Doom of Biel-Tan. That is why we are here. Even the smallest fragment could be wrought into a great weapon for the Emperor's Inquisition.'

A BOLT OF blue lightning smashed into the daemon prince, shifting its weight slightly as it turned to stare at the farseer, and triggering a terrible keening. This was all the opportunity that the avatar needed, as he bucked the daemoniac form and reached for his fallen weapon. As the daemon returned his fathomless eyes to the avatar beneath it, the Wailing Doom slashed across its unholy face with a tremendous explosion of power.

The daemon screamed as the blade sliced into its head, shattering its skull in hundreds of dimensions at once. As it reared up in agony, a second great blast from Macha smashed into its face, lifting the contorted form into the air. Then the avatar was on its feet, molten blood cascading down its metal skin, spraying out of the terrible wounds that threatened to tear him apart.

With one last supernatural effort of will, the avatar brought the sword round in a magnificent arc. The weapon wailed into the eye of the storm that spiralled above it, promising doom, and the avatar let out a cry to Khaine. The sound brought silence to the mountain, as all eyes turned to watch the terrible blow. The eldar warriors had stopped fighting and a painfully beautiful chant rose from the remnants of their force - *Kaela Mensha Khaine*.

The Wailing Doom, the ancient weapon of the avatar of Khaine, seemed to fall into slow motion, sweeping up in a vertical crescent from the avatar's feet, leaving a stream of sparkling energy in its wake. Its tip ripped into the body of the daemon prince with the sound of reality being torn asunder, and the avatar pushed it on with the very last of his ageless strength. The blade ploughed through the abdomen of the shrieking daemon, spraying warp energy and toxic liquids across the mountain, and then sliced up through its neck, smashing into the base of its skull. The daemon's head was shattered in an immense explosion, sending the collapsing skull rocketing up into the gyring storm above.

The head of the daemon prince detonated like a mine, blasting rings of ugly, purple light and splatters of filthy ichor across the mountain top. The blast seemed to consume the storm, and the roiling clouds were a sudden blaze of red fire.

Macha raised her arms to the heavens, holding a small, shimmering stone of maledictum between her hands. She was whispering and chanting into the blaze that engulfed the sky. Then suddenly, as if on command, the fiery clouds spiralled into a whirlpool and vanished down into the farseer's stone, leaving the scene in stillness and silence.

The avatar of Khaine pushed his sword into the air and a last fork of lightning ruptured the sky, striking the ancient blade as though it were a conductor. The sword flashed momentarily and then shattered with a crack of thunder, sending a shard splintering off against the rocks, as the avatar slumped to the ground with the rest of the blade still clasped in its hand. He lay prone on the mountain top as the clouds parted, leaving him bathed in starlight. His magma-like blood oozed slowly from his stricken body, forming little streams of lava that trickled down the mountainside, as though it were a volcano.

On the lower summit, Macha the farseer collapsed in exhaustion, but she knew that this was not over. She struggled against her exhaustion, trying to warn the warlocks that were rushing to the aid of the avatar, but she could manage nothing more. *A curse on the naive humans.*

'Now. Now's OUR chance,' said Jhordine, but Prothius was already on his way.

The Librarian vaulted across the lava flows that radiated out from the fallen avatar and rolled beneath the fire that seared out from the line of eldar warlocks who had already gathered to honour him. Streaks of blue power jetted through the air, sending up explosions around the charging Librarian. But the eldar were tired and spent, and Prothius was easily their match. His spinning force staff deflected the bursts of alien power, and sent back flares of its own, smashing into the line of stationary warlocks.

Stooping, Prothius scooped up the abandoned shard of the avatar's blade, feeling its writhing energies repulse at his touch. Voices started to whisper into his mind, but he shut them out and turned. The whispers persisted, pressing at his soul and driving up the pressure in his head to bursting point.

He leapt the last of the magma streams and slid down a short cliff, crashing into the middle of a ring of his battle-brothers who awaited him at its base.

'Let's get out of here,' recommended Jhordine, as streams of warlock fire crested the cliff top, raining energy down onto the team. The Deathwatch Marines returned fire instantly, sending salvoes of bolter fire streaking back up the cliff, breaking away chunks of rock and sending a few eldar flipping over the edge to their deaths.

'Agreed. The Thunderhawk is already on its way. Extraction point is less than five hundred metres,' barked Trythos over the din.

PROTHIUS COULD NOT let go of the sword fragment. It was as though it was fused into his grip. He felt weak and drained, and the shard had grown heavier with every hard fought step. Heavier still after they had climbed into the Thunderhawk and blasted away from Tartarus. It was as though it wanted to be back with the eldar. And the whispering wouldn't stop. His mind was peppered with thoughts that were not his own, chattering and debating all around him. But one voice was clear, and its pain was exquisite: *Human, you know not what you have done.*



PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Tartarus system, 999.M41

THE VOICES SOARED into an angelic chorus, filling the furthest reaches of space with silver light. It was a divine sound, ineffable in its beauty and valorous in purpose. The Astronomican pulsed with life, riddling the Imperium with the light of the Emperor, filling it with the perfect sounds of his psychic choir.

Gabriel held the voices in his head for an instant, thrilling at the touch of this sacred beacon. They filled him with cool light, flooding his soul with the promise of salvation. It was like looking into the eyes of the Emperor himself and seeing him gaze back with implacable calm.

But the sound seemed to shift. The harmony faltered and then collapsed. Soaring sopranos screeched into shrill screams, and the unblemished light was suddenly awash with tortured faces. Deep reds bled into the stream of silver, curdling his thoughts into a sickly blend of bloody images. The screams grew louder, threatening to overcome his mind with their potency. And voices started to emerge from the forest of sound - voices that called his name - *Gabriel Angelos, this was your doing*. They were accusing him, hating him, reaching for his soul with the ice-cold fingers of the dead.

'Gabriel!'

He fired out his hand, grasping the nearest neck in his iron-grip. The immense muscles of his shoulder and arm bunched in tension.

'Gabriel.' The voice was firm and gentle, but it was accompanied by a palm that slapped across his face.

The Blood Ravens captain prised open his eyes and stared into the face of his friend. 'Thank you, Isador.'

Isador Akios gazed back at his captain with the tenderness of decades of familiarity. 'You look terrible.'

Gabriel's skin was glistening with sweat and a single bloody tear had streaked down his face, leaving a scar-like mark over his already scarred cheek. His lip was split and bleeding where Isador had struck him. The plain tunic that he wore was soaked with sweat, and it clung to his muscular form as he rose from the posture of supplication before the altar.

'Again, thank you, Isador,' he replied as he got to his feet, meeting the Librarian's eyes levelly with his own, and wiping the blood from his mouth. 'I was praying,' he explained.

'Yes, I can see that.' Isador had seen Gabriel pray at each of the designated times of every day for over a century. He had always been devout, as you would expect from one of the Emperor's Space Marines. But something had changed since the Cyrene campaign. There was not much room in their daily routine for personal space, but Gabriel now spent every spare moment in the temple, and Isador was concerned for his old friend.

'Are we closing on Tartarus?' asked Gabriel, reasoning that this would be why his meditations had been interrupted.

'Imminently, captain,' replied Isador, still studying Gabriel's face carefully. 'We have entered the Tartarus system and are preparing a trajectory for optimum orbit around the fourth planet - Tartarus itself.'

'Any more news from the regiment on the ground, Isador?'

'No, Gabriel, none. I pray that we are not too late,' said the Librarian with concern. The Blood Ravens Third Company had received the distress call from the Tartarus Planetary Defence Force - a regiment of the Imperial Guard affectionately known as the Tartarans - a couple of days earlier. The report was broken and intermittent, but the Tartarans appeared to be under attack by a large force of orks. Gabriel had immediately directed the company's battle barge, the *Litany of Fury*, to make for Tartarus to offer assistance. The Blood Ravens had fought orks many times before, and they knew how to confront this foe.

'What do we know of the planet?' asked Gabriel as he brushed his way past Isador, heading for the command deck.

'It is a civilized world and semi-urbanised. There are a series of cities and one spaceport. Most of the indigenous population are focussed in the cities.'

'And what is the population, Librarian?' asked Gabriel, keen to know the details of the battle to come before throwing himself into it.

'Nearly four billion,' replied Isador, wincing slightly at the thought of the probable casualties.

'Any idea why the orks would be interested in this place?' asked the captain, wondering whether there might be some strategic targets that he ought to know about.

'No, Gabriel. But then, the orks know nothing of reason. They appear solely concerned with war for its own sake. Our libarium on the *Omnis Arcanum* holds many records on ork battle tactics, but little on their psychology.' Isador had spent long years studying in the legendary libarium sanatorium, housed in the Blood Ravens' Chapter Fortress, the *Omnis Arcanum*. It was justly

famed as one of the most extensive archives in the Imperium, and the Librarians of the Blood Ravens were amongst the most knowledgeable servants of the Emperor anywhere in His realm.

'War for its own sake?' Gabriel stopped and turned to face Isador. He smiled. 'We can do that.'

THE APPROACH TO Tartarus was littered with space debris and junk. Great hunks of ruined space ships floated freely in the outer reaches of the system, as though they had just fallen off larger vessels and then been abandoned. They formed the ugly wake of the ork invasion fleet, polluting the Imperium with their crude technologies and their callous disregard for anything except war. The massive bulk of the *Litany of Fury* eased its way through the detritus, destroying any of the wreckages large enough to cause any harm. The gun-servitors played casually with the debris field, as though they were on a training run, preparing themselves for the battle to come.

'Good of them to leave us a trail, Isador,' commented Gabriel dryly.

'Yes, subtlety is not their strongest asset, captain,' replied the Librarian. 'Orks are certainly not at their best in space. On the ground, it is a very different story, as you well know.'

As they spoke, the planet of Tartarus slipped onto their view screen, emerging out from behind the exploded remains of an old Onslaught attack ship that the ork fleet must have jettisoned as useless. Its jagged hull simply collapsed under the brief strafe of fire from one of the prow batteries of the *Litany of Fury*, leaving the field of vision clear for the first time since they entered the system.

The blue-green planet was shrouded in debris - ruined relay stations spiralled around abandoned junks, intermixed with what must have been the ork fleet. For a few moments, the Space Marines could not distinguish between the space trash and the ork vessels - nothing looked like it could sustain an orbital battle. Occasional bursts of flame from engines picked out some of the smaller craft, perhaps more Onslaughts or a Savage gunship, but there was no sign of the huge bulk of a kill kroozer command ship. It was all very chaotic, but deathly quiet.

'What a mess,' muttered Gabriel under his breath, shaking his head with revulsion. The vulgar clumsiness of the orks never ceased to amaze him. They had no right to be a space faring race: their fleets were almost entirely salvaged from Imperial or even Chaos vessels that were immobilised or weakened in the glorious Imperial crusades. They were vultures. The orks would steal the remains of an honourable space ship, ignoring the pleadings and death-throes of its machine spirit, bolt on a bristling array of heavy guns and prow batteries then plunge the hapless craft into battle. When the vessel died, they would simply abandon it unceremoniously, leaving it to float through space like junk.

Tartarus itself was no longer the pristine blue and green for which it was famed. It was not a heavily populated world, and there was a lot of agriculture. The atmosphere was usually clear and crisp, providing a perfect view of the verdant surface from orbit. No longer. Even from space the fires that engulfed the cities could be seen burning with a dirty orange. Great sheets of flames stretched across the arable lands and the wide prairies that rolled between the settlements. Plumes of thick, black smoke billowed into the atmosphere, shutting in the heat and moisture and changing the planet's temperate climate into a stiflingly humid monsoon.

A click of heels made Gabriel turn. A nervous curator stood before him, clutching a large, heavily bound book. The man was struggling slightly under its weight, as though he were not used to carrying anything heavier than a pen. Little beads of sweat trickled down his shaven head, leaving shiny traces over the cursive lexigraphs etched into his skin. The writing marked him as a curator of the Blood Ravens library but, instead of the usual grey robes of an Administratum curator, this man was bedecked in a smock of deep red.

Gabriel nodded at the man, indicating that he should give the tome to Isador. The prospect seemed to fill the small man with dread and his eyes bulged slightly as he turned to approach the Librarian.

'Thank you,' said Isador smoothly, taking the book in one hand and dismissing the trembling curator, who turned quickly and shuffled away, breathing hard.

It was one of the quirks of the Blood Ravens that each of their battlebarges contained its own library, and hence each required a team of curators to facilitate its smooth operation. The curators would also record details of each and every event that took place on the vessel, although they would rely on the testimony of the company Librarian for details of missions that took place off ship. Hence, every barge contained the history of the company that operated it, in addition to copies of more general Imperial tomes. Whenever the battle barges rendezvoused with the Chapter fortress, copies of every file would be transferred into the central library sanatorium, where only the most senior Librarians and the Chapter Master himself would have access to every detail concerning every company.

Gabriel had often reflected that his brother-librarians were rather fanatical about documentation, as though knowledge and experience were not real unless they were committed to paper. He knew that the Blood Ravens were unique amongst all the Chapters of the Emperor's Space Marines in being so studiously conscientious, and he was not sure why this was the case. He had asked Isador more than once, but had not received a satisfactory response, as though the Librarian was worried that he was not entirely trustworthy. He would mutter something about the appropriate designations of knowledge, and then would intone the Chapter's maxim: knowledge is power - guard it well.

'This is the recorded history of Tartarus,' said Isador, carefully laying the heavy book onto an intricately carved podium next to the view-screen.

'Anything we need to know?' asked Gabriel, his attention already turned back to the jumbled ork fleet around the planet. He trusted that Isador would find anything that needed to be found. He had a gift for these things.

The two Marines stood in silence for a short while; Gabriel gazing out into space, considering the ork formation, Isador leafing through the pages of the book with intense concentration, his blue eyes burning with focus. It was Gabriel who spoke first.

'The bulk of the ork fleet has already descended on the planet's surface. Those Onslaughts and Savages are running a patrol pattern, policing the inner orbit to protect the land forces from bombardments.' He had reached a conclusion and was simply

sharing it with the command crew. He didn't turn to face the deck, but spoke into the view-screen. 'Take us in to a low orbit. Execute covering fire to keep those gunships off our backs. We will deploy in Thunderhawks and drop-pods onto the co-ordinates of the last message from the Tartarans.'

There was a flurry of activity on the command deck as servitors rushed to make the necessary arrangements and to notify the assault squads that they should start their purification rites and prepare their armour for battle.

'Inform Chaplain Prathios that he will join the party,' said Gabriel as he finally turned away from the viewer to oversee the bustling bridge.

Librarian Isador looked up from the pulpit at his captain's last order, and raised a single eyebrow. The old Chaplain had been a fearsome warrior in his time, but he was now the oldest serving Marine in the Third Company, and he would be the first to admit that he was past his best, even if he wouldn't admit it out loud.

'Is everything well?' asked Isador with genuine concern, closing the great book on the stand in front of him and walking back to the view-screen.

'I'm not sure. Something doesn't feel right about this,' said Gabriel, conscious that his words sounded rather too much like those of a Librarian. In the darkest recesses of his mind, he could still hear the silvery tones of a psychic choir singing to him. These were not sounds that a Space Marine captain was used to hearing, and certainly not something that he could discuss with a sanctioned psyker like Isador.

'No matter. The Emperor will guide our hands,' he said, rallying a smile for his old friend.

'Yes, indeed, Gabriel. The Emperor will guide us.' Isador held Gabriel's hesitant eyes for a moment, watching them for shadows.

'And what of Tartarus, Isador?' asked Gabriel, changing the subject with a characteristic inquiry.

Isador did not look away. 'For the most part, it seems an unremarkable planet, captain. It was settled in the thirty-eighth millennia by a colonising mission, who subsequently established it as an agricultural centre. More recently it has seen some affluence as a trading centre, and the population has grown. The Tartarus Planetary Defence Force has stood guardian over the planet since its foundation - successfully seeing off various incursions by the orks. Most of the Tartarans' activity, however, has been the suppression of civil wars and uprisings, of which there have been many. Some minor Khornate cults have been recorded amongst the population at various times, but they have been efficiently suppressed. Considering the relatively small size of the population on Tartarus, a great deal of blood has been shed here over the centuries.'

'That will make the soil fertile,' said Gabriel with a faint smile.

'So it seems, captain. There is one strange thing in the historical record, however: there are a number of references to events on the planet *before* the thirty-eighth millennia.' Isador loaded his observation with a significance that was lost on Gabriel.

'And why is this strange?'

'Because, captain, the planet was not officially colonised until 102.M39, and the records show that the planet was completely uninhabited at the time of colonisation. There should not have been any humans on this planet in the thirty-eighth millennia, and certainly none recording an official Imperial history.' Isador furrowed his brow and stared out of the view-screen at the burning planet. 'As you know, it is most vexing when Imperial records are incomplete or ambiguous.'

The two Blood Ravens shared a moment of thoughtful silence as they reflected on the history of their own proud Chapter. 'Yes,' said Gabriel eventually, 'most vexing.'

Planet Tartarus: Magna Bonum Spaceport

THE ROCKETS PUNCHED into the side of the Leman Russ, rolling the tank onto its side with the force of the impacts. The turret of the battle cannon swung round under gravity, smashing into the ground and rupturing instantly. Meanwhile, the hull-mounted lascannon spat impotently into the air, as though sending up flares. Colonel Brom could see the hatch flip open, and a tumble of tank-crew spill out onto the rockcrete. They were on their feet and running before another hail of rockets punctured the exposed underbelly of the tank. The explosion was massive as the rockets detonated in the fuel reserves and triggered the remaining cannon shells. A mushroom cloud plumed into the air as a fiery rain of shattered tank hailed down into the line of Imperial infantry that had been sheltering in its shadow. The fleeing tank crew were blown off their feet, skidding along the hard-deck on their faces.

The orks raised a loud, incoherent cheer, brandishing their weapons in the air and then charging forwards towards the breach. There were hundreds of them. Huge, hulking masses of green muscle bearing down on the Tartaran infantry, their massive axes and cleavers glinting viciously, already wet with Imperial blood. The weight of their charge made the deck rumble and roll, and their cacophonous war cries filled the air with aural terror.

The Tartaran infantry hastened to form a defensive line, troops from the rear rushing to fill the gap left by the ruined tank. From his vantage point behind the lines, Brom could see the fear plastered all over their faces, but they opened fire just as the colonel thought that they might turn and run. Streaks of las-fire lashed across the closing gap between them and the rampage of orks. Volleys of fire from heavy stubbers and plasma guns strafed through the advancing pack of greenskins. Even as one or two of the slugga boyz and gretchin collapsed to the ground, the thundering gaggle of teeth and muscles stormed over their prone bodies, trampling them into pulped death.

A barrage of grenades hissed out of the Tartaran line, arcing in tight parabolas before plunging into the throng of orks. Pockets of explosions ripped through the crowd of wailing greenskins, shredding them in clusters, sending sprays of ichor and green flesh raining down over their brethren. But the charge continued unbroken.

At the head of the charge was a knot of massive creatures, each covered in crudely riveted plates of armour. They brandished evil-looking power claws in one hand and clunky guns in the other. Attached to the back of one of them was a towering bosspole, crested with three impaled, severed heads. Even from this distance, Brom could recognise one of the heads as Sergeant Waine, and he flinched involuntarily at the barbarism of these creatures. The other two heads seemed barely human at all.

Erratic splutterings of gun-fire spat out from the charging orks, smashing into the Tartaran line with crude power, lifting Guardsmen off their feet as shells punched into them. Stikkbombz flipped and spiralled through the air, detonating into blasts of shrapnel as they hit the infantry formation. Guardsmen fell in dozens, clutching at puncture wounds and lacerations. And all the time the charge was getting closer, full of the promise of gleaming choppas and ravenous teeth.

The Tartaran line was beginning to crack, and Brom could see the terror induced hesitation from his gunners. They were beginning to freeze. The colonel drew his sword from its scabbard and flourished it in the air, pulling his pistol from its holster with his other hand, and charged towards his men.

'For Tartarus and the Emperor!' he yelled, barely audible over the screeches and cries of the incoming orks. A few of the Tartarans turned to see what the noise was, and a faint cheer came from the line as they saw their colonel plunging into the fray with them. But most of the men were staring fixedly forward, watching the orks steamroller their way through the barricades around the edge of the spaceport's decks.

A couple of the orks in the front of the charge pumped their burnas experimentally, checking the range. Plumes of flame jetted towards the Imperial line, engulfing clutches of men, who fell screaming to the ground, thrashing in the fire. The orks screamed out in delight as they realised that they were now close enough for some serious fun. Burnas erupted throughout the charging rabble, dousing other orks and Imperial Guardsmen indiscriminately. Some of the shoota boyz cast their guns to the ground as they cleared the last few metres that separated them from the Tartarans, preferring to grasp their massive axes in both hands for the melee.

AS THE ORKS closed, Guardsman Larius could see the hungry saliva dripping between the monstrous teeth of the orks. He could see their tiny, beady red eyes burning with a deep, thirsty malice. And he could smell the gallons of toxic sweat and fresh blood that poured off the huge beasts as they rumbled unstopably forward.

Larius looked down at the rifle in his hands and then along the line of his fellow Guardsmen, each with their lasguns at their waists sending delicate javelins of fire into the rampaging advance. He looked back up at the thundering figures of the orks, as they snarled and wailed towards him.

'Hold the line!' came Brom's voice from behind him. 'In the name of the Emperor, you will not falter!'

Another weak cheer arose from the line of Guardsmen and an autocannon team opened up with a volley of heavy fire, shredding a knot of orks as they leapt the final few metres that separated them from their prey.

Larius turned away from the orks and ran. He ran like he had never run before, driven on by abject terror. He threw his rifle aside and pumped frantically with his arms, trying to drive himself faster and faster through sheer will power.

A faint piercing pain brought him up sharply, skidding to a halt on the rockcrete deck. His hand clutched at his chest in a reflex action and he looked down. Blood seeped out from around his fingers, trickling down over the blues and blacks of his uniform. He carefully lifted his hand away and looked at the gaping wound with something approaching puzzlement. As his legs gave way, he slumped down onto his knees, noticing the polished boots that stood in front of him for the first time. With the last of his strength, he looked up at the hardened face of Colonel Brom whose pistol was still smoking. The last words that Guardsmen Larius heard in this world were spat at him by his commanding officer.

'Coward.'

'COWARDS!' YELLED CARUS Brom as a series of Guardsmen peeled away from the front line and ran. He fired some carefully placed rounds into the backs of the traitors as they fled. They flung up their arms and crashed into the hard-deck, skidding into death on their knees like the grovelling worms that they were.

'You will fight and die, or you will just die. It's up to you,' he shouted at a group of men who had turned away from the fighting just in front of him. Wild panic danced across their faces as they struggled to understand their options. They twitched and hesitated, terrified of the horrors behind them but deeply shamed by the man before them.

'You are Tartarans, damn you! Turn and fight!'

One of the men, Guardsmen Ckrius, suddenly snapped to attention and threw a crisp salute to Brom. Then he racked his shotgun and turned, screaming and firing madly into the fray. The rest of the group followed suit, inspired by the reckless bravery of their comrade and the steely gaze of their colonel.

But Brom couldn't hold the line together by himself and he was not willing to spend all of his ammunition killing Guardsmen when there were orks to slay. Clutches of Tartarans turned and fled back into the relative safety of the spaceport, which was now spotted with mortar fire from hastily erected ork emplacements in the combat line.

Stepping up along side Ckrius, Brom threw his officer's pistol to the ground and snatched up a fallen hellgun that must have fallen from the hands of one of the ill-fated storm troopers that had tried to secure this position on their own. Damn glory boys, cursed Brom.

'For Tartarus and the Emperor!' he yelled as he sprayed las-blasts out into the wave of snarling green that roared straight towards him.

'WAAAAAAGH!' BELLOWED Orkamungus from the rear of the attack, slapping Gruntz across the jaw and knocking him clear of the wartrukk. The warboss pointed up at the sky over the spaceport and roared again, reaching down from his command post and grabbing Gruntz around the neck. The kommando thrashed in resistance, scraping at the warboss with his claws and hissing into his face. But Orkamungus shook him violently by the neck, beating him against the side of the wartrukk until he stopped kicking. Then he lifted Gruntz into the air with one immense arm, stuffing his snarling face towards the sky above the battle for the spaceport.

Crumpling to the ground with a resounding crash, Gruntz muttered under his breath, spitting globules of saliva and blood from his jagged mouth. 'You'ze da boss,' he spluttered, pulling himself to his feet and thudding off to join the rest of his kommandos.

SERGEANT KATRN WAS sprinting across the spaceport, flanked on both sides by members of his Armoured Fists squad - a Tartarans team usually based in a Chimera transport. They had broken away from the fighting line when an ork had smashed down through their mortar emplacement with its axe and then ripped the weapon's crew into pieces with its power claw. Colonel Brom had been nowhere to be seen, and so Katrn had bolted, bring the remnants of his squad with him.

The Armoured Fists ducked and wove their way through the hail of ork bombs and mortar shells, striving to reach the flimsy cover of the spaceport's buildings. Ordnance pounded into the ground all around them, blasting craters into the hard-deck and spraying lethal shards of rockcrete through the fleeing troopers. As one, they dived for the temporary cover of a gaping crater, rolling into a false sense of relief and security. Impacts rained down all around them, shaking the ground itself.

Katrn peered over the edge of the crater, back towards the chaotic scenes on the front line. The Tartarans were holding their ground, fighting with frantic desperation against the pressing, green muscle of the ork rampage. The greenskins were on top of the infantry now, hacking indiscriminately with their brute choppas, slashing in every direction and pounding the wounded under foot. The infantry were struggling with their bayonetes and swords, thrusting at the immense creatures without much hope but with insane determination. Banks of hardened veterans had formed disciplined firing lines, sending salvoes of las-fire punching into knots of orks.

A squad of enormous, overly-muscled ogryns was pouring out of a Chimera transport and laying into the orks with their ripper guns and then using them as clubs to smash the greenskins when the range closed.

Striding out of one of the hangars on the far side of the spaceport came Mavo's Sentinel squadron. Sergeant Mavo took the lead, stamping down with the huge legs of the armoured bipedal walker, squashing an ork instantly, and then opening up with the nose-mounted autocannon. He was supported on both sides by Catachan-pattern Sentinels that spewed chemical fire from their heavy flamers as they stalked into the mist of the battle.

TUCKED AWAY IN relative safety at the rear of the ork rampage, Orkamungus cackled an inchoate noise to Fartzek and the stormboyz. He was jumping up and down and pointing towards the three large metal stomping machines that were laying into the orks at the front of the crowd. Under his immense feet, the wartrukk was gradually crumpling, and one of the axles snapped. Two stompers were spilling fire over groups of shoota boyz, and one of them was rattling cannon shells across the battle field, shredding the stikk bommas in the heart of the gaggle.

A glut of activity surrounded Fartzek as his mob responded to the cries from their warboss. Four of them held him down while another strapped a large rocket to his back. They snarled and slapped at him as a mekboy riveted the fixings into his leathery skin. When they were done, Fartzek climbed clumsily to his feet, threw a thunderous punch into the face of the mekboy, and then fired the rocket. The ignition incinerated a gretchin that was creeping away from the mob under cover of the flight preparations. It squealed briefly and then collapsed into a pile of ashes.

As the rocket flared and propelled the Fartzek into the air, he let out a gurgling cry and the stormboyz stamped their feet into the trampled earth in response. The huge ork arced through a shallow curve, rattling his slugga as he flew over the heads of his brethren. After a couple of seconds he slammed into the side of one of the metal stompers, smashing his choppa into an armoured plate to ensure purchase. The human inside the machine leaned out of the cockpit, eyes wide with horror, and Fartzek cackled into his face with a malicious and mirth-filled snarl. Then, without even the slightest hesitation, he detonated the warhead on the rocket.

SERGEANT KATRN WATCHED Mavo's Sentinel explode, ducking back into the crater to avoid the waves of concussion that radiated out from the destruction. Mavo had only been in the field for a few seconds.

Most of the Armoured Fists were already scrambling out of the other side of the crater, tripping and crawling their way though the rain of debris towards the port buildings. Katrn scampered after them, hunched over in the crazy belief that he would be safer that way.

A series of tremendous impacts smacked into the ground between the Armoured Fists and their objective. They all fell flat to the ground and waited for the explosions to shred them, but the detonations never came.

Lying prostrate on the rumble-strewn deck, Katrn stole a glance towards the point of impact. A group of three steaming drop-pods sat imperviously on the rockcrete in front of him, errant ork fire ricocheting harmlessly off their armoured plates. With a deep metallic clunk and then a hiss of decompression, hatches began to open on each of the pods.

Striding confidently from the steam-shrouded doors nearest to Katrn came a huge warrior, fully two metres tall, bedecked in shining red power armour. As he cleared the cloud of steam, the massive warrior turned his head calmly from side to side, taking in the scene, his green eyes flickering with calculation and thought. The figure made no attempt to take cover from the hail of fire that rattled through the spaceport towards him.

Katrn's jaw dropped in awe as he realised what these monstrous warriors were. They were the Adeptus Astartes - the Emperor's Space Marines. These soldiers were hand-picked from the elite of the galaxy's fighting men and then surgically augmented for years until they were finally implanted with a black carapace that ran under their entire skin, permitting them to interface completely with the ancient power armour that enwrapped them like a second skin. Katrn had heard the legends, but he never thought that he would live to actually see one.

Similar figures emerged from each of the other pods, and several more followed from the first pod, behind the eerily calm soldier. They deployed immediately into a wide fan around the first figure, the green eye-visors of their helmets scanning the spaceport and the battle on its edge, their boltguns already primed and trained on possible targets.

'Space Marines...' muttered Katrn to himself, unsure whether to celebrate their arrival or to hide back in the crater behind him.

The first Marine was the only one without a helmet, and Katrn couldn't help but cringe away from his eyes as they caught sight of him lying in the rubble, clearly attempting to flee the battle. The Space Marine looked him up and down in undisguised disgust then waved an order to his squad.

Without a word, the crimson-armoured Space Marines broke into a run and pounded across the space port towards the thickest and most ferocious point of the front line. They vaulted over the mortar craters with single strides, spraying precision bolter shells from their guns with each step. Already the Tartarans who had held their positions were cheering with renewed energy as the bolter fire streaked over their heads and punched into the orks, driving them back for the first time.

Sergeant Katrn watched the Marines bound over his head and then launch themselves into the fray with selfless abandon, and he slid back down into the crater, struggling to catch his breath. He could still see those piercing green eyes accusing him of treachery and cowardice. He could see the disgust and the revilement, and he shared it. He was a coward, unworthy of the proud uniform of the Tartarans. He had presented the Blood Ravens with their first sight of his regiment: crawling, snivelling cowards sneaking away from their deaths like traitors.

But he was not dead yet, and he would show them what a Tartaran could really do. Katrn sprang to his feet and jumped clear of the crater. Pumping his rifle from side to side as he ran, building his momentum, he sprinted back across the deck in the wake of the Space Marines, screaming the air out of his lungs.

'For Tartarus and the Emperor!'

STILL LURKING AT the rear of the battlefield, Orkamungus beckoned to one of the nobz in his bodyguard, Brutuz, who slunk over to his war-boss with justified trepidation. The giant ork was casually staring into the sky above the spaceport, watching the rain of drop-pods as they flashed down through the atmosphere like meteorites.

Brutuz presented himself to the warboss, already flinching in anticipation of the strike. For a moment, he was saved as something caught Orkamungus's eye. Gruntz and the kommandos had skirted the edge of the battlefield and the warboss could see them slipping around the perimeter of the spaceport towards the city of Magna Bonum beyond.

Orkamungus cackled deeply, baubles of phlegm bubbling in his massive oesophagus. He stomped forwards to the edge of the wartrukk and leant down to Brutuz, slapping him firmly on the back, causing the nob to spit in relieved shock.

The warboss pulled himself back up to his full height and roared his war-cry across the battlefield, 'Waaaaaaaaagh!' Hundreds of orks turned their eyes to him as they stumbled and lumbered away from the Space Marines. For a moment they were caught between fear of the Emperor's sword at their heels and terror at the wrath of their warboss. But it was only for a moment, and then they kept running.

Brutuz turned quietly and started to walk away from the wartrukk, hoping that Orkamungus had finished with him. He had taken only two steps when the warboss leapt from the side of his truk and smashed down onto Brutuz, squashing him flat against the earth under his awesome weight. Then, sitting on the nob's back, pinning him against the ground, Orkamungus beat the hapless ork repeatedly in the head until he was sure that he had made his point.

IN THE THICK of the fighting on the front line, an axe flashed down a fraction too late as Brom rocked onto his back foot, unleashing a spray from his hellgun at close range. As the ork smashed its weapon into the deck the blade caught in the rockcrete and the creature roared with frustration. Brom's hail of fire strafed up the ork's bulging abdomen, riddling it with holes.

The colonel sighed slightly, propping himself up on the barrel of his gun for a moment, before hefting it once again and opening up at yet another of the greenskinned beasts.

All around him was the constant roar of battle. He could hear the cries of his sergeants rallying the troopers against wave after wave of ork assaults, and he could hear the screams of men as they fell beneath the monstrous blows from the inhuman creatures. Explosions filled the air with concussions and the ground shook under the constant impacts of mortars, grenades and rockets.

'Colonel!' cried Ckrius, staring in horror at Brom as his hellgun coughed savagely into the gut of a charging ork, dropping it to the ground amidst squeals of frustration.

Brom stole a glance at Ckrius, but he couldn't tell what the trooper was trying to tell him.

A projectile zipped over the colonel's head - Brom could feel the heated air sizzle as it shrieked past him, singeing his closely cropped white hair. He turned his head, following the flight of the bolter shell as it punched into the face of the ork behind him. The creature was already riddled with gunshot wounds all the way down its chest, but it had freed its axe from the rockcrete and was holding it high in the air, ready to hack down into Brom's back. The bolter shell buried itself into the beast's skull and then exploded into tiny lacerating fragments that shredded the thick bone instantly.

Before Brom had chance to react, a huge red-armoured warrior pounded up to his side, loosing showers of bolter shells into the frenzied mobs of orks that charged and lumbered towards the line. And the stranger was not alone, squads of similar figures deployed themselves into position in the heart of the defensive formation, towering head and shoulders above the Imperial Guardsmen around them.

In only a few moments the ork charge collapsed, and the chaotic assault seemed to fall into a frenzied retreat. The Space Marines pressed their advantage, striding forward of the Tartaran line and pressing the defensive action into an assault of their own.

By now the orks were in even more disarray: charging shoota boyz skidded to a halt and others ploughed into the back of them, unable to stop in time. The cleaver wielding slugga boyz had already turned tail and were lumbering back into the midst of the mobs of orks in the mid-field and the snivelling gretchin were diving for whatever cover they could find as the Space Marines' barrage continued relentlessly.

For the first time, the Imperial forces started to make ground against the orks. Blood Ravens strode forward at the head of the counter-offensive, scything their way through the disorganised greenskins with sputtering chainswords and disciplined volleys of bolter fire. The retreat rapidly collapsed into a rout, as the orks abandoned their positions and ran in erratic, wailing mobs.

Brom watched the fleeing orks with something approaching amazement, but was overcome with relief. He turned to the Space Marine who had saved his life and bowed deeply.

'I am Colonel Cams Brom, and you are most welcome here, captain.'

The Space Marine eyed him sceptically. 'Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens Third Company. What is your status?'

'The Tartarans have suffered terrible losses, captain, but they have fought bravely and with honour... in the main,' said Brom, trying to draw himself up to a more respectable height before this giant figure.

Gabriel surveyed the ruins of the spaceport. It was spotted with ordnance craters and speckled with the corpses of Guardsmen - some of whom were facing back towards the centre of the compound with gunshot wounds in their backs. But he couldn't see a single greenskin corpse inside the defensive perimeter.

Nodding slowly, he turned back to Brom. 'You stood your ground in the face of the Emperor's foes. You have done your duty, colonel.'

Brom nodded and let out a brief sigh of relief as he realised what the Blood Raven was looking at. 'Thank you, captain.'

'I am not here for thanks, colonel. This spaceport must be held if we are to maintain troops and supply lines to planet's surface. It is only by the provenance of the Emperor that we arrived in time,' replied Gabriel, already scanning the scene for signs of supplies in the compound itself. 'And what of the wounded and the civilians?' he asked.

'They are stranded, captain. The Tartarans have few ships, and most were destroyed by the orks during the initial stages of the invasion,' explained Brom, feeling rather too much on the defensive.

'Then you shall have more ships,' said Gabriel simply, turning to Brother-Sergeant Corallis. 'Sergeant, contact the *Litany of Fury* and order that Thunderhawks are deployed to evacuate the wounded. Meanwhile,' he added, turning back to Brom with the hint of a smile, 'we will dispatch the ground forces.'

'But captain,' replied Brom, slightly confused. 'The orks have retreated. The ground forces are already broken.'

The Blood Ravens captain turned away from Brom and watched the greenskins scrambling away into the mountains on the horizon. His Marines had driven them out of the combat theatre, but then had broken off the pursuit, firing volleys at the heels of the scampering vermin just to keep them moving.

'If you are to defeat your enemies, colonel, you must first understand them. The orks have a saying: never be beaten in battle. Do you know what this means?' Gabriel returned his searching gaze back to the colonel, who shook his head nervously. Its meaning seemed obvious to him.

'It means. Colonel Brom, that orks never retreat, they only regroup. If they die in battle, then they do not think that they have not been beaten - they are only beaten if the battle itself defeats them. War for its own sake, colonel. The orks will be back, and they will keep coming until you or they are all dead.'



CHAPTER TWO

IN THE DISTANCE there was a constant rumble of thunder as artillery fire and pockets of fighting continued. But the spaceport was secure and, tucked into the cliffs behind, the city of Magna Bonum remained relatively unscathed by the ravages of war. Its gleaming white buildings shimmered with bursts of red as the setting sun turned to orange and bounced the dying light off the bloody battlefield. Nothing moved in the streets, and an eerie calm had descended on the city.

The Blood Ravens were making preparations for their pursuit of the orks, overseeing the fortification of the spaceport in case the greenskins returned while they were away. Gabriel had already dispatched a squad of scouts into the wilderness to locate the rallying point of the foul aliens, and he was awaiting the return of Sergeant Corallis with impatience. He was certain that the warboss would be regrouping his forces for another assault, and was eager to thwart it before it began. The best way to beat orks was to prevent them from forming their forces in the first place.

'Prathios, my old friend,' said Gabriel as the Chaplain walked into the spaceport's Imperial shrine. 'It is good to see you.' The two Marines bowed slightly to each other, showing a respect suitable to a holy place.

'It is good to be here, Gabriel. It has been a long time since I saw planet-fall. How can I serve you, captain?' The huge, old Marine looked down at Gabriel with compassionate eyes. 'Why are you so troubled?' he asked.

Gabriel turned away from the Chaplain to face the altar, dropping to his knees before the image of the Emperor's Golden Throne. It was encircled by a ring of silver angels, their wings tipped with blood. Facing away from the throne in the middle, their mouths were open and their heads thrown back, as though they were singing to the whole galaxy.

'I just need to be calm before the battle. I am impatient to deal with these orks, and impatience does not become me. I would not like to err in my judgment,' said Gabriel, admitting more than he would to anyone else.

'Your concern does you credit, captain,' answered Prathios, kneeling into prayer beside Gabriel, gazing at the images on the altar. 'It is a beautiful sight, is it not?'

For a moment or two Gabriel said nothing; he just stared straight ahead, as though his gaze was trapped in the icon. 'Yes, indeed it is. But tell me, Brother Prathios, haven't you ever wondered what it might sound like?'

The Chaplain continued to look at the image, considering the question. 'I wonder every day, Gabriel, but I will hear it soon enough, when the Emperor finally calls my soul to him.'

COLONEL BROM LOOKED over his men in the remains of the spaceport. They were tired. Exhausted. The ork invasion had taken them by surprise and it had been more severe than any of the previous incursions into the Tartarus system. The Tartarans' small space-bound force had been virtually annihilated in the orks' attack run, and then the giant, clumsy kill kroozer had plunged into the planet's atmosphere, spewing an invasion force of orks onto the surface. The greenskins had no need for the spaceport, which the Tartarans had defended so desperately. They had just attacked Magna Bonum because that was where the Tartarans' Fifth Regiment had dug in - so that was where the good fighting was to be found. Brom shook his head at the irony; if they hadn't tried to defend the city, perhaps the orks would have just ignored it.

'Colonel Brom,' said Trooper Ckrius, flicking a sharp salute as he snapped to attention.

'Yes, trooper. What can I do for you?' Brom was getting a little tired of Ckrius's enthusiasm. The young Guardsman had fought bravely against the orks, standing his ground with Brom himself, albeit after attempting to desert the battle. This was as much as Brom could ask of any of his men, but Ckrius seemed to think that he owed more than any of the others. As though his moment of hesitation had condemned him to a lifetime of penitence and of service to the officer who had made him see the light.

'I have brought you some recaff, colonel,' said Ckrius, thrusting a battered, tin cup towards his commanding officer.

Despite himself, Brom was grateful. It had been a long day and, although the sun was setting in a dazzling array of golds and reds, he knew that there would be no sleep for them tonight. Perhaps never again.

'Thank you, Trooper Ckrius,' he replied wearily, reaching out and taking the hot cup from the young man, who was still saluting.

'You can relax, soldier.'

'We can sleep when we're dead, right colonel?' said Ckrius eagerly, excited that Brom had remembered his name. He nodded his head energetically towards the recaff cup as though it contained the elixir of life.

Brom glanced down at the steaming liquid and raised it to his lips. It was so hot that it burnt his throat as he swallowed a large mouthful. He didn't care. If that was the worst pain he would feel today, he would have no complaints.

'Let's hope that we don't have to wait that long,' replied the colonel, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking levelly at the young trooper. The young man looked terrible, running on hysteria and nervous energy. 'You fought well today, son. Get some sleep, and you will also fight well tomorrow.'

'But there is no time for sleep,' protested Ckrius, twitching his head excitedly from side to side, taking in the flurry of activity around the spaceport. 'There is so much to do.'

'The orks will not be back for a while yet. Captain Gabriel tells me that they will have to regroup at a safe distance and then reorganise before they will return to face the Tartarans again. Evidently, the reorganisation of a mob of orks can take a long time. We will be ready for them,' said Brom, hoping that the Blood Raven was right.

'Captain Gabriel?' asked Ckrius, as though he had heard a secret password. 'Is that the Space Marine captain?'

'Yes, Captain Gabriel is the Space Marine commander. He is here to help us with the ork problem,' explained Brom carefully, conscious of the excitement in the young trooper's face.

'The boys... that is, we were wondering who they were, colonel,' said Ckrius self-consciously. He looked back over his shoulder to a group of troopers who sat around a small fire on the hard-deck, sipping recaff from mangled tins. They all pretended to be chatting casually or looking elsewhere when Brom followed his gaze.

'I see,' said Brom as the real motivation for bringing him the recaff dawned on him. He smiled - these troopers had probably never even seen a Space Marine before. 'They are Blood Ravens, trooper. The Blood Ravens Third Company.'

Ckrius's eyes lit up. 'I've heard of them,' he blurted excitedly. Then he paused for a moment and a shadow fell over his face as his thoughts caught up with him. 'Aren't they—'

'Yes, I dare say you have, trooper. Their reputation precedes them wherever they go, I'm sure. The Adeptus Astartes are justly exalted throughout the Imperium. As I say, they are here to help us with the orks, and we should thank the Emperor for that.' Brom cut Ckrius off, aware of the rumours about the Cyrene affair but unsure of the facts himself. 'Now I suggest that you get some sleep, trooper. Tomorrow will be a long day, and you will need all of your strength if you are to show the Blood Ravens the worth of the Tartaran Fifth.'

'Yes, colonel,' replied Ckrius, saluting weakly and turning away. Brom watched him walk back to his friends around the fire, and smiled to himself as they crowded around the trooper, pestering him with questions.

THE BLOOD RAVENS scouts swept back into the spaceport on their bikes, engines roaring with power. Against the setting red sun, the ruby bikes seemed to fluoresce with energy, and the heat haze from the exhaust vents blurred into the fading daylight. Brom watched them slide the huge machines to a halt, and shook his head in faint disbelief. Those assault bikes were faster than a Sentinel walker and packed an awesome amount of firepower. And just one Marine sat stride each of the awesome machines, throwing it around as though it were nothing.

The Marines climbed off their bikes and pulled off their helmets, apparently enjoying the last rays of sunlight on their faces. The air was cooling rapidly as the night drew in, and Brom could only imagine how hot the Marines must have been inside that heavy armour all day. But the faces of the scouts were even and unbothered. Their hair was not matted to their heads, and they looked perfectly comfortable. The colonel shook his head again, wondering what he could achieve with a squad of such soldiers. There were mutterings and faint whistles from some of the Guardsmen as they saw the bikes roll onto the hard-deck. At the end of a day like this one, the sight of nine Blood Raven assault bikes riding out of the sunset was more than any of them could have expected, and they didn't try too hard to hide their awe.

Brom cast his eyes over his men once again, still shaking his head. They certainly needed this kind of inspiration. It had been a bad day for the Tartarans. Hundreds of men had fallen - good men who had stood their ground in the face of the alien onslaught. Many bad men had fallen too; he had dispatched them himself with own pistol as they had tried to run from their duty.

He had not known that the Tartaran Fifth boasted so many cowards. His men had stood defiantly in the face of many foes before today. They had confronted insurrections and rebellions. They had cleansed cities of perverted and mutated cultists. They had even met orks before, when greenskin raiders had tried to plunder the resources of Tartarus. And always his men had stood firm - fighting for their honour, for the Emperor, and for their homes.

Something was different about this invasion. Although the arrival of the Blood Ravens was welcome, and their timely intervention had been decisive, the Tartarans had dealt with orks before, even without the help of the Adeptus Astartes. This glut of greenskins was no bigger than any they had faced before. But something *was* different. The men were whispering amongst themselves, casting furtive glances at each other, muttering quiet suspicions around the camp fires. Brom couldn't help but wonder whether the presence of the Space Marines actually made the men more suspicious: if the Adeptus Astartes are here, this must be some serious shit.

And Captain Angelos didn't help - his haughty attitude was almost insulting. He hadn't even included the Tartarans in his plans for the fortification of the spaceport; the Blood Ravens were doing everything. In truth, most of Brom's men were grateful for the chance to rest, but he had heard some of them grumbling about not being good enough for the Space Marines.

A shiver ran down his back as Brom realised what Angelos's first impression of the Tartarans must have been. In his mind's eye, he could still see those men laying face down on the ground with his pistol wounds in their backs.

Then a realisation struck him. Something had been different even before the Space Marines had arrived. Some of his men had been defeated even before the battle had started. He had heard them talking about the voices in the wind. Some of them had heard warnings whispered in the breeze ahead of the ork assault - whispering songs and choruses that echoed into their ears from everywhere at once. Even Brom had convinced himself that he had heard something.

The scouts were striding over to the Blood Ravens' encampment around the spaceport's shrine, while a team of other Marines walked back towards their bikes, presumably to make the necessary offerings to their machine spirits before they would be ready to go out again.

Watching the scouts, Brom noticed a group of Blood Ravens emerge from the shrine to greet them. One of them caught his eye immediately - slightly taller than the others, his armour was the colour of a clear blue sky. He bore the insignia of the Blood Ravens on his auto-reactive shoulder guard, and his gleaming armour was studded with purity seals. In place of the grey raven that adorned the chests of his battle-brothers, the figure had a starburst of gold and, although he had no helmet, his face was obscured by an ornate hood that was somehow integrated into his armour. In his hand he held a long staff, crested with the wings of a raven with a glowing red droplet in its heart.

BROM MADE HIS way over to the Blood Ravens' compound and presented himself to the unusual Marine. 'I am Colonel Carus Brom of the Tartarus Planetary Defence Force. It is an honour to be in the presence of a Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes,' said Brom formally, after a short cough.

Isador turned. 'Wait,' he said sharply, then turned back to the scouts that were about to enter the shrine to make their report to the captain. 'Corallis - Captain Angelos should not be disturbed at the moment. He will be finished soon.'

The sergeant nodded his understanding to the Librarian and stood to the side of the doorway, as though on sentry duty, and Isador turned back to face Brom. 'Yes?'

'I am Col—' began Brom.

'Yes, I know who you are Colonel Brom. What do you want?'

In the rapidly fading light, Brom could not see Isador's face under the psychic hood, and the reddening sunset had transformed his pale blue armour into a disturbing purple. Brom swallowed hard, more cowed by this Librarian even than by the rampage of orks that he had encountered that afternoon.

He collected himself. 'I wish to know how the Tartaran Fifth can be of service to you.'

Isador watched the man closely, noting how the fear in his voice competed with the fierce pride in his eyes. There was something unspoken in that stare - something both hopeful and desperate at the same time.

'I saw you fight today, colonel. You are a brave man.' Isador's voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

'Thank you, my lord,' said Brom, genuinely proud.

'I am not your lord, colonel. We must all be watchful for false idols. I am a servant of the Emperor, just like you,' said Isador, watching Brom's response with interest.

A voice seemed to be whispering into Brom's mind and tugging at his consciousness. Without thinking about it, he flicked his eyes from side to side, looking for the source of the noise.

'Colonel?' inquired Isador, and Brom's gaze snapped back to Isador's shrouded face, where his eyes seemed to be glowing with a distant light. 'Is there something else?'

'No. No, there is nothing else, Brother-Librarian,' replied Brom, picking his words carefully.

'You are a brave man, Colonel Brom, but it seems that your men are merely shadows of your resolve. Brother-Captain Angelos is doubtful about their efficacy in this theatre,' said Isador frankly.

Brom smarted. 'I shall strengthen their resolve. You may rely on that.'

'See that you do, or we shall be forced to do it for you.'

Brom took a breath. 'I should like to offer my assurances and the Tartarans' services to Captain Angelos himself.'

The Librarian nodded slowly. 'As you wish. But you will wait until the captain has finished his prayers.'

For a few moments the two men stood in silence, but then Isador spoke again. 'You have something else that you wish to say. Say it, colonel.'

'I have no gift for words, Brother-Librarian,' said Brom, a little taken aback by Isador's astute question, 'so I will be blunt. Some of the men are talking about the fate of planet Cyrene, and I was hoping that you could set the rumours straight before they get out of hand.'

'What are the men saying?' asked Isador, checking that Gabriel had not yet emerged from the shrine behind them.

'They have heard that your company cleansed the planet of a terrible heresy,' explained Brom, hoping that the Librarian would finish the story for him. But there was silence, so he continued. 'They have heard that you performed an exterminatus, down to the last man, woman and child.'

'Rumours are dangerous things, colonel,' said Isador, leaning down towards Brom. 'Colonel Brom, your company and even your precious Tartarans are welcome, but such questions are not. You would do well not to ask the captain about Cyrene if you wish to retain what little good will he currently has towards you.'

The door to the shrine creaked open behind Isador, and Gabriel stepped out into the night air, stooping slightly as he passed under the mantel. He nodded a quick greeting to Isador and glanced down at Brom before turning swiftly to Sergeant Corallis, who stood crisply at the side of the doorway. Isador took a couple of steps towards Gabriel to join the briefing, leaving Brom standing on his own in the gathering dark.

'Sergeant, what news?' asked Gabriel.

'We found the trail of two mobs of retreating orks, captain. They appear to be heading on intersecting trajectories, presumably towards a rallying point deeper in the forest. If we leave now, we should be able to catch one of the mobs before it reaches that point,' reported Corallis.

'Understood,' said Gabriel. 'But what of the other mob?' Corallis looked slightly uneasy. 'We caught up with it on our bikes, captain, or what was left of it.'

'Explain.'

'Something had already taken care of the bulk of the mob, and we had no problems cleaning up the remnants, captain,' explained the sergeant.

'"Something?" " sergeant? What? Who? The Tartarans,' asked Gabriel.

'With all due respect,' said Corallis, flicking a glance towards the dim figure of Brom, 'that is most unlikely. The attack was incredibly precise and the attackers left no trail at all. It is as though they just vanished after the battle. Not that there was much of a battle, it seems. More like a slaughter.'

'Marines?' asked Gabriel with some concern.

'No, captain. The wounds on the orks were too delicate to have been caused by bolter fire. It was as though they had been shredded by thousands of tiny projectiles. I've never seen anything like it. When we caught up with the stragglers, they were so dazed and confused that it was hardly worth wasting ammunition on them.' The report clearly disturbed Corallis as much as it did his captain.

'Very good, Corallis, thank you,' said Gabriel turning to face Isador. 'Isador, what does the good colonel want?'

'Brother-Captain, the colonel wishes an audience with you,' replied Isador, stepping back and sweeping his arm to indicate that Brom should approach.

'Captain Angelos. I wish to place the Tartarans at the disposal of the Blood Ravens. As you know, we have suffered many casualties, but between the fifth and seventh we can offer an entire regiment. They stand ready to serve you in the protection of the city. I realise what you may have seen, but my men wish to make amends for—'

'The Tartarans will have many opportunities to prove themselves warriors worthy to serve the Emperor, colonel. The Blood Ravens are leaving the city, and we are leaving its protection in your hands,' said Gabriel, already on his way to organise the departure.

'Very good, captain,' said Brom with a slight bow. 'I will ready my men. May I ask what your next course of action might be?' Gabriel stopped walking and turned to face Brom directly. 'Orks respect only strength,' he said deliberately, 'and I intend to show them that we have it in ample supply. The Blood Ravens are going hunting.'

HIDDEN IN THE depths of the forest, a safe distance down the valley away from Magna Bonum, the orks had stopped their retreat. The clearing was already cluttered with spluttering machines and slicks of oil. A terrible stench filled the air and wafted up into the sky, forming dark, pungent clouds that obscured the moonlight. Groups of mekboyz pushed each other around, smashing their wrenches into wartrukks and warbikes, punching rivets through their armoured plates to keep them in place. Snivelling gretchin sat in packs, chained into little circles so that they couldn't run off into the forest. Some of the stormboyz poked about at their jump packs experimentally, pretending that they were testing their components, while the flashgitz spat saliva onto their shootas and buffed them with the hair from decapitated heads.

In the centre of the clearing, Orkamungus was standing beside his crumpled truk, yelling at the mekboyz who fussed around it nervously, trying to winch up the back wheels in order to fix a broken axle. The wartruk was so huge and so badly damaged that it seemed an almost impossible task, and the mekboyz kept recruiting more and more orks into service - partly to help them lift the immense machine, and partly to share the blame when they failed to fix it.

The warboss himself was stomping up and down alongside his truk, screeching and hollering, slapping the back of his hand across the heads of any boyz who looked like they weren't trying hard enough.

Suddenly he sprang into the air and crashed down onto the back of the wartruk, thinking to use its elevation to help him see where the rest of the mobs had gone. The thicket of mekboyz working on the rear axle were instantly squashed into the ground as the orks that were already struggling to support the weight of the massive truck collapsed under the additional weight of the monstrous warboss. The truk jolted back down into the earth with a crash that made Orkamungus stumble. He roared in displeasure and spun the rickety shoota turret to face the cowering orks at the side of the vehicle. They looked up at him with a mixture of resignation and terror, but then Orkamungus merely cackled his throat, pretending to riddle them with shot, sputtering and whooping with the imaginary report from the gun.

The clearing was not even nearly full, although Orkamungus could see more and more of his orks spilling out of the forest around the perimeter, barging their way through the thinning trees as their noses caught the scent of cooking meat. Fires were blazing all around, and the orks were roasting various creatures in the flames. The burning flesh sent thick clouds of black smoke billowing into the sky, and the gretchin strained to breathe it in, as though it was the only food they would get that night.

The warboss scanned the scene with his tiny red eyes. Still not enough. Wait more. He spun the shoota turret round to face the growing crowd and angled the barrel up into the sky, spraying slugs in a barrage of fire and crying out into the night.

'Waaaaaaaagh!'

ONLY HALF AN hour after leaving the spaceport, the Blood Ravens caught the scent of the orks. In the distance was the echo of gunfire, and Corallis could make out the faint haze of fires on the horizon. But that was not their target tonight. The sergeant was at the head of the hunting squad, guiding them along the path that he had taken with the scouts earlier that evening.

The dark forest was littered with mutilated human corpses and the burnt out remains of woodsmen's huts. Not even these wilds had been spared the ravages of the ork invasion - although Gabriel could not imagine that the greenskins had found much satisfaction in the slaughter of these defenceless farmers. They were probably just venting their frustration and hatred after being repelled by the Blood Ravens at the spaceport. Orks in retreat were just as destructive as orks on the advance - they are always on the rampage. War for its own sake, thought Gabriel with a heavy heart.

The Marines moved swiftly and quietly through the shadows, pausing occasionally for Corallis to pick up the trail. It was not hard to follow. Scattered along the ground were discarded plates of armour, broken machine parts that must have fallen from rumbling wartrukks, pools of blood and slicks of oil. The Marines could have followed the stench even in perfect darkness - even without their enhanced night-vision.

With an abrupt motion, Corallis brought the group to a halt, raising his fist into the air as he stooped to the ground. The moonlight dappled his armour through the canopy, making his image swim and shift before Gabriel's eyes.

There was silence as the Marines waited for the sergeant to draw his conclusions. He was tracing a pattern on the ground with his hand and staring out into the darkness of the thick forest off to the side of the vulgar trail of debris and destruction. It seemed pretty obvious where the orks had gone, so Gabriel was concerned. He made his way up along side Corallis and rested his hand on the sergeant's shoulder. 'Corallis. What is it?'

'I'm not sure, captain,' whispered Corallis in response. 'There are some faint markings here, running along side the ork trail. They are hardly here at all, as though made by feet that barely touch the ground. But there is definitely something - something swifter and stealthier than we are.'

'Were they following the orks?' asked Gabriel, as the significance of Corallis's last words sunk in. 'Or are they following us?'

'I'm not sure, captain. The marks are too vague to render much information about when they were made.' But the sergeant was staring out into the forest again, making it clear that he suspected that whatever had made the marks was still out there. Gabriel followed his gaze, scanning the moon-dappled foliage for signs of movement.

'The moonlight and shadows would hide anything tonight - even an ork,' said Corallis, shaking his head.

'Yes, sergeant - or even us,' replied Gabriel with half a smile, pressing down on Corallis's shoulder as he stood and waved a signal to the hunting party. He clicked the vox-channel in his armour and whispered his directions to the squad. 'Let's take it off road. Keep to the thick foliage and trace this ork trail in a parallel motion. Silence, understood.'

Without a word, the squad of Blood Ravens dispersed into the trees, slipping into the shadows and the natural camouflage provided by the broken pools of moonlight.

HIDDEN IN THE shadows and the foliage, the Blood Ravens pressed on through the forest. 'There is something else in these woods, Gabriel,' said Isador, leaning closely to the captain's ear as they slipped through the undergrowth. 'Something unpleasant.'

'Besides us, you mean?' asked Gabriel with a faint smile, as he dropped to one knee and levelled his bolt pistol. The rest of the Blood Ravens followed suit, each bracing their weapons and falling into motionlessness. There was a fire burning in a small clearing about one hundred metres ahead of them, and the smell of burning flesh was beginning to become overpowering. Gabriel signalled to Corallis to go and check it out, and then turned back to Isador.

'What do you mean, brother?'

'I'm not sure, captain. But there are voices in these woods. Silent voices that press in at my mind so sweetly...' The Librarian tailed off, as though remembering something beautiful. 'They are evil and heretical voices, Gabriel. But I do not know where they are from.'

Gabriel looked at his friend with concern, not knowing what to say. He simply nodded. 'We will be careful.'

'I do not care for all this sneaking about,' continued Isador, as though that might explain everything.

'I know, old friend. You have always preferred the direct approach,' replied Gabriel, trying to lift the mood.

'What about the Tartarans? Why not send them after the orks, instead of treating them like glorified baby-sitters? Better still, why not take the entire regiment and meet the main ork force head-on? It could not possibly stand before us.' Isador's voice was full of sudden venom.

'We have fought the orks a hundred times, Isador. And you told me yourself, they thrive on war. Nothing would please them more than a direct assault on their warboss. They would fight with greater passion than we have yet seen. Our casualties would be unacceptably high,' said Gabriel, explaining what Isador already knew.

'But what are the Imperial Guard for, if not to die for the Emperor?' He almost spat the words into the dirt. 'At the very least, we should have brought a few squads with us on this hunt - we would not want to be remembered for our carelessness, would we?'

The words were laced with disgust, and Gabriel was momentarily stunned by Isador's speech. There was more to this than a revulsion towards the cowardliness of some of the Tartarans. The Librarian was holding something back about Gabriel himself, as though not quite daring to challenge the judgement of his old friend.

'We, Isador? We, or me?' Gabriel was staring straight into the eyes of the Librarian, fierce with repressed pain. Isador stared back, meeting the captain's bright eyes and immediately seeing his mistake. With a quiet sigh, he responded.

'I am sorry, Gabriel. I am not quite myself today,' said Isador, looking around into the forest as if expecting to see someone watching them. 'I am not accusing you of anything, captain. And when I said "we", I meant it - we are the Blood Ravens, battle-brothers until the end.'

'Perhaps you are right, old friend. Perhaps I have grown careless. We are battle-brothers, Isador, but I am the captain.

Responsibility is mine,' said Gabriel, dropping his gaze from Isador's face and shaking his head faintly. 'I also have not been myself lately.'

'I have seen how you have changed since Cyrene, Gabriel. But there was nothing that you could have done to save it. You did what had to be done.' Isador's tone was gentle again.

'Do not mention that place again, Isador!' One or two of the other squad members turned their heads as Gabriel raised his voice. He brought himself under control quickly and continued. 'Cyrene was my homeworld... it was my responsibility,' he said, his voice dropping to a barely audible whisper.

'Captain.' It was Corallis, stooped under the cover of giant fern fronds just in front of them. Gabriel looked up and wondered how long the sergeant had been there. By his side, Isador was doing the same thing. They shared a quick glance and then Gabriel answered.

'What news, sergeant?'

'The orks have established a camp at an old pumping station in the forest. There is good cover around the perimeter, and they are unprepared for our assault.'

'Excellent,' said Gabriel, relieved and enthusiastic at the thought of combat at last. Nothing cleared his mind better than a righteous cleansing. 'Then let us show these orks how Blood Ravens bring death to the enemies of the Emperor.'

THE SPACEPORT WAS shrouded in darkness as the thick black clouds rolled across the sky, obscuring the stars and filtering the moonlight into a dirty grey. A thin drizzle of rain fell continuously, coating everything in a slick, oily ichor as the smoky clouds spat their residue to the ground. Camp fires were scattered reassuringly over the deck, with groups of Guardsmen huddled around them for warmth and companionship. Others were hard at work on the port's fortifications, tugging the ruins of Sentinels and Leman Russ tanks into banks around the perimeter that faced out into the wilderness. Autocannon, heavy bolter and lascannon emplacements were being dug into the barricades at regular intervals, facing out across the plain. That is where the orks would come from, if Captain Angelos had been right about their renewed offensive.

Colonel Brom stood on the tracks of a Leman Russ that had been slid into the barricade on its side. He was scanning the horizon for signs of movement, but there was nothing except the faint orange glow of distant fires. That's where the warboss must be, he thought. Captain Angelos was right after all. They're regrouping, out of range of our gun emplacements. But somehow the hazy glow was reassuring; if the orks were playing by their camp fires, then they were not about to launch their second attack tonight.

The dull, misted moonlight bathed the afternoon's battlefield in monochrome, and Brom slouched down onto the side of the tank to sit and consider it. He sighed deeply and shook his head, patting each of his pockets in turn in a quest for a lho-stick. Finding one in his left breast pocket, he tapped it methodically against the armour of the Leman Russ and then flicked it into life. Taking a long draw and letting the smoke blossom into his lungs, Brom tried to get the events of the day into some kind of perspective.

Behind him, he could hear the industry of his Tartarans. Most of them had recovered from the shocks of the day already, and they were struggling to prepare for tomorrow. There were whispers of excitement about the arrival of the Space Marines and occasional shouts of awe as stories were shared about the incredible feats they had accomplished on the battlefields of a thousand planets. Rumours and legends flooded the camp like a contagious disease, inflecting everyone with a new vigour and a thrill of excitement.

Not everyone. Brom sat on his own, staring out across the silvering corpses of his Guardsmen as they lay unrecovered where they fell, intermingled with the ork-dead, their blood mixing in the soaked earth. Hundreds of them. Almost half the Fifth and more than half the Seventh had been killed in one afternoon. And these were his men. Good men with whom he had fought on numberless occasions in the past.

And the Blood Ravens had called them cowards.

Taking another draw on his lho-stick, Brom blew a wispy thread of cloud out into the night air. It was a good weed - locally grown in the rich, fertile soil of Tartarus. For a moment, he thought that he could taste the blood-drenched soil seeping into the smoke, but he shut out the thought in a wave of nausea.

Cowards. The word stuck in his mind and cycled through his thoughts like a hot coal, scorching at his soul. Something had happened. Some of his men had turned and run. He had dealt with many of them himself - executing men who had saved his own life countless times. The guilt gnawed at his conscience, making his head hurt from within.

Glancing up and down the line of the barricade, Brom could see little pockets of men sitting in silence. They had obviously moved away from their comrades to be alone with their thoughts, gazing out over the carnage of the day. Not for them the naive excitement about the Space Marines. Tiny little embers of fire marked them out as smokers, speckling the imposing weight of the barricade with the touches of fireflies.

Brom didn't have the heart to bust them for skipping work. The fortifications were going up quickly, as the most enthusiastic of the men laboured under a haze of optimism. He was happy to let his men deal with the events of the day in their own ways - the last thing they needed now was their commanding officer to yell at them about treachery and cowardice. Everyone knew what had happened. Some were trying to forget, to make the approaching battle less horrifying. Others had fallen into themselves, searching for their last scraps of resolve. But some, suspected Brom, would simply find the terrible truth - they were cowards after all.

Anger and confusion curdled together in Brom's head. The Blood Ravens had treated him like a lackey, and they had cast a slur on the honour of the Tartarans. He was a colonel of the Emperor's Imperial Guard, and should be treated as such. And it wasn't as if the Blood Ravens were beyond reproach themselves: mighty though they may be in battle, inside those giant suits of power armour there was the heart and soul of a man. They could make mistakes too, just like the Tartarans. And they had. He knew that they had.

Brom was hissing and muttering to himself as his anger seethed inside him. A voice called out from behind the barricade.

'Colonel Brom? Is everything alright, sir?' It was Ckrius, again, probably carrying another cup of recaff and grinning inanely.

'Fine, trooper,' said Brom dismissively, suddenly aware that he had been mumbling and spitting with quiet rage. 'Fine.'

'You need any more recaff, colonel?' asked the trooper hopefully.

Brom laughed. He knew it. 'No, thank you Trooper Ckrius. I'm fine.'

As Ckrius climbed back down the barricade to rejoin his friends, Brom shook his head again. Where had all that anger come from? He threw his lho-stick to the ground and stamped it out with his boot. The Space Marines were a blessing from the Emperor himself. They were the finest warriors in the Imperium, selected from the most able hopefuls from thousands of different worlds and then cultivated for decades. Their honour and judgement was beyond reproach. Who was he to question them? And Captain Angelos was right - the Tartarans had collapsed, some troopers had turned in fear. Without the Blood Ravens, the spaceport would have fallen. Perhaps Angelos had been right to assign them construction duty while the Blood Ravens hunted the orks.

IN THE SHADOWY depths of the forest, the Blood Ravens were deployed in an arc around the perimeter of a compound. The old buildings around the pumping station were decrepit and barely stable, but they still seemed to be in use. Certainly they would not provide any significant cover for the mob of orks that lumbered and snorted their way between them.

The makeshift ork camp was a jumble of debris and filth. The greenskins had pulled down a couple of the old buildings and were using the wooden frames for their fires. Some of them bore deep flesh wounds on their limbs, but they still jostled and pushed each other about, trying to find their place in the food chain around the roasting meat. They snorted and snarled, spitting phlegm onto the ground as saliva ran between their jagged teeth.

In the centre of the compound was the largest of the mob, one of the so-called "nobz". Gabriel was watching it carefully as it smashed its fist into the smaller greenskins that fussed around it. They cowered under the blows but then set about their business with renewed vigour, as though the violence were itself a kind of language between the savage creatures. The nob was inspecting the pumping station with a small team of mekboyz, who prodded and poked at the end of a pipeline with their clumsy tools.

'Corallis. Where do those pipes go?' asked Gabriel in a barely audible whisper.

'They carry the water supply into Magna Bonum, captain,' answered the sergeant, realising at once how important this pumping station was to the people of Tartarus.

Gabriel nodded, clicking open a vox-channel to the rest of the squad. 'Focus on the largest of the creatures first - if we break their strongest warriors, then the others will flee. We can mop up the stragglers later.'

After a brief pause, the forest erupted into a blaze of bolter fire as the Blood Ravens opened up from their positions around the perimeter of the compound. The fire flashed into the centre of the offensive arc, defining a lethal killing zone in which the orks were instantly cut down. The Blood Ravens loosed another hail of fire, and then Gabriel was on his feet and charging into the chaotic mess of the ork camp, his chainsword whirring with serrated death.

The surviving orks scattered around the compound, diving for their weapons and colliding with each other with horrendous thumps. In the disarray, Gabriel hacked into the nearest knot of fumbling greenskins, thrusting his spluttering blade through bone and flesh, while his bolt pistol coughed shells from his other hand. In the heart of the mob, he could see the nob screaming commands at its bodyguard, sending the surrounding orks into a frenzy. The giant beast itself had tugged on a gleaming power claw, which still dripped with blood, and had drawn a huge gun into its other hand.

Gabriel ducked a viciously curving cleaver, using his own momentum to cut down with his chainsword, taking the legs off the offending greenskin next to him. Firing a rattle of bolter shells into a couple of shoota boyz that were fumbling with their guns in front of him, the Blood Ravens captain strode forward towards the nob. This kill was going to be his.

On the other side of the camp, Isador was a blaze of blue energy. He brought his force staff sweeping round in great crescents, smashing its power into gaggles of orks that shrieked and sizzled under the tirade. From his left hand pulsed javelins of blue lightning, which chased after the fleeing greenskins and incinerated them as they tried to dive for cover.

All around the compound, the Blood Ravens were laying into the broken camp of orks, capitalising on the confusion of the greenskins as the creatures struggled to mount a defence. Sergeant Corallis had lost his boltgun and was wrestling one of the beasts with his hands, pitting his power armour against the bunched musculature and the barbed teeth of the ork. In one smooth movement, Corallis rolled backwards onto the ground, carrying the greenskin with him and flipping it over his shoulder. As he rolled back up onto his feet, he snatched up a fallen cleaver from the dirt and smashed it down into the skull of the stunned ork before it could regain its feet. The cleaver dug deeply into the thick skull and the ork's eyes bulged in surprise before the handle snapped clean away and the creature fell onto its face in the mud.

Meanwhile, Gabriel was striding through the camp towards the ork leader, dispatching the smaller orks with almost casual abandon as they charged at him with axes and clubs. Nothing would draw him off course now. The ork boss could see him coming, and it was blasting out rounds from its crude gun, cackling into the air with insanity burning in its tiny red eyes. The shots bounced off Gabriel's armour, denting it and scratching away the brilliant red paintwork. One or two of the slugs buried themselves in the joints between the armoured plates, punching into his flesh and sending shafts of pain darting through his limbs. But the Space Marine's augmented nervous system quickly shut down the pain receptors and his enhanced blood clotted the wounds almost as soon as they were made.

He cleared the last few strides with a running leap, throwing himself through the air towards the huge ork with his chainsword spluttering greenskin blood in an ichorous arc. The creature met Gabriel's attack with a swipe from its power claw, dragging a clutch of deep gashes across the captain's chest plate and throwing him aside, his bolt pistol falling into the dirt.

Gabriel hit the ground in a roll, flipping back up onto his feet and spinning his chainsword with a flourish. In an instant he was upon the ork again, his blade flashing and coughing in a relentless tirade of hacks and swipes. But the greenskin was just as fast, parrying the Blood Raven's weapon with flicks of his power claw and countering with a series of vicious kicks and scratches. In the depths of his mind, Gabriel could hear the silver choir flooding his soul with light once again, and he pressed his attack with righteous desperation, throwing all of his strength into each strike. The ork seemed to be lapsing into slow-motion, and Gabriel blocked its attacks with increasing ease.

The opening seemed to gape and beg for him to slaughter the vile greenskin. Gabriel watched the ork flail and thrash with its power claw, but it all seemed pathetically slow. And there, in the centre of the frenzy of claws was a gap which the ork had left completely unprotected - Gabriel could see it as clear as day, as though the light of the Astronomican itself was piercing it for him. But, as he stepped forward to run his chainsword through the enemy, the choir in his head started to wail and scream, and the beautiful silver light started to run with blood.

Gabriel screamed as he thrust his blade into the beast's chest, and then he ground the whirring teeth of the chainsword deeper into the creature's abdomen before ripping it free with a vicious upward swing. The nob was rent in two as it fell back under the strike, already dead before it hit the ground.

All around the camp, the remnants of the ork mob started to wail and shriek. They turned and tried to run, but were easily cut down by volleys of fire from the other Blood Ravens.

'GABRIEL?' ISADOR WAS at his shoulder, his hand resting gently on his punctured and torn armour. 'Gabriel, are you alright?'

'Yes. Yes, I'm fine,' answered Gabriel, wondering why Isador was making such a fuss. He had fallen to the ground after the battle with the ork boss, but now pulled himself to his feet to face the Librarian. 'I'm fine, Isador.'

'Your scream had me worried, brother,' said Isador looking around the camp. 'And I wasn't the only one to notice it.' The rest of the squad were stalking around the compound, kicking each ork corpse in turn to make sure that the creatures were really dead, and firing a single shot into the heads of any that groaned.

'I'll be fine, thank you Isador. Where is Prathios? I must give my praise to the Emperor for this victory,' said Gabriel, searching the scene for the company Chaplain.

'Prathios fought well, captain. He is over there with Corallis, who was injured in the fight,' replied Isador, pointing with his staff to one of the ruined buildings. 'After you have seen Prathios, you should visit the Apothecarion to see about those wounds, Gabriel.' Gabriel looked down at his armour and saw for the first time how much damage it had suffered. The paint was scratched and the plates were riddled with dents, gashes and holes. He couldn't really remember suffering such an attack.

'Yes, Isador. I will do that. Thank you again,' he said as he turned and made his way over to Prathios and Corallis.

Standing alone in the centre of the compound, Isador surveyed the scene. Not a single Blood Raven had fallen in the attack, although Corallis had lost his left arm. All of the orks had been slain. It had been a good night for hunting after all.

From out of the darkness something cold tapped at the inside of Isador's mind, and he snapped his head round to stare into the forest at the edge of the compound. There was something in the shadows, something that was not quite there. A wave of whispers seemed to emanate from the darkness, questing for a space in the Librarian's head.

Isador slammed shut the doors to his soul and sent a sharp, noiseless blast into the trees: *I will suffer no trespass*. At that, the voices seemed to die into silence. After concentrating his gaze on the forest for a few more moments, Isador turned his attention back to the camp. Squinting slightly at the sudden pain in his head, he made his way back towards Gabriel and Prathios, the sound of his captain's scream resounding in his mind once again.



CHAPTER THREE

TERROR GRIPPED AT his soul, releasing the one thought that the struggling man should have suppressed for all time. He couldn't hang on to his consciousness as it swam and curdled, as though stirred by the piercing force of a primeval spear. Voices were seducing him from all sides, licking at the inside of his head like exquisite flames, weakening his resolve and drawing him into hell. He could see the sorcerer towering over him, and could sense the muttering voices of his perverted priesthood ringed around him, but there was nothing he could do to fight them. Finally, without a word or even a breath, he cried out with his mind in desperate longing, *Choose me!*

Chaos Sorcerer Sindri looked down at the ruined husk that was once a Marine of the accursed Alpha Legion, but there was no pity in his stare. His fist was clasped around his Bedlam Staff, clenching and unclenching in impatient anticipation, and, buried deep in the visor sockets of his bladed helmet, Sindri's eyes glowered a thirsty red.

'He is ready, my lord,' hissed the sorcerer, clearly pained by the requirement of deference. Nonetheless, his tone was soft and sibilant.

'Then proceed, sorcerer, but proceed carefully. If you fail me, this will not be the only sacrifice tonight,' said Chaos Lord Bale bluntly, leaning his impressive weight against the great Manreaper scythe, which seemed to writhe hungrily in his grasp.

The sorcerer did not reply. Instead he pointed with his staff and, without a word, the chosen Chaos Marine slouched towards the edge of the crater, as though held in a trance.

At the bottom of the freshly excavated pit lay an altar. It was little more than a slab of rough hewn stone, but it pulsed with ancient promises. Its sides had been carved with snaking designs and icons depicting sacrifice and slaughter, and dark prayers had been etched into the rock with teeth and bones. Each inscription had drawn the blood of its artisan, and had been made in a frenzy of agony and love. The surface of the altar, stained with the life blood of countless sacrifices, ran with deep grooves and runnels.

The Chaos Marine climbed carefully down the sides of the crater towards the altar, more and more horrified with each step, not able to understand what he was doing. But the voices whispered into his soul, drawing him onwards and dissolving his resistance.

He required no escort - despite himself he knew what he had to do. Stealing a glance back up to the rim of the pit, he could see a ring of his battle-brothers from the Alpha Legion, each shimmering in the dark black and green of their ancient armour. They stared down at him in silence, filling the humid night with their heavy malignancy.

As he approached the altar, he realised that Sindri and Lord Bale were there already with retinues of armed Marines fanned out behind them. Just in case. Even in the night and in the heavy shadow of the crater, he could see the steady evil throbbing in their eyes. Lord Bale himself was a monster of man - hugely tall and draped with corpse-like flesh that paled into a sickly white in the thin moonlight. Only his bladed teeth seemed to reflect any light at all, and that was vicious beyond the imaginings of men. A terrible stench wafted through the night air, and the Chaos Marine noticed for the last time how Bale's burnished green armour was coated in a thick, ichorous film of ruined flesh. It was the last residue of the countless men who had fallen beneath the Chaos Lord's war-scythe in his millennia of bloody rampage across worlds and galaxies.

Without any prompting, the nameless Marine climbed up onto the altar and lay down, throwing his arms up over his head and pushing his feet across into the corners of the stone. He closed his eyes and felt the tablet's almost imperceptible vibrations beneath him. So, this is where it would all begin.

Sindri's voice was hissing and muttering at the head of the altar, drawing more and more movement from the rock itself, which began to emanate heat. Bale could see the runes and the prayers start to glow around the sides of the tablet, and blood started to ooze out of the eyes of the daemons etched into the stone. In the sky, dark clouds started to congeal and swirl, condensing a sleet of rain and filling the night with sheets of lightning.

The prostrate Marine could feel the rain falling onto his face and splashing off the altar. Droplets began to seep into his mouth, and his tongue licked at them automatically. The familiar irony taste rippled through his body, sending a thrill into his soul as he realised that it was a rain of blood, and that it was all for him.

Suddenly Sindri stopped his chant and silence filled the pit, broken only by the persistent spatter of heavy rain. Then the Marine screamed. A great gash had opened up across his chest, spilling blood and organs out across the altar. Another tore into his stomach, and then smaller cuts started to criss-cross his legs and arms. After a couple of seconds, his face was ripped to shreds by the invisible force and a torrent of blood was cascading down the sides of the altar, spewing out of every inch of the screaming Marine.

Lord Bale ran his tongue along his razor-sharp teeth, watching the Chaotic powers rack the body of the victim, dreaming that such power would one day be his. But his reverie was broken as Sindri raised his staff into the sky and drew down a sizzling bolt of purple lightning, wailing a prayer as the energy coursed through his body and bounced back into the dual-pronged blade at the crest of his Bedlam Staff. With a dramatic flourish, Sindri spun the blade and brought it down in a sudden, single sweep, cleaving the Marine's head from his shoulders.

'And so it begins,' hissed the sorcerer, as a raucous cheer arose from the Chaos Marines around the rim of the crater.

THE FIRST HINTS of daylight dusted the ornate stonework of the cathedral, but dawn brought with it the promise of war on the horizon. The city of Magna Bonum was still resting, its streets filled with the half-baked shelters of refugees who had flooded in through the great gates, thinking that the high city wall would bring them some measure of protection. It had never been breached

before, but never before had it faced such a colossal onslaught of ork power. Despite the glorious sunrise, the horizon was heavy with a dark ocean of greenskin warriors, rumbling their way towards the city.

The Blood Ravens had returned from their hunt only a few hours before dawn, and Gabriel had appropriated the cathedral as the most suitable location for their base in the city. They had swept past the spaceport with barely a nod to the cheering troopers of the Tartarans. Sergeant Matiel had paused for a moment, and presented one of the Guardsmen with the severed head of an ork, as a memento and as inspiration for them in the battle to come.

The young trooper had stared at the huge, heavy skull in disbelief, and for a moment Matiel had thought that the man would drop it in horror.

But as the Blood Ravens pressed on past the spaceport they could see the head lifted onto the barricades, skewered on the point of a lance. They would leave the defence of the spaceport to Brom and his men - it would fall anyway, and Gabriel was not about to lose any of his Space Marines in a futile fight.

The cathedral itself was a towering testimony to the Emperor-fearing architects of Tartarus. Its main spire thrust proudly into the sky like a giant sword, laced with threads of gargoyles and inscribed with hymns of duty over every stone. The immense adamantium doors shimmered with etchings of saints and their litanies of repentance, inspiring the people who passed through them into passions of vengeance against the vile forces that would challenge the glory of the Imperium.

Inside, the massive, vaulted ceilings defined a cavernous space of soaring columns and deepest contemplation. Around the walls were frescos showing the heroism of the Tartarans in the face of heretics, cultists and aliens. The stained-glass windows depicted the Golden Throne itself, surrounded by the silver choir of the Astronomican, and the morning sun streamed through them, flooding the cathedral with the grace of the Emperor himself.

In the small chapel behind the altar, Gabriel knelt in silent prayer. After a few moments, the glorious rapture of the Astronomican washed into his mind once again. It began with a single voice, silver and pure. It was a solitary note, unwavering, struck and held beyond all sense and perception, playing directly into the soul. One voice became two, and then two shattered into a miracle of harmonies, filling every last vestige of his soul with an aria of purity and light.

Hidden in the depths of his conscious mind, part of Gabriel resisted the magnificent vision, as the last healthy cells in a body might fight an enveloping cancer. Part of him knew that this was not a vision for an untrained mind. Gabriel was no astropath, and he had not spent decades of psychic torment in the secret halls of the librarium sanatorium, learning to control and shape the deceptive energies of the immaterium, like Isador. His soul simply knew not what to do with this rapturous vision.

It was no secret that the Blood Ravens boasted an unusual number of psykers, particularly in the upper echelons of their structure. There were even rumours of an elite cadre of Librarians who formed a combat squad on their own, for especially sensitive or secretive missions. But even Gabriel had heard only rumours about this, and he had never found the right moment to ask Isador; too much curiosity about the constitution of the librarium sanatorium from non-psykers was not encouraged, and he was not sure how his old friend would react.

Gabriel also knew that many of the most powerful psykers in the Chapter had been recruited from Cyrene, Isador included. Indeed, the Blood Ravens had recruited heavily from that planet before... before it had been cleansed. Even the great Father Librarian, Azariah Vidya, may the Emperor preserve his soul, was originally from Cyrene. In the years of the Blood Ravens' infancy, Azariah had been the first to hold the dual mantle of Chapter Master and Master of the Librarium, but with him had started the long tradition that marked out the Blood Ravens from other, more puritanical, Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes. Nonetheless, the Blood Ravens had never adopted Cyrene as their homeworld, preferring to base their fortress monastery in the mighty battle barge, *Omnis Arcanum*. The Chapter returned to the planet periodically and conducted the Blood Trials, at which aspirant warriors would compete for the chance to become a Blood Ravens acolyte. Gabriel himself had once fought in those trials, besting hundreds of his fellow Cyreneans before being whisked into orbit for further, agonising tests in a Blood Ravens' cruiser.

And then, one day, Gabriel had returned to Cyrene. By then he was an honoured captain of the Blood Ravens, returning to his homeworld with Brother Chaplain Prathios to conduct the Blood Trials himself and to sweep for new recruits. What he found on Cyrene on that trip was to change his life forever.

There had always been an uncommonly large incidence of mutant births on the planet, and relatively large numbers of nascent psykers amongst the populace. In fact, although such abominations were swiftly cleansed and burned by the local authorities, it had been suggested more than once that this demographic quirk could be linked to the unusual potency and number of Blood Ravens psykers.

Within only a few days of making planet-fall, Gabriel had cut short the trials and returned to his strike cruiser, *Ravenous Spirit*, from which he had transmitted an encrypted astropathic communique. Shortly afterwards, a flotilla of Naval and Inquisition vessels had joined the *Ravenous Spirit* in orbit and had proceeded to launch a unrelenting barrage of lance strikes, mass drivers and cyclone torpedoes, reducing the once green world to a primeval, molten state.

It had been his duty, and a Space Marine is nothing without his sense of duty. It had been his decision, which made it his responsibility. Billions of people. More people than were struggling for their survival here on Tartarus, and Gabriel could still hear their screams in his soul - they blamed him, and they were right. He was one of them.

Again, the crystal clear tones of the Astronomican started to slip and scrape, like claws dragging desperately for purchase as they fell from an elevated promontory. Gabriel could see his own fall in the screams of the desperate, melting faces that seemed to reach out for him, dragging him down into hell. But he did not try to hide from the accusations of the dead - they knew what he had done as well as he did. In some ways, their hideous taunts were more apposite and honest than the soaring magnificence of the Astronomican itself.

'FARSEER. IT APPEARS that the humans may deal with the greenskins for us,' said the ranger, stooped into submission before the unmoving figure of the farseer. 'I have seen them fight, and they are strong, if clumsy.'

'Yes, Flaetriu, the new humans will be able to see off the orks, but they are not entirely our allies,' said Macha, her gaze focussed in some unseen place elsewhere. 'We should not forget that they are treacherous creatures.'

The shade of the trees played in eddying patterns across the green and white armour of the Biel-Tan eldar. Their temporary camp was buried deep in the forest, at the end of pathways that seemed to lead nowhere. The camp itself hardly broke the rhythm of the trees, as the eldar structures flaunted a perfect match in colour and structure with the local foliage. A number of orks had already passed through the camp, utterly oblivious to its existence, until a rain of fire from shuriken catapults shredded them into mush. The rangers had been roaming the woods for days now, monitoring the movements of the vile greenskins and plotting ways for the small Biel-Tan force to eradicate the space-vermin. Flaetriu could not even bare the smell of the creatures - their very existence seemed to offend his sense of reality. He and his fellow rangers had already dispatched large numbers of the disgusting creatures, and part of him was loathe to let the stupid humans enjoy the rest. Then again, pest control was not really a profession appropriate for an eldar - such mundane matters could be left to the more mundane races.

'Their arrival was well timed, farseer,' said Flaetriu.

'They were bound to come,' replied Macha, still gazing into the invisible distance. 'Their fates are inextricably bound to this place, although they have forgotten this already. The humans have such pathetically short memories. It is this, rather than the darkness in their souls, that makes them so dangerous.'

'When does the Swordwind arrive?' asked Flaetriu, looking into the sky, as though searching for signs of the rest of the Biel-Tan's army.

'They will be here in time, now that the orks are no longer our concern. For now, Flaetriu, go and see whether the humans require any assistance with the greenskin vermin.'

'Yes, farseer,' said the ranger, bowing his head with something like eagerness. Then, with a couple of long, bounding strides, he had vanished into the trees, keen to add some more kills to his day's tally.

THE FIRST SHELL exploded against the walls of the city with a screeching boom, sending a rain of rubble tumbling to the ground. The sound brought everyone in Magna Bonum to a standstill, as they realised that the dawn of war had finally come.

The first shell was followed by a second, this time clearing the great walls and smashing into the smattering of hab-units that sheltered in their shadow. The explosion sent groups of civilians running from their homes and sparked fires across three blocks. But these were just ranging shots, and the real barrage was yet to come. A spasm of artillery fire erupted from the wilds in front of the city walls, raining shells down into the buildings and the crowded streets of Magna Bonum. Pandemonium was loosed on the city, as civilians recovered from their shock and started to run in all directions at once, seeking the flimsy shelter of buildings and make-shift bunkers. Guardsmen ran through the crowds, trying to calm the people as they dashed towards the gun emplacements built into the walls.

Outside the cathedral a great mass of people had gathered, hoping that the immense building would provide them with shelter. But a squad of Blood Ravens stood across the towering doors and blocked their path, their red armour glinting gloriously in the morning sun. Guardsmen and Space Marines darted in and out of the cathedral, slipping between the huge sentries with nods and salutes. Two Whirlwind tanks had rolled into the plaza in front of the cathedral, emblazoned with the insignia of the Blood Ravens. Open-topped transports carrying clutches of Marines accompanied them. The missile batteries of the tanks rotated slowly to face out over the city to the south, ready for the orks to come into range as they approached the city walls.

A Rhino transport roared into the plaza, sending civilians scattering out of its path as it skidded to a halt at the bottom of the steps to the cathedral. As it stopped, a hatch folded out of its stern and a squad of Blood Ravens came pounding down the cathedral steps to leap inside, just as the last Marine cleared the hatch, the doors slammed shut and the vehicle's tracks spun into life once again, thrusting the Rhino back out across the plaza and off towards the squad's defensive assignment.

Inside the cathedral was a throng of activity. Gabriel was receiving a short line of sergeants, dispatching them with well-rehearsed protocols and precise orders. Pushing his way to the front of the crowd, with a small knot of Guardsmen around him, came Colonel Brom.

'Captain Angelos. Librarian Akios,' said Brom, nodding his greetings to Gabriel and Isador. 'I have taken the liberty of stationing Tartaran squads around key facilities in the city, especially the power plant. We are also standing guard over the spaceport.' Brom was standing crisply to attention and trying to communicate an efficient air of confidence.

'Ah, Colonel Brom, good of you to join us,' said Gabriel, deflating Brom immediately. 'Your initiative is admirable, colonel, but I need you to pull your men out of the spaceport and to man the defences of the city walls.'

'But, captain, if we abandon the spaceport—' started Brom, visibly exasperated.

'—the spaceport cannot be held by the Tartarans, colonel, and the Blood Ravens cannot spare any Marines for the defence of suboptimal positions at this time. Our priority has to be to maximise our defences in one location to assure victory. You should not mistake the orks' simple manner for stupidity, Colonel Brom. They are more cunning than they might seem, and splitting our defences would play straight into their hands.'

'I'm sure that you know best,' said Brom, biting down on his lower lip.

'Thank you, colonel. Now go. I have much to attend to,' replied Gabriel, turning sharply to address one of the waiting Space Marines. 'Brother Matiel, take your assault squad to cover the set of buildings opposite the market sector. And Brother Tanthius, take the Terminators down to the east gate.' Gabriel looked around. 'Corallis? Send word to the *Litany* that we may need aerial support before the day is over.'

Colonel Brom paused for a moment and pulled his cape more securely over his shoulders. Then he straightened his tunic and turned with affected dignity, making his way out of the cathedral with his subordinates in tow.

'I am not sure that I agree with this course of action, Gabriel,' said Isador, watching Brom disappear into the crowd. 'Why should we sit here within the city walls and wait for the orks to attack? Why not carry the fight to them?'

'Brother Isador, would you have us go out and meet the orks on open ground as they roll forward in full strength? That would be madness. You and I both know better than to try and engage the orks on their terms. Far better to let their charge break against the walls of Magna Bonum, and then to meet them on our terms. The Codex calls for a defensive action in these circumstances, Isador, and a defensive action is what we shall launch, no matter what the preferences of Colonel Brom.'

'Perhaps you are too harsh on him, Gabriel. This is his homeworld, after all, and he will fight for it harder than anyone,' said Isador, feeling the frustration in the captain's voice.

'I am well aware of the importance of one's homeworld, Isador,' retorted Gabriel, slightly stung. 'But I am a servant of the Emperor and an agent of the Codex Astartes. I will do my duty here, and I trust that the rest of you will do the same.'

'Of course... you are right, captain,' answered Isador smoothly, as though placating him. 'Perhaps patience is the better virtue here.'

THE TARTARAN GUN emplacements in the wall blazed with energy, lighting their positions like torches against the rockcrete. Lascannons, autocannons and heavy bolters lashed viciously into the charging mass of green muscle that thundered across the plains to the south of Magna Bonum. The orks had already overrun the spaceport, and its smoldering remains could be seen under clouds of black smoke to the south-west. But the defence of the spaceport had been half-hearted at best, despite all the effort expended on the construction of barricades. At the last minute, Colonel Brom had rushed round the site and ordered his men to rig the place for a special welcome for the orks, and then to get out.

The greenskins had crashed into the makeshift defences and overrun them almost instantly, hardly even noticing that the defensive guns were firing automatically and that there were no troopers to hack and dice. By the time that it dawned on the mob, it was too late. Brom flicked the switch with a satisfaction that he hadn't felt in years, and watched the spaceport evaporate in a furnace of flames and orks.

The bulk of the greenskin horde pounded on towards the city, hardly even flinching when hundreds of their number were incinerated by the crude trick. Most of them could already see the Imperial forces that lay in wait for them, resplendent in the morning sun, and the prospect of imminent combat drew them on even faster. The salivating and panting mob rolled onwards in huge numbers, filling the air with smoke, stench and the sound of thunder.

From their emplacements on the city wall, the Guardsmen of the Tartarans stared in awe at the scale of the army that was descending upon them. The plains of Bonum were thick with greenskins and their crude vehicles of war. Countless buggies swept along in the vanguard, flanked by huge ork warbikes. Behind them came a storm of infantry: shoota boyz and slugga boyz in incredible numbers. And in the heart of the mass were some bristling wartrukks, with enormous orks standing proudly on their roofs, howling into the air as though driving their forces onwards.

As the first of the speeding buggies bounced into range, the city's walls became a blaze of gunfire, shedding hails of las-fire and bolter shells in a constant barrage. Some of the buggies flipped and burst into flames, others crashed straight into the back of them, but most of them ploughed on towards the armoured forces waiting at the base of the wall.

Leaning hard against his autocannon, trooper Ckrius was jolted around by the powerful recoil, but he could see a stream of Blood Ravens' assault bikes heading out from the city, seeking to intercept the ork warbikes before they could draw in from the flanks. Huge, red Predator tanks rolled out away from the walls, their gun-turrets blazing with lascannon fire as they laid into the advancing tide of ork buggies, splintering the advancing mass before rolling over the top of anything that got in their way. The Tartarans in the wall's launcher-emplacements were lobbing mortars and grenades, plotting the parabolas so that the explosions would clear the Imperial forces. But shells were also coming back from the greenskins, smashing into the wall and sending avalanches of rockcrete crashing to the ground. Guardsman Katrn ducked back away from the team of the heavy bolter, covering his head with his hands and muttering something inaudible amongst the din. The gunner crew turned and yelled at him to get back into position, but he just ignored them, shaking his head violently and crying out. The crew could see tears in the Guardsman's eyes, and they shook their heads in disgust, turning back to the weapon as dust and debris rained down on their position.

In his mind, from somewhere beyond the noise of battle, Katrn could hear the gun-crew taunting him. *Coward... coward... you are a disgrace to your family... the Emperor will spit on your soul...* In a moment of resolution, Katrn drew his laspistol and levelled it towards the gun-crew. *Yes, that's it... the false Emperor doesn't understand you...* He clenched the trigger in a frenzy of violence, riddling the backs of his crewmen with bullet holes until they slumped forward, falling out of the emplacement and tumbling down to the ground outside the wall. With a flash of a smile, Katrn vaulted over the fallen masonry to man the heavy bolter.

A SMALL GAGGLE of greenskins had stopped in the middle of the field, just out of range of the city's ordnance, and Ckrius was watching them carefully from his position in the wall. They were running in circles and punching each other, but grabbing at tools and machine parts from inside one the wartrukks that had clunked to a halt beside them. There were pieces of piping and huge rivet-guns being thrown around, and seemingly random metal plates were being bolted together, but gradually a recognisable structure began to take shape. Guardsman Ckrius realised what was going on just in time, and he dived for cover at the back of the gunning alcove just as the immense bombardment shell smashed into the wall only a few metres above his emplacement. A rain of rockcrete tumbled down from the ceiling, burying the autocannon beneath a heavy pile of debris.

Crawling back to the edge of the wall and peering out over the battlefield, Ckrius could see a formation of Blood Ravens' Tornados changing direction to launch an assault against the huge bombardment cannon. The land speeders sped over the pounding infantry of greenskins, spraying bolter fire and plumes of chemical flame from their heavy flamers as they went. The Tartarans' very own Sentinels were stalking through the orks in the wake of the Tornados, scorching out spurts of las-fire to support their speeding allies.

A rattle of fire caught one of the Tornados in the rear, and Ckrius watched in horror as its engines started to smoke and splutter. Suddenly, they ignited and the Tornado was transformed into a cannoning ball of flame, skidding down into the sea of orks beneath it and scything to a stop. Ckrius could vaguely see a Blood Raven tumble from the wreckage and struggle to his feet as dozens of greenskins launched themselves at him. At least ten orks were thrown screaming into the air before the Space Marine was finally swamped.

A sudden realisation struck Ckrius: that burst of fire had not come from the battlefield, it had come from one of the emplacements in the wall. Leaning out of the gun alcove, the trooper craned his neck to the side, looking over the face of the wall. He was shocked to see that it was already badly pitted with shell marks, especially around the gates on the south and east. However, the gunners seemed to be holding their positions, and their positions were defined by bright bursts of fire as the cannons flared with life.

As he surveyed the scene, Ckrius could hear the whine of incoming ordnance and he actually saw the tumbling, gyrating shell punch clumsily into the south gate. The explosion was immense, rocking the wall and almost throwing Ckrius out towards the raging battlefield below. When he looked again, the gate was a ragged mess of ripped and shredded adamantium, and hundreds of orks were pouring towards the breach in the city's defences.

Another mighty blast made Ckrius spin, casting his eyes to the left where the east gate used to be. Now there was just a pile of rubble, some scraps of twisted metal, and a rampage of greenskins clambering over the ruins into the market sector of the city.

'THE TORNADOES HAVE taken out the bombardment cannon, captain, but the orks are already through the city walls,' reported Corallis sharply. 'We are making good progress against the orks' heavy weaponry, but there is only so much that the Predators outside the city can do to stem the tide of foot soldiers that are overrunning the breaches in the wall. Our assault bikes have their work cut out with the ork warbikes and can offer little support to the wall's anti-personnel guns.'

'Pull the bikes back into the city, sergeant. They will be more useful in the streets than running around in wild ork chases in the open country,' said Gabriel, trying to keep the defences focussed around the city itself. 'And get some Devastator Marines down to those breaches to support the Vindicator tanks.'

'There is something else, captain,' said Corallis uneasily.

'Yes? Time is precious, sergeant,' replied Gabriel, coaxing and impatient.

'There are reports from the wall, captain... Reports suggesting that some of the Tartarans have turned their guns against us.'

There was a pause while the significance of this intelligence sank in.

'I see,' said Gabriel, as though unsurprised. 'Tell Brom to get his men back in line before we deal with them ourselves. And where is Brother-Librarian Isador?'

Sergeant Corallis was not entirely comfortable with his new role as the command squad sergeant, acting as the ears and eyes of his captain. He would have preferred to be out there in the fray, bringing the Emperor's righteous justice to the foul aliens, but his injury had not healed properly and his body had rejected the bionics of his replacement arm. 'He's already on his way to the south gate, captain.'

'Excellent.' With that, Gabriel strode down the cathedral steps and vaulted onto the saddle of his assault bike, leaving Corallis to coordinate the battle from the cathedral. 'I'll be at the east gate,' he said as he kicked the bike into life, spinning its rear wheel in a crescent across the flagstones until it was pointing towards the east. 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he cried, as he released the front brakes and the bike lurched forward, sending him roaring out of the plaza.

Sergeant Corallis stood on the top of the cathedral steps and watched his captain plough through the crowds of civilians and weave between the hulking masses of Blood Ravens' tanks and gun emplacements, raising cheers from the Marines that saw him pass. His men loved him, and Corallis felt a sudden rush of pride that Captain Angelos had entrusted him with custody of the command post. One arm or two, Corallis would not let him down.

GRUNTZ KICKED ONE of his kommandos square in the jaw as the hapless creature scrabbled desperately to keep its grip on the roof top. Far below, the pathetic humans had bunched into a crowd in the plaza to watch. A group of the big, red-armoured soldiers had noticed all the fuss and were already training their guns on the orks. Bolter shells started to punch into the masonry around the dangling kommando, and Gruntz kicked him again.

'You'ze da prob, Ugrin!' he yelled, kicking Ugrin repeatedly in the face and stamping down on his hands. 'Dem'ze shootin at you!' A final heavy stomp crunched into Ugrin's face, and he could hold on no longer. His fingers slipped from their hold on the roof, and he fell shrieking down the side of the building, all the way staring back up at Gruntz and trying to spit at him. Gruntz watched his kommando fall and then leant over the ledge and spat a huge globule of phlegm down after him, hoping that it would reach him before he splattered into the flagstones and died. A rattle of bolter fire pushed him back away from the ledge, and he stamped in frustration as he realised that he would never know.

The remnants of the ork kommandos were busying themselves on the roof. Two of them were supporting the weight of a rokkit launcha and one was scurrying around them with a rivet gun, anchoring the machine into the rockcrete of the ledge. Orkamungus had been very clear about their function, and Gruntz was not about to return to the warboss with anything other than good news. None of these runts could screw it up now, even after that clumsy oath Ugrin had slipped off the ledge and alerted all the humans. Peering back over the edge of the roof, Gruntz could see the two great, red tanks positioned in the heart of the city, in front of the cathedral. Somehow, Orkamungus had known where they would be, even yesterday. Their missile turrets were twitching slightly, as they tracked distant targets outside the city. Then in a great roar of energy, a flurry of missiles burst out of their chambers, searing into the sky and vanishing from view. A couple of seconds later, Gruntz could hear the distant explosions as the warheads punched down into the ork positions.

'Waaaaagh!' he cried, with defiance and rage spluttering from his mouth. He turned to face his gunners and stamped his feet, pointing back over his shoulder into the open square below. Stamping and screeching, he slapped one of the orks hard across the

face, and the stunned kommando yelled back, pulling the mechanical trigger-lever on the side of the rokkit launcha. The machine lurched and bucked, ripping itself free of its fixings in the roof, but the huge rokkit shell burst out of it and roared up into the sky, spewing a trail of thick smoke in a tight spiral.

As the rest of the kommandos struggled to keep hold of the launcha, Gruntz watched the rokkit vanish into the clouds. It was gone. Gruntz turned round to face his kommandos with his gun drawn. The crew struggled and jostled, trying to stand behind each other, but Gruntz just sprayed a barrage of slugs into the nearest of the inept bunch as they all stood, wide-eyed, waiting for punishment. A moment later and a spluttering whine made Gruntz look up.

The rokkit coughed and rolled as it fell back out of the cloud line, its fuel clearly exhausted as it plummeted back down to earth. The red soldiers in the plaza had also noticed it, and salvoes of fire streaked up from their gunners to try and take out the warhead before it fell. But the rokkit plunged straight down, flipping end over end and spluttering with smoke.

As the red soldiers finally scattered out of the way, the falling rokkit smashed straight into the roof of one of their tanks, exploding with tremendous force. The shell pierced the armoured plating of the tank and the flames detonated the reserves of missiles inside. An instant later and missiles were jetting around the plaza, most of them flying off into the distance but some smashing into the surrounding buildings and reducing them to rubble.

Gruntz leapt into the air, punching his fist into the sky with a victorious cry. Turning to congratulate his kommandos, he was riddled with a silent spray of tiny projectiles, which killed him instantly.

Flaetriu, the eldar ranger, tugged his elegant blade out of the throats of two of the vile greenskins, and re-holstered his shuriken catapult as another collapsed to the ground. The final ork had panicked and fallen off the rooftop as it had fumbled with its cleaver.

'That counts as four more,' muttered the ranger to himself as he nodded a swift signal to the other members of his squad on a rooftop across the plaza.

GABRIEL SLID HIS bike around the next corner and powered on towards the gate. He could hear the cacophony of battle rumbling and blasting ahead of him, beckoning him with its chorus of glory.

As he dropped his knee and banked the bike into a tight bend, he saw the crude shredders strewn across the road. But it was too late, and the bike's front tyres ran into the spikes on the apex of the curve. The tyre exploded in a burst of decompression and the bike scraped into a vicious skid along the road, shedding sparks and parts before smashing into a building at the side of the street. Gabriel was dragged along with his machine, his leg trapped under its weight when he crashed out of the turn.

The bike crunched to a standstill, and Gabriel struggled to lift the weight of the machine off his leg. Spasmodic slugga fire zipped across the street from the other side, speckling the bike's armour with darts of ricocheting bullets. Glancing back over his shoulder, Gabriel could see a ragtag mob of orks scrambling out of the buildings, stomping their feet in anticipation of a kill and firing their guns erratically in his direction. He kicked at the bike and twisted his own weight, but he was stuck under the machine. Grabbing his bolt pistol from its holster along his other leg, Gabriel wrenched his body into an awkward firing position and opened up at the gaggle of orks.

The first shots punched straight into the face of the mob's leader, the biggest of the bunch, dropping him to his knees in a bloody cascade of his own brain tissue. His henchmen wailed in anger and brought their weapons into sharper focus, as a hail of slugs crunched into the bike on all sides of Gabriel and bit into his armour.

Gabriel gritted his teeth as the onslaught started to penetrate his armour and the ork slugs began to dig into his flesh. He struggled against the weight of the mangled bike, trying to shift his body to minimise the orks' firing line and to maximise his own freedom of movement. He had managed to yank his chainsword free of the wreck in preparation for the close combat, and his bolt pistol was spitting with venom. Voices in his mind spiralled into focus. *Not like this.*

A sudden roar filled the air and a powerful volley of fire pulsed across the street from above his head. Blasting up from behind the buildings into which Gabriel had crashed, a squad of Space Marines roared into the sky with their jump packs a blaze of afterburners. As the squad sprayed the street with bolter shells and gouts of flame, two Marines dropped to the road next to Gabriel and prised the bike off their captain.

With just a nod to the Sergeant Matiel, Gabriel was on his feet at once, and pounding across the street to engage the orks. The squad of Space Marines was descending into the melee with their chainswords whirring as Gabriel charged into the fray with two Blood Ravens storming in behind him.

WITHOUT BREAKING THE rhythm of his fire into the mob that was pouring through the south gate, Tanthius slammed his power fist down onto the head of an ork that was charging towards the Terminators from the side, brandishing its huge cleaver threateningly. The blow crushed the greenskin's spine and cracked its thick skull instantly, and the creature slumped into a motionless heap.

Hundreds of orks were stamping and pushing their way through the breach in the city walls, and even the squad of Terminator Marines could not hold back the tide. Tanthius and his battle-brothers were standing against the pressure of an ocean of green muscles and a continuous barrage of fire. Their storm bolters were smoking with discharge as explosive shells filled the breach with shrapnel and shattered fragments of death. The orks fell in wave after wave, ripped to pieces by the tirade launched from the Blood Ravens who were defending the breach, but still they came, spilling out into the outskirts of the city and running off into the interior.

Isador was in the breach itself, standing on top of a pile of fallen masonry and lashing out with his force staff in a blur of unspeakable energies. Pulses of lightning jousted out from his fingertips, frying orks as they dived for him or incinerating them as they struggled to make clear shots in the densely packed muddle of greenskins. His staff flashed and spun, cracking across skulls and slicing through abdomens as rivers of blue power flooded from the raven-wings at its tip. He was a burst of blue rock against which the green ocean was breaking.

A strafe of explosions ripped through the masonry on the ground, sending chunks of rockcrete flying into the air, defining a line straight for the blazing Librarian. The shells exploded as they hit Isador's coruscating power field, throwing him backwards into the city. He rolled back over his shoulder and up onto his feet, levelling his staff as he came up and letting out a terrible javelin of blue flame that roasted the knot of orks who tumbled after him. But deep, resounding footsteps told him that something bigger than an ork was headed for the breach.

Tanthius saw it first and turned all of his guns onto the monstrosity as it lumbered into the southern gateway. 'Dreadnought!' he yelled into the vox-unit in his helmet. The hulking, stomping machine almost filled the breach all by itself, with its clumsy mechanical arms thrashing into the masonry to help it keep its balance. Two weapons turrets protruded from the side of its stomach on either side of an armoured porthole, through which Tanthius could see the ugly face of its ork pilot.

The rest of the Terminators turned their guns in unison, abandoning the flood of smaller targets that burst over the banks of their own dead and gushed into the city. Lashes of explosive shells blasted against the huge, hulking ork machine as it stomped clumsily through the ruins of the wall, knocking great chunks of masonry flying with its flailing arms as it fought for balance. The impacts from the Blood Ravens' shells rattled the loping machine, but it eventually planted its feet and turned its own guns on the Terminators, sending out blasts of flames and a fleet of rokkit that smashed into the Blood Ravens formation. Tanthius felt the flames douse his armour as the skorcha bathed the Terminators in fire, but it would take more than a few flames to arrest the might of a Blood Ravens Terminator. He took a couple of steps forward into the flames, stomping down on the slowly roasting greenskins by his feet, splattering them into the rough masonry, and spraying insistent hails of shells against the armoured can. Three rokkit slid out of the flames in front of him and shot past his head. Even without turning, Tanthius knew that the huge explosion behind him was Brother Hurios, and he punched his humming power fist into the chest of another ork in rage. Lifting the struggling creature by its leg, Tanthius swung the beast around his head and used it to batter a gaggle of its greenskin brethren as he pounded forward towards the dreadnought.

Pulses of cackling energy sizzled against the sides of the ork dreadnought, destabilising it just enough to throw its aim, and Isador hacked at the machine's legs with his staff as sheets of lightning lashed out of his fingers. Just as Tanthius erupted out of the inferno inside the city, charging towards the breach, Isador jammed his staff into the crude, exposed knee joint of the dreadnought. The huge machine stumbled as its weapons tracked across to trace the motion of the charging Terminator and, as its weight shifted, Isador threw a javelin of power up into its undercarriage. As the machine lifted fractionally into the air, Tanthius took a flying leap and rammed into the side of it, plunging his power fist straight through the crudely riveted armour into the head of the ork inside. The dreadnought swayed under the assault and then its legs buckled from beneath it, sending it crashing to the ground, leaving Tanthius standing proudly on its fallen shell, ork blood and ichor dripping from his power fist.

The victory was short lived as a row of explosions signalled the arrival of another dreadnought. Turning with determination, Isador and Tanthius saw a pair of ork dreadnoughts step into the breach, flanked on both sides by knots of smaller killer kans, each brisling with power claws and heavy weapons.

'We must hold this gate!' cried Isador into the vox-unit.

Another voice crackled onto the hissing channel. It was Corallis, from the command post. 'Brother Librarian. Pull the Terminators back away from the wall and into the city. We will make our stand around the cathedral. Captain Angelos has called for orbital support, and the bombardment is imminent.'

Tanthius shared a glance with Isador before signalling the orderly retreat to the remaining Terminators. Isador ducked an axe blade that cut into the side of a building next to his head, and then reached out with his hand and unleashed a fountain of pain directly into the flesh of the salivating ork that had struck at him. The Librarian's thoughts were riddled with doubts. Another bombardment, Gabriel? This is not the captain that I have come to admire.

THE CONCUSSION OF a huge explosion rippled up the street, knocking the remaining orks from their feet as the Space Marines continued to cut them down. A line of Blood Ravens appeared at the end of the road, marching backwards in an orderly fashion and firing continuously into the crowd of orks that were threatening to overrun them.

'The Devastators from the east gate, captain,' said Sergeant Matiel, nodding in the direction of the retreating Marines, as the last of the ork gang was dispatched at the blade of Gabriel's chainsword.

'Yes, sergeant. So it seems. The explosion must have been the Vindicator,' answered Gabriel as he started to run towards the retreating line, keen to get back into the action and to rally his Marines.

The vox channel hissed with static. 'Captain, the *Litany of Fury* reports that its bombardment arrays are now ready for firing.' It was Corallis, back at the cathedral. 'Reports from the wall defences suggest that the orks have breached the city limits, captain. If we are going to use the bombardment cannons, we have to use them now.'

Gabriel shivered as he heard the words, and he tried to ignore them. He was still running when he burst through the line of Devastator Marines and plunged into the wave of orks that hounded them. His chainsword was already spluttering with ichor, but he was roaring with energy himself. 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he yelled, and the Devastators stopped retreating. They planted their feet and braced against the onslaught of ork bodies, powerfists humming thirstily, multi-meltas whining with heat, and heavy bolters rattling off shells.

The Space Marines had kicked their jump packs into life and were hovering above the Devastators, adding their rain of bolter shells to the fury of heavy weapons blasting out from their battle-brothers on the ground.

'Captain,' crackled an inconstant signal into the vox in his amour. 'There are too many of them. They are spilling around the edges of our position, flanking us on both sides and penetrating further into the city. We cannot hold them here,' reported Matiel from his vantage point above the skyline.

'Understood,' said Gabriel with frustration, as he dragged the teeth of his chainsword across the neck of one ork and jammed his bolt pistol into the mouth of another. 'Sergeant Matiel, take your assault squad back into the cathedral precincts. And Brother

Furio,' he said, nodding a greeting to the sergeant of the Devastator squad who was fighting at his shoulder. 'We must pull back towards the cathedral - we can make our stand there. It is senseless to spend our lives so cheaply in these streets.'

Switching the vox-channel, Gabriel reluctantly made the call to Corallis. 'Sergeant. Recall the Marines from the wall and tell that idiot Brom to get his men into the cathedral precinct. Tell the *Litany of Fury* to give us five minutes.'

STANDING AT THE top of the steps in front of the cathedral, Gabriel and Isador watched the bombardment shells sear through the sky like falling stars. They thudded into the plain outside the city and exploded into sheets of white light. Mushrooms of dust and dirt billowed up from the impacts, and ripples of concussion throbbed across the skyline of the city.

A second flurry of meteoric strikes flashed down into the outskirts of Magna Bonum, just inside the ruins of the once defiant city wall. The immense explosions pounded the rockcrete and tore buildings apart, sending waves of fire rushing through the streets. Huge fountains of rubble and broken masonry were thrown high into the air, only to rain down again like cannonballs into those structures that had survived the initial blasts.

The edges of the city and the plains of Bonum beyond were submerged under a blanket of brilliant white as the superheated charges from the bombardment shells fried the air itself. The orks at the gates and those that had just broken through into the city were instantly incinerated, leaving nothing but faint thermal shadows scorched into the crumbling rockcrete.

'Did everyone make it back?' asked Isador, looking past Gabriel and addressing the question to Sergeant Corallis.

'Nearly everyone,' answered the sergeant without turning. He couldn't take his eyes from the awesome scene before him. 'All functional Marines are within the limits of the cathedral compound. Some squads of Tartarans were cut off in their wall emplacements.'

Gabriel was just staring at the ruined remains of the city. The bombardment had prevented the loss of Magna Bonum, but it had levelled most of the city in the process. He was speechless as he struggled to reconcile himself with the wisdom of his decision. 'It had to be done,' said Corallis, turning at last and bowing slightly to his captain. 'The walls were breached and the orks were simply too numerous for us. The city was lost, captain.'

'And now it is won?' muttered Gabriel in self-recrimination.

Without saying a word, Isador walked slowly down the steps into the crowded plaza. The rattle of gunfire had started again, and the Librarian paused to look out into the streets nearby. Some of the orks had clearly penetrated more deeply into the city than the blast radius. He signalled to Colonel Brom, who was standing at the bottom of the steps with a group of subordinates, summoning him.

'Yes, Brother-Librarian Akios?' said Brom without ceremony as he walked over to Isador. 'I think that the Tartarans could have let the orks destroy Magna Bonum themselves, without the help of the Blood Ravens,' he added, as though unable to keep his rage bottled up.

'Quite possibly,' replied Isador. 'But the captain's purpose was to eradicate the orks, not to preserve your precious city, colonel. He has done Tartarus a service, even if you are too short-sighted to notice it.'

Brom smarted at the personal slight. 'Is this the same service he did for Cyrene?'

Isador's hand slapped across the colonel's face in a blur, knocking the man from his feet. 'You will not speak that way, colonel. Captain Angelos is an honourable man and a fine strategist. He does not take his responsibilities lightly.' Isador paused for a moment, conscious that he should not react too much to this provocation. 'Besides, colonel,' he continued, 'it seems that the Tartarans did quite a fine job of destroying their own forces, even before the bombardment.'

Climbing back to his feet and wiping the blood away from his lip, Brom replied. 'I am sure that the Blood Ravens know better than most not to listen to rumours, Librarian Akios.'

'Colonel Brom,' said Isador, ignoring the last slight, 'I expect that the Tartarans will want the honour of cleansing the remaining streets.'

Brom brushed the dust from his tunic and turned back to his subordinates. 'Sergeant Katrn, take your Armoured Fists squadron and sweep the ruins in the south of the city. Trooper Ckrius - you are now a squadron sergeant - form your own squad from whatever men you like and sweep the east.'



CHAPTER FOUR

'KNOCK IT OFF, all of you'z! We'ze movin' out!' bellowed Berzek, clattering the gretchin round their heads with a sweep of his huge arm. The grots snivelled and whined, flicking recriminating glances up at their massive keeper.

'We'ze not gonna stay an' fight?' asked one of them, scowling.

Berzek smashed the rotten little creature across its face with the mechanical claw that was bolted onto his forearm. The gretchin stumbled backwards and smacked into a wall, before it slumped to the ground whimpering.

'I'ze da biggest ork 'ere, which meanz I'ze da leada an' you'z a lousy bunch a gitz. We been waitin' an waitin' a fight deze marine-boyz, an' we'ze gonna stomp dem but good. To do dat, we need da strength of all da boyz, not a small weak mob ov runtz like you'z boyz.' As he splattered his words, Berzek reached out and gripped his power claw over the face of the fallen gretchin, lifting it up by its head and shaking it around for the others to see.

'We'ze orks! An' we'ze made for fightin'. Fightin' and winnin! So uze you'z skulls fa sumtin.' With that, Berzek clenched his fist and crushed the gretchin's head into a dripping, bloody pulp.

'We'ze gonna go get Big Boss Orkamungus. He got sumtin' special planned for deze humies,' explained Berzek with a cackle of phlegm building up in his throat. He spat it into the street, where it splattered over the dusty, red helmet of a fallen Marine.

THE GREAT VAULTED space in the cathedral was strung with ropes, from which swung artificial floors. The cathedral was one of the only large structures left undamaged by the bombardment, and it had been rapidly transformed into a medicae-station for the Imperial Guard and civilians of Magna Bonum. Each of the four temporary floors was already strewn with injured bodies, and servitors rushed between the makeshift beds administering pain-killers. There was little else they could do for the wounded until fresh supplies arrived.

'The remaining greenskins seem to be fleeing the city, captain,' said Colonel Brom. 'I sent out two squads and neither of them has reported any serious resistance. Sergeant Ckrius has indicated that a number of ork groups actually refused to engage with his troops. They fled when he approached. I assume that they have had enough of fighting for today.'

'You should never assume anything about the orks, colonel,' countered Gabriel, looking up from a large map that was spread over the altar of the cathedral. 'And you should certainly not think that they will ever have had enough of fighting. They live to fight, colonel. If they are fleeing, you may rest assured that it is not because your squad of Guardsmen scared them away. It is more likely because they have more important battles to fight later.'

'Colonel,' interjected Isador from the side of the altar, looking from Gabriel to Brom as though trying to build a bridge. 'Perhaps you can help us with this map? Orbital imaging from the *Litany of Fury* suggests that there is an even larger ork force massing in this area here,' said the Librarian pointing to a spot about fifty kilometres away from Magna Bonum. 'Can you tell us anything about that site, colonel?'

Colonel Brom hesitated for a moment, waiting for Gabriel to look up from the map again, but the captain didn't move. So Brom approached the altar with a nod to Isador, and inspected the map.

'That is the river basin that feeds the reservoirs for the city of Lloovre Marr,' said Brom, tracing his gloved finger along the valley floor towards the capital city. 'If they cut off the water, the city will not be able to stand against them for long. Our problem, however, is that the valley is the easiest approach to the city.' Brom traced his finger back across the site of the ork encampment towards Magna Bonum. 'And it is the only route along which we can transport heavy weaponry. The valley walls are sheer, and the plains on either side are thickly forested. We will not be able to reinforce the regiment in Lloovre Marr without passing the ork forces in the valley.'

'If you are right, colonel, then this is an unusually well planned assault by the greenskins. Their attack on Magna Bonum served merely to pull our forces into this city, while their real target was the capital.'

'And they have cut us off from that quite effectively,' said Gabriel, looking up at last.

'It would confirm reports that the main warboss was not actually part of the assault on Magna Bonum,' offered Corallis. 'The boss would stay with the bulk of his force, would he not?'

'You're right, sergeant. Dispatch a scout squad up into the forest on the rim of the valley, and let's see what these orks are planning. In the meantime, the Blood Ravens will move out in force and try to catch the ork army before it reaches the city. Colonel Brom, we may yet have need for your Tartarans.'

'EVERYTIN' IZ READY, boss!' spurted Berzek as he threw himself facedown into the swampy ground with his arms spread out wide in supplication.

'Dem humies is in fa a good stompin'!' replied Orkamungus, chuckling with colic. 'Dis is gonna be da best fight o' dere miserable lives!' The warboss stepped forward and trod affectionately on the back on Berzek's head, squashing his face further into the sodden ground until he started to thrash with suffocation. But a slippery voice oozed into Orkamungus's ear and disturbed his show of appreciation.

'Just make sure that it is the last fight of their lives,' hissed Sindri, as he walked out from the shadows of the forest.

Orkamungus turned in surprise, and pulled himself up to his full height when he saw Sindri and Bale standing before him. The Chaos Marines were imposing figures, resplendent in their shimmering power armour, but they were dwarfed by the immense physical presence of the ork warboss, who towered over them.

'I don't takes ordaz from you, humie,' bellowed Orkamungus, showering the Chaos sorcerer with globules of spittle and slimy ichor.

'We've kept our side of the bargain, ork,' said Bale, stepping forward past his sorcerer and spitting the words back at the huge creature. Bale was not about to be cowed by this brainless beast. 'You wanted a new planet on which to wage war, and we have given it to you.'

Sindri eased back into the conversation. 'You wanted to face the Imperium's finest warriors, remember? You wanted to face the Space Marines, Orkamungus. And they are here. We have given you the Blood Ravens.'

'We have even provided you with weapons to use against them,' rumbled Bale, bluntly insinuating that the ork force would have crumbled without the aid of the Alpha Legion.

Orkamungus howled at the slight and raised his immense hand, ready to level a blow against the Chaos Lord. 'We'ze don't need need yor fancy weaponz!' As he did so, a clatter from the shadows of the trees revealed a squad of Alpha Legionaries with their boltguns trained on the huge warboss. Bale himself had moved faster than everyone, having already stepped inside the range of the ork's strike with his manreaper scythe poised.

'All we ask in return,' said Sindri, filling the awkward moment with velvety tones, 'is that you keep your end of the bargain. We simply want you to keep the Imperials distracted from our operations here. I'm sure that you'll enjoy that.'

'You'ze kept your word, humie. Dat's da truth. But dat don't mean you'ze can orda da orks around,' said Orkamungus, eying Bale warily whilst talking to Sindri.

'My apologies. We've delivered the last of the weaponry,' continued Sindri, indicating the pile of crates on the edge of the tree-line. A group of orks were already prising open the containers and prodding about at the devices inside. 'I'm sure that you'll make sure they find their way into capable hands.' As he spoke, one of the orks yelped in pain as a plume of flame jetted out of one of the weapons it was holding, bathing his own head in fire.

'Now, if you will excuse us, we will take our leave. I... respectfully request that you keep the Blood Ravens busy for as long as you can,' said Sindri, bowing slightly in mock grandeur.

'Bah! We'ze keep dem more dan buzy. We'ze keep dem dead!' spat Orkamungus, stomping his foot down into the wet ground with a tremendous splash, missing Berzek's still-gasping head by fractions.

DISAPPEARING INTO THE shadows of the forest, the Alpha Legion squad moved rapidly towards their extraction point. The legionaries were fanned out around Sindri and Bale, defining a perimeter that bristled with barrels and blades. They were alert and focussed, just like their delusional brothers in the Adeptus Astartes, but they were also liberated from the pathetic constraints of the Imperial creed. The orks may have been their allies, but they knew better than to underestimate the greenskins' hatred towards humans. All humans. The legionaries scanned the forest for signs of an ambush.

'The thought of kowtowing to these filthy creatures disgusts me,' said Bale, his voice rich with anger. 'I hope you know what you're doing, sorcerer. Otherwise, I will throw you to them as a personal gift.' The Chaos lord was storming through the foliage, lost in the intensity of his own repulsion.

'The orks are a tool, my lord, nothing more,' said Sindri smoothly, keeping pace with Bale. 'And quite an effective one, I might add.'

'Perhaps,' coughed Bale, stopping abruptly and turning suddenly to grasp Sindri by the neck. 'But I dislike providing such unpredictable aliens with our own weaponry.'

'Lord Bale,' managed Sindri between gulps of air. 'Orks are not unpredictable. Quite the contrary.' The grip around his neck loosened and he dropped to the ground. Bale snorted roughly and started back towards the waiting drop-ship. Sindri rushed after him, abject, humiliated and fuming inside. 'You can rely on them to turn against you. But they will honour their agreement for as long as we can provide them with enemies to satisfy their lust for battle.'

'There are other ways to make people do as you please,' answered Bale with off-handed ferocity. 'Ways more appropriate to warriors of the Alpha Legion. If we intimidated them with our strength, then they would take pause before betraying us.'

'But my lord, you cannot intimidate something that knows nothing of fear.'

'I can teach them to fear the Alpha Legion, sorcerer,' countered Bale with calm certainty. 'Just as I have taught hundreds of worlds to tremble at our name.'

'My lord, trouble yourself no longer with these orks. They will serve their purpose. Already the pathetic Imperials will be heading for Lloovre Marr, in pursuit of the mob. We will have what we came for and be gone before the orks finish off the Imperials and turn on us.'

'The Blood Ravens are not fools, Sindri. The Alpha Legion have had dealings with them before. You risk underestimating our allies and our enemies, sorcerer, and that is not the kind of wisdom I need from you,' said Bale as he climbed up into the hatch of the drop-ship.

BERZEK SPAT A fountain of mud and blood out of his gaping mouth as he lay imprinted into the fecund earth. He looked up at the huge form of his warboss, and watched him foaming at the mouth. The immense ork was on the verge of catatonia, and Berzek didn't know whether to speak or to attempt to slither away. If he said the wrong thing, he would be stomped. If he said nothing, he could be stomped anyway. Orkamungus was one massively stompy ork.

'Why'ze we talkin' wit dem humies, boss? Why'ze we no fight wit dem good?' said Berzek from amidst a mouthful of swamp. His decision was made.

Orkamungus looked down at him in surprise, as though he'd forgotten all about him, or perhaps the boss simply assumed that the grunt had died.

'Dem smelly Chaos-boyz iz weak. Not nearly enuff of a challenge for orkz boyz. If dey were strong like orkz, dey no need us ta fight for dem.'

'We'ze takin' dere guns and dere help and, when we'ze done choppin' up all the otha humies, we'ze comin' back here to chop dem up az well,' said Orkamungus with surprising composure.

'Dat plan'z a good'un, boss,' offered Berzek in relief, as he realised that he was still alive.

THROUGH THE SHIFTING shadows of the foliage, Flaetriu flashed a signal to Kreusaur on the other side of the clearing. The rangers had been keeping their eyes on the ork camp when the Chaos Marines had dropped in, making sure that the stinking greenskins were not about to stray into the farseer's plans, and they had quickly melted further back into the forest to observe the events that unfolded. Now, with half of the Alpha Legion squad already in the drop-ship, the rangers could contain their disgust no longer. As one, the rangers opened up with their shuriken catapults, transforming the clearing into a mist of tiny, hissing projectiles. The air was perforated by the rattles of rapid impacts against the power armour of a clutch of Chaos Marines, who dived for cover behind the hatch of the drop-ship. But there was no cover, because the eldar had the clearing surrounded.

'Orks?' bellowed a rumbling voice from inside the drop-ship, and thunderous footfalls could be heard storming back down the ramp.

'No, my lord,' hissed Sindri, who was still on the ground. He turned his head slowly, taking in every shadow in the tree-line, apparently oblivious to the hail of lethal molecules that were hurtling about the glade.

'How many?' asked Bale as he leapt from the top of the ramp and thumped into the ground next to the sorcerer, his huge scythe glowing with thirst.

'Two, I think,' replied Sindri as his eyes settled on those of the invisible Flaetriu. 'Two eldar.'

The sorcerer stabbed his force staff into the turf and sent an arc of purple energy sizzling through the canopy. It smashed into a tree, which burst into incandescence instantly. But the ranger was already gone.

'Two? Where are they?' asked Bale, his head snapping from side to side as the incessant shuriken bounced and ricocheted off the armoured plating on the drop-ship, giving the impression that the eldar were everywhere at once. He couldn't see them.

Sindri ignored Lord Bale and lashed out with another bolt of lightning that incinerated another tree and brought a scream of frustration from the mouth of the sorcerer.

A wail of pain made them turn, just in time to see one of their Marines shredded by a focussed barrage of shuriken projectiles. He was riddled with tiny holes all across his abdomen, as though each of his major organs and both of his hearts had been shot through. He had fallen forwards onto his knees and blood was pouring out of the joints in his armour, from around the edges of his shattered helmet, and from the hundreds of tiny wounds all over his body.

Bale took a step towards him and swung his scythe cleanly through the Marine's neck, taking his head off with a single strike.

'Silence!' he yelled, still searching the tree-line for signs of movement.

A series of heavier impacts suddenly strafed across the ground towards Bale's feet, coughing up little divots with each strike. They weren't shuriken hits, it was bolter fire. Bale spun to face the other side of the clearing and saw a squad of Blood Ravens scouts burst through the thicket with their boltguns blazing.

The Alpha Legionaries responded instantly, turning their guns onto these new targets and rolling for positions of cover behind rocks and the ramp of the drop-ship. Bale howled with relief - at last he had enemies that he could see - enemies he could kill. Without any regard for the torrent of bolter shells that whistled and streaked past him in both directions, Bale broke into a run, charging through the crossfire at the Blood Ravens scouts with his scythe whirling round his head.

Sergeant Mikaelus rallied his men with a battle cry, knowing full well that his scout squad, formidable though it was, was no match for a full battle squad of Chaos Marines. 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he yelled, receiving an echo from his men. The scouts were relatively new initiates into the Chapter, but even they knew of the Alpha Legion and the particular hatred felt towards them by the Blood Ravens. None of them would have thought twice about launching this attack, despite the probability of death.

Lord Bale was on top of the line of Blood Ravens in an instant, his scythe flashing with vile energies as he brayed bestially. The scouts fought valiantly, sending disciplined salvoes of bolter fire sleeting across the glade and punching into the cover of the Alpha Legionaries. But their cover held, and the scouts had only trees and foliage to protect their armour from the onslaught that burst back across the clearing.

Two scouts were already pierced with fatal wounds when Bale hacked through their necks with a majestic sweep of his blade, and three more had been brought down in a hail of fire as they had charged towards the drop-ship with their own guns blazing with honour.

Mikaelus placed a careful shot straight into the eye-socket of a Chaos Marine who poked his head over the ship's ramp to make his own shot.

The Blood Ravens would take some of these traitors with them. As he drew his combat knife and charged towards the Chaos Lord who was scything through his squad Mikaelus sprayed a spread of automatic fire towards the muttering sorcerer in the centre of the glade.

He was only a couple of strides away when the burst of power smashed into his back, sending Mikaelus sprawling to the ground at the Chaos lord's feet, his combat knife falling just out of reach. Something was forcing its way through his armour and infusing into his blood. He could feel fire pulsing through his veins, as though his body had been injected with raw warp taint. The scream of another scout brought sudden silence to the forest, and Mikaelus felt the burning certainty that he was the last of his squadron. 'That was pathetic, Marine,' spat Bale, rolling Mikaelus onto his back with a prod from his barbed boots. 'I have come to expect better from the Blood Ravens over the years. But I suppose that you are not what you once were.' Bale stooped down and picked up Mikaelus's knife, flipping it playfully in his hand. 'I had heard, in fact, that some of you might show enough promise for me to welcome you into the Alpha Legion.'

The sorcerous energies pulsing in his blood racked Mikaelus with agonies of paralysis, depriving him of his last wish - to spit his hatred into the face of this Chaos lord.

'I suppose that I must have heard wrongly,' said Bale, catching the combat knife and plunging it down through the chest of the Blood Raven at his feet.

'THE FORCES OF Chaos have revealed their hand, farseer,' reported Flaetriu, bowing deeply to the seated figure in the trees. 'Yes, Flaetriu. They too have a role to play in this affair, although the presence of the Alpha Legion changes the balance of power here. You were right to attack them, ranger, even if you were too hasty.' A look of deep concern glided across Macha's beautiful face. 'How did the other humans fare against their dark brethren?' 'Not well, farseer. Not well at all.'

THE CONVOY RUMBLED on through the valley, with the wide treads of Rhinos, Razorbacks and Predator tanks flattening everything before them. The Whirlwind missile launchers had already ground to a halt as they came into range, and the sky above the convoy was streaked with vapour trails from the flurry of rockets that were being loosed over the horizon. At the head of the column were a spread of assault bikes and the hovering forms of land speeders, which darted ahead and then dropped back into line on reconnaissance sorties. The bulk of the Blood Ravens' force, however, was led by the massive weight of the Predators and Vindicators. Flanking them were the remnants of the Tartarans' heavy weaponry: some spluttering Leman Russ tanks, a squadron of Hellhounds, and a couple of Basilisks, both of which were starting to pull off to the side to start their barrage of earthshaker artillery from long range.

The impacts of the ranged ordnance could already be felt on the ground. As the distant thuds drew nearer, rockslides started to cascade down the steep valley walls and the water in the river jumped with kinetic energy. In their hearts, many of the Tartarans hoped that the bombardment would be enough, and that the ork army would already be shattered by the time they arrived. But, as they rounded a bend in the meandering valley, the thunderous wailing of orks ready for battle rolled over the convoy, squashing any thoughts of an easy victory.

The valley was overflowing with ugly, snarling jaws, huge jagged teeth and massive green muscles. The greenskins were erratically spread across the river basin, randomly bunched into growling mobs, each ork jostling for position at the front of their groups. There were craters in the valley floor where the Whirlwind rockets had done their damage, each carpeted with broken green bodies. But for every ork that had fallen under the rain of rocket-fire, twenty more snarled with defiant thirst as the Blood Ravens swept around the meander in the valley. And when they caught sight of the humans, every greenskin throat was opened into a terrible keening for war: 'Waaagh!'

Ordnance started to fall onto the Imperium's forces as the range closed and the ork mortars began to hurl stikkbombz. By the time the Rhinos and Chimeras screeched to a halt, spewing Marines and Tartarans onto the valley floor, the Imperial column was caught in the eye of a pungent, smoky storm.

As battle was joined across the whole valley floor, with rockets and artillery shells pounding the ork position and a flood of troops firing hails of bullets into their disorganised lines, a Thunderhawk roared through the sky over the Imperial forces, its guns ablaze in salute to the Emperor and His Blood Ravens. The soldiers on the ground raised their weapons and cheered as they saw Captain Angelos's personal heraldry fluttering from the roof of the vessel.

The lascannons on the gunship flared and pulsed, sending streams of las-fire slicing into the orks as it descended onto the valley floor, burning gaggles of orks as it came down straight on top of them. The vessel dove into the middle of the ocean of green, cut off from the Imperial troops, but providing them with a rallying point in the heart of the enemy lines. With a clunk and a hiss, the hatch popped open and Gabriel leapt clear of the ramp with a single bound, his chainsword already a blur of motion and his bolt pistol coughing. Close behind him was Isador, dropping to the ground below the Thunderhawk and calmly surveying his surroundings before lashing out with his force staff, sending a ring of energy pulsing out into the pressing perimeter of orks that encircled the gunship.

Then came Tanthius, crunching into the rocky ground with the full weight of his Terminator armour, his squad thudding down around him. A huge eruption of firepower burst out of the vanguard group, with the Terminators towering over the orks and unleashing waves of autocannon fire and sleets of bolter shells from their storm bolters. Jets of chemical flame doused the charging orks, sending them wailing and screaming into the river for relief, only to be cut down by the Thunderhawk's gun-servitors.

The unexpected penetration into the heart of the orks' position took the greenskins by surprise, and some of the forces that were charging towards the Imperial convoy broke off in confusion. Turning, they started charging back through their own brethren, knocking each other aside in the frantic scramble to engage their enemies. For a while, it looked as though they would start fighting amongst themselves, and the Imperial column took advantage of the confusion to press forward into the sea of green, pushing an incursion through it like a lance into the heart of the ork infantry.

Meanwhile, the Thunderhawk was back in the sky, hovering over the battlefield and employing its lascannons to great effect in the confined space of the valley floor. Beneath it, the Terminators stood immovably against the tide of orks that rushed, dived, and charged at them, ploughing through their number with a combination of continuous bursts of heavy fire and simple, brute force from their power fists. In amongst the throng, standing back to back in their own pocket of resistance, Gabriel and Isador fought off the mob with incredible ferocity and skill. Gabriel's bolt pistol had jammed, leaving him with only his chainsword and his combat knife to dispense the Emperor's benevolence. And Isador was alight with divine grace, slicing and searing with his staff as though guided by the hand of the Emperor himself.

Gabriel felt more alive than he had felt in years. It was almost like dancing, as he parried a cleaver chop with one hand and spun his combat knife in the other, plunging it up to its hilt into the ear of the offending ork. The screams and inhuman shrieks of combat gradually faded out of his hearing, only to be replaced by a single searing note of unbelievable beauty. The voice multiplied into a choir, filling his soul with light and washing over the action around him, making it seem clumsy and slow in

comparison. Gabriel ducked and swirled with unprecedented grace, slicing cleanly through limbs with his chainsword and pushing his short combat knife into all the soft, vulnerable places of ork anatomy.

The explosions of ordnance fire boomed in the background, and Gabriel was vaguely aware of it as his knife stuck in the neck of a greenskin. He kicked the beast clear of his blade before turning and throwing it into the snarling, open mouth of another. With only his chainsword left, he clasped it in both hands and swung it powerfully around in an arc, slicing through the guts of six orks as they tried to close him down from three sides. Behind him, Gabriel could feel the motion of Isador as the Librarian flared with power, dispatching orks three at a time with blasts from his staff or fingertips. The pair were gradually cutting a path further and further into the ork forces, moving away from the Terminators on their own.

Whispering voices quested for their ears as they fought onwards into the orks. *Kill. Kill. Bleed them dry. It is your responsibility. We all look to you. Drench the soil with their blood. Kill. Kill.* Suddenly the silvery voices of the heavenly choir were shattered again by the screams of tortured souls, and Gabriel shrieked with pain as Isador's staff scraped across his chest before cracking into the ork that was about to plant its cleaver in his head.

AS GABRIEL WALKED through the forest, he could still hear pockets of fighting continuing amongst the trees. The bulk of the ork army had been broken, and most lay dead in the valley, with their pungent blood running red in the river. The thump of dreadnought footfalls and the rattles of their autocannons could still be heard as the last of the fleeing orks were mopped up by the Blood Ravens. Small groups of the greenskins were mustering for their last stands, desperate to make one more kill before they died.

Gabriel had been slightly concerned that they had not found any orks large enough to be the warboss of such a significant force, but he had other things to attend to and he let a squad of scouts disappear into the forest to hunt down the ork leader. He had also noticed that a number of the larger orks appeared to have Imperial weaponry, including the boltguns such as Space Marines used. It was not uncommon for a few of these scavenger creatures to have weapons from other races, but the numbers here were noticeably larger than he expected. He was increasingly suspicious that there was more to this ork invasion than a typical greenskin jaunt.

'Captain Angelos,' said Sergeant Corallis, hastening from a clearing in the trees ahead. Corallis's face was crestfallen and he was obviously distraught. As he approached, Gabriel noticed that he was carrying something roughly hemispherical in his hands.

'It's Kuros,' breathed the sergeant, pushing the object towards his captain.

Gabriel reached out and took the shoulder plate, nodding in understanding. The underside of the armoured panel was covered in a thick layer of carbon, as though it had been used as a bowl in which to overcook some meat. 'What happened to this?' asked Gabriel, handing the shoulder guard over to Isador but addressing his question to Corallis.

'It was still attached to his body, captain,' explained Corallis, tremulous with anger and disgust. 'He is burnt beyond recovery of his gene-seed. Something seems to have reached into his soul and burnt him from the inside out.'

'What about the others?' asked Isador.

Gabriel placed his hand on Corallis's shoulder. 'It's not your fault, Brother Corallis.'

'They were my squad, captain. I should have been with them.' Corallis punched his right fist against his left shoulder, where his left arm should have been. 'This is a pathetic excuse.'

'Corallis, this is not your fault. Sergeant Mikaelus was leading the squad. He is a fine Marine and a devoted servant of the Emperor. You could not have left your squad in better hands,' said Gabriel.

'Mikaelus is also dead, captain, along with the rest of the squad. Their bodies are up there in the clearing.' Corallis would not be consoled.

'Are they all burnt like this?' asked Isador with concerned tone.

'No, Librarian Akios. Only Kuros is like this. Mikaelus is worse. Most of the others died like warriors, and we will be able to recover their gene-seed,' answered Corallis, turning to lead them back to the clearing.

The little glade was a scene of carnage. The bodies of the scout squad were strewn over the rocks and grass, lying in ruined poses, in pools of blood that matched the deep reds of their armour. The trees around the edge of the clearing were battered and shredded with bolter holes, and patches of the ground were scorched into dry browns.

Mikaelus was lying on his back across a large rock in the centre of the glade. His face was contorted with pain and his skin was blistered, as though burnt on the inside. Protruding from his chest was the handle of his own combat knife, and the earth around the rock was sodden with blood, as though he had been slowly drained of his life.

'He was still alive when we found him, captain. But his mind had gone. His soul had already left this realm, and he was rambling like a conduit to hell itself,' said Corallis numbly.

Scratched into Mikaelus's armour was a crude mark. It looked like it had been carved with the tip of a dagger, or gnawed with a claw. In a vulgar way, it resembled an eight-pointed star.

'This is not the work of orks, Gabriel,' said Isador, giving voice to the feelings of everyone. 'This is a mark of the ruinous powers. It is a mark of Chaos.'

'He is right, captain,' added Corallis. 'The others were killed by bolter fire, not by slugs or cleavers. Boltguns are the weapons of Marines, not aliens.'

'Perhaps, Corallis,' said Gabriel.

'And the burns, Gabriel. They are warp burns, of the kind unleashed by sorcerers of Chaos. This looks like the work of a squad of traitor Marines,' concluded Isador reluctantly.

'The documents you found about Tartarus, Isador, did they say anything about what happened to it during the Black Crusades? Is there any history of Champions of Chaos bringing war to this planet?' asked Gabriel, still unwilling to make the logical leap.

'The great book does not mention these things, Gabriel, but I suspect that the tome is incomplete. I have a number of curators investigating the archives already,' replied Isador.

'Isador, can you sense anything unusual in this place?' asked Gabriel without daring to look the Librarian in the eyes, but willing to trust the senses of his old friend.

The Librarian concentrated for a moment, opening his mind to the eddies and energy flows of the glade. Instantly a flood of voices crashed into his head, screaming and shouting of pain and death. But there, hidden behind the Shockwaves of the slaughter, was a careful, delicate whisper, trying to slip unnoticed into his soul. He had heard that voice before, and he hesitated slightly before replying.

'No. No, Gabriel, I have sensed nothing since we arrived. But if there is a sorcerer of Chaos with the enemy, he may be able to mask their presence, especially with all the background static caused by the battles and the uncouth aliens.' Isador looked away into the trees, as though looking for someone.

'There is something else you should see, captain,' said Corallis, leading Gabriel to a point on the other side of the glade, pointing out the burns left by the thrusters of a drop-ship.

'This,' said Corallis, picking up a fragment of ceramite from the grass. 'This is not Blood Ravens armour, and it was not shot by a bolter.'

The shard of ceramite looked as if it had been punched out of the armour of a Space Marine, but it was a dull, acid green. Moreover, it was perforated by a series of tiny holes, barely a couple of centimetres across.

'It looks to me, Corallis,' said Gabriel, 'like our friends the Alpha Legion are on Tartarus, and that we are not the only ones who are not pleased to see them. These are shuriken marks, are they not? It seems that the orks are just a distraction from the main game.'



PART TWO



CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOREST SHUDDERED and rippled, sending Shockwaves of green pulsing across the canopy. A couple of seconds later and the Thunderhawk dropped slowly down through the trees, its engines roaring and whining as they fought for a soft landing. The gunship came down just outside the busy clearing, crushing trees and plants like blades of grass.

Gabriel and Isador watched the vessel descend in silence. They already knew who was waiting for them inside, but they were not sure why he had come to Tartarus. The *Litany of Fury* had not been sent any warning of his arrival, but the crew had managed to get a message down to surface before the inquisitor could requisite one of the Chapter's Thunderhawks and make planetfall himself.

The two Blood Ravens cast their eyes around the scene of carnage in the glade, and shook their heads. There were dead Marines strewn over the ground, and one that had apparently been ritually sacrificed across a rock in the centre of the clearing. It didn't look good.

'What do you think he wants?' asked Isador, voicing the worry of everyone. 'Do you suppose that he suspects one of us of heresy?' 'He is an inquisitor, Isador, protector of the Emperor's divine word and will. He suspects everyone of heresy,' answered Gabriel flatly. 'That is his job.'

'Perhaps he has sensed the taint of Chaos on this world?' offered Corallis, looking back towards the ruined figure of Mikaelus.

'Yes, perhaps,' replied Gabriel, as the hatch hissed open on the Thunderhawk and its boarding ramp lowered slowly.

Isador took half a step back as Inquisitor Mordecai Toth strode down the ramp towards the group of Marines, and Gabriel stood forward to greet him. Despite the absence of a Space Marine's suit of power armour, Mordecai was an imposing man. He was tall and well muscled, and his dark skin glistened under the dappled light of the forest. His armour was elaborately etched with runes and sprinkled with purity seals. Emblazoned on his chest was the Imperial "I", marking out the inquisitor's almost limitless authority in the realm of the Emperor. A great book of law, sealed with locks and runes of binding, was chained around his waist, and an ornate warhammer swung casually from his right hand as he strode down the ramp.

'Inquisitor Toth,' said Gabriel, drawing himself up to his full height in front of the newcomer. 'Welcome to Tartarus.' The captain spared a quick nod for each of the two Blood Ravens who had accompanied the inquisitor from the *Litany of Fury*, and he noticed that a nervous-looking curator from the librarium was still hovering in the hatchway behind them clutching a package of papers. For a moment, Mordecai looked Gabriel up and down, the movements of his one human eye not quite matched by those of his augmented bio-monocle, which seemed to take in the rest of the glade. 'Thank you, captain, but we have no time for welcomes or courtesies. The Blood Ravens must leave Tartarus immediately.'

THE GUARDSMAN PRODDED the stonework gingerly, pressing his gloves up against the intricate carvings, tracing the forms of the runes. They seemed to slip and slide under his touch, as though striving to avoid his fingers. But the man's eyes gleamed with a long forgotten magic, as though something primal were gradually seeping out of his pupils. The runes on the stone were reaching into his soul, even as they danced and swam around his fingertips.

Behind him, he could hear the voices of his comrades, each barely a whisper as they jostled for better positions. One or two of them were getting impatient, and he was certain that they were complaining about how long it was taking him to decipher the symbols. Up on the rim of the crater, a row of men stood guard, keeping their eyes peeled for any sign of movement in the surrounding wilds.

The stone was roughly cut, but slick with recently let blood. It was stained a rich, deep brown where countless trails of blood had caressed the sides of the altar, streaming their way into the fertile earth below. Tavett could almost feel the energy pulsing along the stains, as though they were themselves veins. Even through his gloves, the rock altar seemed to throb with inorganic life. Firing a quick glance over his shoulder to check on his comrades, Tavett sprung from his kneeling position, launching himself onto the surface of the stone altar. He could hear his companions shriek as they saw him jump, and their rapid footfalls filled his ears as he spread himself across the cold stone tablet. They are so pathetically slow, thought Tavett. That's why I was chosen, because I'm better than they are. My blood burns, and they are nothing more than cold husks.

By the time Sergeant Katrn had reached the altar it was already too late. Tavett lay on his stomach with his arms and legs outstretched to the corners of the tablet, as though struggling to embrace its huge form. His uniform was ripped to shreds, and his back was a web of lacerations and carved symbols. Blood poured out of him, coasting over his skin and gushing down the wriggling runes on the sides of the altar. His head was pushed round, so that he was looking awkwardly to the side, as though his neck was broken. And he was chattering incoherently as trickles of blood seeped out of his open mouth, a grotesque smile etched into his emaciated cheeks.

Katrn watched the ruined trooper with a fixed expression, staring with a mixture of hatred, anger, revulsion and jealousy. Why had that wretch Tavett been gifted with this glorious end? The little runt wouldn't even have been here if it wasn't for Katrn's leadership. He had shown no understanding of the true nature of combat and war until Katrn had skewered him with his own bayonet on the walls of Magna Bonum. Only then, as Katrn had stared down into his streaming face, had a flash of realisation seared into Tavett's stricken mind: blood for the Blood God - that's what war was for.

The sergeant looked down at the bloodied form of Tavett and saw the last flickers of ecstasy dying in his eyes. There was still blood in him, still some life left to be bled before his soul would be sucked from him and cast into the unspeakable realms of the immaterium, where it would be enveloped in the ichorous embrace of the daemons of Khorne. Katrn shook his head in disgust and drew his pistol, firing directly into Tavett's temple. This wretch was not a fit sacrifice for the Blood God, and he was certainly not deserving of such a glorious end.

As the shot passed straight through Tavett's head and ricocheted off the stone beneath, something else stabbed into Katrn's shoulder. He spun on his heels just in time to see the rest of the Guardsmen rack their weapons, some of them already diving for cover behind the altar and others wailing into shredded deaths as hails of shuriken rained down from the rim of the crater. A lance of pleasure fired through his shoulder as a trickle of blood started to soak into his tunic. Instinctively, he pressed a finger into the tiny wound and drew out more blood, letting it drip to the ground in great globules.

Thrilled, Katrn levelled his pistol as he ducked behind the stone of the altar and fired off a couple of rounds, but the figures around the pit were constantly moving and he could not target them. They flicked and fluttered with incredible speed, almost dancing around the crater, but constantly loosing hails of fire into the pit. Despite himself, Katrn found himself marvelling at the grace of his assailants. Compared to the orks and even to the Blood Ravens, these were enchantingly elegant warriors.

'Bancs! Let's have some grenades up there,' called Katrn, as the trooper came flying over the altar into the pocket of cover behind. 'Yes, sergeant,' replied Bancs, instantly rummaging into his pack for frag-grenade ammunition for his shoulder launcher. 'What are they, sergeant?'

'I'm not sure, Bancs. I've never seen anything like them. Could be eldar,' answered Katrn, still gazing in wonder at the attackers as they ducked and bobbed their way around volleys of las-fire from Katrn's Armoured Fist squad.

'I'm sure that they'll bleed just like the rest of us,' answered Bancs enthusiastically, ramming the ammunition stock into his weapon and bracing it against the edge of the altar.

'Yes,' said Katrn. 'I'm sure they will. All the same, I think that it's time to leave this place. We will be missed. We have to get back to camp.'

The clunk and hiss of the grenade launcher was followed by a series of explosions around the rim of the crater, which sent mud and rubble sliding down into the pit in miniature avalanches. The eldar seemed to vanish, and it was impossible to tell whether any had been hit by the blasts. After a few seconds, another rain of grenades shot over the lip of the crater, detonating over the open ground beyond. There was still no sign or sound of the eldar.

'Let's move out,' said Katrn, waving his bloody arm like a banner for the rest of the squad.

The Armoured Fists squad and the ramshackle assortment of other troopers that Katrn had recruited from the regiment during the battle for Magna Bonum scrambled up the walls of the crater on their hands and knees. Peering over the rim, Katrn could see the pockmarks left in the ground by the grenades, but there were no bodies and no blood had been spilt. Scanning his eyes quickly through the tree-line, he waved a signal to his men, and they all pulled themselves clear of the pit, readying their weapons as they ascended onto the level ground. But no shots came.

'I don't like this,' said Bancs, his head twitching nervously from side to side. 'Maybe they don't bleed like us... I think I preferred fighting the orks.'

'Shut it, Bancs,' hissed Katrn, silencing the anxious trooper with a powerful authority that even surprised himself.

'S... sergeant—' started Bancs, unable to control himself.

'—I said shut it, Bancs. What are you...' Katrn followed the trooper's horrified gaze and saw his own blood seeping out of his wounded shoulder and wrapping itself around his right arm. The blood was congealing and solidifying, as though sculpting muscles out of blood on the outside of his body. A rush of power flooded into his mind as he watched the awful mutation of his arm. A mark of Khorne, thrilled Katrn, turning to gaze back down on the altar, still bedecked with the tattered remains of Tavett. 'Bancs, give me your cloak. Now, let's get back to the camp.'

THE GRENADES EXPLODED around the rim of the crater, but Flaetriu's rangers had already withdrawn into the trees. The farseer had told them to prevent any bloodshed in the pit, not to slaughter the humans, and Flaetriu was as good as his word. How was he supposed to know that the weak-willed mon-keigh would butcher themselves, even without the help of the Biel-Tan?

From the shadows of the forest, Flaetriu watched the second rain of grenades and scoffed quietly. A blind ordnance barrage was no way to fight eldar rangers, and he laughed inwardly as the scrambling, crawling mon-keigh flopped over the lip of the crater, confident that they had dealt a deadly blow to their foes. The fools.

'Flaetriu,' said Kreusaur, appearing at his shoulder and pointing a long slender arm. 'What is happening to that one?' The eldar's keen eyes could make out the grotesquery that was squirming around the mon-keigh's shoulder and enveloping his arm. 'Should we kill him?'

'No, Kreusaur. The farseer was very explicit - there is to be no bloodshed here. We must let them leave,' answered Flaetriu, fighting against his nature. 'We should fetch her now, before this commotion attracts the attention of the orks.'

The two rangers took one last look at the group of humans, who were making ready to leave. Then they flashed a quick signal to the rest of their party, turned, and vanished back into the forest.

'YOU MUST LEAVE, and that is final,' said Mordecai without raising his voice. His manner was infuriatingly calm, as though he was asking Gabriel to do the most natural thing in the world.

The men had retired into the Thunderhawk in order to conduct their conversation in privacy. Gabriel and Mordecai were on opposing sides of the uncomfortable drop-bay, sitting into harness fixings usually used by Marines in rough descents. The Thunderhawk was not designed with conferences in mind, and neither man was happy with the inappropriate surroundings for their important discussion. Standing in the hatchway that led into the cockpit was Cams Brom, who had insisted that he should be included in any decisions that might effect the defence of Tartarus.

'You will need to give me a better reason than that, inquisitor,' replied Gabriel, teetering on the edge of composure.

'I need give you nothing of the sort, captain,' countered Mordecai, leaning back in mock relaxation, hiding his face in the shadows, and letting the light reflect off the insignia on his breast plate.

'I am well aware of the powers and function of the Emperor's Inquisition, inquisitor. You may well have the authority to evacuate every last civilian and Guardsman off this planet,' said Gabriel with a casual nod towards Brom. 'But you are very much mistaken if you think that I will cede command of the Blood Ravens to you. The Adeptus Astartes are not common soldiers, inquisitor, and I will thank you to show us the appropriate respect.'

The inquisitor leaned forward again, bringing his face back into the light, and gazing levelly into Gabriel's keen green eyes. He nodded slowly and then leant back into the shadows. 'Very well, captain, I realise that you have had experience of the Inquisition before.' He watched Gabriel smart slightly, and then continued. 'If you must have a reason, then I shall give you one: a giant warp storm is sweeping through this sector of the galaxy, wreaking turmoil and havoc on each world that it touches. It is pregnant with the forces of Chaos and it is unclear what fate might befall any life-forms touched by its wrath. It will arrive imminently, and it could trap us here on Tartarus for more than a century, raining the terrors of warp energy into our souls each moment. We must evacuate the planet, and we must do it now. Would you like me to explain that again, so that we can waste some more time, captain?'

'The Imperial Guard can attend to the evacuation, inquisitor. We have already given them the use of some of our transport vessels to assist with the wounded civilians. The matter is already in hand, and I am sure that Colonel Brom here is more than capable of ensuring the success of such a logistical exercise. The Blood Ravens, however, are not logisticians, inquisitor. We are Space Marines, and we have more pressing issues to attend to,' replied Gabriel, conscious of Brom's eyes from the cockpit.

'More pressing issues?' asked Mordecai, raising an inquiring eyebrow.

'Yes, inquisitor. I have reason to believe that there are forces of Chaos working on this planet,' answered Gabriel simply.

The inquisitor said nothing for a few moments, and Gabriel could only vaguely see his face in the shadows. Then Mordecai leant forward, pushing his face towards Gabriel, his eyes dancing in the sudden light.

'Strange that I sense no taint here, captain,' he said, almost whispering. 'In any case,' he continued in a more casual tone, 'if there were a Chaos presence on Tartarus, it would be better for us to leave it here with the orks, rather than wasting any more lives trying to combat it. Believe me, captain, we could not dispense any fate worse than that which will be dealt out by the storm itself - these forces of Chaos and the orks will not be able to stand against each other and the storm.'

'What if they do not need to stand against each other? I suspect that the orks and the Chaos powers are in cahoots on Tartarus, inquisitor. Could they not stand together against the storm?' asked Gabriel, his voice earnest and firm.

'They are welcome to try, captain. But we must leave here, and we must leave now,' said Mordecai, leaning back into the harness once again and letting out a quiet sigh of exasperation.

'You may leave whenever you like, inquisitor, and the Blood Ravens will gladly donate the use of our transport facilities for your purpose. We, on the other hand, will stay long enough to satisfy our suspicions and settle our affairs. How long until the storm arrives?' asked Gabriel, his mind made up.

'Three days, captain. Perhaps less.' The inquisitor turned to Brom for the first time and waved his hand dismissively. 'Colonel Brom, would you be kind enough to leave us alone for a moment? The captain and I have some matters of faith to discuss.' The Imperial Guard colonel stared back at Mordecai and then shifted his gaze to Gabriel, searching for an unlikely ally. 'With all due respect, Inquisitor Toth, this affair involves me and the Tartarans as much as it does any of you. Tartarus is our home, and we know it better than anyone. I have heard stories of this warp storm before - legends speak of it visiting this planet once every three thousand years, bringing with it—'

'—that's all very interesting, colonel,' said Mordecai, cutting him off and rising to his feet. 'But perhaps I did not make myself clear? When I asked you to leave us, I expected that you would leave the Thunderhawk now.'

Brom's mouth snapped shut and his eyes narrowed as he met the inquisitor's gaze. 'As you wish, Inquisitor Toth,' he said, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. He turned to face Gabriel and bowed very slightly. 'Captain Angelos, I take my leave.'

Gabriel did not stand, but he nodded an acknowledgement to Brom as the latter turned and strode rigidly down the boarding ramp. 'Thank you, Colonel Brom,' he said softly, unsure whether Brom could hear him or not.

'This does involve him, inquisitor. He may well have some knowledge that could be of use to us - and knowledge is power, as you well know. You could have shown him more respect,' said Gabriel as Mordecai retook his seat.

'Captain Angelos,' began Mordecai, ignoring Gabriel's protests on the behalf of Brom. 'I understand that you uncovered deep-rooted heresy and the taint of Chaos on the planet Cyrene. That was your homeworld, was it not?'

Startled by this sudden shift in the conversation, Gabriel recoiled. 'I fail to see how that is relevant to the present situation, inquisitor, even if I were disposed to discuss it, which I am not.'

'You should feel free to discuss such things with me, Gabriel,' said Mordecai ingratiatingly. 'I may not be your precious Chaplain Prathios, but I am an agent of the Emperor's Inquisition and nothing needs to be hidden from me.'

'Even so, Inquisitor Toth,' replied Gabriel formally, 'I cannot see what Cyrene has to do with this situation on Tartarus.'

'That is why you are not an inquisitor, Gabriel,' said Mordecai, smoothly persisting with his familiar tone. 'As I recall, you were the one who requested the assistance of the Inquisition in the performance of an exterminatus on Cyrene - the systematic annihilation of all life on the planet - genocide by another name.'

'Toth, I'm not sure what you're trying to do here, but you are succeeding in trying my patience,' said Gabriel, anger tingeing his voice.

'I am not questioning your loyalty, captain. But I am concerned that your actions on Cyrene may have affected you in ways that even you do not fully understand.' Mordecai paused to take in Gabriel's response, but the Blood Raven's face was simply knitted in anger. 'In particular,' he continued, 'I must wonder whether your actions there might have effected your judgement here.'

With a sudden crack, the harness behind Gabriel whipped out of its fixings in the wall, sending a little shower of adamantium raining down over the two men. Gabriel released his grip on the straps as he realised that he had been pulling them unconsciously. He said nothing, but just stared at the inquisitor with burning green eyes. Mordecai held up his hands, as though signalling that he didn't mean to be confrontational. He knew that he had gone too far, and he made a mental note of Gabriel's limits.

'Perhaps that was a... poor choice of words, Captain Angelos,' said Mordecai, retreating into formality once again. 'My fear, captain, is simply that you may have become oversensitive to the appearance of taints of Chaos following the ordeal on Cyrene. It would be quite understandable.'

'Are you suggesting that I am making this up? Have you seen the Marines in the clearing outside!?' asked Gabriel, his voice grating with volume and indignance.

'No, captain. I am merely asking that, as a loyal subject of the Emperor, you keep the interests of the Imperium in mind before your own... agenda.' The inquisitor was choosing his words carefully now, intending to make Gabriel think without being overly inflammatory.

'I suggest that you leave my Thunderhawk, inquisitor,' said Gabriel, rising to his feet and indicating the boarding ramp, 'for the good of the Imperium.' Inquisitor Toth may have commandeered the vessel from the *Litany of Fury*, but it was still a Blood Ravens' gunship.

Toth rose and stood directly in front of Gabriel, staring him in the face with deep brown, almost black eyes. He was shorter than the captain, and lighter. Gabriel's power armour transformed him into a giant, superhuman warrior, but Toth faced him calmly. He had confronted Space Marines before and was not about to be intimidated by this captain. 'Thank you for your time, Captain Angelos. We will talk again soon,' he said, before turning and making his way out into the forest.

ISADOR AND CORALLIS found Gabriel still in the Thunderhawk. He was kneeling quietly, as though in mediation, and Isador could hear faint whispers questing through the air. The captain's face was calm and his eyebrows were slightly raised, as though he were listening to a majestic symphony. A tear ran down his rough cheek, vanishing into the depths of an old scar, and a trace of light danced along its tail. In the shadows at the far end of the chamber sat Prathios, half hidden and perfectly silent. He nodded to the two Marines as they entered the chamber.

With a sudden gasp, Gabriel flicked open his eyes and stared directly ahead. His eyes were wide and burning, as though gazing on some distant horror. Then it was over and he seemed to return to himself; turning his head to face Isador he smiled faintly.

'Isador, it is good to see you. We have much to discuss,' he said, rising to his feet and gesturing for the Marines to join him.

'Are you alright, Gabriel?' asked his old friend, momentarily looking around the chamber for the source of the whispers, which seemed to persist even after Gabriel's meditations ended.

'Yes, Isador. I'm fine. The good inquisitor gave me much food for thought, that is all,' replied Gabriel, still smiling weakly.

'Captain,' interjected Corallis. 'The inquisitor had no right to speak to you in such a manner. And he has no reason to doubt you.' Corallis and Isador had already spoken to Brom, and they had a good idea what Toth would have said to Gabriel.

'On the contrary, sergeant,' answered Gabriel frankly. 'The inquisitor has every right to speak in whatever manner he chooses. That is his prerogative. And he has his reasons to doubt me. He is wrong, but he has his reasons, and I cannot blame him for that. We must each serve the Emperor in our own ways, Corallis.'

'So, are we going to leave?' asked the sergeant hesitantly.

'Do you trust that the storm will deal with our enemies for us?' asked Isador, as though anticipating that Gabriel would have succumbed to Toth's pressure.

'No, my brothers, we are not going to leave. We will not use this storm as an excuse to avoid our enemies or our responsibilities. The forces of Chaos are here for a reason, and I suspect that this fortuitous storm has some part to play in their plans. Coincidence is not the ally of fortune, only knowledge can overcome ignorance. We must stay and discover the truth.'

Isador and Corallis nodded and then bowed slightly. 'We are with you, brother-captain. As always,' said Corallis, his voice full of relief.

'Sergeant Corallis, organise the remaining scouts into two squads and dispatch them to sweep the areas flanking the valley. We need to see why the Alpha Legion chose this spot to engage the Blood Ravens, if indeed it is they who are here on Tartarus.'

Corallis nodded and then strode off down the ramp to organise the scouts, leaving Isador and Gabriel together in the belly of the Thunderhawk, with Prathios still silently observing his younger battle-brothers.

'What news from the librarium, Isador?' asked Gabriel, recalling the sight of the curator who had accompanied Mordecai.

'Interesting news,' replied Isador, checking back over his shoulder to make sure that they were not being overheard. 'It seems that there are records of Imperial settlements on Tartarus dating from before the thirty-eighth millennia. However, the records themselves have been expunged from the Chapter archives. So, whilst there are references to them, the references lead nowhere - simply to empty shelf space.'

'I assume that your curators have pursued these missing files,' said Gabriel, encouraging Isador to continue.

'Of course, Gabriel,' replied Isador. 'But their inquiries have been met with silence and the seals of the Inquisition. It seems that there is more to the history of Tartarus than we are supposed to know, captain.'

Gabriel nodded, unsurprised. 'I agree, Isador. And what about this storm? Do the records say anything about a warp storm?'

'There are a few references to various legends about a warp storm that is supposed to visit the planet every couple of thousand years. Folk stories, Gabriel, nothing more. No mention is made of any verification,' said Isador hesitantly.

'Is there something else, Isador?' asked Gabriel, taking note of his friend's tone.

'I'm not sure. However, when we tried to discover the details of the legends, we discovered that they had also gone missing from the archives. It does seem as though somebody has tried to eliminate all accounts of the pre-Imperial past on Tartarus - but that this person did not do a very good job of covering his tracks,' conceded Isador.

'They did not anticipate an investigation by a Blood Ravens Librarian, clearly,' said Gabriel affectionately. 'Have you spoken to Brom about this? He mentioned something about a legend when Toth started to talk about the warp storm. Perhaps the colonel will be of use to us after all, Isador.'

'I did see him,' said Isador, shaking his head slowly. 'He came storming out of his meeting with you in an evil mood. I left him alone, and he went off with some of his men.'

'We need to find him. They may be only folk stories, Isador, but even fairy stories can reveal something of the truth, if you know how to read them. And I am confident in your skills in this regard, my friend,' said Gabriel with a faint smile. 'If we can find out anything at all, it may give us the advantage we need. Make sure that your inquiries are discrete, Isador. It would not do for the honourable inquisitor to think that we did not trust him.'

THE BROKEN BODY of a mon-keigh soldier lay across the altar, and Farseer Macha inspected it with a mixture of disgust and despair. The human's blood was still warm, dripping into little, vanishing pools on the earth. She shook her head in disbelief and prodded her finger into the cauterised hole in the man's temple. The wound was clean and crisp, as though the las-shot had carefully parted each molecule of tissue as it had passed through. With a wave of relief, Macha realised that the mon-keigh had been killed before the sacrifice had been completed. Apparently, the pathetic humans couldn't concentrate long enough to conduct a proper sacrifice. She praised Khaine for the stupidity of the mon-keigh - blood for the Blood God, indeed.

However, the mon-keigh's blood was not pure. As Macha withdrew her finger from the man's head, she noticed that something was growing up through its skull from the underside, as though rooted in the stone of the altar itself. She clasped the human's hair in her hand and quickly tore its head away from its shoulders, pulling the head into the air. A rainbow of blood swept out of the body, dappling droplets into the already sodden soil. Sure enough, writhing in ungodly ecstasies under the man's body was a bunch of snaking capillaries, growing directly out of the stone, drinking the man dry. They were discoloured and brown, hardly matching the man's blood at all. Beneath them, as though trapped deep within the material of the altar itself, Macha could see the suggestion of a face, contorted in agony. It was just the ghost of a once human face - an immaterial representation trapped in the material realm, taunted and tortured by the gyrating sea of souls that made up the fabric of the altar.

'Flaetriu? Was this the first sacrifice that the humans made?' asked Macha, standing back from the altar in revulsion.

'We saw no others, farseer,' answered Flaetriu.

Casting her eyes around the crater, Macha realised that the little group of mon-keigh encountered by her rangers could not possibly have excavated the site. It would have taken them days, especially if their attention spans were really as short as suggested by the botched sacrifice.

'Something else has been here, Flaetriu. Something more powerful than the mon-keigh that you saw off.' She had returned to the altar and was running her delicate fingers through the wriggling capillaries, almost caressing them. 'Something got here before the humans and before us.'

'The orks?' offered Flaetriu half-heartedly, casting his hand up towards the rim of the crater where a mob of the greenskins had been slaughtered by the eldar, as both had come to investigate the pit.

'No, ranger, not orks. Orks care little for such things, and they have not the wit for an archaeological dig. This is the work of the minions of Chaos. I sense the hand of the Alpha Legion in this, Flaetriu, and that is most troubling. It seems that the Chaos Marines are not here merely to war against the other humans.' She paused for a moment, letting the tiny tendrils tickle around her fingertips. 'But their hand is dark and the future is confused. I cannot see their intentions. We must move quickly.'

'Farseer!' The call came from Kreusaur, standing dramatically on the lip of the crater, shuriken catapult held vertically into the sky. 'The mon-keigh, they are coming. Do you wish us to execute them?'

No, Kreusaur, replied Macha, her voiceless words slipping directly into the ranger's mind. The time for conflict with the red soldiers will come. But this is not the time, and this is certainly not the place. Distract them, ranger. We must press on before the other humans do something that we will all regret.

THE THIN BREATH of smoke eased its way into the air in front of Brom, its calm tranquillity belying the turmoil in his head. He stuffed the little roll back in his mouth, his hands trembling with agitation, and sucked a series of shallow draws. The smoke caught in his tense throat, making him cough and splutter, and he threw the little stick down into the grass and ground it into the mud with his boot.

The smoke seemed to hang in the air in front of him for a long time, keeping its coherence in the form of a small cloud. As he breathed, the cloud gently washed away from his face, only to be drawn back again when he inhaled. In annoyance, Brom lashed out with his hand, swiping his glove straight through the smoke, muttering to himself about the audacity of the inquisitor and the arrogance of the Space Marine. One day they would need his help, and then they'd see what their lack of respect had cost them. Down on the valley floor, Brom could still see the carnage that the battle had wrought. He was sitting on a small rock promontory that stuck clear out of the tree-line about half way up the valley wall, and even from there he could see the piles of ork corpses and the streaks of blood that ran across the river basin. The green, verdant land of Tartarus was slowly being transformed into a blood-soaked offering to the glory of the Emperor - and the Tartarans were celebrating his majesty with their own blood, mixing it with that of these filthy xenos.

How much blood had been spilt today? Enough to make the Lloovre River run red. For a moment he wondered whether the people in the capital city would see the red in the water before they raised it to their lips to drink. But the planet was soaked with blood in

any case - it wasn't as though the people hadn't already consumed their fair share of produce from the tainted soil, thought Brom sourly, tugging out another smoke.

'People are so hypocritical when it comes to blood,' he hissed to himself, without really thinking.

The little cloud of smoke in front of his face had still not dissipated, and it seemed to be curdling into vague eddies as he tried to wave it away. It slipped and flowed around his hands, presenting no obstacle against which he could strike, almost enwrapping his limb with its weightless form. For an instant, Brom thought that he could see a face crystallise in the smoke, but it was just a fleeting moment and then it was gone.

A gentle breath of wind whipped through the valley and dispersed the smoke in a reverie of whispers, making Brom check quickly from side to side to ensure that he was alone. He was not.

'Colonel Brom. There is something that I would like to ask you.'

'Librarian Akios,' said Brom, standing awkwardly to his feet and turning to greet the Blood Raven. 'How may I be of service?'

'Captain Angelos has asked me to question you about the local legends concerning the warp storm,' began Isador, realising his own clumsiness as soon as he spoke. 'He did his best to recover. And I would be most interested to hear what you have to say on the matter, colonel.'

'There is not much to tell, Librarian. Mostly just folk stories, I'm sure. Nothing that would interest the Adeptus Astartes or the good Captain Angelos. Certainly, Inquisitor Toth showed no interest in what I had to say,' said Brom, almost poisonously.

Isador watched Brom closely as he spoke and noticed the particular way in which the colonel emphasised the inquisitor's name.

He paused momentarily, unsure about the meaning of Brom's tone. Just then, Sergeant Corallis's voice hissed into the vox unit in Isador's amour.

'Librarian Akios, the scouts are back from their sweep, and Captain Angelos requests your company,' said the sergeant simply.

'I will be right there,' replied Isador, turning away from Brom immediately.

'WHERE IS BROM?' asked Gabriel curtly, as Isador came up the ramp of the Thunderhawk. 'This concerns him also.'

'He is smoking, captain, out in the forest,' answered Isador.

'I would have thought that he would have better things to do,' replied Gabriel. 'His men need discipline and courage drilling into them, Isador. After the fiasco on the walls of Magna Bonum, there is worse to tell.'

'What happened?'

'The scouts returned with news of a excavated crater about ten kilometres from here,' began Corallis. 'They were ambushed by a group of eldar rangers as they closed on its location, but successfully repelled the xenos. Strewn around the rim of the crater they found the bodies of a mob of orks - evidently they had also been interested in the crater for some reason—'

'—and evidently the eldar did not want them to see it, for some reason,' interjected Gabriel.

'Indeed. The scouts proceeded down into the crater, where they found a disturbing artefact. Some kind of altar, marked all over in runes that they could not decipher. They hastened to bring this news back to us, so that Librarian Akios might have the chance to see the writing,' finished Corallis, turning to Isador.

'The involvement of the eldar on Tartarus is certainly unexpected. It bespeaks something terrible - the eldar do not concern themselves in the affairs of others without a reason, even if their reasons are often incomprehensible to us,' said Isador, distracted by the casual mention of the ancient, alien race. Then he realised why the eldar had been glossed over in the story - there was something more pressing between the lines. 'What does this have to do with Brom?' asked Isador quickly.

'Stretched over the altar, gashed and torn with sacrificial markings, was one of Brom's Guardsmen, Isador,' explained Gabriel.

'One of Brom's men was sacrificed? We should inform him, of course,' said Isador, still not quite understanding what all the fuss was about.

'There's something else,' continued Gabriel. 'The man was executed by a single shot to the head. A shot from an Imperial Guard officer's laspistol.' Gabriel could see the Librarian's mind racing with the significance of these facts. 'He was sacrificed and executed by other Tartarans, Isador.'



CHAPTER SIX

STANDING ON THE edge of the crater, Gabriel stared down at the altar, a spread of Blood Ravens lining the rim of the pit with their weapons trained. Gabriel had selected a small detachment to check out the reports about the altar - just the command squad, some scouts, and Matiel's squad of Space Marines. In the end, he had decided against telling Brom about his scouts' reports, and the team had slipped out of the makeshift camp in the valley before Toth could ask any questions. No doubt it would not take long for the inquisitor to realise that they were missing, but, hopefully, by then Gabriel would understand what was going on.

'So, the good inquisitor senses no taint of Chaos here. How fortunate for the Imperium that such keen-eyed eagles stand vigil over her gates,' said Gabriel, shaking his head and laying his hand onto Isador's shoulder.

The decapitated body of an Imperial Guardsman still lay across the face of the altar, with his head visible in the swampy ground a stone's throw away. As Matiel surveyed the territory surrounding the crater, casting his intricate and suspicious gaze over the mess of dead greenskins, Isador made his way down into the pit, letting the force of gravity ease his weight down the crater walls in a smooth landslide.

Satisfied that the pit was secure, the Marines broke away from their vigil around its lip and followed Matiel's lead, stalking between the corpses of the orks and prodding them with blades and gun barrels. The orks might not be the smartest race in the galaxy, but even animals could play dead when it suited them. But these orks really were dead. Some of the them had been shredded by thousands of tiny projectiles, others had been felled by a single, precise shot through the soft tissue just below their jawline, and some had simply been sliced into pieces.

Stooping to pick up a fallen weapon, Matiel gasped audibly. It was a boltgun - the distinctive weapon of the Space Marines. But the designs etched into the material of the gun were not very clear - the ork had obviously tried to scratch them away in an attempt to make the weapon his. Deep grooves and scars were dug into the metalwork, wrought by claws or teeth, but they could not fully obscure the markings that were set into the weapon when it was first made. Wriggling out from under the clumsy marks of the ork were the points of a star, each at the end of an axis that bisected a smaller circle. The eight-pointed star, thought Matiel: the mark of the Traitor Legions and the forces of Chaos.

He turned the weapon in his hands; he was repulsed slightly by the touch of a weapon that had been twice damned: once by the unspeakable evils of the heretic Marines that had turned their backs on the Emperor himself during the galaxy-shattering horrors of the Horus Heresy, and once by the taint of grotesque xenos savagery.

The metal was cold, and it lay just out of reach of the ork that had fallen next to it. Inspecting it more closely, Matiel realised that the gun had not been fired. The trigger-happy orks had been slain almost instantaneously, and it looked like most of them had not managed to get off a single shot. Not even the Blood Ravens would hope to kill a pack of orks so efficiently, reflected Matiel, his opinion of the eldar teetering perilously close to admiration.

Meanwhile, Gabriel was watching Isador climb down into the pit and approach the altar. He turned as Matiel approached him from behind, and took the weapon held out in the sergeant's hand.

'A boltgun,' said Gabriel with mild surprise. 'So we were right about the presence of a Traitor Legion here on Tartarus,' he added, pressing his thumb against the markings on the weapon's hilt, as though trying to divine their origin.

'It has not been fired, captain,' explained Matiel. 'The eldar must have laid an ambush for the orks, and then slaughtered them like animals before they even had chance to react.' A mix of repulsion and admiration were evident in his voice.

'They are animals, sergeant, so that is only fitting. We would do the same,' said Gabriel, drawing an un-self-conscious comparison between the Blood Ravens and the eldar, 'if we could.'

Matiel nodded, acknowledging Gabriel's shared admiration for the mysterious aliens, realising that respecting the skills of another warrior, even an alien warrior, did not necessarily make you a heretic. 'Perhaps there is something that we can learn from them,' ruminated the sergeant, almost to himself.

'Yes indeed,' replied Gabriel confidently. 'Knowledge is power - we must seek it out. From this,' he said, casting his hand around the remains of the ork mob, 'we learn not to underestimate the potency of an eldar ambush.' There was a smile on the captain's face as he turned back to watch Isador in the crater.

'What dark crafts have these eldar invoked?' asked Matiel, following Gabriel's line of sight.

'I DO NOT think that this is the work of the eldar, Gabriel,' said Isador, looking up from the remains of Guardsman Tavett. 'I am reasonably sure that it was the eldar who removed the man's head, but he had already been dead for some time by then. For one thing,' he added, 'this man had already been shot through the brain with an Imperial issue laspistol.'

'So, did the Tartarans sacrifice this man themselves?' asked Gabriel, walking around the altar and inspecting Tavett's remains for himself. Despite the evidence, Gabriel could not quite bring himself to believe so little of the Imperial Guardsmen of Tartarus. Most of them had fought valiantly at the side of the Blood Ravens, and some had died as heroes of the Imperium. In the main, the Tartarans were a credit to the spirit of the Undying Emperor, and this was such an epic betrayal that Gabriel refused to make the logical leap. Whatever his personal feelings about Brom and the smattering of cowards in his regiment, he should not prejudice them.

'No, I'm not sure that they did,' replied Isador thoughtfully. 'It looks as though the shot was designed to kill this man before the sacrifice was complete. Perhaps the Guardsmen interrupted the ritual.'

Chaplain Prathios was stooped over the altar, staring into the stone where the Guardsman's head should have been. He seemed transfixed, and almost motionless, as though watching something complicated and partially hidden.

'This man was not the first sacrifice on this altar today,' said Prathios, lifting his head and looking at Isador. 'You should take a look at this.'

The Librarian stepped over to the position indicated by Prathios and looked down into the slick pool of blood. Tiny little stalagmites of red poked up through the blood and, for a moment, Isador thought that they were merely small spikes designed to prevent the victim from slipping off the tablet during its agonies. But then he saw them move. They vibrated and pulsed microscopically, swaying like a miniscule forest.

Looking back along the stricken figure of the Guardsman, he could see that these tiny tendrils had worked their way into his flesh. They appeared to be dragging him down into the stone itself, drawing him bodily into the material of the altar. In a sudden moment of understanding, Isador realised why the Guardsman looked so odd - he was not all there. Crouching down to look at the side elevation, Isador could see that the prostrate trooper, lying on his stomach, was half absorbed into the altar - his chest had already been assimilated, as had his thighs and feet.

In horror, Isador drove his staff under the body of the man and levered him off the tablet, ripping the tendrils free of his body as it slipped from the altar and squelched to the ground in a bloody heap. The man's body looked as though it had been sliced roughly in two, parted lengthways to separate front from back. All that was left was the bloody pulp of his headless back.

The tendrils on the altar shot out after the falling body, questing blindly for the source of their sustenance before shrinking and slurping back into the surface of the tablet. Where the threads of blood touched it, Isador's staff flared with power, spitting sparks of blue fire into the coagulating pool on the altar. The pool hissed and steamed as the righteous energy spilled into it, but Isador pulled his staff clear and peered into the fizzing surface.

Beneath the sheen of slick rock, Isador could see the suggestion of a face wracked with agony, a flock of swirling daemonic forms tearing at it from all sides. A number of the curdling images seemed to be reaching for the surface with immaterial claws, scraping at the substance of the altar from within, as though swimming through an impossibly dense medium. The face pulsed and oscillated, thrashing from side to side in death pains, or birth pains. Then it stopped abruptly, spinning round and resolving into focus in an instant, staring straight into Isador's soul.

With an audible gasp, the Librarian drew back from the altar, pushing his staff into the ground to support himself. Prathios and Gabriel reached for their battle-brother, steadying him with their powerful arms, and watching the colour gradually return to his face.

'Brother Isador, you have one hour to study the altar. Document everything - let us see whether we can fill in some of the gaps in the history of this planet for ourselves.' With concern amounting to worry, Gabriel was watching the pale expression on his old friend's face. 'Then we will destroy it, lest its vile taint infect us all.'

The Librarian's face was still white and his blue eyes were wide and icy. 'Gabriel, we must not destroy this artefact. We are Blood Ravens, and we must not turn our backs on the search for knowledge, no matter how distasteful it may seem.'

'You had better not let Toth hear you saying such things, Isador. He views our Chapter with suspicion enough already, without you giving him the idea that we covet the knowledge of heretics.' Gabriel's voice was only half mocking, for his point was serious. 'Learn what you can, brother, but then we will destroy it. There are boundaries between research and complicity, and we must be careful to stay on the right side of them.'

With that, Gabriel turned and started to climb back up the earthworks towards Matiel and the Space Marines that stood sentry over the distasteful scene, leaving Isador and Prathios with the altar. 'One hour, then we move on,' he called over his shoulder, as though worried that Isador might have already forgotten.

THE CARVINGS AND etchings were buried beneath a thick treacle of congealed blood, and Isador struggled to make out the runes. He pulled his gauntlet off and pushed his fingers into the cracks in the stone, scooping out gobbets of viscous ichor and tracing the unfamiliar lines. His fingers scraped against the rough surface of the stone, catching on the pointed nicks and grooves, drawing tiny beads of his own blood into the mix. But he worked methodically, struggling to uncover the ancient engravings in time to give them the attention that they deserved.

The runes seemed dead under his touch, cold and hard like inanimate stone, and Isador lamented that he had been so hasty to rip the Guardsman from its diabolical embrace. Without the flow of new, rich blood, the altar was nothing more than a monument, albeit a monument covered with ancient, runic script.

Here and there, Isador could just about make out some of the words, but the language of the runes was old and unfamiliar to him, and many of the symbols were still obscured under a thick coating of blood. The characters seemed to tell a story about a quest, a heroic mission to uncover the key to salvation for Tartarus and the surrounding worlds. There was an icon representing a mountain and then the phonetic symbols for Korath. There was some mention of the Blood God and the appearance of his messengers, but Isador had seen enough of these artefacts before to know that all of them contained such slogans. He was unimpressed.

One rune struck his eyes and drew his attention, pulling him in with its own gravity. *Treraum* - storm. It was an ancient rune, and for a moment Isador did not recognise it. Not since his years in the Blood Ravens' great library sanatorium had he seen this style of rune ornate and twisted, as though it strove to hide its own meaning from the prying eyes of men. The characters next to it were even more obscure and intricate. They sounded little bells in Isador's memory, but he could not quite place them. He had seen them before, he thought.

'Isador!' called Gabriel from the top of the earthworks. 'Time to leave. Do you have what you need?'

The Librarian looked from the altar to his captain and then back again, thinking of what he could say to waylay their departure. But Gabriel saw his movements and assumed that he was shaking his head.

'Isador - I said one hour, and I meant it,' he said, waving his arm to Matiel. 'Sergeant, rig that monstrosity for destruction, and then let's get out of this Emperor-forsaken place.'

Matiel kicked in the burner on his jump pack and rose noisily, if gracefully, into the air. Behind him, two other members of his squad of Marines did the same, each carrying clusters of melta bombs. And the three of them descended rapidly into the pit, like red angels carrying the promise of redemption.

Isador turned back to the altar, a wave of desperation spilling into his mind. Those idiots were about to destroy one of the most valuable artefacts found in this sector in centuries. Gabriel was just too narrow-minded to see what he was doing. Cyrene had made him weak and paranoid. The path of the Blood Ravens was not supposed to be easy - the pursuit of knowledge required certain sacrifices, but its use could transform a Space Marine into a god. Who else but a god could command the lives of a planet's entire population? Gabriel was too short-sighted, and his guilt threatened to wreck his judgment.

When Matiel touched down behind Isador, he found the Librarian muttering to himself, as though reading from a foreign text. He hardly seemed to notice the arrival of three Space Marines roaring down with their jump packs blazing.

'Librarian Akios, time's up. The captain wants us to blow this place right now. And good riddance to it, I say,' said Matiel, gesturing for his men to fix their charges to the other side of the altar. 'The stench of the xenos and the heretic is almost overpowering. It is an offence to the Emperor.'

'Just give me another minute,' hissed Isador, snapping his head round to face the sergeant and fixing him with narrowed, blue eyes. 'I need just one more minute. Alone,' he added, as Matiel nodded but showed no signs of moving.

The sergeant nodded again and then turned smartly, walking round to the other side of the altar to check on the progress of his team. Turning his attention back to the runes, Isador produced a small combat knife from a holster on his belt. He muttered something inaudible as he ran his finger along its blade, and the sheen of the metal seemed to burst into effervescence. When he pressed the blade into the side of the altar, a trickle of blood seeped out of the stone, as though he were inflicting a wound. The blade hissed and vibrated under his touch as he cut through the altar, defining a neat rectangle around the constellation of runes that surrounded *Treraum*.

As Matiel came back round to set his mine on Isador's side, the Librarian was tucking something into his belt and wiping blood off the blade of his knife on the grass.

'Matiel! Let's blow this thing and get out of here,' yelled Gabriel, standing on the rim of the crater.

'Yes, captain,' replied Matiel. Then he dropped his voice and turned to Isador. 'Time's up, Librarian.' Isador was already on his feet. He nodded a quick acknowledgment, strode away from the altar, and started to climb up towards Gabriel.

What are you doing, Librarian? For a moment, Isador thought that the words were his own, swimming around inside his head as though they had always been there. But there was an unusual quality to them - something slippery and immaterial. Whenever he tried to grasp one of the thoughts, it eased clear of his mind, vacillating in and out of his memory like a ghost.

I know that you can hear me, Blood Raven, came the voiceless words again. *What are you doing, hiding artefacts from the heroic captain... acting against his orders?*

Isador did not break his stride as he climbed the banks of the crater. *He doesn't appreciate the value of this find, and I had no time to convince him. He will thank me for my vigilance, when the time comes.*

I understand, Isador, just like you, said the voice, finding his name for the first time. *And I am also able to thank you for your conscientiousness.*

I do not want your thanks, sorcerer, replied Isador, realising the nature of the voice at last. *And I will use the powers I glean from this ancient knowledge to destroy you.*

Oh, Isador, you poor, misguided fool. I will be waiting for you on Mount Korath, and then we will see who will do the destroying... whispered the voice, tailing off into silence.

I'll be there, sorcerer, thought Isador as he crested the rise. He nodded a greeting to Gabriel, without meeting his eyes, and turned back to the crater in time to see the three Space Marines blast into the air, flames pouring out of their jump packs as they distanced themselves from the altar. A sudden explosion shook the ground, sending a plume of smoke and sodden earth mushrooming into the sky, chasing the trails left by Matiel and his Marines.

After a slight delay, a second explosion sounded with a tremendous crack - flames and fragments of rock blew diagonally out of the crater, and the sides of the pit started to collapse. Isador and Gabriel took a step back as the ground subsided beneath their feet and waves of earth slid down the banks to drown the shattered remains of the altar.

'JAERIELLE'S STORM SQUAD have caught the tail end of the Chaos Marines' column near the summit of the mountain, farseer. He has engaged them, but he is badly outnumbered. A ranger detachment is with him, but they are no match for the heavy firepower of the Marines,' reported Flaetriu as he swept into an elegant bow.

Seated in meditation upon a large, smooth rock which held her clear of the foliage in the forest, Macha opened her eyes and looked at the ranger. 'Yes, Flaetriu, the Storm squadron will not be able to hold the Chaos forces on their own. They will need help, but it is not clear that we will be able to provide it.'

'Are you saying that all is lost, farseer?' asked Flaetriu, raising his head and staring at her, his eyes flashing with stung passion. 'Calm yourself, ranger. I am saying no such thing; we do not have it all to lose,' replied Macha cryptically. 'And what of the other humans? The soldiers in red?'

'They have found the altar, farseer. One of them, a psyker I think, studied it briefly, but then they destroyed it. Those mon-keigh have no idea what they are doing, farseer. They just stumble on blindly, destroying everything that they do not understand,' said Flaetriu, his voice dripping with disgust.

'And yet they are coming this way.' Macha was talking to herself as much as to Flaetriu - pondering the role of the Space Marines in the larger picture. 'Perhaps they are not as stupid as you think. This psyker, did he know that you were watching him?'

'No farseer, we were cloaked in the edge of the forest. There is no way that he could have seen us. And we made no contact with our minds. There was something...' Flaetriu trailed off, unsure of the words.

'Something else, ranger?' prompted Macha.

'I'm not sure. But it did seem that there was more than one psychic presence in the area,' replied Flaetriu, unconvincingly.

'Perhaps one of the other humans is also a psyker. It is of no concern to us,' dismissed Macha, her mind already on other things.

'Let us set an ambush for these red Space Marines. Flaetriu, take a detachment of Falcon grav-tanks and a wraithguard squad back down to the Korath Pass - that is the perfect location for an ambush, especially if the mon-keigh are on their way to the summit of Mount Korath.'

'Excellent, farseer. The humans will walk straight into our trap,' replied Flaetriu, the passion of battle already beginning to flow into his temperamental soul.

'Yes, they will walk into the trap, Flaetriu, but they will not be unprepared; you can never ambush a Space Marine, for they expect treachery and war around every corner. However, we should be happy to validate their paranoia...' said Macha, already sliding off into meditation as she spoke.

'We will destroy the Space Marines, and then concentrate our wrath on the forces of Chaos,' said Flaetriu, flourishing his cloak into an ostentatious show of deference for the farseer.

'Perhaps, young ranger, perhaps,' said Macha, her eyes closed and her voice barely a whisper. 'But just as we have locked the mon-keigh into their path, so they have surely locked us into ours. As we lay traps for the humans at our heels, they trap us between their own forces and the forces of Chaos that we chase. I do not trust the mon-keigh to understand their importance on Tartarus - they have already failed us once. But the future is hazy and confused, and I am not sure that we can do this on our own. Only time will reveal the full character of our respective paths. For now, we must fight everyone: war is not an end in itself, ranger, but it is the most powerful tool we have.'

HALF WAY UP the sparsely forested side of Mount Korath, two eldar Vypers skimmed out to the flanks of the Alpha Legion column, hissing through the evening air as their anti-gravitic engines propelled them up the mountain slope. Each skimmer was supported by a pack of jetbikes that spread out in wakes behind them. They were racing against the armoured column of Chaos assault bikes that roared with brutal power as they bounced and tore their way over the ground behind them.

The Vypers wove and slid gracefully between rocks, trees and the hail of fire that spasmed out of the horde of Chaos bikes. Their weapons-turrets spun smoothly, and their gunners released a constant tirade of shuriken fire from the heavy cannon fixtures. Behind them, the jetbikes bobbed and swerved with incredible manoeuvrability, darting between obstacles and cutting through the crossfire as they flew past the Vypers and pushed on towards the summit.

At the head of the Alpha Legion bikers, Krool screamed into the reddening dusk as the engines of his bike roared with passion and hunger. A splattering of shuriken projectiles clinked into the armour of his left leg, sending pins of pain darting through his nervous system as they penetrated his skin, parting his armour at the molecular level. His bike responded to his rage as though it were an extension of his body; it snarled and spat energy as the Chaos Marine struggled to direct the twin-linked bolters mounted on either side of the front wheel. He clicked the thumb-triggers, and parallel streams of bolter fire seared out of his bike, tracing the wake of a fluttering Vyper but finding no target.

Roaring in frustration, Krool demanded more speed from his bike and it let out a high pitched shriek as it strove to satisfy his bidding. He banked abruptly to one side, throwing his weight towards the ground to tighten his turn as he peeled off to the left of his comrades. Then, flipping the bike back over to the right and almost laying it on its side, Krool brought himself into the slipstream of the offending eldar vehicle. Nobody was going to flank a squadron of Alpha Legion bikers, and certainly not a delicate bunch of effete aliens.

Krool could see the gun-turret on the back of the Vyper spin round to face him, and he laughed out loud at the idea that the eldar would have time to get off even a single shot. Again he clicked the thumb-triggers, and a stuttering burst of fire flashed out of the twin boltguns. This time he found his target, and the bolter shells punched into the rear of the Vyper, shattering one of the stabiliser-fins and spinning the Vyper laterally. Its gun-turret spun wildly as it tried to compensate for the erratic motion of the vehicle, and a gout of shuriken sprayed out towards the rest of the Alpha Legion bikers.

As his bike closed on the hobbled Vyper, Krool drew his bolt pistol and placed the reticule directly onto the head of the rear gunner, clicking off a single round that cracked the eldar's helmet and lifted him out of the turret. Before he hit the ground, Krool had riddled him with fire from his bike's guns.

But the Vyper was not finished yet, and the pilot spun the destabilised vehicle around to face the charging figure of Krool. The nose-mounted shuriken catapults sputtered a sheet of projectiles into the path of the roaring biker, but Krool yelled his defiance into the storm and pushed his bike even harder.

The shuriken clinked, thudded and ricocheted off the front of the bike, shredding the tyre and ruining the huge suspension coils. The front of the bike dropped as the wheel rim ground into the dirt, and the boltguns dipped their fire short of the Vyper, strafing back through the earth.

Krool let out another yell, screaming into the onslaught of alien projectiles as they sliced and punched into his armour. His bike snarled with power and then bucked, pulling the front wheel out of the soil and pushing it into the air, presenting the undercarriage to the tirade of eldar fury.

In another second the bike smashed into the grounded Vyper, crunching into its thin armour with the full weight and force of the assault bike. The long spikes that adorned the frontal plates of the bike punched straight through the walls of the Vyper's cockpit as the front of the bike crashed back down to earth. The pilot was killed instantly as a spike pushed unstopably through his face. As the momentum of the bike was suddenly arrested, Krool was bucked over the wreckage of the two vehicles, landing in a crumpled heap on the other side of the Vyper.

Struggling to his feet, Krool turned to look at the ruin that he had wrought, and let out a howl of victory as the two vehicles convulsed and then exploded. He threw up his arms and yelled, watching the Alpha Legion bikers press on towards the summit of the mountain, now flanked on only one side by an eldar Vyper. He screamed after them, punching the air to will them on. A burst of fire punched into his back, shredding his organs, and the bladed prow of a Wave Serpent transport sliced him neatly in two. The armoured panels on the sleek, green and white sides bore the runic symbols of the Guardian Storm squad, and Jaerielle stood dramatically on the roof, directing the anti-gravitic transport after the speeding column of Chaos Marines, determined to prevent them from reaching the marker on the summit.

STANDING ON TOP of a majestic but stationary Blood Ravens' Rhino transport to improve his line of sight, his red armour resplendent in the reddening light of the dusk, Gabriel peered through a set of image-enhancers, studying the narrow mountain path before them. Purpling in the sunset, Isador stood stoutly next to his captain, his blue power armour shimmering in the dying light.

The mountain rose from the edge of the river valley, sheer and imposing, bursting out of the tree-line and casting a deep shadow across the orangy landscape. Deep in the valley below, a rough circle of burnt out forest marked the location of the altar, and gentle wisps of smoke still floated into the air from the smouldering remnants of the forest fire caused by the explosions.

Gabriel took the binocs away from his eyes and shook his head. 'Are you certain, Isador?'

'Yes. The Pass of Korath - the only traversable route to the summit of Mount Korath. This is where the inscriptions on the altar said that we must go,' said Isador firmly, as a gust of dusty wind brushed across their faces, whispering inaudibly. 'Do you question my findings?' he added, as though giving voice to another's doubts.

Yyessisador, hedoubtssyou. The wind blew stronger, whipping up the sand from the ground and blowing it into clouds.

'I do not question your abilities, brother, but I wonder about the tactical sense of this move. That mountain pass is the perfect location for an ambush - see how the crags reach over the path at its narrowest point? There are too many enemies of the Emperor on Tartarus for us to be complacent,' replied Gabriel, surprised that Isador required an explanation.

Ssseeisador, ssee how he doubtss you, the whispers in the wind were beginning to resolve themselves more clearly. *He fearss your powerss, Librarian. He calls you mutant behind your back. You must placate the child for now. Lead him, but let him lead.*

'I do not deny that this is likely to be a trap, Gabriel,' responded Isador, narrowing his eyes as though disturbed. 'But a trap would at least be proof that we are going in the right direction. If the Blood Ravens were being pursued, you would take them through this pass, would you not?'

'You are right, old friend,' said Gabriel warmly, with a faint, weary smile. 'We will follow this path. Stay alert, and follow my lead. I want no mistakes here.'

'Agreed,' replied Isador, nodding his confirmation.

'Corallis!' called Gabriel, crouching down to talk to the sergeant as he approached the side of the Rhino. 'Send a scout squadron ahead into the pass. Tell them to be careful, and to keep off the main path - I suspect that we are expected. We will follow in force with Brother Tanthius's Terminators and Matiel's assault squad. The tanks will be too slow and may clog the pass, so the assault bikes and a squadron of Typhoon land speeders will provide support.'

'Understood,' nodded Corallis as he turned to distribute the captain's orders.

'What about the Tartarans?' asked Isador. 'Shouldn't we send word back to the camp to summon Brom and a detachment of Guardsmen? We should make use of their numbers - and we could push them through the pass first, to spring whatever trap might be waiting for us.'

'There is no time to send for the Tartarans,' said Gabriel, regarding his friend closely, 'and no need. The pass is narrow, and greater numbers would not help. In any case, their numbers are dwindling, Isador. Besides, the Blood Ravens do not require anyone else to do their fighting for them. We will take swift death to the enemies of the Emperor, as we have done for millennia. Brom and Inquisitor Toth can relax in the soft comfort of the camp for a little while longer - their times to fight will come soon enough.'

THE COLUMN OF warbikes split in two as it hit the eldar defences, peeling left and right to encircle the Wave Serpents and warriors that had ringed the strange menhir on the summit of Mount Korath. The eldar had got there first, as their anti-gravitic vehicles had skimmed over the rough terrain as though it were a perfectly surfaced road. The Chaos bikes had bounced and powered their way across the rubble, skidding over the loose sand and smashing through the increasingly sparse foliage.

Eldar jetbikes seared around the ring, their engines whining as they pursued the circling Chaos bikes in a lethal spiral. Bursts of bolter fire and sleet of shuriken sizzled through the air, gyroscoping around the menhir and the eldar emplacements that surrounded it. Jaerielle watched the dogfights impatiently, taking the occasional pot-shot at a warbike as it roared by, waiting for the melee to begin when the rest of the Chaos Marines arrived. He waved his Storm squad into a fan formation, facing down the mountain side towards the rumble of the Alpha Legion's Rhino transports, shielding the menhir behind them.

A screeching sound made him look round to the left, and he saw one of the Biel-Tan jetbikes burst into flames, spinning on its axis as its stabilisers failed. A hulking warbike ploughed after it, its boltguns flaring with firepower as it continued to pound the spluttering eldar. The jet-bike could no longer hold the curve around the menhir and it broke away from the circle, rolling and spinning like a drill, whistling down the slope towards the advancing forces of Chaos.

Just as the first Chaos Rhino crested the rise at the summit of the mountain, its fore-guns blazing with fire and with two horned Chaos Marines dousing the field with flamers from the hatch in its roof, the jet-bike reached the ridge from the top, drilling straight into the front of it. A huge explosion shook the ground as the jetbike detonated like a warhead, blowing open the front of the Rhino and enveloping its occupants in superheated chemicals.

A squad of Chaos Marines spilt out of the rupture in the front, thrown by the force of the impact and the arrested momentum of the Rhino. They tumbled through the flames, diving and rolling to control their falls. And then they were on their feet, their bolters

braced and coughing at once, spraying the first salvo of fire directly into the eldar defences, clipping at the circling jetbikes and riddling Jaerielle's line with venom.

The Storm squad reacted instantly, moving into new formations like a fluid organism and releasing disciplined volleys of shuriken fire back into the face of the advancing Chaos Marines. Jaerielle watched as two giant warriors strode out of the blazing remains of the Rhino, stepping through the chemical fire as though it were a cool river. One of them must have been over two metres tall. He was bare-headed and carried a huge scythe, its blade easily the length of a human. The other was slightly shorter, but the ornate blades on his helmet thrust viciously into the sky, making him seem even bigger. In his hand he carried a long, dual-pronged force staff, which sizzled and hissed with purple energy, repelling the flames effortlessly.

Behind the two huge warriors, two more Rhinos crested the summit of the mountain, skidding to a halt and spilling two more squadrons of Alpha Legionaries into the fight. As they did so, the circling warbikes broke off from their ring and arced back round to provide flanks for their battle-brothers - forming a single, wide line of fire that advanced steadily towards Jaerielle's small unit. The eldar may have made it to the menhir before the Chaos Marines, but they had sacrificed power for speed. Jaerielle's Storm squadron contained ten eldar warriors. He had one Vyper left at his disposal, and three jetbikes. Looking down the slope from the menhir, with the last red rays of the sun flooding down the mountain face from behind him, casting his own deep shadow right up to the feet of the enemy, Jaerielle could count five bristling bikes, two hulking armoured transports, and nearly twenty-five mammoth Chaos Marines. For the first time in his long life, even the supreme arrogance of the eldar could not convince him that victory was certain.

THE PASS OF Korath was little more than a narrow path cut through the cliffs, providing a hazardous route from the Lloovre Valley to the summit of the ancient mountain. On both sides of the rough path were steep cliffs, sheer and unforgiving, and in the half light of dusk the pass was cast into near darkness by their shadows.

Up ahead, already at the narrowest point of the pathway, barely wide enough for a Rhino to pass through, Gabriel could see his scouts. They had paused momentarily, and he could see them looking from side to side, scanning the rock faces for signs of trigger mechanisms or mines. So far, there had been nothing, and Gabriel was beginning to feel uneasy.

The makeshift road had been chewed up by the passage of a number of heavy vehicles. The scouts had noted the wide tracks of Rhinos and the bouncing intermittent marks of assault bikes in the dust. But the eldar seemed to have left no trail at all, if indeed they had even passed this way.

Corallis raised his arm, indicating that the pass was secure. The sergeant had insisted that he should lead the scouting party despite the loss of his arm. He was determined that no other Marine should suffer the fate of Mikaelus in his place, and Gabriel had not the heart to argue with him. Besides, Corallis was the best scout in the entire Third Company, and Gabriel was pleased to have his eyes to survey the pass.

With a sudden cutting motion, Corallis changed his signal, pulling his arm down in a swipe across his body and drawing his bolt pistol. The other scouts dived for cover at the edges of the path, rolling behind boulders and bracing their weapons against them. Gabriel could see the movement from his vantage point on top of the stationary command Rhino further back down the pathway, but it took a fraction of a second for the sound to reach him, echoing back and forth through the sheer crevice.

All at once, he could see flickers of green catching the last rays of sunlight, high in the cliff face; and there, through the eye of the narrowest point of the pass, he could see a group of sleek, green grav-tanks slide into place. So this was the trap, thought Gabriel calmly. This we can deal with.

'Corallis,' he hissed into his armour's vox-unit. 'Keep in the cover at the edges of the pass - the Typhoons are coming through.

Tanthius - get the Terminators into the breach behind the Typhoons. And Matiel - see what you can do about those snipers up on the cliff face.'

As he finished talking, everything happened at once. The Typhoon land speeders roared into life, accelerating to attack speed almost instantaneously and flashing through the pass amidst a hail of fire, engaging the Falcon tanks on the other side. The jump packs of the Space Marines erupted, pushing the squadron into the air as they traced their bolter fire against the cliff faces, splintering the stone and sending avalanches of rock tumbling down into the pass.

Sergeant Tanthius broke into a loping run, waving his arm to the rest of the Terminators to follow him into the breach. As he passed the scouts, who were stabbing out rapid volleys of fire and then ducking back into cover, Tanthius saw that the pass opened up into a wider valley on the other side. There were three Falcon tanks arrayed across the space and at least two squads of wraithguard lying in wait. The Blood Ravens' Typhoons were skidding and darting under heavy fire, trailing threads of smoke from their engines.

The Terminators fanned out into a firing line and braced their feet into the rocky ground. As one, they opened up with storm bolters and assault cannons, strafing a line of fire across the wraithguard squads as they started to run towards the Marines.

Tanthius levelled a careful shot into the elongated headpiece of one of the alien warriors, cracking the helmet but not stopping its charge. Another three shots smashed into its head, shattering the strange carapace completely, but still it ran, as though its head had been mere ornamentation.

One of the Typhoons banked sharply to avoid overshooting the Falcon tanks, but as it turned it presented its thin undercarriage to the eldar line and they punished it with a volley of las-fire that blew it immediately into a tumbling fireball. A second Typhoon burst through the burning wreckage of the first, its heavy bolter sputtering, spitting a typhoon missile directly into the sloping prow of the offending tank. The missile skidded across the sleek armoured panels and slid off into the air, spiralling harmlessly into an explosion against the cliff face beyond.

The Typhoon flashed in between the tanks, clearing the eldar line and then banking into a tight turn to attack it again from the rear. Another missile jetted out of the land speeder. This time it punched into the thinner, oblique armour at the back of the tank, ripping through into the Falcon's interior where it detonated ferociously. The tank bucked and spasmed before exploding outwards from within, scattering fragments of the chassis across the valley floor.

Meanwhile, Gabriel had ducked down into the roof-hatch and his Rhino was rolling through the narrow point of the pass with its storm bolters stripping a constant line of fire. It came to a halt in the midst of the line of Terminators, emptying the command squad onto the deck behind it. Gabriel drew his chainsword into his right hand and his bolt pistol into his left and called out to his men. 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!'

A great chorus of voices echoed back through the narrow crevice. 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' And the small Blood Ravens' strike force was now fully deployed, as gouts of flame, bolter fire and coruscating blue energy lanced out of the command squad towards the advancing wraithguard.

Above the fray, hovering on bursts of flame from their jump packs, Matriel's Marines were spraying bolter shells against the rock faces as the eldar snipers leaped and danced from ledge to ledge, evading the lethal barrage but unable to return fire.

'FARSEER,' SAID FLAETRIU, hastening into a bow. 'Jaerielle requests support. He fears that the Chaos Marines will soon overrun his position and occupy the site of the menhir.'

Macha nodded slowly. She knew that this would happen, and she was prepared for it. 'Send a squad of Warp Spiders to assist Jaerielle. Instruct them to rig the menhir for detonation. If the defences fail, the forces of Chaos cannot be permitted to possess the knowledge hidden in that marker.'

The ranger nodded quickly. Warp Spiders carried warp jump generators in their armoured carapaces, enabling them to slip in and out of even the most secure locations, flitting in and out of the warp at will. A squadron could jump through the webway straight to the site of the menhir without having to penetrate the line of Chaos Marines assaulting it. But there were not many of them, and certainly not enough to turn the tide of the battle on the summit of Mount Korath.

'The Blood Ravens are being held down at the Pass of Korath, farseer, but the conflict is a bloody one on both sides. You were right that it would be hard to ambush these mon-keigh,' reported Flaetriu, as Macha turned her gaze away from the flashes of fire just visible up at the summit, and he stared down the mountain side where an explosion had just mushroomed into the air. The Biel-Tan were engaged on two fronts, and they could not win them both.

'Our priority must be the menhir, ranger. Withdraw the wraithguard through the webway portals and tell the Falcons to blow the pass. We need only delay the Blood Ravens long enough to ensure that the Chaos Marines cannot triumph,' ordered the farseer. 'Our battle with the soldiers in red can wait for another time.'

LORD BALE SWEEPED his scythe in a powerful arc, but Skrekrea was faster than the Chaos Marine. She leapt clear of the swing, spinning into a pirouette as she kicked out at the ugly, misshapen face of the Chaos Lord. The kick made firm contact with his jaw, turning his head in a fountain of blood from his mouth. But he did not even stagger under the blow. Instead, he brought the scythe back round in a rapid back-swing as he yelled in fury. The butt of the scythe struck Skrekrea in the side of the head just as she landed, knocking her off her feet, and Bale roared with rage.

As the scythe fell for the death blow, Bale let out a scream. A bright flash flared next to him and a rush of warp power poured out onto the mountain side. A heavily armoured eldar warrior leapt out of the warp-tear with a rotary death-spinner churning out lethal micro-filament threads that rattled and whipped into Bale's armour. The Chaos Lord stepped back under the onslaught, swinging his blade wildly in the direction of the Warp Spider, Skrekrea momentarily forgotten.

Sindri was at his shoulder, stabbing out with a spike of purple energy from his force staff. The blast sizzled and cracked against the eldar's armour, which was warded against the forces of the warp to permit travel through it. Nonetheless, the Warp Spider was thrown back by the energy, flying off his feet and crashing to the ground in front of the menhir.

The Chaos Marines were pressing in now, closing their grip around the dwindling forces of the eldar defenders, and Sindri could taste the power of the menhir in the air as he spun and stabbed with his staff. Bale was a roaring monster of fury, scything and slicing with his man-reaper, defining a frenetic sphere of death around him as he strode forward. The air around him was thick with bolter shells, clouds of shuriken, and flashes of las-fire, but he ignored it, focussed exclusively on his blade and the menhir. It was almost in reach now.

A blue fireball exploded into the back of one of the Chaos Marines in front of Bale, opening up a hole in reality and punching the screaming Marine through it into the immaterium. He just vanished into the heart of the explosion.

Bale and Sindri turned together, tracing the path of the fireball. Behind them, advancing up the mountain side, just clearing the crest of the summit, was a line of eldar soldiers. They were different from the ones defending the menhir - taller and more mechanical-looking: wraithguard. Interspersed in the line were three warlocks, each with crackling staffs of power that flared and jostled with energy, firing strips of blue lightning into the rear of the Alpha Legion's forces. In the centre of the line was a female figure, bathed in an aura of light that seemed to hold her hovering above the ground. Her arms were outstretched to the heavens, and great balls of blue energy kept forming in front of her, then searing through the air into the Legionaries, picking off a different Marine with each blast.

'The farseer!' gasped Sindri, his voice cold with surprise as Bale's Marines struggled to reorganise their deployment, striving to fight front and rear actions simultaneously.

'I thought you had arranged for her to be tied up elsewhere, sorcerer,' hissed Bale as his blade swept through the legs of a charging eldar warrior, sending his two halves tumbling to the ground in twitching heaps. The Chaos Lord was in the thick of the close-range melee, and he was enjoying himself. The eldar were suitable opponents, and the ground was slick with the blood of his Marines and eldar both. Blood for the Blood God, he thought with satisfaction. But he had no intention of dying on this mountain, and he was not fool enough to believe that even he could survive the crossfire of these deadly aliens.

Sindri planted his staff into the rock and started to mutter indistinctly to himself, letting a field of energy build around him, shielding him from the blasts of the eldar warlocks. 'It is of no consequence, Lord Bale. We should retire from this theatre and let the Blood Ravens deal with the eldar. They will lead us to our goal in the end, and in the meantime they will bleed in our place.'

'You'd better be right about this, sorcerer,' said Bale, shooting a hate-filled glance at Sindri, as a pulse of las-fire flashed past his shoulder, singeing the acid-green paint from his armour. 'I grow tired of your faltering schemes. These are not orks, and they will not be so easily manipulated.'

Bale took another look around and realised that he had no choice. The eldar defending the menhir had received reinforcements from somewhere, and they were all fighting with renewed spirit now that the farseer had come into view. And the wraithguard were advancing relentlessly from the rear, rapidly closing down Bale's scope for movement. If they were going to get out of here, they had to go now.

With a tremendous leap, Jaerielle vaulted over the head of a Chaos Marine, dragging his blade across his throat under the helmet seal and slicing the head free. He landed lightly, pulling his sword clear and spinning it in a low arc towards the feet of another. His blade was met by a great curved scythe that shattered his sword with one sweep. But as Jaerielle discarded his blade and rolled for his gun, the giant Marine turned his back on him and strode away, shuriken ricocheting off his massive armour. Looking around, Jaerielle could see that the other Chaos Marines were also disengaging - their remaining assault bikes were already streaking off down the other side of the mountain.

Jaerielle, you will not pursue these forces. It was the farseer, speaking directly into his mind. *Let them go. We have more pressing objectives to achieve. Remember, Jaerielle, war is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Let them go.*

In his soul Jaerielle could feel the fire of combat burning, and he longed to pursue the disgusting mon-keigh - to cleanse the galaxy of their vile presence. The Biel-Tan may hate the bestial orks more than anything else in the galaxy, but the mon-keigh were a close second.

As you wish, farseer, he replied, fighting to control his urges, realising for the first time that he was thoroughly ensnared by the Path of the Warrior, unable to suppress his desire for combat and riddled with desperation to shed blood for Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God.

'WHERE DID THEY go?' asked Matriel as he crunched to the ground at Gabriel's side, his jump pack spluttering into silence. The snipers had all been killed, or had vanished, and the rest of the eldar force seemed to have fled. They had suddenly disengaged and turned tail, as though conceding defeat. But they had not been beaten, reflected Gabriel uneasily.

'What were those portals?' asked Gabriel, turning to Isador. The fighting had simply ceased, and the Blood Ravens had been left unsure about how to proceed. Gabriel had ordered caution, and his Marines had taken up tactical positions but had held their fire. They had refrained from pursuing the eldar; Gabriel suspected that their real fight was not with these mysterious aliens. He was simply pleased to see them leave.

The Falcon tanks had turned their guns on the cliff walls of the pass itself, causing a huge avalanche that blocked the crevice completely, sealing the Blood Ravens on one side and most of the eldar force on the other. The wraithguard that had been trapped with the Space Marines had charged into a series of circular, stone portals and vanished - the portals exploding into fragments behind them. It had all happened in an instant.

'They are webway portals - temporary doorways from one point in space to another,' answered Isador. 'They are a unique eldar technology, captain, and incredibly unstable. Stepping through throws you instantaneously into the warp and then drags you out again into another place, where another portal is open. An unshielded soul would go insane,' he added, shaking his head at the apparent recklessness of the aliens.

The sudden silence in the valley was eerie, as the chatter of falling rocks and the dull echoes of footfalls gradually ceased. Gabriel looked around carefully at the scattering of dead and wounded Marines on the valley floor, together with the remains of ruined equipment and the broken figures of wraithguard.

'Get a dreadnought up here to clear away this rock-fall,' said Gabriel as Corallis hastened to report to his captain. 'In the meantime, this is a good location to establish a field base. Get hold of Brom and tell him to bring a detachment of Tartarans to defend this pass. And make sure that those web-portals have really been destroyed - it would not do to have our eldar friends popping up in the middle of our base.'

'What about Toth?' asked Isador carefully.

'What about him? I'm sure that he will make his own way here in good time, but I am equally sure that I am not going to help him interfere with our purpose here,' replied Gabriel gruffly.

'And what exactly is our purpose here, Gabriel?' asked Isador.

'You were correct, Isador,' said Gabriel wryly. 'The fact that the eldar laid a trap for us does suggest that we are on the right path. We will follow the aliens to the summit of this mountain, and we will discover what they are so keen to hide from us. There is a bigger picture here, Isador, although we cannot yet see what it is. There are still two days before the warp storm arrives, and before then we will find out why Tartarus is so important to these aliens, and to our old foes, the Alpha Legion. And we will do it with or without the blessing of Inquisitor Toth,' said Gabriel firmly. 'Corallis. Where is Prathios? I must pray,' he added, turning away from the Librarian.

A whisper of wind gusted through the mountain pass as the red sun finally set, and Isador breathed it in like a breath of fresh air.



CHAPTER SEVEN

AS THE FIRST rays of the dawn pierced the heavy shadows of the mountain pass, Brom walked away from the newly completed field-station. He kicked at the pebbles on the ground, frustrated and discontented. Before the arrival of the Blood Ravens he had been the ranking officer on Tartarus - a commissar in all but title. It was not that he was not thankful for the help of the Adeptus Astartes in the war against the orks, but he had not anticipated the way in which the Blood Ravens captain would take control of all the military affairs of the planet after their victory.

The arrival of the inquisitor had not improved matters. Toth and Angelos had been at loggerheads from the start, squabbling over their powers and jurisdictions. They had even had the gall to argue about who would have control over the Tartarans in front of him. Brom shook his head in disbelief, kicking a stone so hard that it shattered against the rock-face at the side of the crevice. Who did they think he was? Treating him like a grunt. He was a colonel in the Emperor's own Imperial Guard, and he deserved some respect. He had stood his ground against the uprisings of cultists and the raids of ork pirates, fighting for the honour of the Emperor Himself, and for the safety of the people of his homeworld. What would Captain Angelos know about that, he scoffed, kicking another stone against the cliff face.

The colonel paused as he reached a large boulder. It had been rolled up against the edge of the pass after a Blood Ravens dreadnought had blasted its way through the avalanche in the middle of the night, splintering the rockslide into smaller boulders that the Space Marines had pushed aside like pebbles.

He pulled himself up onto the rock and tugged a lho-stick out of his pocket, tapping it several times against the packet in a personal ritual. Flicking it into life, he gazed back over the new field-station, bathed in the fresh light of morning. Despite his resentment, he was proud of what his men had achieved here in such a short period. If Angelos persisted in assigning the Tartarans such menial and logistical functions, at least they could take pride in how well they performed.

In truth, some of his men were only too pleased to become support personnel - to let the Blood Ravens do the fighting for them. Brom shuddered slightly at the thought of those cowardly troopers, feeling the disdain pouring out of Angelos even from the other side of the camp. But there were some Guardsmen who knew the true value of war - they knew that combat was a goal in itself, that shedding blood was the highest form of offering to the God-Emperor, whether it was the blood of the enemy or your own. There was but one commandment for the loyal soldier: thou shalt kill. Sergeant Katrn knew, and Brom knew that he could rely on Tartarans like him to sustain the honour of his proud regiment.

He took a deep drag on his lho-stick, letting the local weed fill his lungs. He held it there for a few seconds, and for a moment he thought that he could feel the substance of Tartarus itself bleeding into his soul.

Yes, he thought, we will fight again. The Tartarans will show these Blood Ravens what it means to be Tartarus born and bred.

'I SEE THEIR faces every day, Prathios. They scream into my dreams and disturb my prayers. It is as though they haunt my mind, now that their planet is no more,' confessed Gabriel, kneeling in supplication before the company Chaplain. The two Marines were hidden in the heavy shadows of a temporary shrine, hastily constructed by the Tartarans in the heart of the new field-station.

'Their souls are at ease, brother-captain. It is yours that can find no peace. You call out into the warp, like a beacon for the pain of those who have passed before you,' said Prathios in a low voice.

'I am calling daemons into my mind?' asked Gabriel, his voice tinged with horror.

'No, Gabriel, the daemons come by themselves, drawn by the agonies of a soul at war with itself. Your anguish exposes you to their taunts, just as a ship at sea exposes itself to a storm.' Prathios's voice was deep and soothing. He had seen Gabriel change since the Cyrene affair, and he was concerned for his captain. Inside all the magnificent power armour, and behind the myths and legends, a Space Marine was just a man. Not quite a man like any other, but a man nevertheless.

The Apothecaries and Techmarines of the Adeptus Astartes could effect profound transformations on the body of an initiate - augmenting the internal organs, adding sensory implants and bolstering muscle strength, they could even insert a delicate carapace under the skin of the whole body, ready to interface with the power armour. However, there was only so much that could be done for a Marine's mind and soul.

The selection procedure for induction into the Blood Ravens - the Blood Trials - were rigorous in the extreme. Not only were aspirants required to demonstrate the physical prowess of a superior warrior, but their genetic code would also be tested for the smallest sign of mutation. But genetic mutation and a taint of the soul were not the same thing. For detection of the latter, the Blood Ravens would rely on the shadowy expertise of the librarium sanatorium - where all would-be Librarians were screened psychically, to the point of insanity, probing the depths of their souls to find the cracks and fissures for which the forces of Chaos would quest constantly.

The Chapter's Chaplains would oversee all of this, and Prathios had done so innumerable times in his long life. Over a century earlier, in his younger years, the Chaplain had even recruited Gabriel himself in one of the Cyrene trials.

Prathios could remember the trial clearly. He could still see the defiant face of the young Guardsman, burning with passion and smothered in the blood of his competitors, as the young Gabriel Angelos fought for his right for a place on the Blood Ravens' Thunderhawk. His brilliant green eyes had flared with resolution - certain that of the millions of Cyrenean warriors, he was the best. And he had been the best, reflected Prathios, without a doubt.

Even then, there had been something unusual about the young Angelos. His sparkling eyes burned a little too brightly, and his soul seemed to shine almost too purely, as though it were untouched by the horrors of the universe. His genetic tests had all come back

perfectly - absolutely flawless, which was almost a mutation in itself, especially on Cyrene. Although he had a sensitive mind, the Chapter had decided not to push Gabriel through the horrors of the sanatorium - he was not a psyker and he would never be a Librarian.

Prathios himself had voiced some reservations about this decision. Part of him was concerned about how the prodigal young initiate would respond when the horrors of the galaxy finally breached the purity of his soul. He was concerned that the Blood Ravens should attempt to prepare his mind for the shock of the terrible responsibilities of the Adeptus Astartes. No matter how spectacular his physical and tactical capacities, Gabriel's soul shone with naive clarity, and Prathios feared that this beauty belied fragility.

And then there had been the return to Cyrene, and Gabriel had looked upon his homeworld with the eyes of a Space Marine for the first time, charged with conducting the Blood Trials himself. What he had seen there had filled him with horror, and what he had done had shattered his naivety forever.

Prathios sighed deeply, reaching his hand down to Gabriel's shoulder, and he shivered at the thought of the storm raging in his captain's soul. No man, not even a captain of the Adeptus Astartes, should have to exterminate his own home planet - what effect had this duty had upon his unsullied mind?

'IT OFFENDS ME to flee from combat, sorcerer. The Alpha Legion has not won its reputation by turning its tail in the face of aliens. We may not have the pathetic paranoia about honour that is shown by the Adeptus Astartes, but we are still warriors, Sindri, and you would do well not to forget it.' Bale was breathing hard, struggling to keep his temper under control. The sorcerer's plans were not playing out in accord with his own, and he was being humiliated at every turn. If the sorcerer did not promise so much, Bale would have flayed him years ago.

From the entrance to a cave in the side of the Lloovre Valley, Bale could see the sun rising above the shimmering city of Lloovre Marr. The Alpha Legion had sped down into the valley during the night, taking cover in the dense forest. Sindri had spotted the cave, and the Chaos Marines had made their way up the opposing wall of the valley to set up a temporary camp in the cover that it afforded. From there they could monitor movements along the river basin and Sindri could attempt to divine the intent of the eldar. Meanwhile, Bale had sent out a rider to summon reinforcements; the next time he came across the eldar, he would not bow to their onslaught.

'My Lord Bale,' whispered Sindri, as the first light of the morning glinted menacingly off the blades that adorned his helmet. 'We work towards a common end. The honour and prowess of the Alpha Legion are under no threat. Rather, we stand on the brink of a great awakening - something infinitely more powerful than our pride is glittering just out of reach. Our rewards will justify our sacrifices a thousand times over.'

'You had better be right, sorcerer,' said Bale, almost spitting with distaste at his manipulative ways. 'Otherwise your sacrifice will follow quick on the heels of your failure. Your reassurances that the orks would keep the Blood Ravens busy have proved false, and your calculations appear to have underestimated the strength of these eldar. I will not tolerate another mistake, sorcerer, and you would not survive it.'

'My lord, I will not fail,' replied Sindri, without bowing. Inside his helmet, his jaw was clenched, and it required a real effort of will to smooth his tone. 'The eldar will guide us to our goal - they will underestimate our strength and our vision. Their arrogance will be their undoing. As we fled, we reinforced their prejudices, my lord. And, as for the Blood Ravens, they are of no consequence. They are... in hand.'

The Chaos Lord scoffed audibly and brushed past Sindri, pushing his way further into the cave, where his Marines were tending to their weapons in preparation for the combat to come.

Sindri, left alone in the mouth of the cave, walked out into the morning air and raised his arms to the sun, bathing himself in the red light of dawn as though it were a shower of blood. His mind was racing with resentment at the ingratitude of that near-sighted oaf, Bale. But he laughed quietly to himself, whispering his voice into the trees: at the end of the affair, nobody will be able to treat me with such disrespect.

THE RUNES ON the altar fragment were unusual, and Isador could still not decipher their precise meaning. He had retreated to the very edge of the camp, climbing into the shattered remains of the avalanche out of sight of the rest of his battle-brothers. The early morning sun was shedding a faint, reddening glow onto the inscription, coating each of the runes in the suggestion of ghostly blood. Isador sighed humourlessly, wondering how much actual blood had coursed across these etchings in their long history. The character *Treraum* - storm - kept drawing his eye, and his memory ached as he tried to recall the meanings of the runes that appeared after it. He hated himself for being unable to remember, and his hate seeped through into resentment against Gabriel for making them abandon the site so quickly.

They were Blood Ravens, after all, was it not their Emperor-given nature to seek out new knowledge that might be of use to the Imperium? And who was Gabriel to judge whether this altar might be of use? He had not served his time in the librarium sanatorium, not like Isador, and had not spent long years exposing his soul to the torturous mantras of heretics and aliens. He had never read the forbidden books of Azariah Vidya, the Father Librarian of the Blood Ravens, may the Emperor guard his soul. Gabriel had never even heard the silver tones of the Astronomican; never had his soul been seduced into the unspeakable symphony of that choir and left hanging in the deepest reaches of the immaterium, utterly alone with only his knowledge and discipline to bring him home again.

Home. Gabriel knew nothing of the value of homecoming. Cyrene had been Isador's home too.

In truth, Isador had never understood why the Blood Ravens did not require all of their senior officers to be Librarians. There were enough of them in the Chapter - far more than was typical in any other Chapter of Space Marines - and the Chapter Master himself was a powerful Librarian. It was ridiculous to expect that captains like Gabriel could really make sensible decisions about relics

like this altar - only a Librarian could know the true value of the artefact. But Gabriel would not ask advice on command decisions, he was adamant that the responsibility was his.

In practice, however, only a handful of Librarians ever acceded to positions of command, except temporarily, in the absence of their captain. It was as though the Chapter had learnt nothing from the example of their Great Father, Azariah Vidya.

Once, during the early stages of his training, Isador had asked Chaplain Prathios about the politics of promotion within the Blood Ravens, but the Chaplain had just shaken his head sadly and said: there is no promotion, young Isador, there is only service - we all have our parts to play for the glory of the Great Father and the Emperor. At the time, Isador had nodded sagely, believing that he saw the sense in subsuming himself into the organic unity of the Chapter. But now, with the morning wind whispering down through the valley and whistling between the rocks, after two days of war against orks and eldar, on an alien planet that was about to be swallowed by a warp storm, he was not so sure. Different decisions could have been made - and he would have made them better.

But all was not lost, since he had saved this altar fragment, and he would work out a way of using the knowledge that it contained to save the Blood Ravens Third Company from making any further mistakes.

'Knowledge is power,' he muttered to himself, reciting the Chapter's motto as though it were his own. 'Guard it well.'

'Librarian Akios. What a surprise to see you here.' The familiar voice came down from the top of one of the large rocks behind which Isador was sitting.

'Colonel Brom. I had no idea that you were there,' said Isador, wondering exactly how long the Tartaran had been watching him. He had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed, and he made a mental note that he should not let that happen again. For all of his faults, Gabriel was never complacent enough to be taken by surprise by a Guardsman.

Brom breathed a plume of smoke out of his lungs, enjoying being higher than the massive Marine for the first time. The smoke settled slowly down towards Isador, dissipating as it reached his immaculate, blue armour. Instead of speaking, Brom took another draw on his lho-stick and looked off into the sunrise, apparently enjoying the beauty of dawn on his homeworld.

'It is beautiful, is it not?' asked Brom openly.

Isador turned and looked at the sunrise for the first time and nodded. 'Yes, colonel. Tartarus is a beautiful planet.'

'It is my home, Librarian, and I will not give it up. Not to the orks, not to the eldar, and not even to the Blood Ravens.' As he spoke, Brom turned his head away from the sun, fixing Isador with a firm and determined stare.

'I can assure you that Captain Angelos has no designs on your planet, colonel... beautiful though it is,' said Isador, trying to diffuse the anger that seemed to bubble in the background of Brom's tone.

'Do you remember your homeworld, Librarian?' There was some acid in the question, and Isador flinched slightly as it stung him. Even if Brom had been watching him for a while, how could he know? A cold wisp of wind flickered between the rocks, making them both shiver.

'Yes, I remember it well,' he replied plainly.

'And did the good captain save it?' asked Brom. He knew. Somehow he knew.

'Gabriel did what had to be done,' snapped Isador, suddenly leaping to the defence of his old friend. 'I would have done the same thing had the decision been mine.' And I would have done, he realised as he spoke.

Brom let another thread of smoke ease out between his pursed lips, as though unconcerned by the Librarian's sudden emotion. His eyes were still burning into the radiant blue of Isador's, glowing with an inhuman taint of red. For a moment, Isador wondered whether it was really Brom that was staring down at him.

'And what of Tartarus?' he asked, changing the subject and watching the colonel carefully. 'You mentioned some legends about a storm, colonel. I would be most interested to hear more about it.'

'You can read it yourself, can't you?' hissed Brom, his voice dripping with venom as his eyes swam with red, as though riddled with burst capillaries.

Stung again, Isador vaulted up the side of the rock and grabbed Brom by the collar of his coat, lifting him clear off the ground. As they turned away from the dawn, the red faded from Brom's eyes and he began to cough violently, exhaling gouts of smoke into a sudden gust of wind.

'Librarian Akios!' The voice made Isador drop Brom into a heap on top of the rock, as he turned back towards the camp.

Standing just outside the fortifications was Sergeant Corallis, waving a summons to Isador. 'The captain wants to see you. You can bring the colonel.'

'CAPTAIN ANGELOS, I am here as you requested,' said Brom, pushing aside the curtains that hung across the entrance to the command post next to the shrine. Isador loomed behind him for a moment, before pushing past him into the hab-unit and nodding a greeting to Gabriel.

'Colonel Brom, thank you for coming. We need your Tartarans to cover this pass. The combat in this sector will be sure to attract the attention of the remnants of the ork forces, and we cannot afford their interference further up the mountain. If the Blood Ravens have to engage the eldar, we will need no other distractions,' explained Gabriel, watching the tension between Brom and Isador with unease.

'Understood, captain,' replied Brom professionally. 'You may count on the Imperial Guard to hold this pass. No ork will get through while a Tartaran still holds his weapon.'

'Very good, colonel. Keep me appraised of the situation and, if possible, I will send support if the orks do attack.' Gabriel hesitated for a moment, as though on the brink of adding something. But then he waved his hand dismissively. 'Thank you, colonel. Your assistance in this matter is much appreciated.'

Brom bowed sharply and then left, leaving Isador and Gabriel alone.

'What is wrong, old friend?' asked Gabriel - the angst on Isador's face was plain to see.

'I do not trust him, Gabriel,' said Isador, watching the curtains close behind Brom.

'He is a good man, Isador. A good soldier. His men love him, and they follow him without question, mostly. He may not be a Space Marine, and he may not even be the finest officer in the Imperial Guard, but he is a good man. I have been too harsh on him, and it is time for me to share some responsibility. This is his homeworld, after all,' said Gabriel frankly.

Isador observed his old friend for a few moments, a torrent of emotions flashing through his mind as the events of the last few minutes rehearsed themselves in his head. They had been through so much together - born and raised on the same planet, and then inducted into the Blood Ravens in the same Blood Trials. A wave of remorse and affection washed over him, and he felt like himself again.

'Forgive me, captain, I am still thinking about the altar,' confessed Isador.

'There is nothing to forgive, old friend. You are a Librarian of the Blood Ravens, and I would be disappointed if you stopped thinking about it before you have solved the riddle,' replied Gabriel, laughing faintly.

'I am frustrated that you decided to destroy it so quickly, Gabriel. I think that we could have used it to learn more about what we are facing here. Knowledge is power, and we sacrificed some of that power today.'

Isador's honesty touched him, and Gabriel slapped his friend heartily on his shoulder. 'You may be right, Isador. My decision was made in haste. There is much that I do not understand on Tartarus, and I fear what I do not understand - such is the bane of our Chapter. It is the other side of our nature, and that part of us with which we must all struggle. Speed is very important on this expedition, with the storm only two days away, but I was wrong not to give you more time. It will not happen again.'

Isador was overwhelmed by his captain's confession and he fell to his knees before him, bowing his head. 'Thank you, my lord,' he said, adding the epithet that he had never before used with Gabriel.

Captain Angelos of the Blood Ravens returned the bow formally, and then dragged his friend back to his feet. 'What is it, Isador? There is something else?' he said, gazing directly into his blue eyes.

'Nothing. There's nothing, Gabriel,' replied Isador, his fingers rubbing involuntarily against the altar fragment in his belt as he spoke. 'When do we get to kill some eldar?'

AS THE MORNING sun broke the horizon, the summit of Mount Korath was already speckled with light. Torches adorned the great menhir and circled it in a gradually expanding spiral. Strewn over the mountain top were the dead bodies of Biel-Tan eldar and the Alpha Legionaries. The eldar dead stood out gloriously in the dawn, as a single, blue flame licked out of the heart of each, picking them out like candles in the faint morning light.

After the battle, Macha had moved through the eldar corpses one by one, kneeling silently at the side of each and muttering in an ancient tongue. She had carefully removed the waystone from the breastplate of each warrior, storing them in an elaborate crystalline matrix - a fragment of the infinity circuit of the Biel-Tan craftworld. The waystone contained the very soul of the warrior, sealed into an impenetrable gemstone that kept the eldar safe from the ravenous clutches of the daemon Slaanesh, that roamed the warp in a perpetual search for their souls.

If their waystones were lost, so too would be the precious soul of this ancient, dwindling race. When Macha returned to the Biel-Tan craft-world, their giant space-born home, she would return the crystalline fragment to the craft's own spirit pool - the infinity circuit in which the souls of deceased eldar could swim until they were called on again.

Having removed their waystone, Macha had reached out with her long forefinger and delicately touched the tiny crater left in their armour. As she had done so, a burst of blue fire had leapt from her fingertip and settled into a single, perfect flame on the fallen warrior's chest. The Chaos Marines she left as they lay.

By the time the morning light had pushed the darkness down into the valley below, the bodies of the slain eldar were a blaze of glory on the mountaintop. The surviving warriors knelt onto one knee and bowed their white and green elliptical helmets to the rising sun, welcoming the new day and giving thanks that Tartarus had not stolen the souls of their brethren.

As the eldar climbed to their feet and broke free of the observances of the ceremony, they set about readying themselves for the short journey to Lloovre Marr. The path down into the valley on the north side of the mountain was steep, and the valley floor itself was shrouded in tree cover. Macha was certain that the Alpha Legion was laying in wait to exact their vengeance on the Biel-Tan, and she wanted to ensure that her warriors were ready. The fate of Tartarus was in their hands - and it was a fate just as precarious as that of the souls of the eldar themselves. Macha had a responsibility, and she would be damned if she was going to fail to live up to it.

The farseer stood on the far side of menhir, gazing out across the valley below while her warriors busied themselves. It looked so peaceful in the gentle light of dawn, and the deep shadows seemed to languish sleepily.

'Farseer. May I speak with you?' asked Jaerielle, stopping a respectful distance from Macha and touching his left knee to the ground.

Macha turned and smiled weakly at the Storm Guardian. 'Of course, Jaerielle. I was expecting to see you this morning. You want to ask me about the eldar path, do you not?'

'Yes, farseer,' replied Jaerielle, unsurprised by the precise question. 'I fear that I may be straying from it.'

'You are a warrior, Jaerielle, and have been one for many centuries. I wonder whether you can even remember a time when you trod any of the other paths of our ancient culture,' said Macha, explaining how he was feeling, rather than asking. 'The Path of the Eldar was put in place to guard us against ourselves, Jaerielle. We are a passionate people, and easily fixated. The path allows us to cycle through various arts and explore all aspects of ourselves, not only the warrior within. It does sometimes happen,' she continued, 'that an eldar becomes trapped in one path or another. His soul becomes unable to make the transition into another part of itself, and the eldar becomes consumed by the art that has chosen him. In your case, Jaerielle, you have been chosen by the Path of the Warrior, and it seems that you may never leave it.'

'War for its own sake, farseer? You are talking about the Way of the Exarch?' asked Jaerielle in whispered tones, hardly daring to speak the name of the most feared of all eldar warrior castes. The exarch is completely lost to himself, enveloped by a passion for war, and utterly dedicated to the arts of one of the eldar aspect shrines. Over time, he will gradually be assimilated into his

armour, which will never be taken off. And when he is finally slain, there will be nothing left but the armour itself, a testament to the dedication and sacrifice of this most lonely path.

'Yes, Jaerielle. You have felt it. I saw it in your soul as you battled the Chaos Marines last night. There was delight in your heart, and joy in your abilities. Your memory is already awash with images of blood, drowning out the dances and poetry of your youth. Soon there will be nothing but battle for you,' said Macha with solemnity.

'Then I am lost?' asked Jaerielle, a hint of panic sounding in his voice.

'You are lost to yourself, child, but not to Biel-Tan. Your path is a glorious one, and we will rejoice in your majesty. The blood you spill will be for the Biel-Tan and for Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God. You will be a hero amongst the eldar, but you will be utterly alone,' explained the farseer.

'I am not ready, farseer,' said Jaerielle, denying the shouts in his soul.

'You came to me, Jaerielle. You are ready. And we need you to be ready. I will talk with the Shrine of the Striking Scorpions, your old aspect temple, and the ritual of transition will be performed before the sun reaches its third quadrant,' concluded Macha, as though this were the most natural thing in the world. She looked down at the kneeling eldar at her feet and shivered slightly - he was about to step into a place where even she could not see.

THE COLUMN OF Blood Ravens roared up the mountain side, dazzling in shimmering reds in the morning sunshine. At the head of the line was the command Rhino, with Gabriel and Isador shoulder to shoulder, leaning out of the side hatch. The Rhino was flanked on both sides by the remaining Typhoons, and a squadron of assault bikes sat in behind, ready to be deployed when required. Following behind the bikes were two more Rhinos, one carrying Mاتيел's Marines and the other a squad of Devastators. A Land Raider tank brought-up the rear, stuffed full of Tантиус and his Terminators.

The route to the top of the mountain was littered with debris and bodies. Chunks of eldar jetbikes and the ruins of a Vyper still smoked vaguely, but there were also burnt-out assault bikes bearing the markings of the Alpha Legion, and smatterings of corpses, both eldar and Chaos Marine.

The Blood Ravens ploughed on undaunted. The roar of their engines and the sight of the detachment deployed in such formidable force filled their hearts with pride. At the head of the column, heroically silhouetted against the red sun as he gazed out of the side of his Rhino, was Gabriel, his chainsword already drawn in readiness, and the image swelled the confidence of every Marine in the line, as they drew their weapons to honour their captain.

As the summit approached, the Marines could see bursts of blue flame jousting out of the mountain top towards the heavens, but the angle of the slope blocked their view of the ground up there.

Gabriel waved his chainsword, and two clutches of bikes peeled away from the convoy, drawing up along side the Typhoons on either side of his Rhino. He wanted to make sure that the eldar saw an imposing front line as they crested the summit. He gazed proudly across the line, and could think of few sights more splendid than a solid bank of Blood Ravens roaring over the crest of a mountain pass.

As the Rhino rolled up onto the mountain top, bringing the whole of the summit into view, Gabriel was surprised to see the extent of the killing field that unfolded before him. He raised his fist into the air, bringing the Blood Ravens to a halt, as he swept his gaze over the vista and tried to take it in.

There were dozens of Alpha Legionaries lying where they had died, riddled with holes and oozing with blood, their armour shattered beyond repair by the strange alien weapons. Their bodies gave the rocky mountain top an aura of acidic green. Intermixed amongst them were the bodies of the fallen eldar, each was a blaze of blue fire, with flames reaching seven metres into the air as the supernatural fire consumed their bodies.

Beyond them, on the very peak of Mount Korath, was an unusual-looking menhir, roughly elliptical in shape and covered with an indescribable array of blue torches. But, as far as Gabriel could see, there was no eldar army lying in wait. The scene was eerily silent.

Jumping down from the hatch of the Rhino, Gabriel strode off toward the menhir, picking his way between the corpses. Isador leapt down after him, and then the Rhino doors opened fully to let Prathios and Corallis join them. The four Marines fanned out and made their way towards the giant marker stone.

Suddenly Corallis dropped down onto one knee, inspecting the ground at his feet. The others stopped, watching the sergeant carefully, trusting his eyes. Isador planted his staff against the rock and Prathios spun his crozius arcanum menacingly.

'Something was here only moments ago,' crackled Corallis through the vox system. 'But the tracks are strange. They just seem to appear and disappear, without leading anywhere.'

Gabriel strode forward of the group, unwilling to be intimidated by the unusual ways of the eldar. As he approached the menhir, something flickered into his path and then vanished. He paused, scanning the scene for other signs of movement. Another flicker made him turn. A heavy-looking eldar warrior appeared suddenly to the side of the menhir. It planted its feet and let loose with a spray of writhing filament from some kind of rotary weapon.

There were a series of cries from behind him, and Gabriel turned as he rolled clear of the gout of fire, and he saw three other eldar, similar to the first. They had appeared from nowhere, and were now arrayed against the rest of his team, cutting them off from him.

As he came out of his roll, Gabriel squeezed off a rattle of shots from his bolt pistol back towards the alien in front of him, but the Warp Spider had already gone. It had simply vanished. Turning, he saw his battle-brothers snapping their weapons from side to side, impotently searching for their targets in the same way.

'Warp Spiders, Gabriel,' hissed Isador's voice through the vox. 'This could be another trap.' A great flash of lightning jousting out of Isador's staff, flashing towards the menhir. Just before the bolt reached the huge stone, there was a faint shimmer in its path and a Warp Spider chose that point to slip back into real space. Isador's bolt crashed into the eldar, catching it full in the chest and lifting it off its feet, throwing it backwards against the menhir with a crack.

Immediately, Gabriel and Prathios opened up with their bolters, riddling the alien with fire and shattering his thick armour, leaving nothing but splatters of blood against the marker stone behind it.

Meanwhile, Corallis had stalked off to the other side of the menhir, keeping low to the ground as though tracking something. He stopped suddenly and rubbed his hand over the loose topsoil. As he looked up, back towards Gabriel and the others, the remaining Warp Spiders sprung into being before him, their death-spinners releasing a tirade of projectile-filaments from close range.

'Corallis!' cried Gabriel, pounding across the summit of the mountain toward the besieged Marine, his boltgun spitting in his hand. Prathios was with him, matching his run stride for stride, strafing his fire back and forth across the backs of the Warp Spiders. Without moving, Isador planted his staff and muttered something inaudible, sending sheets of blue power coruscating through the ground, racing against the storming Marines.

Isador's bolts seared under the feet of Gabriel and Prathios as they ran, and then exploded into flames as they crashed into the stances of the Warp Spiders. The creatures shimmered slightly, trying to leap back into the webway, but Isador's energy blast had done something to their warp jump generators. Before they could even turn to face the charging Marines, Gabriel and Prathios were upon them, riddling them with bolter shells.

In the last stride before he reached them, Gabriel cast his bolter aside and drew his chainsword into both hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Prathios dropping his own gun, and swinging the crackling crozius into his fist. Gabriel launched himself at the Warp Spider in the middle, crashing into its back and flattening it against the ground. In one smooth movement, he flourished his chainsword into the air and drove it down through the alien's spine. The creature twitched momentarily, and then fell still.

A shower of fire speckled his armour as he sprang off the corpse and rounded on the last eldar, seeing that Prathios had already incinerated the other one in an inferno of power discharge from his crozius.

Gabriel brought his sword down swiftly, but the Warp Spider was fast, dancing around his blow and punching a flurry of shots straight into the captain's chest plate. His chainsword missed its target but hacked into the alien's weapon, where it stuck, spluttering impotently. As one, Gabriel and the eldar discarded their chewed-up weapons and started to circle one another like animal predators, flexing their shoulders ready for the fight.

A javelin of power flashed over his shoulder from Isador. It seared past Gabriel's face, punching into the stomach of the eldar and blowing a hole clear through. The alien staggered for a few more steps and then sunk to its knees facing Gabriel - it seemed to be staring at him with the alien eyes hidden behind its elongated helmet. Then Prathios stepped up and swung at the Warp Spider with his hissing crozius, striking it cleanly and knocking the creature's head crisply off its shoulders as its body slumped to the ground at Gabriel's feet.

'Corallis?' asked Gabriel urgently. The sergeant was lying on his back in a pool of blood, his armour punctured by numberless holes, and Gabriel knelt swiftly by his side. 'Corallis?'

'The others have gone on ahead, captain,' replied Corallis, coughing as a trickle of blood seeped out of the corner of his mouth. 'They have rigged this marker to explode. It was a trap.' As he spoke, he lifted his hand from the ground, revealing what he had found before the battle started. A small, blinking device was buried just beneath the surface.

It was a mine.



CHAPTER EIGHT

'THERE ARE ELDAR explosives and demolition charges all around the menhir, captain,' reported Matiel. His squad of Space Marines were working their way around the great stone marker, studying the ground and noting the relays clamped into the stone itself. 'We dare not move them - the trip mechanisms are unknown to us, and we would risk destroying the stone... and us.'

'I understand,' said Gabriel, his attention still distracted by the scouts who were carrying their sergeant into the back of one of the Rhinos. Corallis was not quite dead - it took more than a few bullet wounds to kill a Space Marine - but he was as near as it was possible to get.

'What about the triggers?' he asked, collecting himself again.

'I think that we can replace the triggering devices, but that is all I would care to do with this xeno-tech,' replied Matiel, somewhat reluctantly.

'See that it is done, Matiel. We would not want the eldar to pay us a surprise visit and blow us all into the warp,' said Gabriel, a characteristic smile drifting across his face, in an attempt to lift the mood.

'Was this a trap?' asked Isador, striding over from the Rhino, into which Sergeant Corallis had just been loaded. The Librarian looked resolute, as though the ruin of Corallis might have been the last straw.

'No, I don't think so,' replied Matiel, nodding a swift greeting to the Librarian as he joined the group. 'Judging by the placement of the charges, it seems likely that they planned to collapse this area of the summit - burying the menhir, and anyone else who happened to be nearby.'

'Corallis did say that the eldar left in a hurry, so perhaps we disturbed them before they could finish the job? Maybe the Warp Spiders were left to complete the demolition?' suggested Gabriel, looking to the others for their opinions.

'Or perhaps they left the summit to lure us in, leaving this stone as bait, planning to use the Warp Spiders to blow it when we arrived?' said Isador, more suspicious than his captain. 'We should not give these aliens the benefit of the doubt, Gabriel. Just because they are the enemy of our enemy doesn't mean that they are our friends. Look at what they did to Corallis.'

'Either way,' said Gabriel, nodding at the plausibility of Isador's version, 'the eldar clearly thought that we would want to take a look at this stone, and it also appears that they were keen to ensure that the Alpha Legion did not get the chance to look at it.'

Gabriel flicked his head towards the killing field behind them.

'We should certainly see what is so special about it. Isador, please take a look at the stone... Take as much time as you need.'

Isador nodded and made his way over to the menhir, carefully stepping between the Space Marines that ringed it. He raised his hand and touched the smooth, featureless surface of the stone, closing his eyes in concentration. Somewhere deep inside the rock, there was a faint, rhythmical pulse, as though it was breathing. He leant in closer, pressing his ear against the rock, straining with his mind to discern the hint of sound within. It was a whisper.

THE ROAR OF a Rhino engine starting up made Matiel and Gabriel turn away from the menhir. One of the Rhinos started to roll down the mountain side, heading back towards the field-station in the Pass of Korath. An escort of scout bikes ran alongside it, as Corallis's squadron refused to abandon their sergeant. The banner of the Blood Ravens was held by the company standard bearer, who stood solidly on the back of an open-topped armoured transport, marking the passage of an honoured warrior. It fluttered in the strong winds that blew across the mountain top, beating the wings of the black raven and making the scarlet drop of blood in the centre of the emblem pulse like a heart.

'May the Emperor heal his wounds,' whispered Gabriel, staring after the convoy. Matiel just bowed his head in respect.

As the vehicles dropped out of sight, the sound of another engine drifted through the breeze, and Gabriel watched the horizon intently. It didn't sound like another Rhino, but it was moving much faster than the slow procession that was taking Corallis down for medical care, whatever it was. After a couple of seconds, a red and black Tartaran Chimera crested the summit at high speed, lifting into the air as the angle of the ground flattened out and then crashing back down onto its tracks.

The transport skidded abruptly, sliding in an ugly arc as its momentum pushed it precariously close to the side of the summit, but then its tracks bit into the rocky ground and dragged it towards the Blood Ravens, sending sprinklings of soil and stones cascading over the edge of the peak.

The Chimera rumbled heavily over the corpses that were strewn over the mountain top, squashing them unceremoniously under its thick caterpillar tracks, apparently unconcerned about whether they were Chaos Marines or the smouldering remains of eldar. As the transport ground to a halt in front of Gabriel and Matiel, it left a path of mulched flesh and pools of blood in its wake.

Given the manner of the arrival, Gabriel already knew who to expect when the rear hatch lowered into a ramp and Inquisitor Toth stamped out into the mid-morning sun, dragging Colonel Brom behind him like a beaten dog.

'Captain Angelos, this is insupportable—' began Mordecai, striding straight up to Gabriel and breathing directly into his face.

'Inquisitor Toth,' interrupted Gabriel smoothly. 'How nice to see you. As you can see, we have been rather busy, and I should apologise for not finding the time to keep you informed.'

'It is too late for pleasantries,' replied Mordecai, unimpressed by Gabriel's transparency. 'Not only did you break from camp without informing the official representative of the Emperor's Inquisition, but I am given to understand that you also found and destroyed a potentially valuable alien artefact, before declaring war on an eldar force and then requisitioning a detachment of Brom's Imperial Guard to oversee your field-station. Needless to say, captain, the Inquisition will not look favourably on these actions.'

'And Colonel Brom, greetings,' said Gabriel, choosing to ignore the tirade from Mordecai - reminding everyone that the inquisitor had no power over the Adeptus Astartes. Brom nodded a brisk greeting and then shrugged his shoulders, perhaps indicating that he was as much a victim of Toth's umbrage as Gabriel.

'I will not be ignored, Captain Angelos, and you will answer to me. I may not have the power to commandeer your precious Blood Ravens, but I certainly do have the power to have you placed into custody for obstructing the affairs of the Inquisition,' said Mordecai, fuming.

'You overstep yourself, inquisitor,' replied Gabriel quietly, fixing Mordecai with his sparkling green eyes and narrowing them slightly. 'I am obstructing nobody. You made it perfectly clear that you had no interest in the events on Tartarus, having already condemned it to the ravages of the imminent warp storm. In this context, I fail to see why it would have been more than mere impoliteness not to inform you of our movements here. If you wish to dispute this matter in the company of the inquisitor lords, then I will be happy to entertain you. But not now - perhaps later. As you can see, there is rather a lot for me to attend to here first. You may notice, for example, the litter of dead Alpha Legionaries strewn over this very mountain top - the very forces of Chaos that you seemed certain did not exist on Tartarus,' finished Gabriel with something of a flourish.

'Yes, captain, it is an impressive sight,' responded Mordecai, recovering his composure and affecting a survey of the scene around him, 'but I did not claim that Chaos had never set foot on this planet. I said, rather, that if the forces of Chaos were present, then the impending warp storm would eliminate them for us - saving us from needless conflict, and saving the lives of many of your Blood Ravens and Brom's Tartarans. Sergeant Corallis, for example, would be alive and well,' he added, twisting the blade.

'Sergeant Corallis is alive,' replied Gabriel from between gritted teeth, 'and he will be well.'

'I hope you are right, captain, since his death would be entirely on your conscience. And I would think that your conscience is crowded enough already.' Mordecai did not flinch away from the Blood Ravens captain, even as Gabriel's muscles bunched in his neck. Sergeant Matiel stepped up to his shoulder, but Mordecai was not sure whether he intended to support or restrain his captain's anger.

'As I have already explained, Inquisitor Toth, the Blood Ravens will remain until the very last minute - and, until then, we will pursue this unfolding riddle. There is still time - nearly two days,' managed Gabriel, his jaw still knotted in tension.

'Captain, I do not... presume to question your decisions concerning the Blood Ravens.' Mordecai's words were carefully chosen. 'But when it comes to employing the colonel's Imperial Guard in your quest—'

'My quest!' cried Gabriel, struggling to control his outrage. 'Yet again you accuse me of pursuing my own personal agenda, inquisitor. If you were not an agent of the Emperor, I would slay you where you stand for challenging my honour and that of the Blood Ravens. But the badge you hide behind also confers a duty on you, Toth,' said Gabriel, almost spitting the man's name into his face. 'It is your duty, as well as mine, to expunge any scent of heresy or taint of Chaos. My conscience is clear about my duty, is yours?'

'Now, it is you who overstep yourself, captain,' replied Mordecai, flinching inwardly against Gabriel's words. This captain was not like any he had encountered before: his mind was sharp, and he had turned the tables on one of the Emperor's inquisitors. The scholarly reputation of the Blood Ravens was not without merit, it seemed.

'Perhaps, but you have overstepped the mark and then marched off into the killing zone: they are not "the colonel's Imperial Guard". They have sworn their lives to the Emperor, not to Brom and certainly not to you, and it is by His mandate that I employ the Tartarans in this war against the forces of Chaos and the xenos here. Through the glory of this holy battle, I elevate them to a status worthy of their oaths of allegiance.' Better that than run away and hide like cowards, Gabriel added to himself.

'I can see now that coming here to Mount Korath to reason with you was a mistake. If you are set on this path that will lead nowhere except to the destruction of you and your Blood Ravens, then I can do nothing to stop you. But I will not allow you to drag the rest of this planet down with you. By Inquisitorial edict, I am taking control of planet Tartarus - all requests for planetary resources, including its military resources, must be approved by me. Captain, from this point on, you and your Marines are on your own,' concluded Mordecai dramatically, turning immediately and striding back up the ramp into the waiting Chimera.

For a moment, Colonel Brom stood at the foot of the ramp, looking from Gabriel to Mordecai and back again. The inquisitor's voice boomed down the ramp, 'Brom!' and the colonel looked up at Gabriel, apparently searching for a sign.

'Go,' said Gabriel quietly, releasing him. 'Make sure that the spaceport at Magna Bonum is held against the orks until the last of the civilians are evacuated.'

THE ELDAR FORCE, arrayed in all of its glory, swept across the valley floor like a bristling dam of lethal weaponry. The gates of Lloovre Marr had been slammed shut hours before, and the remaining defenders of the capital city had hastened to the gun emplacements in the great wall. It was a testament to the tumultuous history of Tartarus that all of its major cities were walled - and Lloovre Marr was no exception.

The sheer, white walls curved around the southern perimeter of the city in a sweeping semi-circle. Each end butted up against the high cliffs of the Lloovre valley, and the northern sectors of the capital had been built in a great cave, scooped out the rock itself. This unusual defensive design had withstood the test of time, and Lloovre Marr had only ever fallen once in its whole history: a revolt had erupted within the city walls, and the governor had been unable to escape the bloodshed, trapped in the impregnable fortress. Since then, a complicated system of tunnels and caves had been dug into the cliffs, in case the rulers of Tartarus ever needed to escape again.

Looking out on the awesome might of the Biel-Tan craftworld - the Bahzhakhain, the Swordwind, the Tempest of Blades, a maelstrom of alien power, silent, beautiful, and breathtaking - the leaders of Tartarus could have been forgiven for taking to the caves at once.

However, the leaders had already fled the city. The governor had been on the first transport to Magna Bonum, and then on the first shuttle to the *Litany of Fury*, when he had received word from Inquisitor Toth that the warp storm was on its way. The ruling

council had left a skeleton force of Imperial Guardsmen behind to defend the city against looters and pirates until the storm broke. Then they would be airlifted off the surface by a Blood Ravens' Thunderhawk.

Looters and pirates were one thing, the Swordwind army of the Biel-Tan was something else entirely. There were one hundred Guardsmen lining the walls of the city, and a smattering of others throughout the streets of the capital itself; not one of them had ever even seen an eldar before in their lives. Now they could see more of them than they had ever wanted to.

A single, impossibly elegant figure strode forward of the eldar line. Her slender and shapely body appeared to be female, but she was taller than most men. Her emerald green robes flowed out behind her like water, and the white detailing seemed to dance over the cloth, as though it was merely the echo of a life being lived in another dimension. A veil fluttered around her face, shedding the vaguest glimpses of an unearthly beauty beyond. In her hand she carried a long, simple staff. It was nearly two metres in length and perfectly smooth from one end to the other. It appeared to be completely without decoration. But it moved, or rather, it seemed to move. It was as though it was a tiny tear in the fabric of space, the merest crack in a window to another realm. The mid-afternoon light just seemed to fall into it, as though being sucked out of this world altogether. And something on the side moved, curdling and gyrating in a world of pure energy, pushing up against the tear, eager to break through.

The figure opened her arms to the city, holding them wide as though trying to take in the whole of Lloovre Mar. And then her voice was heard by everyone. Each of the Guardsmen stopped their preparations for war and listened, struck by the angelic lilt of the feminine voice. It was as though they didn't have to listen at all, as though the voice just slipped directly into their heads, delicately caressing their ears with the idea of sound.

People of Lloovre Marr, I bring you a choice, said Macha, letting her thoughts drift across the valley and into the city. *And choice is the greatest gift that you can receive from anyone.* For a moment, the farseer thought about her own life and that of Jaerielle. Indeed, the whole of the Path of the Eldar was premised upon the annihilation of choice. Choice brought selfishness. And selfishness was the beginning of the end. But still, even a farseer had choices to make - the future was not an uncomplicated place. *Either you open the gates and leave the city... or you die where you stand. The choice is yours, but choose, and choose now.* Macha lowered her arms and stood quietly between the Swordwind of Biel-Tan and the walls of Lloovre Marr. Nobody moved. Her army stood perfectly motionless behind her, only the banners of the Biel-Tan fluttered in the wind that swept through the valley: crisp white flags bearing a golden rune, *Treraum*, and a crimson heart.

In the main line, the Storm squad and Defender squads shone in pristine white psycho-plastic armour, with elongated green helmets glinting in the sun. Behind them were the wraithguard, towering over their living brethren in inverted colours: green, wraithbone armour and white helmets. And in front were the Aspect Warriors, resplendent in the brightly coloured uniforms of various shrines. At various points throughout the formation were the sleek, deep green Falcon tanks and a few Vyper weapons platforms, each flanked by a couple of jetbikes.

On the city wall, the Guardsmen gradually realised that something was expected of them. Shaking their heads to clear their minds of the sweet invasion, they glanced up and down the battlements, looking to each other for ideas. None dared be the first to move. All of the senior officers had already left the city, and the soldiers needed their leadership more than ever.

Then, simultaneously, two different decisions were made. One Guardsman, Bobryn, started to work the release mechanism for the gate, reasoning that Tartarus was already doomed and therefore not worth dying for at this late stage. And another, Hredel, opened fire from his autocannon platform.

As the first shots rang out through the valley, Macha turned and walked back into the midst of her army. She shook her head sadly: humans, she thought, both the hope and the bane of the galaxy.

FROM THEIR VANTAGE point, high in the walls of the Lloovre valley, Chaos Lord Bale and the sorcerer Sindri watched the eldar force assemble at the gates of the capital city. Their own force of Alpha Legionaries was collected into the deep cave in the cliffs, where the Chaos Marines fumed in frustrated silence. Great fires had been lit, and swirls of noxious smoke filled the close air of the cavern, smothering the oxygen with a blanket of burning flesh.

The broken remains of eldar warriors were strewn over the cave floor, their armour cracked open and their flesh scooped out like giant shellfish. The thin, slender bodies of the eldar were broken and cast into the fires; there was precious little meat on them and they tasted disgusting, but they made pungent firewood.

'The eldar will take the city quickly, sorcerer,' said Bale, emerging out of the smoky cave to join Sindri on the ledge outside. The smoke and the corpses in the cavern had put his soul at ease, but fury remained bubbling beneath the surface of his composure. Sindri nodded without looking round. His eyes were fixed on the distant scene to the north. The white walls of the city shimmered slightly in the sunlight, but the Biel-Tan army was a blaze of reflections and star-bursts before them. The rumble of cannon fire had already started, and Sindri was sure that he had caught the scent of a voice in the air before it had all begun. Tiny bursts of fire were visible in the walls as the heavy weapons platforms flared with activity, and the eldar lines had begun to swim with motion. And, unless his eyes were deceiving him, the great gates of Lloovre Marr were lying open in the centre of the wall.

'Yes, my lord. The eldar will take the city. But it is of no concern to us. We need not race against our guides, Lord Bale,' said Sindri smoothly.

'You'd better be right about this, sorcerer,' replied Bale, his voice tinged with his natural disgust for scheming and his frustration about watching combat without being able to reap the carnage himself.

'We do not need to be there yet. But when the time comes, we will move swiftly,' said Sindri calmly. 'Then you will have your bloodletting.'

Bale inspected the territory between their cave and the city walls. Even for Chaos Marines the distance was too large for a swift attack. It would take them several hours to traverse the valley, and they would be clearly visible to the guards on the city wall - especially if those guards were eldar rangers. Launching a rapid strike would not be possible from this position, and the Alpha Legion would be humiliated yet again by Sin-dri's meddling schemes.

'I do not like this, sorcerer. I do not place my faith in the hesitant or the probable - it is better to feel the certainty of my scythe than the inconsistency of your reassurances.' The effects of the smoke were wearing off, and Bale's temper was rising yet again. 'Patience, my lord,' soothed Sindri. 'We do not have to cross the valley.' He turned back towards the cave and pointed vaguely towards the entrance. A thick blanket of smoke hung across it like a curtain, but only the smallest wisps were escaping into the air outside.

'Where do you think all of that smoke is going?' asked Sindri coaxingly.

'I don't have time for your games, sorcerer. And neither do you,' menaced Bale, unamused by Sindri's rhetoric.

'The smoke is being drawn further into the cave, my lord, because there is a network of tunnels beyond. A network that leads right into the heart of Loovre Marr - I was given a map many years ago, by a... friend in the governor's office. When the time comes, the Alpha Legion will already be in the city. There will be no storming through the valley and no cumbersome siege of the city walls... At least not by us,' added Sindri cryptically.

Looking from Sindri to the battle and then back again, Bale snorted an agitated acknowledgment. It did sound like a good plan, but Bale would believe it when he saw it happen. Until then, the sorcerer lived on borrowed time. Turning suddenly, Bale strode back through the curtain of smoke and disappeared into the interior of the cave.

THE SCRIPT ON the menhir was different from that on the altar in the crater: it contained the characteristic angles and runic curves of an eldar tongue. Isador had searched the stone for a long time before he had found it, for it was not literally on the surface of the rock at all. Rather, the markings swam just underneath the surface, all but invisible to the eyes of men. They had been etched into the essence of the menhir itself, not hacked and carved into the mundane rock like the clumsy scribe-blings of cultists. The Librarian had pressed himself against the rock and felt the residue of a soul oscillating deep within, as though the eldar artisan had left a fragment of herself to imbue the stone with meaning and life. As his mind tuned in to the gentle pulsing of the rock's rhythm, the script had begun to flicker into life, glowing with an unearthly blue somewhere inside. It was as though the material of the huge rock had gradually shifted into translucence, revealing a liquid heart in which an ancient message swam like the memory of stars.

The message itself was straightforward enough, belied by the breathtaking beauty of its form. There was something about a curved blade - some sort of key. And there was a string of co-ordinates, coded in an elaborate manner than made Isador's head spin; the figures spiralled and shifted until his mind discovered their secret, bringing them under control and settling them into a firm pattern.

When the eldar hid their secrets, they placed them in full view of all, knowing that only the rarest of individuals would be able to see them, let alone decipher them. The problem was not a linguistic one - the nines were simple enough for an educated Blood Raven to understand - rather, the problem was psychic. Only the most gifted of human psykers would taste even a hint of the presence of the runic script in the first place.

Stepping back from the menhir, Isador looked at it with fresh eyes. He could see now that it was a blaze of runes and twisting lines of script. The psychic etchings snaked and spiralled around the smooth form, flowing and coalescing like mountain streams, mixing their meanings together into transient poetry and garbled gibberish in equal measures. The tiny section on which his mind had focussed was merely the most miniscule fragment of a grand, sweeping narrative.

The rock itself seemed to shimmer with release, as the texts that it contained were freed to swim and shift before the eyes of a reader once again. It was as though the menhir wanted to be read. For the first time, Isador realised that the menhir was not a rock at all - it was a giant tear-drop of wraithbone, the mysterious material employed by eldar artists and engineers to construct their unfathomable technologies.

'What do you see, Isador?' asked Gabriel, approaching his friend from behind and placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Isador started at the touch, and his head snapped round to stare at his captain, his eyes wide and wild. 'Oh, Gabriel,' he managed, bringing his shock under control and turning back to the menhir. The lights and the script had vanished, leaving no sign of ever having been there at all. 'It was so beautiful...'

Gabriel looked at the rock for a moment, noting its graceful curves and its smooth lines. He shook his head vaguely. 'Your eyes are different from mine, old friend. What did you learn?'

'The menhir is a marker. It must have been left here by the eldar thousands of years ago. It speaks of a bladed-key, buried beneath the ground for all time,' said Isador, his mind drifting back to the images that he had seen in the wraithbone.

'A key to what?' asked Gabriel.

'I am not sure. It would take me months to decipher all of the text,' lamented Isador.

Again, Gabriel looked up at the menhir and gazed at its perfectly smooth, flawless surface. He raised his eyebrows. 'It is enough, I suppose, to know that the Alpha Legion and the eldar are both pursuing this key. Do you know where it is?'

'Yes. The runes are very clear. They were clearly intended to guide an eldar force to it at an important moment,' replied Isador, deep in thought.

Gabriel's thoughts were catching up with those of his Librarian. 'So, the eldar have been here before, and they anticipated the need for a return to Tartarus?'

'So it seems, Gabriel.'

'Did the historical records make any mention of an eldar invasion or presence on this planet in the past?' asked Gabriel, already sure that Isador would have mentioned such a thing.

'No, Gabriel. I can only assume that the eldar were here before the colonisation of Tartarus - before the Imperium's records began,' said Isador, his mind racing with the possible implications of this knowledge.

'Can this all be coincidental?' asked Gabriel, giving voice to their joint concerns. 'The return of the eldar, the presence of our old adversaries, the Alpha Legion, the invasion of the orks, and the imminent arrival of the warp storm?'

Isador shook his head. 'I do not believe in coincidences - they are the symptoms of ignorance. I fear that the Blood Ravens may be the only force on this planet who do not know what is going on.'

THE STRIKING SCORPION squad was first into the breach as the gate ground slowly open. Their new exarch - the eldar warrior that was once Jaerielle - was their spearhead, dancing and flipping through the hail of fire from the gunnery emplacements on the city wall. He was through the gate and into the courtyard on the other side before the mechanism had even wound open fully, flicking and darting between shots from the Imperial Guardsmen, as though they were moving too slowly to trouble him.

Inspired by their exarch, the emerald green figures of the rest of his squad stormed into the city behind him, flourishing their chainswords and dispatching sheets of shuriken fire from their pistols. Following in the wake of the Striking Scorpions came the reds and golds of the Fire Dragons, dousing the wall defences in chemical flames from their fire-lances and fusion guns. And then, bursting through the flames, hissed the Vypers and jetbikes, flashing through the open gate into the city streets under cover of heavy fire from the Falcon tanks outside.

The Falcons had slid to a halt in front of the walls, and were battering the gun platforms with barrages of fire from their shuriken cannons and lance arrays. The impacts strafed across the wall, blasting great chunks of rockcrete out of their structure and shaking the weapons emplacements.

The Imperial Guardsmen in the city defences found themselves in crumbling alcoves, with debris and rockcrete raining down onto them from great cracks in the superstructure. The fixings for their autocannons and multi-meltas were breaking free as the rockcrete splintered out from underneath them, denying them the stability needed for accurate fire.

Guardsmen Hredel threw his weight against his weapon, hoping that his mass would keep the autocannon rooted while it fired a constant stream of shells down towards the breach in the open gates.

Down in the courtyard inside the gate, a smattering of Guardsmen, led by the hapless Bobryn, who had opened the gate and then regretted it instantly, staged a last ditch defence of the city. Eldar jetbikes zipped past them into the capital, not even bothering to engage the defenders. The Vypers slid to a halt in the courtyard, but did not open fire on the Guardsmen. Instead, their gun-turrets spun around and started to blast away at the rear of the wall, where the wall's gun platforms were unshielded. Hredel turned to look into the courtyard just in time to see the withering hail of shuriken crash into his gunnery platform, killing him instantly. Meanwhile, Jaerielle sprang into the line of defenders in the courtyard, flourishing his toothed blade in a dizzying display of virtuosity.

Bobryn's mouth dropped open as the eldar warrior spun through the air in a graceful arc, vaulting the impromptu barricade in a single bound, its blade whipped into a blur by the speed of its motion. He just had time to marvel at the skill of the alien, before the blade passed straight through his neck.

Jaerielle swooped and sliced with his chainsword, letting it dance all by itself, pulling him from one kill to the next in a frenzy of blood. The little stand of Guardsmen dwindled into nothing in a matter of seconds, and Jaerielle spun to a standstill in amongst the spread of dismembered corpses, striking the victory pose of the Striking Scorpions, with streams of mon-keigh blood coasting down his emerald armour.

As he struck the pose, Farseer Macha walked calmly through the gates into Lloovre Marr, flanked on both sides by a retinue of warlocks, claiming the city for Biel-Tan. She stood for a moment, motionless in the entrance to the courtyard. The barricades of the defenders were still in place, and the Striking Scorpions and Fire Dragons had fanned out around the perimeters - they showed little sign of having seen combat today. But there, standing on the far side of the barricades, was Jaerielle, surrounded by a litter of corpses and running with blood. His blade was held dramatically above his head, and his pistol was pointing at the ground, as he stretched his legs into a long, low stance.

The sound of a distant explosion made Macha turn and look back out of the open gates. In the distance, directly below the sun, was the imposing sight of Mount Korath. Its peak was a blaze of light, and a mushroom cloud of thick smoke and debris had plumed into the air above it, casting the valley into shadow as the cloud obstructed the sun for a moment. The Blood Ravens, thought Macha, hoping that her Warp Spiders had done their job.

In the foreground, the rest of the Biel-Tan army remained positioned for battle before the walls. The wraithguard trained their wraithcannons on the defensive gunnery positions, although most had already fallen silent. The Storm and Defender squads were starting to file through the gate, keeping the farseer in sight in case they were needed, but the battle for Lloovre Marr was basically over. The Swordwind had swept the pathetic defence before it and, turning again to look at Jaerielle, Macha wondered whether he could have done it all by himself.

A line of ranger jetbikes hissed through the gates, and Flaetriu vaulted off the leading machine before it slid to a halt. He swept into a bow before the farseer.

'Farseer, the Chaos Marines are regrouping in a cave in the valley wall. They are several hours' march from here. We have time to refortify the city before they arrive,' reported the ranger, his concentration suddenly broken by the sight of Jaerielle further inside the courtyard.

'Thank you, Flaetriu. In the meantime, take your rangers through the city, and find those cowardly mon-keigh that fled their positions at the wall. We want no surprises today,' said Macha gravely. Even as she spoke, she could feel that surprises were on their way.

AS THE COLUMN of Blood Ravens thundered down the north side of Mount Korath, Gabriel clicked the detonator-trigger that Matriel had given to him. Behind them, the summit of the mountain erupted like a volcano as the eldar charges exploded. The mountain top was vaporised and a huge cloud of debris and smoke blasted into the air, obscuring the sun. The rocks around the summit were instantly rendered into flows of molten lava that sprayed outwards from the mountain in a superheated fountain. Great sheets of molten rock started to ooze down the mountain side, chasing the heels of the Blood Ravens as they roared down into the valley towards Lloovre Marr.



CHAPTER NINE

THE GRAND STREETS of Lloovre Marr were quiet and deserted. Vehicles and market stalls had been abandoned by the sides of the roads, and the doors to buildings had been left swinging in the breeze. The population had left in a hurry, and it looked as though they had not anticipated returning. Lights still burned behind some of the windows, but Macha was certain that these had simply been left burning when the occupants left - there were few signs that anyone remained in the capital.

The eldar convoy moved along the central boulevard with swift urgency, heading for the very heart of the city. Jetbikes flashed through the adjoining streets, running parallel to the convoy to ensure that it was left unchallenged. The boulevard itself was lined with tall, white statues. Each depicted a human figure, usually a warrior, presumably from the history of the city. Their heads were all turned towards the centre of the city, as though gazing up towards the great palace of the governor that dominated the administrative core of the capital.

To Macha's eldar eyes, the statues looked clumsy and ugly - not merely because they depicted the disproportionate features of the mon-keigh, but also because the artisans had been poor. In general, reflected the farseer, this was true of all human art - it all seemed so rushed and underdeveloped. It was almost as though art were a hobby, rather than the highest expression of the soul. It would be inconceivable that the Biel-Tan would grant a commission of the magnitude of a public statue to an artisan who had not been walking the Path of the Artist for many centuries, perhaps even millennia. The commission itself might take decades to fulfil. But these pathetic lumps of stone looked as though they had been turned out in a matter of months, by artisans barely old enough to hold the tools.

Shaking her head in disbelief and pity, Macha took a moment to consider what these statues said about the soul of the mon-keigh. Each of them represented a warrior, and each was gazing on the buildings of the Administratum, fierce with pride. It is not the art itself that these humans exalt, realised Macha, but power and war. Art is merely a means to praise the warriors - and combat is the highest expression of their souls. She nodded to herself in satisfaction, as she thought about the dedication of the mon-keigh's Space Marines, and compared their abilities to wreak destruction with the mon-keigh's pathetic attempts at the construction of art. For the eldar, war was embraced as a artistic path - the most feared of many equal paths to truth and glory. For the humans, it seemed, the whole society was subordinated to war - only in war did the human soul find itself. They were only slightly more civilised than orks.

Behind the statues, running along both sides of the boulevard, were grand stone buildings, each rendered in the same white stone. The structures grew larger and more imposing as the eldar moved further and further into the city - as though the heart of the city warranted the most glorious architecture. All of the structures showed signs of age and decay, giving the street the aura of an ancient capital of culture, resting on the strong arms of thousands of warriors that had died for its glory.

The last time Macha had been on Tartarus, Lloovre Marr did not even exist. This end of the valley had been nothing but thick forest, huddled in the basin of the valley's flood plain, where the soil was richest and most fertile. She had known, of course, even then, that the mon-keigh would recover their strength and rebuild their cities on Tartarus. She had even seen that they would build here - away from the sites of the destruction of their other cities, starting afresh, carving their new capital into the cliffs with their very hands.

That had been why she had picked this site, where her secrets would be buried beneath the cheap grandeur of the Imperium of Man. The mon-keigh would never think to look right under their noses. And, sure enough, the whole population had left at the first rumblings of a problem, never even pausing to see what they were leaving behind.

As the eldar convoy neared the end of the boulevard, Macha let a faint smile float across her lips: this grand capital city was nothing more than a tiny blip in a war that had begun countless millennia before mankind had even made its first leap into space; for the sake of Khaine, she had been a farseer for longer than these buildings had stood against the elements of Tartarus. And now she was being chased across the planet by two bumbling platoons of children - one carried with them the doom of Tartarus and its surrounding systems, and the other brought hope with them, like a delicate, flickering candle. She had never thought that the once mighty eldar would be reduced to playing nanny for the younger races of the galaxy - but here she was.

The end of the boulevard opened up into a wide plaza, in the centre of which was the focus of the gazes of the all the statues along the way. A huge figure rose out of the pristine white flagstones - a statue taller and more magnificent than any of the others. It was the figure of Lloovre Marr himself, the founder of the city, acclaimed as the first governor general to rule Tartarus in the Emperor's name. The official historical record recounted stories of his valour and strategic genius, organising the planet's defences against the incursions of ork raiders and the uprisings of cultists.

In one hand, Lloovre Marr was holding his sword, pointing up into the heavens, as though redirecting the admiration of his people towards the Emperor himself. In the other, a great slab of white stone represented a scroll, on which Lloovre Marr was reputed to have written the constitution of Tartarus, pledging its future to the cult of the undying God-Emperor, and vowing never to permit the seeds of heresy to take hold in this fertile soil.

Macha smiled to herself at the constellation of ironies as she realised that the monument had been constructed directly upon the site that she was looking for.

JUST BEFORE THEY broke the tree-line, the Blood Ravens' convoy drew to a halt. The co-ordinates that Isador had deciphered from the eldar menhir on Mount Korath, before they had blown it up, seemed to refer to a point in the middle of Tartarus's capital city. On their way down into the valley, the Blood Ravens had seen hints of an eldar trail, as well as tracks of Chaos assault bikes, so

Gabriel was certain that they were on the right track. All sign of the Alpha Legion had vanished half way through the valley, but Gabriel had pressed on after the eldar, fearing what might happen if they reached their goal. He disliked such games of cat and mouse, but he took some solace in the fact that he was the cat. At least, he hoped that he was the cat.

The convoy stopped in the fringe of the forest and Gabriel jumped down from his temporary vantage point on the roof of his stationary Rhino, making his way to the very last line of trees before the ground fell away into the plain in front of Lloovre Marr. With Isador at his shoulder, Gabriel dropped to the ground as the foliage thinned, and he crept further forward.

Lying flat against the earth, Gabriel took out his binocs, letting them whirl and blip until they clicked into focus against the great wall of the city before him. The once shimmering rockcrete was now a pitted and stained mess where ordnance and flamer gouts had smashed into the formerly smooth surface. The wall's gun emplacements had been shattered and cracked with precision fire, but the great gates showed no sign of damage at all.

'Do you think the defenders repelled the attack?' asked Isador, trying to make sense of the unexpected scene.

'No. There was only a minimal force left to defend the city, thanks to Toth's alarmist pronouncements. There is no way that they could have confronted the eldar,' replied Gabriel, half-whispering.

'Then what happened?'

'It looks to me,' answered Gabriel, thinking as he spoke, 'as though somebody inside the city opened the gates and let the eldar in. There seems to be no damage to the material of the gates at all so I think that they were open before the first shots were fired.'

'Then why was there firing at all?' asked Isador, seeing the logic in Gabriel's train of thought, but still unsure.

'Perhaps not everyone was ready to surrender,' answered Gabriel. 'The Guardsmen were left here without any senior officers - each would have had to make their own choice, and bear the responsibility for it.'

'So, someone opened the gates, and somebody else started firing...' said Isador, incredulously shaking his head. 'These Tartarans are an inconsistent people - with cowards and heroes in equal measure,' he added, thinking back to the stand against the orks at Magna Bonum.

'I'm sure that the same could be said of any planet,' responded Gabriel thoughtfully. 'Even Cyrene,' he added without meeting Isador's eyes.

A rustle in the foliage made the Marines turn - Matiel was working his way through the undergrowth towards them, keeping as low as his power armour would let him, before sliding down onto the ground next to them.

'Are the eldar manning the gun emplacements?' asked the sergeant, staring forward at the walls and shielding his eyes. The red sun was setting behind them, and it bounced off the reflective surface of the walls before them.

'I don't know,' replied Gabriel, honestly. 'But it would not be characteristic of the eldar to appropriate the weapons of humans, so my guess would be that they would make their stand on the other side of the walls, making us waste our energies destroying the wall itself before we even engage the aliens.'

'What do you suggest, captain?' asked Matiel with a hint of impatience.

'I suggest that we do not disappoint them,' said Gabriel, standing up out of the foliage and making no attempt to conceal himself.

'The time for subtlety is over, my friends. This is a situation that calls for the exercise of power.'

As he rose to his feet, threads of blood trickled down the chest plate of his armour. Isador sprang up to inspect the wound on his friend, but found none. Instead, he noticed that his own armour was running with blood. As Matiel climbed to his feet to join them, his red armour was slick with streams of blood as well.

'What's going on?' asked Matiel, flicking his eyes from Gabriel to Isador and then back to his own chest.

Gabriel knelt back down to the ground and pressed his hand into the earth. It compressed like a sponge, and a little pool of blood oozed out over his fingers, filling the depression. He looked up at Isador. 'The ground is saturated with blood.'

'The historical records show that Lloovre Marr was constructed on the cusp of the water-table, Gabriel. All of those pumping stations that we saw near Magna Bonum were used to lower the water-level so that the city would not subside,' explained Isador, his voice tinged with disgust as he realised what was going on.

'So, all of the blood spilt here over the last few days has seeped down to this level, turning this place into a swamp?' asked Matiel, sharing Isador's disgust.

'There is more than a few days' worth of blood here, sergeant,' replied Gabriel standing once again, 'however bloody these days have been. This swamp must have been forming for years.'

'Surely the people of Lloovre Marr would have noticed this?' said Matiel, stubbornly entertaining his own disbelief.

'Yes, Matiel,' said Gabriel. 'I'm sure that they noticed it, and I would be very interested to know why this city was built here in the first place. The blood-drenched history of Tartarus is beginning to look rather more sinister, is it not, Isador?'

'Gabriel, the city was built by the founder of this planet, three thousand years ago,' replied Isador.

'Yes, but as we have just discovered, the eldar were here before then. Why should we not believe that humans were here before then as well?' asked Gabriel.

'But why would there be no records?' countered the Librarian. 'Why indeed?' replied Gabriel, nodding as though his question answered itself.

'YOUR CONNIVING WILL cost us this war, sorcerer,' bellowed Bale, his huge scythe swept out towards the raging battle before the walls of Lloovre Marr. The Blood Ravens had broken cover at the edge of the tree-line and were lashing out with their heavy weapons, bombarding the walls and the city beyond with cannons and rockets. 'The false-Emperor's lackeys... those Blood Ravens have beaten us to the city. While we hide in this cave like cowards, they fight like warriors against the aliens.'

'They are merely puppets, my lord,' responded Sindri smoothly, as though unperturbed by the Chaos Lord's anger, but watching the blade of his scythe carefully. 'You have been generous with your patience up until now, Lord Bale, and I beg only a little extra indulgence. Events are proceeding to my... to our benefit, according to my devices.'

'Are you blind, sorcerer? As you gaze into the patterns of the warp, are you rendered utterly oblivious to the events of reality?' Bale was in no mood for Sindri's empty assurances - the Alpha Legion had a proud history and it was not forged by shying away from combat.

Although the Alpha Legion was counted amongst the Space Marine Chapters of the First Founding, it had been the last of this most glorious group, and its primarch, Alpharius, had vowed that his Marines would prove themselves the finest of the Emperor's warriors. More than anything else, Alpharius despised weakness and cowardice. Long ago, it was his passion for strength and power that had drawn the primarch to the side of Warmaster Horus, welcoming the opportunity to test his Marines against the might of their brother Space Marines. Alpharius had gloried in the war that engulfed the galaxy as Horus turned against the Emperor in those fateful, ancient days, bringing the Imperium to the point of annihilation. And in the millennia since the end of the Heresy, which saw Horus killed and his forces driven from the heart of the galaxy, hunted constantly by the misguided fools who remained loyal to the false-Emperor, the Alpha Legion had not once shied away from battle. Indeed, they searched it out, eager to test themselves against the self-righteous, loyalist Space Marines, like the Blood Ravens.

'I see the battle, my lord, but it is of no concern to us,' hissed Sindri, squirming slightly. 'The Blood Ravens are but hapless fools before the might of the Alpha Legion - they are no test of our strength. Far better to let the eldar deal with them, preserving our own forces for more worthy foes.'

'As I recall, sorcerer, you once told me that we could leave these Marines to the orks - you were wrong then. What makes you think that the eldar will fare any better against these Blood Ravens?' asked Bale, spinning his scythe with slow menace.

'The eldar are entirely a different matter,' answered Sindri, shrinking slightly from the scythe and dismissing the question of the orks quickly. 'They are an ancient and formidable force, my lord. And they know why they are here. Their farseer will ensure their effectiveness. They do not go to war for fun, my lord, but with the determination of an ageless purpose.'

'It sounds as though they are a foe worthy of the Alpha Legion, sorcerer. So why must we sit and watch these Blood Ravens steal our glory?' said Bale, bringing the debate into a vicious circle that was echoed by his spinning scythe.

'My lord, we will have our chance to fight - have no fear of that. We must merely seek to apply our force at the most advantageous moment. Alpharius himself taught that the enemy is humiliated most when they are defeated with the least effort. Let us humiliate these Blood Ravens completely,' responded Sindri, finding his escape route at last.

'If you fail me in this -' began Bale, a hint of acceptance in his voice.

'—yes, then I will suffer greatly... and gladly. I understand,' interrupted Sindri, recovering the initiative. 'Just be ready to move when I instruct.'

A ROCKET WHINED overhead, crashing into one of the once grand buildings at the back of the plaza. The formerly smooth masonry was already a ruin of pits and pock-marks, and tendrils of smoke had stained the once pristine white surfaces. The rocket punched through the outer wall of the building and detonated inside, blowing a section of the wall out into the plaza in a shower of debris. Macha didn't even flinch as the ordnance flashed over the monument in the centre of the plaza. She stood calmly in its long shadow, watching the sun dip down towards the horizon as the daylight started to die. The Blood Ravens' rockets seemed to slip directly out of the red sun as they strafed across the city from the launchers outside the gates.

The city was crumbling all around her, and Macha shook her head in amazement as she watched the mon-keigh bring destruction to this monument of their own magnificence. How much more impressive is their ability to destroy than their ability to build, thought the farseer.

The Striking Scorpions were darting around the statue of Lloovre Marr, erecting a ring of barricades and defences in case the Space Marines broke through the city wall. The Scorpions were perfectly adapted for this kind of close-combat - their temple prided itself on a matchless reputation for proximal fighting. Their helmets integrated the notorious mandiblasters - a pair of weapon pods positioned on either side of the warrior's face. This Sting of the Scorpion could fire bursts of laser-accelerated plasma into the body of a close-range opponent, lacerating their armour in advance of a strike from the Scorpion's chainsword. In the midst of these Aspect Warriors stood Jaerielle, issuing directions and manoeuvring great lumps of masonry into position as though they were weightless. The Striking Scorpions obeyed their exarch without question, transforming piles of debris into elaborate barricades that rivalled the surrounding buildings in their elegance - giving off the sense that they had been there for as long as the city itself. For the exarch, war was the highest form of art.

Farseer Macha watched the symphony of preparation with a mixture of admiration and terror. She realised that she was in awe of this exarch - the eldar warrior, once known as Jaerielle, who had lost himself to the temptations of Khaine. And in that moment, she also realised that his transformation was not yet complete. He was destined to be both more and less than an exarch.

Flickering visions burned themselves into her mind, and Macha slumped towards the ground, unable to sustain the barrage of images that pummelled against her consciousness. The eruption was unbidden and powerful, shaking the farseer to her soul. The pictures flashed and spiralled through her mind, sizzling with potency and branding their images into the backs of her eye-lids. Seeing the farseer waver and stumble, Jaerielle vaulted over the barricades and sped to her side, catching her falling form an instant before her head crashed into the flagstones. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her over the barriers, climbing up the steps at the foot of the grand statue, where he placed her gently onto the ground. She sat, propped up against the figure of Lloovre Marr, staring at Jaerielle with her eyes wide.

'What do you see, farseer?' asked the exarch, searching Macha's face for a sign.

'The past and the future coalesce in the present, exarch, and the dizzying confusions of temporal distance are focussed only momentarily,' said Macha, conscious that there was no time to explain properly. She started again. 'I see the past and the future as one, Jaerielle, and I see you in both. You are the same, and yet you are different, as though transfigured by some greater power. You are fighting everything, and overcoming all, and yet you are dead to yourself. Macha's head was jittering spasmodically from side to side, and her body seemed to have lost all of its strength. She slumped over to one side, and Jaerielle caught her again before she fell.'

'They are calling for you, Jaerielle. Their voices run through my mind, like beams of light falling into a warp-hole. They are reaching for you, trying to pull your soul back to them. You have been chosen, Jaerielle - and now that you are chosen, you have always been so. The future loops back through itself, touching your soul and setting you apart from the beginning. You were here before, and now you are here again. This is your place - it is where you are, and where you cannot be otherwise. You were here on Tartarus three thousand years ago - and you watched yourself die then. Now you must be reborn.' Macha's voice was rasping and low, as though she was struggling for enough air to give sound to her words.

Jaerielle peered uncertainly into the farseer's fathomless eyes, uncomprehending but feeling the truth of her rambling words. 'Farseer, you cannot ask for anything that I do not willingly give,' he said, bowing his head even as he held Macha by her shoulders.

'It is already given, yet the souls of the Biel-Tan already sing with praise for the sacrifice that you are about to make. The blood of many foes stains our hands, and there will be more to come before this war is over. Your hands drip with the blood of the mon-keigh and the ancient daemons of this world, as though today's battles and those of long ago were one and the same. Your soul cries out to Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God, and demands union with his substance, just as the souls of all those who have gone before you call out to you.'

'Yes, farseer, I can feel the truth of it,' replied Jaerielle, his own eyes burning with certainty and excitement.

'The other exarchs and the seers of the Court of Biel-Tan are calling for you, Jaerielle. I can feel the touch of their voices, icy with the depths of space. The shrine of the avatar is aching for you. You must go to them - you, who are the best and the worst of us all. You must go to them now, so that you may return to us in our time of greatest need - returning as the very incarnation of Khaine himself. Macha drew herself up onto her feet, supporting herself against the statue behind her. She held out one arm, pointing into the flagstones on the ground nearby. As she muttered some inaudible sounds, a translucent haze jetted out of her fingertips, pouring onto the stone tiles, where it pooled and shimmered.

'You must go. You must go now,' she said, as rockets fizzed overhead, blasting concussive waves across the plaza as they punched into the buildings on all sides. She staggered under the effort of concentration, struggling to keep the portal open amidst the gathering turmoil of battle.

Jaerielle hesitated for a moment, staring at the farseer, desperate for a last sign of guidance. But Macha would no longer look upon him. It was as though he were suddenly repulsive to her, as though he were already the bloody hand of a war-god, bent solely on death and destruction, utterly without balance. Searching her face, Jaerielle also saw fear flashing over her features - there was nothing so terrifying to the eldar as the loss of balance in one's soul.

He walked slowly over the shimmering pool on the flagstones, following the stream of warp energy that poured out of the farseer's hand. Looking down into the pool, he could see the distant throne room of Biel-Tan as though it were a rippling reflection.

Arrayed throughout the great chamber were the exarchs of the other shrines, and the seers of the grand council. They were waiting for him - the most lost soul of all the Biel-Tan. They waited to sacrifice him to Khaine, so that he might be reborn as the god's avatar.

'You are lost on the Path of the Warrior, Jaerielle of the Striking Scorpions - your soul is lost to you already. Now it belongs to all eldar. May Kaela Mensha Khaine find you worthy of becoming his avatar,' said Macha, sharing a brief, compassionate glance. And with that, Jaerielle stepped onto the warp-pool, sinking into it as though it were water, and vanishing from the face of Tartarus.



CHAPTER TEN

THUNDERING THROUGH FROM the back of the Blood Ravens' column came the massive Vindicator tank, grinding to a halt in front of the gates to Lloovre Marr. The rest of the detachment from the Third Company was already arrayed before the walls, waiting for a breach to be opened in the city's perimeter. Not a single shot had yet been fired, despite the fact that the Space Marines were out in the open, with no appreciable cover. The eldar were clearly not stationed in the wall's gun emplacements. Either the Blood Ravens were not expected - which seemed unlikely - or the eldar had other plans for them. Standing beside the Vindicator, inspecting the Marines that were spread out around him, Gabriel nodded a signal to Matiel, whose Marines were deployed in a single line, parallel to the curving wall. At once, a great gout of flame burst out of the sergeant's jump pack, launching him into the air and up the side of the wall. On both sides of him, his squad followed suit, and the Space Marines rapidly crested the wall, stepping onto the battlements as they reached the correct level.

'Company!' hissed the voice of Matiel through the vox unit in Gabriel's armour. Simultaneous with the crackle of his voice, Gabriel could see the report of Matiel's bolter flare from the top of the wall. Suddenly, the Space Marines were a blaze of fire as they stooped into the cover of the castellated fixtures - disciplined volleys of bolter fire flashing down into the city on the other side of the wall. Above the pitch of the rattling bolters, Gabriel could hear the faint whine of shuriken as the eldar returned fire, and then the dull booms of frag-grenades as the Marines tossed them down into the courtyard.

'How many?' asked Gabriel, his transmission whistling with feedback from the explosions.

'Too many, captain,' said Matiel simply. 'The eldar positions are trained on the gate. They are just waiting for you to blow them and step into their killing zone.'

'Understood, sergeant. Hold your position,' replied Gabriel, turning smartly towards the squad of Devastator Marines that was waiting impatiently for the gate to be opened. 'Let's have some supporting fire for the Space Marines.'

The Devastators angled their missile launchers into the sky, searing out salvos of rockets in invisibly high and steep parabolas. The rockets flashed back down over the city walls and punched down into the courtyard on the other side, setting off explosions that made the ground tremble.

Meanwhile, Gabriel had climbed up on top of the Vindicator and was muttering down through the top hatch, directing the pilot to a new target. The heavy tank jolted and its tracks spun, rotating the vehicle on the spot as the differentials worked. Then, with a sudden convulsion, the massive demolisher cannon roared with life, sending a huge blast of power punching into the rockcrete wall, about one hundred metres west of the city gates. Before the dust had time to settle, the cannon coughed again, smashing into exactly the same spot and collapsing a section of the wall.

As soon as the second blast struck, Tanthius and his squad of Terminators were storming towards the felled section of the wall, their storm bolters spluttering with fire, punching stones and chunks of rockcrete out of the edges of the ruined structure, widening the breach. Lumbering along behind them was the Third Company's massive dreadnought, piloted by the ancient form of a near-dead Blood Raven, held away from death by the sarcophagus in the heart of the great war-machine. Thousands of years before, Blood Ravens Captain Trythos had been mortally wounded whilst on secondment to the Deathwatch. His soul had refused to die, and he had been enshrined in the Third Company's dreadnought so that he might continue to vanquish the foes of the Emperor beyond his natural years.

Dreadnought Trythos stomped into the breach, pushing ahead of the Terminators, its multi-melta hissing with power in one hand and great plumes of chemical flame jetting out of the other. It stood dramatically in the gap in the wall as debris rained down around it and dust hazed the crimson of its massive armour. Already, sprays of shuriken fire were bouncing off it, as the eldar started to reposition their forces to focus on the breach. But the small arms fire meant nothing to it; as it plunged forward into the city and out of Gabriel's sight, with Tanthius's Terminators close behind.

Gabriel and Isador were pounding across the level ground in front of the walls, sprinting for the breach. Behind them came the Devastator squad, still launching salvos of grenades over the wall towards the eldar positions, even as they ran. The Typhoon land speeders zipped through the gap ahead of them, flashing over the piles of rubble as though the ground were a smooth road. They tore into the city in support of Trythos and the Terminators, heavy bolters strafing a line of fire before them.

By the time Gabriel reached the breach, the battle on the other side of the wall was already joined. The hole in the wall was just to the west of the main gates, and Gabriel could see that the eldar had been forced to abandon many of their fortifications as the Blood Ravens had blasted through the wall behind their positions. But some of the aliens remained dug in on the east side of the gate, although they were being pestered from above by volleys of fire from Matiel's Marines.

At the north side of the wide courtyard, the bulk of the eldar defences were under attack by the Terminators and the dreadnought, which advanced relentlessly despite the torrent of fire that flooded out of the eldar lines. The two Blood Ravens' Typhoons had vanished into the streets of the city, searching out the location of other eldar emplacements.

A massive explosion shook the wall, sending great chunks of rockcrete tumbling down into the breach. As Gabriel turned back to the east, he saw the city gates blow inwards, cracking off their massive hinges and crashing down into the courtyard. Out of the cloud of fire and dust rolled the Vindicator tank, crumpling the remains of the gate under its heavy tracks and spitting huge gouts of power from its demolisher cannon towards the main eldar force, incinerating sections of barricades with each blast. Flanking the Vindicator on both sides, and squeezing past it to rush through into the city streets, streamed a line of assault bikes, making the most of the smoother ground. And rumbling in behind came two Predator tanks, one sending out jets of las-fire and the other chattering bursts from its autocannon turret.

By now the eldar seemed to be in disarray, swamped by the awesome firepower of the Blood Ravens that converged on their positions, pummelling them from a distance. But Gabriel was uneasy - the eldar didn't seem to be engaging. Whenever their positions came under fire, the alien warriors would abandon them and move further back into the city, sucking the Blood Ravens northwards, into the central avenue. Searching the battlefield with his eyes, Gabriel was also concerned to see relatively few eldar corpses.

And then it happened. As the Terminators pursued the gradual retreat up into the wide boulevard, a flurry of Falcon tanks skimmed out of the side streets, strafing the Terminators with lines of shuriken from their catapults and blasting javelins of lance fire into their midst. A tremendous blast of las-fire lashed out of one of the side streets, punching into Dreadnought Trythos as it doused the retreating eldar in flames; the thick pulse of energy virtually vaporised the dreadnought where it stood. Its giant limbs clattered to the ground as its body was utterly shattered by the incredible blast.

Tanthius let out a yell as Trythos collapsed to the ground, and he pounded off in the direction of the blast. As he rounded the street corner, he skidded to an abrupt halt as the huge, crystalline turret of an eldar Fire Prism tank flared with energy before him. He dived for the ground, crashing the immense weight of his Terminator armour into the flagstones as the powerful pulse of energy lanced over his head. He could hear the explosion behind him, and shuddered at the thought of what the Fire Prism had just hit. Climbing back to his feet, Tanthius rolled into the cover of the building on the corner of the street.

Meanwhile, back on the main street, the eldar had been reinforced by a squadron of war walkers that came striding out of cover behind the various statues and monuments that lined the avenue. The Blood Ravens Terminators were now under heavy fire, drawn into a narrow column where their power was compromised.

As Gabriel broke into a run towards the beleaguered vanguard of the battle, one of the Typhoons burst back into the courtyard in front of the gate, and slid to a halt before the captain.

'Captain Angelos, we have found the co-ordinates that you gave us. There is a great statue in the centre of the city, and it is being guarded by a heavily armed group of eldar warriors. They appear to be engaged in some kind of ritual,' reported the pilot breathlessly.

'Very good, pilot,' replied Gabriel. 'Thank you.' He turned to Isador. 'This battle is a distraction, designed to keep us away from the key while the eldar take it for themselves. The aliens are drawing us into a stalemate in that avenue, to slow us down.'

'I thought that this was too easy, Gabriel. The eldar are cunning indeed,' replied Isador.

'How many aliens are defending that site, pilot?' asked Gabriel, his mind racing with a plan.

'No more than twenty, captain, but they look different from the warriors here,' said the Marine, indicating the forces defending the courtyard and those in the wide avenue up ahead. 'Their armour is different, and their weapons are more elaborate.'

'Twenty we can manage,' said Gabriel, clicking his vox channel into life and turning away from the Typhoon. 'This is Captain Angelos. Get me a squadron of assault bikes and a Rhino, and get me them now. Matiel? I'm going to need you down here in the courtyard in two minutes.'

'Brother,' said Gabriel, turning back to the pilot of the Typhoon, 'I am going to need your vehicle.'

'THEY ARE ALREADY inside the city, sorcerer. Perhaps, if you really have a plan, now would be a good time to act?' scoffed Bale, his face taugth with anger and frustration.

'Yes, my lord. Now is the time to move,' replied Sindri, dismissively, turning away from the Chaos Lord and striding back into the cave, vanishing into the curtain of smoke before Bale even had chance to speak. Instead, the Chaos Lord stomped after him, cursing under his breath.

The sorcerer picked his way through the temporary camp inside the cavern, moving around the fires and the clutches of seated Chaos Marines, whispering into the darkness as he went. His words curdled and swam with the threads of smoke, easing themselves into the clouds that hung from the stalactites in the low ceiling. As each of the Marines breathed in gulps of the damp, smoky air, their lungs were inflated with his intent, and they stirred into motion as though commanded.

By the time Sindri reached the back of the cave, where a narrow tunnel bored down into the rock, the Alpha Legionaries were already arrayed behind him, their weapons braced and their dark eyes gleaming with anticipation. Lord Bale pushed his way through his men, shouldering them aside as he made his way to the front of the group.

'This had better work, sorcerer,' he hissed, pushing Sindri in the back with the pole of his scythe so that the sorcerer stumbled forward into the tunnel. 'You first,' he added, bearing his yellow teeth in the faint light.

The tunnel was narrow, only wide enough for one Marine to pass at a time. It had clearly not been built with such huge figures in mind, and the line of Alpha Legionaries grumbled and complained as they stooped and ducked their way deeper into the side of the valley. Sindri removed his high, bladed helmet, stowing it under his arm as he pushed his glowing staff out before him as a torch.

As the passageway plunged down into the cliffs of the valley, bringing the Alpha Legionaries closer to the level of Lloovre Marr, Sindri noticed that the rock walls were becoming moist. In the gentle glow of his staff-light, the rocks began to shimmer and shine, casting dull reflections through the tunnel, making the shadows flicker and dance. The ground underfoot was becoming slick and slippery, as the moisture ran down onto the rocky floor, but the Marines were sure-footed and alert.

Eventually, after the tunnel had dropped another few metres, the rock on the ground gave way to a soft earth. Lord Bale paused for a moment, watching the figure of Sindri stumble and stoop ahead of him. He knelt briefly, pressing his hand onto the ground to feel the new surface, wondering whether they had already passed through the cliff-level and down into the soil-strata of the river-basin itself. The ground was soft and saturated with water; it squelched under his hand like a swamp. He shook his head slightly, disliking the confined space and the prospect of a flooded tunnel if the passageway dropped any lower. This would not be a fitting place for the death of an Alpha Legionary, let alone a Chaos Lord.

'Sorcerer!' he bellowed, his voice bouncing and echoing through the tunnel. 'Sorcerer! Where does this tunnel lead? This had better not be some kind of trick,' he said menacingly, realising how vulnerable he was to the powers of the sorcerer in this narrow space, and how useless his scythe would be if it came to combat.

Up ahead, Sindri stopped walking. He stood upright, unfolding from his stooped position, with his back to the Chaos Lord. He did not turn around. 'It leads to power and glory, Lord Bale,' he said in a barely audible whisper that seemed not to echo at all. With that, the sorcerer pressed on into the darkness, and Bale, unsatisfied but trapped before a line of impatient Marines, walked awkwardly after him.

After a while, Bale saw Sindri draw to a halt a little way ahead of him. He stood upright and then vanished from view. The Chaos Lord roared his rage into the tunnel, filling it with palpitations of anger as he stormed forward in pursuit of his sorcerer. The cursed sorcerer has tricked me after all, he thought, thrusting his great scythe in front of him and watching its blade glint with thirst. Behind him, he could hear his Marines breaking into a run to follow him - the sound of weapons being readied for firing rattled through the passageway.

Suddenly, Bale burst out of the confined tunnel into a wide chamber. He lost his footing as he charged into the subterranean cavern; the ground dropped away from a ledge at the end of the tunnel, and he fell a couple of metres into a pool of liquid. Landing on his feet, Bale flourished his scythe in a dramatic arc, ready for whatever lay in wait for him.

Splashes sounded all around as a squad of Marines leapt down into the water to support their lord, and behind him he could hear the clatter of footfalls as the rest of the detachment fanned out around the stone ledge.

The darkness was dense, and Bale opened his augmented eyes wide, straining to see the details of the chamber. But there was hardly any light this far under the ground, and he could make out very little. Then, far away, presumably on the other side of a huge chamber, Bale saw the glimmer of Sindri's staff.

'Sorcerer!' yelled Bale, formulating threats in his mind as his deep voice resonated through the cavern.

The point of light stopped moving, and then rose into the air, growing brighter as it did so. Bale shot a signal to his squad to spread out and prepare to return fire. But the light continued to increase in intensity, and the radius of its reach started to seep out across the cavern, lighting Sindri himself like a target on the ledge against the far wall.

After a few seconds, the full extent of the massive chamber began to become evident. The ceiling was a giant rocky dome, vaulted and grand, as though carved out to approximate the interior of a cathedral. The stone walls above the ledge were curved in a huge circle, and they were covered in frescoes and images, painted crudely in a deep red ink. Below the ledge was a vast lake of liquid, big enough to submerge a small city. The ledge itself seemed to mark the intersection of the rock-layers of the valley walls from the soft soil-strata of the river basin on the valley floor.

Bale looked around the chamber in amazement as the orb of light from Sindri's staff flooded out to fill the whole space. As the light crept over the surface of the water, Bale noticed that it was not water at all. Scooping his hand down into the dark liquid, he lifted a fist full up to his mouth, tasting the rich iron as the thick liquid gushed down his throat.

It was blood.

This was a vast, underground reservoir of blood, cut into the river basin below Lloovre Marr and, from the look of it, it had been lovingly created and cared for over a long, long time.

'We are nearly there, my lord,' came Sindri's voice from the other side of the chamber, apparently unsurprised by the scene around him. 'But we must hurry. The path heads back up into the cliffs now, and it will take us up into the heart of Lloovre Marr itself. Come.'

THE FARSEER SLUMPED to the ground, exhausted and spent, as the pool of warp-energy on the flagstones faded out of existence. A couple of Striking Scorpions sprang forward from their places in the defensive emplacements around the monument, gathering the farseer into their arms and carrying her back behind the elegant barricades, leaving the figure that had just emerged from the pool crouched into a ball on its own. It looked as though it had just been born, fully formed and terrible. The figure was huge, much bigger than any other eldar, even in its crouched posture. As it gradually unfolded itself, drawing itself up to its full height and stretching its metal skin in the dying light of the red sun, even the Striking Scorpions shrank back from it.

The Avatar of Khaine threw back its head and let out a blood-curdling howl that could be heard for several kilometres in every direction. Macha narrowed her eyes in pain as the hideous sound scraped into her ears, grating against her finely tuned sensibilities like teeth down the blade of a sword. She knew that every eldar in the city would hear the cry, and that they would fight with renewed passion as the spirit of Khaine riddled their souls with the lust for blood.

Great bladed horns rose from the avatar's ornate wraithbone helmet, and a plume fluttered between them, displaying the colours of the Biel-Tan. Its armour burned with a fiery red, as though its molten blood radiated through the plates, and the intricate web of runes that laced its body glowed with ancient powers, forgotten even to the eldar themselves.

Its left hand was a dripping mess of blood and pulp, as though it had been melted in the wet heat of boiling oil. But this disfigurement was a mark of distinction and, more than anything else about the avatar, it was this bloody hand that would inspire the Biel-Tan to greater feats on the battlefield. It was the mark of Kaela Mensha Khaine himself - echoing the injury inflicted on him at the beginning of time, when the Great Enemy had destroyed him and scattered his substance across the material realm. This Avatar of Khaine was the embodiment of one such fragment - a fragment kept in the heart of the Biel-Tan craftworld until its moment of greatest need.

Jaerielle? asked Macha, speaking her words directly into the avatar's mind, searching for any spark of recognition. But there was nothing, just a cold blast of psychic energy that washed back into the farseer's mind, chilling her to her soul.

Pulling herself onto her feet, Macha drew her own ancient force sword from its holster on her back and walked gingerly forward towards the avatar. For the first time in the history of the Biel-Tan, the avatar had been incarnated without its Wailing Doom - the ancestral weapon of this god-eldar.

The Ceremony of Awakening had been performed too quickly, and shards of the avatar's energy were still missing. It was born incomplete.

As Macha stumbled, too weak to support the weight of her own weapon, the two Striking Scorpions rushed to her aid once again, grasping her elbows and supporting her weight. Her blade was a pathetic shadow of the great Wailing Doom lost on this very planet three thousand years before, but it was the finest blade on the whole of Biel-Tan, and a weapon worthy of a great eldar warrior.

The farseer walked towards the avatar, and dropped to one knee before it, holding her long, two-handed force sword out in front of her. The avatar looked down at the small figure of the farseer and tilted its head slightly, as though confused by an inappropriate sight. Then it reached out its right hand and lifted Macha back onto her feet, before kneeling itself and bowing its head to the farseer who had brought it back from the fathomless depths of Biel-Tan's infinity circuit. Macha nodded with satisfaction and held out the sword. Without a word, the avatar took the great blade into one hand, and leapt backwards away from the farseer, flourishing the sword in a complicated and elegant pattern. Then, as it turned its back on her to set out into the city, a Typhoon missile blasted out of an adjoining street and smashed into its chest.

THE LAND SPEEDER banked around the building on the corner of the street, bursting out into the plaza. Gabriel hit the brakes hard and skidded the Typhoon, banking again to bleed some energy as Isador punched the trigger of the missile launcher. The rocket roared out of the turret and spiralled straight into the chest of the monstrous warrior in the centre of the plaza, where it exploded in a shower of flames.

Meanwhile, the Blood Ravens assault bikes poured into the plaza out of the street behind them, each skidding to a standstill in a neat formation across the square, training their front guns on the green eldar figures that flickered with motion behind the structure around the statue of Lloovre Marr. As the bikes opened fire with their twin-linked bolters, battering the barricades with a tirade of explosive shells, the Rhino finally rolled into the plaza, spilling Matiel's Marines out of the back before it had even stopped moving.

The flames from the missile impact had not abated, but the colossal eldar warrior sprang clear of the inferno that had erupted around its chest. There was hardly even a mark on it as it flipped across the plaza, closing the space between it and the Blood Ravens in a flurry of somersaults. Isador punched the missile launcher again, but the rocket flashed harmlessly over the gigantic eldar and smashed into the statue of Lloovre Marr, blowing it into a crumbled ruin.

With its last flip, the eldar creature reached the Typhoon and brought its flashing blade smoothly down on top of it. Gabriel and Isador dived out of the vehicle as the sword passed straight through it, rupturing its fuel lines and detonating the engine core. As the Blood Ravens rolled for cover at the edge of the plaza, the monstrous eldar creature stood bathing in the flames that ripped out of the wrecked Typhoon.

'In the Emperor's name,' said Matiel, tumbling into cover next to Isador. 'What is that thing?'

'It is a daemon conjured by the treacherous eldar, brother. It is called an avatar,' replied Isador, levelling his force staff at the creature and loosing a javelin of energy directly into its stomach. The blast was enough to attract the avatar's attention - it turned to face Isador and began to stride in his direction.

Meanwhile, Gabriel was back on his feet and charging at the gigantic creature, his chainsword sputtering in his hand and a chorus of silver voices singing in his ears. Once again, the world was rendered into slow motion as Gabriel pounded across the plaza, his every step apparently accompanied by the symphonic tones of the Astronomican.

The avatar bent its legs, ready to spring forward at Isador, just as Gabriel crashed into it from the side. The two warriors tumbled to the ground, and Isador leapt out of his cover to assist his friend. Sprinting towards Gabriel, he called back over his shoulder to Matiel: 'Deal with the barricades!'

Immediately, the Space Marines powered up into the sky, their jump packs flaring and their bolters coughing shells down towards the eldar encampment in the centre of the square. But the green-armoured eldar were fast and nimble, evading much of the fire and returning it in stinging volleys. From his vantage point in the sky, Matiel could see the figure of a robed eldar woman lying down in the middle of the defensive ring, propped up against the ruins of the monument that they appeared to be defending. He pulled a chain of frag-grenades from his belt and lobbed them down towards her.

Meanwhile, Gabriel wrestled with the avatar, struggling to keep the huge creature from bringing his great blade into play. The Blood Raven pummelled the hilt of his chainsword against the avatar's burning armour, pounding over and over again until the faintest of cracks began to appear. Sheets of blue lightning jousting out of Isador's staff, as the Librarian stood just clear of the two writhing warriors, launching javelins of power to assist his captain.

Lying on the ground with the Blood Raven on top of it, the avatar bucked and threw Gabriel over his shoulder, away from Isador. In the same movement, it reached for its fallen sword, but a blast from Isador sent the blade skidding out of its reach. As it sprang back up onto its feet, the avatar was pounded from both sides at once - Gabriel launched himself back into the creature's face while Isador ploughed into its legs with his force staff. A huge explosion shook the ground at the same time as a cluster of grenades exploded behind the barricades. With a shriek of frustration, the avatar crumpled to the ground once again.

Gabriel drove his chainsword into the weakened crack in the avatar's armour, finally breaking through. A sizzling jet of molten blood spurted out of the hole, spraying Gabriel in the face, making him cry out and reel in pain. As the captain rolled backwards off the avatar, Isador leapt forward into his place, thrusting the tip of his force staff deep into the wound and leaning his entire weight onto it. As the staff sunk deeper into the creature's chest, Isador closed his eyes and released his rage into the weapon, letting its power cascade down the shaft and explode into a starburst of blue energy inside the eldar warrior.

The explosion threw Isador and Gabriel a hundred metres back through the air, until their flight was broken by the stone of a white building on the fringe of the plaza. They thumped into the wall, and then slid down into heaps at its base. When they looked up, the bloody remains of the avatar were fizzing and hissing all over the flagstones, but Matiel's Marines were still raining fire on the barricades.

Gabriel was first on his feet. Pausing to offer Isador his hand, Gabriel pulled his friend onto his feet with a nod of admiration, and then sprinted off through the plaza towards the barricades. As he reached them, Matiel crunched to the ground next to him, and Isador skidded to halt at his other shoulder. The other Space Marines had also returned to the ground, and there was no sign of movement on the other side of the barriers.

The three Marines clambered over the barricades and jumped down the other side, where they saw a solitary eldar woman standing before a large pit in the ground, where once the statue of Lloovre Marr had been. She appeared unarmed.

Kill me, if you must, humans, began the eldar in an odd tongue that spoke directly into their minds. *Cast my name to the winds, if it pleases you. But you must heed me. Bury again that which lies beneath my feet, for it will be the ruin of us all. I may have been your enemy in this - but we have a greater foe than each other.*

Gabriel stared into the farseer's eyes for a moment, and a torrent of images invaded his mind. Pictures of flames and blood, of the Astronomican itself lost in an inferno of chaos and darkness. Then the eldar looked away, fixing Isador with her stare.

'Do not listen to this alien, Gabriel. We must destroy it,' said Isador, apparently unable to tear his eyes away from those of Macha. His face was suddenly gaunt and pale.

Gabriel was silent for a brief moment. 'She knows much, much that we need to learn, old friend.' As he spoke, he peered past the eldar and down into the pit. Its sides were sheer, and at the bottom was a pool of blood, as though it had seeped in to reach its own natural level. Held proud of the blood on a stone plinth was a curved, bejewelled dagger. Was this the key of which Isador had spoken, wondered Gabriel?

Isador was struggling within himself, trying to find his own thoughts in amongst the confusion of images that invaded his head. A familiar voice was whispering into his mind: *It lies within your reach now, Librarian - reach out for it - it is yours - only this pathetic farseer can stop you - see how your captain doubts you still...*

'What could she offer, except lies and treachery? Do not trust her, Gabriel! Suffer not the alien to live,' added Isador, quoting the motto of the Ordo Xenos Deathwatch kill teams.

'Knowledge is power, Isador—' began Gabriel, but his voice was cut off by a rattle of bolter fire from the Space Marines on the other side of the barricade. The three Blood Ravens turned to see what had drawn the fire, spying a squad of Alpha Legionaries emerging into the plaza from one of the side streets. But then a gasp of agony from the farseer made them all turn back again.

'The key!' cried Macha, pointing down into the pit.

Gabriel and Isador rushed to the side of the pit, flanking the farseer, and stared down. Isador let out a streak of fire from his staff as Gabriel snapped off a flurry of bolter shells, but the figure in the bottom of the pit was gone before the shots hit the pool of blood.

'Who was that, alien? And what did he steal?' hissed Gabriel, turning suddenly and gripping the farseer by the throat. The figure had worn the apparel of a Chaos Sorcerer, and the colour of his armour suggested that he was part of the Alpha Legion. He had taken the dagger and then vanished into one of the walls of the pit, as though there were a hidden tunnel under the plaza.

He took a key. The last step along a long, bloody path.

'A key? A key to what?' asked Gabriel, trying to meet the farseer's gaze, but it was still fixed on Isador.

To the undoing of us all, human.

'Stop speaking in riddles!' cried Gabriel, shaking her by the neck and lifting her slight form clear off the ground.

He stole a key, a key to the shadows of this world, to the evil horrors that lie within.

'Tell me what the key does, alien, or I will kill you,' said Gabriel, increasingly exasperated.

You do not know already? Your inquisitor keeps you on a very short leash. He knows. Ask him.

Gabriel was stunned into silence, unable to see how Toth could be involved in any of this, and yet intuitively sure that the eldar witch was telling the truth.

He has known since he arrived. Or, should I say, since long before he came to Tartarus. His kind have been before - they have never left. Did you not find it all too convenient that he appeared from nowhere and landed just on the cusp of a warp storm?

Human, you are caught in events and machinations beyond your reckoning. But we can help one another - stop the forces of Chaos succeeding...

'You people have fought well, alien,' said Gabriel, releasing his grip on the farseer's throat, his mind racing. 'And I can see that we may share some common goals here. But you cannot ask me for trust, and I cannot risk betrayal. I will not be responsible for the loss of any more unnecessary lives - and you have cost enough of those already. You should have asked for an alliance before you squandered your position of strength, then I may have taken you seriously. Now, you have wasted enough of my time.'

Gabriel drew his bolt pistol and levelled it at the farseer's head. In that instant, she finally tore her eyes away from Isador and fixed them on Gabriel, a flood of compassion pouring out of them, touching his very soul. But a searing pain in his shoulder yanked him out of his reverie, and he spun to find the source of the shot, snatching his bolt pistol around in a sudden movement. A Warp Spider blinked out of existence just as he caught sight of it.

Turning back to the farseer, Gabriel saw the Warp Spider standing beside her, with his death spinner pointed straight at his face.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes as Isador and Matiel hesitated about taking their shots - unwilling to risk their captain's life.

The farseer held up her hand, placing it onto the barrel cluster of the death spinner, apparently in a signal not to fire.

Your enemies have taken up a position in the Dannan sector of the city. They will not remain there long. We are too weak to fight them, and far too weak to confront that which they seek to unleash - you have seen to that, human.

With that, the Warp Spider and the farseer simply vanished, leaving Gabriel with doubts, questions and uncertainties spiralling in his head.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A MAN STUMBLED up the steps of the Temple of Dannan, tripping and falling flat onto his face as he reached the top. His head crashed down against a massive, acid-green boot, harder than the rockcrete on which it stood. As he lifted his face off the foot, a thin trickle of blood oozed from his temple, running unevenly over his already disfigured face. The man looked like a half-melted wax figurine, with the flesh on the right-hand side of his body distended into hideous folds. He was panting with excitement as he finally lifted his gaze to meet the eyes of the Chaos Lord, who stood magnificently at the top of the steps, surveying the throng of cultists that had gathered in the precinct since his arrival less than an hour earlier.

'M-my... my lord,' stuttered the cultist, still prostrated awkwardly on the ground, with blood bubbling out of his mouth. 'The Marines of the false-Emperor approach from the south.'

Lord Bale looked down at the cultist for a moment, almost acknowledging him, then turned away to address Sindri, who stood next to him in the doorway to the temple. Behind them, in the interior of the chapel, the faint sound of screams pulsed rhythmically.

'Sorcerer, how long before the ceremony is completed? It would not do for the Blood Ravens to catch us before we are ready for them,' asked Bale, still unwilling to acknowledge that Sindri's plans appeared to be panning out exactly as he foresaw.

'Bale,' said Sindri, smoothly, using the Chaos Lord's name in a simple and unadorned way. 'These flies are but minor annoyances. We have the key, and we have ample bodies here,' he said, indicating the mass of cultists in the temple precinct. 'If necessary, we can imprison the Blood Ravens behind a wall of corpses while we finish the ceremony - and then, afterwards, we will not have to think about them at all.'

Bale looked at the sorcerer, and he could see the confidence flowing out of him. This was the first Marine in decades to speak his name so directly and not feel the icy pain of his scythe through their necks. The Chaos Lord could not bring himself to speak in response - he ground his teeth together in irritation, hating Sindri's success, but eager to reap the rewards of the ceremony.

'Events have proven my words true, have they not,' continued Sindri with a smug, rhetorical flourish. 'We are in no danger—'

'Events have proven you fortunate, sorcerer,' interjected Bale, unable to hold his tongue any longer. 'The Blood Ravens are not to be underestimated - they made short work of your precious orks, and they have already proven themselves against the cursed eldar. To what do we owe your most recent bout of nauseous optimism concerning our own safety?'

'I have reason to believe,' replied Sindri, his voice hissing with serpentine sibilance, 'that we have a new ally in their camp. An individual more than ready to betray the Blood Ravens.'

Again, Bale ground his bladed teeth together as Sindri appeared ready for his attack once more. One day, the sorcerer would slip up and Bale would make sure that he was there to enjoy it.

'Very well,' muttered the Chaos Lord, waving his hand dismissively. 'Prepare for what is to come... and dispose of this cretinous fool.' Bale kicked casually with his foot, cracking the cultist in the face and shattering his jaw.

'W... why? M... my lord,' spluttered the cultist, spitting blood and breathing roughly to suppress his screams. 'H-how have I failed you?'

But Bale was already deaf to his words, and instead Sindri stooped down and picked him up by his hair. 'You brought unwelcome news to his lordship. You will not make this mistake again,' said Sindri, himself an expert in never delivering bad news to Bale. He dropped the cultist back onto the flagstones, then grabbed a fistful of his hair again and dragged the hapless fool into the dark interior of the temple, the shrieks of sacrificial victims echoing louder as they entered the vaulted space.

THE BOLTER SHELL punched into Matiel's jump pack as he roared around the street corner in pursuit of the squadron of Alpha Legionaries. The pack whined in resistance as its power started to fail, and then sputterings of smoke started to cough out of the puncture. Matiel lost altitude rapidly, and the stabilisers failed almost instantly, flipping the sergeant onto his side and blasting him across the street towards the buildings on the other side. The rest of his squadron rocketed after him, fighting against the centrifugal forces as they flew round the corner in his wake.

The Chaos Marines had formed a temporary firing line across the street, and a sheet of fire erupted from them as the Space Marines rounded the bend. The volley of fire stripped through the Blood Ravens formation, bolter shells punching into armour and pinging past to impact against the buildings beyond.

Meanwhile, Matiel smashed into a building at the side of the street, slumping down its face until he crunched into the road at its base. His jump pack was still spitting gouts of fire, throwing him off balance as he struggled to his feet. He clicked the release, and the pack leapt from his back, spiralling into the air at the head of a whirling trail of black smoke. It pitched suddenly, zig-zagging down the narrow street, and then crashing into a building just ahead of the Alpha Legionaries. The explosion shook the building, dislodging a rain of masonry down onto the Chaos Marines.

The rest of the Space Marines thumped to the ground, rolling into the cover of doorways and behind abandoned vehicles. They had not expected the Alpha Legionaries to end their retreat so abruptly, and the firing line had taken them by surprise. Now a disciplined bank of fire erupted out of the Chaos line, strafing down the road towards the Blood Ravens. Matiel's squad was pinned.

The sound of heavy footfalls pounding through the adjoining streets made Matiel look round, checking behind his own squad in case he had been led into an ambush. But he was greeted with the magnificent sight of a squadron of Blood Ravens Terminators storming into the street, with Tanthius in their heart, his storm bolter a blaze of firepower.

The line of Alpha Legionaries was broken almost immediately as the awesome power of a Terminator squadron bore down on it, pummelling it with shells and gouts of flame. Tanthius himself squeezed off a couple of cyclone rockets that zipped along the street ahead of his squad, exploding into the now disorganised clutch of Chaos Marines. Matiel waved a signal to his assault squad, and the Marines were immediately up onto their feet, joining the charge of the Terminators, adding salvoes of fire from their bolters.

The Chaos Marines scattered into side streets, vanishing from the main road, leaving three smoking corpses laying on the flagstones. As they disappeared from view, a thunderous boom shook the street, sending a series of ripples along the surface of the road, toppling the Blood Ravens as the ground under their feet oscillated and convulsed.

The thunder grew louder as the Marines rolled towards the edges of the street, searching for patches of firm ground. Tanthius stood defiantly in the middle of the road, riding the waves of rockcrete as they rolled beneath him. His feet were planted, and behind his helmet his jaw was set - a Blood Ravens Terminator would not give ground to the trickery of the Alpha Legion.

The waves of rockcrete grew higher and more powerful as gusts of wind started to rip down the street, funnelled into gales by the high buildings on either side. With an immense crack, the flagstones at the end of the street were catapulted into the air in a fountain of rockcrete. The line of the fountain accelerated down the street towards the Blood Ravens, throwing the flagstones wildly in the air as it pushed onwards. Tanthius twisted his feet, grinding them into the rockcrete beneath him, planting himself against the onslaught rather than diving for cover.

The immense wave of flagstones broke over the defiant, crimson form of the Blood Raven, exploding into a tremendous fountain of masonry and crumbling debris. The street was filled with a mist of dust and steam, as flagstones crashed down all around, shattering into fragments and throwing up plumes into the air.

As the dust finally settled, Matiel wiped the debris from his visor and surveyed the ruin of the street. There, exactly where he had been before the storm had hit, Tanthius stood proudly in the middle of the road, his blood-red armour radiant in amongst the speckling rain of debris. All around him was broken masonry and the remains of ruined flagstones. And, only a metre in front of his feet, the road had simply vanished; it had dropped away completely, swallowed up in a colossal chasm that seemed to have split the entire city in two along a line that bisected the street just in front of Tanthius's feet.

On the far side of the chasm, about a hundred metres away from Tanthius, Matiel could see the Alpha Legionaries spilling back into the street, staring back over the destruction that had rent the road asunder. They looked as surprised as I feel, thought Matiel, watching them turn their backs and head off into the distance. Instinctively, he reached for the ignition switch for his jump pack, but then realised that he had jettisoned it already.

WHINING SLOWLY TO a halt at the edge of chasm, Gabriel peered over the lip. The bottom was about fifty metres down and, even in the fading light of the dusk, Gabriel could see that it was flooded with blood. For a brief moment, the Blood Ravens captain wondered whether the entire city had been built atop a lake of blood - it seemed to seep through everywhere when a hole appeared. He shook his head, dismissing the thought and drawing the bike back away from the ledge.

'What happened here?' asked Gabriel, addressing his question to Mattel and Tanthius, as Isador clambered out of the Rhino that ground to halt before the group. 'I felt the earthquake from the plaza, but this is not quite what I expected to find here.'

'The chasm has split the entire city in two,' reported Isador, joining the group after peering down into the ravine. 'Early signs are that it has cut off the Dannan district completely, isolating the Temple of Dannan at the centre of a virtual island.'

Gabriel nodded his acknowledgment to Isador, but kept his gaze on the other two, waiting for their explanations.

'We were pursuing the Alpha Legionaries, captain. They set a trap for us in this street, forcing us down onto the ground and pinning us in defensive positions,' reported Matiel. 'When Brother Tanthius arrived, we drove the enemy back down the street together. They were on the point of breaking when the quake struck, ripping the street in two and cutting us off from the cursed Marines of Chaos.'

'Brother Tanthius, what happened to the eldar forces near the main gates?' asked Gabriel, keen to keep abreast of the situation throughout the city.

'There was a tremendous shrieking noise, like a scream, emanating from deeper in the city. When they heard it, they simply stopped fighting and disappeared, darting through those Emperor-forsaken warp-gates once again. The eldar are slippery creatures, captain,' replied Tanthius. 'Before they fled, we inflicted great damage on their forces - they will not be so keen to tackle Terminators of the Blood Ravens again,' he added with satisfaction.

'Isador, do you have any idea where the sorcerer will take the key?' asked Gabriel, furrowing his brow as he tried to keep track of the complicated events of the day.

'Not really, Gabriel,' replied the Librarian. 'I suspect that he will need consecrated ground and a controlled atmosphere to perform any rituals that he may have in mind.'

'Consecrated ground?' asked Gabriel. 'What would that entail in this case?'

'It would depend upon the nature of the artefact. Judging by the markings on the altar we found in the valley, I imagine that we are dealing with a Khornate artefact here - so the ground may have to be consecrated with blood,' said Isador.

'How much blood?' asked Gabriel, walking back towards the chasm and looking down into it again. 'Would you say that a lake the size of Lloovre Marr might be enough?'

'By the Throne, Gabriel!' said Isador, stepping onto the rim of the abyss. 'If this blood really stretches out under the entire city, then Lloovre Marr itself would constitute ground consecrated for the Blood God, Khorne. The power of a cultist ritual here would be immense.'

'It seems that there was some measure of truth hidden in the riddles of the eldar witch,' said Gabriel, thinking of Macha's warnings and the pool of blood that had gathered in the crater below the ruined monument. 'We must get to the Temple of Dannan and stop the foul ceremony of the heretics before it can begin.'

The others nodded in agreement, but Gabriel remained motionless for a moment. His mind was racing with the other words of the eldar woman - she had said that Inquisitor Toth knew more than he was revealing and, if he was honest with himself, Gabriel had known this from the start. Rather than putting his mind at ease, this insight made his soul shrink from his consciousness, hiding from the articulation of the idea that he may possess unsanctioned psychic abilities. This was not the time to confront his own daemons - there were real daemons to slay on Tartarus, and it was up to him to see it done.

'Get a bridge built over this chasm, and get it done now,' he barked to Matiel, delegating command of the logistics to the sergeant, and cursing inwardly that all of the Thunderhawks were in use in the evacuation at the spaceport. Matiel nodded sharply and hastened off to organise the emergency construction.

'And Isador, get a message to Toth - tell him... tell him that we respectfully request his presence in the capital city,' said Gabriel, considering how best to phrase it.

As Isador's face cracked into a faint smile, a gunshot pinged off his shoulder plate. A flurry of activity instantly erupted behind them, as the Blood Ravens organised themselves for battle, fanning out across the street to form a bristling barricade.

Turning, Isador saw crowds of people pouring out of the side streets into the main road. They were human - or had once been human. Their flesh was melted and disfigured, and they loped and staggered through the street in vulgar lurches. They each bore the touch of Khorne - mutating them into the minions of the Blood God - and there were hundreds of them. And they just kept coming, spilling out of the side streets and stumbling along from the other end of the main road, as though there was no end to their number. Perhaps there were thousands. They pressed down the road, trapping the Blood Ravens between that sea of cultists and the chasm of blood, hurling crude projectiles, and snapping off shots with shotguns and pistols.

'The people of Lloovre Marr?' asked Gabriel, a nauseating sickness dropping into his stomach as he braced his bolter. 'Living on the consecrated ground of a daemon can have unfortunate effects on people,' he added, his thoughts dizzy and spiralling with images of Cyrene.

'Brother-captain,' said Tanthius, stepping forward in his massive Terminator armour and placing a firm hand on Gabriel's shoulder. 'Allow your blessed Terminators to cleanse these aberrations in your place. Your attentions are needed elsewhere.' Gabriel looked up into the visor of his long-serving sergeant and smiled weakly. 'Thank you, Tanthius,' he said, 'but this is not a responsibility that I can shirk.'

He appreciated his sergeant's concern and his unspoken understanding, but there was no way that Gabriel was going to hide from his responsibilities just because of events on his homeworld. If anything, he was buoyed by a violent sense of justice for all - if the heretics on Cyrene had to die, then so too did the vile mutants of Tartarus. There could be no exceptions.

Nonetheless, Gabriel's stomach churned with nausea as he drew his chainsword. But then, just faintly in the back of his mind, the gentle tones of the silver choir started to wash across his soul once again, reassuring him that his direction was correct and his purpose firm.

'We will fight together, Brother Tanthius,' he said, striding towards the Blood Ravens' barricades with his chainsword held high and his bolter braced in his hand.

THE THUNDERHAWK ROARED over the street, strafing fire through the throng of cultists, overshooting them and coasting over the Blood Ravens as they retreated across their makeshift bridge. The gunship pulled up dramatically, soaring vertically into the sky and arcing back on itself. It rolled to level out and then dived back down into the street, its guns pulsing with fire as its strafing run ripped through the cultists a second time. But the thinning crowd did not disperse, and the cultists pressed on towards the temporary bridge over the chasm, walking relentlessly into lashes of fire from the retreating line of Blood Ravens and falling in droves.

As his Marines filed over the narrow bridge, Gabriel stood shoulder to shoulder with Tanthius and Isador, blocking the path of the cultists and cutting them down with bursts of bolter fire and hacks from his chainsword. The three of them held the crowd at bay until the rest of the Blood Ravens reached the other side of the chasm, where they peeled left and right, lining the opposite ledge of the ravine. As one, the line erupted with fire, sending a hail of bolter shells flashing across the chasm, leaving glittering trails as the sun finally dropped below the horizon and the street was cast into darkness.

The disciplined volleys of fire punched into the cultists, dropping dozens at a time, driving them back through sheer pressure of fire.

'Isador. Tanthius. Time to go,' said Gabriel, as a shredded cultist fell at his feet. The supporting fire from the far bank had given them a little breathing space.

Loosing a couple of final blasts with his storm bolter, Tanthius turned and sprinted across the bridge, with Isador close behind. Gabriel hesitated for a moment, listening to the pristine chorus that still echoed in his head as he stepped forward into the throng, carving his blade through limbs and cracking skulls with the butt of his gun. Then, as though suddenly changing his mind, he turned and ran towards the bridge - the cultists being sucked into the fire-vacuum left by his departure.

From the far side, shots flashed through the night, picking off the cultists that tried to run after the sprinting captain, knocking them wailing into the depths of the chasm itself. Repeated splashes could be heard as the corpses dropped into the river of blood that filled the bottom of the ravine.

As Gabriel ran, the Thunderhawk swooped in for another run, dragging its fire through the crowd but then dumping a whistling projectile towards the bridge itself. Gabriel threw himself headlong as the bomb smashed into the apex of the bridge, detonating in a great ball of flame. The flimsy structure buckled and collapsed, free-falling into the chasm together with the cultists who had managed to evade the fire of the Blood Ravens.

A strong arm reached out and caught the grasping hand of Gabriel as the bridge fell away from under him. For a moment, the captain was held dangling precariously over the bloody chasm, but then he was pulled clear and deposited on the flagstones.

'Thank you, Isador,' said Gabriel, climbing to his feet. 'My apologies, Tanthius - thank you,' he corrected himself when he saw that it was the sergeant who had saved him.

Another explosion emptied behind him, and Gabriel turned to see the Thunderhawk dump more explosive charges into the cultists on the other side of the ravine. The brief fireballs shed sudden bursts of light in the darkness, highlighting the grotesque and contorted agonies of the cultists as they were blown apart. Then the Thunderhawk stopped its raids, and the remains of the road fell into abject darkness. Gabriel could only assume that the cultists were either all dead, or that they had finally fled.

PLUMES OF FIRE jetted against the flagstones as the Thunderhawk lowered itself gently onto the road. The hatch opened, and a shaft of light flooded out, silhouetting the impressive figure of Inquisitor Toth in the drop chamber within. He stood for a moment, his ornate warhammer slung over his shoulder in the image of a barbarian warrior, and then strode down the ramp, his boots clanking solidly.

The dramatic gesture was wasted, as Gabriel and Isador were deep in conversation. The inquisitor made his way into the midst of the Blood Ravens, most of whom were busily securing the area.

'How could I not have seen this, Isador?' asked Gabriel. 'How is it that I am most blind when it matters most?'

Isador looked at the pain in his friend's green eyes, the faint light of torches dancing in them in the darkness. 'Your intuition was right about Tartarus, old friend - that is why we stayed on this planet... Or, are you not talking about Tartarus at all?'

'I should have seen the rot before it started to spread - I was blind for too long. I put my own world to the torch, Isador - our world. How many innocents died on Cyrene, so that the heretics would burn? And yet... here I am again, at somebody else's doorstep, flourishing the executioner's blade so righteously...' Gabriel trailed off, unable to finish his thought.

'Blessed is the mind too small for doubt, Gabriel,' said Isador, managing a faint smile for his friend.

'I have no doubts!' snapped Gabriel, a little too sharply. 'I still believe in the purity of the Imperium... in the sovereign might of the Golden Throne... even in the guidance of the Astronomican itself,' he added, almost as a confession. He looked around for a moment, wondering where Prathios was.

'It is in yourself that you have lost faith, my friend,' said Isador, finally giving voice to a concern that he had harboured ever since Cyrene.

'No, Isador. Not in myself, only in what I see,' replied Gabriel, his eyes still searching for the company Chaplain in the night.

'And what is it that you see, captain?' asked Inquisitor Toth as he strode in between the two friends, cutting off their conversation. Gabriel twitched visibly, shaken a little by the sudden arrival of the inquisitor. But he recovered quickly and drew himself up to his full height as he addressed Mordecai.

'I see conspirators and liars more concerned with their own agenda than with the will of the Emperor, inquisitor,' he said, making no attempt to hide the venom in his voice.

'And you expect me to break down and confess to being such a heretic?' responded Mordecai with a snort and a brief laugh. 'I am not so easily cowed by your accusations, Marine, and I have nothing that I must confess to you.'

'You lied to me!' shouted Gabriel, stepping closer to the inquisitor and making Isador reach for his shoulder to restrain him. 'You lied to me, and many good Marines are dead because of it.'

'They are better off dead with pure hearts than caught in this warp storm, captain. If you really feel that accusations are an appropriate subject of conversation with an inquisitor, then I might accuse you: their deaths are all on your head, captain, for I warned you to leave this world and you ignored me. I told you about the storm, but you had to go looking for the taint of Chaos, as is your wont, it seems,' said Mordecai, calm and calculating as usual.

'Your words still ring untrue, inquisitor,' countered Gabriel, although he had to acknowledge the literal truth of them. 'I know that you are not new to Tartarus - I know that your masters at the Ordo Xenos have been here before.' Isador withdrew his hand, evidently shocked at the risk Gabriel was taking - confronting an inquisitor with the knowledge of an eldar witch.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Gabriel saw Mordecai flinch. 'I am not in the habit of explaining the affairs of the Emperor's Inquisition to Space Marines, captain. But yes, you are right, the Ordo Xenos has been watching Tartarus for longer than you might imagine.'

'What are they watching, Toth?' asked Gabriel, his contempt fired by Mordecai's confession.

'They are watching for signs of unspeakable horror, captain,' replied Mordecai, his tone softening even as Gabriel's hardened.

'Would these be the same horrors pursued by the Alpha Legion?' he asked, almost spitting as he recalled that the inquisitor had claimed to feel no taint of Chaos on Tartarus.

'There are no coincidences on Tartarus,' began Mordecai, almost to himself. 'There is only the storm that winnows the faithful from the heretic.'

'And are we faithful men, Toth? Are we good servants of the Emperor?' bit Gabriel, challenging the inquisitor.

Mordecai looked down at his feet for a moment, hefting his heavy warhammer from one hand to the other, swinging it like a metronome, as though trying to keep pace with his thoughts.

'This world is cursed, captain,' he began, as though he had reached an important decision. 'Three thousand years ago an artefact of ancient and evil power was lost here. The forces of Chaos seek this artefact - they have sought it for centuries, but they have never been in possession of all the pieces of the puzzle.'

'Until now,' offered Gabriel, encouraging Mordecai to continue.

'Secrets are hard things to keep, captain, as the Blood Ravens themselves know well. The events of that day three thousand years ago drew the attention of many eyes, some of which have not aged as rapidly as our own. For them, it has simply been a matter of waiting for the right time to return to this world. Not long ago, an Imperial excavation team accidentally uncovered a marker - the first of a series of coded markers. I'm afraid that the Inquisition was not quick enough to silence news of this find, and it quickly found its way into ears that should not have heard it. This marker indicated the location of the altar that you yourself discovered in the valley. From then on, it was a simple matter of following the trail.' Mordecai was on a roll now, evidently relieved to be getting this off his chest.

'And this artefact, what is it?' asked Gabriel, trying to cut through the irrelevant details - time was short.

'It is a stone - a small gem called the Maledictum. Inside is contained a daemon of great power - a daemon prince, born of the forces of Chaos itself,' replied Mordecai with sinister force.

Gabriel was shaking his head, trying to make all of the pieces fit together. It didn't make sense. 'How is it possible that the citizens of Tartarus did not know all of this? These markers... and the artefact itself must lie buried beneath their own cities. Why do their records contain no mention of any of this?'

'When the warp storm last visited Tartarus, three thousand years ago, it drove the local population into insanity. When the Imperium resettled the planet, it did so as though for the first time. Lloovre Marr himself cleansed the planet of all survivors of the storm - it is said that the rivers ran with blood. All traces of the previous colonists were eradicated. Lloovre Marr and his comrades built over the dark places without ever knowing what lay beneath,' explained Mordecai.

'That is why the history books begin so precisely in 102.M39?' asked Isador.

'Yes, the previous records were all expunged by the Inquisition,' replied Mordecai. 'And thus the people of Tartarus remained ignorant of what lay beneath them, even when they built a network of underground tunnels as escape routes from the capital city.'

'Knowledge is power, inquisitor,' said Gabriel, quoting the motto of his Chapter with a wry smile. 'The Inquisition's secrets may have hobbled the people of this world.'

'If this Maledictum stone is as powerful as you say, inquisitor,' said Isador, his interest piqued, 'would it not exert some kind of effect on the people even whilst it is buried?'

'A good question, Librarian,' replied Mordecai. 'The ancient text in the *Registratum Malfeas* suggests that the daemon within the stone may be imprisoned, but it is not without power, particularly if its thirst for blood is satiated. It is possible that the stone could affect the affairs of Tartarus - it is certainly affecting them now.'

'And what about the eldar?' asked Gabriel, as he realised that the words of the eldar witch had proven true. 'Do they seek this power for themselves?'

'No, captain. It was they who imprisoned the daemon in the first place, placing it behind a complicated combination-lock. Their farseer entrapped the daemon in the stone, and buried it. She rigged the burial chamber with a psychic lock that could only be breached by the residual power that she imbibed into a ritual dagger, which she also buried. Even if someone were to recover the stone itself, it could only be awoken in a final ceremony performed on ground consecrated by the blood of a devoted population,' explained Mordecai, pausing as the expression on Gabriel's face changed.

'Inquisitor, the whole of Lloovre Marr is constructed on top of a giant reservoir of blood - just look down into that chasm. It appears that large sections of the population must have been cultists for some time - perhaps influenced by the power of the stone, or perhaps mutated by the sea of blood that seeps through their soil. Even their lho-sticks must be saturated with the resonances of blood and death,' responded Gabriel. 'It seems that it was not only the people of Tartarus who were ignorant about the events here, it seems that the Inquisition was also kept in the dark.'

'How do you know this story, inquisitor?' asked Isador, his scholarly scepticism making him suspicious. 'Did you learn it from the eldar?'

'No, Librarian,' answered Mordecai. 'The eldar have fiercely safeguarded all knowledge of the stone - even going so far as to interfere with our efforts to retrieve it. As Chaos's most ancient enemy, they see themselves as the only capable defence against its influence. And we are all paying for their arrogance now.'

'I'm not sure that you have answered my question,' persisted Isador, his years of training in the librarium showing. 'How do you know all this?'

'Because we were here, Librarian Akios,' said Mordecai, pausing to let the statement sink in. 'The Inquisition was here three thousand years ago, when many Chapters of the Space Marines were still young. An inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos led a Deathwatch recovery team to Tartarus, drawn by the presence of the eldar and a particular eldar artefact. This team saw the eldar farseer imprison the daemon with its own eyes.'

'And what was the Deathwatch team here to "recover"?' asked Gabriel, one eyebrow raised incredulously.

Mordecai sighed audibly, as though he had not been willing for the conversation to reach this point. His warhammer was still swinging rhythmically from one hand to another, but he broke the rhythm and hefted it into the air, brandishing it above his head in both hands. 'This,' he said. 'The Deathwatch team came for the materials needed to construct this warhammer - a daemonhammer. It was forged from a shard broken from the sword of the avatar of the Biel-Tan - the fabled Wailing Doom of Khaine himself. That was the very weapon with which the avatar slew the daemon prince on that dark night - and this is a daemonhammer unlike any other. It is the God-Splitter.'

'And the Inquisition stole part of this glorious weapon,' said Gabriel, shaking his head in disappointment. 'What a mess.'

'You still do not know it all, Captain Angelos of the Blood Ravens. That Deathwatch team was led by a certain Captain Trythos, also of the Blood Ravens - the first Blood Raven ever to serve a secondment with the Ordo Xenos,' said Mordecai, revealing more than he should have done, but enjoying this last fragment of power.

Gabriel shook his head. The great Trythos had been here before - was it here that he had been mortally wounded whilst on a Deathwatch mission, before his body was returned to the Third Company and enshrined in the sarcophagus of a blessed dreadnought? The same dreadnought that was destroyed by the eldar this very morning.

'Yes, Gabriel - Brother Trythos, Captain of the Blood Ravens Third Company lies at the start of this affair - the hidden history of your own company is also embroiled in the history of Tartarus.'

'I assume that there is still time to avert the disaster,' said Gabriel, resolution fixing itself across his face.

'This is already a disaster, Gabriel. The power of the Maledictum has grown - it is enough to turn the faithful and drive men mad. Many of the local population have already turned, as you have seen, but some of the Imperial Guard also teeter on the edge of a precipice. It is affecting you and your Marines too, I can feel it. It is calling to the warp storm, drawing it in to eclipse the system when dusk falls tomorrow. It wants to trap us here with it, so it can force even the best of us to serve its twisted will. This is why I encouraged you to leave... and why I still encourage it,' explained Mordecai, appealing to Gabriel to see sense at last.

'You should have revealed this to me at the start, Toth. It would have made matters easier, although it would not have changed my decision. You know that I cannot leave this planet as it is. I will not shrink away in the face of such evil,' said Gabriel, full of resolve.

'I would not have it any other way,' said Mordecai, slinging his warhammer over his shoulder and thumping his other hand down on Gabriel's shoulder guard. 'Let us end this bickering and face our enemy together. United, we have a better chance of thwarting the Alpha Legion's plans for the Maledictum.'

Returning the gesture, Gabriel slammed his palm down onto Mordecai's shoulder. But when they turned to Isador, the Librarian was already walking away, muttering to himself, whispering silently.

They are weak, Isador. Terrified of the power that you alone amongst them can understand. It is yours... yours for the taking... before the small-minded cowards destroy it... think of the good you could do in the name of your Emperor... think of the power you could wield in your Chapter...

Isador shook the voice out of his head. *It is mine...*



PART THREE



CHAPTER TWELVE

IN THE VERY centre of the Temple of Dannan, the dark corridors gave way to a majestic courtyard. It was bounded on each side by the arches of stone cloisters, decorated in the High Gothic style of the finest Imperial architecture. Intricate engravings scrolled across the arches, depicting scenes of glory and honour from the history of Tartarus and displaying the ritual iconography of the Imperial cult itself. Above the largest arch in the north wall was a magnificent icon, carved deeply into the pristine stone. It showed the image of the Golden Throne, ringed by the ineffable presence of the Astronomican, singing the Emperor's grace for all the galaxy to hear - sending out a beacon for the souls of the faithful, no matter where they might be.

But the icons were defaced and vandalised, sprayed with blood and chipped away by the clumsy strikes of clubs, sticks and fists. Here and there, the stone was riddled with pits and holes, as though it had been struck by a barrage of gun shots from close range. And, in the centre of the courtyard, the once verdant and beautiful plants had been burnt to ashes. In their place stood a ring of human cultists, stripped to their waists, trembling with fear and excitement. A series of grooves had been etched into the flagstones, leading from their feet to a small, circular hole in the middle, like the radials of a wheel. The hole dropped away from the temple, plunging down into the great subterranean reservoir of blood, hidden in the vaulted chamber under the city, like an underground cathedral in its own right.

When Sindri had realised that the temple had been built directly above the blood-chamber, he had laughed - there are no coincidences on Tartarus. It was as though the whole planet had been designed with this ceremony as its goal.

The sorcerer paced around the ring of cultists, dragging the eldar's curved blade over their backs as they winced and moaned, concentrating in towards the hole in the centre of the circle. Thin trickles of blood seeped out of the cuts in their backs, running down their bodies and dripping into the blood grooves in the stone floor. Gradually, the grooves began to fill with red, and the lines pushed slowly towards the hole, one droplet at a time.

As they bled, the cultists chanted and swayed to an erratic, ugly rhythm, and Sindri stepped spasmodically, in time with the broken beat. The spell seemed to inflate throughout the courtyard, spilling out of the mouths of the cultists and pushing against the cloisters that surrounded them. A field of scintillating energy was building gradually, as the chanting grew louder and the blood flowed thicker. The cultists were being bled in body and soul together.

Suddenly, Sindri stopped circling the group, halting behind one of the cultists. In an abrupt movement, the sorcerer lunged forward and grasped the woman's hair, pulling it violently back to expose her neck. Spinning the dagger in his other hand, he brought it smoothly across the cultist's throat, dropping her onto the ground as her life-blood gushed from the mortal wound. She fell forward, along the blood groove, spilling her blood into a river that flooded the channel and rushed towards the hole in the ground.

The other cultists continued to chant and sway, their eyes wild with fear and ecstasy as Sindri started to circle them once again. Guardsman Katrn watched the movements of Sindri with hungry eyes, imploring the sorcerer to give him the honour of being next, impatient to blend his blood with the thousands of other devotees whose essence had drained into the great reservoir over the decades and centuries. He chanted the spell with extra energy each time Sindri passed behind him, as he felt the cold slice of the curved blade cut into his back.

Katrn had already shed the blood of many Tartarans, fighting his way from Magna Bonum, but now it was time to give his own blood to the cause. His mind reeled with disbelief at the thought that so many of his brethren could still not see the truth of their origins; they were still blind to their place in the plans of the daemon prince; they still thought that war had to have a purpose - that shedding blood for the Blood God was not enough in itself. The fools.

Sindri stopped again, yanking back the head of another cultist and slitting his throat without ceremony, dumping the body forward into the circle with a casual push. The sorcerer was moving faster now, driven into a trance by the chanting, the motion, and the pungent scent of the fresh blood. The incandescent field around the courtyard was pulsing with energy, pressing against the stonework and splintering cracks into the Imperial icons.

Finally, the sorcerer stopped behind him, and Katrn's soul rejoiced as his head was pulled back, exposing his neck to Sindri's blade.

'Sindri!' bellowed a voice, shattering the discordant chant and making the energy field flicker.

Please, oh please cut me, begged Katrn in his mind. *Please*.

Sindri stayed his hand and snapped his head round to see who dared to intrude on the ceremony. 'Whait!' he hissed. 'What, my lord,' he added, struggling with the words.

'The Space Marines have breached the Dannan sector - they are on their way. Your cultists bought us almost no time at all,' said Bale, his voice full of disgust. He was growing sick of the sorcerer's plans collapsing into ruin just on the verge of their success.

Katr'n felt the sorcerer release his head and withdraw the knife from his neck, snatching him back from the verge of glory. He cried out in frustration as Sindri walked round the circle towards the Chaos Lord, instructing the cultists to carry on chanting while he was away.

'The circumstances that you mention demonstrate divine providence, Lord Bale,' said Sindri, raising his arm and guiding Bale out of the courtyard. 'Everything is proceeding according to plan. Once I have completed the ceremony, you will have that which we have plotted and schemed to achieve.'

Bale looked at Sindri for a moment, suspicious of his choice of words. 'I do not trust you, sorcerer,' he said frankly. 'What will happen if the Blood Ravens should arrive before this "providence" graces us?'

'Providence has already graced us, my lord - if only you had the eyes to see it. When the Space Marines arrive, then we shall play the good hosts and indulge them in a bloody feast,' answered Sindri, risking a subtle slight. 'But at all costs, Lord Bale, you must keep them from interfering with the ceremony. This is a delicate process, and I cannot afford for it to be interrupted... again.'

Uncertain, Bale nodded and turned to walk away, leaving the sorcerer to do what needed to be done.

'And Bale,' called Sindri after him, using his unadorned name once again, 'might I advise that you throw everything at the cursed Blood Ravens. Everything. Their contribution to our project might prove most useful in the end, especially at this critical juncture.'

'Do not tell me how to fight Space Marines, sorcerer!' retorted Bale, stamping to a halt and looking back over his shoulder.

'My apologies,' said Sindri smoothly. 'I just thought that you would be pleased to finally get your chance to engage the Blood Ravens.'

Bale did not answer, but stormed back into the dark interior of the temple, leaving Sindri to turn back to the cultists in the courtyard. If the truth were known, he was pleased at the prospect of a proper fight at last.

Now, where was I, thought Sindri, as the rhythm of the chanting started to penetrate his soul once again. Ah yes... power demands sacrifice.

Katr'n gasped with ecstasy as the sorcerer tugged back his head once again and drew the icy touch of the eldar blade across his throat. As the Guardsman slumped down into the blood groove at his feet, he could feel his life gushing out of him, pouring his soul into the fecund embrace of the Blood God himself.

ANOTHER THUNDERHAWK ROARED overhead as Inquisitor Toth's own vessel blasted into the air to return to the spaceport at Magna Bonum. All of the transports were required to help with the evacuation, but Colonel Brom had released a detachment of his Tartaran Guardsmen to assist the Blood Ravens, and a Thunderhawk was temporarily requisitioned to take them to Lloovre Marr.

The gunship did not even land, it just dropped down above the road and opened its hatch, tipping a couple of squads of Imperial Guardsmen out onto the flagstones. Then, with a roar of power, it eased back into the sky and flashed off into the night, heading back towards the evacuation point.

One of the Guardsmen rushed forward to greet Gabriel, stooping into a bow as he approached.

'Captain Angelos, I am Sergeant Ckrius of the Tartarus Planetary Defence Force,' said the young soldier proudly. His uniform was ripped and dirty, and his face was blackened by the smoky report of his weapon. But his sergeant's pips were sparkling and clean, as though he had just finished polishing them. He looked up into the face of Gabriel with fierce determination burning in his eyes. 'I bring two squadrons of storm troopers and the regards of Colonel Brom. He regrets that he cannot spare more.'

'Thank you sergeant, you are most welcome here,' replied Gabriel, nodding to the young Guardsman and wondering how bad things must be at the spaceport for such a youthful soldier to be put in charge of two entire squads. He studied the lad's face and saw how it must have aged over the last couple of days; he was not much more than a boy, but he had survived more than many men, and his sparkling eyes spoke of an undiminished resolve to save his homeworld.

For a moment, Gabriel saw himself in those eyes - he had once been a young Guardsman on Cyrene, before the Blood Trials, before the Blood Ravens had changed his life forever.

'Tell me sergeant, how fares the spaceport?' asked Gabriel.

'The orks have regrouped and are attacking in force, captain. Many civilians have been killed in the crossfire as they struggled to get into the spaceport, but we are holding out as best we can...' Ckrius trailed off, apparently unwilling to go on.

'Is there something else, sergeant?' asked Mordecai, overhearing the conversation and joining the group.

'Yes, there is something,' said Ckrius, puffing out his chest and steadying his voice. 'It seems that some of the Tartarans themselves have turned against the Emperor - a number of squadrons have deserted their positions, including an elite Armoured Fist squad.'

'They are cowards, then,' replied Gabriel, remembering the scene that greeted him when he first set foot on Tartarus.

'It is worse than that, captain,' confessed Ckrius, flinching at the insult on the honour of his regiment, but unable to deny it. 'The squads have not fled, they have turned their guns against us, and some even fight along side the orks.'

'It is as we feared, Gabriel,' said Mordecai, turning to face the Blood Raven. 'The Maledictum is working its dark magic on the people of Tartarus, twisting their wills against themselves. Their bodies were prepared by the taint in the soil itself, and now their souls are lost.'

'More and more turn every hour, captain. Before long, the spaceport will fall - the evacuation must be completed within the next few hours,' added Ckrius.

'It must be completed today in any case, sergeant,' responded Mordecai. 'The warp storm will be here before the day is out, and when it arrives, it is all over for anyone left on the surface.'

'Thank you, sergeant, for bringing us this news and for joining us at this troubled time,' said Gabriel, impressed by the resolve and strength of the young trooper. He bowed slightly to the sergeant in a rare sign of respect for a junior officer. 'Now, we have work to do. Sergeant, we are going to launch a two-pronged assault against the Alpha Legionaries in the Temple of Dannan. You and

your storm troopers will assist Sergeant Tanthius and the Blood Ravens Terminators - you will storm the temple doors from the front. You will be supported by a team of Devastator Marines - but most of the heavy weapons batteries are still on the other side of this chasm. The Whirlwinds may be able to provide some covering fire from there, but the other tanks will be of no use. There is a ceremony being performed in the temple, and it is imperative that we do not allow it to reach completion - do you understand?" explained Gabriel quickly.

'Yes, captain. You may count on us to do our part,' replied Ckrius, saluting crisply, despite his fatigue and the grime that covered him.

'The rest of you,' continued Gabriel, turning to face Mordecai, Matiel and the remains of the assault squad. 'The rest of you are with me.' He hesitated for a moment, looking for Isador. The Librarian was standing a little way off, talking to a small group of Marines. He nodded briskly to Gabriel as their eyes met, as though indicating some sort of understanding, and then he stalked off towards the temple with the Marines in tow.

A ROCKET ZINGED overhead, crashing into the steps of the temple and exploding into rains of shrapnel. Another fell short, drilling down into the flagstones in the square and excavating a large crater. The cultists who were collected outside the Temple of Dannan did not scatter - they stood their ground and were slaughtered in their dozens with each blast from the distant Whirlwind rocket launchers. In only a few moments, the rockcrete surface of the temple precinct was slick with blood and gore. As the bombardment ceased, Tanthius stepped forward into the square, flanked on both sides by a short line of Marines with full Terminator honours. The Blood Ravens opened fire, punching a volley of shells through the square, shredding the cultists with splinters of flame and shrapnel.

This is too easy, thought Tanthius as his storm bolter spluttered in his hand. Where are the Alpha Legionaries?

The sound of breaking glass made him look up. Great sheets of stained glass were tumbling out of their frames in the upper levels of the temple. Huge monuments to the glory of the Emperor were being desecrated and shattered from within, as sleets of bolter fire flashed down through the early morning darkness. Tanthius could vaguely see the horned helmets of Alpha Legionaries moving in the shadows beyond the window frames.

Angling his bolter fire up towards the wrecked stained glass windows, Tanthius drew his power sword and lashed out with it into the throng of cultists, cutting through a swathe with ease. His brother Terminators echoed his movements, dragging their line of fire up the front of the temple and peppering the window cavities in the upper levels. Their secondary weapons continued to slice into the seething crowd of cultists - a plume of fire jetted out of a flamer on the arm of one, and the hum of power fists sizzled in the air as they pummelled anything that strayed too close.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Ckrius waved some quick signals to the storm troopers, who peeled into two squads. One knelt into a firing line and unleashed their hellguns, spraying a tirade into the throng of cultists at the side of the knot of Terminators. The relentless fire cut a sudden corridor into the crowd, and Ckrius stormed into it, his hellgun bucking with automatic fire as he sprinted towards the temple steps. Behind him came one of the storm trooper squads, pounding over the carpet of corpses, desperate to reach the other side of the square before the corridor closed in on them again.

Ckrius burst out of the crowd on the far side, diving up the steps of the temple and crashing his weight into the heavy doors. He rolled instantly, bringing his hellgun round to bear on the cultists once again. An instant later, and seven more storm troopers flew out of the crowd, launching themselves out of the reach of the grasping hands and turning to riddle them with lasfire.

The eighth member of the squad nearly made it, but the corridor collapsed just before he broke through, and the cultists pressed in on him from both sides, swamping him under the sheer weight of numbers. For a moment, his head rose above the throng, thrown back in agony as the cultists bit and clawed into his flesh, trying to bleed him dry.

Without breaking his firing rhythm, Ckrius snapped his pistol from its holster and clicked off a single round, striking the storm trooper directly between the eyes and killing him instantly. The pistol was reholstered immediately, as Ckrius grasped his hellgun back into both hands for better control - he hoped that his men would do the same for him, when his time came.

With a command from Ckrius, the line of storm troopers on the temple steps focussed their fire into a single strip of the square, cutting another corridor in the crowd, leading right up to the feet of the storm troopers on the other side. As soon as the corridor opened, the troopers broke into a run, sprinting across the square with their hellguns blazing before them. Ckrius rose to his feet and braced his gun against his shoulder, picking off cultists one at a time as they threatened to obstruct the storming troopers - he was determined not to lose any more men so early in the day.

As the two squadrons were reunited on the temple steps, the cultists found themselves caught in the crossfire between the storm troopers and the Blood Ravens Terminators. The whole precinct was instantly transformed into a giant killing zone, with lasfire, bolter shells and flames flashing maniacally through the space from both sides. Every shot hit something, and in a matter of seconds the crowd had been reduced into a pummelled, broken and bloody pile of corpses.

Tanthius strode forward into the square, scanning the upper windows of the temple for signs of Chaos Marines, but he could see no movement. His feet squelched horribly as they trod through the gory mess on the ground, but he nodded an acknowledgment to Ckrius on the temple steps.

The clink of grenades hitting the flagstones sounded an ominous note in the morning air. Suddenly, explosions rocked the temple precinct and, with a crack the temple doors burst open - a volley of bolter fire punched out into the square, scattering the storm troopers and peppering the armour of the Terminators.

A phalanx of Alpha Legionaries stormed out of the temple, their guns blazing in all directions at once. Simultaneously, more stained-glass windows shattered and fire hailed down into the square from above.

THE SOUND OF combat outside echoed through the narrow passageway, shaking the stone blocks in the foundations of the temple. Gabriel crouched and rushed the last few steps, emerging into one of the antechambers in the interior of the temple. He snatched

his bolter from one side to the other, but the room was empty. He whistled a signal, and the rest of his team stalked out of the service tunnel, immediately spreading out into a firing formation with their weapons primed.

Gabriel held a finger to his lips to silence the others as he strode towards the only doorway, his heavy boots clanking against the stone floors in blatant disregard for his own order. Outside the small stone chamber was one of the low, subsidiary aisles of the majestic nave, cast into deep shadow at this time of the morning. Beyond it, through a series of wide arches that ran the length of the temple, the grand, vaulted nave stretched off in both directions, leading to the main entrance on the left and the altar on the right.

The huge front doors were a frenzy of activity as Alpha Legionaries arrayed themselves around it in a tight firing arc. Others had already rushed outside, and Gabriel could see the report of their bolters in the darkness of the precinct. In the other direction, behind the altar and beyond the apse, a coruscating purple glow spilled into the temple from the cloistered courtyard in the heart of the temple. And high above, in the rafters and ramparts, Gabriel could see other Chaos Marines running to the front of the temple to find vantage points for the battle.

'Sergeant,' whispered Gabriel to Matiel, as he ducked back into the antechamber. 'Take the assault squad into the shadows of the aisles and wait for my signal. You can provide support for Tanthius and Sergeant Ckrius from there, catching the cursed Chaos Marines in your crossfire.'

Matiel did not answer, but he nodded briskly, flicking some silent hand signals to his squad. The Space Marines dropped into crouching positions and darted out of the door, filing along the arched side-aisles, virtually invisible in the deep shadows. Finally, Matiel nodded again to Gabriel. 'May the Emperor guide your blade, Gabriel,' he said as he ducked out to join his squad.

'What about us, captain?' asked Mordecai, swinging his warhammer between his hands.

'We have a ceremony to interrupt,' hissed Gabriel, peering round the doorway and then dashing out into the nave towards the altar.

'SINDRI !' CALLED THE Chaos Lord as he burst into the courtyard, his eyes quickly scanning the scene of carnage. The sorcerer had gone, leaving a ring of dead cultists in the centre of the courtyard, lying in the blood grooves like spokes on a wheel.

'Sindri, you coward!' he bellowed, spinning to search the shadows in the cloisters around the edge of the courtyard. That vile sorcerer, thought Bale, his anger rising. His plans have failed and he has deserted me.

The Chaos Lord kicked his boot against the ribs of one of the sacrificial cultists. It made no noise, except for a moist squelch as a bubble of blood burst out of its slit throat under the sudden pressure.

'SINDRI!' roared Bale, thrusting his scythe into the air and spinning it in a vicious arc, smashing it down into the body of the cultist at his feet. The blade clanged and sparked against the flagstones as it hacked straight through the dehydrated human form.

'You will suffer for this,' he muttered under his breath.

'You will suffer first,' came a voice from behind him.

The Chaos Lord looked back over his shoulder, his scythe still buried in the distended flesh of Katrn. Stepping through the purple energy field that still enveloped the courtyard strode a Blood Ravens captain, his chainsword drawn. Behind him came the figure of an inquisitor, wielding an ancient-looking warhammer with controlled malice.

Bale laughed, dragging his blade free of the corpse and spinning it round his head, sending a spray of blood splattering across the courtyard as he turned to face the intruders. He dropped into a low fighting stance, the blade of his manreaper scythe held above his shoulder as he shifted his weight onto his back foot. At last, he thought, an opponent worthy of a Chaos Lord of the Alpha Legion.

'Don't worry, we will deal with your sorcerer later,' added Gabriel, holding his chainsword vertically at his side in both hands, and pushing his left leg forward into a long combat stance.

'This one is mine,' he hissed to Mordecai, as he darted forward, lifting his chainsword above his head and driving it down towards the Chaos Lord. Mordecai hesitated, eager to assist but aware of the age-old rivalry between the Blood Ravens and the Alpha Legion - this was an honour duel, and he had no place in it. He switched his warhammer into one hand and retreated into the shadows of the cloisters. As he did so, something caught his eye on the other side of the courtyard - a figure in blue power armour had emerged from one of the transepts. He only saw it for a moment, before it sank back into the shadows. It looked like Isador. The Chaos Lord was as quick as Gabriel, dropping his scythe into a vertical sweep and smashing his blow aside, lifting his front foot simultaneously and kicking it into the Blood Raven's chest. Gabriel staggered back under the blow, regaining his balance and repositioning his chainsword in a horizontal pose above his head, pointing at the Chaos Lord.

Letting his momentum turn his body, Bale spun his other leg in a low sweep towards Gabriel's front foot, bringing his scythe around at the same time. Gabriel lifted his foot just in time, stamping it down again on Bale's ankle, feeling the joint collapse under the force. Simultaneously, he dipped the point of his chainsword and swept it round to parry the scythe blade as it streaked towards his head.

The Chaos Lord let out a scream, part pain and part fury, as he tugged his broken leg back out of Gabriel's reach. 'Sindri!' he yelled. 'You will pay for this!'

No, I don't think so, Lord Bale, came the smooth tones of the sorcerer, slipping directly into Bale's mind. I'm afraid that the ceremony failed to break the protective seal guarding the stone - I confess that I had expected that it would not work... yet. We need a larger sacrifice, my lord. We need more blood to fully consecrate the ground.

All of a sudden, a series of explosions sounded from within the nave of the temple, and then the rattle of bolter fire erupted in their wake. Matiel and the Marines had joined battle against the Alpha Legionaries.

'You have failed, sorcerer!' bellowed the Chaos Lord, bringing his scythe down for another attack. Unbalanced by his broken leg, the strike was more clumsy than the last, and Gabriel stepped comfortably inside it, pushing his chainsword into Bale's midsection.

No, my lord. Power demands sacrifice - and I thank you for yours.

The manreaper fell from Bale's grasp, clattering to the ground as he staggered back, gasping for breath. The morning sun had just crested above the cloisters, sending the first red rays of the day lancing into the courtyard, accompanied by the cacophony of battle in the nave and in the precinct outside.

'This is not the end, Blood Raven,' spat Bale as he slumped to the ground, sliding his weight along the grinding teeth of the chainsword and splashing blood into Gabriel's face. 'No, this dawn is the dawn of a new war...' His voice trailed off as the dark light faded from his eyes and his mouth fell open in a last gasp of horror.

Gabriel pulled his chainsword clear of the dead Chaos Lord, its spluttering teeth spitting droplets of blood and gore across the courtyard. The huge stomach wound was pouring with blood, rapidly forming a wide pool around the fallen Marine. But Gabriel noticed the danger too late, and the blood seeped its way into the blood grooves cut into the flagstones and started to race along towards the hole in the centre of the courtyard.

Intuitively, Gabriel sprinted for the cloisters, launching himself off his feet just as the stream of Bale's blood poured into the hole and cascaded down into the reservoir below like a waterfall. The purple energy field around the courtyard exploded in a brilliant flash of light, and the flagstones on the floor vaporised immediately, sending jets of steam fizzing into the sky. The corpses of the cultists slipped into freefall, tumbling down into the lake of blood below.

As the commotion died down, a pillar started to rise out of the subterranean lake, grinding up towards the gap where the courtyard had once been. It rumbled into place, like a peg filling a round hole, sealing the courtyard once again. The stone of the new floor was stained a deep red, from centuries of submersion beneath a sea of blood. In its centre was a small altar, pristine and white, as though untouched by the hideous taint of its surroundings. And on this altar rested a small gem-stone, glowing red with unearthly powers, as though lit by the fires of hell itself.

Drawn by the ungodly noise, Matiel came storming into the cloisters from the nave, accompanied by two Space Marines. They ran over to Gabriel and Mordecai, pushing the piles of debris and masonry off them and helping them to their feet.

'What happened, captain?' asked Matiel. But Gabriel was staring over the sergeant's shoulder into the courtyard beyond. There, on the other side, just emerged from the shadows of the cloisters, stood Isador. The Librarian appeared to be muttering to himself, staring at the ground, whispering and twitching his head, as though fighting with his own private daemons.

'Old friend,' called Gabriel, pushing Matiel gently aside and stepping out into the courtyard once again.

The Librarian stopped mumbling and raised his eyes, meeting those of Gabriel for a moment. Then, in a sudden movement, Isador raised his arm into the air, and the Maledictum stone flashed across the courtyard into his hand. Gabriel saw his friend's eyes switch from icy blue into a blaze of reds and golds, burning with hellfire. A crackling purple energy field erupted around Isador's armour, as the Librarian slowly lowered his arm, pointing it towards his oldest friend.

Gabriel dived to one side, drawing his bolt pistol as he rolled. Flipping back onto his feet, the captain snatched off three shots. At the same time, shots echoed out from Matiel and Mordecai. The shells punched into Isador, staggering him and making him stumble backwards. But then the force field around him flared with even greater energy, and he pulled himself upright again. By this time, Gabriel had broken into a run, charging towards his onetime friend, firing a stream of bullets. The shells pummelled into the field around Isador, but then a great explosion erupted under the impacts, throwing Gabriel off his feet and back towards the Blood Ravens in the cloisters.

When he stood up and looked back across the courtyard, Librarian Isador Akios had vanished.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE VOICES ECHOED and rang, as though being chanted in the great vaulted spaces of an ancient cathedral. They were pristine and perfect, like points of silver starlight in the dead of the night, guiding travellers home and keeping them away from danger. And they soared, filling Gabriel's head with spirals of glittering faces as the choir of the Astronomican cycled through his mind, growing louder and louder as though drawing closer with every passing second.

And then the shift: the faces palled into mutation, their flesh running from their skulls as though melted by some immense heat, and their song was transformed into a cacophony of screams. But Gabriel was ready for his vision this time, and held his nerve, letting the abhorrent images spiral and swim, whirling into a cyclone of guilt and doubt. And there, gradually forming from the drips and tears of rendered flesh, swirling into focus in their core, there was the face of his friend. Isador stared back at him from his own consciousness, his face ripped and scarred, with tears of blood cascading down his cheeks.

A gentle pressure landed on his shoulder, and Gabriel flicked open his eyes. Chaplain Prathios stood before him, his hand resting firmly against Gabriel's armour, and his wise eyes staring down at the captain, filled with compassion.

'I am sorry, Gabriel,' said the Chaplain in barely audible tones.

'He was a finer man than I am, Prathios. A more powerful warrior, and a devoted servant of the Emperor,' confessed Gabriel, unable to hold the Chaplain's gaze for long.

'We all admired him, Gabriel,' replied Prathios simply, nodding his head towards the other Blood Ravens.

Kneeling in front of the ruins of the Emperor's altar in the Temple of Dannan, Gabriel looked back over his shoulder. Mاتي and Tanthius bowed their heads, each kneeling at the front of their squads, filling the centre of the nave with two brilliant columns of crimson armour, each Marine perched reverently on one knee with their helmets on the ground next to them.

The battle for the temple had not outlasted the death of the Chaos Lord. The Alpha Legionaries in the nave had been rapidly overrun, attacked from the front by the Terminators and Ckrius's storm troopers, and from behind by Mاتي's Space Marines. In the end, it seemed that the Alpha Legion had left only a small force in the temple to defend their lord - although Mordecai was certain that this was because the bulk of the Chaos Marines had left with the sorcerer, slipping out of the temple through one of the many subterranean tunnels.

Gabriel rose to his feet and turned to face the assembly. Hidden in the shadows of the side aisles, he could see Sergeant Ckrius and his storm troopers - each standing to attention, but with their heads bowed, helmets tucked under their arms. And standing on his own in the opposite aisle was Mordecai, his warhammer slung casually over his shoulder, leaning back against the wall. He was an inquisitor, after all, reflected Gabriel, and not prone to feelings of regret or forgiveness.

'I knew Librarian Akios from the first moments that I donned the sacred armour of the Blood Ravens,' said Gabriel, addressing his men as though his old friend had died in the service of the Emperor. In a manner of speaking, he had died. If only he had died, thought Gabriel. The faces of the assembled Marines looked up to him, waiting for his words. 'I knew him before then - as young warriors on the planet of Cyrene. He was a greater soldier than I ever was, and a wiser man. I have seen the powers of Librarians many times over the long decades of my service, but never have I seen a Blood Raven wield the kind of raw power, ability and will that was possessed by Isador. He saved my life many times, and was a guardian of my soul. He will be missed... I will miss him,' said Gabriel, his voice drifting off as his emotions caught up with him.

'But the Emperor's justice is even - none may escape it. The Adeptus Astartes carry the wrath of the Emperor to all parts of the galaxy, visiting his righteous retribution against all those who turn against him. There can be no exceptions. Not even for a servant as loyal and devoted as Librarian Akios,' and not even for the innocent souls hidden in the midst of a cursed planet, added Gabriel in his mind. 'The Blood Ravens prove their worth only in the face of the enemy, and even more so when this enemy is close to our hearts. Isador, my friend, is dead - and I vow here and now to liberate his body to this realisation.'

Throughout the temple, the Blood Ravens touched their right fists to the flagstones, and Gabriel nodded to them in silence. 'The battle to come will test us all,' he continued, 'and many of us will fall. But we will fall with our blood pure and our souls in the hands of the Emperor. We will die in glory, as the saviours of the burning remains of Tartarus, and as the vanquishers of the cursed Alpha Legion. We will die, but we will kill - and we kill for one reason, and for that reason alone: because we are right.' There was no cheer from the Blood Ravens, no rousing cries to bring their souls to a frenzy. Rather, the Marines lifted their fists from the ground in silence, clasping them into their other hands, and offering them forward to Gabriel. Without exception, each Blood Raven bowed his head and offered his oath to his captain, vowing to follow him into the very gates of hell - for that was where they were going.

'WHERE TO NEXT, inquisitor?' asked Gabriel, striding down the steps outside the temple, side by side with Mordecai. 'Isador was our best guide to the riddles of this planet. And we have wasted enough time on riddles - so be frank with me, Mordecai,' he continued, using the inquisitor's personal name for the first time, 'do you know where the Chaos Marines have gone?'

'The battle fought between the eldar and the forces of Chaos three thousand years ago took place on the summit of the twin-peaked mountain. It is not far from here - just a few kilometres to the north,' replied Mordecai. 'But I cannot guarantee that the Alpha Legion will be there, Gabriel. I know nothing of this "Sindri" of whom the Chaos Lord spoke, and... and I do not know how much your Librarian understood.' The inquisitor chose his words carefully, in an uncharacteristic display of compassion towards the Blood Ravens captain.

'Sindri is not my concern, Isador is. He has fallen... and he will find my blade waiting for him as he hits the ground... You may trust that he understands more than enough, inquisitor - he was a Blood Ravens Librarian, and well schooled in the arts of the scholar.'

'Then we should head for the mountain,' responded Mordecai, hesitating before going on, unsure how to phrase his thoughts. 'Gabriel - you must understand now the weight of my original concerns here on Tartarus. I am sorry for your Librarian, but his loss is a potent symbol of the power of the Maledictum. I must admit... I was surprised that it was Isador who succumbed.'

'I know, Mordecai,' said Gabriel in a conciliatory tone. 'You suspected me... You were not alone, inquisitor. For a while, I also doubted myself,' continued Gabriel, wincing slightly at the thought of the visions that had plagued him since his arrival on Tartarus.

'It takes either steel or rot to willingly condemn your own home-world, captain. You must understand my concerns - even a captain of the Adeptus Astartes has a breaking point, and putting your home and family to the torch could have been it. I sensed the burgeoning seed of Chaos in the midst of your company, and you seemed all too eager to shed more blood on Tartarus,' explained Mordecai, relieved to finally make his confession to the Blood Raven. 'I was so certain, in fact, that I failed to notice its true source in the Librarian. I... I was wrong, captain.'

Gabriel nodded simply; he was unsurprised by the inquisitor's revelations. Despite the fact that he could see the way that Mordecai was trying to be compassionate, Gabriel had more important things on his mind than the conscience of this inquisitor.

'We will discuss the matter another time, Mordecai. For now, we have an enemy that demands our ministrations,' said Gabriel as the two men reached the great chasm around the Dannan sector once again. The far side was a blaze of crimson armour, as the rest of the Blood Ravens from throughout the city had made their way to this point. Cut off from their captain after the battles with the eldar and hearing the roar of battle around the temple, the Marines had already rebuilt the bridge over the ravine. Now they stood waiting for the return of their captain, with their armour gleaming, and the turrets of their tanks raised in salute.

Gabriel and Mordecai strode over the bridge, with Tanthius and Matiel leading their squads behind them. Alongside the Blood Ravens marched Sergeant Ckrius and his storm troopers, proudly receiving the honour of the Space Marines as they joined the assembled force on the far bank. As they strode across the bridge, the towering Terminator armour of Tanthius leant down towards Ckrius, placing an immense gauntlet on the sergeant's human shoulders. 'You fought well, Ckrius. I will ensure that the captain is not ignorant of that.'

THE SUN WAS nearly at its apex, piercing between the clouds that always gathered around the high summit of the twin-peaked mountain. Isador clambered up the steep pass, cresting a rocky rise as he broke through the cloud line. For the first time he saw the ruins of the ancient mountain-city, now barely more than rubble. The city had been destroyed long ago, and the people of Tartarus had never bothered to rebuild it. They were not fond of high places, and, in any case, the sides of the mountain were barren and infertile - Lloovre Marr himself had instructed that the cities should be built down in the fecund valleys, on the alluvial plains.

Climbing onto the remains of the old city wall, Isador turned and looked back down the mountain. A few kilometres away, on the rim of the great valley, wherein nestled the city of Lloovre Marr, a cloud of dust barrelled towards the foot of the mountain. As the sun beat down on the movement, Isador could see glints of crimson sparkling through the dust, and he knew immediately that the Blood Ravens were on their way.

Are you looking for me? The familiar whispering voice eased into his head and made him turn away from the vista, turning to look down into the ruins of the old city itself. In the midst of the moss-enshrouded rubble, his dual-pronged staff held vertically in one hand, stood the acid-green figure of a Chaos sorcerer. His bladed helmet glinted in the midday sun, and his visor glowed with a deep red.

Sindri, whispered Isador, returning the voiceless conversation. *You are a difficult person to find.*

I have been waiting, not hiding, Librarian, slithered the thoughts of the sorcerer, as Isador leapt down from the wall, crunching the uneven ground under his boots.

'You allowed me to take this stone,' said Isador, producing the Maledictum and holding it out in front of him. 'You were true to your word - which makes you a fool.'

'It remains to be seen whether you will be true to yours,' replied Sindri, holding out his hand, as though expecting the Blood Raven to surrender the stone voluntarily. 'Will you use it to slay me, as you promised... or will you simply hand it over, like a good little puppet.'

'I think that I will keep the stone with me, sorcerer. You are too weak to stomach its gifts, otherwise you would have taken it yourself,' said Isador, pacing in a circle around Sindri at a careful distance. 'And now, I will keep my promise - to you and to the Emperor. Now, I will destroy you and end your delusional scheme here on Tartarus.'

Isador took another couple of strides, prowling around his victim. Stopping abruptly, Isador set his back foot into the ground and pushed off towards Sindri, the Maledictum held clasped against his staff, pushed out like a lance in front of him. As he dived forward, his force staff burst into life, a field of coruscating energy erupting along its length.

The Chaos sorcerer turned to face the thrust, but made no attempt to evade it. Instead, he held out one gauntleted finger and a tiny thread of purple jetted out of it, striking the Maledictum. With a sudden flare of warp energy, the stone burst into life, magnifying the power of Isador's staff immeasurably, and surrounding the Librarian in a crackling, pulsing field of purple light.

As he lunged towards the sorcerer, Isador felt his feet lift off the ground, but he pushed on, focussing his will and driving forward with sheer determination. But his lunge was never completed. The field of warp energy stopped him in his tracks and lifted him into the air, suspended on a thin thread of power that flowed out of Sindri's forefinger.

A flood of whispers and slices of pain cut into Isador's mind, taunting him and attacking the very fabric of his soul. His body spasmed, racked with agony as the daemonic force of the Maledictum fought against his grip. Chaotic voices cried into his ears, and his body went suddenly rigid, as though shot through with electricity. Then his force staff erupted into flames, burning his

hands until the flesh in his gauntlets started to blister and melt. With a sudden explosion, the staff shattered, spraying fragments and shards of the ancient weapon into Isador's face and lacerating his skin.

As suddenly as it had begun, it ended, and Isador collapsed to the ground, broken and bleeding, the Maledictum glowing faintly in his ruined hands.

'Lord Bale was likewise foolish in believing that I was defenceless, Librarian. He also thought that he was in control of his own destiny. Like you, he was wrong,' said Sindri, peering down into the face of Isador with mock concern as the stone flared again and the Librarian writhed in agony.

'The orks also thought rather more of their own abilities than of mine. And their simple arrogance was very useful to me,' continued Sindri, apparently compelled to share the details of his machinations with his fallen adversary. 'And now it seems that even the great Blood Ravens have played their part, exactly as planned.'

The stone pulsed again, and Isador cried out as its energies riddled his body with pain. He looked up at Sindri and spat. 'You have not seen the last of the Blood Ravens, sorcerer. I am their worst, not their best.'

'Ah, such humility, Librarian,' replied Sindri, his voice dripping with sarcasm. 'I think that you hold much promise - much promise, indeed. And for that I should kill you, in case your abilities prove too great a threat to my plans - your honoured battle-brothers are far too narrow-minded to appreciate them.'

With a slow gesture, Sindri pushed his hand down towards the fallen Librarian, his fist crackling with energy, and Isador braced himself for the death blow. But it never came. Instead, the Maledictum flashed out of his grasp and darted up into the outstretched hand of the sorcerer. Isador slumped back against the ground as the agony left his body.

'But I have already invested so much in you. And, to be honest, even if you had a century to prepare, you would still be too late to prevent me from achieving my glory tonight. Now, I must see to my own preparations, and you... you must attend to your dear captain's demise, if you are capable,' said Sindri, taunting the broken Librarian.

'I will not serve you, sorcerer,' moaned Isador, hardly able to move.

'It does not matter what you want to do, Librarian - you have already ensured that the valiant Captain Angelos will hunt you down. You will either kill him, or you will die. The choice is yours, but it is not much of choice, is it...' said Sindri, turning away from the crumpled figure of Isador and striding away into the ruined city.

As he disappeared behind the remains of a stone building, his thoughts washed back into Isador's mind: *You have already served me, Librarian - I forgot to thank you for delivering the Maledictum.*

IN THE DISTANCE a bolt of lightning flashed out of the sky, striking the forest off to the east of the huge mountain. A brood of dark clouds was gathering on the horizon, and distant thunder rumbled with foreboding. The landscape was cast into two, with half lit under the brilliant afternoon sun and the other half shrouded in the advancing shadow of the storm.

The faint rattle of gunfire and the distant, erratic thud of explosives sent little Shockwaves pulsing down the mountain side, but Gabriel could not yet see the site of the battle, as he looked out of the roof hatch of the leading Rhino in the column of Blood Ravens.

As the convoy roared up the mountain, grinding over the barren, rocky terrain, Gabriel started to see signs that combat had been joined along that route. It started with the broken body of an Alpha Legionary, riddled with holes and his back broken as he lay slumped backwards over a large boulder. But then, as they made their way higher up the slope, there were more bodies. Not only the shattered, bulky forms of Alpha Legionaries, but also the hacked and mutilated bodies of the graceful eldar. Gabriel took all of this as a sign that he was on the right track. More worrying, however, was the occasional bloodied body of an Imperial Guardsman, perforated by shuriken fire.

'It looks like we are the last to join the party,' said Gabriel, his face taut against the wind as the Rhino rushed up the mountainside. 'No, captain,' replied Mordecai, his mouth cracking into a smile for the first time. 'The party can't start without us.'

Gabriel laughed weakly, straining his eyes against the wind, trying to distinguish individual shapes amongst the flashes and confusion at the summit of the mountain. But they were still too far away, not even the Space Marine's enhanced ocular system could resolve the images. He thumped down on the roof of the Rhino, willing the machine to move faster.

Behind him, the full force of the Third Company was arrayed in a glorious convoy. He had lost too many Marines on Tartarus already, but this was the moment for which they had all fought and died. The remnants of the Assault Bike squadrons bounced along the flanks of the column, and the remaining tanks rumbled along in the middle, interspersed with Rhinos. On either side of Gabriel's Rhino skimmed the Typhoons, and immediately behind came the Land Raider, which contained Tanthius's surviving Terminators. Visible through the open side-doors was Tanthius himself and, dwarfed by the immense size of the Blood Raven, Sergeant Ckrius rode along side him - his storm troopers having been loaded into the spaces left by fallen Marines in the various Rhinos.

'Sergeant Ckrius is a fine soldier,' said Mordecai, flicking his head back towards the Razorback.

'Yes, Tanthius has spoken highly of him,' replied Gabriel without looking round. 'But look at his brethren,' he added, casting an arm out to indicate the bodies of the Guardsmen on the mountainside, 'they are cowards and traitors, tainted by Chaos.'

'There are some pure souls on Tartarus, Gabriel,' countered Mordecai. 'Not all of them have succumbed. It is a testament to his character that he has remained so resolute.'

'Perhaps,' said Gabriel, 'but we are not here to recruit new Marines, inquisitor.'

'So many have fallen, captain. You must look to the future - not even the mighty Blood Ravens live forever,' said Mordecai, hesitating as he wondered whether he was overstepping the mark. 'Even Cyrene had some souls worth saving,' he added, aware of the ambiguity of his words.

'And yet we saved none - and some who survived have betrayed the memory of those who should have been saved,' responded Gabriel bitterly, snapping his head round to face Mordecai, his eyes burning with a confusion of pain - Cyrene, Tartarus, and

Isador spiralled through his mind. 'I know nothing of the soul of this Ckrius - how can I know that he will not crack under the responsibilities of a Blood Raven?'

'You cannot know, captain. You must have faith,' said Mordecai gently. 'Just as Chaplain Prathios once showed such faith in you.' Gabriel looked off into the distance, watching the storm gathering on the horizon. Then he nodded, reaching a decision. 'Very well, inquisitor - you are right. If the young sergeant survives this day, he will take the Blood Trials. The loss of Isador warrants a new birth in the Blood Ravens.'

A scout bike came bouncing down the mountainside towards the convoy, followed by two more bikes, struggling to keep pace with their speeding sergeant. The lead biker hit the brakes as he drew along side the Rhino and slid his back wheel round 180 degrees, spinning it in the dust as he drew level with Gabriel. The sergeant tugged at his helmet, casting it aside, and Gabriel smiled broadly, dropping down to the side-hatch to talk to the veteran sergeant.

'Corallis! It is good to see you, old friend,' called Gabriel through the wind.

'Thank you, captain,' he answered, waving his new arm for his friend to see. 'The Apothecaries on the *Litany of Fury* patched me up and packed me off again - it is good to be back, Gabriel.'

Gabriel just nodded, this was not the time for reunions, and Corallis knew that he was pleased to have him back. 'What news?' he said, indicating the area of the mountain from whence Corallis had come.

'A ruined city lies around to the west. It appears deserted. To the east there is a mob of orks lumbering towards the summit. On the summit are the Alpha Legion and a few eldar - the aliens are badly outgunned, captain. Their numbers are small,' reported Corallis.

'Lend me your bike, sergeant,' said Gabriel, reaching his hand out to clasp that of Corallis. 'I have a feeling that destiny is calling me from that old city - and I don't want to keep it waiting.'

In a smooth movement, Gabriel lifted Corallis off the bike and leapt across onto it, taking the sergeant's place before the bike unbalanced. From the hatch of the Rhino, Corallis looked over at his captain: 'I hope that you find him, Gabriel.'

'He will be waiting, I know it... Keep the Blood Ravens on course - I will see you on the summit,' said Gabriel, revving the bike's engine into a great growl and spinning the back wheel as he peeled away from the convoy and roared off to the west.

A CLOUD OF dust kicked up off the ground as Gabriel slid the rear of his bike round, bring it parallel to the ruins of the old city wall and killing the engine. He stood onto the bike and then vaulted up onto the crumbling wall. On the other side was a small clearing, strewn with rubble and cracked masonry, some of it overgrown with moss and creeping plants. Once, it must have been a courtyard or a marketplace, but now it was just a mess of stone fragments and wreckage.

On the far side of the clearing, between two ruined buildings, stood the blue-armoured figure of a Space Marine. His back was turned and his arms were outstretched to the sides, his palms pressed against the walls as though he were holding them up. Gabriel saw Isador at once and stood for a moment, motionless on the top of the city walls, staring at the back of this old friend. He had never thought that it would come to this, and his soul rebelled against the very ethical imperative that gave his life direction - perhaps Isador could be an exception?

No exceptions, Gabriel, came the voice of Isador, slipping into Gabriel's mind as though whispered lovingly in his ear.

The Blood Ravens captain vaulted off the wall and crunched down into the old marketplace, landing with one knee touched to the ground and his fist driven into the flagstones, while his other hand rested on the hilt of his chainsword.

'No exceptions, old friend,' said Gabriel in a whisper that Isador could not have heard.

As Gabriel rose to his feet, his hand still poised over the hilt on his chainsword, Isador's feet lifted off the ground. The Librarian rose about a metre off the flagstones, with his arms still stretched out by his sides, and then he started to revolve slowly. After a few seconds, his body faced directly towards Gabriel, but his head was bowed to the floor, hiding his face in shadows.

You are a fool, Gabriel, came Isador's thoughts. *You were always shortsighted - your mind closed to the very powers that could make you great. I have seen you struggling with yourself. Why struggle, when the power is there just waiting to be released?*

'Because it is wrong, Isador. Because there are some things more important than power,' said Gabriel, stalking slowly towards the levitating figure.

There was no movement from Isador - he just seemed to hang in the air, as though suspended on an invisible cross. *You are wrong, old friend. There is nothing more important than power: how ridiculous that you, a Space Marine, can still believe that power is not the goal of all our efforts. We crave it - and without it we would be nothing more than primitives. Without it, Cyrene would still be a seething pool of mutation and heresy. Power makes us right, Gabriel. And you are wrong - for you and your faith are no match for me.*

'Of all my brothers, why you? You, out of all of us, you were always the strongest,' said Gabriel, taking another cautious step towards the Librarian, his voice rich with emotion.

That is why, foolish Gabriel. That is why. Can you imagine being forced to serve the weak and the fumbling? Could you be commanded by that nauseating wretch Brom? Strength should command, not some pathetic notion of justice. The thoughts were bitter and dripping with venom, making Gabriel's mind recoil.

'You are not yourself, old friend. I have heard these words before - the cursed Warmaster Horus said as much to the Emperor himself as he unleashed bloody civil war on the galaxy. These sentiments would have found no place in the heart of Isador Akios, Librarian of the Blood Ravens,' said Gabriel, reaching his hand to his head in a reflex response to the pain. 'These are not the words of my friend.'

A crack of lightning arced across the sky and thunder crashed as the storm drew closer to the mountain. Isador finally raised his face from the ground and stared at Gabriel, his eyes ablaze with red and golden flames, and his face a ruined mess of cuts, scars and streams of blood. *Then I am not your friend.*

The words wracked Gabriel with pain, and he slumped to the ground clutching his head. *Isador was weak-willed, but his body is strong. He resisted a little, but I broke him easily. This form will be enough to smite you, captain - an entertainment while I await the coming storm.*

The voice in his head had lost its aura of Isador; it hissed and cackled, burning Gabriel's mind and licking at it with blades, slicing at his soul to the point of submission. Gabriel writhed on the ground, his body spasming as his mind played cruel tricks on his nervous system.

I am stronger than you could ever imagine - the daemons and the gods tremble before me, fearing my wrath, fearing my power, fearing the coming of the storm.

Gabriel staggered back to his feet, swaying uneasily and gripping his head in the gauntlet of one hand.

This could have been you, Gabriel. You showed such promise on Cyrene - slaughtering the innocent with the guilty in one stroke. Such power. Such glory. There was a part of you that thrilled when you ordered the strikes, I know it. Part of you thrilled when you betrayed your own people - because you had the power to do it.

Roaring with the release of pent-up rage, Gabriel lurched forward towards the husk of Isador. 'I betrayed no one!' he cried as his chainsword flashed from its scabbard, spun once in the air, and then plunged deeply into the Librarian's chest. 'Not even you, Isador.'

The fires in his eyes flared suddenly and his mouth fell open in shock, then Isador fell out of the sky and collapsed to the ground. Immediately, the daemoniac whisperings in Gabriel's head subsided, and he could hear the faint chorus of the Astonomican echoing around his soul once again, giving direction to his faith.

'Innocents die so that humanity may live, Isador,' said Gabriel, pulling his blade out of his friend's primary heart, 'not because we prove our power by killing them. I ended their suffering and saved their souls - and I will do the same for you... not because I can, but because I must.'

The Librarian's eyes flickered back into blue, and he gazed up at his old friend with his own eyes for the last time. 'I was wrong, Gabriel,' he coughed, trails of blood seeping out of the corner of his mouth. 'I thought that I was strong enough to control it. I thought that I could use its power for the good of the Imperium... you must see that.'

'I believe you, old friend,' said Gabriel, smiling faintly as he saw the familiar light return to Isador's eyes. It flickered weakly, on the point of extinction. 'That is why I bring you redemption myself Gabriel dropped his chainsword to the ground and drew his bolt pistol. He knelt for a moment at the side of the dying Librarian, and reached out his gauntleted hand, grasping Isador's wrist firmly. 'Goodbye, Isador. May the Emperor shelter your soul from the storm.'

Standing slowly, Gabriel fired a single shot from his boltpistol and turned away. He strode to the ruined city wall without looking back, and vaulted over it, landing smoothly onto his bike on the other side. Kicking the bike's engine into life, Gabriel spun the rear wheel and left the old city in the dust.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CONVOY OF Blood Ravens had ground to a halt several hundred metres short of the summit. The storm had finally reached the mountain, and great sheets of lightning tore into the mountainside, forming a ring of warp energy and fire around the twin peaks. The mountain itself had cracked open along the line of the barrage from the storm, and the dual summits had been torn into the air, floating like impossible islands of rock in the tumult of energised rain. An archipelago of islets, blasted free of the mountain top, were held in impossible suspension all around them.

Through the purpling curtain of warp lightning, Inquisitor Toth could make out dozens of figures on the two islands, and constant flashes of gunfire. Right on the point of the highest peak, Mordecai could see the silhouette of a Chaos sorcerer in a bladed helmet, his arms held up into the storm as though calling it to him. In his hands burned two red flames.

The storm washed down the mountainside, rippling out from the sorcerer's peak and hurling lashes of hail and spikes of lightning through the gale-force winds. The tumult roared through the ring of warp energy and beat against the Blood Ravens as they waited for the order to advance on the summit. Mordecai and Corallis looked out of the roof-hatch of the lead Rhino, surveying the unnatural scene as the lashes of another realm streamed into their faces. Against the roar of the wind, they could not even hear each other speak.

Corallis stared into the firestorm, his enhanced vision able to pick out individual figures in the kaleidoscope. He narrowed his eyes in disgust as he recognised the shapes of a number of Imperial Guardsmen in the fray, fighting alongside the hulking figures of the Alpha Legionaries. On the second island-summit, lower than the one on which Sindri stood calling to the storm, stood an eldar farseer, her arms upheld to the heavens as though entreating the gods for assistance. Around her was a small, dwindling group of eldar warriors and wraithguard. They were completely outnumbered and outgunned, but they fought with incredible desperation, discipline and grace, as though their very souls depended on it.

Dropping his eyes from the scene, Corallis shook his head - he had never seen a battlefield like it before. It was as though the forces of nature themselves were at war, and the various races of the galaxy were simply caught in the fray. He looked along the line of the sheet of coruscating energy that stood between the Blood Ravens and the theatre of battle, and saw that the border was strewn with corpses - some human, some eldar, and some hidden in the huge suits of armour of the Alpha Legion. They had clearly fought all the way up the mountainside.

He turned to look back down the mountain, over the heads of the Blood Ravens and Imperial storm troopers that had spilled out of their transports, realising that the only way onwards would be on foot. Even in the gathering darkness shed by the black clouds of the warp storm, Corallis could see how the route was speckled with death and doused with blood. He did not pretend to understand what was unfolding here, but he knew that it had to be stopped.

Cresting a rise to the west, Corallis saw a burst of red in a cloud of dust. Flashes of lightning reflected brilliantly off the speeding form, making it flash like a beacon. The sergeant gripped Mordecai's shoulder and spun the inquisitor round so that he could see, nodding his head towards the approaching rider. Mordecai squinted his eyes against the wind and rain, but then a crack of lightning lit the mountainside and Gabriel's assault bike shone in the sudden light as he roared across the slope towards the Blood Ravens.

Mordecai nodded firmly to Corallis, but the sergeant was still staring out across the mountain. There was something else over there. As Gabriel drew closer, a great cloud of dust began to emerge over the rise behind him. After a couple of seconds, the cloud of dust turned into a line of ork warbikes, bouncing and roaring in pursuit of the captain. And in the wake of the warbikes came a clutch of wartrukks, battlewag-ons and the rumbling forms of looted Imperial Chimera transports.

'Orks!' yelled Corallis into his armour's vox unit. 'Orks approaching from the west.'

Mordecai snapped his head back towards the speeding figure of Gabriel, who was already within range of the small vox units built into the Blood Ravens' armour. The ramshackle line of orks behind him was clearly in view now.

'Ordnance!' came the crackling voice of Gabriel, as his bike bumped and skidded over the increasingly wet ground.

The turrets of the Predators and Whirlwinds rotated smoothly to the west, and a flurry, of fire erupted from the tanks in the Blood Ravens' convoy, their shells flashing through the air over Gabriel's head. A series of explosions detonated on the mountainside as the rockets and shells punched into the ork line, toppling a gaggle of warbikes and dropping a battlewagon into a sudden crater.

At the same time, Tanthius's Land Raider streaked through the driving hail towards the orks, passing Gabriel's bike on its way. Behind it growled one of the Rhinos being used by the storm troopers. Tanthius and Ckrius, standing against the elements in the open hatch in the side of the Land Raider, snapped a crisp salute to Gabriel as they roared past, the vehicle's gun turret lancing parallel streams from its twin-lascannons as it went.

As he reached the rest of the Blood Ravens, Gabriel hit the brakes hard, skidding the bike over the sodden ground and stopping perilously close to the lead Rhino. He vaulted from the bike, straight into the side-hatch of the transport, greeting Corallis and Mordecai with abrupt nods. The rain and wind whipped them.

'We cannot approach the summits, captain,' explained Corallis through the vox-channel. 'The storm hobbles the systems in our vehicles, and... well, the mountain top is unsound, as you can see.'

Gabriel stared forward into the curtain of warp energy for the first time, his mind racing with questions that had no answers. The scene on the other side was simply impossible - with islands of rock floating amidst floods of fire, wracked with bolts of purple lightning and lashed by tonents of rain and hail. The Alpha Legionaries and a knot of damned Imperial Guardsmen were assaulting a sub-summit, held by the eldar witch that had saved Gabriel's life in Lloovre Marr. She was a blaze of blue fire, but her

forces were dwindling. And there was Sindri, standing on his own on the top of the highest island, calling to the daemons of the warp, the Maledictum in one hand and the curved dagger in the other.

'We have little time left, Gabriel. The sorcerer must have released the daemon,' said Mordecai, clearly relieved that Gabriel had returned to lead the Space Marines.

'Our course is clear,' said Gabriel resolutely, making his decision instantly. 'We must destroy this Chaos sorcerer and his lackeys... and we must attend to the daemon before it is too late - it will not find our souls as weak as it has those of others' he added, Isador's face flickering behind his eyes.

'What about the eldar, captain?' asked Corallis, unsure about how to approach the aliens.

'This is a desperate hour, sergeant, and the eldar risk their already meagre forces to confront the evil on Tartarus. They are our allies, at least for today,' replied Gabriel with only a hint of hesitation, speaking such heretical words in front of an inquisitor of the Emperor. But Mordecai simply nodded his agreement, and Corallis leapt out of the Rhino to disseminate the orders.

THE LAND RAIDER ROARED through the hail, its lascannons slicing into the greenskins and cutting them down in swathes. Splutters of gunfire rattled back at the charging transports, ping-pong off their thick armour and grinding gashes out of their bodywork. But the Land Raider showed no signs of slowing as it powered onwards, heading directly for the biggest wartrukk in the ork line, pulsing javelins of las-fire into its front armour.

Gretchin and slugger boyz scattered out of its path as the Land Raider drove through the vanguard of the ork force, flattening a warbike as it fell under the heavy tracks of the huge vehicle, making the transport bounce and swerve.

'Brace for impact!' yelled Tanthius from the viewing hatch, preparing the Terminators within for the collision. Sergeant Ckrius linked his arm around a brace in the gun turret just in time; the Razorback crashed straight into the front of the rumbling wartrukk. The impact sent Tanthius flying out of the hatch and over the wreckage of both vehicles. He reached out his arms in front of him and let the powerful servos in his armour absorb his weight as he struck the ground on the other side. His momentum pushed him into a roll, and he was quickly back on his feet, unleashing the might of his storm bolter into the backs of the orks on the wrecked wartrukk.

Ckrius quickly unhooked himself from the Land Raider and climbed up onto the roof, drawing the officer's sword that he had salvaged from a battlefield corpse as he saw a huge greenskin slam its choppa into the side hatch. Only a couple of days earlier, Ckrius would have had no idea what to do, and would certainly never have dreamt of leaping off a roof onto the back of an enormous, massively muscled green alien. But today he was a seasoned ork-killer. Holding his blade firmly in his right hand, he dropped off the Land Raider directly down onto the creature's back, driving his sword cleanly between the beast's collarbone and its shoulder blade, letting his fall push the blade in right up to its hilt. The ork hardly even had time to shriek before the blade pierced straight down through its heart, killing it instantly.

The other side hatch of the Land Raider burst open and a Marine in Terminator armour sprang out with a massive thunder hammer swinging around its head. The Terminator squad had re-equipped itself ready for the demands of this hill-top battle. The Marine stopped suddenly at the sight of the little human soldier tugging his brittle sword out of the greenskin's shoulder. Then he nodded to Ckrius and leapt forward into the crowd of orks that were pressing towards the wreck, his hammer sweeping in lethal arcs.

Three more Terminators stormed out of the Razorback in his wake, each stealing a surprised glance at the solitary storm trooper blasting away with his hellgun, before they opened up with their storm bolters and flamers.

Disciplined volleys of fire riddled the greenskins that charged towards Ckrius, and he flicked a glance to his right. Pounding across the slick battlefield towards their sergeant came the rest of the storm troopers, leaving a couple of Marines to support the heavy guns of the Rhino from which they had spilled.

BOLTER SHELLS FLASHED past her head, but she ignored them, trusting that the remnants of the Storm squad and the wraithguard would keep the shots away from her. At her side, the last of the Biel-Tan warlocks sent crackling blasts of warp energy jousting from his fingertips, cooking the flesh of Chaos Marines inside their armour and making their souls cry out in horror. The once pristine white armour of the Storm squad was now scratched and dull, coated in layers of dirt and blood. But they fought with a passion and determination known only to the eldar race.

Skrekrea had been here before, on this very mountain side with her brother, all those centuries ago - and now her brother, Jaerielle, was gone. These daemons would pay dearly for his soul. She flipped and danced around the rain of bolter fire, rattling off shuriken from her pistol and slicing her power sword with immaculate precision. She plunged her blade straight through the green and black armour of a Chaos Marine, shrieking a cry into his face as she withdrew it, and watching his head shatter and explode as her rage was funnelled through the Banshee Mask on her own head, transforming it into a psy-chosonic blast. As her sword withdrew, she flipped it over and drove it blindly behind her, skewering another Alpha Legionary in the back of the neck as he tried to slip past towards the farseer.

Macha held her arms up into the heavens and called down the lightning, forming it into spheres of pure, blue energy that revolved in the air in front of her chest. With a slight contraction of her eyes, she fired the energy balls searing through the dark, moist air towards the Chaos sorcerer on the higher island-peak. With his arms also raised to greet the storm, Sindri hardly even noticed the fireballs blazing towards him. But at the last second, one of his arms snapped out to his side, punching the blue flames and exploding them into showers of red fire, as the Maledictum stone in his fist flared with power.

Turning his eyes to face Macha, Sindri glared through the hail, wind, and bolts of warp energy, his eyes burning with red and gold fires, daring her to interfere. For a moment, Macha felt like the sorcerer was breathing into her face, as his eyes seemed to fill her entire field of vision. But then he turned away from her again, raising his face and hands back to the storm, crying into its heart.

A phalanx of Alpha Legionaries strode around Sindri, repositioning themselves between the sorcerer and the farseer, as the islands of rock bobbed and swirled on the flood of fire around the mountain top. They braced their bolters, checking their aim against the motion of the ground beneath their feet, and then loosed a volley of fire down towards the eldar. Macha, with nowhere to go,

raised her hand and a jolt of blue flame seared out to meet the bolter fire, detonating the shells in mid air. The Marines fired again and again, and Macha was forced to contend with them rather than Sindri, despite the fact that he was so close. If only more eldar had survived. Then she realised that the eldar had failed: *Gabriel... Gabriel...*

'Almost! Almost!' cried Sindri into the storm, his face convulsing with power and pain as tendrils of daemonic energy started to lash down at his skin. But he could not wait any longer; he had waited so long and been so patient all these years, even putting up with the humiliations of service to that cretin, Lord Bale.

Raging with impatience, Sindri pointed the Maledictum towards a knot of Alpha Legionaries and Imperial Guardsmen on a floating mass of rock nearby. The stone blazed with power and a lance of red light flashed into the soldiers, exploding them into a rain of blood and disintegrating the rock beneath their feet.

'Yes!' he cried as he felt the currents of power shift in the storm above him. 'Yes! It is upon us!' he screamed, crashing the Maledictum into the hilt of the curved dagger, where it burst into flames as the stone found an empty socket. Streaks of purple lightning and tendrils of warp power whipped down out of the storm, lashing themselves around the body of the sorcerer and lifting him into the air. He screamed and wailed in ecstasies of agony, feeling the daemon prince tugging at the tendons of his soul from the other side of the breach in the immaterium, clawing at his mind, desperately trying to make the leap into the material realm and into the solid body of this devoted sorcerer.

'Bear witness to my ascension!' bellowed the voice of Sindri, echoing with power into the ears of everyone on the mountain, resounding through the storm itself. For a moment, it seemed as though the entire battle ceased as all heads turned towards the levitating form of the Chaos sorcerer.

GABRIEL STOOD IN the centre of a resplendent line of Blood Ravens, their crimson armour shimmering in the lightning flashes, their resolve unshaken by the daemonic fury that stormed around the mountain top. They were poised, ready to advance through the ring of warp energy that held a column of liquid fire on which floated islands of battle and damnation. They were unflinching in the face of a Chaos sorcerer, ascending to daemonhood before their very eyes. They were the Adeptus Astartes, and this was their purpose: to defend the Emperor's realm against the unholy. In the fires of battle, they would test their resolve and prove themselves worthy of a place at the Emperor's side.

Bowing his head for a moment of silent prayer, Gabriel heard a delicate voice calling his name: *Gabriel... Gabriel...* It repeated over and over, gradually shifting into a beautiful rhythm and then, slowly, a chorus of other voices started up underneath it. The pristine, clear, silvery tones of the Astronomican soared into his soul, pressing the strength of the Emperor himself into his heart. He lifted his head, and raised Mordecai's daemonhammer - the god-splitter - into the air: 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he yelled, his voice carrying against the vicious wind. A tremendous call came back, thundering from the lungs of every Blood Raven, shaking the ground itself: 'The Great Father and the Emperor!'

With that, Gabriel strode forward through the curtain of energy, vaulting up onto the first island of rock and swinging the god-splitter for the first time. It erupted with power even before its arc was complete, spitting unearthly energy from its head as it approached the body of the first Alpha Legionary, before erupting into an immense explosion as it impacted, blasting the Chaos Marine off his feet and casting him into the sea of fire.

Gabriel swung the hammer again, crashing it into the side of the next Chaos Marine's head and knocking it clean off his shoulders. He let the arc continue, sweeping it lower as he spun his own body, pushing the hammer through the stomachs of two more Marines before hoisting it up into the air and screaming in a defiant cry: 'I come for you, sorcerer!'

Mordecai had said that this daemonhammer was constructed from a fragment of the weapon of an eldar avatar - the very weapon used by the eldar to defeat the daemon prince three thousand years before. He had entrusted the ancient artefact to Gabriel, pushing it into his hands before they had jumped down out of the Rhino to take their positions in the line of Blood Ravens. 'Call it a premonition,' Mordecai had said, 'and damn my unsanctioned soul, but I believe that you will end this fight, Gabriel, not me. You are the Emperor's champion, and I am a mere servant. You, like your Captain Trythos before you... you must wield the daemonhammer on Tartarus and save us all from this daemon.' Gabriel had just nodded and taken the weapon, appreciating the inquisitor's confidence, and knowing that he was right.

The little platform of rock was swimming in the blood of Chaos Marines and strewn with their corpses; Gabriel stood alone. Looking around, he saw his Blood Ravens leaping from one island to another, hacking into the Alpha Legion with chainswords and power fists. Lines of Devastator Marines were punching out volleys of bolter fire, shredding those Imperial Guardsmen who had turned against the Emperor. And Mاتي's assault squad roared above the flaming ocean with their jump packs spilling fire, raining frag-grenades onto Chaos positions and spraying them with bolter shells.

Gabriel vaulted up onto the next rocky island, heading towards the highest summit where Sindri was still held in the heart of the storm by the wild tendrils of energy. Beneath him, a phalanx of Chaos Marines was bunched into a firing line, loosing bolter fire across a chasm towards the eldar farseer, whose bursts of defensive flame seemed to be growing weaker.

Crunching down into a crouch as he landed, Gabriel saw that this platform contained a knot of Imperial Guardsmen, each mutated and contorted into inhuman shapes. They were concentrating their fire against a squadron of Gabriel's Devastator Marines, ensconced on a nearby islet, who ceased fire when they saw their captain suddenly appear amongst their targets. For a moment, the Guardsmen were confused by the unexpected turn of events, but then one of them caught on and turned. He yelled something to the other men, and they all turned at once, lumbering towards the Blood Raven with their shotguns barking, brandishing blades in the air.

With a swift movement, Gabriel swung his hammer in a horizontal arc, scattering Guardsmen into the seething fires around the platform - he didn't have time to waste on these heretics. But something made him pause before he struck the one who had told the others to turn. He stopped the hammer just next to the Guardsman's head, and then dropped it to his side, staring at the officer while his brain rushed to put a name to the face.

Then it hit him: Brom. It was Colonel Brom. His face was bright red, burnt, and covered with lacerations. His uniform was ripped and dirty, and parts of it were clearly soaked with blood. But it was definitely him.

'Brom?' asked Gabriel, still unwilling to believe what he was seeing. 'Brom? Is that really you?'

'Ah, the heroic Captain Angelos - how good of you to notice me, at last,' hissed Brom, his voice distorted and barely recognisable. 'I thought that this might get your attention,' he added, stabbing forward with his power sword.

Gabriel parried the clumsy lunge with his gauntlet, catching the blade in his fist and pulling the weapon out of the colonel's hand.

'What are you blathering about, Brom?' he asked, casting the sword into the flames.

'Do you know how long I have been on this planet?' asked Brom, apparently rhetorically. 'My whole life - that's how long. And then you arrive and it is as though I wasn't here at all. You and that inquisitor—'

A tickle of blood suddenly appeared out of a hole in the centre of Brom's forehead, and he slumped to the ground, dead. His mouth was still open, ready to continue his list of grievances, and Gabriel was grateful that he had not had to listen to any more drivel from the colonel. He strode to the edge of the platform and looked down, seeing Matiel hovering between two islets on his jump pack, squeezing off bolter shells in all directions. Nodding his gratitude to the sergeant, he turned and jumped towards the base of the summit.

SOMETHING HAD SHIFTED within the warp field, and Macha cast her eyes around the fiery landscape searching for the source of the movement. She felt a familiar presence, one she had not felt for thousands of years. And then she saw it, flashing through the hail and pounding into the forces of Chaos like the tool of a deity. It swept and spun, crashing into Alpha Legionaries and fallen Guardsmen, as though guided to them by some ineffable power. It was majestic and effortless, wielding its wielder and gifting him with the illusion of control.

The Blood Raven has a fragment of the Wailing Doom - all is not yet lost. We must help him, said Macha, reaching out with her mind to the best of her warriors.

Understood, replied Skrekrea as she somersaulted over the collapsing form of a dying Chaos Marine and brought her blade round into a vicious vertical arc in her wake, driving it down between the neck and shoulder plates of another. She turned to face the farseer, and sprinted up the slope towards her, pushing her foot hard into the ground as she reached the summit, next to Macha, and leaping out into the fiery space between their islet and the one above where Sindri levitated. She flew through the flames, her legs cycling and her back arched with the effort of the long jump.

Macha sent out bursts of blue energy from her fingertips, incinerating the sleet of bolter shells that flashed out towards Skrekrea as she leapt towards the Chaos Marines. The warlock, just down the slope from Macha, power coruscating around his hands as he unleashed bolts of raw energy against the forces of Chaos that besieged their own island-summit, turned to assist the farseer, throwing blue flames across the chasm in support of Skrekrea. Macha nodded her thanks to the warlock and started to redirect her own assault against Sindri himself once again, forming revolving balls of blue energy and hurling them across the void towards the Chaos sorcerer.

But the loss of Skrekrea and the warlock from her own defences left Macha vulnerable to the pressing forces of Chaos behind her. Bolter shells zipped past her head, and she could hear the wails of her diminishing Storm squad as they fought to keep the Alpha Legionaries and fallen Guardsmen off her back.

The emerald-green wraithguard reorganised their positions behind the Storm squad, forming a solid shielding line between the enemy and the farseer, standing implacably with their wraithcannons a constant blaze. Aggressive fire zinged out of the Chaos forces, zipping into the wraithguard, and punching out great chunks of their psycho-plastic armour. But the un-living eldar warriors held their ground, unafraid of death, afraid only of failure.

Without their leader, the Storm squad began to falter, pinned down under the relentless fire of the Alpha Legionaries, and engaged on all sides by lunging blades and hacking axes. The squad leapt and spun, their own blades blurring into torrents of violence, but they were outnumbered, and their own numbers were falling all the time. It would not be long before the eldar were overrun and the Alpha Legion would have a clear line to the farseer.

You must hold the line - Kaela Mensha Khaine is with us, came the thoughts of Macha, filling the souls of the eldar with hope. *The spirit of our avatar is with us in the mon-keigh's daemonhammer.*

The Storm squadron seemed to lurch with new energy, leaping and striking with inhuman speed, cutting a swathe through the Chaos forces, and an eerie chant flowed out of their diminishing numbers, filling the storm with a chorus of eldar magic: 'Kaela Mensha Khaine!'

THE DAEMONHAMMER SEEMED to erupt into flames as Gabriel crashed down onto the rocky platform, and the strange alien music flooded through the hail and wind. The hammer pulsed with power, radiating energy into his body as he brandished it above his head and charged towards the phalanx of Chaos Marines that stood guard around the very peak of the dismembered mountaintop. As he closed, a group of Marines snapped round to face him, their bolters coughing with fire, while their brother-Legionaries continued to focus their shots elsewhere, to the other side of the pyramidal rock, where Gabriel could not see. The bolter shells flashed through the dark air, heading straight for Gabriel in a lethal horizontal sheet than threatened to cut him in two. But suddenly, the shots seemed to reduce into slow motion as the eldar chants rose into a deafening chorus, mixing with the silver tones of the symphony that still played in his mind. The daemonhammer glowed with power. With consummate and casual ease, Gabriel brought the daemonhammer round in a horizontal arc, sweeping it through the oncoming fire and detonating each shell as the hammerhead crunched into it. He didn't even break his stride as he pounded onwards towards the shocked Alpha Legionaries, bursting out of the line of explosions unscathed by their vicious tirade.

As he ran, Gabriel saw one of the Chaos Marines suddenly throw up his arms, casting his bolter to the ground, and then slump forward onto his face. Standing in his place, her curving blade dripping with blood as lightning flashed behind her, an eldar

warrior paused for a moment, throwing back her head and letting out a cry of victory. The cry rose shrilly, gathering volume and power until it drowned out even the sound of the storm and the chanting of her brethren.

The Chaos Marines on either side of the eldar warrior collapsed to the ground, clutching their hands to the sides of their helmets, shaking their heads in insane agony. As they fell to their knees, the eldar snapped back into motion, spinning into a pirouette with her blade outstretched, taking the heads of both Marines in a single fluid movement.

Gabriel was closing now, swinging the hammer above his head in preparation for the combat to come as he stormed over the uneven terrain. The Chaos Marines were in disarray, trying to deal with the slippery eldar in their midst and with the charging Blood Raven all at once - they snatched bolter fire in all directions, snapping their weapons from side to side whilst drawing their chainswords ready for close-range combat.

Diving forward into a roll, Gabriel cleared the last few strides in an instant as bolter fire zinged off his armour and flew over his head. He flipped back onto his feet, bringing the hammer down vertically on the head of one of the Chaos Marines, shattering his spine as the hammer flared with power. To his left, the eldar warrior was dancing and springing between Marines, slicing into their armour with her blade and spraying out shuriken from her pistol. For a brief moment, the eldar and Blood Raven came to rest, back to back in the midst of a ring of Alpha Legionaries.

Looking up, Gabriel could see the figure of Sindri, suspended above the floating mountaintop, hanging by tendrils of power that seemed to pulse, feeding him with the energy of the storm. Time was running out, and he leapt forward towards the Marines that blocked his path up the summit, sweeping the daemonhammer in front of him and clattering through their outstretched chainswords. He felt a movement breeze past his shoulder as he started to run forward, and then the eldar warrior landed lightly in front of him, having somersaulted over the Blood Raven's head.

Skrekrea bounced into a spin, flashing her blade out in every direction, slicing into the Chaos Marines all around, but leaving Gabriel completely unscathed. As she danced through the combat, she opened a gap in the line of Marines, and Gabriel barged through it, dropping his shoulder and pulling the weight of the daemonhammer behind him. He knocked two Alpha Legionaries off their feet as he crashed through them, and then leapt up the slope towards the peak, the way ahead clear.

A wail of agony from behind him made Gabriel pause. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the eldar warrior skewered on the blades of three Chaos Marines. Her head was thrown back and a death cry was gurgling unevenly from her throat as the Marines twisted their blades. Gabriel turned to face them, his blood boiling and rage flooding into his head, and he brought the daemonhammer crashing down against the rock at his feet. The hammerhead exploded with power as it pounded into the rock, ripping a crack into the islet and rendering it asunder, breaking the platform under the Chaos Marines free of the mountain summit and sending it tumbling down into the sea of flames below. The Alpha Legionaries scrambled to keep their footing on the plummeting platform, but the rock flipped end over end, throwing the traitorous Marines screaming into the daemononic firestorm. Gabriel watched them fall, and then turned back to the mountaintop, looking up as Sindri started to glow with power, radiating purple light from his body as the blood of the dead Marines blended with the swirling ocean that consecrated the tainted ground of Tartarus. The Blood Ravens captain swung the hammer over his shoulder and started to climb up towards the emergent daemon prince.

'YES!' CRIED THE bellowing voice of Sindri as the storm pulsed through his veins, filling his body with the oscillating energies of the warp. A great ring of purple flame blew out from his position, rippling across the fragmented mountaintop in concentric circles, dousing the combatants in warp energy. The Alpha Legionaries roared with renewed passion as the power washed over them, and the Blood Ravens staggered under the tidal onslaught. But Matiel blasted over the waves with his jump pack spilling orange flames into the sea of fire. He roared towards the Chaos sorcerer, determined that his Space Marines would not meet their end at the hands of such a foul creature. His bolter coughed and spat shells, and his chainsword spluttered in readiness as he barrelled through the hail and wind, yelling his determination into the storm: 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!'

Gabriel pulled himself up onto the summit just in time to see Sindri turn his head towards the sergeant, as he seared through the air towards him. A sudden javelin of purple flashed out of the daemon's eyes, punching into the jetting form of the Blood Raven and halting him in midair. Sindri shrieked with pleasure, immersing himself in the daemononic energies that flowed through him as a conduit into the material realm.

Matiel was held for a moment, suspended in the onrush of warp fire, held high above the frantic battle that raged on the sundered mountaintop. His arms snapped out to his sides, and his weapons fell away from his hands, as he was held in a blaze of agony for all the warriors to see.

'No!' yelled Gabriel, hefting the daemonhammer onto his shoulder and crouching, ready to pounce. 'Matiel!'

Suddenly, a blue fireball hissed through the sleeting rain and punched into the levitating form of the Chaos sorcerer, knocking him back. Sindri, the emergent daemon prince, snapped his gaze back round to face the eldar farseer, raking his flaming eyes in a great arc of destruction across the islets of the mountaintop, exploding rock and incinerating Marines as his stare touched them. The purple river crashed against the figure of the farseer, splitting into a series of streams that ran around her, as she stood defiantly against the current.

Meanwhile, released from the daemon prince's thrall, Matiel tumbled out of the sky, crashing down against a rocky outcrop far below.

'No!' yelled Gabriel, as he launched himself into the air, swinging the daemonhammer up in a vertical arc and throwing himself towards the pulsating form of Sindri. He jumped three metres into the sky, carried upwards on the back of the eldar chants, the chorus of the Astronomican, and the righteous will of the Blood Ravens themselves. The daemonhammer seemed to drag him higher and higher, pulling him into the eye of the storm as though it were a guided missile, as though it had a will of its own. Sindri narrowed his eyes, concentrating the river of fire into a torrent that crashed into the farseer as she staggered back under the daemononic onslaught. But she would not fall, and the daemon prince roared his rage into the storm, bringing down forks of purple

lightning and ravaging the mountain with hurricane force winds. Just at the last minute, he saw Gabriel out of the corner of his eye. But it was too late.

The daemonhammer swept up and around in a spiralling blur, dragging Gabriel in a loop around the daemon until he was suspended in the eye of the storm alongside the husk of Sindri. Without even a moment's hesitation, Gabriel shouldered the hammer and spun his whole body, bringing the daemonhammer around with all his strength. The ornate, rune-encrusted hammerhead flared with blinding light as it punched into the chest of the emergent daemon, driving straight through its body in an explosion of warp fire and gore. Sindri's body was rent in two, as his chest crumpled into nothing and then exploded out of his back, leaving his head hanging momentarily in the air above his stomach.

The storm itself seemed to reel in agony as its eye was shattered by the captain of the Blood Ravens. The clouds whipped into a giant whirlpool, pulling the lightning into spiralling streams that seemed to be sucked back in towards the core, dragging the energy of the imma-terium back through the Chaos forces in an immense backwash that left the Alpha Legionaries boiling within their armour. The storm was collapsing back on itself, as Gabriel tumbled down towards the rocky summit of the mountain, and the floating islets of rock themselves started to fall back into place on the mountaintop.

As Gabriel crashed into solid ground, he pulled himself to his feet and watched the maelstrom raging all around him. The remaining Blood Ravens were struggling to maintain their balance as the mountain shifted and rocked, spilling the boiled Alpha Legionaries and the treacherous Guardsmen into fiery chasms that were quickly sealed as the mountaintop reformed. Further down the mountainside, Gabriel could see the remnants of the orks turning tail and fleeing down into the valley. Then, with an earth-shattering crack, the Maledictum dagger thudded into the stone at his feet, its curved blade biting into the rock with the hilt holding the stone itself.

He hoisted the daemonhammer for one last strike, but a thought stayed his hand, pressing into his mind.

Human! Do not destroy the stone... you will doom us all!

Gabriel paused with the hammer held aloft, poised, ready to crash down on the Maledictum. He could see the eldar farseer, shining like an angel in the spiralling maelstrom of the collapsing storm. She was staring at him, willing him not to crush the stone. There were a few eldar warriors standing beside her, a couple of wraithguard and a warlock. The eldar had paid a heavy price for the souls of the Tartarans.

'Captain!' came a shouted voice from behind him. 'Destroy the stone before it leads others to ruin - it lies at the root of the damnation of Tartarus!' cried Mordecai, straining his voice against the torrential storm, standing on the edge of a nearby islet.

Gabriel shook his head and closed his eyes, trying to find some calm in the eye of the storm, searching his soul for the guidance of the Astronomican. But there was nothing but fire and darkness swirling behind his eyelids.

'You know not what you do...' came the thoughts of Macha once again, but this time they were accompanied by a rain of shuriken and blasts of wraithcannon. *I cannot let you destroy it.*

The fire zinged against Gabriel's armour, ricocheting in sparks, but he did not move. He stayed silent and still, waiting for calm, waiting for certainty. The hammer hummed in his hands, hungry for destruction. His mind was congealing with disparate images: he saw flickers of the silver choir transforming into the tortured faces of the people of Cyrene; he saw Isador's eyes burning with fury and hatred; and he saw the disfigured form of Brom, a bullet hole fresh in his forehead.

Opening his eyes, not even wincing at the sleet of shuriken that peppered his armour and sunk into his flesh, he looked down into the Maledictum. Something dark and shadowy moved within, and inchoate whispers reached for his mind.

'No!' he cried, bringing the daemonhammer crashing down on the stone, driving the dagger down into the rock below but shattering the Maledictum into a rain of tiny shards. A immense explosion detonated as the hammer struck the daemonic stone, sending concentric shock-waves of warp energy radiating out from the mountaintop. The explosions knocked everything flat, rippling down the mountainside after the fleeing orks. Then, with a sudden reversal, the Shockwaves were sucked back up the mountain, gathering in the storms, the hail and the lightning, dragging the darkness back to the hilt of the curved dagger, and sucking them into the abrupt implosion.

The twin-peaked mountain was thrown into sudden silence, leaving the motionless, prostrate forms of Blood Ravens and Biel-Tan eldar lying on the rocky summit. The clouds parted, and the dusky red sun shone warmly through the cold, still air.



EPILOGUE

'THE THUNDERHAWKS ARE on their way, captain,' reported Corallis, finding Gabriel bent over the body of Sergeant Matiel. 'Matiel was a fine Marine, Gabriel. He will be missed,' he added, kneeling at Gabriel's side.

'Yes, sergeant. We have lost many fine Marines on Tartarus. The Blood Ravens have suffered greatly for their part in this debacle,' said Gabriel gently.

'It is our role to suffer, so that others will live,' replied Corallis. 'This has always been the way of the Adeptus Astartes. It is what makes us better than our foes.'

'But even the Blood Ravens must survive, sergeant,' said Gabriel, rising to his feet. 'We must collect the gene-seed of our fallen battle-brothers, ready for transportation back to the *Litany of Fury*. We will burn the bodies in a pyre on the mountain top, so that the evacuated civilians in orbit will see the flames of those who sacrificed themselves to save their planet. Their legends will live on, even as their souls ascend to the side of the Golden Throne itself.'

'Yes, captain. It will be done,' said Corallis, nodding a slight bow.

'Did the young Sergeant Ckrius survive the fight against the orks?' asked Gabriel, slightly preoccupied with other things.

'Yes, captain. He was badly injured, but Tanthius has recommended him for battle honours,' replied Corallis. Like many of the other Blood Ravens who had seen the young trooper fight, Corallis was impressed and proud of the boy's achievements.

'Good. Make sure that he doesn't die, and see to it that he receives medical care aboard the *Fury*. We have to look after the future of our Chapter, Corallis,' said Gabriel, smiling faintly.

'Yes, captain,' nodded Corallis, returning Gabriel's smile. 'I will inform Tanthius at once - he will be keen to see to these arrangements himself.'

'Very good, sergeant,' said Gabriel, turning away and scanning the desolate scene in the dying light. The mountaintop was littered with the bodies of Alpha Legionaries and the mutated corpses of treacherous Guardsmen. Interspersed with them were the red-armoured forms of fallen Blood Ravens, and Gabriel shook his head painfully.

'Well done, captain,' said Mordecai, striding through the killing field towards Gabriel. 'I knew that I was right about you.'

Gabriel looked at the inquisitor, unable to return his familiar tone. Something still did not feel right about this episode, and he was certain that Mordecai had more to answer for than he was letting on. The Inquisition never released more information than they needed to - and knowledge is power, as the Blood Ravens knew well.

'What happened to the eldar?' asked Gabriel, keen to fill in some of the missing pieces.

'They disappeared after you destroyed the stone. They simply vanished,' he said, holding out his hand.

Gabriel stared at the hand for a moment, uncomprehending. Then he realised what the inquisitor was waiting for, and he slapped the shaft of the daemonhammer into Mordecai's gauntlet. He snorted inwardly, utterly unsurprised by the actions of the inquisitor.

'And the orks?' he asked.

'As you know, most of them were drawn to the mountain by the commotion of battle. And those that were not dispatched by your Terminators were seen to by the explosion. The Tartarans from Magna Bonum are mopping up the few survivors,' replied Mordecai, almost gleefully, feeling the weight of the daemonhammer in his hands.

'Good,' said Gabriel uneasily, nodding a quick bow to the inquisitor before turning away from him. 'I must find Chaplain Prathios,' he added as an explanation, striding away.

HUGE FLAMES LAPPED out of the massive funeral pyre on the summit of the mountain, filling the night sky with dancing fire and shadows. The bodies of each Blood Raven had been removed from their ancient armour, with their gene-seed carefully extracted, and then laid onto the pyre with every dignity. Gabriel had stood before the bodies with a torch burning in his hand, the surviving Marines and troopers arrayed behind him, each kneeling respectfully. Then he had thrown the torch in a spinning parabola, flipping over and over through the darkness until it landed in the heart of the pyre, which erupted into blossoms of flame immediately. Plumes of dark smoke wafted up into the night, blotting out the stars in an otherwise clear sky.

Gabriel watched the smoke rising slowly, feeling the heat of the flames against the skin on his face. The smoke swirled and eddied in the breeze, gyrating into transient shapes before dissipating.

He hung his head slowly, his heart aching with the amount of blood that had been shed over the last few days.

Kneeling in prayer, Gabriel closed his eyes and calmed his breathing, knowing that the rest of the Blood Ravens would be doing exactly the same thing behind him. Over to the side of the funeral pyre, standing on his own, Gabriel knew that Mordecai was watching the ritual with disapproval - there were some aspects of the Adeptus Astartes that the Inquisition simply had to tolerate, and ritualised cremations of Marines were one of them.

From the silence in his mind came a single, solitary voice. It was a soprano, soaring quietly into the heights. One voice became two, the second low and rumbling, plunging into the ancient depths of his soul. Then another voice joined the harmony, and soon the silvery chorus filled his head once again. It was pure and clear - the majestic music of the Emperor himself, guiding Gabriel's soul and purging his sins. At last, it seemed that Gabriel was at peace.

Then, one of the voices faltered, and the soprano shifted into a piercing scream. The silver lights started to tinge with red, and Gabriel screwed his eyes closed tightly, trying to shut out the invading images. But the silver ran with blood, and the faces of the angelic choir started to melt and ooze, rendering themselves into perversions of Imperial grace.

He twitched his head from side to side, trying to shake himself free of the vision, but something held him there, trapped inside his own head. Isador's face flashed past his eyes, whispering to him that he should not falter. Myriad faces exploded into sight, speckling his consciousness with the visages of Cyrene and Tartarus. The faces started to merge and swirl, spiralling together as though stirred into an emulsion. And then, peering out of the curdling mess came a familiar voice, laughing and cackling with amused triumph.

I am free, Gabriel - you have my thanks.

Show yourself, daemon! yelled Gabriel into his own mind.

You will see my form soon enough - you who are my herald!

I am not your herald, warp-spawn - I am your vanquisher. It was I who destroyed the Maledictum, said Gabriel, shaking his head invisibly.

Yes, it was you who released me from that prison, liberating me with your every sacrifice...

Gabriel's soul rebelled, struggling to keep its distance from the vile rape of his consciousness. He refused to believe. *My sacrifices were not in your name, daemon. We fought to destroy you.*

And yet it was you who spilt the blood of the orks. It was you who mixed the blood of the Chaos Lord and his sorcerer into the giant altar that is Tartarus. And it was you who thwarted the attempts of the eldar witch to prevent my coming...

'No!' Gabriel let out a scream of defiance, throwing himself forwards into the flames of the pyre and burning his body out of its vision. A strong hand gripped his shoulder and dragged him out of the fire.

'They are gone, Gabriel,' said Prathios in soft, low tones. 'You must think about the future now.'

Gabriel shrugged the hand from his shoulders and jumped to his feet, realising at last whose voice he had heard curdling around in his head. He strained his eyes against the firelight, staring over to the side of the funeral pyre, but there was nobody there. He spun on his heel, scanning the darkness around the assembly of kneeling Blood Ravens - nothing.

I knew that I was right about you, Captain Angelos, came the voice again, slipping into his mind and taunting him. *The righteous are always the easiest to lead, especially the ignorant and the righteous.*

'I know you now!' cried Gabriel, spinning on the spot and yelling into the night, as the smoke from the funeral pyre started to squirm and coil. The eddies began to curdle and mould into swimming shapes, hinting at a face in the firelight. Standing on top of the pyre was the immolated figure of man, his flesh blazing with flames and dripping down into the inferno below.

The face in the smoke resolved for an instant, and a low, cackling laugh echoed down the mountainside. It was the face of Mordecai Toth, frozen for a moment, but then whirled into a blur by a sudden gust of wind. Then it was gone, leaving only the distant echoes of laughter in the valley below.

'Knowledge is power, daemon! I know you now! I know your name and your form! You may have escaped the confines of Tartarus, but you will never escape me. With your freedom, you have guaranteed your annihilation,' yelled Gabriel, his voice dropping from a cry to a whisper as he muttered his silent vow.



THE TRIALS OF ISADOR

THE BINDING OF the book glistened slightly as Gabriel looked at it, shifting and shimmering in the dim light of the little library that the captain kept reserved for his personal use. There was an intricate design inscribed into the unusual material of the cover; it seemed to flicker in and out of resolution, as though its level of precision lay just beyond the capacities of even Gabriel's enhanced eyes. The book enticed and repulsed simultaneously.

'Where did you find this, Prathios?' he asked, without averting his eyes from the elaborate, silvered image of raven-wings before him.

'He left it in my care, captain,' replied the Chaplain. His voice was deep and edged with concern, like the warm light ebbing out of the orb that hung above the desk. For a moment, Prathios wanted to reach out of the shadows and place a reassuring hand on Gabriel's shoulder. The captain looked strained and gaunt, sitting before the heavy tome in the lonely space, he wore the worries of a captain whose battle-brother and friend had fallen beyond his sight right before his eyes.

'He gave it to you?' asked Gabriel. He turned his head slightly, as though to indicate a measure of incredulity, but not far enough for Prathios to see his face.

The Chaplain measured his words. 'He entrusted it to me.'

There was a long silence before Gabriel turned his head back to the book, considering its remarkable cover with a deep sadness in his heart. 'And you entrust it to me, Prathios? What would you have me do with it?'

'You are our captain, Gabriel, and Commander of the Watch. It is for you to decide.' The Chaplain's words were laced with an unspoken meaning that Gabriel was reluctant to acknowledge.

'He was my friend, Prathios...' began Gabriel, letting his words trail into a thoughtful silence. 'We fought in the Blood Trials of Cyrene together, all those years ago. You must remember that? We stood shoulder to shoulder at the end of that ordeal, as we did after innumerable battles thereafter, each holding the fate of the other in our hands. We were united in trust from the very beginning, Prathios. I do not want this now.'

Prathios looked down at the back of his captain's closely cropped and scarred head. Not for the first time, he found himself thinking that Gabriel looked old before his time, as though the crippling responsibilities of his position and his past had defeated even the renowned longevity of the Blood Ravens.

The Chaplain remembered those fateful Blood Trials well - he had been there too. He had been the one who had overseen the intense competition and the bloodshed. He had watched Gabriel and Isador emerge victorious and gore-soaked from the fray, one after the other. He had seen the way that they had drawn instinctively together, never once turning their fearsome passions on each other, despite the clear rules of the trials; for the sake of mutual respect and trust, they had risked mutual failure. And that was one of the reasons that they had passed: unbreakable resolve and inherent brotherhood was just as important as combat proficiency. The Blood Ravens could fashion a Space Marine out of any healthy body, as long as it was a genetic match with the Chapter's gene-seed, but that body would be of no use to anyone if its will was weak or fractured. Worse: a weakness of will could be the seed of treachery, and too many Marines had already fallen into the cursed abyss of heresy.

It was their instantaneous and profound brotherhood that made Isador's fall so painful and personal for Gabriel, but ultimately it had been Prathios who had approved of their ascension into the ranks of the Blood Ravens neophytes. It had been Prathios who had overlooked the infringement of the rules of the trials, which had explicitly stated that each warrior was finally responsible only for himself. He could have set the survivors against one another, forcing them to fight through to the last man standing, but he had seen the resolve in those fiery blue-green eyes and he had known that there was no way that Gabriel would turn on his impromptu brother-in-arms.

It had been Prathios who had placed his own sense of wisdom before the traditions of the Blood Ravens and, to some extent, it had been on his recommendation that the Blood Ravens Third Company had quietly permitted the terms of their Blood Trials to evolve to permit teamwork. The spectacular rise of Gabriel and Isador into the most senior ranks of the company seemed to provide evidence enough for the wisdom of this evolution. Prathios had flattered himself that this practice made the Third Company more human than some of the other Chapters, and even than some of the other companies of the Blood Ravens. Besides which, it was no secret that the Chapter was increasingly in need of initiates, as its numbers began to dwindle. Recruiting only one warrior from each trial no longer seemed like an option: new measures for new needs. However, for the first time in many decades, Prathios realised that he had some doubts about how to conduct the Blood Trials when the *Litany of Fury* arrived at Trontiux III and then Lorn V. Perhaps Space Marines were not meant to be so human after all?

'None of us want this, Gabriel,' said Prathios eventually, 'but we must each act as our responsibilities dictate.'

'You want me to read it?' asked Gabriel. 'Or do you want me to pass it along to the Chapter Masters? Perhaps you would prefer if I sent it directly to the Ordo Hereticus? Is that not my duty?'

There was an injection of venom in Gabriel's voice that made Prathios smart. He knew that duty and responsibility did not always coincide, and that the first did not always make the second bearable.

'It is not for me to say, captain,' replied Prathios honestly. 'My place is to look after your spiritual wellbeing, and hence I can simply advise you to act as your responsibilities and duties dictate. Librarian Isador Akios was a leading figure in the Third

Company of the Emperor's Blood Ravens. He was an initiate of the Ordo Psykana, he was a precious member of your command team, he was a powerful warrior, our battle-brother, and... and he was our friend, Gabriel.'

Gabriel nodded in resignation - he knew that he could not expect his Chaplain to make this decision for him, and he knew that the responsibility was his, as it had been for innumerable difficult questions before now. He had borne the responsibility for the extermination of his own homeworld, out of duty to the Emperor and his Chapter. It was his duty to shoulder these things, no matter what the personal cost. Not for the first time, he wished that the long and painful process of becoming a Blood Raven could have eradicated his humanity and left him only with a sense of duty. He had heard rumours that this was true of some of the other Chapters of Space Marines. But he also knew that his emotions gave him types of knowledge that mere calculation and duty could not - intuitive knowledge was still knowledge, if you knew how to handle it. And knowledge is power.

'Knowledge is power,' muttered Gabriel as he ran his fingers over the metallic cover of the book in front of him,

'Guard it well,' intoned Prathios, as though automatically completing the motto of the Blood Ravens.

'Yes,' said Gabriel, as he realised the particular salience of that deeply imbedded maxim. 'Knowledge is power - guard it well.'

With a new sense of resolution and certainty, he opened Isador's journal to the last page, where he saw the characteristically elaborate and decorative script of his old friend. Even in his personal log, the former Librarian kept the kind of immaculate record that he had demanded of all Blood Ravens - when knowledge is power, every last detail needed to be recorded, lest the vital information be lost through carelessness.

Gabriel nodded in recognition of the diligence of his one-time friend, but then he started to read and he recoiled in shock.

THAT FOOL GABRIEL has no idea what's happening on this blessed world. He thinks that the approaching warp storm is to be feared, and that the artefacts we have found must be destroyed. Such blindness. How much will this stupidity cost us? How far can I permit this to go?

Even if the others cannot, I can see the mania in his eyes, and I know the secrets of the voices that he hides from us, those that sing into his soul in the guise of the sacred choir. He cannot conceal these silvering tones from me. For I hear them too, but I know their nature and I know that the Emperor has not blessed them. This is the difference between my old friend and me: I can tell the difference between truth and lies, for my soul has been wrought and tested in the secret fires of the great Librarium Sanatorium, and yet it is the bumbling, ignorant captain that leads our company into error and stupidity.

The Great Father would lament the idiocy of his favoured son - how far removed from his own nature are the children of Vidya? Have the Blood Ravens really regressed so far that they no longer see the wisdom of placing Librarians in charge of their affairs? Did Vidya mean nothing? Why does Gabriel persist in ignoring me? Does he really think that he is better than I am? He would not even be here were it not for me - he couldn't have pieced together the pieces of this Tartaran puzzle. In truth, he would have died back on Cyrene with the other aspirants all those decades ago. I have carried him for too long, and now he cannot even see that I'm doing it.

If Gabriel has neither the vision nor the will to harness the power of the Maledictum for the Blood Ravens and the Emperor, then I will do it myself. The time has come for me to step out of the tainted shadow of the misguided captain. His fate is sealed already by my reports to the Order of the Lost Rosetta - they will see to it that the Third Company will be in need of a new commander soon, and I will show the Blood Ravens that such positions should be filled by visionary Librarians once again. The Blood Ravens will recapture the nature of Azariah Vidya, even if we must pay the bloody costs of our own cleansing... and Gabriel should know all about such costs.

GABRIEL PUSHED THE book away from him, unable to read on. His face was white and his eyes burned dryly, as though he had been struck with acid. From the shadows behind him, Prathios could see the captain's shoulders tense and the muscles in his back bunch.

The book slid across the polished surface of the table, but stopped just short of falling off the edge, left teetering precariously on the point of balance. It pivoted slightly on the lip, as though mocking them.

'Have you read this, Prathios?' Gabriel's voice betrayed something uneven in his soul.

Silence answered him in the place of a confirmation.

'That is not an answer,' snapped Gabriel, turning in his chair to face the Chaplain for the first time. 'Have you read this, Chaplain Prathios?'

For the first time since they had met when Prathios had recruited him on Cyrene, Gabriel saw the falterings of doubt creased into the Chaplain's features. There was another pause, but then Prathios found his voice at last. 'Yes, captain. I have read parts of it. More than enough. And yet not enough... Enough to know that prudence dictates that it requires your attention before that of any other authority, Gabriel. It is a volatile document, old friend.'

Peering through the shadows, Gabriel's eyes burned like flaming emeralds, tingeing eerily between green and blue. For a moment, Prathios thought that he saw something alien buried inside, a Gabriel that he had never known seemed to lurk in the recesses of his hidden heart.

Blinking out the light, Gabriel turned back to the table and reached out for the book. He drew it back towards him and opened it forcefully, letting the pages fall arbitrarily near the start of the volume.

I HAVE WATCHED this man for over a hundred years. He has always made his offerings to the Emperor at each of the designated times of the day, dutifully and with firmness of resolution. But something inexplicable has changed in the nature of his observances since Cyrene - it has become gradually impossible to deny that the subtle changes have become substantive. I wonder whether there is a need for me to act on this, or perhaps to seek advice from Chaplain Prathios.

This morning I found Gabriel kneeling in prayer in the chapel, as the Litany of Fury pushed into the Tartarus system. We had already seen the first dregs of ork vessels littering the outer reaches, and the captain should have been on the control deck.

I found him without his armour and apparently transfixed. When I called his name, it was as though he could not hear me at all. This is not unheard of amongst more pious Marines, but when I persisted his response was violent. As though possessed by some primal instinct, he grasped out at my neck, before I struck him back into awareness. As I looked into his distraught and confused features, I witnessed a single tear of blood run down his face - like the jewel of the Blood Ravens itself. Not for the first time, I was alarmed to see that his eyes seemed to flicker between green and blue.

For a moment, I might have forgotten that he is not a Librarian, for I have only ever seen such soul-shifts amongst rare initiates of the Librarium Sanatorium. Yet Gabriel has never set foot in those hallowed halls. He was never deemed worthy of that elated calling. Even Prathios did not judge him able to withstand the long years of psychic torment involved. And yet now I wonder whether he has even been able to withstand the psychic trauma of his duties on Cyrene.

He is quite changed. His piety has become laced with mania. I must seek the guidance of the Chaplain before the campaign on Tartarus really begins.

GABRIEL RAN HIS hands over his closely-cropped hair, staring at the immaculate script in front of him. Perhaps for the first time, he realised the potential dangers of the near-fanatical tendency of Blood Ravens Librarians to record everything. In the past, he had asked Isador about the documentary practices of the librarium, but his old friend had invariably demurred, muttering something about the appropriate designations of knowledge, clearly indicating that it was not the place of a Space Marine captain to know too much about the affairs of the librarium.

It was certainly true that the Librarium Sanatorium operated with unusual and well-guarded secrecy in the Blood Ravens, almost as though it were an institution in its own right, and Gabriel had often wondered whether its exclusive status within the Chapter was an idiosyncrasy or a generic aspect of the Codex Astartes. He knew that it even contained its own levels - *designations* as they were called - including a shadowy and elite order called the Psykana. But even the Chapter Masters would not be drawn on this question, perhaps because the majority of them were also Librarians. Not for the first time, the image of Azariah Vidya floated into his mind, and Gabriel realised that the legacy of the Great Father was a complicated one for the Blood Ravens.

All he knew about the documentary practices was what he had seen with his own eyes: Librarians and their scribes were expected to record all events and impressions that might have significance for the Blood Ravens themselves or for the furtherance of knowledge. Each battle-barge and strike cruiser would then submit copies of all their records to the great librarium aboard the Omnis Arcanum whenever they rendezvoused, hence ensuring that the legendary central repository always contained the complete, collected knowledge of the Chapter. Knowledge was most valuable when it became a resource for the Chapter, rather than merely the musings of an individual. Knowledge is power, pondered Gabriel as he turned a few more pages.

THE TARTARAN COLONEL Brom has complained about Gabriel's conduct during the battle for Magna Bonum today. He made a series of intimations about the Blood Ravens' predilection for aerial bombardments, following the captain's decision to call for support from the Litany of Fury. It is true that the result was the levelling of Brom's precious city, which I can understand that he did not appreciate. However, it is also true that the bombardment broke the greenskins, and without it we might not have prevailed, despite the glory of our stand at the South Gate.

'Note: we must discover the source of these rumours about the Third Company - it seems highly unusual for such information to travel so quickly. The implications are that there are forces working against us somewhere in the Imperium, spreading these stories deliberately. This requires urgent attention.'

Gabriel understands the orks much better than Brom, and he knows that they fight for our annihilation, not for our cities. It is not Brom's place to question the captain, although I can understand his resentment - this is his homeworld. I can only imagine how Gabriel would have reacted had somebody else made the decision to exterminate Cyrene... but I know how it feels to see Gabriel make such a decision about my home. I was with him on that day; I was on the control deck of the Litany, standing at Gabriel's shoulder and watching our planet burn.

I do not doubt the wisdom of Gabriel's decision here, or before - Cyrene was lost, and sacrifices must be made in the name of the Emperor. Especially sacrifices of blood. But seeing Brom today, I realise that I resented my detachment from the destruction. Whilst I stood squarely at my captain's shoulder, it was he who signalled the Ordo Hereticus, and it was he who finally commanded the Exterminatus. As he has stated repeatedly since then: it was his responsibility, not mine.

Like knowledge, it seems that responsibility has its own designations - although in the person and example of Vidya these were united gloriously. Surely this should be the model for the Blood Ravens? Responsibility should be grasped in the hands of those with superior knowledge, for knowledge is power.

Least I should be misunderstood by my peers in the librarium should they ever read this: I am not claiming that Gabriel was wrong. Far from it - his decisions were probably correct. However, being right is not finally the point, since even an ork can be right from time to time. It is merely probability, not heresy, to observe that one in an infinite number of illiterate orks could accidentally pen the Codex Astartes. But, of course, writing the text is not the point at all, the point is the appropriate intentionality behind it, and the will to live it. The prodigal ork could not be said to be responsible for the text, since it could have no understanding of its significance.

In other words, the issue for the Imperium of Man is to whom it awards the right to be right, so that the responsibility for good decisions lies with those most able to make them. It can be no accident, then, that our greatest leaders have all been powerful psykers - our forefather the Emperor himself and our own Great Father Azariah Vidya. In these examples we must see the model for the designation of responsibility.

To be responsible is to understand. And I wonder whether Gabriel can truly grasp the significance of his decisions, whether they are tactically sound or not. He is rash and instinctual - yesterday he screamed through the battle at the pumping station like a man possessed, not even noticing the damage that he himself had sustained. He is dismissive of those who might know more about

this place - including of Brom and even myself. He is obsessed with responsibility, even at the expense of knowledge. He may have been tactically right about Magna Bonum today, but only coincidentally.

I see the psychic scar of Cyrene in his manner. But he does not see the connections between our homeworld and this ork-infested planet. Yesterday afternoon I heard them whispered by the shadows of the forest itself, as though Tartarus is aware of its place in the galaxy and of the way that the Blood Ravens sow these distances together.

Today my curators unearthed some interesting material on the history of this mysterious planet. It seems that a number of Blood Ravens have been here before, long ago, before the official records of the planet began. One of them, the distinguished Librarian Prothius, served in the Deathwatch on a mission here. As an initiate of our Ordo Psykana, he dutifully recorded his findings in our great librarium, but it also seems likely that reports would have been filed with the Ordo Xenos. I have requested a transcription scribe from the Psykana to produce a copy of his report; it should arrive shortly.

Given this information, I would not be surprised to see an Inquisitorial presence here in due time - they too must have records of what unfolded here all those centuries ago.

IN TRANSFIXED AND horrified disbelief, Gabriel turned a few more pages.

WE ALL FEAR what we do not understand, such is the bane of the Blood Ravens and the converse of our thirst for knowledge. But the real question concerns how we respond to that fear - whether we seek to hide away from it, seeking to immerse ourselves in false certainties, or whether we embrace the fear and use it to fuel our quest for more questions and more doubts. It is only in the fires of uncertainty that our souls can be cleansed and bettered.

And yet Gabriel destroyed the ancient altar that we found in the pit. Perhaps he could not see its value, or perhaps he feared its tainted and blood-soaked nature. But it could not have been hidden to him that I perceived its importance. Indeed, I asked him for more time to study it, and I was denied. It does me no credit to say so, but it is almost as though he sought to deprive me of that which he knew he could not understand. This is not the spirit of scholarship that we might expect from the valiant captain. It seems that Prathios was right when he decided not to push Gabriel into the tortuous path of the Librarian, over a hundred years ago - such an attitude would sit even more poorly in the mind of a Librarian. To be more cynical, might it be that Gabriel has something to hide here?

I saw the eldar runes interlaced with the crude cultists' etchings on the altar, and I even removed the ancient symbol of Teraum, or "storm", but Gabriel did not want to hear of it. Even after I had led him to the base of Mount Korath, he still doubted my wisdom and my tactical sense. I could hear the psychic echoes of his hostility and doubt like whispers in my mind. But I knew that the eldar menhir awaited us, and my resolve was firm. It was not until the cursed eldar themselves appeared in the Pass of Korath that Gabriel was finally forced to concede the truth of my knowledge.

Perhaps, had he listened before, Corallis would not be so seriously wounded. As a result, he has found himself unable to thwart my investigation of the menhir, much as he would like to destroy it and move on. He has promised me more time for this artefact, but I can feel that he has done so to make peace with me, not because he believes in the pursuit of knowledge. In other words, he has surrendered to my will out of weakness, out of fear of my knowledge, fear of my displeasure, and perhaps even fear about a dereliction of duty, which makes me lose still more respect for him.

I had never thought that it would come to this.

I dare not tell him of the power of this place, nor of the way that it whispers its secrets into my mind, picking me out from amongst our company as the one most able to understand. He will not understand - he cannot understand, for it was not he that was chosen. And through his lack of understanding, he will destroy our chance of appropriating this great power for the Blood Ravens. Even the unearthly voices from the depths of Tartarus understand his inadequacies; there is no need for him to know.

CLOSING THE BOOK carefully, Gabriel pushed his chair back away from the table and turned to face Prathios, who had remained unmoving in the shadows of the small chamber. Despite himself, the Chaplain found himself taking half a step back as he met the intensity of his captain's eyes.

'When did you know of all this, Chaplain?'

'Librarian Akios did not share the details with me, captain, and I have not read them all. I read enough to know that the tome should come to you, and I brought it to you as soon as that became clear.'

'I'm not sure that is an answer to my question.'

'Isador came to me as we entered the Tartarus system to express some concerns about your... emotional wellbeing,' answered Prathios, choosing his words delicately. 'He was concerned that you were not at peace with the events of Cyrene, and wondered whether I had also noticed anything of this nature.'

'And?'

'Captain?'

'And had you noticed anything of this nature?'

There was a slight pause, in which Prathios realised that this was not the time for circumspection. 'Yes, captain, I had.'

'I see,' replied Gabriel flatly, clearly aware that he had confessed enough to the Chaplain to make this observation obvious. 'And when did Isador entrust you with this record?'

'Shortly before we moved on the Temple of Dannan, captain. But I had neither an opportunity nor a reason to open it until... until after the Tartaran campaign was concluded.'

'I understand, Prathios. Thank you. You may leave, and you may now trust that I will take the appropriate measures with this report. It is in my hands now, as it should be, and it is my responsibility.'

With that, Gabriel turned away from the Chaplain and returned to the book at the desk. He sat quietly without opening the cover until Prathios realised that the captain was waiting for him to leave. So dismissed, he bowed slightly and then walked crisply out of the room.

THE REPORT THAT I have been awaiting from the Litany of Fury arrived today. It makes interesting reading. I refer you to the *Omnis Arcanum LS* archive 38.999ICX324.99i for the full text, in which the complete records of *Psykana Librarian Prothius* can be read. Even all those millennia ago, it seems that the Librarians of the Blood Ravens were meticulous in their record keeping which is something of which we should be proud.

I am pleased to be able to report that the account of the honourable *Prothius* confirms my interpretation of the eldar text on the menhir that we discovered on the summit of *Korath* (which Gabriel generously consented not to destroy until after I had inspected it), as well as my intuitions about the powers that pulse through this place.

It appears that *Prothius* was here on *Tartarus* as one of his duties during his third secondment to the revered *Deathwatch*. He reports that the *Inquisition* was fully aware of the blood-drenched history of the planet, and that the kill-team's mission had been timed to coincide with the presence of an eldar force, which the *Ordo Xenos* knew would be on *Tartarus* every three thousand years in order to do battle with a greater cyclic-daemon. It seems that two of our Blood Ravens were chosen for this mission, presumably because the eldar in question were *Biel Tan*. (It seems that there are those in the *Ordo Xenos* who are not without knowledge of the Blood Ravens, after all.) In addition to *Prothius*, the famed Captain *Trythos* was seconded to lead the mission. 'It is with some regret that I note the fall of the *Dreadnought Trythos* during the battle for *Lloovre Marr*, although my regret is coloured by the account by *Prothius*, as I will explain.'

Prothius does not record the source of the *Inquisition's* knowledge about the details of the *Biel Tan's* preparations for this encounter, but we may surmise them ourselves from other sources.

I would like to make a note of concern about our contacts in the *Inquisition*: *Inquisitor Toth* reported to Gabriel and myself today that *Trythos* was the first ever Blood Raven to serve in the *Deathwatch*. He made no mention of *Prothius*, whom we know had served twice before the mission in 999.M38. From this we might surmise three things: first, that the inquisitor is simply poorly informed, since the integrity and meticulous exactitude of our own records cannot be doubted; second, that the inquisitor has been properly informed but that he is deliberately attempting to deceive us; and third, that the report of the good Captain *Trythos* (on which *Toth* must be basing his knowledge) deliberately excluded the contribution made by *Prothius*, perhaps because of a disdain for Librarians that seems to retain echoes in parts of our Chapter to this day. *Trythos* was not himself a Librarian, and hence the imperative and ability to produce perfect records would have been absent from his mind.

The second option demands a further question: why would *Toth* seek to deceive us? Unfortunately, I do not have enough information to answer this question, but I might posit two possibilities: the first is that the inquisitor is aware of the perfect records of our *Librarium Sanatorium* (perhaps even of our *Ordo Psykana* itself) and that he is seeking to obscure the role of our Librarians in this affair in the hope that we will not check these archives and thus discover the truth. Unfortunately, this explanation gives *Toth* both too much credit (for knowledge) and not enough (for intelligence). However, it occurs to me that this thesis reflects the pervasive and primitive fear of Librarians that I have also perceived in the manner of our own good captain recently. Perhaps this character-atrophy is not limited to our Chapter, but rather has become a characteristic of the Imperium at large? This convinces me further that action is required.

And the second explanation is even more sinister, since it suggests that there are forces at work in the *Inquisition* that are deliberately attempting to sabotage the Blood Ravens Third Company. This ties in with the fact that rumours of the *Cyrene* incident had somehow reached Colonel *Brom* before our arrival. Whatever the explanation, I advise that the Chapter Masters should be informed that our contacts in the *Ordo Xenos* must be re-screened, perhaps through the use of false information. We should start with the *Order of the Lost Rosetta*.'

GABRIEL FURROWED HIS brow and ran his hand across the scar on his cheek, trying to make sense of *Isador's* reasoning. It lacked the rigorous logic that he had come to expect of a Blood Ravens Librarian, and it seemed to be run through with paranoia about the status of the Chapter and, in particular, of Librarians themselves. *Isador's* mind appeared to be full of fears and doubts, as though his thoughts had been contaminated with some kind of slow-acting poison. For the first time, Gabriel realised that it might have been *Isador* rather than himself who had been affected by the destruction of *Cyrene*.

Isador also made occasional mention of voices whispering truths into his mind, and Gabriel knew enough of the ways of Librarians to know that this was not normal even for them. It was slowly dawning on him that his old friend had probably been going mad. Perhaps the insidious power of the *Maledictum* had been attempting to seduce him since their arrival on *Tartarus*, just as the entrapped daemon had been working its slow, seeping sorcery on the whole population of the planet for millennia.

Was this what *Isador* meant when he said that there were connections with *Cyrene*? It had been clear there that the minds of psykers were much more sensitive to corruption than those without such abilities, although the psychic citizens of *Cyrene* were nascent, not honed like *Isador*. Nonetheless, Gabriel saw once again the wisdom of seeking to divorce psychic potentialities from command structures in the Chapter - with great power comes tremendous risk. *Vidya* had been the exception that proved the rule, not a model to be followed unquestioningly. And none could hope to emulate the syncretic glories of the Emperor himself, not even the Great Father. At the end of the day, it was merely a human will that had to keep even magnificent powers under control. And every human will had its breaking point. Even some of the primarchs were broken during the Heresy, after all.

Were the whispers that sang symphonies into his own mind those of the daemon that had addressed him as its herald only days before? Were there elements of truth lurking in the rantings of *Isador*?

THE HONOURABLE PROTHIUS *had made a study of the so-called "Fall" of the Cyclopean Primarch from scholarship and psychic discipline into the forbidden and dark arts of sorcery. His commentary is fascinating, incisive and original, and I would recommend it as reading for all initiates of our Librarium Sanatorium.*

It seems that the purpose of his commentary was to explain his actions on Tartarus but, more broadly, it provides an eloquent defence and justification of the scholarly nature of our Chapter. As appears to be happening today, it appears that the efficacy and trustworthiness of psykers and their research into the invisible or hidden realms was under the closest scrutiny at that time. Prothius was not blind to the irony of the Imperium's twin need and disdain for powerful psykers and the mysterious, unearthly knowledge that underlied their powers. Indeed, it seems that his commentary was inspired by his Deathwatch mission on Tartarus, during which an Inquisitorial representative of the Emperor's Ordo Xenos commanded him to recover a fragment of the eldar's Wailing Doom for research and use as a potentially powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Imperium. Of course, such missions are amongst the most important and interesting tasks of the Deathwatch, which must be why the Blood Ravens have been honoured by secondment into their sacred ranks so often.

When I consider the attitudes of Inquisitor Toth and Captain Angelos on our present mission, I am struck by their lack of vision and understanding. They do not appear to understand the potential value of recovering the Maledictum for ourselves. Rather they seem to seek to destroy it. They are the lesser sons of Inquisitor Jhordine and Captain Trythos. And it seems that I am destined to play the role of the heir of Prothius, even against the blindness of my battle-brothers if necessary.

Lest the deeds that I am planning here be misunderstood as betrayal, I would like to present an interpretation of Prothius's commentary as the parameters of my own behaviour. Then, before I move in pursuit of truth, knowledge and power (as it is my duty and my calling to do) I will entrust this account into the care of Chaplain Prathios so that the Blood Ravens will understand my actions, even if they no longer have the vision to accept them. I pray to the Great Father and to the Emperor of Man that Gabriel does not stand in my way and that he will honour my deeds as a Blood Raven should. If he does not, then all is lost for our once magnificent brethren.

Prothius provides a wholly persuasive commentary on the formulation of the Edicts of Nikaea, which still delimit the freedoms of Librarians to this day. He demonstrates persuasively that they were the result of the cowardice of the psychically impotent, making reference to certain cerebrally-stunted figures. Indeed, Prothius located a copy of the "Grimoire Hereticus" in which it is stated very clearly that a number of Librarians at what he calls the "Hearing of the Thousands" attempted to storm from the hall, horrified that such a reactionary and misguided debate was taking place. Other records unearthed by Prothius, such as the epic ballad "Prospero's Lament" imply there had always been a certain atmosphere of jealousy and distrust towards the psychically gifted, even amongst the sons of the Emperor himself. The psychically blind feared what they could not understand, just as they do today.

Prothius himself recovered the forbidden "Tome of Mordance", which was allegedly penned by the Sorcerer Lord Mordant Hex. It was rumoured to have been found abandoned in the Etiamnun Reclusium, after the hermits of that quiet world had been slaughtered by a force of Space Marines who were in search of a hidden webway portal that might have led to the great halls of learning of the Black Library. In this tortuous text, it is written that even the Cyclopean Primarch had never lost faith in the Emperor, but rather that he was hounded and driven from his father's side by the scheming jealousies of his lesser brothers. Thus it was that the weak-minded and the fools sowed the seeds of distrust in psychic powers that persist to this day, and they turned the Imperium against these glories simply out of ignorance, fear and jealousy. Had the Emperor but placed his faith in superior knowledge rather than brute force, the galaxy may have been saved from the horrors of the wars that followed. Knowledge is power, but even at the time of the Emperor himself those with knowledge and power were viewed with suspicion by lesser men. So it is with me today. Gabriel resents my superiority, and he seeks to prevent my ascension to levels that he can never understand. Having no way to know whether these heights are sacred or heretical, his fear drives him to obstruct me. His inadequacies haunt him like the souls of those he slaughtered on Cyrene.

In other words, it is the fear of the unknown rather than the love of knowledge that is to be eradicated and controlled. This is why Azariah Vidya should be the model for the Blood Ravens - like Magnus (even more than the Emperor himself, since he finally bowed to the pressure of ignorant fools), Vidya personified the unity of knowledge and power. As it was for him, so it should be now: the Librarians should command the Blood Ravens - it should be me, not Gabriel, who takes responsibility for our actions. Gabriel is a blind fool whose weak mind has been addled by responsibilities that it can neither understand nor hope to comprehend.

Not unlike the falsely-cursed Prospero, Cyrene was a planet with well-developed nascent psykers and communes of sorcery. It was a place of wonder. But rather than utilising his power to save the souls of his homeworld and the knowledge that they cherished, Gabriel reacted to this realisation with fear and loathing, summoning the Exterminatus and raising the planet to the ground. He did not have the courage to stand up for a truth that even the Emperor could not understand or condone. Can there be any greater sense of stupidity, impotence or irresponsibility? Had he been willing to pay the price of excommunication in the name of truth, he should have made a stand that might have led to him being branded a heretic and a traitor. But he lacked the vision.

Unlike the short-sighted fool, I am willing to be misunderstood - indeed, I am now resigned to it. But knowledge is power, and I must guard it well.

THERE SEEMED TO be some logic and reason in Isador's words, but they stung Gabriel's eyes as he read them. There was something so profoundly wrong with the sentiments of the text that they caused him physical pain. Even worse, he was struggling to understand where Isador's argument was flawed. Like Magnus at the notorious "Hearing of the Thousands", about which all Blood Ravens of command rank were taught, Isador's words were eloquent and persuasive without necessarily being right. There was an important distinction to be made between having the power to convince others of the truth of your knowledge, and actually have

the power of knowing the truth. One of the things that all commanders of the Blood Ravens were trained to do was to intuit precisely this distinction, and Gabriel could feel the signs of clever persuasion masking the truth in Isador's words. Pushing the book away from him, as though its very presence obstructed his clarity of mind, Gabriel sat back into his chair and closed his eyes. He concentrated, trying to recall what he had been told about the events that Isador had narrated from the reports of Prothius. So adhesive were Isador's clever words that it took him several minutes to cleanse his thoughts and to remember what he would have taken as absolute truth only an hour earlier. Even then, the horror of Isador's blasphemies about the Emperor's character still lingered in the shadows of his mind. He had never heard anyone dare to give voice to such thoughts before, and for the first time in his life he thought that he could understand a glimmer of what it might have been like to have lived through the terrible days of the Heresy itself.

It was true, recalled Gabriel, that the "Hearing of the Thousands", as it was referred to in the archives of the Blood Ravens, had become perceived as a legal and moral trial regarding the rectitude of psychic powers and sorcery. One side had argued that there was nothing inherently evil about any kinds of knowledge, and that the problem lay only in the uses to which it was put. This was a defence of the right to scholarship and inquiry into the sorcerous arts, as well as an assertion that certain Space Marines were more than capable of harnessing such knowledge for the good of the Imperium. The logic dictated that depriving the legions of these resources would effectively deprive the Imperium of its greatest powers. It is conjectured in the "Apocrypha of Haidyes" that a variation on the slogan that would eventually become the maxim of the Blood Ravens, 'Knowledge is power, and we should seek it relentlessly,' was employed during the Hearing, although its source is not identified.

The other side of the debate insisted that psychic powers were inherently unstable and that because not everyone with such powers might also display the kind of strength of will required to control them properly, their use should be tightly controlled and delimited.

The Librarians and Marines of the Blood Ravens had discussed this debate over and over again, trying to understand the significance and meaning of its various possible outcomes, as well as its actual historical outcome all those millennia before. The debate was part of their heritage and an essential problematic at the heart of their identity - all Blood Ravens would be exposed to elements of the discussion during their hypno-conditioning.

According to the *Ravonicum Rex*, an ancient and possibly apocryphal text that was kept under guard in the deepest recesses of the Librarium Sanatorium aboard the Omnis Arcanum, there were those amongst the Gathering of the Thousands that had sought compromise, seeing the merits of each side of the intractable debate. The relevant sections of the *Ravonicum* had remained hotly debated within the lore of the Blood Ravens, despite the mysteriousness of their origins. Vidya himself makes reference to them in his classic text, *Pax Psykana*. Vidya's text alludes to the existence of a complete copy of the *Ravonicum* that vanished during the attack of the eldar Harlequins at the raid of Quarab.

As he considered the conventional lore of his Chapter, Gabriel finally realised the critical logical perversion of Isador's argument: it rested upon the dismissal of the Emperor. For Isador, there was a level of knowledge and truth that transcended not only the person of the Emperor himself, but even transcended the Emperor's comprehension. Hence, Isador's argument rested upon the assertion that he was not only the equal but actually superior to the Emperor. This was the worst kind of heresy.

Furthermore, Isador's position de-recognised the function of wisdom, law and duty in the Imperium. In other words, it ignored the question of responsibility. Isador neglected the possibility that the Emperor was fully aware of the powers that he was depriving his children, but that his superior wisdom told him that even the minds of the primarchs could not hope to withstand such terrible pressures and temptations for long.

How much less so could the minds of Librarians, Space Marines, or normal humans? Laws cannot accommodate exceptions, and so the Edicts of Nikaea were promulgated for the good of the whole Imperium - to prevent the weak from damaging themselves and others, all members of the Imperium, including those who might be strong enough to cope with them, would be forbidden from certain designations of knowledge. It then became a matter of duty and responsibility for the primarchs and the Legions to uphold these Edicts as law. To fail to do so, even in the name of greater knowledge and power, would be to undermine the fabric of the Emperor's Imperium itself.

'Duty before all else,' muttered Gabriel to himself. Out of all the Chapters of Space Marines, the Blood Ravens had a special reason to embrace this truism, he reflected, letting his mind shift back to the screaming faces of Cyrene that still haunted his dreams. That is why our Chapter Masters insist on a mixture of Marines and Librarians in the command structure.

'I did my duty,' he murmured. The Blood Ravens did not seek to save our tainted homeworld through the exercise of great power. We cleansed it in the name of the Great Father and the Emperor, just as we did on Tartarus.

We might have sought to harness the innate power of the nascent psykers and the mutants there, cultivating them into powerful warriors, as legend tells us once happened on Prospero. However, that would have been a perversion, a heresy: knowledge and power before all else, pursued relentlessly. To act in this way would be a dereliction of duty. It would be a failure of responsibility. It would have been wrong.

'Knowledge is power, so it must be guarded well and given the respect of wisdom and duty. I have exterminated my own homeworld - the homeworld of Isador and of the Great Father himself. And I did so out of pristine duty. That is why the Emperor's Astronomican soars into my mind, confirming my place at the shoulder of Vidya in the shimmering tones of the silver choir. I enact their will, not my own.'

Flicking over to the last page of Isador's report once again, Gabriel gazed down at the words that had horrified him only hours before:

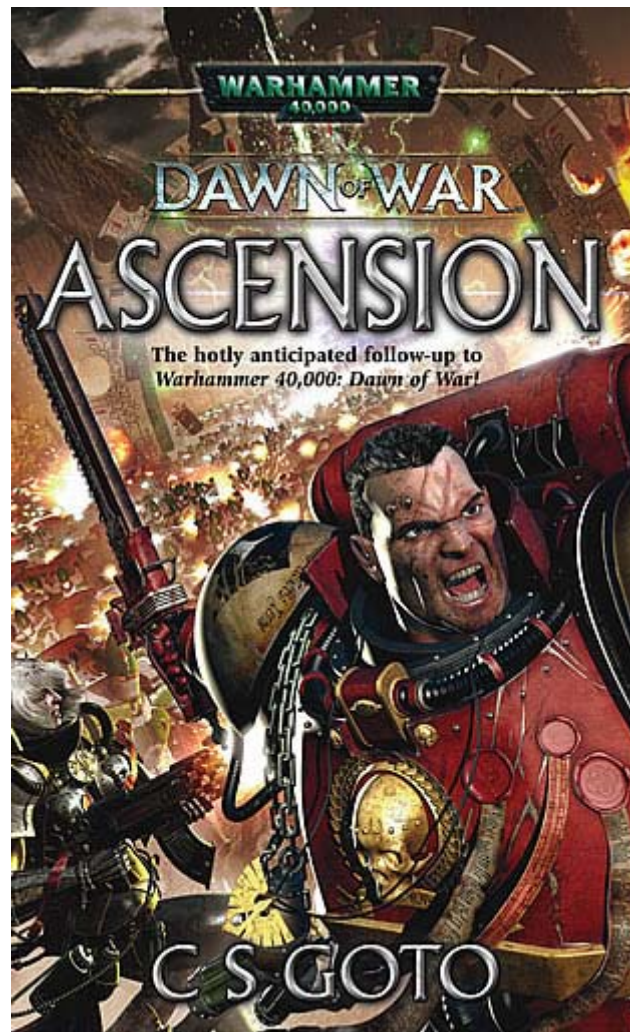
THAT FOOL GABRIEL has no idea what's happening on this blessed world. He thinks that the approaching warp storm is to be feared, and that the artefacts we have found must be destroyed. Such blindness. How much will this stupidity cost us? How far can I permit this to go?

Even if the others cannot, I can see the mania in his eyes, and I know the secrets of the voices that he hides from us, those that sing into his soul in the guise of the sacred choir. He cannot conceal these silvering tones from me. For I hear them too, but I know their nature and I know that the Emperor has not blessed them. This is the difference between my old friend and me: I can tell the difference between truth and lies, for my soul has been wrought and tested in the secret fires of the great Librarium Sanatorium, and yet it is the bumbling, ignorant captain that leads our Company into error and stupidity.

READING THROUGH THOSE words again, Gabriel could not help but feel the horror of their power once more. He was sure that Isador had gone insane, tempted out of his right-mind by the whispered seductions of daemons, vanity, and promises of secret knowledge. And yet, interlaced and curdled through the complicated text Gabriel could sense threads of truth and flickers of light. As he stared at the page, his mind flashed with images of the daemon that he had unleashed from the Maledictum on Tartarus. It had taunted him with its gratitude, calling him its herald rather than its vanquisher, as though he had been guided through his actions like some kind of puppet. And the thoughts of the eldar farseer had riddled his mind, competing with the daemon in its ridicule of his weakness of will. And then there were the screaming faces of Cyrene, coagulating and gyring through his waking dreams, like razor-wire being stirred through his brain. Somehow, Gabriel knew that Isador must be right that there were important connections between these haunting visions that he could neither comprehend nor even admit to anyone else. Despite everything, Gabriel found himself wishing that Isador was still with him.

With a nod of resolution, Gabriel withdrew his pistol from its harness and took careful aim. The shell seared cleanly through the cable that supported the lighting-orb over the desk. He watched it fall, as though in slow motion, seeing the complicated array of filaments and flames inside it begin to splutter and fade through its descent. Then, in an explosion of glass and gas, the orb crashed down onto Isador's book. For a fraction of a second the room plunged into darkness, but then a residual spark ignited the ballooning gas and the book erupted into flames.

As he watched the complicated and dangerous journal burn into cinders before him, Gabriel gazed into the flames, letting his eyes fixate as his mind continued to race with everything that he had just read. And, as the flames started to fade, his mind began to calm. A single, distant voice started to sing with exquisite precision and metallic coolness. After a few seconds, the voice was all that he could see and hear, echoing and resounding through his mind like a refracted star. Gradually, other voices joined the first, peppering his mind with points of starlight until his head seemed to encompass an entire galaxy. As he watched, the breathtaking vision began to swirl and tinge with red, and Gabriel knew that mysterious choir of voices was soaked through with blood and death. He did not know what it was, and he realised that Isador had been right about at least one thing: he feared what he did not understand.



DAWN OF WAR: ASCENSION



PROLOGUE

BEGINNINGS SWIRL INTO the forgotten past, like ideas fading into the inconstant oceans of memory. They swim, free-floating on the cusp of the empyrean, flickering in and out of reality, as though prodding at the consciousness of a submerged mind. Without warning - or with warnings so subtle that they pass as mere comets' tails or clouds of burning gas - an old beginning can push itself out of forgetfulness and cast itself into the glare of a new sun, dragging itself out of the oceans of darkness and into the light once again.

There are but few whose thoughts sense the eddies and dances of moments gone by, and fewer still whose souls sail the very brink of the abyss from which the ghosts of beginnings and ends emerge into our world. And those few are both the best and the worst of us, for there is nothing hidden to them in the great expanse of time. But even the greatest of them is not always free to choose the sea-lanes on which their visions might sail.

The future is no different from the past. It is nothing more than a beginning yet to come, and it curdles in the endless ocean of time, riddling the depths of the invisible realms with immaterial phantasms. It is the idea of a current and the suggestion of a storm; it is the gathering cloud that persuades a sailor to drop anchor, to head for land, or to brace for the coming of hell. But not every wisp of vapour births a maelstrom, and not every sailor looks up to heaven.

The future grows from myriad beginnings, but each of those beginnings also have a beginning of their own - an infinity of regressions back to The Beginning, before which an origin was not even a word and the future was an unbounded explosion of light. It was not a moment or an event, but a tear in the very fabric of our universe, through which the empyrean and the material realm could spill and mingle. Before the tear, there was nothing but darkness or perhaps nothing but light, and from it was born reality itself.

The Old Ones told of a time after The Beginning when an Ancient Enemy emerged from the hearts of a thousand suns, feeding on light, drinking the very life of the galaxy. These glittering beings were born entirely into the material realm, and they were its undisputed lords - commanding the very stars themselves. But mastering the materium and conquering the galaxy were not the same thing, and the Old Ones confronted this Ancient Foe by surfing the tides of the immaterium, drawing ineffable power from realms incomprehensible to the star gods, realms swimming with the unformed and raw powers of daemons and gods.

I have heard legends that this was the time when daemons first dragged themselves into existence, clawing their way through the rift between realms, salivating at the scent of life on the other side. And I have also heard that eldar more ancient even than Asurmen himself were born into this time, fed by curdling eddies of power where the Old Ones stirred the material and immaterial together with a giant, warp-stone jewelled spear. Thus the Old Ones stood against them at the dawn of war itself. Despite the machinations of the Ancient Enemy, the tear in the galaxy was never sealed, and from it continues to pour the echoes and promises of our eternity. From it seeps hope and damnation together.

Buried in the deepest vaults of the Black Library, hidden from the eyes of the young races and the foolish hearts of our time, lie the tomes of the most ancient of the eldar, the very first volumes to be taken into the care of the Harlequins, older than the mysterious library itself. There are rumours that these timeless texts may even bear the imprints of the Old Ones themselves. I have seen them, and they are exquisite.

The Black Library itself lies veiled in the lashes of the webways that riddle the great tear, surfing the empyrean tides as a glorious galleon in the light-streaked darkness. If the Ancient Enemy were to return to complete their Great Work, then the tear would be sown up, the Library would blink out of existence and the sons of Asuryan would be cut off from their life source forever. We would cease to be; cease to ever have been as the universe was severed from its own memories. The Eye of Isha would dim, closing for all eternity. The legacy of the Old Ones would vanish.

For the Ancient Foe have no souls, and thus nothing to fear by severing reality in two - draining the life force from the substance of life.

For the Ancient Foe have only life, and an insatiable thirst for death.

For the Ancient Foe were turned back only by the blinding brilliance of Isha's gaze, and, were that gaze ever to fade, there would be nothing to stand before them.

Thus the gaze of Isha is cast over the universe, sprinkling it with moments of light, ever vigilant for the first stirrings of ancient endings.

And it is to the farseer that we turn for visions of time beyond and around our own; it is they who pilot our craftworlds through the treacherous tides and webs of fate, casting their eternal souls to skim the fringes of the ineffable abyss. They are the navigators of our souls, seeing the past and future blended into our present, seeing ancient origins swimming into our destinies together with the daemons who continue to claw their way into our realm.

But I have seen the treachery of our ways: even the farseers cannot see everything or everywhen, and if they could it would drive them into madness. Visions of paradise and hell are inseparable: the great tear brings both glory and annihilation - it is the birthplace of war and victory. With the eldar, our daemons were also born into reality, and even I cannot see whether it was wise to pay this price to arrest the advance of the Ancient Foe. Even the present is unclear - visions of elsewhen are doubly treacherous.



CHAPTER ONE: VISIONS

IN THE GLITTERING darkness of her sanctum, deeply enshrouded in the immensity of the Biel-Tan craftworld, Farseer Macha was sitting in concentration. The stones scattered into the air, spiralling and spinning like tiny planets in a vacuum. Each glinted with a pregnant light, shimmering gently as though pulsing with energy, and casting kaleidoscopic reflections through the shadowy chamber. The fragments of light danced delicately over Macha's inhumanly elegant features as she gazed intently at the shifting patterns.

The eldar farseer was kneeling quietly, her long white hair falling in loose cascades over the skin of her exposed shoulders. It rippled slightly, as though caught in a breeze from another realm. She was wrapped in a translucent, emerald-green cloak, fastened by a silver clasp just below her super-sternal notch. Its delicate, diaphanous fabric seemed to shift like the air itself, caressing the immaculate pale skin that was concealed beneath it.

As she watched, the rune-stones swirled in the air before her, etching patterns of light into the darkness, spying and gyiring to and fro like birds of prey circling their quarry. Her glittering green eyes flicked and tracked the movements, but her body remained absolutely motionless.

The configuration of the stones shifted and swam, as each hovered and flew above the glistening, circular wraithbone tablet that was set into the floor in the centre of the chamber, just a breath away from the farseer's knees. Their movements defined a rough sphere, as though their paths were bounded by an invisible orb; they swept into curves and arcs, skating the perimeter before being turned back by some mysterious gravity.

Macha's eyes narrowed as the flight of the stones accelerated, bringing her concentration into sharper focus to prevent the runes from escaping the curved pocket of space-time in which they raced. A fizzing, whirring whine began to build as the stones rushed against the banal, material resistance of the atmosphere in the chamber, and the scent of heat started to waft into the air. Trails of deep green smoke were left in the wake of the stones, like lines of vapour behind aircraft. After a few seconds, the invisible, floating sphere became a dull cloud of dirty green, shot through by the burning flashes of the runes.

An instant later and there was peace. The runes fell into stillness, as though they had suddenly run out of energy. The smoke began to dissipate into wisps that snaked up and away from the stones, spreading silent tendrils across the smooth blackness of the low ceiling. For a moment, the rune-stones lay in the air, as though supported on tiny, hidden platforms. But suddenly they fell, dropping straight down and clattering against the polished surface of the wraithbone tablet below, bouncing and skidding until finally coming to rest.

Without moving her body, Macha lowered her profoundly inhuman eyes to gaze upon the pattern defined by the fallen stones. Each lay in its own reflection on the water-like wraithbone while the intricate and ancient runes etched into their surfaces glowed with understated power. Macha stared at them, letting her long eyelashes touch together, blurring the faint lights into muffled stars. Then her eyes closed completely and her vision exploded into light.

WHITE. PURE WHITE. Resolving into javelins and streaks of brightness, like torrential rain. Blinding light, like an exploding star, ripping through space. An inferno, rippling like water, gushing and flooding, crashing and cascading over a craft. An eldar cruiser. A wraithship. The *Eternal Star* was afloat in the surge, with waves of fire smashing against its shimmering hull. It bucked and heaved, fluttering wildly like a great oil-drenched bird, bleeding energy in terrible swirls of blue.

Despite herself, Macha flinched at the uncontrolled violence pouring through her mind. She pressed her eyelids together more tightly, sending fine creases jousting across the smooth skin of her perfect face.

Tiny specks of darkness flashed through the wash of brightness, darting and flicking like a school of fish. A flock of birds, twisting and diving through the hail and the driving rain. The miniature black moments seemed to conduct the searing white energy around them, like small magnets dragging the flows into curves and pulling them into new pathways that punched straight into the fleeing shapes of other vessels. The escapees were fleet, but they were no match for the specks of night that zipped along in pursuit. The little white and green ships danced and spiralled with exquisite grace, defining sweeps of beauty in amongst the waves of destruction and ruin, but it seemed that they were reduced to slow motion as the shoals of darkness ripped at them with threads of lightning. The prey were Shadowhunters - eldar escort ships...

The farseer strained her vision, struggling to contain the carnage that raged in her mind. She could feel the despair flowing out of the images, and it was exciting an anger deep in her soul, which fed the violence of the imagery still further. Even though it clouded the echoes and reflections of time, it was not always possible to keep the personality of a seer out of her visions, especially when the images were so emotive. Eldar emotions could be the ruin of the universe, if only in the minds of their farseers.

There had to be more detail. She could not tell who the attackers were - she had never seen such vessels before. And she could not tell when the attack was taking place - was it the past or the future that she saw?

With an abrupt anti-flash of darkness, a swirling vortex whirled up in front of the star, seemingly sucking the light into itself and drawing the life out of the sun. The ghoulish shadow spun and shimmered with an eerie black light, somehow more brilliant than the star that it appeared to consume. For an instant, the spectral shade seemed to resolve itself into the suggestion of an iridescent humanoid figure, eclipsing the sun with its radiance. Then it blurred back into motion and was gone.

Another image pierced Macha's thoughts, pressing in from behind her and making her mind's eye spin to confront it.

On the fringes of the torrent of light there were other ships. Bulky and ugly, like those of the mon-keigh. Slow and cumbersome, with repulsive angles and crude explosive weapons. They were bobbing in the waves of energy, like ships about to be lost to the

sea. Their weapons flared with desperate abandon, shredding the space with torpedoes, shells, and fragments of death. Streaming out of the larger vessels were lines of smaller ships, not much bigger than the Shadowhunters, but much slower. They swam through the quagmire of energy and battle, heading for the *Eternal Star*.

'IT WAS LSATHRANIL'S Shield,' said Macha, meeting the gaze of the exarch with such passionate certainty that he could not doubt her. The light in her chambers flickered imperceptibly, echoing her own intensity.

'You're quite sure, farseer?' asked Laeresh, deciding that it might be prudent to doubt her a little; Macha was a passionate female, and she always wore the fierce mask of certainty. 'It would not do to be mistaken in this.'

'Quite sure, Laeresh. The planet is unmistakable, and the light is definitive.'

The warrior considered her for a moment, studying her exquisite features and searching them for the tiniest flickers of doubt. He was sure that she could not be right all the time. None of the seers could see everything, and none had perfectly crisp vision - there was always room for a slip, or for personal interest to breathe clouds across the vista.

Laeresh himself had been a seer once, during one of his previous stops along the winding Path of the Eldar, so he knew the racks of doubt that plagued the sensitive mind. He had not withstood them well, and he had marvelled at Macha's mastery of her thoughts even then, when she was little more than a youthful seer, still searching for her place and role on the craftworld of Biel-Tan.

Whilst Macha had finally found her calling on the Path of the Seer, plunging her destiny into the wild oceans of her people's souls, Laeresh had found his certainty in the hilt of a reaper launcher; abandoning the Seer Way he had fixed his soul into the hands of Kaela Mensha Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God. He joined the ranks of the Dark Reapers, one of the most sinister and lethal of all the temples of Aspect Warriors, finally losing himself in the craze and passion of battle - finding his soul reflected in the slick sheen of the blood that pooled around his feet.

He regretted nothing and could remember little of his life before becoming the temple's exarch. Such was the price of his ascension. But he could remember Macha: he could remember her face when it was younger and fresher than it was now. If anything, she had grown more beautiful as the pain and terror of her visions had gradually carved themselves into the depths of her emerald eyes. Every time he looked at her, he ached with half-disremembered, half-buried emotions. It made him doubt his own judgment. It made him resent her certainty.

The Reaper exarch gazed at the farseer for another moment, as though calculating his decision. 'If you are so certain,' he said, tilting his head inquiringly, 'then we must take this to the Court of the Young King. Biel-Tan must prepare for war.'

'I NEVER SAID that it was the future,' replied Macha flatly, as though the question itself had missed the point. To an outsider, she might have seemed to be chiding a slow student. 'I could only see where the battle was raging, not when. It may have been the past that I saw.'

Despite her almost whispered tone, the farseer's voice echoed repeatedly around the great reception hall; in this elaborate ceremonial chamber, Macha's ineffable majesty was at its most dramatic. The sound swept round the elevated throne in the centre and reflected back on itself, bouncing up into the vaulted reaches of the ceiling. It was as though there was more to her voice than the audible noise, and the small congregation of eldar arrayed before her shifted uneasily, aware that the farseer lived in a space that was a mystery to them.

Although Laeresh had requested an audience with the Court of the Young King on behalf of Macha, the traditions of the craftworld dictated that the Court would honour this request by visiting the ritual throne chamber of the farseer herself. Laeresh enjoyed the Court's discomfort in this glorious space.

Most eldar craftworlds were governed by a Seer Council, headed by the farseer, but Biel-Tan had been an exception for millennia. Alongside the seers, Biel-Tan was ruled by a military council comprised of the exarchs from the biggest Aspect Temples on the craftworld. The balance of power between these councils was delicate, and the exarchs resented any and all appeals to traditions that implied their subordination to the Seer Council. In practice, most of the political decisions were made behind the closed doors of the Young King's Court, whilst the exarchs begrudgingly acknowledged their need for the advice and guidance of Macha and her seers.

'Then what do you propose that we do, farseer?' asked Uldreth, the exarch of the Dire Avengers. His tone was harsh and his voice scraped through the air as though dragging itself over rough metal. It was a challenge, not a question.

'We must unleash the Bahzhakhain. We must dispatch the Swordwind to Lsathranil's Shield,' intoned Laeresh urgently. He was standing on the throne pedestal itself at Macha's right shoulder, his deep purple cloak hanging like a shroud around his glistening black armour.

'I did not ask you, Reaper,' responded Uldreth, almost spitting on the polished floor. He kept his eyes fixed on Macha, not even turning his face to address Laeresh; his immaculate blue armour shone and its emerald edging seemed to glow with suppressed fires.

The other exarchs arrayed on the floor offered no response. It was not clear whether they were ignoring Laeresh or whether they were ignoring Uldreth, but they made no attempt to intervene in the obvious tension between the two great warriors.

'We cannot afford to take the risk, Uldreth Avenger. If the vision is of the future, then we must act now,' pressed Laeresh, ignoring the manner of the Dire Avenger and appealing to his deep-seated concern for the survival of the ancient and precarious eldar race, a concern common to all eldar, even if only at the most subconscious level.

'Can you tell us nothing of time, farseer?' asked Uldreth, his voice still bitter, albeit tinged with hints of resignation. 'Are there really no clues about whether this battle lies in the future or the past?'

'I have said,' stated Macha simply. 'The vision raged as though in the present, but such is the way with visions that are seen in the present. I could see nothing of time, except that it continued to pass as it does now.'

Macha could see the frustration on Uldreth's face. His eyes narrowed slightly, as though the uncertainty afflicted him with physical pain. Finally, he shot a glance towards Laeresh. 'And you, Reaper, what role is there in this for you?' 'I will accompany the farseer, Uldreth Avenger,' replied Laeresh, nodding a slight and stiff bow, affecting deference where it was due but unfelt.

'Will you, now?' hissed Uldreth, his eyes narrowing still further, until they were little more than slits. 'I see that you think this matter decided already? Well, it is not - Farseer, what of the other seers on the council? Do they share your visions?'

Macha had expected this question, and she had already given it a great deal of thought. If she were honest, she had to admit that it was unusual for no aspects of her vision to be shared by the others. It was not uncommon for the seers of the council to experience the same visions at similar times, or, at least, to be struck by different versions of the same vision - the same vision from differing standpoints. But, in this case, not a single seer had even glimpsed the light-riddled battle of Lsathranil's Shield - not even Taldeer, who was usually so in tune. Her mind was growing increasingly unsettled, as though the vision had seeped its way into her own soul and become part of her. She had seen her ancient Wraithship, *Eternal Star*, in the midst of the battle, and there was more to her role in the vision than forgotten pasts or a sentimental attachment to her ship.

'They do not.' The answer was simple and direct, and Macha held her gaze firmly as she spoke. 'This is my vision. Mine alone.' For a moment, Uldreth held her gaze, peering into her bright eyes as though searching for some hidden truth. When he broke contact, he flashed his own green eyes at Laeresh and then turned to leave. He spun on his heel, whisking his blue cloak into a whirl, and then strode towards the great staircase that led up to the Triclopic Gates at the entrance to the farseer's throne hall. The other exarchs bowed abruptly to Macha and then hurried off in Uldreth's wake. One of them, the sparkling golden form of the Fire Dragon exarch, Draconir, paused momentarily and nodded to Laeresh.

SECURE IN THE depths of the venerable battle barge, *Litany of Fury*, the young neophyte's eyes bulged, but he did not cry out. His body could not even twitch, since his limbs were bound to the great, ceremonial tablet with adamantium hoops and a heavy strap ringed his chest. Beneath the restraints, Ckrius's muscles spasmed and knotted, his body attempting to thrash against the violence being done to it.

There was already a long scar running down the boy's chest, where his sternum had been cracked open and a second heart inserted into the cavity below. There were a couple of tributary incisions slipping out of the scar, where the small, tubular ossmodula organ and the little, spherical biscopea had been implanted at the same time as the extra heart.

These zygotes were usually implanted when the neophyte was much younger than Ckrius - perhaps as young as ten years old. It took time for them to stabilise, and for the young human bodies to accept the new organs. The ossmodula and biscopea implants were developmental, flooding the body with hormones to encourage rapid growth and strengthening of the skeleton and its musculature - an older neophyte may not respond well to such traumatic processes. But time was not a luxury that the beleaguered Blood Ravens Space Marines could enjoy; they needed new initiates as quickly as possible, and the surgical processes were being accelerated beyond the point of caution or good sense.

A thin jet of blood was spraying out of another slit in Ckrius's chest, and the neophyte's eyes seemed fixed on the crimson shower. There was barely controlled horror in his face as he flickered on the edge of consciousness, waiting for shock to dull the searing pain. But a complicated web of intravenous drips supplied him with a constant flow of stimulants, ensuring that he would not drift into unconsciousness or even be able to sublimate the memories afterwards. These horrific procedures would stick with him forever, always present behind his eyelids if ever he tried to close them for sleep or dreams. He was becoming a Space Marine, and it was important that he should never forget what that meant.

The mechanical, skeletal, metal arms that augmented the surgical dexterity of the Blood Ravens apothecary twitched and clicked as they worked the instruments inside Ckrius's flesh. Meanwhile, the apothecary's real arms were braced against the neophyte's shoulders. The spray of blood had erupted as one of the main blood vessels exiting the primary heart had been severed, and now the apothecary was carefully inserting the tiny haemastamen organ into the line of the vessel. It was designed to monitor and control the make-up of the Marine's blood, particularly to ensure that the other implants would receive rich enough sustenance for proper development and maintenance.

Before reconnecting the severed blood vessel, the mechanical, chattering arms of the apothecary tugged the incision in Ckrius's chest a little wider, making him moan and gasp. Another thin metal arm appeared from under the apothecary's black smock, carrying a dark, fleshy organ of about the size and shape of a small fruit. The arm pushed the Larraman's organ through the opening in the neophyte's flesh, while another of the many arms quickly stitched it into place - setting it next to the primary heart like an extra valve in the severed blood vessel, and then connecting the artery again on the other side of it.

With smooth slithering motions, the various metal arms and instruments withdrew from the violated body and slipped back into place under the apothecary's smock as he simply turned and left, leaving the gaping wound on Ckrius's chest open to the air with blood pouring out of it. The neophyte's head strained against the restraints that were looped over his forehead, as he watched the apothecary vanish. Up until that point, he had wanted nothing more than for his torturer to leave him in peace, but now that the oddly augmented figure was leaving him half-finished, his mind welled up with panic that he would simply bleed to death on the tablet.

In fact, he might bleed to death there and then. Many neophytes did not make it past this, the fifth phase of the transformation into a Space Marine. The apothecary had deliberately left the egregious wound open. One of three things would now happen: Ckrius would bleed to death; Ckrius's Larraman's organ would eventually kick in and stem the blood flow, but his immune system would be too weakened by all the body-trauma and he would die of an infection - nothing would be done to prevent this; or the haemastamen organ would already be working to provide the Larraman's organ with the enriched blood necessary to help it heal the wound quickly enough to prevent either infection or too much blood loss. Then he might survive.

The only way Ckrius would still be alive in an hour's time would be if his genetic make-up was an almost exact match with the Blood Ravens' gene-seed. If not, one or other of the implants would fail, or would be inefficient, and he would die. The apothecary would let him die: if the zygotes did not take root, then the neophyte was basically worthless to the Chapter.

STANDING IN THE shadows at the edge of the Implantation Chamber, Captain Gabriel Angelos watched the ritual surgery taking place. Every time he saw it done, it seemed like only yesterday that it had been him lying on that ancient tablet. The myriad scars that adorned his body flared with pain at the memory, sending sparks of agony rampaging around his brain. Part of him wondered whether this reaction had been hard-wired into his brain during the course of hypnotherapy which accompanied the surgery and then continued for much of the rest of a Marine's life - it wouldn't have surprised him. Then again, the implantation process was not something that could easily be forgotten.

Clouds of smoke billowed around the room from the burners that had been lit at each corner of the operation tablet. The smoke was slightly toxic - enough to cause lethal infections in any untreated wounds, and enough to choke a normal human being. Gabriel and Sergeant Tanthius who accompanied him breathed easily, their multi-lungs working naturally to filter out the more unpleasant effects of the gas. Ckrius had to make do with his old lungs for now.

The ceremonial conditions of the implantation process were deliberately unhygienic. Purity was an entirely ritualised concept in this context, as the bank of masked Chapter priests ensconced in prayer at the far side of the chamber showed. The neophyte had to survive the various surgeries, but he had to survive them himself: the apothecary would administer the transformation, but would offer no medical care. A Space Marine should have to rely on nobody, and if he required a sterilised atmosphere and shiny new surgical instruments, then he was not of the right stuff. The Implantation Chamber was a haven for death and disease - its carefully controlled air supply was rich with some of the most deadly viruses and bacteria ever to have plagued the galaxy. The unusual air-conditioning also acted as a defensive precaution - this was one of the most secure locations in the Blood Ravens' realm. At the back of the chamber were a pair of massive, heavy, adamantium doors, bolted and encrusted with purity seals. Sprinkled around the frame of the great doors were a series of automatic defence cannons that tracked and whirred constantly, drawing tabs on anything and anyone that moved into the room. An ancient, runic script had been inscribed in a giant arc around the super-armoured portal, but there were few who could decipher its meaning. And at the apex of the arch was a shimmering, blood red, stylised raven.

Behind those doors was kept part of the Chapter's supply of gene-seed. This was the most heavily guarded place in the entire battle barge - even more secure than the magnificent armouries of the Blood Ravens. Without a home world of their own, the Blood Ravens had no central planetary Fortress Monastery in which to hide their genetic treasure. Instead, the reservoir was divided amongst the Chapter's magnificent battle barges, including the epic fortress of the *Omnis Arcanum*, buried deep in their impregnable hulls and encased in concentric spheres of armoured shields. Even if the unthinkable were to happen, and a battle barge was destroyed, the gene-chamber would survive, tumbling invisibly through space until its heavily encrypted signal was picked up by another Blood Ravens vessel. It could survive for centuries, even millennia without external power. Like their brother Chapters, the Blood Ravens took no risks with their gene-seed, for without it they were doomed.

'Do you think he will survive?' asked Tanthius, his concern etched dearly into his wide, open features. The veteran sergeant had discovered Ckrius himself, during the terrible battles of the Tartarus campaign, which had cost the Blood Ravens so dearly. The youth had made an impression on the wizened old Terminator, despite his jaded professionalism, and Tanthius felt some responsibility for the safety of his young charge.

'We will see,' replied Gabriel. That was all he could say: only time would tell. 'He is strong, Tanthius,' he added, as though consoling his old friend.

A hiss of decompression made the two Marines turn. The doors to the Implantation Chamber slid open and a sheet of light cut into the deep, smoky shadows. For a moment the huge green tank on the far side of the chamber was lit up, as though held in a spotlight. Inside it, Gabriel could see the vague, ill-formed shape of a man; it was a growing-tank, in which the apothecary was already preparing the black carapace for Ckrius, should he survive long enough to need it. The insertion of the carapace under the skin of the neophyte was the last phase in his transformation - once it was complete, he would become an initiate Marine, finally able to bond with the ancient power-armour that characterised all Space Marines.

Then the tank fell into shadow as a heavy figure strode into the light-flooded doorway. The Marine bowed deeply on the threshold, paying his respects to the sacred site into which he was about to enter, and then he stepped inside, letting the doors hiss shut behind him, extinguishing the light altogether.

'How is he doing, captain?' asked Librarian Ikarus, staring straight at the bound figure of Ckrius on the tablet, without looking over at Gabriel.

'Ikarus,' nodded Gabriel in greeting. 'It is still too early to tell.'

'His suffering is great,' whispered the librarian, a wave of pain seeming to wash over his own face. 'I can feel his anguish - he radiates it as a star gives off heat.'

'I am sure that it was this way with us, too,' said Tanthius, almost to himself. He was watching the boy's muscles tense and bulge as he fought against the panic and the agony.

It was not usual for three such high-ranking Blood Ravens to be present during these rituals, but these were unusual times for them. Gabriel's Third Company had been severely tested on Tartarus, and he had lost many Marines in the battles against the orks, the traitorous Alpha Legion, and the manipulative, xenos eldar of Biel-Tan. And from the whole population, they had found only one warrior with the character and constitution of a hero. Only Ckrius had seemed a likely neophyte, but even he was older than they would have liked, and there was no guarantee that he would be a genetic match with the Blood Ravens' seed.

Although the Blood Ravens could claim a magnificent victory at the end of the Tartarus campaign, it was tinged with a profound sense of loss. Great Marines had fallen, including Gabriel's oldest friend, Librarian Akios Isador. And in return, the Chapter had taken Ckrius, an Imperial Guardsman who had fought the orks with glorious abandon, standing side by side with the Marines until

the very end. But they had taken only Ckrius, and he could not replace the numbers that had been lost. The Third Company stood perilously close to their own extinction. Thus, Gabriel, Tanthius and Ikarus maintained their vigil in the Implantation Chamber, watching every change in the condition of their neophyte, muttering silent prayers to the Emperor of Man that he might survive the vastly accelerated process that he was being forced to suffer.

THE FOUR EXARCHS stood facing one another, with their retinues fanned out behind them, resplendent in the glorious colours of their temples. The Courtroom of the Young King was one of the most elevated spaces on Biel-Tan, lifted like a majestic dome out of the peaks of the craft-world. Its vast curving walls aspired to a distant apex, all but invisible from the polished wraithbone floor. The dome was almost transparent, and the brilliance of the stars outside pierced its substance with heavenly patterns that swam and trailed with the steady, interstellar motion of the immense craft. The bonesingers who had fashioned the grand hall from wraithbone drawn directly from the warp were the finest in the long and noble history of the Biel-Tan. The walls glinted and glistened in accord with the mood of the occasion, and the patterns of stars outside seemed to form and reform into ancient eldar runes, spelling out the glorious heritage of the sons of Asuryan. The hall was big enough to hold a thousand eldar warriors, but today there were only a dozen.

The Court had been comprised of the same four exarchs for centuries. They were the keepers of the largest Aspect Temples on Biel-Tan, and between them they determined all the military affairs of the craftworld.

They were each warriors to the core; each the absolute personifications of their Aspects; each had abandoned the Path of the Eldar, having lost themselves in the service of Kaela Mensha Khaine himself - never again to leave the bloody road of the warrior. But they were not all the same - the Aspects each had personalities of their own, as though aping the moods of Khaine.

As usual, Uldreth spoke first, planting his ornate dreadsword between his feet. He was the youngest of the four, and the most afflicted by the extremes of passion that plagued his race. The others had mellowed slightly as the long years had passed, although none might be considered cold. The Court of the Young King had a reputation amongst the other peripatetic craftworlds of the eldar for being bellicose and aggressive, and this was not just because of the Dire Avenger in their midst.

'The farseer is confused and her vision is vague,' began Uldreth, turning his face from one exarch to the next. 'And the Reaper is not to be trusted. We should not risk Biel-Tan on the whim of a maniac and a fool.'

'*You* will not speak in this way of our farseer, Uldreth, Dire Avenger,' intoned Draconir, his voice calm and low. 'She has led us to safety and to victory many times before now, and it is not the place of this court to challenge her. We are here to decide how to respond to her visions, that is all. As for Laeresh of the Dark Reapers - his role in this is as yet unclear. It does not become this council to speak so cheaply of another exarch. The Reapers have always been amongst us, and we must not do them any further dishonour.'

'Yet, there is a reason that their Aspect finds no place in this Court, Draconir, Fire Dragon—' began Xoulun, flashing her black eyes like miniature anti-stars.

'—we are all aware of the composition of this chamber, Xoulun, Scorpion Queen, and we need no reminders of its rationale. The Dark Reapers are not here, and Laeresh's voice is not heard in this hall. This is the precaution that we have taken for millennia, and nothing further needs to be said about it now.' Draconir returned the Striking Scorpion's glare, casting the reflected fires of his golden eyes into the fathomless black of hers.

'The Fire Dragon is right,' said Azamaia, shaking her glorious, golden hair as she spoke, bringing everyone's attention back to her. 'The only matter that we need to discuss is the question of whether we should unleash the Bahzhakhain against Lsathranil's Shield. If it was the future that the farseer saw, then we must act quickly—'

'—if it was the future, then the choice is already made,' spat Uldreth, cutting the Howling Banshee off in mid sentence. He hated the way that this court kowtowed to Macha, as though she were some kind of goddess. She was no Eldrad Ulthran, and she had made mistakes before. It was not that long ago that she had summoned forth the Avatar of Khaine and sent it to its doom on the backwater world of Tartarus. That whole affair had been a disaster for Biel-Tan, costing the craftworld many fine warriors, and all for nothing. The mon-keigh had ruined the Avatar and unleashed a hideous daemon from the warp. Macha had not foreseen that - her visions had been "clouded" by something or someone that she could not or would not explain. In the meantime, the birth pains of the Avatar had drained all the life force from the Young King himself, leaving Biel-Tan without its premier warrior lord. Had the Court forgotten this so soon?

'We are Biel-Tan!' asserted Uldreth forcefully. 'We are not Ulthwe, and we have no need to sneak about in the shadows of the galaxy hiding from our fate, led by the vague ramblings of farseers and witches.'

'Hold your tongue, Avenger!' snapped Draconir, rising to the bait, as he always did. Behind him, his honour guard bristled with readiness, always prepared to fight. They were treading the Path of the Warrior, and fighting was always at the forefront of their minds. The eldar were an obsessive species, and theirs was a special kind of decadence, an indulgence in the arts of death at every available opportunity.

'This bickering will not help us, friends,' said Azamaia, stepping into the space between the two males and keeping them apart. 'We must keep our minds focussed on bigger questions for now. The chance will come later for you to resolve your differences here. That time is not now.'

'She is right,' agreed Xoulun, reluctantly holding out her arm across Uldreth's chest. 'Now is not the time for this. We must decide about Lsathranil's Shield.'

'I do not believe in Farseer Macha,' stated Uldreth, standing down and letting his voice sound calm and reasonable, despite the green flames still dancing in his eyes. 'She has been wrong before, and she may be wrong now. We would be taking a tremendous risk to take Biel-Tan so close to Lsathranil's Shield, since it is now buried deep within the territory of the mon-keigh. I cannot condone this action without greater certainty than Macha can offer us. We must fight the battles that present themselves to us, not go chasing around the galaxy looking for those that may not even concern us.'

'That does not sound like the reasoning of a Biel-Tan warrior,' mumbled Draconir under his breath.

'Uldreth is right about the risk, Draconir,' said Azamaia, acting as the intermediary and pretending not to hear the murmured insult. 'We can ill-afford a costly war if it is unnecessary. What is the use of a farseer if she cannot prevent us from reliving the mistakes and disasters of our past? If it is the past in Macha's vision, we would be fools to drag it into our future by our own actions.'

'If it is not the past, then we risk everything - that too should be a lesson from our history,' countered Draconir, aware that he was not going to win this debate.

'I agree with Uldreth,' announced Xoulun predictably. 'Biel-Tan has other battles to fight at the moment. The foul, greenskinned orks are infesting the system of Lorn, once a splendid exodite colony. There are also signs of mon-keigh in the sector. The extermination of these vermin and the re-establishment of an eldar colony is a much more fitting task for the Swordwind. Taldeer and the other seers on the council have foreseen great victories for us.'

'Are we really so vain that we must act only where our victories have already been assured?' asked Draconir, already knowing the answer. 'Sometimes the right battle is the one whose outcome lies obscured beyond the battle itself.'

'If you really believe those honourable sentiments, Draconir, Fire Dragon, then you are really agreeing with me that we should not base our actions on the visions of a seer, not even on those of our venerable farseer. We should act according to our will and do what we believe to be right. We are warriors, for Khaine's sake! Biel-Tan no longer has any need for the archaic institutions of our forefathers. The Seer Council has no place in my craftworld.' Uldreth was enthused with passion.

'You go too far, Dire Avenger—' began Draconir, shocked by the audacity of the other exarch.

'—let us devise a test,' interrupted Uldreth, his mind racing only fractionally ahead of his words. 'If Macha and Laeresh are correct and this vision is of the future, then it should not matter what decision is reached by this Court: the battle will occur anyway. If, on the other hand, we decide to pursue the vision, then we will make it happen through the efforts of our own wills - which will prove nothing about the vision other than that we believed it. So, I propose that we decide to ignore Macha's vision. If we end up fighting for Lsathranil's Shield, thenceforth I will bow to your greater wisdom, Draconir of the Fire Dragons.'

'THEY WILL DO nothing. Uldreth carried the Court, as usual,' said Draconir, bowing deeply at the pedestal in front of Macha's throne. 'I am sorry.'

As the Fire Dragon exarch spoke, Laeresh turned violently away from Macha's shoulder and stormed away towards the stairs that led up to the Triclopia Gates and out of the chamber.

'Laeresh!' called Macha, with more affection than anger. 'They must reach their own decisions. That is their function.'

The Dark Reaper paused at the foot of the great staircase, leaving his back to the farseer and Draconir. They could see the rage in his shoulders as his purple cloak rippled. He did not turn.

'I never said that it was the future, Laeresh—'

'—but we cannot run the risk, Macha,' said Laeresh. He did not snap round suddenly, but turned very slowly and whispered his words with aspirated force.

'I agree with Laeresh, farseer,' confirmed Draconir, stooped on one knee before her. 'If there is uncertainty about this, then we must assume the worst. I do not think that the Court really appreciates the significance of Lsathranil's Shield. Even if your vision were of the past, farseer, there must be some significance to the fact that you have had it now?'

'Perhaps, exarch. But there is not always a simple reason behind the appearance of ghosts from the past. Or for those from the future, come to that. If I were confident about this, then I would have told the Court.'

'I do not think that Uldreth's decision was entirely rational, farseer. There was a passionate quality to his voice. There is something else informing his thinking on this. He distrusts you and your visions. Even had you been certain of the timing, I suspect that he would have refused to act.' Draconir said.

'He is passionate. It is the curse of our people that the best of us are also the most passionate. They believe in things, and through their belief they make them true. Uldreth believes in his sword - that is his way.'

'I also believe in my sword, farseer,' confessed Draconir.

'Yes, but not only in your sword - that is why you have come to me now. It is the fixation that causes the problems. Eldar souls are powerful beings, intimately connected to immaterial realms beyond our own. Our beliefs have repercussions. They produce ripples and echoes in the empyrean. If too many of us believe the same thing, we sometimes have the power to make it real. Or if the most powerful of us believe something passionately enough, he might create the echoes of it in the unseen realms. This is the curse of the eldar.'

'Do you not believe in your visions, farseer?' asked Draconir, still on one knee.

'Yes, I believe in them. I see them, and they are real. I have no doubts about them. Everything I see is real. But it has taken me many centuries to learn about the difference between reality and inevitability. Time and space are interrelated in infinitely complex ways, and space is not delimited by our material realm. I can believe in my visions without ever expecting to see them occur, without ever desiring to see their truth realised. I can believe without passion.'

'I believe in your visions, Macha,' stated Laeresh, striding back to the throne. He had seen the passion in her eyes when she had first described the vision to him. He knew that she was not as free of the "curse" as she purported to be.

'I know you do,' smiled Macha faintly, looking up at her old friend and seeing the fierce certainty in his eyes. He knew her well, and, even if he could no longer remember the details, the knowledge was lodged somewhere in his subconscious.

'I also believe in you, farseer. But Uldreth's belief is of a different nature from ours. He is searching for...' Draconir searched for the right word, but could not find it. 'He is distrustful of everything except his sword.'

'I can understand this distrust,' confessed Laeresh. 'I too feel it. This is the way of Khaine.'

'But your distrust is general, Laeresh. As is yours,' said Macha, waving Draconir to his feet. 'For Uldreth, his distrust must be focussed on someone or something in particular. He is an Avenger, and his nature is to search for vengeance. He is never stronger than when he feels wronged, and his soul craves that feeling at all times.'

'That is as may be, but why must he focus his ire against you, farseer? He shows poor judgement in his choice of enemies.' Draconir was genuinely confused.

Macha shook her head and sighed. The past was a complicated place for her, but for the exarchs it was simple. They could remember precious little of their lives before their ascensions. Their personal histories were nothing more than wisps of cloud to them, lingering in the unused recesses of their minds. She didn't know whether this was a deliberate consequence of the ritual transformation, or whether it was simply a side *effect* of the psychic changes affected during the soul's dedication to Khaine. She knew, as the keepers of the Aspect Temples had known since time immemorial, that the exarchs were war personified, with the hindrances of their personalities stripped away like inhibitors from a powerful engine. In an ugly, alien tome stolen from the mon-keigh, she had once read that the Imperium of Man also aspired to the creation of warriors who lived in the eternal present, with their lives stripped away by drugs, augmetics and conditioning.

But Macha also knew that the personalities of the eldar warriors did not disappear completely, even though their consciousness of their identities vanished. There were residues hardwired into the neurological and psychic structures of their brains, and ghosts that danced across the surface of their souls. They may never be able to articulate these things, but Macha could see them clearly. Besides, she had known Uldreth and Laeresh for centuries, since before either of them had become exarchs - although neither of them might remember much of that now.

'I'm sure that he has his reasons,' said Macha, unsure about what to reveal of Uldreth's past. Some things were best left in the past, without deliberately creating new echoes. Beginnings had a tendency to resurface from time to time of their own accord, and she was certain that the histories of Uldreth and Laeresh would come back to haunt them soon. She had foreseen it.

'I cannot come with you, Macha,' said Draconir, with honest resignation in his voice. 'I am part of the Court and thus subject to its pronouncements. There is nothing I can do.'

'The Dark Reapers will accompany you to Lsathranil's Shield, farseer,' said Laeresh, dropping to one knee before her throne and punching his fist against his chest. 'We are not so bound as the Fire Dragons.'

Macha nodded sadly. A long time ago she had warned the Young King's Court about the Reapers, and part of her wondered whether it had all been about this moment.

THE SHACKLED NEOPHYTE had finally been permitted to lose consciousness. The bleeding had stopped, and the pool of blood that had gathered around him had eventually drained away through the matrix of grooves and channels cut into the surface of the tablet beneath him. It would be collected into a reservoir under the adamantium table; it would certainly be needed again before the end of this process.

'He's still alive?' asked Gabriel, striding into the Implantation Chamber as the doors slid open. He peered at the prone figure of Ckrius.

Tanthius nodded deliberately from the shadows; he had not left the room since the surgery. 'Yes, still alive.'

'He is a genetic match?'

'So it seems,' said Tanthius.

'Perhaps we should return to Tartarus and do another sweep?' wondered Gabriel out loud. He knew that it was impossible - the planet was ruined and most of the population had been infected by tainted blood that ran under the surface like subterranean rivers. In truth, Gabriel knew that he was taking a risk even with Ckrius. The Blood Ravens could not afford to introduce any residual taint into their Chapter, even in the blood of just one of their initiates. But they did not have the luxury of choice, and they had to take what they could get, within reason. Ckrius would make a fine Marine, if he survived long enough.

In their long and glorious history, the Blood Ravens had never managed to find a planet to act as their home world. Terrible fates had befallen most of those that they had set their eyes upon. In the most recent past, just before the Tartarus campaign, Gabriel had led his Third Company back to Cyrene, the planet on which he himself had been born. It had been used as a recruitment planet for generations, and it was the closest thing to a home that Gabriel had ever had, although he could remember very little of it now. Except the screams. His memories of that once green and verdant world were now flooded with pain and the contorted agony of the people as they fell beneath the righteous fury of the Blood Ravens themselves.

When he closed his eyes, he could see nothing except the tortured hell of Cyrene as the Exterminatus finally consumed all the living tissue on the planet's surface. Not only had Cyrene been unsuitable for recruitment on that visit, but it had been riddled with corruption, taint, mutation and heresy. Gabriel had not had any choice - he could not suffer those abominations to live. From orbit, he had killed the entire planet.

It was a terrible irony that he could remember so little of the beauty of that planet from his boyhood, but that he could still feel its loss so intensely. The hypnotherapy that he had undergone as he became a Space Marine had overwritten certain memories of his youth, leaving his mind tuned perfectly to the present. But the process could not obliterate his past completely, and his emotions continued to tug at his mind when he thought of what he had done to his own home planet. It was a curse of the Blood Ravens that they could not forget anything that they did as Marines; their minds were finely tuned to encourage their academic tendencies, which was why they had such a reputation for scholarship and knowledge. Gabriel had heard that it had something to do with a slight mutation in their catalepsean node. Whatever the reason, he could not forget the hell that he had unleashed on Cyrene, but the visions of the heaven that he had destroyed were gone forever.

The pattern had not escaped Gabriel's notice: first Cyrene and now Tartarus - the Blood Ravens seemed to find their recruits amongst the damned. Or, perhaps, damnation followed the Blood Ravens to these planets. Either way, there was cause for concern about the Chapter, and Gabriel needed to do some more research. There was a cavernous hole in its ancient history, and not even

the great Father Librarians had been able to fill it - the Blood Ravens were hiding something from themselves, buried deep in their past, and now it seemed to be haunting them.

'We are coming up on the Trontiux system, sergeant. You will be needed for the landing party,' said Gabriel, turning to face Tanthius.

'Very well, captain,' he answered, nodding to acknowledge his duty, although it was clear that he did not want to leave Ckrius alone.

'He is about to start his hypnotherapy, Tanthius. There is nothing that you can do here. The apothecaries will drill the catalepsean node into his skull, but that is a simple procedure compared to what he has just gone through. There is little risk. He will be fine...' Gabriel trailed off. 'Although, he may be a different Ckrius when you see him again.'

Tanthius nodded and strode out of the room, leaving Gabriel alone with the boy. Trontiux III was another planet from which the Third Company had drawn recruits before, and they were hoping that there would be a new generation of warriors waiting to prove their worth in the Blood Trials. After this, the battle barge would make its way to Lorn V and then Rahe's Paradise - a backwater world on the fringes of the segmentum. These too had provided recruits before, although not on the scale of Trontiux III.

Gabriel gazed down at Ckrius, his heart swelling with a mixture of pride and pity. The boy was being transformed into the most Emperor-blessed form in the galaxy - he was joining the Adeptus Astartes. He was becoming a Space Marine of the Blood Ravens Chapter. He was being given the opportunity to serve the Undying Emperor in the most glorious ways imaginable. He was to be bathed in the pristine light of the Astronomicon, and guided by its imperial grace. There was nothing more magnificent, beautiful or terrible than a Space Marine.

But just for a moment, looking down at the broken, scarred body, Gabriel wondered what the cost of ascension would be for Ckrius, and whether he would ever understand, or even remember, what he was giving up. One thing was certain, he would be a different person tomorrow.



CHAPTER TWO: WRAITHBONE

THE FOUNDATIONS OF the monastery-outpost on Rahe's Paradise were heavy and deep, plunging down into the rock substructure of the planet's crust. Although the edifice was only an outpost, with a minimal detachment of Marines, it was still the largest building on the planet, and it needed every centimetre of its foundations, especially when it fired its huge air-defence cannons. Its jet-black, ornamented and armoured gothic walls towered over the rocky desert, dwarfing the out-croppings and boulders that peppered the sands.

Father Librarian Jonas Urelie had been based at the outpost for decades. He was old, even by the extended standards of the Blood Ravens, and he was not discontent with the slower pace of life on the backwater planet. In many ways it was an important post, being both the furthest reach of the Blood Ravens' realm and an important source of fresh warriors for the Chapter. After Cyrene and perhaps Trontiux III, Rahe's Paradise was the closest thing that the Blood Ravens had to a home; the locals were not technologically advanced, but they were an intelligent and passionate people showing excellent psychic potentials, which suited the librarian-rich Chapter.

Most of the planet was violently inhospitable for human life, with vast, scorching deserts fading into permafrost around the poles. What little life there was on the planet was concentrated into the hoop of massive mountains and volcanoes that swept around the crust, forming a perfect, diagonal ring that could be seen from orbit. The foothills were lush testaments to the fertile alluvial soils that the volcanoes spewed from time to time, and they received all of the scarce precipitation of the world, as the water vapour was forced higher into the atmosphere, riding up through the jagged passes of the mountains.

Life in the shadows of the mountains was manageable, although competition for the scarce food resources was intense. As a consequence, the various peoples of the range were fiercely xenophobic, distrusting anyone from outside of their groups, perhaps fearing for the security of their storehouses. Hence, the children grew up with weapons in their hands, always ready to defend their homes from the threats of others, or from the claws of the various wild beasts that also competed for food in the same restricted spaces. Life was hard in the mountains, but compared with life in the desert it was a veritable paradise.

One of the early Blood Ravens missionaries, the legendary Chaplain Elizur, had remarked to a local that this was a harsh place to live, and the local, perhaps not understanding exactly what the huge, god-like warrior had said, had thrown his arms wide to indicate the lush vegetation of the foothills and said: 'No, this is my paradise.' The local chieftain had been called Rahe. The scene is portrayed in a fresco in the great entrance hall of the monastery-outpost, beneath calligraphy in High Gothic: Rahe's Paradise, Raised out of Hell. The name had stuck, and the irony of it had been noted by many subsequent visitors.

It had been to the surprise of many that Jonas had specifically requested the posting; he had been a great warrior in his time, and his brethren could not imagine him fading away in the dark. Rahe's Paradise was certainly no humiliation - it was a worthy post for an aging Space Marine librarian - but there was little combat to be had, except for occasional ork raids and not infrequent civil wars. However, Jonas had harboured a desire to visit Rahe's Paradise for a long time: it had something more important than war buried beneath its sands.

Since arriving, he had started excavating under the flagstones in the lowest level of the monastery, digging down into the foundations. At first he had tentatively lifted a few slabs and had dug carefully in small, controlled areas, not wanting to cause too much disruption and not confident that there would be anything to find. His explorations were not entirely official. But after only a few weeks it had become clear that there was even more down there than he had ever hoped.

Over the years, Jonas had lifted nearly all of the stones out of the cellars, even transferring the dungeons into one of the monastery's towers, which he reinforced with the stone taken from the floors. There was not much need for them on Rahe's Paradise, but it would have been unthinkable for a Blood Ravens outpost to be without detention facilities. Occasionally, local warlords might take a step too far in their competition with their neighbours, and then the Blood Ravens would step in. But, in general, the Marines left the local population to their own devices, only imposing their presence when it was time for the Blood Trials once again. At those times, the warring groups would pause and the finest warriors from all sides would congregate in the ancient amphitheatre, cut into the volatile volcano, Krax-7, which loomed up behind the imposing shape of the monastery. And during the trials themselves, the animosity between the contestants only made them fight harder.

Most of the ground that had once been the floor of the lowest level of the monastery was now an elaborate dig, roofed in by what was once the ceiling of the dungeons and cellars. Gradually bringing in more machinery, Jonas had cut down through the sand and rock, shifting tonnes of debris and effectively lowering the base level of the building by nearly ten metres. The excavation had become so deep that he had felt it wise to buttress the great walls of the monastery to prevent his digging from weakening their massive structure.

Eventually, the site had become too extensive for him to manage on his own, and he had sent out a request to the Order of the Lost Rosetta, an Order Dialogous of the Adeptus Sororitas, ostensibly affiliated with the Ecclesiarchy. Sister Superior Meritia had answered the call.

The Blood Ravens had an ancient agreement with the Ecclesiarchy that Sisters of the Lost Rosetta would be seconded to them on request, for the purpose of mutually beneficial historical research. In fact, the Blood Ravens were one of the few Chapters of Space Marines that maintained better than cursory relations with the Ecclesiarchy. Most Chapters kept the priests at arm's length, disapproving of all the dogma and the rituals that subordinated everyone absolutely to the God-Emperor. The Adeptus Astartes had a much more complicated relationship with the Emperor - he was simultaneously both more and less than a god: he was not exactly the ineffable, untouchable, pristine figure at the centre of Ecclesiarchal law, but rather he was a father and a hero - the

historical founder of the Space Marines, friend and battle-brother to the great primarchs. In many ways, the Emperor was the first and greatest of the primarchs themselves, and the Adeptus Astartes were living incarnations of his will - angels of death, born of the Emperor himself. They had no objections to the Ecclesiarchy preaching absolute obedience to everyone else in the galaxy, but they themselves required no reminders of the debt or duty they owed, and they were certain that they owed nothing to the bureaucrats and priests of the Ecclesiarchy.

However, the Blood Ravens were serious about scholarship, and to that extent they had something in common with certain parts of the Ecclesiarchy. As long as questions of dogma could be subordinated to questions of history, things tended to progress smoothly, more or less. It was to their mutual advantage to suspend their grievances and, more importantly, it was to the benefit of the Emperor and to the history of his glorious Imperium. Everyone could agree that such glory was a good thing. At the most fundamental level, that was the commonality that kept much of the sprawling Imperium together, despite the variances and differences between its myriad and multitudinous parts.

Between them, Jonas and Meritia had uncovered dozens of Adeptus Astartes artefacts from the dig. To their mutual fascination, many of them dated from before the recorded date of the arrival of the Blood Ravens on the planet, from before the construction of the monastery-outpost itself, or even the now legendary Blood Trials that were conducted by the missionary-chaplains Elizur and Shedeur. Even more incredibly, they had discovered the suggestions of the remains of another fortress that had been built on exactly the same site before the construction of the current monastery. The archaeological evidence suggested that the previous structure was at least co-extensive with the present buildings, and that it had been home to a considerable number of Marines.

Jonas had heard rumours about lost Blood Ravens fortress monasteries before, when he had been still a young librarian, little more than a scout, and he had always thought that they might hold the secrets of the lost period in his Chapter's history. However, when he came to Rahe's Paradise he never really believed that he would discover something like this.

'Meritia,' said Jonas quietly, sweeping his hand across a slab of engraved rock and sending up little clouds of dust. 'Meritia, have you seen this?'

The Sister was kneeling to the ground inspecting the cracked remains of what had once been an auto-reactive shoulder plate - its red sheen suggested that it was from a long dead Blood Raven, but the Chapter markings had weathered away, so she could not be sure. She rose to her feet and turned to face Jonas, letting her ragged grey hair flop over her face. She was not an old woman; her hair was prematurely grey. It had been shimmering and black when she had first arrived on Rahe's Paradise, but she had awoken one morning after a restless night of violent dreams to find her hair glittering and grey.

'What is it?' she asked softly as she strode over towards him. She always felt as though she should whisper on site - it was like being in a library.

Jonas dug his fingertips down into the sand next to the tablet, feeling along its length for a crack. With a slight nod of satisfaction, he found some leverage with his index finger and drove it underneath the stone. With a faint grimace of effort, the librarian prised the slab of rock off the ground; it pivoted along the far edge, as though hinged, and cascades of sand fell away, revealing the full extent of the object. The tablet was nearly two metres long, perhaps a metre wide, and at least ten centimetres thick.

As she approached, Meritia shook her head in amusement: Jonas hadn't even noticed that he had just lifted more with the index finger of one hand than most men could have done with the strength of their entire bodies. It was remarkable, in fact, how quickly the excavation had been able to proceed because of Jonas's considerable abilities. Space Marines and their librarians were not designed with archaeology in mind, but, in the hallowed halls of the Lost Rosetta Convent, there were whispers of admiration about the military efficiency with which the Blood Ravens executed their scholarship. Between the two of them, Jonas and Meritia had made more progress on this dig than an entire team of Ecclesiarchal researchers could have done.

The dirty, red sand fell easily off the stone lid as Jonas tilted it, revealing curving patterns of engraving beneath. For a moment, Jonas cast his eyes over the cursive inscriptions, taking instant and careful note of the patterns that he recognised and those that he didn't. Most of the intricate detailing was already familiar to the librarian from other finds that they had discovered in the site; it was ornamentation that would have been familiar to any Blood Raven - swirls of High Gothic and stylised imagery of wings. However, the designs on the artefacts uncovered in this dig had a different quality from those found elsewhere in the galaxy. The images were broadly the same, but there were some subtle differences - different angles of curvature, extra strokes added to the wing-shapes, and some slightly altered characters in the script, a more archaic form of High Gothic. If anything, these designs were simply more beautiful than those Jonas was used to - less purely functional - and these artefacts were older than anything the Blood Ravens had ever come across before.

Meritia gasped, and Jonas snapped his attention away from the carvings on the stone and followed her line of sight down into the small chamber that he had uncovered beneath it. The stone slab had evidently been some kind of lid on a long, slender casket. It had been well sealed, and not a single grain of sand had found its way inside. Laying in the centre of the uncovered space was a shimmering black tablet, nearly a metre in length and perhaps half a metre wide. It seemed to contain a universe of miniature stars, glittering and winking in a complicated darkness.

Entranced, Meritia could find no words. She had never seen anything like it before; it just seemed to draw her in, capturing her eyes and her mind in an eternal instant. She had read about such materials, and had heard accounts from other Sisters who had been fortunate enough to glimpse it, but she had never dared hope that she would come so close to it herself. Legends told that it was fashioned out of the very fabric of the warp itself, rendered material by the impossibly ancient technologies of the eldar. And the warp contained no time - it was utterly timeless. This manifest fragment might be older than the galaxy itself. Her mind seemed unable or reluctant to grasp what she was seeing.

'Is that wraithbone?' asked Meritia, still staring at the object with wide, brown eyes. It seemed to thrill as she spoke its name, drawing her down to it. With aching trepidation, she stooped to look at it more closely, crouched under the lid that was still propped delicately against Jonas's finger.

The librarian closed his fingers around the edge of the heavy stone slab and lifted it clear of the exposed interior of the casket, placing it carefully onto the ground with one hand. Then he knelt softly on the sand next to Meritia and stared at the tablet. 'Yes,'

he said simply. 'It is wraithbone.' Jonas had had dealings with the eldar before, and this was not the first time that he had come across their mysterious material.

As they watched, the surface of the glistening tablet started to shift and stir. Little marks began to appear, like gashes through the fabric of space itself, revealing glimpses of something unspeakable beyond. But the marks stretched and swirled, swimming into different configurations before finally settling into a distinct pattern.

'Those are eldar runes,' said Meritia, squinting slightly with concentration as she tried to decipher their meaning.

'Yes, but ancient ones - different from any I have seen before,' replied Jonas, unable to work out what they said.

There was a long pause while the two scholars knelt at the side of the grave, gazing silently at the entombed alien object that they had unearthed in the remains of an ancient fortress.

'We should take it to the librarium,' suggested Jonas eventually, breaking the spell. 'Perhaps we will be able to translate it there.'

Meritia nodded absent-mindedly, her thoughts lofty and distant, but then she voiced the question that was also niggling at the back of the Blood Raven's mind. 'Jonas. What is it doing here?'

THE ROAR OF the engine sunk into a deep purr as the shining, red bike crested the volcano and stopped. Streams of lava ran through grooves on either side of it, rolling laboriously down into the desert beyond the edge of the foothills. The deep red sun had just broken the horizon over the sand, and its first rays burst into crimson brilliance against the armoured panels of the Blood Ravens scout-bike, bathing the flows of molten rock in a more general haze of red. After a couple of seconds, half a dozen other bikes pulled up alongside the first, flanking it dramatically against the sunrise.

Behind them, a great column of sulphurous smoke filled the sky, and a steady rain of molten rock filled the air with streaks of fire, splattering the ground all around. The volcano, Krax-9, had erupted during the night, and Sergeant Caleb's squad had been dispatched to investigate.

The monastery-outpost on Rahe's Paradise hosted two scout squads. They were on the point of graduating from the Tenth Company into one of the main combat Companies of the Chapter: it was tradition that one would go on to join the Third Company - led by the Chapter's Commander of the Watch - and one the Seventh, each of which was famous for its explorative functions and hence required some extra training for its scouts. This extra training was received on Rahe's Paradise partly because two scout squads was considered to be a suitable defensive force for such a small and relatively peaceful outpost and partly because the terrain was harsh and the people just bellicose enough to keep young scouts on their toes. The occasional raid by pirates or even by the foul greenskinned orks was simply a bonus.

There was also usually a single squad of Assault Marines stationed at the monastery itself, in case the Chapter had any need to flex its muscles on the planet or in the most inaccessible regions of the mountains. The Assault squad was seconded on a rotational basis - one being supplied by each Blood Ravens' company in turn for a period of no more than two years at a time. It was in the interest of the entire Chapter that the outpost should be maintained, but none of them could afford the loss of an entire squad on a permanent basis. Sergeant Ulyus had departed with his squad from the Second Company nearly a month ago, and Jonas was still waiting for the replacements to arrive from the Third Company - reports from Captain Angelos suggested that they had been delayed by unexpected complications on Tartarus.

Caleb scanned the glorious sunrise for a few moments, training his eyes into the red glare of the local star as fragments of falling lava sizzled against his armour. In the past, pirates and rogue traders had taken advantage of the signal disruption caused by massive eruptions to plunge down into the desert undetected. It was no secret that Rahe's Paradise was under the protection of the Blood Ravens, but it was also no secret that the Marines maintained only a minimal presence there. From time to time, the more unsavoury characters in the Imperium thought that it would be worthwhile to test their luck. Caleb was there to make sure that their luck ran out as soon as they emerged from the morning heat-haze that was already sheening over the desert.

The light was more intense than it seemed; the deep red hue belying the strength of the star and bathing everything in a warm, bloody atmosphere. Caleb squinted, waiting for his oculobe implant to filter out the obfuscatory glare. The small, slug-like organ at the base of his brain had been working inconsistently recently, but the repair facilities on Rahe's Paradise were not sufficient to deal with zygote maintenance, so Caleb was waiting for the arrival of the Third Company's apothecary. In the mean time, his vision was occasionally glitchy, and he was sufficiently irritated that he was wondering whether it might be better not to have the implant at all. Just a few moments earlier, on the early morning ride, Caleb had seen a sudden burst of bright light that almost blinded him. It seemed to have been a hallucination or an oculobular malfunction; none of the other scouts in his squad had seen anything.

'There,' said Caleb, pointing out into the desert with his gauntlet.

A black speck seemed to blink and flicker on the horizon, silhouetted against the bloodied sun. After a few seconds of staring into the light, Caleb could see that the speck was actually a constellation of even smaller figures.

'Pirates?' asked Abraim, staring alongside his sergeant.

'Perhaps,' replied Caleb thoughtfully, watching the tiny flecks move and dance against the morning sun. 'Certainly too fast to be orks.'

An instant later, and the specks disappeared.

THE ELDAR RANGER inspected the landing site quickly, checking to ensure that his team had not left any traces. He knew that they would not have done - they knew their jobs better than anyone - but their team had not survived for as long as it had by being careless. Confidence and complacency were much more comfortable bedfellows than urgency and discipline. Confident though he was, Flaetriu knew that his life and his soul rested upon his diligence; he checked the site carefully.

The elegantly curving shape of the Vampire Raider was now fully submerged under the sand. Although its twin dorsal fins protruded out of the desert, they were virtually invisible. A light-gravitic shield clung to the shiny surface of the fins, refracting and bending the surrounding light around them so that they were visible only as slight distortions in the already heat-distorted

scene. The technology was a variation on that used in the cameleoline cloaks worn by the rangers themselves. One of the clumsy mon-keigh would walk straight into them before he saw them.

Flaetriu pulled the hood of his cloak down over his face and tightened the scarf that covered his mouth. The heat change caused by the sunrise was whipping up eddies of wind, sending sheets of sand scraping against the faces of the eldar rangers. The team's cloaks were fluttering in the cycling breeze as they settled into a dull orange colour, roughly matching the hue of the desert under the red sun.

The eight immaculately camouflaged rangers climbed into their desert-pattern jetbikes, and Flaetriu checked the line. His team were flickering in and out of visibility, but their long shadows stretched out on the sand before them, as the sun continued to rise at their backs. A couple of kilometres in front of them were the first undulations of the foothills, beyond which towered the massive mountain range that ringed the planet. A huge plume of smoke pushed up into the sky above the glowing peak of a jagged volcano, and thin rivers of lava coursed down its sides in an intricate lattice.

Even from this distance, Flaetriu could clearly see the squadron of blood red mon-keigh warriors bestride their cumbersome, bi-wheeled vehicles, staring out into the desert towards his rangers. He smiled underneath his scarf, certain that the primitive humans had no idea what was about to happen to them.

Let's go, he said, without a sound, whispering the command directly into the minds of his team.

A bank of jetbikes flashed forward from each side of him, accelerating to maximum speed almost instantaneously and virtually without sound. Flaetriu sat for a moment, watching the dust trails of his team disperse in the morning wind, enjoying the heat of the sun on his back. Then he smiled again and kicked his own bike into motion. Following the Path of the Outcast wasn't always melancholy: he was going to enjoy this.

ON REFLECTION, IT was strange that the four of them had chosen such different paths. At one time, they had all been together, bonded by a commonality of purpose and even by friendship, but then something had changed in each of them and their worlds had pulled them apart. Not one of them had been content with the cycling way of the eldar, and each had plunged their souls into specific paths, grasping hold of their fates with both hands in a manner both horrifying and inspiring to the rest of their kin. They were the best and the worst of their people - magnificent and terrible. Each of them had given up their chances of a normal life on Biel-Tan, and each had condemned themselves to lives of power and agony. In their own ways, each had found the truth of the eldar soul, and they lived with a suppressed contempt for their fellow eldar, who also called themselves sons of Asuryan.

For Flaetriu the choice had been agonising. He had already spent a cycle as a seer, and had served for a time in the Aspect Temple of the Dire Avengers, but in neither path did he find his soul at ease. After centuries of life, he still felt as though he was not yet fully alive.

It was not that he disliked his fellow eldar, he simply could not understand their contentedness. They were all committed to a way of life that had been deliberately constructed to prevent them from becoming themselves, and they thought that they were happy.

In the ancient and long misremembered past, at the time of the Fall, it is said that the one who is now known only as Asurmen led the eldar into exile aboard the great craftworlds. It was he who founded the first of the Aspect Shrines, the Shrine of Asur, in the discipline of which the Asurya would cleanse their souls of the passions and savagery that had brought doom to their race.

Asurmen taught that there was a way for the eldar to harness their nature into weapons that could be used to protect their people, rather than to ruin themselves. The way of an Aspect Warrior was to channel the violence in an eldar's soul into service, transforming self-indulgence into acts of worship for Kaela Mensha Khaine, the bloody-handed god. War became a way of purging the eldar nature without encouraging the warriors to be consumed by the thirst for violence itself.

In the centuries and millennia that followed, the Asurya took the Path of the Warrior to all the craftworlds, founding first the Temple of the Dire Avengers. After time, other temples were created, reflecting the multitudinous aspects of the terrible thirst in eldar souls. In mirror images of the warrior path, other paths were established within eldar society, including the Path of the Seer. Each path permitted the controlled and disciplined expression of part of the nature of the eldar, such that their souls might never again fall into the decadence that had led to their Fall. In this way was born the Path of the Eldar - a winding road of self-discipline and self-reproach. Every craftworld eldar would spend a cycle following each of the eldar ways, taming her passions and controlling her myriad nature. In this way the eldar race hoped to escape its daemons.

Of course, the way is not clear to everyone, and the souls of a few are so passionate that they cannot easily be tamed. Such rare individuals may return to the same path over and over again - perhaps flitting between different Aspect Temples until finally meeting their deaths.

Even more exceptionally, some become trapped by their own essential tendencies, never able to leave their paths - doomed to fight for all time in the guise of an exarch, becoming the living incarnations of Kaela Mensha Khaine himself, both admired and abhorred by their fellow warriors and by all eldar. Such had been the fate of Laeresh and Uldreth. In her own way, this had also been the fate of Macha. But Flaetriu had been adamant that this would not be his destiny.

Flaetriu had seen the manner in which choices had changed his friends. Laeresh and Uldreth, in particular, had drifted apart, losing contact with their own memories and settling into a bitterness that they could not even explain to themselves. Even Macha had changed, although her movements were subtle and beyond the comprehension of a normal mind. She forgot nothing and found memories lurking in her mind that she had never seen before - memories that may not have been hers, and may not have been of things gone by in the past at all. The forgetfulness of the exarchs and the knowledge of the farseer transformed them all - each withdrew from their kin, vanishing deeply into their paths where non-travellers could not see.

There had been no call in Flaetriu's mind - he felt no compulsion to immerse himself utterly in one way or another. If anything, there was a general disillusionment with the entire eldar way and a faint sickness at the prospect of a life cycling through various distractions. He was an eldar, and he could see no point in his long life if he had to spend it denying his nature. These were dangerous thoughts, he knew, and they had led eldar into darkness and damnation before.

But Flaetriu was no traitor and, despite his misgivings, he loved his people and the craftworld of Biel-Tan. When his friends had begun to vanish into themselves, he had found nothing left to keep him there. Not wanting his dangerous ideas to endanger others, nor desiring his psychic presence to alert daemons to their location, he had taken his weapons and left the glorious sanctuary of Biel-Tan, setting himself adrift into the vastness of space, finding himself on the Path of the Outcast before he had given it any conscious thought.

Since then, Flaetriu had found other eldar of like-mind and they had formed themselves into a ranger team, patrolling the wake of Biel-Tan and eliminating anything that strayed too close to the vast craftworld. It was a peripatetic, indulgent and liberated life that brought peace to his heart. He was loyal to his race and to himself.

Most of the Biel-Tan eldar didn't even know that the rangers existed, or at least didn't like to admit it. But Macha knew. She had always had a special bond with Flaetriu - indeed, the four friends had always been very close. Macha knew that his loyalty to Biel-Tan was beyond question, and she could rely on him to act when the Court of the Young King might be reluctant. They had fought together many times before, including during the debacle with the mon-keigh on Tartarus. Unlike many of the eldar, Macha understood that the Path of the Outcast was as essential to the eldar way as any of the other paths.

'THE REPORT STATES that one of the scout patrols has come under attack, captain,' reported Sergeant Corallis, his face creased with urgency. The veteran Marine, who still served as a scout for the Third Company, had completed his training on Rahe's Paradise decades before, yet he was still surprised at the way that the news of the attack had affected him.

'You're certain that they were eldar?' asked Ikarus, taking careful note of the emotion in Corallis's expression.

'Yes. Caleb was very clear. Five or six eldar warriors in camouflage gear ambushed them while they were investigating a volcanic eruption on the edge of the mountains,' said Corallis, nodding for emphasis.

'It'S THE BIEL-TAN farseer again,' said Gabriel. His back was facing the assembled command squad and he was staring out into space through a giant view screen that dominated the wall. As he spoke, the others turned to face him, but he did not turn.

'You cannot be sure of that, Gabriel,' said Prathios calmly.

Nobody knew better than the chaplain how disturbed Gabriel had been by the events with the eldar on Tartarus, especially since they followed so closely on the heels of such trauma on Cyrene. The Blood Ravens captain was amongst the finest warriors that the Chapter had ever produced, but there was still a part of him that was merely a man. And that part could not hide from its conscience. The conscience could not be surgically removed during the Implantation Process, and they was no zygote that could completely cripple it - not even hypnotherapy could deprive a man of his humanity. That was why Chaplain Prathios was there, after all.

'Prathios is right, captain,' agreed Tanthius, eying his captain with concern. 'Eldar raids are not uncommon in that region. We have seen them before.'

'Not like this,' countered Gabriel, turning at last. 'This is an invasion.'

The other Marines stared at their captain. They knew better than to doubt him, but they also knew that there was no way that he could know anything about this "invasion". He was not a librarian, and he had no sanctioned gifts of foresight. However, he did have uncannily acute senses, and the eyebrows of the Inquisition had been raised in his direction before, particularly since Cyrene.

'You can't know that,' said Ikarus bluntly, speaking what was in all of their minds as the only librarian amongst them. 'Caleb saw five or six warriors, not an invasion force. Even a vanguard force would have been larger than that, and the main force would have appeared on the Monastery's long range sensors - the web-portal that used to be on Rahe's Paradise was destroyed centuries ago.'

'I know it's an invasion,' repeated Gabriel without anger, his blue eyes brilliant and certain. It was just a statement of fact. 'It is an invasion, and that farseer is behind it. Don't ask me how I know, I just know.'

'What do you propose that we should do, captain?' asked Tanthius, cutting to the chase. For him this was the most important question; he would follow his captain into the Eye of Terror itself if he asked him to, and he would not ask why. Gabriel had been his battle-brother for as long as he could remember, and not once had the great captain led him wrong. If he said that this was an invasion, then it was an invasion, and at the end of the day Tanthius didn't care how he knew.

Gabriel paused for a moment as he formulated an answer. The battle barge. *Litany of Fury*, in whose conference chamber they now stood, was on its way to the Trontiux system, where it would fall into an orbit around the third planet so that a small detachment of Marines, including himself, Tanthius and Chaplain Prathios, could descend to the planet's surface and conduct the Blood Trials. After Trontiux III, the *Litany of Fury* would head for the Lorn system, before finally heading for Rahe's Paradise. Even as they spoke, Guardsman Ckrius was being rapidly transformed into an initiate down in the *Litany's* apothecarion, and the Third Company had to ensure that he was the first of a new batch, not just a single, isolated neophyte.

The Third were not the only Company who found their home on the *Litany*. The Ninth was also based within its revered and venerated halls, under the command of Captain Ulantus. It was a Reserve Company, comprised mostly of Devastator squads, and it was at about three-quarter strength. Ulantus was a straightforward and direct man; he would not entertain Gabriel's fantasies, even though, as a Battle Company commander, Gabriel was technically the ranking officer on the *Litany*.

'The *Litany* will continue to Trontiux III - we cannot afford to miss this opportunity to run the Blood Trials there... Captain Ulantus can oversee the trials in my place. I will take the *Ravenous Spirit* to Rahe's Paradise, immediately,' said Gabriel eventually, confident that his plan was sound.

'I do not approve of this plan, captain,' hissed Ikarus heavily. 'We have no reason to assume that the five eldar on Rahe's Paradise are anything more than pirate-raiders. Sergeant Caleb and Father Librarian Jonas will be able to dispatch them - that is why they are there, after all. In only a few weeks, the *Litany of Fury* itself will arrive and we can deal with any residual problems then, if necessary. I am sure that Captain Ulantus would agree with me.'

'I'm sure he would, Ikarus,' replied Gabriel dryly. 'But Ulantus is not Commander of the Watch and neither is he captain of the *Ravenous Spirit*. Neither, for that matter, are you, librarian.'

Chaplain Prathios had already lowered himself into one of the chairs that ringed the perimeter of the room, surrounding the depression in which it was expected that speakers would stand to address the chamber. He watched his old friend's eyes narrow with bitterness as he spoke to the librarian, and a wave of concern washed into his mind. Ikarus was newly elevated to the command squad, following the recent fall of Isador on Tartarus, and the two Marines did not yet know each other very well. Gabriel and Isador had been like brothers, and nobody should ever have had to step into his shoes so quickly - especially after the terrible way in which he met his end.

Prathios had watched Gabriel in prayer on many occasions over the last few weeks, and even he could see Isador's tainted and ruined face plaguing the captain's already tortured mind: there was certainly little room for Ikarus in Gabriel's affections at the moment. Not for the first time in the last few months, Prathios found himself concerned for the balance of his captain's mind. Ikarus bit his tongue and nodded in silence, shifting his shoulders into a slight bow. He had voiced his opinion, in accordance with his duty, but Gabriel was right that his viewpoint was ultimately irrelevant if the captain chose to ignore him. This was not a democracy, and Gabriel was not just any captain - he was the Chapter's Commander of the Watch, charged with safeguarding the boundaries of the realm against incursions and threats. If he saw a threat to Rahe's Paradise, then he should act; Ikarus could and should do nothing to stop him.

'I will explain this course of events to Ulantus,' said Gabriel, striding over to the reinforced metal doorway, which hissed open as he approached. 'I realise that many of you have duties to perform during the Blood Trials or misgivings about my choice,' he continued, without staring back at Ikarus. 'So I will not oblige you to accompany me to Rahe's Paradise. However, I would ask that you assemble a force large enough to man the strike cruiser. *Ravenous Spirit*, and have it ready to embark immediately.' Then he was gone.

The rest of his command squad exchanged glances: a mixture of resignation, confusion, and determination flooded around the conference room. Then, without a word, they bowed to each other and left to make the necessary preparations.



CHAPTER THREE: CLANDESTINATION

THE GLITTERING, ELEGANT form of the *Eternal Star* glinted in the opening of the webway, fluttering like a giant, weightless bird of prey. It was caught in the immense shade of Biel-Tan itself, which dominated the system like a colossus, drawing all eyes to it as though trapping them with some mysterious gravity.

A faint, black light spilled out of the portal that led into the webway, sheening across the entrance like a thin film of oil, making it visible only as a slight distortion in the light cast by the stars beyond. It was not properly in the material realm, and its presence there was more suggestive than substantial. If travellers could really see what lay beyond the portal, none might dare enter it. The *Eternal Star* seemed to flex its wings, rippling with semi-visible energies as it closed on the portal, drawing away from the gravity of the gargantuan craftworld behind it. Standing on the control deck and gazing out into the portal, Macha's mind was a labyrinth of hesitations.

'I never said that it was the future,' she muttered, as much to herself as to anyone else. When there were so many thoughts echoing around inside her head, it often helped Macha to vocalise one of them just to give it some immediacy.

Without shifting the view on the screen, Macha could see in her mind the image of a sleek form slipping out of one of the huge docking bays in the underside of the craftworld. The vessel just seemed to drop silently out of the bottom of Biel-Tan, as though it had suddenly been born into the galaxy then and there, and then it accelerated towards the *Eternal Star* with smooth and effortless ease. Macha held the image in her mind for a couple of seconds and then shook her head, still uncertain that this was the right course of action: the Court had decided not to act on her vision, but to commit the Swordwind to the increasingly volatile situation on Lorn V - that was their choice, and it was not her place to challenge such decisions, only to guide them.

Yet something had convinced her that this was an exceptional circumstance. It had not been the faith of Draconir or even the personal bitterness of Laeresh; something in her soul told her that she had to go to Lsathranil's Shield, although she could not tell what it was. For some undecipherable reason, her vision of that world was clouded and hazy.

The Reaper's Blade is in position. From the command deck of his Void Dragon cruiser, Laeresh's voice eased its way directly into Macha's head and broke her chain of thought, resolving her confusion with its single-minded clarity.

The *Reaper's Blade* was a beautiful ship, almost invisible against the darkness of space because it was immaculately black from prow to stern. It was unique amongst the vessels of the Biel-Tan fleet since it did not bear the emblem of the craftworld - the seeing eye set into a triangle of power. Instead, the runic symbol of the Dark Reapers was emblazoned in shimmering silver into the star-sails that projected out of the middle of the hull on both sides, like wings. No eldar could command that ship, except for the exarch of the Aspect Temple himself - not even the Court of the Young King could order it into battle, and Laeresh was taking great pleasure in ignoring Uldreth's requests that the *Reaper's Blade* should accompany the fleet to Lorn.

The Dark Reapers occupied an unusual position in the society of Biel-Tan. Unlike the other major Aspect Temples, they were not represented in the Court of the Young King. Instead, they were a semi-autonomous force on the craftworld, which placed them on the periphery of Biel-Tan society and caused some eldar to view them with suspicion. This marginal status was reinforced by the low numbers of eldar who joined the temple during their cycle on the Path of the Warrior, which meant that the temple was always one of the smallest and most mysterious on the craftworld.

Legend had it that the Dark Reapers found their origins on the lost craftworld of Altansar, which once partnered Ulthwe as a guardian of the Eye of Terror. Many millennia ago, the Eye expanded and Altansar was caught in its grip. For centuries, the doomed craftworld battled the daemonic forces of the massive warp storm as it was slowly pulled in. But, after half a millennium of fierce resistance, Altansar finally succumbed and plunged into the Eye, never to be seen or heard of again.

From the millions of eldar who perished, their emerged only one survivor, the Phoenix Lord Maugan Ra, the Harvester of Souls. Maugan Ra was the first of the Dark Reapers, wielding the first Reaper Cannon - the Maugetar. His armour was blackened and tortured by the rapacious currents of the Eye, and in that terrible visage he dedicated himself to wreaking vengeance on those who had brought destruction to his temple. With no home left to defend, Maugan Ra adopted the maxim that remains etched into the wraithbone shrines in Dark Reaper temples to this day: war is my master, death my mistress. He had no lord other than death itself. Although Asurmen was the first of the Phoenix Lords and his Dire Avengers are the most numerous of all Aspect Warriors, there was never a warrior that more perfectly enshrined the nature of Kaela Mensha Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God, than Maugan Ra. Perhaps this is why his temple is still viewed with such dread.

The temples of the Dark Reapers are doomed to stay on the edge of craftworld society, since the craftworld on which they were born was destroyed long ago - the Reapers find their home in battle, and nowhere else. This means that none can claim dominion over them, and they answer to none other than their own exarch, aspiring always to rediscover the ancient armour of Maugan Ra and the lost craftworld of Altansar.

Hold there, replied Macha at last, her mind wandering in search of a sign that they were on the right path.

Uldreth had made it very clear that he did not approve of her departure, but there was little that he could do to stop her. She was the craftworld's primary farseer, head of the Seer Council. However, even the seers of the Council were concerned by her actions - Farseer Taldeer had foreseen a more pressing crisis on Lorn V, and her vision had been shared by a number of others. They were certain that the situation there was unfolding in Biel-Tan's future, and that they had to act now. Macha could not help but think that it was strange that she had not also seen that vision, and part of her was struggling to connect it with her own. Her intuition told her that there had to be a connection, no matter how or why it was hidden to her now. It was very unusual for the minds of the council members to be completely out of synchronisation. However, if there was a connection, it remained invisible to Macha.

'Things have come too far to stop now,' she muttered to herself, shaking her head slightly and sighing. Part of her knew that things had come this far because of the antipathy between Laeresh and Uldreth - they drove each other to the extremes of forbearance, and it was dangerous. Laeresh was out there now in the *Reaper's Blade*, and Macha could feel his smug sense of satisfaction even from the control deck of the *Eternal Star* - she was fully aware that the Reaper was doing this only partly because he had faith in her vision. He was passionate beyond good sense. For a moment she lamented the way eldar passions could escalate events so quickly. 'I did not say that it was the future.'

Just under the surface of her consciousness, Macha knew that this situation was partly her fault - although neither Uldreth nor Laeresh could remember that.

The Hand of Asuryan will guide you. It was Draconir's mind, projected from somewhere in the interior of the craftworld itself. Macha nodded at the unexpected thought from Biel-Tan.

Follow my lead, she suggested, directing her thoughts to the sleek cruiser that flanked her own.

Very good, farseer, replied Laeresh. There was an edge of eagerness in his mind.

With a sudden but smooth movement, apparently thrusting its shimmering wings back into a dart, the *Eternal Star* flicked forward into the slick sheen that filmed across the portal, and it vanished.

'Yes,' said Laeresh, smiling, as the *Reaper's Blade* shot into the webway in the farseer's wake.

GABRIEL'S FACE TWITCHED and contorted with painful concentration as his head flooded with images and memories. His eyes flicked back and forth, as though they were scanning across scenes etched into the back of his eye-lids, and beads of sweat rolled down his scarred forehead, running into streams as they hit the service studs just above his left eyebrow.

While final preparations were made for the departure of the *Ravenous Spirit*, Captain Angelos was kneeling in prayer in the Third Company's chapel, aboard the *Litany of Fury*. The heavy, gothic spire pierced out of the top of the massive battle barge, like a ritualistic gun-turret, sparkling with armaments and ornaments to the Emperor's undying glory. It was the preserve of Chaplain Prathios, who administered to the spiritual needs of the Company in the sanctity of the chapel's towering spaces.

Standing in the deep shadows behind the altar, a faint light flickering across his face, Prathios was watching the tortured figure of his captain suffer on the steps before the image of the Emperor.

It was not unusual for his Marines to suffer some minor trauma after completion of some of their most grotesque duties; it seemed to be an affliction of the sensitive minds of the Blood Ravens. The same process of genetic selection that led to the perpetuation of great numbers of librarians and scholars in the Chapter also guaranteed that all the Marines would be of unusually sensitive dispositions, even after all the hypnotherapy and psyche-conditioning. Prathios knew of some of the rumours whispered about them in the halls of other Chapters, but he was a chaplain of the Emperor and had more elevated voices to listen to than the malicious whispers of the ignorant.

When he thought back over all the things that Gabriel had been through over the last year or so, Prathios was not surprised that his soul was tortured. Despite all of the modifications and implants, despite the infernos of battle and the perpetual horrors of war, there was still a human soul hidden beneath that super-armoured shell. Immaculate duty, honour and courage could not shield his mind from everything. Every soul had a breaking point, and Prathios prayed to the Emperor every day that Gabriel's trials had not pushed him beyond his. But his behaviour had changed since Cyrene, and the incident with Isador on Tartarus had been hard on him; he had spent a lot of time in the chapel, alone with his nightmares. And now he seemed to have fixated on the eldar farseer, as though she were responsible for all the problems that currently beset the Chapter. If he were honest with himself, Prathios was concerned about his captain's state of mind, and he knew that he was not the only one who had noticed Gabriel's odd behaviour. The captain's lips were working soundlessly, as he muttered prayers and litanies of purity, combating the vicious images that stabbed at his mind with the force of his faith. The muscles in his neck bunched and knotted against the physical pain that seemed to seep through from his waking dreams.

'Gabriel, you must rest. There is no need for us to depart so soon,' said Prathios, breaking the fevered silence with his deep voice.

'There is need,' said Gabriel, slowly and deliberately, keeping his eyes closed.

Prathios said nothing for a moment, watching his captain fall back into prayer. 'Your men will follow you, Gabriel. I will follow you. But you must give us more reason than your faith. You are a Blood Raven - we do not act without reason. Knowledge is our power—'

—there is no need to lecture me on my obligations or my nature, chaplain,' interrupted Gabriel, his eyes flashing open suddenly.

'And it does not become you, of all people, to denigrate my faith. The Emperor's light guides the Blood Ravens, just as it does the rest of the Adeptus Astartes. We have no less and we need no more than that.'

The chaplain nodded, taken aback slightly by his captain's sudden venom, but acknowledging that he was right. There was nothing more glorious than opening one's soul to the guidance of the Imperial light, although the sacred Astronomican remained invisible to most servants of the Emperor, radiating through the echoing minds of astropaths and sanctioned psykers. As a chaplain, Prathios had seen glimpses of its pulsating brightness, and he was always conscious of it as a beacon in the deepest subconscious parts of his mind. But he would never claim to have seen it clearly or unambiguously in the glare of his mind's eye. Ever since Cyrene, however, he had seen Gabriel blinded by visions of its radiance, and the Blood Ravens captain had no sanctioned psychic potentials.

'You are right, captain,' confessed Prathios, stepping forward into the flickering light and bowing slightly to Gabriel. 'It is not my place to question the wisdom of your decisions. But I know that you will forgive me my concern for you and for our Chapter. I am your chaplain, after all.'

'I know, Prathios, and there is no need for talk of forgiveness,' said Gabriel gently, rising from his knees and smiling faintly at his old friend. 'We have known each other a long time, and I have been grateful for your counsel on many occasions before now. You are a wiser man than I will ever be, but I must simply ask you to trust me now.'

'Trust is not something for which you must ask, Gabriel,' replied Prathios, staring into the captain's bright blue eyes and nodding his assurance. 'Where it is deserved, it is given freely and without question.'

'Do not abandon your questions, chaplain. I am sure that we will have need for them before this affair is over. Your trust I accept gratefully, but I would never ask you to stop questioning my actions. As you said, we are Blood Ravens: to question is our nature.' The sound of an immense weight shifting made the two Marines stop and turn, casting their eyes back down the aisle of the chapel towards the huge ornamental doors that led out into the uppermost levels of the *Litany of Fury*. The ancient stone tablets that served as doors swung inwards slowly, letting a sheet of light stream in from the brightly lit corridor beyond, stretching down the aisle towards the two old friends. Silhouetted in the doorway, with his massive arms outstretched to each side, holding open the giant stones, stood the impressive figure of Tanthius. Except for his helmet, he was already sealed into his ancient suit of Terminator armour.

Tanthius gave the doors a final push, forcing them to open fully and fold back against the interior walls of the magnificent chapel with a resounding crash, flooding the cavernous space with light. He bowed sharply before he spoke.

'My apologies for the interruption, captain. The *Ravenous Spirit* is now ready for departure. We have a full complement of Marines and the servitors inform me that the service crew is also at adequate strength. The *Litany's* apothecarion will not release Ckrius into our care, so he will stay aboard the battle barge under the watchful gaze of the apothecary. In case we or Father Librarian Urelie have need of maintenance services, Techmarine Ephraim has volunteered to join us temporarily from the Ninth Company. I understand that Captain Ulantus has approved this.'

'I am not sure that he approves of it, Tanthius, but he has agreed that it would be unreasonable of him to cause a Battle Company to depart into a combat zone without any technical support,' nodded Gabriel, smiling to himself at the futile protestations that been levelled by Ulantus when he had made the request. 'Ephraim is a fine Marine, and he will be an asset to us.'

The Terminator Marine offered no response - none was required. He simply nodded his understanding. 'We await your convenience, captain.'

THE SCROLL WAS one of the oldest artefacts that they had unearthed below the monastery. Its material was akin to paper, but somehow it had survived the passage of millennia in a small, vacuum-sealed, adamantium tube. It contained a mixture of images and passages of text, inscribed by hand in some form of ink that had neither faded nor dulled over time. The reds and blacks of the lines were vibrant and brilliant, as though only penned on that very day. The illuminations were breathtaking.

As far as Meritia could tell, the scroll was titled, *The Sky Angel Steals the Light*, and it contained a folk-story of some kind. A myth perhaps. It had been written in an old and primitive version of High Gothic, hardly recognisable to modern eyes, but it was clearly the product of a culture under the influence of the Imperium of Man. The fact that she had found it in the ruins of an ancient fortress monastery led her to believe that the story had some relevance to the Blood Ravens - an implicit connection being the angel in the tide and the winged insignia that punctuated the text in the place of section breaks. It was not identical with the emblem of the Blood Ravens, but it was similar.

The Adeptus Astartes did not usually enlist scribes to record folklore or legends, and certainly not in such elaborate or ostentatiously artistic forms, so the scroll was intriguing for reasons other than merely its content.

The oddly cursive curl of the script was similar to that found on the casket in which they had uncovered the wraithbone tablet, which made Meritia think that the scroll and tablet were probably contemporaneous with each other. But the wraithbone tablet was covered in the impossible beauty of eldar runes, and this scroll was definitely the product of human artistry - its undeniable beauty being clumsy in comparison with the xenos artefact.

After Jonas had carried the tablet to the librarium, the two of them had spent some time trying to decipher its markings, but they had not made much progress. The runes were unconventionally shaped, and they seemed to swim and shift as the scholars tried to read them. After many hours, they had not got much further than the title, and they were not even sure that they had got that right: Ishandruir - The Ascension. It was going to take quite some time to translate the rest, but their only urgency stemmed from their own excitement about the find. There was no real hurry.

Returning to her little chamber for the night, Meritia had pulled out the scroll as a form of light relief. Its odd High Gothic was relatively simple to read, and the story that it told was interesting enough. As far as she could work out, it had something to do with a giant bird who could change shape into that of a man - the Sky Angel. Through a long and protracted process of trickery and deception, the Sky Angel stole a star from the evil gods who sought to keep the system in darkness. He tried to steal it for himself, but he dropped it as he fled through space, and it burst into life, flooding the local planets with light and giving them life. She was not really sure what happened to the Sky Angel after that, since the focus of the story then seemed to shift to the surface of one of the planets, where the gods remained fuming with wrath, which spewed out of the ground like lava from volcanoes.

As she read, the vox-unit in the corner of her chamber whistled delicately. In the still night air, the sound seemed unnecessarily shrill and loud, and Meritia glared at the little machine with irritation. The powerful amplifier arrays of the outpost-monastery were essential for the maintenance of communication with the rest of the sector, but they did mean that any sense of seclusion that Meritia might have enjoyed in her own chamber was entirely false. For some reason, the Blood Ravens Techmarines and even a detachment from the Adeptus Mechanicus had never been able to establish a reliable astropathic station on Rahe's Paradise. Two astropaths had been sent to the planet over the years, but both had been wracked with nightmares and agony. One had hanged himself in his cell. So the outpost relied on the slow, primitive vox technology even more than it might otherwise have done. There was a loud hiss of static, and then a voice crackled with sibi-lance.

'...ister Meritia. This is Sister PtoleMEA... en route to... e's Paradise... two days. Please acknowledge.'

Meritia just stared at the machine with mounting displeasure. Not only had it interrupted her studies, but it was now also the bearer of such troublesome news. She knew PtoleMEA - she was also of the Order of the Lost Rosetta, although the two of them had never been close. She was young and ambitious, and Meritia was not sure why she should be on her way to Rahe's Paradise. This was not the kind of posting that someone like PtoleMEA would request.

'Acknowledged,' she said simply, not bothering to repeat her message and not caring whether it was swamped in the rush of whining feedback that suddenly filled the echoing stone room.

There was no reply, and Meritia chose to interpret that as a good sign.

Part of the reason that she had answered the Blood Ravens' call for scholarly aid on Rahe's Paradise was that she had wanted to escape the internal politics of the Ecclesiarchy. There were so many agendas competing for resources in those hallowed halls, and factions were constantly at each other's throats, determined to discredit their hypotheses and research programmes. From time to time, there were even charges of heresy thrown about, when one powerful group of scholars realised that another was working on a competing project. For obvious reasons, charges of heresy within the Ecclesiarchy were taken even more seriously than such charges in other branches of the sprawling Administratum - and heresy was always the most serious of charges. The Adeptus Sororitas were in a unique and complicated position when such dramas began to unfold, since they were technically part of the Ecclesiarchy itself, but they could also be enlisted into the service of the Ordo Hereticus whenever there was need. It was more often the case that the militant orders of the Sisters of Battle would be seconded by the Inquisition for services outside the confines of the Ecclesiarchy, but from time to time the inquisitors of the Ordo Hereticus had need for the special talents of the non-militant orders, such as that of the Lost Rosetta, particularly when charges of doctrinal heresy were levelled at curators, scholars or priests.

Meritia was something of an idealist, and she sincerely believed that scholarship should be free of politics. Of course, she was aware that certain types of knowledge could be dangerous, but she was confident in the ability of scholars to draw a line between the discovery of dangerous information and the internalisation of any taint that it might contain. She was opposed, for example, to the puritans in her order who insisted that the Lost Rosetta should have no contact with alien artefacts, lest their own sacred purity be contaminated by the foul taint of the xenos creatures. She had seen Ordo Hereticus inquisitors summoned to investigate her own Sisters when it was discovered that they were analysing a lost eldar tract or an intercepted data-stream from a tau fleet. Being on her own on Rahe's Paradise was supposed to free her from such considerations, although she was aware that her willingness to leave the order's convent would be seen as suspicious in itself by some, and that her association with the Adeptus Astartes might not be looked upon too favourably by the authorities in the Ecclesiarchy itself. Nonetheless, she thought that she would at least be out of sight for a while and thus free to indulge her scholarly nature. She had also been confident that, whatever their doctrinal differences, the Ecclesiarchy could never openly claim that association with a Space Marine Chapter would corrupt one of the Sisters Sororitas.

The imminent arrival of Ptolemaea was a harsh wake-up call, and Meritia's mind raced with various explanations for the dispatch of the younger Sister. She was especially concerned since no word had been sent ahead of her by the order's Sister Superiors or by any agents of the Ecclesiarchy. It seemed that her arrival was supposed to be a surprise and, given that, Meritia wondered under whose authority the ambitious woman was really coming. She had certainly made no requests for additional researchers herself. Finally turning her face away from the little vox-unit in the corner, Meritia inspected herself in the mirror that dominated the back of the main door to her chamber. It was there mainly to reflect the daylight onto her desk in the hours before sunset, since her slit-window was inadequate to the task of providing sufficient reading light, and for some reason artificial light was damaging to some of the older texts. Indeed, some of the most interesting tracts remained utterly invisible until exposed to natural light. She stared at her grey hair, narrowing her eyes slightly in persistent disbelief. She could still remember the first morning when she had caught her own reflection in that mirror and had gasped in shock at the transformation. When she had arrived on Rahe's Paradise, her hair had been long and dark. One morning, without any apparent reason, it was shimmering and grey. She still had no idea what had happened to it, but now she was more concerned about what Ptolemaea would think of the sudden, inexplicable transformation.

THE ENGINES ROARED and poured flames down into the desert as the Thunderhawk slowly descended, blasting a wide crater into the sand as its retro-burners flared. The crimson gunship shone like a second star against the red of the rising sun. It landed with a surprisingly delicate touch, and then there was a slight delay before the hatch cracked open and lowered itself into a disembarkation ramp.

Without hesitaton or ceremony, Gabriel strode down the ramp, taking in the chilled morning air, the desert, and the black, towering shape of the Blood Ravens' outpost-monastery. He paused momentarily at the bottom of the ramp and turned to survey the horizon. Scans from the *Ravenous Spirit* in orbit had not revealed the presence of any alien craft or personnel on the surface, but Gabriel knew better than to trust that even the Imperium's finest technology could outsmart that of the eldar. He swept his eyes over the desert, satisfying himself that there was nothing there.

At the head of a line of scouts, Father Librarian Jonas Urelie stood next to Sergeant Caleb waiting for Gabriel to acknowledge them. The sand whipped around them like a heavy, red mist, but touches of gold in their armour burst with reflected light. Except for their helmets, they were in full, formal battle armour. They had not had much notice of the captain's arrival, otherwise they would have organised a more ostentatious reception - for now, the military honour of an armoured Blood Ravens librarian and scout squadron would have to suffice. Jonas was slightly concerned that Sister Meritia had declined his invitation to welcome the great captain, but he understood that it was short notice.

As Gabriel looked around, the rest of the command squad strode down the ramp behind him, fanning out into a wide formation at his back. They were fully armed and armoured, with their weapons held ready. Tanthius planted his massive feet immediately and started to track his storm bolter across the terrain. They were taking no chances.

'Father librarian,' began Gabriel, finally striding over to the older Marine and grasping his arm in greeting. 'We received news of your recent encounter with the eldar, and we are here ahead of the *Litany of Fury* to bolster your defences.'

'Captain Angelos,' replied Jonas, meeting his sparkling gaze. 'You are most welcome here, but we have seen nothing further of the eldar since they attacked Caleb's squad.' The veteran librarian tilted his head to indicate the scout sergeant on his left. 'As you can see, we are not under attack.'

'I will receive your report on the eldar shortly,' said Gabriel, sharply shifting his attention to Caleb before turning it back to Jonas. 'It is good to see you, old friend,' he said, smiling suddenly.

'It has been a long time, Gabriel,' replied Jonas, pleased that the formality had been dropped. 'We have much to discuss. Rahe's Paradise has turned out to be even more interesting than I had anticipated.'

'Father Jonas,' interjected Corallis, stepping up to Gabriel's shoulder. 'It is an honour to be back on Rahe's Paradise again.'

'Ah, young Corallis, the honour is mine,' replied Jonas, nodding his head in a show of mock respect. 'Although, you are no longer so young, I see.'

Corallis smiled and nodded in return. It was a long time since he had been stationed on Rahe's Paradise as a trainee scout, but Jonas had been in charge even then. The two had been through a lot together, and the old librarian was proud of the younger Marine's achievements. He was right, however, that the veteran sergeant was no longer a young man: much of his abdomen and right side had been destroyed by an eldar Warp Spider on Tartarus, and he was now riddled with bionics, even more than the average Marine. To recognise his valour on that cursed planet, Gabriel had elevated him into the command squad, making him a veteran sergeant despite the fact that he had been in a scout squadron only a year earlier. It was fitting that the Commander of the Watch should have an expert scout close at hand.

'Sergeant,' said Gabriel, interrupting the reunion without ill will. 'Take four bikes and run reconnaissance around the surrounding terrain. I assume that you can remember your way around.'

'Of course, captain,' replied Corallis, nodding sharply and turning to head back up into the Thunderhawk.

'Corallis,' called Gabriel after him. 'Take Ikarus with you.'

The sergeant paused to acknowledge the order, and then jogged up into the gunship, inside which the bikes were braced into the deck. Ikarus, who had heard Gabriel shout the order to Corallis, strode up the ramp behind him.

'He is a fine Marine, father,' said Gabriel, turning back to Jonas.

'Yes,' replied Jonas, watching Corallis disappear into the ship. 'He always was.'

There was a moment of silence, and then Jonas spoke again. 'Will you be conducting the Blood Trials before the *Litany of Fury* arrives, captain?'

Gabriel considered the question. 'Perhaps it would be wise to make a start, father. We may not have much time.'

Jonas inspected Gabriel's eyes again, searching for some clue about the urgency. It seemed clear to Jonas that the eldar were gone - there had been raiders on Rahe's Paradise before. Indeed, he had heard one rogue trader refer to the place as Raider's Paradise.

He wondered what Gabriel knew that he did not. He simply nodded.

'Tanthius, organise a defensive deployment around the monastery,' said Gabriel, looking back over his shoulder at the magnificent, towering form of the Terminator. 'The rest of us will move inside. The monastery is clearly the strong-point in this area.'

As he spoke, a thunderous growl echoed down the ramp of the Thunderhawk as four blood-red bikes emerged into the morning sun. They paused for a moment at the top of the ramp, and then Corallis gunned his engine, pulling the front wheel up as his bike shot forward down the ramp. As he hit the sand he threw the bike to one side and roared out into the desert, his ad hoc squadron in close pursuit.

IN THE FAINT blue light of the sanctum of the Dire Avengers' temple, Uldreth paced restlessly around the holographic image that was projected in the centre of the octagonal chamber. The three dimensional picture was intricate and complicated, laced with the glowing tracks of spacecraft and trace lines of weapons discharge. The vectors were plotted in wisps of green as luminous blue darts flickered and flashed through the image.

The exarch shot occasional glances at the shifting scene, taking in all the details in a fraction of a second. His mind had become so accustomed to strategic layouts that they no longer seemed to require any conscious interpretation. Despite the fact that the complicated image was actually a composite of two separate theatres, Uldreth could see the potentials and realities of each instantly, while an inner voice continued to rail against the reckless abandon of Macha and Laeresh.

One of the projections showed the farseer's wraithship as a burning wing of brilliance, fluttering like a mythical bird on the cusp of an impossibly black abyss. Another cruiser, presumably the *Reaper's Blade*, flickered on the edge of the image, dark and foreboding in deepest purple. The intent of the two ships was clear from their formation; they were about to enter the webway portal, at which point they would finally blink off Uldreth's chart.

The second scene, overlaid and interlaced with the first, showed a clutch of cruisers setting forth in the opposite direction, taking the vanguard of the Biel-Tan Swordwind to the Lorn system. The youthful farseer, Taldeer, was in the command ship. In painful and sorrowful tones, she had spoken to the exarchs of the Court about an unfathomable foe hidden in the depths of Lorn V. The other seers had also glimpsed shadows moving across the once glittering system, and the decision to despatch the Swordwind had been unanimous in the Seer Council - Macha had not been there to oppose it, and Uldreth was not convinced that she would have opposed it even had she still been there to do so.

The Court of the Young King had not been so united. The old Fire Dragon, Draconir, had objected to the ease with which Uldreth had offered his support to Taldeer, whilst denying it to Macha, the craft-world's most senior farseer. He had complained that the ramshackle army of orks on Lorn V was hardly a threat worthy of the Bahzhakhain, and certainly did not constitute a dark, unfathomable, or mysterious foe. The force of orks was dangerous, certainly, and its presence on an old exodite world was an insult that could not be suffered for long, but it did seem that the greenskin-hating mon-keigh were already on route to Lorn, and it seemed sensible to let the two fumbling, parasitic races kill each other for now. The Swordwind could always be sent later, to deal with the survivors, after it had followed the advice of its principal farseer in Lsathranil's Shield.

Uldreth stopped pacing suddenly and glared at the intermixed trails of fluorescent colour, as though willing them into new patterns, although he was unsure about which fleet he wanted to stop. It was too late to do much about either, but Uldreth was angry with himself for his post facto indecision. He hated that he could not control Macha, and he hated that the cursed Dark Reaper could accompany her without fear of retribution from the Court. He knew that Laeresh would be loving this. At the same

time, Uldreth could not suppress the suspicion that Macha might be right. At an unconscious level, Uldreth knew that he could and should trust the farseer, and he was not sure what prevented him from doing so. It was just a feeling, but it was complicated by invisible, subconscious currents that he could neither see nor understand.

As he glared at the racing images, Uldreth raged inside at his desire to call back the *Eternal Star*. He raged even more at the niggling certainty that he should really send out the order to arrest the Swordwind before it was irrevocably committed to the assault on Lorn. Instead, he just stared at the holographies with his green eyes burning until the *Eternal Star* blinked into the webway portal, and the Swordwind's cruisers streaked off the scope, accelerating into javelins of light.



CHAPTER FOUR: CAMELEOLINE

I HAD BEEN led to believe that Librarian Akios Isador would be here,' said PtoleMEA, as the desert wind whipped her long, red headscarf around her pale face. Her skin was porcelain-white, tinged with the faintest hints of blue, as though her veins ran a little too close to the surface. It gave her an air of elegance and fragility, belied by the harsh near-blackness of her stark eyes. Unlike the other Sisters of her order, PtoleMEA had no cloak to hide her body, and no shoulder bag in which to store her trappings. Instead, she wore a crimson and asphalt body glove that clung to her figure like a second skin. It was scarred and well worn, and was studded with pockets and holsters, in which she presumably stored the equipment that she would need as a field agent of the Order of the Lost Rosetta. It appeared to Jonas that the straps around her thighs were as likely to hold weapons as styluses.

'Isador did not land with the Third Company, Sister,' answered Jonas, intrigued to know why PtoleMEA might be so interested in the deceased librarian. 'I understand that he was killed in battle shortly before Captain Angelos brought his men here.'

'Indeed,' replied PtoleMEA without visible emotion, looking past Jonas at the cloaked figure of Meritia.

'Perhaps I may be able to offer my own services in his place,' continued Jonas. 'Or there is Ikarus Yuiron, who is part of the honourable captain's landing party. Was there a particular issue that you wished to discuss with him?'

'I am sure that there is more than enough expertise here,' answered PtoleMEA vaguely, turning her attention back to the old Blood Raven without speaking a word to her Sister.

'Yes, indeed, Sister. And I must say that it is an unexpected honour to have you here. Had you informed us of your arrival, I could have arranged a more appropriate reception for you and your escorts.' Jonas gestured casually towards the women standing on the landing ramp behind PtoleMEA. The four of them were in the shimmering power armour of the Order of Golden Light, one of the smallest of the militant Order Minoris of the Adeptus Sororitas; they occasionally accompanied the non-militant Lost Rosetta on expeditions to the less hospitable parts of the galaxy. In fact, the two orders were related historically, each splitting from the now defunct Order of Lost Light after a virulent purity sweep by the Witch Hunters of the Ordo Hereticus found its particular mix of scholarship and martial prowess threatening to the stability of the Imperium.

The Sisters of Battle held their weapons braced across their chests as they scanned the sand-fogged air for signs of danger. For a moment Jonas wondered why the Ecclesiarchy would have organised such an escort for PtoleMEA on a research trip to Rahe's Paradise - it hardly counted as a high-risk environment.

'I made several attempts to contact Sister Superior Meritia whilst in transit,' replied PtoleMEA, looking past Jonas once again. 'It would seem that my attempts were not successful.'

'It is not unusual for vessels to experience communication disruption in this region of the segmentum, Sister. But I regret that we were unable to arrange a proper welcome for you,' replied Jonas, conscious that Meritia had not yet greeted her Sister. 'As you may be aware,' he continued, looking back over his shoulder in an attempt to include Meritia in the conversation, 'we have found some interesting artefacts recently. One of them is truly fascinating, and your arrival is most fortuitous in this regard - we have been having some problems translating the script, but I am sure that we will be able to work it out between the three of us.'

'Perhaps,' said PtoleMEA, disappointing Jonas with her apparent lack of interest. She was still looking at Meritia. 'Although I have to confess that translation has never been my forte, father. I would be happy to try.'

There was a pause as the strong desert wind blew a cloud of sand across the group, dragging PtoleMEA's headscarf off her head and sending it fluttering off into the sky like a blood-red bird. She let it go without the faintest reaction.

'Sister Senioris,' began PtoleMEA at last, bowing her immaculately shaven head towards Meritia, 'it has been a long time. The last time I saw you, I believe that your hair was black. Time passes quickly, it seems.'

'Yes, Sister PtoleMEA, although faster for some than for others,' replied Meritia carefully, her muddled grey hair tangling in the wind.

'Nonetheless, it passes for us all,' enjoined Jonas with slightly forced joviality. The tension between the two women was obvious.

'That is why we are all here, after all - to study the passage of time. Come, Sister PtoleMEA, I am sure that you are eager to see the librarium?'

'Yes, indeed, father,' said PtoleMEA, breaking eye contact with Meritia once again. 'Is Captain Angelos also there in the Blood Ravens' monastery?'

'He is indisposed at present, Sister. But I am sure that he will want to welcome you himself at a more convenient time for you both.' With that, Jonas turned and strode back towards the walls of the outpost.

For a few seconds, Meritia hesitated, apparently unsure about whether to accompany the Space Marine or to wait for the Adeptus Sororitas, but then she fell into step next to Jonas, leaving PtoleMEA to organise her Sisters of Battle.

THE ETERNAL STAR slid out of the portal like a sleek fish through water, easing itself into real space with graceful certainty. It slipped rapidly through the void, decelerating quickly, as though unable to sustain its previous speed in the thickness of the material realm, even in the perfect vacuum of deep space. Reality itself exerted its own particular friction on the wraithship, making it glow faintly with a new heat.

After a couple of seconds, the *Reaper's Blade* shot out of the shimmering, oily black of the portal, flashing past the *Eternal Star* in a blaze of energy before its engines were cut and it began to slow down. The Void Dragon was a very different vessel from the wraithship, very much a product of the materium; it may have fallen behind in the labyrinthine webways that had brought the two

ancient cruisers to the fringe of Lsathranil's Shield, but in material space its engines could be counted amongst the most powerful in the Biel-Tan fleet. The myriad souls collected into the Reaper's spirit pool were happiest in the heavy void of deep space. Ensnared in her throne-room in the heart of the *Eternal Star*, Macha felt the phase shift that always accompanied a ship's movement out of the webway. It was like suddenly plunging into a wall of water, as though the air around her was abruptly rendered into something thicker and more viscous than it had been before. She gasped audibly, drawing in the relatively treacherous air, before her lungs and her mind re-accustomed themselves to normal space once again.

As the farseer sat in silence, motionless, the runes that she had previously laid carefully onto the glossy, circular wraithbone tablet in the middle of her chamber began to twitch, jitter and hiss, like shards of ice on a hotplate. A fine steam wafted into the air, making the atmosphere even thicker and more oppressive, filling the room with a sickly sweet fragrance. Macha's eyes snapped open and she stared at the suddenly animated stones, confused by their unbidden movement.

A moment later and they were a dizzying blur of motion, spinning into a tight vortex above the polished wraithbone. Macha looked on in consternation, unsure why the runes were suddenly spiralling of their accord. They were moving faster and with more energy than she had ever seen before. Reaching out her long, elegant arm, already resplendent in the white and emerald psycho-plastic armour of the Biel-Tan, she touched her finger into the miniature storm that raged before her.

It had taken her decades of patience and diligence to bring her set of runes into perfect synchronicity with her own particular psychic signatures, and the abrupt sense of alienation that slapped her as the stones repelled her touch was akin to horror. She stared in confused disbelief at the singed and smoking tips of her fingers as she withdrew them sharply from the runic maelstrom. With an explosion of emerald light, the stones seemed to detonate, spraying themselves into shrapnel and jagged shards that ricocheted around the polished, wraithbone walls of her inner sanctum. A hail of razor-sharp projectiles, like the tiny shuriken used in eldar firearms, lashed into Macha's body, lacerating the psychic shields and armoured plates with microscopic ease. Before she could rise to her feet or even let out a cry, Macha slumped forwards onto the circular tablet, unconscious and bleeding from thousands of tiny incisions.

THE HUGE WOODEN table was set up against the wall at the far end of the librarium, directly beneath the soaring arch of stained glass that reached up into the shadows of the distant, vaulted ceiling. Light streamed through the window in great shafts of colour, perforating the cool air with massive javelins of warmth. The rest of the cavernous space was riddled with book stacks, aspiring towards the far-off reaches of the ceiling, each one filled with heavy, bound tomes, many of which were concerned exclusively with the long history of the Blood Ravens on Rahe's Paradise.

Jonas stepped to the side of the table to let Ptolemaea get a better view of the shimmering black tablet that had been carefully laid on top of it. It was resting on a scarlet, deep-pile, velvet cloth, embossed in each corner with the golden wings of ravens. Set onto the surface of the dark, reflective wooden table directly in the full glare of the light that flooded in through the stained glass, the wraithbone tablet seemed to shine with vibrancy and energy, as though it harboured a life of its own.

Standing in the shadows behind Ptolemaea, Meritia could not help but gasp at the beauty of the object that they had found in the foundations of the monastery. It had an indescribable radiance that left her breathless every time she looked at it.

'It is wraithbone?' asked Ptolemaea professionally, leaning her face closer to the tablet as she spoke. 'And it is inscribed with eldar runes.' She paused, peering closely at the swimming, cursive strokes that shifted through the alien material. 'Very old eldar runes, from the look of them. I suspect that there are eldar today who would not be able to read this.' Another pause as she straightened up again. 'Very interesting,' she concluded. 'Where did you find it?'

'It was sealed in a stone casket under this very room,' replied Jonas, watching the young Sister for signs of excitement. 'The casket appears to have been decorated with ancient versions of both eldar and Gothic scripts.'

Ptolemaea seemed almost bored by the remarkable discovery. She nodded distractedly and then turned away from the librarian, scanning the hundreds of book-stacks and the shadows in the hall behind her. 'Do you suppose that Captain Angelos will be joining us?' she asked.

'He is on his way, Sister,' said Jonas, sharing a glance with Meritia while Ptolemaea faced back into the librarium. Meritia met his gaze for a moment, but then lowered her eyes back to the tablet on the table.

Just as Jonas spoke, the double doors at the other side of the librarium were pushed open and a blast of cold air swept through the hall, unsettling years of dust into brightly lit strips of colour, held in apparent suspension by the shafts of light from the window. Gabriel strode along the central aisle towards the three scholars, letting the heavy doors swing closed behind him. As he walked, he seemed to be floodlit by the beams of brilliance from the stained glass, and his highly polished armour glinted with tiny, multicoloured stars. Ptolemaea's eyes widened as the captain advanced towards her.

'Sister Ptolemaea,' he said as he approached the younger Sister of the Lost Rosetta. 'My apologies for being unable to welcome you earlier. You honour the Blood Ravens with your unexpected presence.'

For a brief moment Ptolemaea said nothing. 'Thank you, captain. I assure you that I had no intention of taking you by surprise. I made several attempts to contact Sister Senioris Meritia whilst in transit, and I had been under the impression that Librarian Isador Akios might have alerted you to my visit.' As she spoke those last words, she watched Gabriel's eyes intently. 'However, it seems that I was mistaken on both counts, for different reasons.'

Gabriel stiffened slightly at the mention of Isador's name. He returned Ptolemaea's inquiring gaze, searching for a motive. 'I was not aware that Isador had been in contact with your order, Sister,' he said, suddenly cautious. Isador had been less than stable towards the end, and, for a moment, Gabriel wondered whether this Sister had been sent to investigate him. No matter what Isador's crimes, he was still a Blood Raven, and his memory should be properly honoured.

'As you are no doubt aware by now, Brother Isador was killed in combat on Tartarus, just before the Third Company made its way to Rahe's Paradise. If there is a debt owed to you by Isador, then it will be my duty to honour it.' Gabriel bowed slightly, without taking his eyes off the woman in front of him.

'There is no debt, captain,' replied Ptolemaea, returning the courtesy of a bow with a swift nod.

'Father Jonas,' began Gabriel, letting his eyes linger on PtoleMEA just a little longer than necessary. 'What is this artefact that you seem so excited about?'

As he spoke, Gabriel walked past PtoleMEA and approached the huge table under the coloured window. Jonas and Meritia approached and flanked him on both sides, leaving PtoleMEA standing on her own behind them.

'It appears to be a piece of eldar wraithbone, inscribed with ancient runes that are beyond our understanding at present,' answered Jonas, noting with satisfaction the glint of awe that flashed in the captain's eyes as he looked at the breathtaking artefact.

'I have seen eldar tablets before, Jonas, but this is exquisite.'

'Yes, we believe that it may be one of the oldest eldar artefacts that we have encountered on a terrestrial dig,' explained Meritia.

'How long will it take to translate its content?' asked Gabriel, his eyes held transfixed by the complicated darkness in the tablet.

'We're not yet sure. But there are three of us now, so we would hope to make some progress soon,' said Jonas with a hint of optimism in his voice.

'Sister PtoleMEA and I will certainly do our best to assist with this,' agreed Meritia, glancing back over her shoulder towards the younger woman.

Both Jonas and Gabriel noticed that there was no response from PtoleMEA to this invitation, but they knew better than to ask about the internal affairs of the Sisterhood. Whatever issues existed between Meritia and PtoleMEA, they were of no concern to the Blood Ravens, so long as the two Adeptus Sororitas performed their duties, and neither Jonas nor Gabriel had ever had any reason to doubt the honour of battle Sisters before.

'What was it doing in the foundations of the monastery, Jonas?' asked Gabriel, raising a question of equal importance to that of what the inscription said.

'Our working hypothesis is that the tablet must have been an artefact captured by the Blood Ravens during a campaign and men brought back to this facility for analysis,' replied Jonas, acknowledging the importance of the question with a grave nod.

'That is obviously nonsense, father,' snapped PtoleMEA from behind them. 'I may have only just arrived, but it seems to me that this tablet was no spoil of war. You said that it was found in a casket bearing eldar and Gothic scripts? In what way would that be consistent with an artefact stolen during a battle elsewhere?'

Gabriel, Jonas and Meritia paused as they leant over the glistening wraithbone tablet, and then they slowly turned to face PtoleMEA.

'She's right, Jonas,' said Gabriel. 'There must be some other explanation.'

THE SHOTS SEEMED to come out of nowhere, like a torrent of hail from a cloudless sky. Tiny projectiles rattled against the fuel tank on Corallis's bike, riddling its armour with microscopic explosions that threatened to ignite the liquid inside. Instinctively, the sergeant hit the rear brakes, skidding the back wheel into an arc and kicking up a mist of red sand. Then he opened the throttle and the bike powered out of the cloud, roaring back towards the forest-fringe on the foothills. As the machine ploughed forward, fountains of sand sprayed up from the thick tread of the huge rear tire. Immediately, he hit the brakes again and slid the bike back through 180 degrees, bringing it round to face in his original direction once again.

Shifting like shadows in the maelstrom of sand that now filled the air, Corallis could see the flickering images of several slim figures. They were clearly using some form of reactive camouflage, but, whatever it was, it was having problems adapting rapidly enough to deal with the wafting clouds of desert kicked up by the bikes. Whoever they were, they were moving faster than anyone local to Rahe's Paradise could ever move.

To honour the battle-brothers of his scout squadron who could not yet wear helmets, Corallis never wore the combat helmet to which he was now entitled. However, on this sortie he was grateful for the dark visor that swept across his eyes, shielding them from the harsh red light of the sun and from the constant barrage of sand. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the rest of his reconnaissance team snapping their weapons back and forth, searching for their invisible foes. Ikarus was already off his bike, standing in the middle of a swirling dust-daemon with his force staff radiating flames like a beacon as he stared into the murky clouds.

Another rattle of shots ricocheted off the front of his bike, and Corallis squeezed off a volley of bolter shells from the twin-linked mount in response - he was not exactly sure where to fire, but was unwilling to let his elusive enemies feel too complacent about their camouflage.

A searing flash of blue lightning suddenly cracked out of Ikarus's staff, spiking through the red, gusting air. The jagged line of power sizzled energetically for a few seconds and then dissipated, apparently failing to root itself in a living target.

Meanwhile, the other two Marines in the recon-team were circling the fray on their bikes, keeping a constant mist of red sand spraying up from their fat wheels. Their bolters were unholstered and they unleashed the occasional experimental shot into the mire whenever they saw the flickering movement of faltering camouflage. Their circumambulations gave off an aura of confidence that pleased Corallis; they knew that Corallis and Ikarus could deal with whatever was hiding in the cloud. All the two of them had to do was prevent anything from escaping.

Corallis stared into the mist, straining his eyes behind the darkness of his visor, struggling to filter out the dizzying eddies of sand. Ikarus was probably only twenty metres away, but the sergeant could only just see his majestic form through the fog, and it was blazing with energy.

After a few seconds, Corallis realised that he was no longer under attack. Not a single shot had hit him since he had blindly returned fire with the bike's bolters. He was relatively sure that he hadn't hit anything, and for a moment he wondered whether the enemy had fled. But then he saw Ikarus stagger, as though something had struck his leg. A lance of energy jabbed out of the librarian's staff in response, but it punched into the ground next to his feet, spraying red sand where there should have been the blood of his assailant.

As he punched the accelerator on his bike, Corallis saw Ikarus fall onto one knee, the armoured plates of his left leg shattering under a silent and precise bombardment. The librarian jammed his staff into the ground to maintain his balance, and traces of blue fire coruscated along its length.

Corallis couldn't hear what was happening over the roar of his bike's engine, but in the second that it took him to close the gap he could see the speed with which the attack was taking place. Sheets of energy flashed out from Ikarus's staff, sizzling through the sand in concentric shock waves. Here and there the waves would ripple, as though breaking around invisible objects in the haze, and Ikarus followed through with great spikes of crackling flame at those points of interference. But he seemed to hit nothing. Vaulting from his bike with his bolter drawn, Corallis attempted to trace the movement of the camouflaged enemy, rattling off shells in half-calculated, half-hopeful directions. More than anything, he wanted to draw some of the enemy fire to give Ikarus chance to recover. But whoever they were, they were not biting his bait.

Without any visible attack, Ikarus staggered back, pivoting on his knee as though some force had smashed into his right arm. Corallis could hear the librarian's roar of defiance as he struggled to hold onto his staff, which spat and dripped with power despite the assault, but the sergeant could still not see the source of the attack. Whoever it was, it was clear that their target was Ikarus. The two other bikes came charging into the fray, skidding through the sand and coming to rest on either side of the beleaguered librarian, flanking him with their mechanical bulk and firepower. Without pausing, they opened up with their twin-linked bolters, perforating the desert clouds in both directions with long tirades of fire.

A stuttering movement made Corallis turn. About thirty metres to the east, he could see a humanoid figure flick into visibility, a long, dull orange cloak fluttering in the wind behind it and a scarf wrapped loosely around its face. There was a flesh wound on one of its legs, and it was limping. Although the sand storm blurred the image, this was the best shot that Corallis had glimpsed all afternoon. Almost instantaneously, the sergeant tracked his bolter across and squeezed off two rounds.

Ikarus had also sensed the movement, and a wave of psychic energy smashed into the eldar's chest just as the bolter shells punched into the side of his head. The ranger's incinerated and decapitated body dropped into a crumpled heap on the sand. After the exertion, Ikarus slumped forward, using both hands to support his weight on his staff. Corallis kept his bolter ready, unconvinced that there could have been only one. If the assailants really were eldar, it would be unprecedented for them to be alone. Even eldar pirates travelled in packs, and the long, cameleoline cloak worn by the dead one was not the kind of thing that he would expect pirates to wear.

As he scanned the haze, Corallis heard Ikarus yell once again. Turning quickly, he saw the librarian lifted off his feet, thrown back between the two Blood Ravens' bikes by an invisible blast. Before he hit the ground, another force seemed to strike at his side, spinning him in the air and severing his right arm in an abrupt fountain of blood. Ikarus crashed to the ground as the two bikes and Corallis opened up with their bolters, riddling the desert with explosive shells, strafing their fire across the vista in sweeping arcs. Then everything was silent. The Blood Ravens held their fire, although there was no evidence that their fury had hit anything. There was no movement in the desert as the clouds of sand began to settle back down to the ground. Ikarus lay motionless in the blood-stained sand, with his severed arm still clutching his force staff nearly ten metres away from him. When Corallis stooped down over the librarian, he saw that his armour was riddled with tiny holes, across his chest plates and helmet. All of the librarian's major organs, including his brain, had been lacerated and pulverised.

THE BLOOD RAVENS had been recruiting from Rahe's Paradise for a long time before they finally set up a permanent base, and the sweeping, circular amphitheatre in which they conducted the Blood Trials was built centuries before the monastery-outpost. Its stone structure had survived more or less intact since it was first erected, until one of the local volcanoes, Krax-7, had erupted and spilt molten rock up against its north face, swamping the thick, curving wall in a lava-flow, making it look as though the edifice had been carved into the side of the volcano itself. An earthquake had then cracked straight through the arena, leaving a deep jagged ravine cut across the wide floor. The chasm dropped through the thin tectonic plate down into the liquid magma beneath, and thick sulphurous gases poured out of the rift continuously. The ravine had never closed again, and the river of molten rock had simply been incorporated into the trials that were hosted within the amphitheatre.

Gabriel stood on the centre-stone of the great arch through which the crowd of aspirant warriors poured into the arena. His armour glittered in the red sun, glowing with life and tinted with gold. On either side of him rose the daunting statues of two of the first Blood Ravens chaplains to come to Rahe's Paradise, Elizur and Shedur, resplendent in their ornate death masks, each brandishing their staffs of office - the sacred Crozius Arcanum. The statues were nearly twice the height of Gabriel, and he was proud to stand between them, staring out into the volcanic mountains as the sun started to sink behind them.

Behind Gabriel, inside the amphitheatre, standing on a stone pedestal at the opposite end of the arena, lit by a conical beam of red sunlight that shone through the arch below Gabriel's feet, Prathios held his own Crozius into the air for the assembled crowd to see, and silence fell. He was bedecked in full battle armour, complete with his own ceremonial death mask - the contorted and tortured face of a beast, half man and half bird. The sudden silence made Gabriel turn away from the mountainscape outside and look back at the scene, casting his own long shadow across the crowd towards his chaplain. For as long as there were Marines like Prathios, he reflected, the future of the Blood Ravens would be secure.

The arena was full of warriors already, pressed in next to each other like cattle in a corral. Their clothes were poor, worn, and ripped, and Gabriel could hardly identify their various political and familial allegiances from their ragged attire. However, although they were all pressed in so intimately, there was no jostling and no antagonism - these were men who would not hesitate to kill each other if they met outside this amphitheatre, and their restraint spoke eloquently of their awe for the Blood Ravens. Despite their ragged and ramshackle appearance, Gabriel was pleased to see the glints of finely honed and immaculately polished blades throughout the throng. These were warriors, after all, and they seemed to have their priorities right.

As the Blood Ravens captain stared down into the crowd, with the blood-red sun at his back, the bursts of light from the well-kept blades of the aspirants seemed to flicker and flash like tiny explosions in the throng. He saw them as starbursts of light, surging with bloody colours, and for a moment he was transfixed.

Then the lights began to blur together, pulsing as though driven from a common source, casting a haze of red over the scene and taunting Gabriel's senses with dizziness. He reached out a hand to steady himself against the statue of Elizur, shifting his weight against the heavy stone monument in an attempt to prevent himself from falling forward into the arena. As his hand punched into the image of the great chaplain, it seemed to fall through the carved rock, plunging into the material as though it were little more than a viscous liquid. As Gabriel slumped over to the side, his body crashed into the statue, which now seemed cold and hard. Without his helmet, Gabriel's head smacked into the rock and then scraped down it as he slid to the ground. Even in his half-conscious state, he could feel the tear of pain as the skin on the side of his face was grazed and ripped by the impact and abrasion. Blood ran down his cheek and neck, and he could taste its metallic tang in his mouth.

For some reason, Gabriel's Larraman's organ did not seem to activate and blood continued to gush out of the wound on the side of his face as he lay on top of the arch between the feet of Elizur and Shedeur. It felt as though his eyes were filling with blood, and the scene within the auditorium below was cast into a deep red hue, as though viewed through a bloodied lens. Just at the edge of his awareness, Gabriel thought that he saw Prathios glance up towards him as he addressed the crowd, explaining to them that most of them would die over the course of the next few days. Even more vaguely, Gabriel was aware that a number of faces in the arena had turned towards him. They did not point or cry out. They drew no attention to him, and their faces seemed awash with compassion.

As he struggled to bring the faces into focus, one of them spiralled up out of the crowd towards him - its clear green eyes and braided blonde hair fixing themselves into Gabriel's mind. At the same time, a choir of voices started to chant into his ears, beginning with a single, soaring note of silver purity. The music began to swirl in sweeps of stereo as it grew louder and more voices joined the first, making Gabriel's mind spin in his head and bringing the gut-wrenches of nausea. For a moment, he thought that the aspirants were singing, but he quickly realised that these voices were from somewhere else entirely.

After a few seconds the voices reached a sickly crescendo, always verging on cacophony and then finally succumbing to it. Together with the music, the spiralling face of the blonde boy span faster and faster until its flesh started to contort and twist, finally ripping and being torn from a rapidly disintegrating skull. As the head collapsed into sprays of pulp, the whole amphitheatre seemed to be screwed into a giant spiral, curdling the entire scene as though it were painted on a vortex of oil. Gabriel couldn't move. He just lay at the feet of the chaplains and closed his eyes, waiting for the confusion to pass; he had suffered from visions before - scenes of hell and chaos afflicting the people of Cyrene - the imploring face of Isador as he died at the end of Gabriel's own blade. But closing his eyes brought no respite, and the heinous choir seemed to sing with increased vigour in the sudden darkness, bringing a sickly red light into his thoughts with each glorious note. For a moment, Gabriel reached out for the choristers, realising that they were a beacon of sorts, that there was something pure, silver, and pristine hidden beyond the nausea. But then he lost consciousness altogether.

SLEEP HAD BEEN the neophyte's only solace, and now the Blood Ravens were about to take that away from him too. Ckrius had been pushed rapidly through the first five phases of the implantation process - a process that would normally have taken several years. During the process, he had experienced precious few moments of sleep, in which pain, surgery and transformation could be forgotten, but they had kept him relatively sane. Of course, the apothecary was not overly concerned about Ckrius's sanity or his state of mind during the first five phases strength of mind was essential, but sanity was a relative concept and not necessarily an asset to a Space Marine. In any case, phase six would begin the process of eradicating any significant personality flaws. After its initial implantation, the catalepsean node would deprive Ckrius of sleep, thus preventing his brain from launching its automatic defences of his personality whilst a programme of hypnotherapy fashioned him into a Marine. Later on, the implant would enable him to regulate his own circadian rhythms by isolating different sections of his brain and letting each sleep in turn - at no stage in the future would Ckrius dream in the way that he did before. He would become able to sleep while he was still awake.

Over the course of recent centuries, there had been some whispered rumours that the phase six zygote had suffered a slight mutation in the Blood Ravens. In response, the librarian fathers of the Chapter had made some slight alterations to the long-term programme of hypnotherapy that all Marines continued to receive, even after they completed their ascensions into the Adeptus Astartes. It was hypothesised that the Blood Ravens' catalepsean node continued to interfere with the ability of Marines to sleep normally even after the implant was fully embedded and control of its functions should have become voluntary. The result appeared to be that some Blood Ravens never had any dreams of any kind, and the Chapter's leaders were concerned about the effects that this might have on their Marines' states of mind. Nonetheless, the zygote continued to be implanted in every initiate because, without it, it would be impossible to conduct the intravenous hypnotherapy required to alter the nervous systems of neophytes to sustain the other implants. And, in the final analysis, the Chapter maintained its faith that the node functioned as it should.

Standing in the observation gallery of the Implantation Chamber, Captain Ulantus was struck with a mixture of surprise and admiration for the youth: after all, he was still alive. If he had to be honest, Ulantus had thought that Gabriel had made a mistake to try and put someone so old through the process, no matter how much need there was for new initiates. It was dangerous for the boy and potentially a tremendous waste of resources for the Chapter. However, not for the first time, Gabriel had proven Ulantus wrong - although he would never admit it in public.

The apothecary's mechanical, skeletal, metal arms were twitching away feverishly under the adamantium slab on which the wide-eyed Ckrius was strapped. The piercing sound of drilling cut through the chamber as the device started to cut up through a hole in the table into the occipital bone in the back of Ckrius's skull. The horror on the neophyte's face was absolute as his body struggled and knotted against his restraints, desperate to yank his head away from this egregious invasion. His eyes bulged in unspeakable, reflexive panic, as though this were the worst of all the tortuous procedures that he had endured.

Ulantus watched the boy's face with something approaching sympathy; he had once been the man lying on that tablet with a shrouded, augmetic, inhuman-human drilling into his head, and he knew the horror of it. However, he also knew that if Ckrius survived this phase, he would do so by convincing himself that it was the worst thing that he would ever have to endure. His mind

would be screaming that he just had to hang on for a few more minutes, then he would be able to sleep and prepare for the next implant, which couldn't be as bad as this one. Hence, Ulantus knew that Ckrius would only survive because he was ignorant: there would be no sleep and the procedures still to come made this one seem like nothing. In the captain's eyes there was sympathy, pity and disgust in equal measures, but his heart was burning with pride that all Blood Ravens had made it through this terrible ordeal. If he survived, Ckrius would also learn to despise the weak-minded optimism that got him through this day: hating who he once was would help him to forget it. If he didn't, he'd be dead.

The high-pitched whining of the drill abruptly changed into a crunch and then it growled as the bit sunk into something moist and soft, before accelerating into a shrill whir as resistance to its motion vanished. Ulantus saw a wet deposit fall under the table and then watched the apothecary's mechanical arms twitch with renewed motion as it manoeuvred the tiny implant into place.

Despite his well-practiced scepticism about Gabriel, Ulantus found himself hoping that the young neophyte would pull through. He had been less than impressed when the Commander of the Watch had decided to take his strike cruiser off to the other side of the segmentum on what appeared to be a whim, leaving Ulantus and the Ninth Company to complete the recruitment sweep of the Trontiux and then Lorn systems, as well as leaving Ckrius in his hands. But Ulantus took to responsibility well, which was why he had been made captain at such a young age, and it hadn't taken him long to adopt Ckrius as his own. It had only been a matter of hours after the *Ravenous Spirit* had departed that he had made his way down to the *Litany of Fury's* Implantation Chamber to check on the boy's progress.

As he watched, the heavy doors to the chamber slid open with a hiss of decompression, letting a beam of light into the dimness inside and sucking a jet of noxious gas out into the corridor beyond.

'Captain, I thought that I might find you here,' bowed Sergeant Saulh.

'Sergeant - you were right. What news?' asked Ulantus, stiffening his posture into an affectation of formality.

'News from the Lorn system, captain. It seems that the local regiment of guardsmen is under attack by a horde of orks,' reported Saulh.

Captain Ulantus nodded his head. 'Understood,' he said. 'Have they requested our aid?'

'No captain. They have made no such request,' replied Saulh. 'The report suggests that they are confident that they should be able to bring the situation under control by themselves.'

'Very well. Tell them that we will be there presently, but that we will first continue to the Trontiux system as planned. In the absence of Captain Angelos and the Third Company, the *Litany of Fury* is not in a position to split its forces at the moment. Tell the guardsmen of Lorn V to keep us apprised of the situation there.'

With that the sergeant nodded and withdrew from the chamber, leaving Ulantus with his thoughts. Trust Gabriel to be off gallivanting around Rahe's Paradise when the greenskins decided to invade Lorn. He shook his head and sighed audibly. Casting his eyes over at Ckrius once again, he turned and strode out of the chamber, heading for the command deck.

JUST ON THE edge of hearing, Gabriel could sense voices speaking in hushed tones. His eyes were closed and his head was throbbing with a numbed, dull pain. As he lay there, memories started seeping back into his mind. He could remember organising the Blood Trial ceremony with Prathios. He could remember climbing up onto the apex of the great arch to watch the long procession of warriors making their way into the amphitheatre, and he could remember standing proudly between the magnificent figures of Elizur and Shedeur. Then things became a bit hazy. There were some images of a blonde haired man with green eyes, who may have been one of the aspirants. There had been an abrasive blow against his head, and he remembered the sensation of heavy bleeding down his face, which explained the pain now. But the details were vague.

Opening his eyes, Gabriel saw the familiar shape of Prathios standing in the doorway to his cell in the monastery. He was talking to somebody in the corridor outside, saying something about Cyrene and psychological traumas. From where he was lying, he couldn't see to whom the chaplain was talking.

'Prathios,' he said experimentally. 'What happened?'

Gabriel reached his hand up to his face and pressed his fingers against the side of his head, where the fresh wound should have been. His fingers quested across his skin for a few seconds, searching for dried blood or even fresh scar tissue, but there was nothing. His skin was laced with scars, but they were the old marks that he had earned over the course of long service with the Blood Ravens. Nothing new.

The chaplain nodded quietly to the invisible figure in the hallway and then turned into the room to face Gabriel. He walked slowly over to his old friend.

'Gabriel, you fell.' Prathios's face was lined with concern.

'Fell?'

'Yes, while I was opening the trials. You staggered and then fell. By the time I reached you, you were already unconscious,' said Prathios softly, watching his captain's eyes carefully.

Returning the chaplain's gaze with an even stare, Gabriel swung his legs over the side of the recuperation tablet on which he was lying. For a moment he thought that he saw his friend searching his soul.

'I banged my head,' he said, his hand still resting on the side of his face. 'It was bleeding.'

'No, captain, there was no blood,' replied Prathios, holding Gabriel's eyes for a little longer. 'There was no sign of damage when I got to you. And Techmarine Ephraim ran some checks on your armour when we got you back here - nothing.'

'I can see what you are thinking, chaplain,' said Gabriel, his eyes hardening. 'But this was no attack of conscience. It was not the inferno of Cyrene that filled my head, as it was on Tartarus. But there was blood. The air itself was weeping blood.' The images were flickering back through his mind as his spoke.

Prathios nodded gravely. As the Third Company chaplain, Gabriel's visions put Prathios in a delicate position. He was well aware that a Space Marine captain should not have such visions, indeed that they may be signs of a taint. However, he could see reasons behind his old friend's episodes, and Gabriel had never permitted them to lead him astray. If anything, his visions of the choir of

the Astronomican on Tartarus had inspired him to heroics of legendary proportions. In Prathios's mind, the captain was not suffering any daemoniac or psychic taint, but rather was afflicted by some kind of psychosis. The Exterminatus of Cyrene, Gabriel's homeworld, had been a heavy burden for the captain to bear - it had been launched at his command. And then on Tartarus, the sole other survivor of Cyrene, Gabriel's life-long friend and battle-brother Isador had succumbed to Chaos, and Gabriel had been forced to kill him himself. No matter how augmented, disciplined and even superhuman the Adeptus Astartes might be, the human mind could only take so much.

As he stared at the fierce and defiant face of his captain, Prathios could not help but wonder whether the Third Company's inexplicable dash to Rahe's Paradise was not in itself evidence that Gabriel was too close to the edge.



CHAPTER FIVE: PHANTASMS

EVEN FROM THE very edge of the system, where the webway portal spilt the sleek eldar cruisers back into real space, Laeresh could sense the presence of the mon-keigh. They were like a stench in the psychic wash that swept through his mind. The warp signatures in the region of Lsathranil's Shield had always been unusual, but Laeresh was not expecting to find the ugly dissonance of humans already mixed into the streams of consciousness that flowed through the apparent vacuum of space. It was as though an animal had died and fallen into the current upstream, filling his senses with atrophy and poisoned decay. His long, elegant face grimaced slightly in revulsion, even before the *Blade's* long-range scanners confirmed the presence of an Imperium strike cruiser in orbit around the fourth planet.

In an involuntary reflex, Laeresh's upper lip curled back into a snarl. 'Cleanse the stars,' he muttered, half to himself. 'War is my master, death my mistress,' he whispered, and the *Reaper's Blade* surged forward towards the offending planet as though responding directly to his words.

Wait. It was a familiar but weak and hesitant echo of a thought, prodding at the edge of his consciousness as though trying to find a way in. Laeresh squinted, shutting the voice out and filling his thoughts with purpose: war is my master. The putrid stench of the mon-keigh could not be suffered around Lsathranil's Shield: death is my mistress.

The *Reaper's Blade* streaked away from the inconstant form of the *Eternal Star*, leaving it glowing on the cusp of the webway portal. After a few seconds, Laeresh registered the fact that Macha's wraithship was not following his lead, but his thoughts were already in the heat of the battle to come and he dismissed her absence as a strategic mistake rather than a significant communication. The *Blade* was more than a match for any of the cumbersome, ugly vessels of the Imperium - he didn't need the wraithship's support to deal with a single strike cruiser.

Wait. The echo came again, persistent and pressing, albeit still weak and feeble. The thought had a familiar quality that Laeresh refused to recognise, shutting it out as his Void Dragon cruiser flashed through the edges of the system, heading in towards the fourth planet.

As the *Reaper's Blade* closed, its frontal pulsar lances erupted with power, sending a volley of high-energy laser bolts searing through the vacuum towards the mon-keigh vessel. In tight formation, a clutch of Phantom torpedoes flashed along in the wake of the energy discharge.

The two vessels were still too far apart for a proper engagement, but long distance strikes were what the Dark Reapers were famous for, and the Void Dragon had been specially adapted to match the tactics of the Aspect Temple: the lance blasts would soften up the enemy's shields before the torpedoes impacted. It was a deep space vessel, capable of supporting the Dark Reapers for years or even decades at a time, if the exarch chose not to take it back to the Biel-Tan craftworld straight away. In fact, it was one of the very few Dragon-class cruisers that contained its own Aspect shrine, so that the warriors on board could be spiritually self-sufficient for longer periods. The spirit pool of the *Reaper's Blade* contained only the souls of deceased Dark Reapers, making it a ritually pure vessel for the exarch and his glorious army - like a miniature recreation of craftworld Altansar, for which the Void Dragon continued to search the deepest reaches of space. The refusal of the Dark Reapers to blend their souls with those of the other Biel-Tan eldar in the craft-world's infinity circuit excited both resentment and relief from the other members of the Court of the Young King. Nobody knew what effect their vengeful souls would have on the balance of that circuit, especially since there were now thousands of them in the *Reaper's Blade* itself, stored up over the centuries in the hope that they might one day be released into the craftworld of Altansar once again.

Wait. The echo was louder this time and more urgent, as though the source was drawing nearer or recovering its strength.

The volley of lance fire streaked towards the Imperium's vessel, which was beginning to pitch around to face the charging form of the *Reaper's Blade* and to bring its own frontal batteries into play. Laeresh also assumed that the mon-keigh would be unimaginative enough to place their thickest armour on the prow of their cruisers, so he reasoned that the apparently aggressive move was actually a defensive manoeuvre. Despite himself, he nodded slightly, surprised that the clumsy fools had even noticed that they were under attack: he was certain that their primitive sensors could not detect the Phantom torpedoes, and he was fairly sure that they would have great difficulty resolving the continuously shifting signature of the *Reaper's Blade* into a constant, definite image. Of course, even the mon-keigh would be able to see a volley of blind-ingly bright laser bolts heading straight for them, eventually.

Wait! The thought was insistent and powerful, activating something primeval deep in Laeresh's mind. His aggression subsided for a moment, and the *Reaper's Blade* slowed down, falling behind the dark, speeding flecks of the torpedoes.

As the Void Dragon slowed it was suddenly overtaken by a blur of light, swooping past it like a majestic bird. The *Eternal Star* drew itself up in front of the *Reaper's Blade*, blocking the route of the Dark Reapers' cruiser. As it did so, the lance bolts smashed into the prow of the distant, ugly Imperium vessel in orbit around the fourth planet. A second later, and the Phantom torpedoes ploughed into the cruiser behind them, detonating on impact and sending out concentric rings of shock waves into the surrounding space and the upper levels of the planet's atmosphere. With only a fraction of a delay, a burst of fire erupted from the Imperium's vessel as a flurry of torpedoes were sent chasing through space towards the eldar cruisers.

Laeresh watched the exchange taking place on the view screen in front of him, cursing Macha under his breath for thwarting his attack. He watched the slow little signals of the torpedoes heading for the *Eternal Star*, and he shook his head in dismay. By the time those pathetic rockets reached the wraithship, it could be on the other side of the planet, and the Void Dragon could be half

way out of the star system. Why would Macha seek to prevent the Dark Reapers from ending this battle at long range, where the mon-keigh's weapons would be ineffective?

Laeresh, wait, came Macha's thoughts, firm and resolute.

I await your leisure, farseer, replied Laeresh, his thoughts full of repressed bitterness.

No, Laeresh, you await direction. Her mind seemed thin and tremulous, as though speaking whilst labouring for breath. *There is more to this battle than an Astartes cruiser, Laeresh...* Her thoughts faded into silence before starting up again, fainter than before. *Follow me*.

With that, the exquisite form of the *Eternal Star* seemed to flick its wings and sweep back out towards the edge of the system. For a few seconds, Laeresh stood on his command deck staring fixedly at the amplified image of the mon-keigh cruiser on the view screen before him. The little torpedoes were visible on the screen now, like small points of light or insects crawling over the *Blade's* sensors. He shook his head again in resentment, and another flurry of Phantom torpedoes streaked out of the Void Dragon's prow, tearing invisibly through the distance between it and the mon-keigh.

As the *Reaper's Blade* banked and set off in pursuit of the *Eternal Star*, Laeresh laughed inwardly at the thought that his rockets would hit the enemy cruiser before the mon-keigh's weapons had even reached his launch location. What's more, the ignorant, myopic humans would probably not even know that they were still under attack, or notice that their foe had already left the system.

HUGE TREES LEANED their great branches together far overhead, until the tips of their broad foliage touched, closing off the sky with a blanket of translucent green. Below the canopy, PtoleMEA could hear the chattering of birds and the howls of animals that she could not recognise. Rain fell heavily, but in patches, forcing its way between the interwoven leaves above and falling as sheets through the cracks. The constant drumming of water filled PtoleMEA's ears until the screeches of unseen animals cut through it, punctuating the deep and indecipherable language of the jungle. She narrowed her eyes in concentration, as though trying to understand what was being said.

As she stared up into the canopy, watching the torrent of bulbous raindrops grow larger as they fell towards her nearly-black eyes, something hissed through the moist air by her ear, sizzling against the falling rain.

Turning, PtoleMEA saw a rush of animals come charging out of the undergrowth, trampling the plants beneath hooves and ripping them into shreds with claws and talons. It was a stampede, like an immense ocean wave rumbling towards her. There was no way that she could stand against the tide and, frantically, she scanned the immediate terrain for some cover or high ground. But there was nothing. She checked behind her, hoping to find the glorious figures of four golden battle-sisters with their weapons primed. Nothing.

In an action that would haunt her for the rest of her life, PtoleMEA slumped to the ground, pulling her head down to her knees, and closed her eyes. She muttered a silent prayer to the Undying Emperor, repeating it over and over again as though the words themselves would flood out into the space around her and shield her body from the bestial rampage.

A warm wind crashed into her body, rolling her over onto her back and ripping at the already worn fabric of her body-glove.

Despite her hands clasped over her head, her crimson headscarf was torn from her and was whipped up into the jungle canopy in an instant.

And then there was a moment of calm. Opening her eyes, PtoleMEA looked around and found that the animals had all vanished, although the jungle around her now lay in trampled ruins.

Crawling back to her feet, another projectile hissed past her ear. There was a pause and then another flurry of shots, zipping through the rain and leaving a faint trail of steam in their wake, like miniature contrails.

Emerging from around the edge of the sudden clearing of ruined foliage, PtoleMEA saw a single, slender, humanoid figure leap and roll as it hit the ground. It didn't stand up again. A second figure burst out of the tree line, this one jogging backwards with a firearm unleashing a hail of projectiles back into the jungle from which it had just emerged. Then a third and a fourth, each hurrying in retreat across the clearing, firing constant tirades into the deep shadows of the jungle. After a few seconds, the makeshift glade was full of retreating eldar warriors, each filthy with combat, their green and white armour scratched and beaten with the scars of conflict. They didn't even seem to notice PtoleMEA behind them.

The orderly retreat was on the point of breaking. Flecks of fire and shards of death slid out of the jungle shade, slicing into the eldar as they returned fire desperately. But they were falling. Not a single warrior had yet made it past PtoleMEA, and she was standing in the middle of the trampled clearing. The eldar were being cut to pieces as they retreated. Limbs were being severed by whatever projectiles were searing out of the jungle in pursuit of them, sending the eldar stumbling to the ground, where they continued to return fire until they were lacerated beyond any hope of recovery by concentrated volleys of fire from the hidden depths of the jungle.

Soon, there were just two eldar left in the glade - a beautiful female, shimmering with an intense psychic radiance that seemed to repel all attacks, and a robust warrior clad in horrifying black armour. They stood directly between PtoleMEA and the invisible assailants in the jungle beyond. As she watched them, PtoleMEA saw an immense crack of power lash out of the trees, like a sheet of lightning. It came racing through the clearing in an instant, exploding into an immense white fireball against the coruscating shield projected by the eldar witch. PtoleMEA strained her eyes to see through the flames to the source of the power and thought that she saw something black and glittering in the jungle. Then the huge fireball expanded even further, engulfing PtoleMEA herself in an icy coldness that simply erased her senses.

'PtoleMEA!'

A familiar voice jabbed at her consciousness, prodding her back into wakefulness and making her mind swim against the raging currents of icy, white fire that seemed to engulf her.

'PtoleMEA!' repeated Meritia, shaking the younger woman by her shoulders. But still she did not open her eyes. Her already pale skin was bone-white and frosty but beaded with sweat. She was quite motionless, but her face was rent with angst, as though a terrible turmoil was raging inside, and perspiration coursed around the curve of her perfectly hairless head.

'PtoleMEA, you must wake up,' insisted Meritia, pressing her voice firmly against the apparently prematurely rigamortised body. When she still got no response, she slapped the woman across her face, leaving a red palm-print clearly visible against the porcelain pallor. There was an urgency about the Sister Senioris that spoke of deep understanding and empathy.

'No!' screamed PtoleMEA as her eyes snapped open and she flung herself bolt upright on the sleeping-tablet. Her wide pupils contracted rapidly in the sudden light but then dilated again in panic as she looked frantically around the small cell in the Blood Ravens' outpost, which comprised her living quarters whilst on Rahe's Paradise. After a few seconds of uncomprehending and hysterical searching, her wide, wild eyes calmed and she lowered her head back down to the thick, bound book that served as her pillow.

Meritia nodded in silent companionship and then turned away, her cloak sweeping round behind her as she strode directly out of the little chamber, leaving the younger Sister alone with her thoughts.

Watching the Sister Senioris vanish out of the cell without a word, PtoleMEA's mind raced with fears. The residue of her nightmare coated the inside of her head, leaving her thoughts muddled and sullied in the darkness. It was unlike any dream she had ever had - more like a vision, and that in itself was a horrifying thought. She was no stranger to the work of the Ordo Hereticus, and she knew what fate awaited those who experienced unsanctioned visions. She had seen such fates administered before, occasionally as a result of her own investigations.

Involuntarily, she laughed out loud, feeling her chuckle slip thickly into a hacking cough, making her sit up again to ease the pressure on her chest. The irony of being sent to investigate possibly heretical visions in a Space Marine captain and then to experience such visions herself did not escape her, and for a moment the irony overtook the terror in her mind. But only for a moment.

In fact, she had suffered a slight hallucination on the journey to Rahe's Paradise, just as her gunship had been released into the system from the *Incisive Light*, the Ordo Hereticus cruiser that had brought her most of the way from her order's convent on Bethle II. She had dismissed it as a side effect of the warp jump from which the *Incisive Light* had just emerged, but it now seemed possible that it had represented the birth pains of whatever afflicted her now.

And what had the vision been about? Although she had listened to the inchoate ramblings of heretics before, spouting the incoherent and delirious details of their blasphemous visions, she had never had to organise such visions into words herself. The words were always given to her by the foul witches, and then she simply had to interpret the language and reach some kind of judgement. Understanding had always been a linguistic exercise for her, and now she found that there were no words for her experience. As her mind tumbled and reached for phrases that would bring shape and form to her memories of the nightmare, she realised that every description that she could formulate made her sound like a witch: animals and aliens on a strange world being attacked by an unidentifiable force that struck her with brilliant, icy flames. Her reason rebelled: was it the case that people would always sound like witches when they tried to describe genuinely new experiences? After all, she was no witch.

Am I a witch? She was suddenly unsure.

I am no witch! She was fierce with resolve.

But the content and the fact of the vision were not the only shocks. As her mind started to function properly again, PtoleMEA ran the events that occurred after she had regained consciousness back through her brain. There was something else: Meritia had acted very strangely too, as though she understood what was happening to her. There had been a look of resigned solidarity in her eyes when she nodded to say goodbye. What did the Sister Senioris know about her dreams? Was she somehow implicated in their occurrence or form? If not, could PtoleMEA dare broach the subject of unsanctioned visions with a Sister Senioris of the Order of the Lost Rosetta? PtoleMEA shook her head in agonising frustration as she realised that she would not have hesitated to turn Meritia in to the Ordo Hereticus had the elder Sister come to her with such a story.

SERGEANT KOHATH STARED down at the rusty, red planet of Rahe's Paradise, watching its giant diagonal ring of mountains and volcanoes slowly rotate. Most of the senior Marines from the Third Company had accompanied Captain Angelos down to the surface, leaving Kohath to hold the fort. The Blood Ravens' serfs who served as the bulk of the crew on the command deck of the *Ravenous Spirit* were poring over their control panels, which were clucking and chattering irritably.

'Well?' prompted Kohath, waiting for a definitive answer. 'Can you see anything?'

There was no reply, as the serfs continued to concentrate on their machines, none of them daring to give a response before they were absolutely sure. Knowledge was valued by all Blood Ravens; ignorance and foolishness were not tolerated lightly, especially not amongst the Chapter's own pledge workers.

The instruments had registered a slight interference signal on the edge of the system, but it had vanished almost the moment that it had appeared. The serfs were feverishly checking to verify whether it had been the ghostly signature of another vessel or whether it had been merely a blip in the ship's machine spirit. The local system was notorious as a hide-out for pirate-raiders, and the Blood Ravens could not afford to be seen to tolerate their presence, especially while there was a fully armed strike cruiser in orbit around the main habitable planet. In addition, Captain Angelos had made it very clear to Kohath that he should keep a constant watch for eldar infiltrations into the system. He seemed to believe that there was an imminent threat of invasion by the mysterious aliens, although nobody seemed entirely sure why. Father Librarian Jonas Urelie had certainly been surprised by this view when Kohath had checked in with him a short time earlier.

'There's nothing, sergeant,' said Reuben finally, glancing up from the glowing green screen over which he was hunched. 'It must have been a glitch.'

'Very well,' nodded Kohath, apparently satisfied by the eventual confidence of his serf. Nonetheless, he clicked the view screen to shift its orientation, bringing the scene behind the *Ravenous Spirit* into relief. In the far distance, he could make out the slow

perambulations of the outer planets as they came into alignment, eclipsing each other in a faint ring of light. For a moment, he thought that he saw a tiny glimmer, little more than a fleck of light dancing around the farthest planet, where it would normally have been hidden in the glare of the planet's reflected light. Then it was gone. It was probably a moon or even an asteroid orbiting the distant world - the outer reaches of the system were peppered with space debris.

As he watched, the little glittering speck reappeared and then disappeared again, blinking like an inconsistent and far-off beacon. Clicking the controls, Kohath enhanced the view and then strained his eyes into the darkness, a quiet, suspicious voice in his soul making him ill at ease. No matter what the *Ravenous Spirit's* instruments said, there was something not quite right about the faint, flickering light, but it was just slightly too far away for Kohath to see it properly. The thought that this could be a deliberately strategic placement prodded its way into the sergeant's military mind.

'Bring the prow around,' said Kohath slowly, still staring out into the blackness. He couldn't see anything unusual, but many battles were won on the basis of sound human intuition, no matter how insistent the Inquisition was that this was usually folly bordering on heresy. If there was anything that Kohath had learnt during his long years of service with the Blood Ravens, it was that war was always the most likely outcome - it was peace that should strike the soul with suspicion and dread.

In the silent blackness at the edge of the system, the flicker of light shifted almost imperceptibly into a burst. It was the merest phase shift, just a slight alteration in the colour spectrum.

'There,' murmured Kohath, as though his suspicions had been confirmed. 'Target torpedoes on—'

A stream of light-bolts flashed into view and the view screen collapsed into a blanket of white. Instantly, a series of explosions shook the command deck. Some kind of laser fire sunk into the armoured shielding, but it was followed by a cluster of impacts from ballistics that Kohath did not see. The ghostly rockets punched into the softened armour and detonated, sending plates of adamantium splintering off into space.

The command deck bucked and rocked, sending any unsecured serfs and equipment careening across the floor, colliding and crashing into the instruments. Only Kohath stood immovable, even as a crate skidded and bounced off his armoured leg, ricocheting off and crunching into the workstation next to Reuben. The terminal exploded, spraying glass and metal shards up into the face of the serf that clung to it for stability. The serf threw himself back away from the unit, clutching at his head and screaming as mists of smoke hissed out of the cracked station. As he fell onto his back, his hands dropped away from his face exposing his ruined skull. His left eye was impaled by a spike of green glass and the right side of his face was completely missing, spilling his pulverised brain out onto the deck.

'Return fire,' said Kohath firmly, still standing in front of the main view screen, unmoving amidst the commotion around him.

'We still have no target identified, sergeant,' insisted Reuben, looking up desperately from his terminal.

'That's the target!' stated Kohath, finally losing his calm as he pointed at the starburst on the view screen, which had just flickered back into life. Whatever it was that was firing on them, he would not permit anything to attack the Blood Ravens without at least trying to fight back. If he had to incinerate the entire outer system, it would be done. Nobody and nothing could take a free shot at the *Ravenous Spirit*, not on his watch.

There was an audible hiss as the volley of torpedoes roared out of the frontal batteries and rocketed out towards the outlying planets. Kohath watched the progress of the missiles on the view screen as they diminished into distant invisibility, then he saw the even more distant flickering target burst into a streak of light and vanish.

Turning away from the viewer in disappointed disgust, Kohath surveyed the destruction on the command deck.

'Clear that body away and put those fires out,' he snapped, repulsed by the mess that disgraced the spirit of his venerable cruiser.

'Reuben,' he began, using the serf's name in an attempt to inspire him to greater effort; Kohath always tried to learn the names of a few serfs in the crew for this purpose. 'Track that vessel—'

Before he could finish his order, another cluster of explosions wracked the *Ravenous Spirit*, this time even throwing Kohath to the deck. When he climbed back to his feet, in amongst the flames that suddenly filled the chamber, he looked over to Reuben and saw the serf's head rammed into the screen of his terminal with blood oozing out over the jagged glass that framed it. The rest of his body had already slouched back into his seat, where it was bathed in fire.

'FARSEER,' CALLED LAERESH in greeting as the doors to her chambers in the heart of the *Eternal Star* slid open and he swept through into the shadowy interior. His frustration about the abortive battle with the mon-keigh had abated and now his voice was tense with concern for Macha.

In the half-light of the farseer's sanctum, Laeresh could see the shimmering field of sha'iel that coruscated around her body as she lay on a shining black, circular, wraithbone counter that had risen up out of the floor in the centre of the room. Her body was covered in a thin, white shroud, and underneath it Laeresh could see thousands of tiny wounds speckling her pale skin. She wasn't moving and her eyes were closed, but the interlacing pulses of energy seemed to both emanate from her and be feeding her with vitality at the same time, as though existing in multiple realms simultaneously. Laeresh had no intellectual tools with which to understand what was happening to Macha, but his intuition told him that the field of sha'iel was a good sign - it meant that she was alive, and that she was recovering.

Standing in a line behind the farseer were three of the warlocks from her retinue, each clad in robes of the deepest emerald - a colour that was darker than black, which cast no reflected light whatsoever. Their heads were bowed and a faintly audible chant was seeping out from under their hoods, gently filling the chamber with an electric peace. The one in the middle, Druinir, looked up and acknowledged Laeresh with unblinking, sparkling, fathomless eyes.

Having burst into her chamber so vigorously, Laeresh now found himself at a loss, not really knowing what to do; acting without thinking was becoming his motif. As soon as the *Reaper's Blade* had taken up its position on the far side of the fourth planet of Lsathranil's Shield, he had rushed across to the *Eternal Star* to check on the farseer, gripped by a sudden panic that he had brought her across the galaxy only to watch her die within moments of emerging from the webway. He cursed himself for the recklessness

with which he had charged into battle, and his mind taunted him with the voice of Uldreth the Avenger, accusing him of abandoning Biel-Tan's farseer at the first promise of combat.

Shutting out the jibes of his subconscious, Laeresh knelt down by the side of the wraithbone tablet and bowed his head, hoping that his strength might somehow be transferred into Macha's body, or that she might at least feel his presence. He had only the faintest understanding of the nature of farseers, but he had absolute faith that she would draw on him when she needed him most. He was no warlock, but he freely offered whatever he could.

Laeresh. The thought was weak and almost trembling, as though it had travelled a long way.

Farseer, replied Laeresh with an abrupt eagerness that seemed clumsy and loud. *Farseer, what happened?* he continued, more softly.

The runes rebelled, Laeresh.

What do you mean? asked Laeresh, raising his head and inspecting the multitude of lacerations that covered Macha's body.

There was blood coursing through the webway, began Macha. It was drowning our souls in the blood of our own kin, crashing like a tidal wave against the defences of our craftworld. Biel-Tan itself was crushed under the liquid weight of its own dead as every eldar was suddenly drained of his life and flung from the bloody hand of Khaine.

I don't understand, farseer, thought Laeresh, confused by the ghastly image.

Neither do I, Laeresh, but I am certain that there is more to Lsathranil's Shield than the mon-keigh. We cannot afford to be rash here. There are forces at work that I do not properly recognise.

I am sorry, farseer, replied Laeresh, accepting the advice as a reprimand and wincing inwardly as the voice of Uldreth returned to taunt him once again.

We need to get down onto the planet's surface, directed Macha.

What about the mon-keigh? They are already on the surface, farseer.

There was a long pause and for a brief, panicked moment Laeresh feared that Macha had died.

I cannot see them, she confessed, finally. The planet has no present, and even its past teeters on the edge of an abyss. The mon-keigh are there, but I am blind to their presence and their role in the planet's fate, since the planet itself seems devoid of destiny. Lsathranil's Shield is cracked.

THE AFTERNOON SUN was still bright through the stained glass, filling the librarium with coloured beams of light as Jonas sat at the great wooden table, deep in thought. The mysterious wraithbone tablet was laid out in front of him, and an inexplicable sheen shimmered across its surface as the runes glowed and shifted before his eyes. Every time he thought that the text had settled and he started the work of translating it, something or things deep inside the warp-spawned material would blink and swim, sending the lines of script spiralling into a vortex before they finally settled into an entirely new configuration.

After several cycles in this way, Jonas had realised that there were actually only a set number of patterns and that there was some kind of psychic mechanism at work that triggered the transition from one to the next. In a moment of clarity, he realised that the tablet was effectively turning the page for him, paced for the eyes of an eldar who would doubtlessly be able to read each page before the next appeared. Unfortunately, Jonas could not read the ancient alien script so quickly, and he had to labour over each rune in turn, waiting for the shuffle-cycle to complete itself before he could move onto the next as the first page reappeared.

Between them, Jonas and Meritia had finally deciphered the first rune, which appeared to art as a title for the whole text:

Ishandruir - The Ascension. For the last few hours, Jonas had been working on the first cluster of runes by himself, struggling even to trace their unsettled shapes into a likeness that he could recognise. He had searched through dozens of tomes in the librarium, leafing through a collection of texts that had been supplied to him by the Order of the Lost Rosetta years before - hence the Blood Ravens' librarian assumed that he had inquisitorial sanction for these dangerous volumes, which contained within their illuminated pages the ruminations of researchers, priests and inquisitors on the nature of the eldar tongue. The Inquisition had been known to arrest scholars for the possession of much less perilous books than these, and it was a mark of the respect that the Ordo Hereticus had for the scholarship of the Blood Ravens that they were prepared to look the other way in this case, in the name of furthering truth and knowledge for the Emperor. However, Jonas occasionally wondered whether the Sisters of the Lost Rosetta seconded to Rahe's Paradise actually served a double function, not only to help with the research, but also to keep an eye on the research being done; in the back of his mind he was always vaguely conscious of the order's twin allegiances to the Ecclesiarchy and the Ordo Hereticus.

He had struggled for hours over the very first rune of the main body of the text. It was an archaic and complicated shape of sweeps and curls, run through with decorative strikes and other strokes that seemed intrinsic to the character's meaning. There was a bold triangle at its centre that seemed to glow with a sickly green. It had taken Jonas long enough just to work out which marks were integral to the rune and which were merely illuminations. Finally, he had found a rune in the forbidden *Obscurus Analects of Xenoartefacts*, inscribed by the notorious Inquisitor Ichtyus Drumall, who claimed to have spent three years in the underworld of craftworld Saim-Hann, attempting to incite a civil war amongst the bellicose gangs of that monstrous vessel. Within moments of his alleged escape, he had been seized by agents of the Ordo Hereticus, his analects removed from his possession, and his soul had been ritually purged until it was finally liberated from the irrevocably tainted form of his flesh.

The rune appeared to be an ancient variation of Jain'zar, which had been translated by Ichtyus Drumall as "storm of silence", but that interpretation seemed almost wholly inappropriate in the current context. The position of the character suggested that it should be the grammatical subject, and Jonas originally thought that it could be a reference to some kind of mythical figure in eldar folklore that bore the name Jain'zar. The tablet was ancient beyond reckoning, and it was entirely possible that the rune had subsequently appropriated the meaning gleaned by Drumall after this original figure had passed from the memories of the eldar. However, as he worked his way through the rest of that first rune cluster, Jonas realised that the rune was actually a variant of the markings seen on some eldar warriors that the Imperium called banshees, because of the way that they howled in the face of battle. Indeed, rendering the complicated rune as "banshee" seemed to make sense, although it was still not clear what the sentence

actually meant: The Banshee's call shall wake the dead, when dark portents wax nigh - heed them as the counsel of a seer, or a father.

Closing the heavy covers of the *Obscurus Analects*, Jonas pushed himself back in his seat, rolling his neck to loosen the tense muscles of his shoulders. Space Marines were not built to remain hunched over a desk for hours on end - his augmetic body needed to move. Through the window, high up in the atmosphere, Jonas saw a sheet of blue light suddenly flare and then vanish, like an aurora.

With his hands massaging the base of his neck, the father librarian gazed back down at the tablet that lay next to the old, forbidden book on the wooden table. He shook his head, partly to work his cervical vertebrae and partly because of his mystification concerning the meaning of the ancient runic script. He didn't know a great deal about the so-called eldar banshees, and he wasn't sure where he would be able to look to find out more. Perhaps the Ordo Xenos would have more information, but it would not be appropriate or safe to send off a request to them. Without that knowledge, however, it was almost impossible for Jonas to understand what was meant by the "banshee's call" or what the "dark portents" might be. Whatever they were, the author of the tablet seemed most insistent that they were extremely important and should not be ignored.

Sighing deeply, Jonas pushed his chair back and stood up, turning to survey the vast collection of book-stacks that filled the cavernous librarium. There had to be something there that would help him, even if he had to go through each volume in turn. He was in no hurry - research always took time, and it wasn't as though the banshee was calling right then.

THE LOW AFTERNOON sun rushed into the amphitheatre through the great arch, filling the circular arena with red light and dazzling any who dared to look out of the ancient stadium's only exit. Any aspirant who even thought of looking out of that arch was not wanted in the trials in any case. Fewer and fewer of the hundreds of warriors that had collected during the first congregation on the previous day would walk out through that arch each evening, until there were only a handful left. Of those, perhaps three or four would discover that there was, in fact, another exit from the amphitheatre, through a series of tunnels and valves in Krax-7 itself, which led into the heart of the Blood Ravens' monastery-outpost. Only those few, who would never dream of staring out into the blinding, bloody light of the local star, only they would eventually reach beyond it aboard the *Ravenous Spirit*, en route to the *Litany of Fury*, where their real trials would begin.

In full armour, Gabriel and Prathios stood side by side on the raised platform opposite the great arch, bathed in the blood-red light. They surveyed the combat that raged in all quarters of the arena with calm and dignified detachment, watching the eclectic mixture of techniques and styles during this first phase of the Blood Trials. This day was a free for all, designed principally to reduce the numbers of aspirants to a more manageable level. Prathios had explained the rules to all of them the day before: they were to arrive at dawn and they were not to leave until sunset; if any of them tried to leave while light still poured through the great arch, he would kill them himself. There was no gate or force field keeping them penned in, but so far not a single warrior had tried to escape the carnage through the wide-open archway.

In fact, Prathios had said nothing about what would be expected of the aspirants once they were within the confines of the amphitheatre. He had simply instructed them that they should not leave until sundown. Dawn had been seven hours earlier, and neither Prathios nor Gabriel had yet spoken a word to the battling warriors before them. All that Prathios had said on the previous day was that the aspirants should understand that very few of them, if any, would have what it took to be considered for the process of ascension into a Space Marine. That was the seed that he had implanted in their minds, and on this first day of the trials he could witness what potentials that seed contained.

Nothing had been said about combat, and, for the first thirty minutes or so after the dawn, nothing had happened. The aspirants had just stood there, bolt upright and proud, staring expectantly at Prathios and Gabriel. But when the two Blood Ravens said nothing, a murmured discontent gradually started to spread throughout the crowd. One or two of the bolder ones called up to the pedestal, voicing their impatience and wanting to know when the trials would start. Such actions seemed to germinate the seed as other warriors realised that the sole purpose of the trials was to reduce their numbers. As a hugely muscled, white-skinned man yelled up at Prathios, a blond-haired youth with dazzling green eyes sprang forward and drove a long-bladed dagger straight through his neck, transforming his angry cry into a gurgling death-rattle.

There had been an elongated moment of silence and shock as the huge man collapsed to the ground with blood pouring out of his ruptured arteries. He had died instantly - one down. Then, finally, after a few seconds of faltering comprehension, a burst of clarity erupted in the mind of another warrior - Prathios could identify the precise moment from the look of excitement that suddenly dawned on the man's face. The short, bearded man swung his axe in a powerful arc straight into the stomach of the taller man standing next to him. It was an utterly arbitrary act - there was no particular reason why the short man should particularly hate the man next to him, he was simply the nearest person. Without pausing, the little man yanked his axe head out of the body and brought it round in a back swing towards the man on the other side of him.

And that was how it started. Since that moment, there had been nothing but combat and bloodshed for the entire day, some of it arbitrary and some of it political, spilling over from the animosities between the gangs and groupings from outside the arena. The numbers were finally being reduced.

Ad hoc groups and alliances had formed as some of the warriors realised that they would stand a better chance of survival if they stuck together. But such alliances quickly collapsed as the fighters realised that they had no real friends in the arena, only competitors; some were stabbed in the back by those whose backs they were defending. More often, the groups collapsed because better groups became possible and people defected, as the warriors began to get a sense of who the best fighters were and tried to team up with them. A strong group was already developing around the boy with the braided blond hair, who had made the first kill, and the squat, bearded man, who had made the second. This was how the first day of the trials usually developed.

Gabriel could not remember his own Blood Trial, but Prathios had told him many times of the legends about him. It was said that he grasped the significance of the first day instantly, and that he arrived in the auditorium already set on his path - and what a

glorious path that turned out to be. His intuitive decisiveness had set him apart from his brethren then - and it continued to raise eyebrows and provoke attention even now.

It was rumoured that Gabriel had been one of the last of the aspirants to show up for the Blood Trials on Cyrene. When he had arrived in the arena, it was already bursting with warriors, each of whom was standing proudly and waiting for direction from the Blood Ravens chaplain. Gabriel had not even broken his stride, walking in through the great arch of the amphitheatre on Cyrene, which was even more majestic than the one on Rahe's Paradise, drawing his sword and taking off the head of the first aspirant he came to, before breaking into a charge and hacking his way through the crowd towards the chaplain's pedestal. By the time the young Gabriel had reached Prathios's feet, he had already killed nearly a hundred of his fellow aspirants. Within minutes, a second figure emerged from the chaos and the two of them instantly struck an alliance, fighting side by side until the ground grew swampy with blood. On that day, Prathios had been forced to call a halt to the killing within an hour of dawn, fearing that there would be too few warriors left to guarantee that any of them would survive the traumas of the Implantation Chamber. As it turned out, only Gabriel and his ally, Isador Akios, eventually became Blood Ravens.

Today's trials were not quite as dramatic as the one in the legend, and Gabriel suspected that even the one from the legend had not been as dramatic as it was subsequently made to sound. But there were enough strong warriors on Rahe's Paradise to make Gabriel and Prathios confident that they would find some suitable neophytes from amongst them. In particular, the boy with the blond braids had caught their attention as an early hopeful. Despite being relatively slight of build and probably amongst the youngest of the warriors present, he moved with a delightful grace and ease, slipping past attacks and countering in the same movement. He had a strong, intuitive grasp of the way that the combat was unfolding, and was always to be found where the fighting was hardest and bloodiest.

'Is he a psyker, Prathios?' asked Gabriel, using the vox link inside their helmets.

'I cannot tell, Gabriel, but he does show evidence of foreknowledge - moving away from blows before they are landed, even when they are struck from behind or from blind spots. His awareness seems considerable,' mused the chaplain.

'And the others follow his lead. That is unusual charisma in one so young,' added Gabriel, impressed. There was something familiar about the boy's face, but he wasn't sure what it was.

'There are others who seem to have similar abilities today, including that one,' nodded Prathios, indicating the short man with the beard. 'If these aspirants do have latent psychic powers, then there would appear to be an unusually high number of them in this group. We will have to inform Jonas and Ikarus; a librarian must assess psychic potentials—'

Prathios broke off as Gabriel vaulted down from the pedestal and charged into the fray. He scanned the scene carefully, trying to work out what had triggered the action in his captain. For a horrifying moment, he feared that Gabriel had finally lost his sanity to bloodlust.

The aspirants were still fighting, hacking and swiping with their no-longer shining blades. But there was something different in the scene. If anything, more of the warriors were falling than before. Looking more closely, Prathios realised that some were collapsing to the ground even before they were struck down by fellow aspirants. Straining his eyes, Prathios saw a heavy-set, pale-skinned man suddenly drop to his knees, dropping his long, curving sword into the blood-drenched sand before him. As he fell onto his face, Prathios could see a spread of tiny exit wounds on the man's back.

Gabriel had his bolter drawn and was standing in the middle of the arena, on the edge of the deep, smoking ravine that bisected the amphitheatre. A circle of space had opened up around him as the aspirants fought to keep out of the Marine's way, while Gabriel tracked his gun through the crowd, searching for something.

After a few seconds, a slight figure came charging out of the crowd with a long-bladed dagger brandished in his left hand. His blond braids fluttered out behind him and his green eyes flashed with intensity. Gabriel ignored the courageous boy as he closed and then leapt forward, driving his dagger into the armoured plate on the Marine's back. The blade snapped like ice against the ancient armour and, following through, the boy crashed into Gabriel's legs. With an irritated backhand, Gabriel swatted the boy across his face, knocking him unconscious immediately. The captain made a brief mental note to commend the boy's spirit.

Gradually, the rest of the battling aspirants stopped fighting, turning to see what the Blood Ravens captain was doing in amongst them. He stood in a ring of clarity with his bolter raised, sweeping it around the perimeter of the arena, with the blond boy unconscious at his feet. In the lull, Prathios jumped down from the pedestal, his own bolter drawn in one hand while the Crozius Arcanum was still held in the other.

'What is it, captain?' he asked.

'They are here,' muttered Gabriel, his voice taut with concentration.

'Who—' began Prathios, but he was cut off by an abrupt burst of fire from Gabriel's bolter. The shells flashed out to the edge of the arena and impacted against the great stone walls, chipping out fragments of masonry and causing the aspirants to scatter. Prathios stared after the apparently arbitrary shots and then turned to his captain, his voice rich with concern: 'Gabriel, there is nothing there.'

'Blow the sulphur cloud,' said Gabriel, ignoring Prathios's words.

As he spoke, a scream arose from the crowd of aspirants and then was cut off. Turning, Gabriel and Prathios saw the short, bearded man slump forward onto his face in the dirt, his back riddled with tiny wounds.

'Prathios, do it now!' barked Gabriel.

The chaplain undipped a grenade from his belt and lobbed it into the smoking ravine behind them. It fell only a few metres before the heat from the lava below caused it to detonate. As it exploded, a great cloud of sulphurous gas erupted from the crevice and wafted out over the arena, rapidly filling the amphitheatre with choking fumes. In a few seconds, most of the aspirants had lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground.

Almost immediately, Gabriel opened fire with his bolter, spraying shells out into the mist with unchecked ferocity, dragging his fire around in a circle at about chest height, now that the aspirants were all lying down. Staring out into the sulphurous fog, Prathios finally caught his first glimpse of Gabriel's targets - slight, slender figures darting through the cloud, visible only as

distortions in the mist. Instantly, Prathios opened up with his own bolter, tracking his fire in the same direction as Gabriel, but facing in the opposite direction.

The darting figures in the cloud started to flicker and materialise more solidly, as though the noxious gas was somehow degrading or interfering with their camouflage. As the targets crystallised, the two Marines stopped their fire spray and placed their shots more carefully, but by now the enemy was in retreat. The fleet figures clearly had no intention of engaging in a fire fight and they were dashing for the archway.

'Nobody leaves until the sun sets,' murmured Prathios, unleashing a volley of bolter fire in the wake of the retreating assailants. He clipped the leg of one of the figures, causing it to stumble and trip as its comrades rushed on without it.

Gabriel was already running, pounding across the arena towards the fleeing foes, clicking off rounds from his bolter as he ran. He reached the stumbling enemy just as it regained its balance and composure. Without breaking his stride, Gabriel launched himself into a dive, crashing into the back of the figure and flattening it to the ground, driving his combat knife down through the humanoid's shoulder, pinning it down.

You know not what you do, human. The thought jabbed into Gabriel's mind like a hot poker, making him snap his neck up and stare after the rest of the attackers. One of them had stopped running and turned to face him. A long, dirty cameleoline cloak billowed in the wisps of sulphur behind it, and the lower half of its face was covered by a tightly bound scarf, but its emerald eyes burned brightly, seeming to draw Gabriel towards them in hypnotic spirals.

Gabriel had heard those words before; the eldar witch on Tartarus had forced them into his head in an attempt to compromise his intent. He would not listen to them again.

A volley of bolter fire streaked past Gabriel's head as Prathios came pounding up behind him, and the eldar ranger finally broke eye contact and disappeared out of the archway, leaving Gabriel and Prathios with their wounded prisoner pressed into the blood-drenched sand.



CHAPTER SIX: PETRIFICATION

THE SLEEK SHAPE of the twin-finned Vampire Raider was bathed in red flames as it scythed its way through the upper atmosphere. Its broad, forward-sweeping wings sliced through the mesosphere and plunged into the gaseous resistance of the stratosphere, submerging the streaking vessel in furious waves of fire.

As the fireball burst through into the troposphere, revealing the slick black of the vessel's armour, a long hatch jettisoned from the underside of its fuselage and a slender missile-emplacement dropped into place. Immediately, the barrel flared and a rocket roared down towards the distant mountains below.

After a few seconds, the hypersonic missiles punched into the snowy peak of one of the largest mountains, instantly vaporising the ice and the glacial permafrost, sending avalanches of snow and abrupt waves of water crashing down the mountainside. The missiles drove their way down into the substance of the mountain, clearing a wide impact crater and blowing clouds of dust and debris into the air. Then, just as the avalanche seemed to stop and the dust started to settle, the warheads detonated in the molten core of the volcano.

The explosion caused the mountain to convulse, shrugging off its surface layer of snow and rocky debris. Then the peak trembled and cracked, as the pressure forced the molten lava out into streams that hissed and steamed through the icy heights, blending with the plumes of sulphurous gases into a towering cumulonimbus. Finally, the pressure was too great to be vented by the little lacerations in the mountainside and the whole peak blew clear of the mountain, blasting immense chunks of rock and spraying magma for kilometres in every direction.

Still descending rapidly towards the desert, the black Vampire Raider rolled in a tight corkscrew, signalling its success to the second Raider that was just emerging from the inferno of the lower atmosphere, its green and white colouring making it appear to shimmer amongst the flames.

The second Raider flicked its wings in acknowledgement as it burst out of the troposphere and dove down in pursuit of the first, spiralling gently as though indifferent to the intractable pull of gravity.

Strapped into the pilot's seat of the black Vampire Raider, Laeresh was confident that the eruption would cover their descent into the desert. He had very little faith in the efficacy of mon-keigh technology; the strike cruiser that he had almost crippled in orbit had merely served to confirm his preconceptions. A huge volcanic eruption would certainly register on the primitive instruments of the humans, but he was sure that the signal would swamp the fleet, delicate signatures of the two Vampires. The mon-keigh would simply assume that it was a natural event, or even that a freak meteor had struck the volcano. He knew that they had been confused by stories of natural disasters on that planet before.

He rolled the Vampire over and tipped its nose towards the desert, accelerating vertically through the sound barrier before pulling up less than a metre from the ground, hammering the sonic boom into the sand and blasting out an impact crater. He angled his bird out into the deep desert, leaving the mountains diminishing behind him. He loved to fly and he nearly always insisted that he should pilot his own craft, despite the fact that his Aspect Warriors would always try to insist that their exarch should remain secure in the transportation hold until touchdown.

In a manoeuvre that would have killed a mon-keigh in one of their primitive flyers, Laeresh hit the gravitic-repellers and brought the craft to a dead halt in less than a second. The extreme g-forces that should have instantly killed all of the eldar onboard were spontaneously nullified by the gravity stabilisers in the Vampire's occupied compartments. Laeresh had used this manoeuvre against the ignorant humans and retarded orks on many occasions, watching them overshoot his position by kilometres as their primitive craft struggled to decelerate slowly enough to keep their pilots alive. The eldar had been making use of anti-gravitic technologies for millennia and Laeresh was constantly shocked that the younger races had still not worked it out.

Slowly, Laeresh brought his stationary, hovering bird down onto the desert, resting it delicately on the blades of the wing-edges. The sand that blew through the air outside his cockpit was the product of a desert wind, or perhaps it was still the remnants of the sonic crater he had blown out of the ground, but it certainly had nothing to do with his landing - hardly a single grain of sand was disturbed as the elegant, black Vampire Raider touched down.

Popping the cockpit release, Laeresh vaulted out onto the fourth planet of the Lsathranil's Shield system for the first time.

'Exarch Laeresh, Dark Reaper, we have been expecting you,' intoned a quiet, patient voice almost immediately. As Laeresh turned, a cloaked and scarfed ranger stepped forward out of the mist and bowed deeply. Vaguely visible in the sand behind him, Laeresh could see the silhouettes of other figures.

The exarch nodded a greeting in return. He had fought with rangers before, but remained reluctant to trust anyone who would voluntarily banish themselves from the company of their own kin. He could understand the desire to be as far away from Uldreth as possible, but that was a different story. 'Ranger, do you have news?'

The ranger hesitated for a moment, as though unsure about whether to answer the Reaper's question. He gazed intently at the exarch's immaculate black visage, a feeling of slight repulsion welling in his stomach. Just before the hesitation itself became a statement, the second Vampire Raider dropped out of the clouds and touched down gently beside them. There was a barely audible hiss as the hatch on the transport compartment slid open and Macha walked warily down the exit ramp, flanked on both sides by her personal retinue of guardians; Druinir led a short column of warlocks behind them.

'Farseer,' breathed the ranger, turning away from the Dark Reaper and sweeping into an ostentatious bow before dropping to one knee.

Aldryan, please, there is no need for such formalities here, responded Macha, her thoughts still inconstant and weak. She glanced past the stooped figure and nodded her acknowledgement to the other rangers in the mist beyond. She knew them all, and trusted them well. *Aldryan,* she added, her thoughts suddenly full of concern. *Where is Flaetriu?*

Aldryan lowered his gaze to the ground hiding his eyes from the vision of the farseer, as they burned with humiliation and the passion for vengeance. 'He is alive. The mon-keigh took him.'

Macha was silent as she wrestled with her own emotions. She had known Flaetriu longer than any of the other rangers - longer than anyone else she knew. They had joined the Path of the Seer at the same time, in the company of Laeresh and Uldreth. However, whilst the exarchs had eventually ascended into a sacred state of forgetfulness regarding their pasts, Flaetriu had never forgotten, and Macha had often wondered whether it was his memories that had driven him from the embrace of Biel-Tan. No matter what his motivations, he was a trusted and valuable warrior and Macha needed him now, just as she had needed him on Tartarus.

'The mon-keigh are known to you, farseer. The captain from Tartarus is amongst them. It was he who captured Flaetriu,' confessed Aldryan, his eyes burrowing into the sand next to his knee, where he saw the ghost of the human's face as he pinned Flaetriu into the desert.

The Blood Ravens?, wondered Macha. *Gabriel!* she realised, inhaling sharply as she saw the face of the Space Marine float back into her mind. It was not a face that she had expected to see again after he had sabotaged her plans on Tartarus. She had worked for millennia to prevent the release of the Chaos daemon on that planet, imprisoning it on that cursed rock, hiding it away. But then the clumsy mon-keigh had smashed the Maledictum stone and torn asunder the delicate barriers that she had erected between the immaterium and the material realm, ripping a gash through which the daemon could squirm into reality. Something in her soul told her that the captain had thought that he was doing the right thing, but his bumbling stupidity, so characteristic of all his race, had caused an incomparable disaster. She suspected that neither he nor his masters yet understood the true scale of their blunder. She had sworn that the next time they met she would kill him.

'You know these humans, farseer?' challenged Laeresh, clearly appalled. 'Why could you not see this before?'

Macha turned to face the fierce exarch, her eyes gentle with compassion. Her mind was still racing with images of Flaetriu and Gabriel, but Laeresh needed her reassurance now. *The Blood Ravens are on Tartarus, Laeresh. Their souls are not without merit, but their minds are weak and foolish.*

Weak and foolish minds are dangerous things, farseer, especially here, hissed Laeresh, demonstrating the strength of his with the force of his thoughts.

'If you already know these Blood Ravens, Macha, then why could you not see them before we arrived?' he repeated, noticing that Aldryan lifted his gaze slightly from the sand at the sound of the question.

I don't know, Laeresh. But I have never claimed to see everything, and Lsathranil's Shield is a murky place, where the tides of the past-future curdle and stir. That the mon-keigh are the Blood Ravens is of no matter - the aliens must be removed before things escalate further. This is an eldar world, and they have no place here. Macha knew that she hadn't answered Laeresh's question, and she realised that she didn't really know the answer herself. In truth, she could still see nothing of Gabriel in the eddying currents of future-time.

'We have begun the process of extermination, farseer. Principal targets have been identified, and we have made a number of successful incursions,' reported Aldryan, looking up at the pale beauty of the farseer as the desert wind whipped her emerald green cloak into a whirl behind her. 'We have been expecting your arrival, and have been anticipating the Bahzhakhain.'

'There will be no Swordwind, ranger,' stated Laeresh flatly, letting his bitterness about Uldreth's refusal to sanction it seep out through his words. 'The Dark Reapers are here; we will bring death to these mon-keigh and bring purity back to Lsathranil's Shield.'

KNEELING IN SILENCE at the altar of the Emperor in the very heart of the outpost-monastery, Gabriel's mind raced with questions. The captured eldar warrior had not said a word, not even uttered a sound since Prathios had thrown him carelessly into one of the cells that Jonas had moved from the dungeons up into the base of one of the great towers. The xenos wretch had simply crumpled into a heap, with apparently toxic blood hissing out of the gaping wound on its leg. It had not responded to any questions and had not even cried out when Prathios had attempted to administer some of his enhanced interrogation techniques. On his way to the chapel, Gabriel had looked in on the prisoner, only to find him sitting in the middle of his cell, legs crossed in front of him, eyes closed. The wound on his leg was apparently healed already.

The Blood Ravens captain searched his mind for any scrap of inspiration. He had been so certain about the presence of the eldar on Rahe's Paradise, certain enough to bring his Battle Company charging across the segmentum. In the voiceless depths of his mind, he had been sure that he was enacting the direction of the Astronomican itself, manifesting the very will of the Undying Emperor. However, now that he was there on the planet's surface with indisputable proof of the sustained involvement of the eldar, the guidance of the silver choir seemed to have deserted him. He had no idea how to proceed. It was as though something was interfering with his mind.

Immediately after he had returned to his cell, following the incident during the Blood Trials, Gabriel had received a communique from Sergeant Kohath, currently commanding the *Ravenous Spirit* in a low orbit around the planet. Kohath had reported a speedy and stealthy assault on the cruiser by an unknown assailant or assailants. Damage to the venerable vessel had been considerable, particularly in the control arrays, and the *Spirit* would have been unable to pursue the attackers even had their whereabouts been known. Kohath was not able to say where the assailants had gone, but Gabriel was certain that they were still in the system.

Opening his eyes and gazing up at the ancient iconography that illuminated the intricately carved wall behind the Emperor's altar, Gabriel sighed. There were dozens of images from the glorious history of the Blood Ravens, and dozens of others that might have been only legends. Elizur and Shedur were there, planting the Blood Ravens' standard symbolically on a jagged mountain peak -

they could have been on one of any number of planets, since the legendary missionary chaplains planted the seed of the Emperor's light on countless worlds, but convention and convenience dictated that they were held to be on Rahe's Paradise in that image. The great librarian fathers, the Chapter Masters from the dim and distant past, including Great Father Azaraiah Vidya, the very first recorded librarian father in the uneven and broken annals of the Blood Ravens, stared down at the Commander of the Watch, their eyes fixed and unmoving, as though searching his soul for signs of weakness. At one time, Gabriel had seen nothing but pride in those eternal gazes, but the galaxy was no longer such a simple place for him. Now, he could hardly even look them in their eyes, and that filled him with a greater sense of shame than anything else he had done before.

'Captain,' said an urgent voice behind him.

Gabriel looked back over his shoulder, still kneeling in supplication, confused by the sudden voice and concerned that somebody could approach so closely without him noticing.

'Sergeant Corallis,' he replied, seeing the veteran scout standing in the doorway, clouds of red dust gusting from the recesses of his scarred armour.

'Gabriel,' said Corallis, dropping the formality and striding forward into the chapel, anxious resolve written on his face.

'What news, Corallis?' asked Gabriel, standing and turning to face his sergeant.

'As directed, together with Librarian Ikarus, I took a bike patrol out into the desert, reconnoitring the key points of strategic advantage and vulnerability around the monastery. The foothills and the mountains appear clean, but we encountered some resistance in the desert itself. We were ambushed by a group of what appeared to be eldar warriors, equipped with some kind of optical camouflage. I have reason to believe that these were the vanguard of a more substantial force, judging by their armament and actions,' reported Corallis, pulling himself up smartly as he reached his captain before the altar.

'Any casualties?' asked Gabriel, nodding without surprise at the revelations.

'Just one, captain. Librarian Ikarus fought valiantly and with courage. He died well.' Corallis hung his head as he reported the news, as though hiding a sense of his own responsibility for the loss. He had never taken the loss of his men well, which was at least partly why the Marines in his squads had such high morale.

Gabriel paused for a moment, and then turned away without a word. Staring back up at the icons of his forefathers, he shook his head. The constellation of eyes burned down at him like starbursts, riddling his mind with accusations that his subconscious was levelling at himself. He had hated Ikarus and had not given him a chance, condemning him of trying to step into the unfillable shoes of Isador. He had resented the librarian's competence - for he had been an outstanding warrior, and that was why he had been selected for promotion into the command squad - secretly accusing him of showboating in the wake of Isador's greatest failure. And, if Gabriel were honest with himself, he had feared Ikarus, feared that the young librarian would stumble just as the once magnificent Isador had done; if it could happen to Isador, it could happen to anyone.

Had he sent Ikarus to his death?

'Captain?' prompted Corallis, watching the back of Gabriel's head as he stared up at the glorious iconography.

'I will record his passing, Corallis. Thank you.' He didn't turn, and Corallis hesitated, unsure whether or not he had been dismissed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the heavy figure of Prathios, half hidden in the deep shadows behind the altar. The chaplain nodded silently, offering a moment of solidarity to the grieving Marine.

'There's something else, captain,' continued Corallis, spurred by the presence of Prathios, who stepped forward out of the shadows and into the dim light of the chapel. 'Despite our attempts to engage the aliens, they appeared unwilling to split their firepower.'

'What do you mean?' asked Gabriel, finally dropping his eyes from the sacred images, tilting the back of his head slightly in curiosity.

'They appeared to have targeted Ikarus specifically, captain, and their fire could not be drawn away from him to any of the others in the squad. Not even to myself,' added Corallis, his voice tinged with self-reproach.

Lifting his head briefly, Gabriel cast another glance up at the hallowed face of the Great Father Azaraiah, narrowing his eyes slightly as though trying to interrogate that inanimate stare. He turned, sharing a look with Prathios.

'We experienced a similar attack this afternoon, Corallis. A group of eldar warriors infiltrated the Blood Trials and started slaughtering the aspirants. They appeared to select those who showed the most psychic potential - eliminating the natural leaders, the charismatics, and those with unnaturally good reflexes,' explained Gabriel.

'Gabriel,' said Prathios calmly. 'The death of Ikarus means that our Company has only one sanctioned psyker at its disposal on Rahe's Paradise, until Ulantus arrives with the *Litany of Fury*.'

The captain nodded slowly, his mind still trying to piece together the events of the day: the attack against Kohath, the death of Ikarus, and the assault on the aspirant warriors. Characteristically, the Blood Ravens had a disproportionately large number of librarians in their ranks, many of whom were seconded to work in the Chapter's great libraries, the most senior being granted duties in the unparalleled Librarianium Sanatorium aboard the magnificent battle barge *Omnis Arcanum* itself. The First Company, who were based on the *Omnis*, also had two entire combat squads of librarians - elite forces used to confront the most archaic or daemonic of threats to the Imperium. To have lost Isador on Tartarus was tragedy enough, but now to be reduced to a single, aging father librarian on Rahe's Paradise was potentially disastrous. The situation was now more serious than Gabriel's personal discomfort about Ikarus, and he knew it.

'Where is Father Jonas?' asked Gabriel. It was an order, not a query, and Prathios strode out of the chapel to find him.

'Sergeant,' said Gabriel, turning to Corallis. 'Find Tanthius and check on the defensive perimeter around the monastery. Make sure that there are no gaps, and warn him to expect action imminently. Inform him that the aliens are using cameleoline cloaks. The Biel-Tan are here, and we should expect war before dawn.'

JONAS DROPPED THROUGH the gap and then turned to help Meritia down into the dust-filled chamber below the main excavations. They had revealed a short vertical shaft under the stone casket in which they had found the wraithbone tablet. It seemed to provide

access to a whole new layer of artefacts. A narrow beam of light shone down through the opening, casting a bright cone into the dim chamber below.

'What is this place?' asked Meritia as Jonas lowered her onto the rough, rocky ground. The floor had clearly been cut smooth a long time ago, but then worn by the passage of many feet and heavy equipment. It was scored through with gashes, as though damaged by sudden, sharp impacts.

'I'm not sure,' confessed Jonas, peering through the darkness and the dust towards the faintly visible walls of the chamber. 'There appear to be markings on the walls.'

Taking a couple of steps, Jonas brought his fingertips up against the finely textured walls, letting his eyes adjust to the scarcity of light. There were thin strips etched into the surface, reaching from the ceiling down to the floor, and the wall appeared to be made out of discrete, convex sections of about a metre in width.

Meritia pressed her hands against the surface, feeling the elongated cracks and scrapes under her skin. 'It feels like a tree, Jonas, like a petrified tree.'

'There's some kind of text here too,' nodded Jonas, agreeing. 'The script seems to alter as it moves down the trunks.' He pointed up towards the ceiling, squinting slightly into the darkness as his oculobe implant worked to enhance his sight. 'That looks like some form of High Gothic, albeit an archaic dialect. And that,' he continued, pointing down towards the floor, 'that looks like the runic script we saw on the wraithbone tablet.'

Bringing her face closer to the wall, Meritia traced her fingers around the bizarre-looking characters etched into the petrified walls at about head height. 'These characters are neither Gothic nor eldar runes,' she said, her voice full of intrigue. 'We should get some light down here, and make some copies of this text.'

The odd script looked like a bizarre synthesis of Gothic characters and eldar runes, all blended together. The achingly beautiful curves of the runes were twisted and contorted into familiar angles, giving the text an everyday banality that almost made Meritia cry; the odd hybrid language was like a perversion or a betrayal of the beauty of the alien script, and it was a sullied, polluted form of the Emperor's own tongue. Yet it was held in the fossilized trees, midway between the perfect runes at Meritia's feet and the austerity of the High Gothic by the ceiling, as though caught in a deliberate limbo between the two.

'Meritia,' called Jonas from over to one side of the chamber. 'You'll want to take a look at this.'

Reluctantly pulling herself away from the streams of fossilized text, Meritia hurried over to Jonas, who was stooped into the entrance of a narrow tunnel that led out of the once tree-lined chamber. It was inclined slightly, dropping further down under the foundations of the monastery. On the far side of the tunnel, Meritia could see the flickering of a dirty red light, sending tongues of brightness licking up towards her.

'Look at the walls,' directed Jonas, moving aside to permit Meritia into the tunnel.

'The light?' queried Meritia as she peered past the librarian.

'There must be a lava flow at the far end of the tunnel,' conjectured Jonas. 'The tectonic plates are riddled with magma streams under the mountains. We are just on the edge of Krax-7's tributary system here.'

At first glance, the walls of the tunnel appeared to have been constructed out of some kind of artificial substance, woven together in a giant weave. Threads protruded and interlaced themselves back into the walls. Others stuck out like barbs, jagged and complicated into the tunnel itself, like the ruins of a huge web.

Taking a tentative step forward, Meritia reached out and ran her hand along the interwoven tentacles. They were cold to the touch, like stone.

'The roots of the trees?' she suggested, glancing back towards Jonas for confirmation.

'Petrified, like the trees themselves,' agreed Jonas.

Meritia knelt smoothly, tracing her fingers along the length of one of the roots. She paused, retracing a section. 'There's a mark here,' she said, looking more closely. 'It's a rune.' Running her fingernail around the curves etched into the stone, she tried to recognise its shape in the near-darkness. It was familiar. 'Jain'zar,' she said, turning to face Jonas as she realised what that meant. 'There's another one further down,' replied Jonas, pointing towards another root a few metres further along the tunnel. 'And there, another.'

A sound in the chamber behind them made Jonas turn, only to see the lithe figure of Ptolema rising to her feet in the cone of light that flooded down from the ceiling, from which she had just jumped.

'Sister Ptolema,' said Jonas, bowing slightly in welcome. 'I am delighted that you could join us. We appear to have found something rather interesting.'

As he spoke, the librarian walked forward towards Ptolema and thought he saw a look of discomfort cross her face. When he closed within a few strides, the Sister stepped deliberately out of the light, throwing her face into darkness.

'Is there something wrong, Sister?' asked Jonas, genuinely concerned.

'No, Father Jonas, everything is fine. Just a slight fever: probably the residual effect of the journey - I am not a well-seasoned space explorer. Most of my work keeps me enshrined in the sacred libraries of our convent, as you might imagine,' explained Ptolema, keeping a distance between her and the librarian.

'I see,' replied Jonas evenly, watching the pale-skinned Sister edge her way deeper into the shadows, not entirely convinced by her story. The confidence and assertiveness of her previous demeanour had all but vanished. 'I trust that the effects will be temporary and painless.'

'Thank you, father,' she answered. 'Now, tell me about your latest finds.' She swept her arm around the unusual, subterranean chamber. 'What manner of place is this?'

'It appears to be the petrified remains of a ritual chamber of some kind - at one time it was constructed out of trees. You can see the fossilised trunks in the walls.'

Ptolema was walking around the circumference of the room as she listened, dragging her fingers across the remains of the trees as she went.

'I wasn't aware that Rahe's Paradise was ever a densely wooded planet,' she said, pausing as the thought caught up with her. 'Yes. It was once a jungle-world, in the long distant past, before some form of natural disaster cracked the planet's crust and flooded the atmosphere with sulphur. The volcanoes and the desert were the results of that cataclysm. At one time, it would seem that Rahe's Paradise was a type of paradise after all,' smiled Jonas.

'How long ago?' asked Ptolemaea, her face still turned to the wall as her fingers traced the shapes of some of the script cut into the stone tree trunks.

'Long ago. When the great missionary chaplains first arrived here, the jungles had already been gone for millennia. They found Rahe's Paradise more-or-less as it is today. Our monastery was built on barren land.' Jonas peered through the dusty shadows at the elegant back of Ptolemaea, unsure why she made him feel uncomfortable. Something about her had changed. 'Is this information not available to your order on Bethle II?'

'I have no idea, father,' she replied, turning to face him at last. 'I had very little time to check our records before I came here.' She paused. 'Where is the Sister Senioris? There is something that I would like to discuss with her.'

'She is inspecting a tributary tunnel, which appears to be the entrance to a larger subterranean network of chambers and tunnels, running through the magma layer. She's...' His words trailed off as Ptolemaea strode past him towards the mouth of the tunnel. Instead of turning after her, he stood for a moment, irritated at the abrupt return of the young Sister's brusque manner.

'Father!'

Jonas turned and rushed over to the tunnel's entrance, finding Ptolemaea on her knees next to Meritia's prone body, her hands clasped around the older woman's face. Taking in the scene in an instant, Jonas planted his hand onto Ptolemaea's chest and pushed her away. He stooped down over the figure of Meritia, resting his scarred and rough cheek against her lips to feel for her breath. It was faint, but it was there. She had lost consciousness, but she was alive.

A COMPLICATED ARRAY of cables and tubes peppered Ckrius's head as he lay strapped to the adamantium tablet in the Implantation Chamber of the *Litany of Fury*. They covered his eyes, ears and nose, forcing his senses to remain active and jamming them full of new types of pain. The pipe that ran down his throat prevented him from making any noise, and the stimulants that were jetted into his ears and open eyes riddled his brain with suggestions of terror.

As the neophyte lay rigid with psychological horror, the apothecary worked feverishly in the massive cavity that it had opened up in his chest. The boy would have no idea about the violations that his body was suffering, since his brain was already overloaded with directly inserted agonies that would have been inconceivable to him only hours earlier, despite the unspeakable traumas of the last few days.

The apothecary had reopened the healed scar down Ckrius's chest and rebroken the ribs that had already knitted back together. The boy's entire sternum was cracked open and folded back while the shrouded figure of the apothecary inserted a series of new organs. The first, a large zygote that had to be inserted somewhere in the digestive tract, was the preomnor organ, which would act as a predigestive stomach for the Marine, bolstering his system against poisonous or indigestible materials so that he could extract maximum nutrition from them without suffering any ill-effects. It was an important organ for survival in some of the most inhospitable parts of the Imperium.

Whilst working on the digestive tract, the apothecary also inserted the complicated little omophagea implant in between the thoracic and cervical vertebrae. It would function in partnership with the preomnor organ, filtering out the essential genetic material from animals and organic substances that contained information about the survival mutations undergone by an organism to succeed in their particular climate. The Marine would eventually be able to verbalise these mutations, understanding them consciously after eating any part of a living creature.

From the smoke-filled darkness of the observation chamber, Captain Ulantus watched the implantations taking place. The *Litany of Fury* was already in orbit around Trontix III, but he wanted to ensure that Ckrius survived the next round of zygote implantations before he took a landing party down to the planet's surface to start the Blood Trials. So far, the boy had responded remarkably well to the hideously accelerated process, and Ulantus was secretly full of admiration for his resilience.

It was not only Ckrius who was being rushed. Ulantus had received a constant stream of communications from the Imperial Guard regiment on the ice-planet of Lorn V. It seemed that the orks had received considerable reinforcements, and it now looked as though a full-scale invasion might be underway. Imperial Guard Captain Sturnn of the Cadians 412th had now made an official request for assistance from the Blood Ravens. He had intimated that there was more at stake there than the security of the local population - indeed, the Cadians were not local to the Lorn system and had been dispatched to Lorn V with their own agenda. Ulantus was concerned enough to send off a message to Captain Angelos, requesting that the Third Company might be able to depart Rahe's Paradise early and send assistance to Lorn. However, the astropathic communication had received no response from the Commander of the Watch. Not for the first time, Ulantus cursed the cavalier nature of the revered captain.

As Ulantus's head raced with thoughts, the apothecary lifted a large, tubular, bloody organ from a tray next to the neophyte. With two other hands, it pushed aside the already cramped organs in Ckrius's chest cavity, making space for the multi-lung just above the primary heart, where it would be inserted directly into the pulmonary system around the trachea. When this organ started to function, Ckrius would finally be freed from the nauseating effects of the toxic and poisonous gases that wafted around the Implantation Chamber, as the multi-lung would filter out the poisons for him.

With an abrupt movement, the apothecary snapped shut the gaping wound in Ckrius's chest, folding the ribs closed and pressing the sternum back together again, leaving a lead weight resting on the join to keep it pressed together. The cloaked figure then turned and nodded sharply at Ulantus, indicating that the procedure was now finished for the time being.

At once, Ulantus turned and strode out of the observation chamber, heading down to the launch bays of the *Litany of Fury*, where his Thunderhawk was already loaded and waiting for him to lead the landing party down onto Trontix III. For a number of reasons, the Blood Trials would be particularly fast and efficient this time.

RUSHING THROUGH THE winding corridors of the monastery, Jonas held the slender, delicate arms of PtoleMEA in one hand, almost dragging her along behind him as he searched for Gabriel. He barged past scurrying menials and bustling ciphers, as the human pledge-workers of the Blood Ravens on Rahe's Paradise went about their daily business, apparently unaware of the events that were unfolding around them.

Eventually, Jonas burst through into the librarium, shouldering open the great doors and ploughing forward in a eruption of dust and light as Gabriel turned to face him. The captain was standing at the ornate wooden desk under the stained-glass windows. He was leaning over a set of maps and blueprints, calculating his defensive strategy.

'Ah, Father Jonas,' began Gabriel. 'I assume that Prathios—'

'Captain, I have some unpleasant news,' interrupted Jonas, swinging the slight form of PtoleMEA around from behind him and depositing her onto the floor between them. 'Sister Senioris Meritia has suffered some kind of attack and is presently in a coma. I have secured her in her chambers and posted guards on her door.'

'What kind of attack?' asked Gabriel. 'And where did it take place?' He was suddenly concerned that his plans to defend the monastery from the outside might already be obsolete.

'I am not sure what kind of attack it was,' confessed Jonas, glaring at PtoleMEA on the floor. 'But, it took place in one of the new tunnels down in the dig. PtoleMEA was the last person to see her, and they were alone when it happened.'

Gabriel nodded at Jonas and then turned his gaze on the young woman at his feet. 'What happened, Sister PtoleMEA?'

'The Sister Senioris was already unconscious when I found her, captain,' said PtoleMEA calmly, picking herself up and smoothing her body-glove over her hips. 'I'm afraid that I can tell you nothing about what happened. Father Jonas and Sister Meritia had been working in the excavation for a while before I got there.'

'I see,' said Gabriel, holding her dark eyes for a few seconds longer than necessary. Something about her seemed different; she was somehow less defiant than the last time they had met, despite the precariousness of her position now. There was something open and vulnerable in her gaze.

'And what were you working on, Jonas?' he asked, turning back to the librarian.

'We have found considerable evidence that the site was once occupied by eldar creatures, captain. The upper layers of the excavation are certainly human, and most of the artefacts appear to be directly related to the history of the Adeptus Astartes on Rahe's Paradise - albeit to a period before the arrival of Elizur and Shedur. However, there is a lower level, where we found the tablet,' explained Jonas, indicating the wraithbone block on the table next to Gabriel's plans, 'which contains a mixture of the Imperial artefacts and those of the eldar. This presumably represents some form of transitional period in the history of the planet. The lower layers, to which we have just gained access, appear to be almost entirely composed of eldar findings. We have, literally, only just scratched the surface of that layer, captain.'

'Have you reached any conclusions about these findings, father?' asked Gabriel, wanting to hear the old librarian's opinions before sharing the recent events with him - they might colour his interpretation of the evidence. It was clear that Prathios had not found him.

'Nothing concrete, yet. As I said, we have only just uncovered the layer.'

'Hypothesise,' requested Gabriel, with an edge of urgency.

'Very well. I suspect that Rahe's Paradise was once an eldar colony - what is sometimes referred to as an Exodite World. It appears that something caused the eldar to leave the planet or to be wiped out. Without checking the dates in more detail, I cannot tell whether this event was a force of nature - such as the catastrophic climatic disaster that brought about the ruination of the jungles and pushed the volcanoes out of the planet's crust - or whether the event was linked to the arrival of the Imperium, perhaps even to the arrival of the very first detachments of Space Marines, who appear to have built their monastery in the remnants of the woods atop the remains of an eldar facility. As you are well aware, captain, we have no records concerning the actions or even the existence of the Marines who occupied the fortress that we uncovered in the foundations of our own. I assume that they were Blood Ravens, but there is little evidence to support such an assumption, one way or the other. It is conceivable that they were involved in purging the xenos taint from the surface of Rahe's Paradise.'

Gabriel nodded in admiration at the old scholar's logic, and he could see that the librarian's mind was at ease once more, having immersed itself in creative scholarship rather than bitter accusations towards PtoleMEA.

'Your conclusions are apposite, Jonas,' said Gabriel, taking some satisfaction in the way that the archaeological record was now confirming the apparently groundless suspicions that he had voiced about Rahe's Paradise a few days earlier aboard the *Litany of Fury*. 'You may not yet be aware that this outpost has now been attacked several times by eldar forces. Your own Scout Sergeant Caleb was merely the first to suffer such an assault: Prathios and I witnessed an ambush against the aspirants during the Blood Trials; Corallis's sortie was attacked and Librarian Ikarus was killed by eldar warriors in the desert; and Sergeant Kohath has reported an attack against the *Ravenous Spirit*!'

'The Biel-Tan?' asked Jonas, apparently unwilling to reach the conclusion. 'Of course, the Biel-Tan. It makes perfect sense,' he explained, as though giving voice to his thought processes. 'From our previous encounters with these particular eldar, we know that they are unusually obsessed with trying to rebuild their lost, ancient empire. An old Exodite World like this one would be a logical choice for them, and I am sure that our presence here causes them much offence,' said Jonas, smiling with sudden satisfaction. 'I can remember reading...' he trailed off as PtoleMEA caught his eye and he was suddenly unwilling to reveal the source of his knowledge. 'It is said that the name Biel-Tan might even mean "the resurrection of ancient days", because of their passion for this cause.'

'Doesn't it strike you as odd,' began PtoleMEA, who was following the conversation carefully, 'that the Biel-Tan and the Blood Ravens would come into conflict on two separate planets, so far away from each other, but in such quick succession? Librarian Isador Akios informed me that your foes on Tartarus were also Biel-Tan - isn't that right?'

She stared at Gabriel, waiting for a response. But, just as the captain was about to speak, a huge explosion made the three of them turn and stare out of the intricately patterned stained-glass window. One of the largest volcanoes in the range around the

monastery had suddenly blown its peak, jettisoning clouds of sulphurous gas, dust, and molten rock high up into the troposphere. Streams of lava were already cascading down the sides of the mountain, and the red sun was being rapidly obscured by the black, mushrooming cloud.

'It has begun,' said Gabriel, snatching up his plans and striding down the aisle towards the great doors.

WE ARE NOT yet in range for an attack, but the Bahzhakhain is poised, explained Taldeer, the projection of her face flickering slightly.

'I understand,' said Uldreth, pacing back and forth in front of the ghostly image of the farseer. He had remained on the craftworld and had watched as two separate fleets vanished off into the webway. He was resentful of his own position, and impatient for battle.

The mon-keigh will not succeed against the foul greenskins on Lorn. They have sent out a request for aid. Their nearest reinforcements are too far away, although the future indicates their presence in the present pathways.

'You are not there to assist the aliens, farseer, but rather to cleanse the planet. Do what you must, but do not trust the mon-keighs' will or their resolve,' warned Uldreth, his lip curling into a snarl at the thought of any form of alliance with the Imperium, even as a temporary expedient.

He paused, not wanting to ask the next question. 'And what of Macha? Do you have any news of her? She has not communicated with me since her departure.'

I cannot see her, confessed Taldeer, her face sad and forlorn.

'What do you mean?' demanded Uldreth, stopping pacing and staring into the apparition of Taldeer. 'She is our farseer and head of the Council of Seers! Your bond with her cannot be broken by space!'

It has not been broken by space, Uldreth Avenger, but it has been broken, nonetheless. I cannot see her, and I can see nothing of the future of Lsathranil's Shield. It is as though it has been erased from the future-past, hanging in the invisible limbo of the pure present.

'What does that mean!?' cried Uldreth, punching his fist into the wraithbone disc above which floated the image of Taldeer. 'Was she right? Are you saying that Macha was right about the danger?'

I cannot see any danger, replied Taldeer without any reassurance. *And I cannot see any safety. There is simply nothing to see there at all.*

'WE HAVE LOCATED the deposit, farseer, and excavations are almost complete,' explained Aldryan, leading Macha through the rangers' camp in the desert. The site was well hidden, and there is no evidence that it has been disturbed over the course of the millennia. 'The seals are still in place, and we are awaiting your word.'

Excellent, Aldryan, replied Macha, steadying herself by leaning on the ranger's shoulder as they walked through the soft sand; she was still weak from her ordeal with the runes. Laeresh strode easily alongside them, the heavily augmented psychoplastics of his leg-armour making the sand irrelevant to him.

So deep in the desert, there was a constant breeze of sand blowing across the dunes, wafting sheets and clouds of red like a pulsing mist. In her weakened state, Macha could hardly see ten metres in front of her, but in that fact there was some reassurance that the mon-keigh would not be able to see anything of their activity from the distant mountain range.

Walking another few steps, Macha's eyes widened suddenly as the extent of the rangers' work became evident. As she crested the dune, in the shadow of which nestled the makeshift camp, a huge quarry loomed into view before her. It must have been about a kilometre in diameter, and perhaps half that deep. In the bottom, she could just about make out the busy forms of rangers labouring at clearing away the sand. They had some kind of suction devices strapped to their backs which drew the sand off the ground and then blasted it into long, thin fountains in the air, sending it cascading over the lip of the quarry and mounding into the massive dunes that now completely surrounded the pit.

No wonder the air is full of sand, reflected Macha as she strained her eyes into the excavations, searching for some sign of the objectives. *How much longer?*

'We are already at depth, farseer. They are now merely working against the wind, keeping the site clear and at a consistent depth.' 'What are you waiting for, ranger?' asked Laeresh, his voice tinged with impatience and repressed violence. His distaste for the outcast was clear.

'We await the farseer's pleasure,' bowed Aldryan.

Macha looked again, but there was still nothing that she could see in the pit. *Let us descend.*

Before the words were even out of her mind, a film of sha'iel started to seep out of the farseer's skin, enveloping the three of them and lifting them gently off their feet. In a matter of seconds, they were already half-way down the steeply sloping sides of the quarry. By the time they reached the bottom, the shrouded figures of Druinir and the other warlocks were already there, formed into a ring around Macha as her feet touched down.

The base of the pit was hard, like stone, but it was run through with scratches and veins, as though water had once eroded little paths through the rock. In places, Macha could see that the surface was uneven and cracked. Stooping and pressing her hand to the ground, the farseer saw that the lines in the stone were actually formed into patterns, some of them the natural signatures of fossils but others were artificial, inscribed like text into what may once have been a riverbed.

I see, thought Macha, letting the images of the jungle river flood into her mind from the point of contact with her fingers. The lines in the stone started to shimmer slightly and then move, swimming like eels or water snakes under the dusting of sand that blew constantly across the surface. The fossils seemed to come alive, sending the ghosts of long-extinct animals scurrying, charging and slithering across the quarry floor. And the artificial etchings began to hum, glowing with a purple heat that spoke of realms beyond the linear flow of time that had led to the eradication of life in the immense desert. The purple veins radiated out

from Macha's touch, darting through the tiny scratches and scars that had been hacked into the stone plateau in the distant past. The eerie chant of the warlocks wafted into the wind.

After a matter of seconds, the whole of the quarry floor was awash with purple traces of sha'iel, like a small, shallow oasis of warp energy in the desert. With a sudden convulsion, the huge stone floor cracked in two, bifurcated by a faultlessly straight line. Then, very slowly, the two great slabs of rock started to move away from each other, as though receding back into the dunes that were mounded up on all sides, gradually revealing a dark, cavernous space below.

LOOKING DOWN INTO the exposed cavern below, Laeresh smiled. There, buried under the desert for millennia, waiting for the return of the Biel-Tan, was a pristine squadron of Wave Serpent transports and Falcon anti-grav tanks. What the mon-keigh called archaeology, he called sound strategic planning. A couple of the Falcons and two of the Serpents had already been painted in the featureless black of the Dark Reapers, and Laeresh vaulted down onto a black Falcon's roof instantly, while the rangers and the Guardians that had accompanied Macha and her warlocks as personal retinues jumped down to check on the other craft.

'Forward planning is the mark of a great farseer, farseer,' said Aldryan, permitting himself a faint smile at the sight of the ancient arsenal that Macha had just unlocked. Around the edge of the cavern, Aldryan could see massive, densely packed pillars, like primeval, fossilised trees, as though the battle squadron had once been secreted in a jungle-glade that had become petrified over the aeons.

Perhaps, replied Macha. *But planning for the future and realising those plans is not the same thing. Seeing what needs to be done is not the same as doing it. All that we have seen is that something is required - but it is not yet clear what. Yet, it is already the time for action, and there is nothing else to be seen.*

She watched the burst of activity in the cavern before her, weary with the effort of opening the ancient seal. But more than anything she was concerned that she had seen no visions since the ruination of her runes aboard the *Eternal Star*, and she had seen nothing of Gabriel's presence at all. All those millennia before, Farseer Lsathranil had used his foresight to provide these vessels for his kin in their time of need, but now Macha could not even see the sun going down at the end of the day.



CHAPTER SEVEN: JAIN'ZAR

THE ANTIGRAVITIC ENGINES made short work of the treacherous and inconstant dunes as the squadron of Falcon tanks whisked along in the front line of the eldar assault. In the centre of the line was the impeccable black of Laeresh's vehicle, now dusted with the red sand of the desert. Spread out to the sides were the white and emerald shades of the Biel-Tan force, sleek and deadly in the ruddy light. As the convoy had started to close on the edge of the desert and the fringe of the ring-mountains had become visible above the horizon, the exarch had climbed out of the gun-emplacement on top of the Falcon and stood on its roof, braced with his reaper launcher, eager for the battle to begin.

On either side of his Falcon there were two jet-black Wave Serpents, hovering smoothly over the sand and scything their dual-bladed prows through any errant dunes. Laeresh could feel the presence of his Aspect Warriors in their transports, and he could sense the faint, rhythmical chant of their battle chorus echoing through the ether as the vehicles slipped forward into their waiting destinies: war is our master, death our mistress.

As he stood expectantly atop the tank, there was a sudden and massive movement in the dunes ahead. His helmet twitched automatically, snapping the aim of his reaper launcher onto the point of movement as the weapon tracked the motion of his eyes. The mon-keigh monastery and the mountains were still over the horizon, so he was not yet expecting blood; his soul thrilled at the sudden promise.

The entire dune that the convoy was climbing began to shift, as though a gargantuan, slumbering, subterranean creature had suddenly awoken beneath it. The desert rolled and parted, opening up a series of chasms in the dune, into which poured waterfalls of sand from each side. As the sand crashed off the sudden peaks, large cylindrical structures started to become visible beneath the grainy torrent.

Laeresh stared at the odd structures for a moment, confused and disappointed, sensing no will or intention emanating from their apparently inanimate forms. They were still largely obscured beneath the sand when a bolt of energy flared near the top of one of them and flashed down towards the convoy.

The bolt punched into one of the frontal wings of a Wave Serpent, but it bounced off the protective energy field, ricocheting wildly up into the air. Immediately, the other emergent gun towers erupted with fire, spraying laser bolts down on the eldar convoy and transforming the baking desert into an inferno.

The Falcons returned fire, their gun turrets rotating freely as the tanks wove with surprising elegance, taking evasive action under the unexpected onslaught. The starcannon on one of the Falcons convulsed and a lance of blinding light jabbed into one of the gun emplacements, severing the structure in two and setting off a chain reaction of explosions that strafed down the height of the base before the main power cell detonated and exploded in a ball of blue fire.

Meanwhile, Laeresh was instantly back in the gun turret on his own Falcon, his thoughts excited and his soul calling out for blood as he plotted the trajectory for his own attack. He counted under his breath, waiting for exactly the right moment, and then clenched his jaw. This was all that his customised vehicle needed from him, and three missiles roared out of the cluster launcher, spiralling around each other as they honed in on the heat source at the top of one of the mon-keigh gun towers. They all impacted at once, punching into the rockcrete structure and detonating inside, blowing a fountain of masonry and melting rock into air. By now the atmosphere was thick with las-fire, rattling shurikens, and scything energy blasts, all shrouded in the blood-red mist of the desert wind. The automated defence guns of the mon-keigh had taken the eldar by surprise and they had been caught in the crossfire between two formations of gun towers: one directly in front of them and another that had risen out of the desert behind them, hemming them in like cattle.

Laeresh spun his turret, letting out a shrill battle cry and looking back towards the rear of the convoy to make sure that the farseer was unharmed. She was standing in a blaze of energy, surrounded by the coruscating forms of her warlocks, great lances of blue flame leaping out of her fingertips and crashing into the primitive mon-keigh emplacements. Her open-topped Serpent had been modified millennia ago to permit the farseer and her retinue to capitalise on their gifts during combat, and Laeresh was momentarily transfixed by the majesty of the scene.

Then a different sort of movement caught his eye and his gun turret spun once again. Blood. On the crest of the next dune, just outside the ring of death, Laeresh could see the glints of five small, red vehicles. They were stationary, as though simply observing the bloody scene that was unfolding before them. Angling his missile launcher with a grin, Laeresh punched the trigger, sending a stream of rockets flashing through a low curve towards the Blood Ravens scouts on the ridge. Just as the missiles were away, Laeresh looked up in time to see a rain of rockets dropping out of the sky from a steep parabola and he vaulted out of his cockpit, thrilled and cursing at the same time.

THE DISTANT THUNDER of ordnance rumbled through the ground, shaking the desert and sending streams of sand cascading down the dunes. The exchange was taking place just over the horizon, and even the superior augmetic vision of Corallis could not yet make out the number of foes. He stood on the roof of a modified Helios Pattern Land Raider, seemingly oblivious to the volleys of rockets that streaked out of the missile turret next to him. He watched the ballistics disappear over the horizon, nodding with satisfaction at the clouds of sand and smoke that plumed into the air after their invisible impacts. The Blood Ravens may not have a large force on Rahe's Paradise, but they could still pack a punch, even at this range.

Over the horizon in the desert, the monastery's automatic defence cannons had been activated while Tanthius and Corallis were still seeing to the last-minute preparations around the base of the towering, black edifice itself. The desert gun emplacements had

laid dormant for centuries, since they were set to respond only to a serious threat - a band of pirates or even a small ork war party would not be enough to trigger them. Whatever was coming over the horizon towards the monastery had set them off, so it was a force worthy of the new defences being hastily erected by the Blood Ravens.

A cloud of dust appeared on the featureless and barren horizon as a single vehicle crested a large dune. It was a burst of blood red against the dull monotony of the sand, shrouded in frenetic dust. The bike tore through the dunes, the roar of its engine now vaguely audible under the constant concussions that were thudding through the air. It bounced and swerved, traversing the passes in the undulating and ever-shifting ground, ploughing straight through the smaller dunes and blasting their sand into sprays and fountains.

The sound of this proximal vehicle made Tanthius pause and turn to face the desert. To him the shape was still blurred and distant. 'Corallis?' He knew that the elevated eyes of the sergeant would be more reliable than his own.

'It's Caleb.'

'Just Caleb?' asked Tanthius, staring out into the swirling cloud that engulfed the speeding figure.

'Just Caleb,' confirmed Corallis, sharing the concern of the massive Terminator Marine.

Eager to impress the famed Captain Angelos and the officers of the Third Company, Caleb had taken four of his trainee scouts out into the desert to check on the form and number of the enemy.

Tanthius nodded and turned back to his work, organising the defensive perimeter around the monastery-outpost. Whatever was coming, it was coming now; this was no time for sentimentality.

He had already deployed the magnificence of his own Terminator squad in the centre of the arc, between the hulking forms of the two Land Raider tanks. Without much effort, they had pushed back the sands of the desert, creating a giant, artificial dune behind which they would be granted some measure of cover. More importantly, this close to the mountains, which towered up behind the monastery, the sand layer was shallow, and by excavating a trench the Terminators had found solid rock on which to plant their heavy boots.

Four Marines in shimmering power-armour stood to attention, waiting for directions from Tanthius - Gabriel had delegated authority to the Terminator sergeant while he saw to matters inside the monastery itself. 'Hilkiah, take your Devastators and form a line on the north of the second Land Raider. Necho, fall in behind Hilkiah with your Assault squadron to provide aerial support when needed. Topheth, organise the assault bikes in a detachment to the west and be ready to sweep round and flank the enemy from the south. Asherah, take the Razorback and fall in behind Topheth's bikes.'

The four Marines snapped crisp nods and strode off to ensure that Tanthius's instructions were carried out.

Turning to the west, Tanthius noted with satisfaction that Sergeant Gaal had already dug his Tactical squad in on the other side of Corallis's tank. The line was almost complete and, despite the limitations of the hardware and numbers available, Tanthius was confident that they would be able to hold it.

By now the rider had closed and, with a roar, Caleb's bike skidded to a halt behind Tanthius. He cut the engine just as Corallis crunched into the ground next to him, having vaulted down from his vantage point on top of the Land Raider to debrief the scout. The young scout swung himself off the bike and drew himself up to attention before the senior Marines. Despite his best efforts to conceal it, the pain that wracked his body flickered across his face. He had not felt pain like that in years, not since the completion of the Implantation process - it was as though something had deliberately reactivated his pain receptors.

'Sergeant Corallis. Sergeant Tanthius,' he bowed to the Terminator as the imposing figure turned to face him. 'There are jetbikes and a squadron of Falcon tanks. At least three Wave Serpent transports, and an open-topped vehicle that I do not recognise - it appears to contain a group of psykers of some kind. They will break the horizon in a matter of minutes.'

'Understood,' replied Tanthius briskly. 'Thank you, Scout Caleb,' he added, seeing the passion burning in the pale, grimy face in front of him. 'This is valuable information. Your brothers did not die for nothing.'

'Caleb, are you damaged?' asked Corallis, as Tanthius turned away to continue with the preparations, striding away into the midst of the line of Terminators.

'No. No, sergeant,' He didn't seem sure. 'I don't think so,' he added, his face still creased with concealed agony.

Corallis inspected the scout but could see no sign of damage on his armour. 'But you are in pain?'

'Yes,' replied Caleb reluctantly. A little. 'But it is nothing, probably just a temporary imbalance in my pain receptors. I have been having some minor problems with a couple of my implants... I was awaiting your apothecary.'

Corallis looked at the scout with concern, but at that precise moment a tremendous roar erupted from the Terminator line behind him as they unleashed the first volley of shells at the eldar force as it crested the horizon, a billowing cloud of silence, sand and shimmering lethality. The automatic defences had failed to hold them, so now it was time for war.

THE DARKNESS INSIDE the chapel seemed to enshroud the kneeling figure of Gabriel before the faintly lit altar. His head was angled up and his blue eyes were wide, staring at the images of his forefathers and the Emperor himself. Even from the corridor outside, Prathios could see the sweat on his captain's brow as he struggled to put his soul at ease before the battle to come. Despite himself, Prathios had to concede that Gabriel was getting worse.

Quietly, the chaplain pulled the great doors closed, squeezing out the last of the light. As he did so, the sound of footsteps heading towards him from down the corridor made him turn. The light in the passageway grew increasingly dim and shadowy as it approached the chapel, but the far end was brightly lit, as sunlight streamed in from the huge windows set high up in the fresco-strewn walls. And in the flood of pristine light at that end marched five glorious figures of imperial virtue.

At the front of the group was the delicate, shapely and lithe figure of Ptolema, moving easily and confidently in her asphalt and red body-glove, a scarf tied carefully around her hairless head and her limbs speckled with holsters and straps. Flanking her on both sides, marching magnificently in her wake, were the breathtaking Celestians of the Order of Golden Light, their polished armour shining brilliantly in the startling beams of light.

'Chaplain Prathios,' said PtoleMEA formally as the glittering group stepped out of the light and into the shadows before the great doors to the chapel. 'We desire to speak with the captain.'

'He is indisposed at present,' replied Prathios, resolutely not looking back over his shoulder in the direction of Gabriel. 'He is administering to his armour and preparing for battle.'

PtoleMEA stared at Prathios for a moment, holding his even gaze with her fierce dark eyes. Her pale jaw clenched slightly and then her eyes flicked towards the closed doors. In fact, they were not fully closed. A crack of darkness seeped out of the middle, where the doors had not been pulled properly shut. In the interior beyond, a single javelin of light from the crack caught the kneeling figure of Gabriel at the altar, holding him in a weak spotlight as he appealed to the icons above the altarpiece.

In the dark depths of PtoleMEA's eyes, Prathios saw the reflected figure of his captain kneeling in supplication, held there as though contained as much in PtoleMEA's thoughts as in the chapel behind him. He took a step to the side, blocking PtoleMEA's view and watching the image of Gabriel blink out of her eyes. 'I am sure that he will be pleased to receive you, if you would have the grace to be patient.'

'I understand that the battle has already begun,' replied PtoleMEA, tilting her head slightly and looking deeply into the chaplain's face. There was a challenge written somewhere in her thoughts. As though to underline her point, a loud explosion resounded in the distance. It was followed by a series of smaller detonations and the commencement of the general, muffled rattle of distant combat. In their pristine, golden helmets, the Celestians behind her turned their heads as one, instinctively turning to face the sounds of war outside the walls of the monastery.

'Indeed it has,' said Gabriel, pulling open the doors and stepping out from behind Prathios. 'We have no time to lose. How may I assist you, Sister PtoleMEA?'

'Captain Angelos,' bowed PtoleMEA, her manner changing completely. 'As you know, the Order of the Lost Rosetta is non-militant, but the Celestian Sisters of the Golden Light wish to fight at your side.'

Gabriel looked down at the top of PtoleMEA's bowed head for a couple of seconds; something had definitely changed in her manner towards him. She did not look up until he lifted his own gaze to the Battle Sisters behind her.

'Battle Sisters,' said Gabriel, looking from one to the other since he could find no indication or markings that might differentiate their ranks on their armour. 'You do the Blood Ravens a great honour.'

The four Celestians bowed efficiently, and for a moment there was silence.

'They will not speak, captain,' explained PtoleMEA. 'The Order of Golden Light requires a vow of silence from their Celestians - in honour of their lost and fallen brethren.' She met his eyes, finally.

Gabriel nodded. He had heard of the ferocious piety of the order, but had never encountered any of their elite Celestian warriors before. He understood that they used no insignia to stipulate their ranks and provided nobody with their names - believing that all the Sisterhood was equal before the Emperor, equally devoted and utterly selfless. For such devout servants, there was no need for the differentiations of name and rank. They did not care for personal identities, but thought only of in whose name they would die. 'This is no time for talk,' smiled Gabriel, nodding a bow to the Celestians. 'It is time for death.'

THE ELDAR LINE burst through the immense dune that obscured the horizon, leaving the wreckage of the automatic gun emplacements out of sight in their wake. Columns of smoke and jets of flame that aspired towards the sun from the blindside of the dune lay testament to the ruined defences and to the few eldar craft that had fallen.

The bladed prows of the Wave Serpents cut through the base of the dune and punched out onto the smoother stretch of desert that approached the foothills and the imposing form of the Blood Ravens monastery. Huge clouds of sand were thrown up into the air, temporarily hiding the speeding, alien vehicles as they pressed on towards the waiting Marines. It was as though the desert itself was rising against them.

As soon as the first vehicle broke the dune, a volley of fire erupted from the line of Terminator Marines dug into the sand between the two Land Raiders that held the most advanced position in the Blood Ravens' defensive arc. A torrent of shells lashed through the sand-riddled air before exploding into lethal shards of shrapnel as they impacted against the armour on the front of the eldar vehicles.

Only a fraction of a second later, the Land Raiders themselves opened up with the twin-linked lascannons housed in each of their side sponsons, streaking the dusky air with strips of brilliance. The Wave Serpents returned fire with a constant spray of tiny black shuriken, visible only because of the incredible numbers being unleashed - like clouds of night whining towards the Marines, blackening the sandstorms into a lethal menace.

As the impacts thudded into the sleek form of the eldar craft, they seemed to slow and pitch forward, driving their dual-pronged prows into the sand and half burying themselves, like a row of gravestones in the desert. The twin barrels mounted on their roofs pitched upwards, counterbalancing the unusual angle of the transporters themselves, and permitting them to continue firing relentlessly.

'Topheth,' said Tanthius, the vox bead in his ear whistling with feedback. 'Get your bikes round behind them - they're digging in.'

'Understood,' hissed the reply through the vox, but it was almost drowned out by the blast of sound that erupted as the attack bikes roared forward of the line and prowled out into the desert, curving round to the southeast.

'Necho. Let's see what a little height will do,' suggested Tanthius, his storm bolter beginning to smoke from the constant stream of shells that was ripping out of it. He looked along the line of his battle-brothers in the Terminator squadron and he nodded to himself with pride - a relentless and formidable sheet of fire was ploughing out towards the aliens, like the Emperor's fury made manifest. Not even the slippery and treacherous eldar could stand against the righteous ferocity of Blood Ravens Terminators.

This time there was no verbal response from the sergeant, but his reaction was rapid, obvious and dramatic. The roar of engines from the north reassured Tanthius and made him grin as he imagined the Assault squadron lifting majestically into the air from behind the furious line of Hilkiah's Devastators, which was alive with the discharge of heavy weapons, filling the rapidly shortening killing zone with gouts of flame, pulses of melta and streaks of bolter shells.

'Your strategy seems sound, sergeant,' said Gabriel, striding up to the Terminator's shoulder from the direction of the monastery behind the line. 'I approve.' He nodded his helmet, communicating his admiration efficiently.

'Thank you, captain.' Tanthius turned to greet his captain, finding him at the head of a startling group of Battle Sisters, accompanied by Prathios and Father Jonas, all in full combat armour - a glorious and inspiring sight, even for a Terminator Marine. 'The theatre is yours.' He bowed crisply.

Gabriel stood for a moment, staring over the rim of the long sand bunker that Tanthius had constructed in a crescent around the monastery. It wasn't rockcrete and it certainly wasn't an adamantium barrier, but it would serve its purpose. The eldar assault appeared to have stalled, and their transports had pitched themselves into the ground. From the north and south of the Blood Ravens tanks, vicious and relentless salvos of fire lashed against the downed vehicles from the Devastator and Tactical squads, chipping away at their armour and blowing great eruptions of sand out of the desert around them. The gun turrets on the roofs of the Serpents were still active, but the clouds of monomolecular projectiles being released were largely being absorbed by the sand banks around the Marines.

'Is this it?' asked Gabriel, disappointed. He had come to expect more from the eldar; they didn't appear to be trying. 'Where is the witch?'

As he spoke, the sand in the bunker wall started to tremble and shiver, as though something vast and heavy were approaching from the distance. Fine cascades began to slide and shift down the bank, drawing Gabriel's attention from the eldar force in the desert. Gradually, the shuffling sands started to crackle with friction, sending little sparks of static arcing between the grains. After a few moments, the sparks had begun to coalesce and merge into pools of flickering energy, dark and shimmering. As Gabriel watched, the pools were drawn into streams running up the bank against gravity, merging and blending with others to form rivers and veins of pulsing darkness, spidering out across the desert towards the eldar like a great web.

Looking out into the desert, Gabriel could see that similar tendrils were being emitted from the eldar barricades, pulsing out towards the centre of the battlefield.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to crack and open out into space, as though some terrible god had reached down and ripped a gash into the planet's atmosphere. A great javelin of darkness spiked into the contested desert between the Marines and the eldar, merging with the black lattice of tendrils in the sand, superheating and crystallising it instantly, rending the shifting tides suddenly solid and impenetrable.

As one, the Blood Ravens and the eldar stopped firing, all eyes turning up to the heavens to find the source of the unearthly blast. High up in the mesosphere there was a small, black starburst, like a jagged hole in the atmosphere itself. Beyond it seemed to glimmer an impossibly distant light, as though it were a window to the stars themselves.

When Gabriel looked down from the mysterious phenomenon, he saw dozens of eldar warriors emerging from behind the barricades of their pitched Wave Serpents, as though responding to this incredible signal. A stream of jetbikes hissed off towards the south, heading to intercept Topheth's column of attack bikes, while neat formations of green and white troops went sprinting over the suddenly glassy, rocky ground, heading directly towards the Blood Ravens. In the centre of the vanguard was an elegant, female form that Gabriel found instantly familiar, surrounded by a coruscating sphere of blue energy that seemed to encompass the dark, shrouded figures at her side.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' yelled Gabriel, striding past Tanthius and vaulting up onto the crest of the artificial sandbank as he drew his chainsword.

A volley of fire rippled out of the Blood Ravens' line, tearing into the advancing eldar forces, before the Marines clambered up out of their trenches with a resonating war-cry and charged forward in support of their captain - the golden Celestians storming forward with them like brilliant jewels in a wave of blood.

At exactly that moment, two jet-black vehicles slid into view on either side of the green and white wall of pitched Wave Serpents, spilling scores of shimmering black-armoured warriors into the desert, who immediately braced their long, heavy weapons and loosed a hail of projectiles into the charging line of Marines. Simultaneously, the strangely elongated gun turrets on the vehicles themselves erupted with light, sending spikes of brilliance searing through the gathering fury of battle, punching into the sheer, black walls of the Blood Ravens monastery itself. As the pulses of light faded, a glittering and magnificent eldar warrior appeared in the smoke on the roof of one of the Wave Serpents. He was taller than all the others and his armour shone with an eerie light as the elaborate crests around his ornate death mask fluttered in the desert winds. He braced a cannon in his hands and threw back his head, letting out a dark wail.

'This is more like it!' yelled Gabriel, rattling off bolter shells as he pounded across the desert.

'Yes,' agreed Tanthius, spying the magnificent foe on the distant dune. 'This is much more like it.'

HER EYES WERE twitching, flickering erratically under her eyelids as though trying to trace the movement of a dream. The skin of her face was slick with perspiration, but it was cold as Ptolema pressed her fingers against the older Sister's cheek. Her loose, grey hair was matted and clumps clung to her forehead, soaked in the exertions of her nightmares.

'Meritia,' whispered Ptolema, leaning her face down towards the Sister Senioris and pressing her lips against her ear, breathing her words against the clammy skin. 'Meritia - what do you see?'

There was no response. The older woman's arms lay limp by her sides, and her legs were stretched straight out on the tablet, unmoving. There was the faintest trace of breath, as though she were lost in a deep meditation.

Straightening up, Ptolema looked away from her unconscious Sister, inspecting the little cell that had been her home for the last few years. It was neatly kept, as she had expected, with tightly packed shelves full of manuscripts, books and scrolls.

On the small desk, bathed in the light reflected from the mirror on the back of the chamber's door, was a crisp adamantium tube with its seal broken and its lid discarded casually. Next to the tube was a rolled manuscript, clearly ancient but exceedingly well preserved. Meritia had apparently been consulting it recently, and Ptolema unfurled a short section with mild curiosity. The script was cursive and elegant - some form of archaic High Gothic - and it appeared to be a folk tale of some kind.

PtoleMEA unrolled a little more of the story, reading the unusual yet familiar script with ease. She nodded, accepting that this was exactly the kind of artefact that she should have expected to find in Meritia's chambers, given that the older woman was charged with co-operating in the Blood Ravens' investigation into their shadowy history. She lifted her hand from the desk and let the scroll roll back into a tube as she looked around the rest of the room.

To her mild surprise, PtoleMEA found a weapon rack in an alcove cut into the window nook. It contained a pair of ornate bolt pistols with elaborately decorated handles, each inscribed with the chalice and star-burst insignia of the now disbanded Order of Lost Light. The alcove was covered by a rough, discoloured tapestry bearing the image of Canoness Silentia - one of the founding mothers of the Order of Lost Light - kneeling in supplication before the Golden Throne of the Emperor of Man.

Holding the tapestry back like a curtain, PtoleMEA looked back over at Meritia and smiled slightly, silently impressed by this unexpected twist in her older Sister's personality. There were agents back on Bethle II that would consider such a tapestry heretical on a number of different grounds: firstly, the canoness appears in the company of the Emperor himself, which was almost certainly an apocrypha, or at the very least a blasphemous crisis of narcissism; and secondly, the Order of Lost Light was disbanded and split into the non-militant Lost Rosetta and militant Golden Light for a good reason - any allegiance to such an unsanctioned institution would be frowned upon by the Ordo Hereticus, no matter how romantic the stories about it might be. And to possess artefacts from that organisation, particularly in the form of weapons, would certainly not be condoned; whilst the tapestry might conceivably be part of a research project, the ancient bolt pistols would be much harder to justify.

Perhaps I have underestimated the venerable Meritia, thought PtoleMEA, intrigued. She made a mental note to report the pistols on her return to Bethle II, and then walked back over to the unconscious body of her Sister, stretched out on the stone tablet against the far wall. Gazing down at her face once more, she watched her hidden eyes twitch and flutter blindly. For a moment, she wondered whether the older woman's nightmares would be anything like her own - they did seem to have more in common than she had thought.

As she turned to leave, pushing open the door and striding out of the chamber, heading down towards the dig in the foundations, an abrupt impact rocked the tower, knocking her off her feet and sending her stumbling against the cold, stone wall.

THE ELDAR WITCH was alive with furious power, streaks of purple and blue flame pouring out of her fingertips. Surrounding her were a clutch of other psykers, bedecked in sinister black robes that fell in heavy folds, billowing as their smooth movements turned the cloaks into whirls. Flanking the psychic inferno were loose squadrons of warriors, each armoured in the familiar white and green of the Biel-Tan. Gabriel had seen those colours so recently, and his soul thrilled and shuddered simultaneously to see them again so soon after Tartarus. He had known that the farseer was there.

The fleet-footed eldar had rapidly closed the gap on the Blood Ravens' line and engaged them at close range, capitalising on whatever distraction had suddenly rent the sky and petrified the ground. But the Marines had risen to the challenge, charging out of their positions with bolters blazing and their chainswords spluttering with thirst. Before long, the charge had splintered and fragmented, and Gabriel had found himself in the middle of a frenetic battlefield, surrounded by a crescendo of blades as the eldar and the Marines met each other in intimate ferocity.

Meanwhile, Topheth's attack bikes were struggling to outflank the eldar jetbikes to the south, attempting to get around behind the killing zone to take on the pitch-black Wave Serpents and the sinister dark warriors that continued to blast away at the monstrous walls of the Blood Ravens monastery, firing salvo after salvo of thunderous light. But the jetbikes were too fast, and Topheth had been forced to change tactics and attempt a frontal assault.

Sergeant Necho had also identified the threat posed by the heavy weapons, and he too had angled his squad towards the jet-black eldar craft. His Assault Marines were already airborne, and they were striving to engage the Serpents from the north, spraying hails of bolter shells and capturing the enemy vehicles in a lethal rain of grenades. But they were being held at bay by the macabre-looking, black-armoured warriors that had spilled out of the transports, who had set up tiers of firing lines and were returning the fierce brutality of the Marines shot for shot, unleashing banks of projectiles from their unusual weapons. The magnificent warrior that had appeared on top of one of the Wave Serpents - presumably the leader of this dark force - had vaulted down from the vehicle and was running forward into the heart of the fray, howling with what might have been pleasure.

As Gabriel's spluttering blade jammed in the stomach of an eldar warrior and he fired off a staccato of bolter shells straight into the alien's face, cleaning the foul xenos creature off his blessed chainsword, he looked up in time to see a gout of flame erupt from the jump-pack of one of Necho's Assault Marines. It spluttered and coughed, and Gabriel knew what was about to happen; he kept his attention fixed on the doomed Marine whilst parrying a force-sword with his own blade and snapping off a couple of shots with his bolter, each finding its target in alien flesh.

With a blinding blast of red light, the Assault Marine's jump-pack went critical and its fuel cells detonated, firing him down towards the ground like a giant bolter shell. Even from where he was standing, Gabriel could see the Marine working to release the grenades that were clipped around his belt, flinging them down into the formation of eldar below him even as he rocketed down towards them. The disciplined aliens seemed unphased for a fraction of a second, holding their firing vectors until they realised what was about to happen. Then, as the xenos creatures began to scatter away from the Wave Serpents, the string of grenades smacked into the ground and detonated all at once, blowing a huge crater into the desert and rocking the nearest Wave Serpent. In an instant, the Marine's jump-pack roared down towards the vehicle, spiralling on its axis now that it had been jettisoned by the Marine himself, until it punched heavily into the gunnery cockpit on top of the Wave Serpent, blowing it clean off the vehicle and engulfing the whole thing in a giant red fireball. The Marine himself ploughed down into the desert nearby. With a roar, Gabriel snatched his attention away from the heroics of his Marine and spun on his heel, always inspired by the exploits of his men. Bringing his chainsword around in a wild and wide arc, he expected to feel the thick resistance of alien flesh at any moment. As he turned, he could see the glorious figure of Jonas in the melee around him, ablaze in warp-fire, lashing out against the fury of the eldar warlocks with bolts of energy from his force staff. In the blur of reds, greens and whites that cycled past his eyes, Gabriel also caught bursts of shimmering gold as the Celestial Sisters unleashed their righteous wrath against the

tainted xenos creatures that seemed to dance and leap with intricate and terrible splendour. If the Imperium had any troops to match the exquisite grace of the eldar warriors, they were the Celestian Battle Sisters. And he could see the glorious form of Tanthius storming through the mire in his ancient Terminator armour, his attention fixed on the magnificent eldar warrior that ploughed through the theatre towards him. The battlefield was roiling with combat, as though the eldar and the Marines were involved in their own grandiose version of the Blood Trials.

Completing his turn, Gabriel's blade slowed to a halt as though losing its momentum, coming to rest only millimetres from the neck of the eldar farseer. For a long second, the Blood Ravens captain stared at the breathtaking alien before him, shocked to see her there but falling into her deep emerald eyes as though momentarily mesmerised. His chainsword still whirred with hunger, but something stayed Gabriel's hand or his intent.

Gabriel.

He had felt that thought before and it sent a thrill tingling along his spine, as though icy fingernails were caressing his neck. But a fraction of a second later he slammed shut his mind, smashing the corrupted thought that violated his Emperor-given soul. As he regained his senses, a huge roaring weight crashed into his back, flattening him to the ground in a thud of armoured plates and battle cries.

When he looked up, Gabriel saw Prathios standing in his place, his Crozius Arcanum blazing with purity and purpose as he brought it round in powerful strikes at the farseer. But Macha just seemed to melt around the attacks, flowing around each thrust and sweep, almost taunting the heroism of the magnificent chaplain who had thrown himself into the defence of his captain.

Then, without warning, everything went black, even more dramatically and completely than before, as though the local star had been suddenly extinguished. It was a brilliant and startling flash of darkness, more blinding than any explosion of light.

For a moment combat ceased, as though held in suspension by the abrupt loss of the sun. But as the light returned, as suddenly as it had been lost, battle was joined once again. This time, however, the eldar were suddenly in retreat, fighting their way back to their makeshift barricades, which started to rise back up out of the sand and resume their function as transports. Once again they appeared to be responding to the dramatic signal. Macha had vanished inexplicably and Gabriel clambered to his feet next to Prathios, resting his gauntleted hand on his old friend's shoulder in a gesture of gratitude and confusion.

'What in the Emperor's name is going on?'

HAVING MADE HER way down into the dig, winding through the shaking corridors of Meritia's tower, Ptolema crouched down to the ground, pressing her fingers against the ancient inscriptions that adorned the mined foundations of what once must have been a great fortress monastery on Rahe's Paradise. She traced the shapes of the unusual script and lingered on the decorative pictures that had been carved directly into the stonework. There were definitely Space Marines in the time-worn images, although it was impossible to differentiate any particular features or individual characters; the detailing had been lost to the weather and to history ages before. She stared at them, bringing her face so close to the relief that her pale nose almost touched the stone: there was something disturbing about the images, but it remained just out of reach of her thoughts. She had never heard of Blood Ravens artefacts dating from more than four or five millennia before, and this lost monastery must have been considerably older than that. She took another look at the Marines in the fresco, touching her skin against the texture of their armour, trying to feel whether there was still some trace of their Chapter insignia. In the back of her mind, she wondered whether they were not Blood Ravens at all. Then she shook her head, trying to clear it of these extraneous thoughts, and she pulled back from the stone images: she was not here to help Jonas with his research, she had an investigation of her own to conduct. It did occur to her, however, that Meritia's condition and her own lapses might both be connected to something on Rahe's Paradise - the commonality might well turn out to be Captain Angelos himself, which would not surprise her given the information that had been supplied by Librarian Isador Akios before he mysteriously died on Tartarus, but it might also have something to do with the history of the planet itself.

Taking another quick look around the excavation site, Ptolema strode over to the hole that dropped down to the next level. At some point in the past it had clearly been covered by a large, heavy, rectangular block - presumably some kind of hatchway or door. The ground on each side of the indentation around the hole was riddled with tiny tracks and carved lines, like veins in the rock. They interlaced and crisscrossed in complicated webs, but it was clear that their patterns would have continued across the surface of the missing slab, since a number of veins were terminated abruptly at the lips of the indentation. At first, Ptolema thought that the little channels had been cut by water trickling through the rock, or perhaps that insects had trawled their way through the earth long ago, leaving their trails carved into the stone as their only legacy. However, as she looked more carefully, it became clear that the lines had been cut by hand, deliberately etched into the rock in this specific pattern, although the significance of the pattern was beyond her.

Sitting onto the rocky lip, Ptolema swung her legs down into the hole and then dropped through into the chamber below, finding herself surrounded by the petrified trees once more. Jonas had set up a few light-orbs on the floor up against the trunks of the trees at regular intervals around the curving, circular wall, filling the eerie chamber with a dim glow and making the rocky ground shimmer as though it were wet.

To Ptolema, this chamber seemed to represent a wholly separate archaeological layer, clearly distinguished from the ruined foundations of the Adeptus Astartes facility above. It seemed to her that the Marines had deliberately built on this site - the gradual transition of eldar runes into High Gothic script etched into the trunks of the fossilised trees suggested that there was a self-conscious plan at work in the location of the later buildings. This bizarre chamber was almost a liminal point, a ritualisation of a chamber acting as some kind of bridge between eras that were otherwise unconnected. What was the connection?

The narrow, angled tunnel in which Meritia had collapsed was still shrouded in darkness, although the dull-burnished radiance of the lava-flow at the far end gave it a gentle ruddiness. Ptolema took a few experimental steps down the inclined passageway and then stopped. If the peculiar chamber behind her really represented an intermediate historical stage between the forgotten presence of a Space Marine Chapter on Rahe's Paradise and the even earlier presence of something else, presumably a settlement of eldar, then this tunnel had to lead down further into that alien past. She paused, gathering her resolve against what she might find.

Standing almost exactly on the spot where she had previously found Meritia, Ptolema looked down at the intricate webwork of petrified roots and vines that interwove to form the walls of the passageway.

'Jain'zar,' she muttered to herself, spotting the eldar rune etched into the rocky roots near her feet and stooping to inspect it more closely. As she ducked down, the ferrous red light burst delicately off a mark on the opposite wall.

'Nrulhinus,' hissed Ptolema, vocalising the syllables of the alien language with practiced elegance. 'The banshee cries.'

A flash of movement made the Sister Dialogous start, snapping her head around to face down the tentacle-draped tunnel. Her dark eyes dilated in sudden and inexplicable terror as a gust of shapeless darkness rushed up the passageway, consuming the ruddy hints of volcanic light as though sucking them out of existence as it swept towards her.

She had time to open her mouth, but no time to scream.

IN THE MIDDLE distance, Gabriel could still see the report of weapons discharge from the shimmering, golden figures of the Celestian Battle Sisters. They were not willing to let the eldar retreat so cheaply, and they had pursued the xenos creatures almost to the point where they had rapidly dismantled their barricades. Above the battle-sisters, resting on miniature infernos of flame, Necho's Assault Marines were still pouring fire down from the sky, filling the wake of the fleeing eldar with a purifying blaze. And from the south came Topheth's squadron of attack bikes, falling into pursuit and opening up with their heavy bolters.

'Tanthius!' called Gabriel over the tumult, pulling off his helmet and staring after the fleeing eldar. His face was still creased with confusion and concern.

'Captain?' replied the huge Terminator Marine, his feet planted firmly against the rocky ground and his storm bolter still trained on the rapidly vanishing foe, which were now almost out of range. He had been cheated of his duel with the magnificent alien, and he was exorcising his frustrations with his bolter.

'This is unexpected,' confessed Gabriel, still gazing towards the horizon where the last silhouette of a Wave Serpent finally vanished from view, chased by a line of explosions as Necho's squad strafed the ground with grenades. 'But we must not be thrown off our guard. Regroup the Marines back behind the sand bunkers. Ensure that they are ready for an imminent counter-attack. The eldar are devious and sly creatures - they would not retreat unless it was to their advantage to do so. Make sure Necho and Topheth are recalled - we will not be pursuing the Biel-Tan today. If their intention is to divide our forces and lure us into a trap, they will not succeed.'

Tanthius hesitated for a moment, wanting to ask Gabriel about the incredible blasts of darkness that had transformed the battlefield.

'We must consider this new alien weapon,' continued Gabriel, as though sensing the concerns of the sergeant. 'When preparations here are complete, we will meet in the librarium,' he added. Then he turned and strode back towards the sheer, black walls of the monastery, leaving Tanthius and Corallis to organise the defences once again.

'WE SHOULD NOT have run from the mon-keigh, farseer. It dishonours us.' Laeresh's voice was rich with anger and his mind emanated a field of barely suppressed rage as he spoke - he had been forced to withdraw from the field just as he was about to engage one of the giant mon-keigh machine-warriors. He drew one of the Dark Reaper Wave Serpents up in front of Macha's transport platform, cutting off her route and forcing the retreating convoy to a halt.

Macha did not answer immediately. Instead she turned to look back towards the Blood Ravens' monastery, the tops of its towers still visible above the horizon, with the immense form of Krax-7 looming up behind it. Thin wisps of smoke still wafted through the air, acting as an ephemeral and transient legacy of the abortive battle. She sighed, letting her soul calm.

'Farseer!' Laeresh was on the verge of shouting, forcing his voice through clenched teeth in an effort to control himself, as he stood in fierce determination on top of the transporter.

Seeing the simmering fury of the exarch, Druinir stepped in front of Macha, cutting off Laeresh's line of sight. The warlock dropped his hood and revealed his long, wizened face. He was old, even by eldar standards, and his skin was beginning to become dry and cracked. But his eyes shone like distant stars, profound and brilliant, as though confining incredible power within those tiny orbs. He didn't have to say anything.

Laeresh bit down on his lip, sinking a curving incisor down into his flesh and drawing a bead of blood into his mouth. The pain stabbed at his thoughts, contesting with his anger, and his rage cleared a little.

'My apologies, farseer,' he said tensely, as though forcing the words out against his will. 'It is not my place to question your judgment.' His eyes flashed, betraying his true emotions.

You are wrong, Laeresh, Dark Reaper. To question is exactly your role. As the thoughts pushed their way into his mind, Macha turned to face him and Druinir slipped back to her side.

We are not running from the humans, exarch. Did you not feel the movement of the Yngirl? Did you not hear the howling of the banshees? You witnessed their call, and it turned the desert to stone. It is as we have feared, as we fear now and as we will fear again before the ending of days. The mon-keigh know not what they do as they stand on the glory and ineffable power of Lsathranil's Shield. We must bring about their end, but this is not the way. We must restore Lsathranil's legacy to its rightful place.

The exarch was breathing deeply, holding his rage in check. With his mind he knew that the farseer was right; he had complete and utter faith in her judgement - that was why he was there, after all. But his soul rebelled against the humiliation of retreat, no matter what the reasons. He was the exarch of the Dark Reapers; if he did not bow to the Court of the Young King, he was not about to kowtow to the stupidity of the mon-keigh. The image of the massive crimson Terminator Marine charging towards him flashed back into his mind, and he cursed inwardly about the lost opportunity for battle.

'I understand, farseer,' he sighed heavily, bowing curtly and then turning away.

Macha watched his vehicle bank and then speed off through the desert with the exarch still standing dramatically on its roof, his cloak washing out behind him like a jet-stream. He was heading back to the rendezvous point with the rangers. She shook her

head silently, wondering what his role would be in the events yet to come. The Dark Reapers were clearly meant to be there - Lsathranil himself had provided for them - but their future was shadowy and vague, hidden behind heavy shadows of the past and ran through with the burning passions of the present. She could not see the currents of history on which Laeresh sailed; something seemed to be blurring her vision.

Gabriel, she thought, only half to herself.



CHAPTER EIGHT: YNGIR

THE HIGHEST ROOMS in the towers of the monastery were the smallest, built into the tapering shape of the great spires, and Meritia's chamber was near the top of one of them. She had chosen it because of its seclusion from the rest of the edifice, which bustled with menials, curators, servants and pledge workers during the waking hours. When she had first arrived on Rahe's Paradise, Jonas had found her yearning for solitude rather strange, thinking that being light-years away from Bethle II and the rest of her order should seem secluded enough for his guest. He was wrong.

As Gabriel paced up the stairs of the tower, taking three steps at a time without giving it any thought, his mind raced with the events of the brief battle with the eldar. It had been the same farseer that they had encountered on Tartarus, and she had recognised him. She had waited for him in the middle of the theatre and had just stared at him, as though searching his soul for something hidden deep within it. If he closed his eyes, Gabriel could still see those glittering emerald eyes radiating something unspeakable and alien into his being. If Prathios hadn't pushed him aside, he had no idea what would have happened, and he shuddered at the realisation that he could have cut her down in an instant, but that he hadn't done so. He hadn't even tried. And then there had been the bizarre cracks of darkness that had flashed through the combat zone, presumably superheating and condensing the sand under their feet into mica glass and rock. He had never seen anything like it before, and his intuition told him that it must have something to do with the odd xenos artefacts that Meritia and Jonas had unearthed under the monastery. But intuition was not good enough for a Blood Raven - he needed some evidence. Perhaps this old Exodite world was hiding an ancient eldar weapon in its depths - something that the farseer could use to shift the terrain of a battle into her favour? Whatever it was, Gabriel needed to know about it - knowledge is power, as the Great Father had said to the earliest recorded Blood Ravens, so we must guard it well.

'Sister Meritia,' he called, drawing to a standstill outside the door to her chamber. If she had regained consciousness, he needed to consult the Sister about her thoughts concerning the mysterious wraithbone tablet and the tunnel network that seemed to run underneath the monastery itself. Jonas was already on his way down into the site, a new sense of urgency driving his scholarship. There was no answer.

'Sister Senioris,' repeated Gabriel, rapping on the door. Still no answer.

Pushing open the door and preparing an apology in his mind should he find Meritia in the room and conscious, Gabriel stepped into the small cell. It was neat and orderly, as he would have expected. The shelves supported a well-organised collection of tomes, together with tablets and scrolls. On the little desk, Gabriel could see an open adamantium scroll tube and the ancient document that it had once contained - clearly Sister Meritia had been working on it before her incident.

Meritia herself was still lying on the tablet against the wall where Jonas had put her so carefully. She was perfectly still and utterly silent, one arm hanging casually down to the ground; for a moment Gabriel thought that she was dead. He had no idea what had happened in the tunnels under the monastery, but it was clear that Meritia was suffering. Jonas had voiced his suspicions about Ptolemaea, but there would be little evidence until the Sister Senioris regained consciousness and could tell them what happened. Taking a couple of strides towards the Sister, a fluttering motion caught Gabriel's eye and he turned to see a hanging tapestry flapping in the draft from the open doorway. Even from the centre of the room, Gabriel could see that there was an antique pistol hidden in a shallow alcove behind it, and he nodded to himself, silently approving of the Sister Senioris's preparedness. Even the Ordo Dialogous should be able to enforce the Emperor's will if necessary. Gabriel was aware that the Order of the Lost Rosetta had not always been so puritanical about being non-militant.

He took another step and his boot crunched down on something on the floor; he felt its resistance collapse under the considerable weight of a Space Marine's foot. Lifting his leg he saw the crumbled and powdery outline of what must have once been a pistol. Instantly, his head snapped back to the tapestry on the opposite wall. As it billowed out from the alcove, Gabriel could clearly see that the pistol hidden behind it was the pair of the one he had just crushed underfoot.

'Sister Meritia,' he said for a third time, but now with more urgency.

There was still no response from the unconscious Sister Senioris, but as Gabriel loomed over her he noticed a trickle of red running over her neck. He reached down and turned her face away from the wall, bringing it square with his own. Her thick, muddled, grey hair was matted in liquid and stuck haphazardly all over the side of her face, and there was the faint, ferrous smell of blood in the air. Pushing the hair away with his fingers, Gabriel saw the neat, cauterised entry wound that had punched through Meritia's temple, killing her instantly. The grey and red liquid in her hair had gradually seeped out of the hole in her skull under gravity, as her head had slumped over to the side. The book on which she had rested her head as a pillow was soaked through.

AS HE DESCENDED down towards the foundations of the monastery, the shadows seemed to grow longer and heavier until the corners of the corridors were all but invisible. Instinctively, Jonas whispered something inaudible and his force staff flared with light, pushing back the darkness as he rushed through the winding and labyrinthine passageways. Gabriel had been adamant that there was some kind of connection between the bizarre happenings on the battlefield and the unusual finds in Jonas's dig. And Jonas had to concede that the appearance of ancient eldar artefacts under the monastery did not bode well. It was entirely conceivable that the conniving aliens could exploit some long-dormant technology as a weapon in the battles to come; it did not befit a Blood Ravens librarian to be ignorant of such risks. Knowledge is power.

After a few moments lost in his thoughts, Jonas realised that the shadows in the old, vaulted corridor remained heavy and impenetrable despite the light spilling out of his staff. He paused, stopping in the middle of a long, high-ceilinged corridor, its

walls punctuated with tall alcoves in which loomed the menacing visages of fallen Blood Ravens, their likenesses carved into the strange igneous rock so prevalent on Rahe's Paradise.

It was always dark this far down in the monastery - there was no natural light and the passageways down there were hardly ever used, especially since the dungeons had been moved to higher ground. The main route down into the foundations was elsewhere, but this was the most direct path from the desert entrance into the monastery. The Chapter's menials performed maintenance sweeps only twice a month, which was enough to keep the unfrequented passages respectable, but not enough to keep them shimmering and clean like the rest of the monastery. Nonetheless, there was no reason at all why the shadows themselves should be indelible marks against the floor and walls. They glinted faintly, as though they were merely mica glass.

Jonas surveyed the corridor from the centre of the sphere of light that emanated from his staff. When he quietened his mind, he thought that he could hear the suggestion of whispers from the shadows, although he wasn't sure whether the breathy, aspirated sounds were actually coming from inside his own head.

There was something in the shadows at the feet of the statue of legendary Third Company Captain Trythos, further down the corridor, just beyond the reach of his staff's radiance. Jonas held his staff in both hands, diagonally across his body, and took a couple of strides forward, watching the edge of the sphere of light gradually creep nearer to the shape. After a few steps, the mound on the floor resolved itself into the slumped figure of a menial. He was crumpled into a heap and clearly dead. Jonas knelt briefly, rolling the man onto his back with a touch of his staff; his eyes were wide open and bulging, but their irises had turned completely white. His mouth was open and a look of utter terror was etched across his features. It was as though he had been drained of his very life force. In some inexplicable way, the shadow in which he was laying did not vanish under the glare of the psychic light from Jonas's staff. He was bathed in death.

Rising back to his feet, Jonas jogged down the corridor towards the last flight of stairs that would lead him down into the excavation site. He vaulted the staircase in one bound, tucking in his legs and barrelling through the air like a cannon ball, flipping slowly through a single revolution. At the last moment, he untucked his legs and whipped his force staff into a whirl above his head, landing solidly in a crouch with his weapon poised and coruscating with blue energy.

The excavation site was a mess. The carefully extracted Imperium artefacts had been smashed and scattered across the ground, and the painstakingly excavated features in the ground had been compressed and ruined by some form of pounding weight. Here and there, where Jonas and Meritia had uncovered eldar artefacts, the site was bathed in the bizarre, indelible, glassy shadows that Jonas had seen in the corridors of the lower monastery. The eldar items themselves appeared to have been incinerated and burnt beyond salvation, and the sandy ground around them had been rendered mica by the incredible heat. The effect appeared similar to what Jonas had seen outside on the battlefield.

Jonas took it all in instantly as he strode through the site towards the hole that dropped down into the lower level of the dig.

Without pausing at the edge, he brought his staff up vertically in front of him and dropped straight down into the chamber of petrified trees below, landing with a crunch on the stone floor, with his staff ablaze with light once again.

The subterranean chamber seemed unchanged. It was shrouded in the same heavy darkness as before, but seemed to shimmer slightly, as though the darkness itself were a form of light. Over to one side, the faint, ruddy glow of Krax-7's lava-flows edged its way into the chamber from the narrow tunnel in which Meritia had collapsed. The dim light was distorted and spiked with the shadows of the petrified roots that crisscrossed the tunnel itself, but Jonas also noticed that a more substantial, humanoid shadow was cast into the tree-lined chamber in which he stood.

Swirling his staff and sending little shards of radiant blue sparking through the gloom, Jonas strode down into the tunnel and brought the dazzling light into focus in front of him. About halfway along the tunnel, collapsed onto the floor, lay the lissom body of Ptolema, face down on the rock. Without emotion, Jonas paused briefly, checking her body for breath, then stepped over her and increased the intensity of the light that now poured from his staff. He strode purposefully to the end of the tunnel and emerged into a wide underground cavern, run through with veins of molten lava. The walls were studded with caves and tunnels, too many for the librarian to investigate on his own.

Turning on his heel decisively, Jonas strode back towards Ptolema and picked her up, swinging her body over his shoulder easily and stalking back up into the foundations of the Blood Ravens' monastery. Captain Angelos would want to deal with Ptolema immediately, then he would return to the explore the caves.

THE ARMoured DOORS to the Implantation Chamber hissed open smoothly, sucking a gust of fumes and smoke out into the corridor. The mist was heavy and pungent, tinted green with noxious chemicals, but it was carried out of the ceremonial chamber on a choral wave of harmonies, as the Chapter priests of the Third and Ninth Companies chanted litanies of purification. Captain Ulantus strode into the ritually cleansed space, his polished armour glinting with its own purity seals. The Blood Trials on Trontix III had been conducted with more haste than he would have liked; he had condensed the week into only two days. The landing party had returned with three successful aspirants, all of them strong and resilient, all of them slightly too old to be ideal. The course of the trials had made Ulantus even more conscious of the importance of Ckrius - not only as an individual neophyte undergoing the sacred transformation, but also as a test case for the ascension of older aspirants. It was never something that a Space Marine Chapter liked to do - the results could be unreliable, unpredictable and occasionally abhorrent - but in times of need even the most pristine of the Emperor's servants had to compromise. Above all other things, the Chapter's gene-seed had to survive. If Ckrius's travails were to fail, Ulantus would not hold out much hope for the others.

While he had been down on the planet's surface, Ulantus had received another message from Imperial Guard Captain Sturnn of the Cadians 412th on Lorn V, reiterating his request for assistance from the Blood Ravens. It seemed that the situation on the ice-world was becoming desperate, and Sturnn was not confident that he would be able to hold off the ork warhost for much longer. The relay stations around the Lorn system were also reporting signs of an approaching alien fleet. The signatures of the vessels did not support the conclusion that they were reinforcements for the orks, and tentative intelligence suggested that it may be an eldar force en route to Lorn V. Sturnn had been reluctant to hypothesise about why the eldar and the orks might both be interested in

that particular planet, but it was clear that he knew more about it than he was admitting. The Cadians were not local to Lorn, and they must have been briefed on the situation before they were dispatched. Whatever the case, Ulantus was fully aware of his duty - if the aliens were threatening an outpost of the Imperium and if the Emperor's Imperial Guard required the support of the Adeptus Astartes, then he would do everything he could, short of jeopardising the survival of the gene-seed of the Chapter by failing to recruit more aspirants. His compromise seemed reasonable: finish the Blood Trials on Trontiux III, but finish them quickly. He hoped that Gabriel would be willing to make a similar compromise on Rahe's Paradise, since the *Litany of Fury* was greatly weakened by the absence of its main Battle Company and its venerable captain. However, there was still no word from the Commander of the Watch, despite numerous attempts to raise him. Ulantus was considering dispatching Saulh in the *Rage of Erudition* to take the message to Gabriel personally.

As the *Litany of Fury* cruised through the outer reaches of the Trontiux system, leaving the third planet as a rapidly diminishing dot on the rear view screens, Ulantus had returned to the Implantation Chamber to check on the progress of Ckrius. It would not be long before the *Litany* would have to make the transition into the warp, and the captain wanted to ensure that Ckrius was as stable as possible before that happened. Although the geller-field around the *Litany* was powerful, it had been breached before, and a neophyte in Ckrius's weakened and susceptible condition would be even more vulnerable to the whispered temptations of the daemonic host in the warp than the rest of the human crew. It would be wholly unacceptable if Ulantus had to execute the young neophyte because of any suspected corruption during the journey through the warp, especially after all the time and effort that had been expended on him already.

Ckrius was still laying on the tablet in the middle of the chamber with his limbs bound under adamantium shackles. The egregious wounds that had been hacked into his chest had healed completely over the last couple of days, leaving long ugly scars running down his sternum - his Larraman's organ was clearly functioning efficiently.

Stepping into the chamber to permit the great doors to hiss and clunk sealed behind him, Ulantus watched the apothecary manoeuvring a large, hemispherical device into place above Ckrius's face. The inside of the machine was bristling with projections, syringes and blades. They were focussed into bunches that approximately coincided with the positions of the neophyte's eyes and ears as he lay on the tablet beneath it.

Even from his position next to the doors, Ulantus could see the settled horror on the youth's face as he realised what was about to happen to him. For a fraction of a second, Ulantus felt a surge of sympathy for the boy, wondering whether it might not be more humane to perform some of these operations whilst the aspirants were unconscious. Immediately, he threw the thought aside, berating himself for his own weakness in the face of pain. Without pain the Adeptus Astartes would be nothing - how could they prove their worthiness of the Emperor's blessing? The wash of sympathy was instantly replaced by a wall of resentment: pandering to this youth was delaying the insertion of the *Litany* into the warp and jeopardising the Blood Ravens' capacity to fulfil its duty.

His resentment was misplaced, and Ulantus regretted it almost as soon as he felt it. Ckrius and others like him were the future of the Blood Ravens. Without him there would be nobody left to fulfil the duties of the Chapter. As his mind calmed again, Ulantus realised that the real source of his resentment was Gabriel and his apparently cavalier disregard for both Ckrius, the Blood Trials and now the developing crisis on Lorn V. It was not his place to question the dignity of the Commander of the Watch, but Ulantus was concerned and infuriated by his recent conduct - he seemed obsessed by the eldar and by that cursed, manipulative farseer. As the thoughts raced through Ulantus's mind, the apothecary slowly lowered the machine over Ckrius's head, obscuring his horrified features inside the dome. A series of whirring noises and cracking sounds told Ulantus that the boy's ears and eyes were being removed by the device so that the oculolobe and Lyman's ear implants could be inserted into the brain stems behind them. After a few minutes, the dome stopped clucking and lifted clear of Ckrius's head, leaving him blinking with sustained trauma, terror and awe at the new world which was suddenly revealed around him, through his now highly enhanced senses.

HER FACE WAS pressed against cold, moist stone floor and her head was aching. It was as though she had fallen and knocked herself out. For a few moments, there was only darkness as her eyelids refused to respond to the nerve impulses that commanded them to open. There was a dull, unspecific pain all over her body, making her muscles rebel against her will as she tried to move them. She lay motionless, her back twisted against a rough wall behind her, with her neck angled uncomfortably around to the other side. In the featureless black before her eyes, Ptolemae struggled to remember what had happened.

She remembered colours more than anything else. Lush and vibrant greens riddled her memory, swamping specific shapes with the overwhelming presence of generalised, verdant life. Her eyes flicked back and forth, as though her brain had not yet properly registered that she was gazing at images in her memory. As her eyes twitched, the green wash started to resolve itself into distinct shapes. Here and there she could see the outlines of trees, dozens of trees, hundreds of trees, trees beyond counting stretching out into the furthest reaches of her mind. It was an epic jungle, covering the surface of an entire planet, swamping it in life and fecundity.

But just as the green resolved itself into a worldwide canopy, a burst of fiery orange erupted near the equator, like a flaming hurricane. The patch of dazzling colour flared and whirled like a maelstrom, eating into the jungle that surrounded it on all sides. And as it gyred and spun, the firestorm seemed to burn itself out - it became speckled with flecks of black, like moments of darkness in the inferno. Soon, before the raging torrent of fire could spread out into the forests, the moments of darkness expanded and commingled, consuming the radiant, orange flames in a wash of black. And the darkness continued to expand, overflowing the perimeter of the maelstrom and spilling out into the jungles, where its growth accelerated and proliferated, rushing around the entire planet in little more than an instant, until there was not a shred of green left to be seen.

As she watched, the darkness seemed to sense her presence and turn towards her, as though the newly engulfed planet was a single, giant eye. Slowly at first, but gathering speed all the time, it rushed towards her, and she had nowhere to turn. Her mind thrashed about, frantically searching for a place to hide; something, somewhere, anything. But there was nothingness all around and the darkness pressed in rapidly and inexorably.

Screaming, PtoleMEA forced open her eyes at last. For a few seconds she was completely disorientated and wracked with pain, as she stared fixedly down into the wet, rough-cut rock on the floor. Slowly, movement returned to her limbs and she pushed her face away from the ground, feeling the blood drip from the abrasions on her cheek where the rock had cut into her skin. Her cramped surroundings surprised her, but she wasn't really sure why. Then gradually her memory started to come back: she had been down in the excavation site. She remembered something about dropping down into that odd, tree-lined subterranean chamber. That's right - she had gone to investigate the site where Meritia had fallen previously. But then what had happened? She couldn't remember.

Looking around, PtoleMEA realised that she was probably in one of the makeshift prison-cells that Jonas had constructed around the base of one of the main towers. The little room was dark, cramped and damp, and the only source of light was a small, barred gap in the wall, high up next to ceiling. The heavy adamantium door beneath it was sealed so perfectly that not even a crack of light pushed in around the edges of it.

Wincing with the pain that suddenly shot through her muscles, PtoleMEA struggled to her feet and reached her hand up towards the light. She could not even get her fingers into the beam, so high up was the window and so shallow was the angle of the light-source outside. Judging by the red hue, the light was the sun itself.

Why was she there? Her mind raced with possibilities. Immediately, her brain pursued its first instincts and lurched into suspicion. She wondered whether Gabriel had discovered that she was there to investigate reports that he was having unsanctioned psychic visions of the Astronomican. She knew that the Adeptus Astartes operated at a complicated symbolic distance from the Ecclesiarchy and even, at times, from the Inquisition, and she didn't find it inconceivable that a Space Marine captain would resort to incarcerating an agent of either body if he felt that she was threatening his reputation or that of his Chapter.

But there was no way that Gabriel could know why she was there. She had told nobody, not even Sister Senioris Meritia, although the older woman must have had her suspicions. After all, this was why the Bethle subsector of the Ordo Hereticus had sent PtoleMEA to perform the investigation and not a fully ordained inquisitor: the Blood Ravens on Rahe's Paradise had a long history of cooperation with the Order of the Lost Rosetta, and the arrival of an extra Sister Dialogous should have caused very little concern, despite the happy coincidence of her arrival at the same time as Captain Angelos.

The only person who could have told Gabriel anything was Isador Akios himself, and even he could not have known exactly what course of action the Ordo Hereticus would pursue after receiving the unusual reports that he had filed about his captain from Tartarus. The Inquisitor Lords of Bethle subsector were impressed by the librarian's piety and devotion to the Emperor's purity, but PtoleMEA had been shocked that a Space Marine would betray the confidence of his captain in this way. She had certainly never heard of anything like that happening before. Whatever had happened on Tartarus had clearly had a profound effect on Isador too, before he died.

After prosecution, PtoleMEA's mind raced to a defensive standpoint. If she could discount the idea that Gabriel had locked her up because of the threat he thought that she posed to him, it was conceivable that he had thrown her into the cell because of the danger that she herself appeared to be in. Again, the pivot here was Meritia - if the elder Sister's coma was accompanied by the kind of visions that had been plaguing PtoleMEA since her arrival in the local system, it was not incredible to believe that she had suffered similar visions before, and that she could have told Gabriel that she suspected PtoleMEA of having succumbed to some kind of taint, resulting in her experiencing unsanctioned visions.

Cycling her mind back through her memories of recent events, PtoleMEA saw once again the look of empathy and understanding on Meritia's face when the Sister Senioris had awoken her from the cold sweat that had accompanied her first vision of the eldar in the jungle. In hindsight, it certainly seemed possible that Meritia's empathy was sympathy for the afflicted. All of the Sisters of the Lost Rosetta had seen the gradual, subtle and insidious effects of taint in the past, and Meritia would have recognised the signs at once. And unlike the Adeptus Astartes, the Sisters of the Order of the Lost Rosetta were certainly not above stabbing each other in the back when it came to suspicions of heresy - a long history of intimate relations with the Ordo Hereticus had made the order suspicious and highly political by nature. At least Meritia was in no state to say anything at the moment, reflected PtoleMEA with relief.

PtoleMEA laughed painfully - she would have turned in Meritia, if she had found evidence of taint in the Sister Senioris, even while she was unconscious and helpless. She should expect no different treatment for herself. If she had any courage at all, she would already have turned herself in or killed herself - she wasn't sure that her visions were anything more than dreams, but uncertainty is so often the midwife of damnation.

She laughed again, coughing and convulsing as her ribs spasmed in pain. The irony of her situation struck her with full force: she had come to investigate the possible taint of a Space Marine captain and now found herself in one of his holding cells on suspicion of taint herself. Even worse, she was fairly sure that he was right to have locked her up. If he warranted an investigation by the Ordo Hereticus, then she certainly did.

A scratching noise on the wall made her swallow, aching laughter. She gulped and cackled slightly, trying to calm her nerves, fearful of hysteria: she was a Sister of the Order of the Lost Rosetta, not a battle-sister of the Golden Light - she was not psychologically prepared for the situation in which she now found herself. But she was also a faithful servant of the Emperor, no matter what her own suspicions were about herself, and she retained her faith that her purpose was pure and unsullied. For a moment she wondered whether there might be acceptable degrees of taint or heresy, whether psychological defects might be excusable if one's soul was pure. She was clutching at straws, perhaps, which, she suddenly realised, is what all of the people she had ever interrogated back in the cells on Bethle II had done.

The scratching returned, louder this time and more rhythmical, as though someone was trying to tap out a message. PtoleMEA listened carefully, holding her breath, her eyes wide and wild as she realised that the strangely musical scraping was probably the eldar prisoner in the next cell trying to communicate with her.

'THEORISE,' PROMPTED GABRIEL, staring at the Marines of his command squad, his back to them as he faced out of the elaborate stained-glass window at the back of the librarium. An aura of red light seemed to surround him, giving his presence a touch of the divine.

'Such events have never been recorded before,' responded Prathios, stating the crux of the problem plainly.

'Whatever power it was,' offered Corallis, 'it was clearly unleashed at the call of the eldar farseer.'

'It did not damage us,' added Tanthius, trying to isolate the most important features of the unusual phenomenon as a weapon. 'It appeared to be extremely powerful, but its influence was limited to the silicon in the sand itself. It's not clear that it had impact on any organic matter.'

'Tanthius is right,' confirmed Prathios. 'Its effect on our Marines was mostly psychological or perhaps psychical; it brought them all to a standstill.'

'But not just our Marines, chaplain,' interjected Gabriel, still gazing out towards the volcanoes in the distance. 'The eldar were also taken by surprise, it seems.'

'Perhaps,' replied Prathios, 'but we must be careful not to interpret the actions of the aliens as though they were human. We can see that the blast gave them pause, but we do not know why - no action is transparent, captain, and the actions of the eldar might well contain a thousand different meanings.'

'You are suggesting that the eldar's response does not contradict the idea that it was an eldar device?' asked Tanthius.

'I am suggesting that we would be foolish to leap to conclusions about the deceitful xenos creatures - for all we know their withdrawal was designed with some tactical advantage in mind. The blast may have been a signal for them.'

'Prathios is right,' concluded Gabriel, turning to face the Marines. 'Until we have evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the eldar were behind the phenomenon. If nothing else, the very fact that it happened during the course of the battle must lend support to this interpretation.'

'Does Father Jonas have an opinion on this matter?' asked Corallis, aware that his former mentor had been based on Rahe's Paradise for many years. 'Has he ever seen anything similar?'

'He is as uncertain as we are,' replied Gabriel. 'But the father librarian is also exploring a hypothesis of his own. His theory rests on some of the finds that he and Sister Senioris Meritia made in the excavation below this monastery. As you know, it seems likely that Rahe's Paradise was an Exodite colony at some point in the past - probably before the destruction of the forests. Jonas seems to believe that the Blood Ravens cleansed the system during a righteous purity sweep of the sector, eradicating the eldar colonists and establishing an outpost on Rahe's Paradise. There is evidence to support the hypothesis that the eldar did not surrender the planet completely, but that they left a system of traps and automated defences that could be activated when the Biel-Tan returned to reclaim the planet - foresight being one of the eldar's greatest assets.'

'You believe that this weapon has laid dormant until now, waiting for the arrival of the alien witch to reactivate it?' asked Tanthius, sceptical.

'It is not a matter of belief, Tanthius,' stated Gabriel flatly. 'It is a matter of history. We are Blood Ravens, and we must not ignore the evidence before us. Whilst the eldar have the advantage of farsight, we must combat it with scholarship. Father Jonas is confident that this weapon is only the first of a series that we might expect - he calls it the Cry of the Banshee, after a phrase on this tablet.'

Gabriel turned away from the Marines and looked down at the wraithbone tablet that still lay on the old, wooden table under the gloriously coloured windows. This tablet appears to hold the keys to unlock the secrets of the eldar weapons here. It talks of the Cry of the Banshee at the start, and intimates that there are other things waiting in the depths of the desert and volcanoes. 'We must be vigilant while Jonas tries to decipher the rest of the alien text.'

'What about Sister Meritia?' asked Prathios, aware of the linguistic skills of the Order of the Lost Rosetta. 'What does she make of this tablet?'

'She is dead.'

There was a considered silence.

'I found her in her chamber. She was shot through the head,' explained Gabriel.

'And the young Sister Ptolema?' pressed Prathios, concerned about the implications of murder within the Blood Ravens' monastery, but more concerned about the urgency of the matter at hand. 'Can she not translate this tablet?'

'She is presently in a detention cell,' said Gabriel, turning once again to face the chaplain. 'We suspect that it was she who killed Meritia.'

THE RED SAND swirled around the rangers' camp in the desert, cloaking the makeshift structures in a veil of dust that rendered the emplacement all but invisible. In the very centre of the camp, an elegant and deceptively fragile structure had been erected. It appeared to be little more than a tent, with a length of fabric stretched over the black, shiny frame in place of a roof. There were no walls. The material and the struts were covered in tiny, silver runes, each of which glowed with an imperceptible hint of power. And the desert sand was not able to penetrate the space within despite the apparently open sides.

Macha sat in the heart of the gazebo, her legs folded perfectly beneath her and her cloak falling into even folds from her shoulders. Behind her were arranged the warlocks from her retinue, each sitting in mirror-images of their farseer, with their faces lowered to the ground and their Hps working silently at a gentle psychic chant.

In front of her, Macha had laid out a set of rune stones, placed carefully onto the shimmering surface of a disc of wraithbone. Her glittering green eyes were burning faintly, as the waves of power that were circulating around the pagoda washed through her mind and touched her soul. She was perfectly motionless, and the rune stones lay utterly still.

Laeresh stood in the corner of the ritual space, his arms folded across his chest and his thoughts set defiantly. He was flanked on both sides by two darkly coloured Aspect Warriors from his temple. The three of them stood without moving, staring down at the farseer before them, breathing an aura of resentment into the atmosphere of the purified space.

'Well?' prompted the exarch, his impatience finally overcoming his reverence.

For a moment there was silence, and then Macha slowly lifted her sparkling gaze from the runes, gazing directly over into Laeresh's soul.

There is nothing, she conceded. I can see nothing, and the runes are deaf to my calls.

'Your uncertainty is not helpful, farseer,' hissed Laeresh.

I have never claimed to be certain, Laeresh. It was you who found certainty in my visions, not me. We are here in the wake of your great passion. Decision and guidance are often separate callings, but wisdom is found in the synthesis of both.

'No more riddles, Macha. We have heard the banshee cry, and we must act now.' Laeresh unfolded his arms and stepped forward, crouching down towards the suddenly fragile figure of the farseer. 'We must attack the mon-keigh and drive them from this world. That is why we have come. It is why we are here - you have protected them for long enough - your precious Captain Angelos is an ignorant fool. Even Uldreth Avenger would support me in this, farseer. Even that bloated, vainglorious courtier would support me, so why should I expect less from you? Where is your guidance now, farseer?'

As he spoke, Laeresh reached his arms forward, beseeching the farseer to condone his thoughts. His hands gripped her slender shoulders, as though he believed that he could convince her of his will through the physical strength of his arms. Immediately, the warlocks broke their silent chant and sprang to their feet. Druinir was first, sliding to the farseer's side with preternatural speed, as though slipping through space without encountering the resistance of physical laws.

The warlock touched his fingers against Laeresh's outstretched arm and a flash of energy lurched into the exarch's flesh, making him recoil, snapping back his arms and staggering back away from the unmoving figure of the farseer. As their exarch shrunk back, the two Aspect Warriors behind him stepped forward to his side, shrugging their reaper launchers out of the holsters on their backs and clasping them diagonally across their chests.

No. The thought was calm, even and utterly incontrovertible. The warlocks arrayed behind Macha and the Dark Reapers who were staring menacingly into their burning eyes all stalled. Druinir and Laeresh exchanged a look of understanding, and then the warlock stepped aside as Laeresh knelt down in front of the still-sitting farseer.

I have never commanded you, Laeresh, and I do not seek to control your destiny. I am merely a farseer of Biel-Tan. Your path is your own, Reaper exarch. Your presence here is your own doing, although I can see the echoes of your intent even in the dimness of the past - you were always bound to be here. Lsathranil himself must have seen this. I cannot see the future in this present - the runes will no longer respond to my touch - but the ripples of the past are clear enough in the present. You must act on them as you deem appropriate. That is your path; it is the way of the Dark Reapers.

'No, farseer. I am here because of your vision.' Laeresh was adamant.

No, exarch. We are both here because of your faith in my vision, not because of the vision itself. Uldreth also knew what I saw, but he interpreted it differently. He is not here. The Bahzhakhain is not here to reclaim this world for the Biel-Tan. We are here because of you, Laeresh, Dark Reaper.

'I don't understand,' conceded Laeresh, the passion gradually seeping from his manner as confusion washed through his mind. *Neither do I, Laeresh. Farsight does not make the future more simple, but rather explodes it into myriad possibilities. We must each choose our path - that is the Way of the Eldar, after all.*

'Is it also our way to flee from battle? I cannot believe that Lsathranil intended the warriors of Biel-Tan to show their tails to the mon-keigh,' hissed Laeresh, his anger rising once more at the memory of their retreat, his soul raging at the taunts of the huge crimson machine-warrior. 'Did you not hear the banshee?'

Yes, I saw the signs. Macha's thoughts were weary.

'Then we must attack!' snapped Laeresh, jumping to his feet and staring down at Macha. 'If you will not condone the honour of the Dark Reapers, then we will act without your sanction, farseer of Biel-Tan. I do not require your permission, and I will not stand by and watch the filthy humans pollute this world further. We must annihilate them before their stench ruins this once magnificent planet forever.'

With that, Laeresh swept his cloak around in a whirl and strode out of the gazebo with his Aspect Warriors in tow, vanishing almost immediately into the eddying sand storms that raged outside.

Macha watched the impassioned exarch leave and then sighed deeply, nodding a signal to Druinir. *You were right, old friend. Laeresh is a prisoner of his passions. We must take the fight inside the Blood Ravens' fortress. Laeresh will provide the perfect distraction - although his passion may do more harm than good. We must be fast and we must be stealthy. Tell Aldryan to prepare the rangers.*

JONAS TRACED THE runes down through the passageway in which both Meritia and Ptolemaea had fallen. The script appeared to be identical to that on the first page of the Ascension tablet that he had found blocking the mouth of the entrance to the bizarre, tree-lined chamber.

He read them off as he walked down the tunnel, using his force staff to support his weight as he leaned down to read each one in turn: The banshee's call shall wake the dead when dark portents wax nigh. Heed them as the counsel of a seer, or a father.

The final rune was carved into the last fossilized root, just before the tunnel opened out into the wide underground cavern, from which a blast of heat pushed up into the passageway. The subterranean cave must have been more than a hundred metres in diameter, and it was riddled with heavy shade and lines of darkness that seemed to pulse through cracks in the floor and the walls. The strange, glossy, indelible shadows that Jonas had seen in the corridors above were also in evidence down there, as though the outline of vaguely humanoid corpses had been burnt into the rock after a catastrophic explosion.

The scene was thrown into an eerie and bloody red by the light of the lava flows that coursed through deep channels in the ground, giving off jets of sulphurous smoke and hisses of steam at occasional intervals. The streams of molten rock turned, twisted, and meandered through the cavern, sweeping through intricate and intermingled patterns, as though designed by an artist with incredible understanding of tectonic currents and the geological movements of rock over impossible stretches of time.

With his glimmering force staff planted between his feet, Jonas swept his eyes over the incredible scene and his mind worked to draw connections between it, the eldar text on the walls, and the wraithbone tablet that they had unearthed in the foundations of an ancient, lost fortress monastery. For the moment, his concern for the bizarre explosion of darkness in the desert was forgotten in the scholar's excitement over his new find.

Eventually, his eyes picked out some new details in the rough-cut walls. He wasn't sure whether his eyes had become accustomed to the unusually shifting light in the cavern or whether the icons had just swum to the surface of the stone. Either way, the long curving wall was now clearly decorated with faintly glowing icons and runes, interspersed between the entranceways to subsidiary caves and small tributary tunnels. His intuition told him that these symbols had appeared in order to be read - much like the text on the wraithbone tablet.

Starting on the right hand side of the tunnel through which he had just descended, Jonas walked slowly around the perimeter of the cavern, studying each of the symbols in turn. Almost at once he realised that this was the same text as was inscribed on the second page of the Ascension tablet, and he was suddenly conscious that he was actually walking through the narrative told by the ancient eldar on this world.

By the time he had patrolled the entire circumference, Jonas had collected together a constellation of fragmentary meanings from the text that had been inscribed into the walls. There was something about the Chaos powers. There was talk of a thirst for warmth. And there appeared to be a reference to some kind of tomb. However, no matter how Jonas juggled the words, he could not find a grammatical subject. All of the phrases appeared to lack a subject, as though it were merely implied or assumed in the centre of them all. He got the distinct impression that the author of the text had presupposed a knowledge of the subject before any reader would have progressed this far.

Jonas retreated away from the walls, picking his way towards the centre of the cavern, stepping over streams of molten rock and jumping lava-filled cracks in the ground. Then, standing in the very centre of the chamber, balanced on an island of rock surrounded by the flow of lava, Jonas turned slowly on the spot, looking from one rune to the next, checking to see that he had not missed anything. As he turned, he was struck by a sudden realisation - the grammatical subject was implied at the centre of each phrase.

With a burst of light and power from his staff, Jonas pushed himself up off the ground, his feet lifting slowly as the bulk of the Space Marine librarian began to levitate up towards the stalactite ridden ceiling. He was a radiant, blue star in the dim, ruddiness of the subterranean cavern.

Looking down from his new vantage point, Jonas smiled as the text was revealed to him in its full glory. The wide, circular stone floor of the cavern was run through with lines and cracks, each flooded with streams and rivers of glowing, molten rock. But these were no random or naturally occurring lines - they were the product of incredible artifice, carved into the very crust of the planet many millennia before. Hanging in a sphere of psychic brilliance, Jonas stared down at the exquisite splendour of the giant rune that was cut into the cavern's floor. It was simply breathtaking in its beauty: the gentle curves of its cursive strokes were accentuated by the steady, graceful flow of the lava; where angles cracked and jutted through the pattern, the lava roiled and broke in thick waves, giving the sharpness a real air of violence and power. The runic character seemed to live in the very bowels of the planet, giving expression to something ancient and forgotten in the geological past.

Yngir, thought Jonas, unsure of the correct sounding.

'Yngir,' he whispered, trying out the unfamiliar syllables while his mind raced to put a meaning to the sounds. As he spoke, the ground started to tremble and shudder. The movements were slight at first, but they rapidly gathered momentum, shaking the entire cavern in growing violence. The stalactites above him juddered and then cracked, crashing down against his armour and then spiking down into the molten inferno below. At the same time, the runnels in the ground started to glow with spluttering energy, and pulses of blue light coruscated over the floor.

A thunderous crack shot through the chamber, suddenly rending the floor in two, splitting the huge rune in the middle. As the two sides of the floor started to crumble, collapse and to retreat back into the walls around the perimeter of the chamber, the streams of lava broke over the edges and started to cascade down into the widening chasm like burning, molten waterfalls.

After a few seconds, a wide space had opened up in the middle of the cavern, flanked on two sides by rains of lava that tumbled and flowed down into it, pooling into shallow reservoirs of fire and molten stone. In between the flaming pools, at the bottom of the abrupt chasm, Jonas could see the shimmering shape of a radiant black pyramid. On each of its four faces, it was covered in webs of tiny silver hieroglyphs, the like of which Jonas had never seen before.

Slowly, and with a considerable effort of will, Jonas lowered himself down into the chasm, his force staff pouring power out beneath him to support his substantial weight. He landed firmly on the freshly exposed floor of the cavern, and immediately he stooped down to inspect the new artefact that had been uncovered.

Despite himself, Jonas gasped in awe as he stared into the spiralling infinities that seemed to open up within the shimmering blackness of the waist-high pyramid. It was like nothing he had ever seen before. Even wraithbone seemed pallid and dull in comparison with the unearthly effervescence and profound lustre of this material. It seemed to contain an entire universe of its own. And the little silver hieroglyphs were alien beyond his experience - little more than bizarre pictograms, illuminated with a complicated array of boxes, circles and painstakingly constructed curves. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, and he was certain that this object was beyond even the artifice of the ancient eldar.



CHAPTER NINE: CONSECRATION

THE DOOR JOLTED and a crack of light seeped in around the edges, making Ptolemea squint as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. There was a pause and then the door was pushed open, silhouetting the massive form of a Space Marine in the dazzling light. Curled into the corner of the cell, Ptolemea turned her face away from the light, holding her hand out in front of her as a shield.

'Sister Ptolemea of the Order of the Lost Rosetta, I have come to hear your confession,' said Prathios, stooping under the lintel and entering the little chamber. He looked around the small room, absorbing the dark, damp, cramped squalor of it; Jonas had done a good job of replicating the conditions of an underground dungeon - even the narrow slit of a window near the ceiling gave the impression that the rest of the cell was below water-level.

As the door clanged shut behind the chaplain, closing out the brightness, Ptolemea looked up at his imposing shape - he nearly filled the cell all by himself.

'Confession?' she smiled, feeling a slight pulse of hysteria in her voice. In truth, she had resolved to confess everything. Sitting there alone in the dark, listening to the rhythmical scraping of the eldar in the adjoining cell, watching the flickering images of trees, jungles and death spiral through her mind, she had been determined to cleanse her soul by confessing her taint to the authorities. She had thought ahead to her eventual execution as wistfully as one anticipates the return of a lost lover.

'Confession of what, Marine?' she asked, her delicate lips pursed. Almost as soon as Prathios had opened the door, she had changed her mind about confessing to anything. There was still a chance, a slim and almost invisible chance, that the Blood Ravens were not aware of her visions. Although she realised that this was a virtually impossible hope, she also realised that when faced with the prospect of her death she would clutch at any flickering hope of life, even if that meant denying her own nature. She was no warrior, and she mocked herself for trying to behave like one.

'We are the Adeptus Astartes, Sister,' began Prathios, misunderstanding her resistance. 'And this is a time of war. We have no need for the Adeptus Arbites here, and there is no call for the Inquisition - we may dispense our own justice.'

Ptolemea wrapped her arms around her knees and looked up at the chaplain, studying his proud gait and his earnest manner. 'I do not question your authority, Blood Raven. I question your judgment. To what do you expect me to confess? I have heard no charges against me - can you not do even this courtesy to a fellow servant of the Emperor?'

'Your crimes are written in your soul, Sister,' said Prathios. 'There should be no need for you to hear them with your ears as well.'

'Indulge me,' whispered Ptolemea, leaning forward over her knees and breathing the words with an amused smile. She was not going to give anything away without at least the show of a fight - she may be insane, but she wasn't an idiot.

'You are charged with the assassination of a loyal and devoted servant of the Imperium and with the attempt to disrupt the execution of a Blood Ravens mission on Rahe's Paradise. We have been unable to raise Bethle II to confirm the real reasons for your presence here, but we suspect that you are acting for personal reasons, and we are sure that, whether this is true or not, it would be confirmed by your convent.' Prathios stared down at the young woman in the cell and watched her eyes widen in shock as he spoke. She seemed to be relieved.

'I'm afraid that I cannot confess to these charges, chaplain,' she said, leaning back against the wall. 'I have done no such thing. I would be more than willing to confess to something that was true. To confess to anything else would simply be a lie - and that too would be a crime.' She smiled again, a relaxed and satisfied smile that made Prathios uneasy.

'Do you not wish to know who it was that you are charged with killing?' asked Prathios carefully, watching the pale, beautiful face of Ptolemea as she closed her dark eyes with a new calm.

'Very well, tell me.'

'Sister Senioris Meritia, of the Order of the Lost Rosetta,' said Prathios with slow deliberation.

Ptolemea's eyes flashed open immediately. 'What?' she said, scrambling to her feet. 'What? But I just saw her in her chamber. She was still unconscious...' her voice trailed off as her mind raced back to the scene. She could still see the flickering eye movements of the older Sister, and could clearly remember the dawning of solidarity that had accompanied her suspicions that the older woman was suffering from the same dreams as her. Despite all the suspicions about Meritia's betrayal that had cycled through her mind since being thrown into that cell, Ptolemea felt the loss of her Sister.

Chaplain Prathios watched the complicated emotions dance over Ptolemea's elegant features. She looked genuinely surprised to hear the news. 'What were you doing in her chamber?'

Snapping out of her reverie, Ptolemea's eyes fixed on those of Prathios. 'I was checking to see that she was alright. I was... worried about her.' She paused, unsure about whether to go on. 'We... we seemed to have more in common than I realised.'

Prathios said nothing, sensing that there was something further that the young Sister wanted to say.

'She killed herself,' stated Ptolemea, vocalising her conclusion but not her chain of thought. Her certainty was written clearly on her face as she stared into space.

'Why should I believe that?' asked Prathios reasonably, although his intuition told him that she was telling the truth.

'Because it is the only possible answer,' replied Ptolemea, meeting his eyes once again.

'Why would she kill herself, Sister?' paraphrased Prathios, needing something more. 'Why would I kill her?'

'You tell me.'

'You don't understand: Meritia was suffering. She was afflicted by... she was suffering from nightmares.'

'What sort of nightmares?' prompted Prathios, wanting to keep the momentum going.

'Dangerous nightmares. Like visions. They racked her with pain and with guilt, making her wake in cold sweats, screaming. They literally turned her grey,' realised Ptolemaea as she spoke. 'I... she didn't understand them, and thought that they were signs of taint.'

'And were they?'

'No! No, don't you see? She killed herself out of fear. She was scared that she was becoming something hideous and monstrous. She was afraid that something had got inside her soul and ruined her purity. But she killed herself!' Ptolemaea was almost shouting now, as though carried along by the impassioned logic of her thoughts. 'She killed herself and that proves that she was still pure! She killed herself to save her soul for the Emperor - she killed herself because she thought that she was becoming everything she despised... she killed herself because she was still a pristine servant of the Emperor.'

'Why should I believe this?' asked Prathios, impressed by Ptolemaea's passion but aware of his responsibility to discover evidence and truth. 'How do I know that you didn't kill her because you suspected her of taint?'

'You're right,' answered Ptolemaea, her self-knowledge falling into place. 'I would have killed her. I even thought about it. I did. I thought about turning her over to the Sisterhood on Bethle II, or even to the inquisitors of the Ordo Hereticus. But I didn't do it. I couldn't. And in the end she saved me the trouble and killed herself - don't you see?'

'You do not persuade, Sister,' countered Prathios. The story was plausible, but she had given him no reason to believe her. Passion is not an argument in itself. 'Give me a reason to believe you.'

Ptolemaea sighed and looked up into the chaplain's eyes, holding his gaze calmly. 'It seems that I must give you my confession after all,' she said. 'I know of what I speak because... I have been suffering these same visions since I arrived on Rahe's Paradise.' Prathios said nothing. After a few seconds he nodded and turned away, pulling open the cell door and leaving without a word. He believed her. If there was a charge more serious than murdering a fellow servant of the Emperor, it was that of being tainted by the unclean and treacherous powers of daemons or aliens. Ptolemaea's confession made no sense unless it was true. Whether or not her visions were actually signs of taint was an entirely different question, and it was not something that a Space Marine chaplain was able to judge by himself, although his intuition told him that her unforced confession was in itself evidence that her soul was pure.

GABRIEL GAZED AROUND the stiflingly hot and impressively wide, subterranean cavern, amazed by what Jonas had uncovered beneath the foundations of the lost monastery. The walls were aglow with eldar runes, which he could not read, and riddled with the entrances to tunnels and caves. There must be an entire network of tunnels reaching out into the desert and up into the mountains. He had thought that the only navigable route was between the great amphitheatre and the Blood Ravens' monastery. It was now clear that he was wrong.

There was a narrow ridge running all the way around the edge of the cavern, providing a ledge from which there was access to each of the tributary tunnels. In the centre, the floor just dropped away down into a sheer and wide pit. The walls were covered in cascades of molten rock, which fell from runnels and cracks in the ridge on which Gabriel stood, collecting into pools of burning light down in the pit.

Looking down towards the base of the pit, Gabriel could see the shimmering, angular form of a black pyramid in the centre. Next to it, slumped on the ground, was the shape of a fallen Marine, face down on the stone floor.

'Jonas!' cried Gabriel, realising immediately who it must be. He launched himself off the ridge in front of the bizarre, root-entangled tunnel that led down from the monastery, vaulting down into the pit and thumping into the rocky ground, landing into an alert crouch.

Rising to his feet, Gabriel surveyed his surroundings, conscious that Jonas must have suffered from some kind of attack and aware that his assailants may still be around. The walls of the pit were bathed in fire and trickles of lava, and Gabriel could not see what was hidden in the recesses beyond. It seemed logical to him that there would be caves and tunnels down there, just as there were around the ridge above, but he could see no sign of them through the molten waterfalls.

Cautiously, he stepped over towards Jonas, taking note of the mysterious, alien-looking pyramid-artefact that the librarian must have been examining. Jonas was lying on his front, with his force staff still clutched in one hand. He was unconscious, but he was breathing.

The sound of a tumbling rock made Gabriel look up, snatching his bolter out of its holster. He scanned the perimeter of fire with the barrel of his gun, looking for signs of the movement that he had heard. But there was nothing.

'Gabriel!' called a familiar voice, making the captain look up. Prathios bowed slightly from the ridge. 'We need to talk about Ptolemaea.'

Gabriel nodded briskly, still uncertain that the noise he had heard had come from such a high elevation. He pointed to his eyes and then gestured to the circumference of the pit, indicating to Prathios that he thought there was a threat nearby.

Spotting the fallen form of Jonas behind his captain, Prathios nodded in understanding and drew his weapon, springing down into the pit to join Gabriel. As soon as he hit the ground, all hell broke loose.

A sleet of projectiles hissed out from behind a molten cascade of lava, slicing easily through the heavy, sulphurous air like burning shards through flesh. The two Marines saw the rampaging cloud just in time, and they dived for the ground, rolling neatly before coming back up into a crouch, their bolters levelled and coughing towards the source of the attack.

The explosive shells detonated as they penetrated the screen of lava, spluttering the cascades into bubbling partitions of fire, but Gabriel couldn't tell whether they were having any impact on the assailants beyond.

After a couple of seconds, the two Marines stopped firing and there was silence in the underground pit, broken only by the distant echoes of their shots as the sound bounced and ricocheted through the maze of tunnels that fed into the wider cavern. They glanced at each other and then stood to their feet next to the bizarre alien pyramid, turning back to back as they swept their weapons around the perimeter of the pit.

The silence was compromised by the grating of sand and gravel under the weight of their heavy boots, and by the spluttering hiss of molten rock falling into the burning pools on the ground.

Gabriel paused, concentrating his gaze into the sheets of lava that pulsed down the walls of the pit. They were not uniform or even, and there were occasional gaps in the flow, as though the volume of lava was not quite enough to cover the walls properly. The captain focussed carefully, holding his eyes on the slits of clarity torn into the molten flows, watching the red and orange light from the cascades spark and reflect off the slick surface of the rock beyond.

There! Gabriel squeezed a couple of shells out of his bolter and watched the little contrails that poured out behind them, as though in slow motion. They spun through the thick, gaseous air and then slipped through a gap in the lava flow, punching into the kaleidoscope of reflections beyond. There was a dull thud, but no explosion against the rock.

He had hit something.

Pulling his chainsword from its holster, Gabriel stalked forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the little slit of clarity in the wall of fire and molten rock. The quality of the reflected light next to the floor was slightly different from that in the middle of the wall, as though the surface was bulging or uneven. Gabriel held his chainsword out in front of him as he advanced, pointing it at the misshapen reflections, while he held his bolter in his other hand, pointing out at right angles to his side.

It looked like a camouflaged body. A cloaked eldar ranger, thought Gabriel.

Just as he reached the wall of lava, a series of explosions and a cry made Gabriel spin on his heel. He left the tip of his chainsword pointing down at the prone body of the eldar warrior behind the screen of molten rock, but he turned his head and snapped his bolter around.

Behind him, in the middle of the pit, stood Prathios, his glittering Crozius held high in one hand while his bolter barked repeatedly in the other. In front of the chaplain were three eldar warriors, each brandishing long, elegant blades that seemed to coruscate with suggestions of purple flames. They were prowling around the chaplain in a complicated pattern that meant he could only ever see two of them clearly - the third was always at least partly hidden behind one or both of the other two. With rhythmic but syncopated regularity, the eldar lurched forward at Prathios, sometimes one by one, sometimes two at a time, and sometimes all at once.

The Blood Ravens chaplain parried and hacked with the sizzling power of his Crozius, meeting the coruscating blades of the aliens with thunderous strikes of his own. Meanwhile, he rattled off shots with his bolter, spraying shells almost randomly as he had no time to take even the most casual aim. The eldar seemed to slip around his shots without concern, and without breaking the rhythm of their dance.

Immediately, Gabriel's bolter spat a volley of shells towards the alien assailants, but the hail of bullets didn't even seem to break the pattern of their movements, as though their dance-like performance had somehow pre-empted his shots. They continued to lurch and swipe at Prathios, their blades flashing radiantly in the dim light of the subterranean pit as the chaplain swept his Crozius in powerful arcs, somehow managing to parry every strike.

Checking back towards the slumped body at the tip of his own blade, Gabriel made up his mind at once. Firing off a constant tirade of shells, he charged back across the pit, spinning his chainsword in eager preparation for combat.

After only a couple of strides, a strip of explosions ripped up the ground in front of him, making him slide to a halt and dive to the side. As he hit the ground he rolled, angling his bolter up towards the ledge around the top of the pit and sending off a salvo of fire. Chunks of rock and spurts of lava erupted as the bolter shells punched into the lip of the ledge. The four eldar marksmen who had taken up the elevated position scattered away from the fire, rolling away from the suddenly unstable ledge. As he skidded along the ground, Gabriel yanked a frag grenade off the clip on his belt and instinctively thumbed the timer down to two seconds. From the prone position on the floor, he lobbed the grenade up towards the eldar snipers. It arced steeply, reaching its peak just over the heads of the aliens when the timer blipped and the grenade detonated into a brilliant, shrapnel-filled fireball.

Three of the aliens dived flat against the ledge, disappearing from view, but the fourth staggered back in the sudden blast of pressure and heat, losing his footing in a flail of limbs and falling head over heels off the ledge. Gabriel watched the hapless creature, ripped through by the shrapnel from the frag grenade, as it splashed down into one of the pools of magma, sending up a thick, viscous fountain of molten rock and then a cloud of steam as the body vaporised in the intense heat.

By the time the other eldar on the ledge had regained their firing solutions, Gabriel was already back on his feet and pounding over towards his embattled chaplain.

IMAGES OF DEATH cycled through Laeresh's mind: *war is my master, death my mistress*. The chant filled his soul with power and longing as the Dark Reapers swept through the desert towards the Blood Ravens' monastery. The jet-black Wave Serpents were flanked by the greens and whites of the Biel-Tan vehicles that had accompanied the exarch, deferring to his authority in the theatre of battle. He was an Exarch of Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God, and war flowed through his veins, rendering him into the best and the worst of his kind. In a time of war, there was no figure more inspirational for the warriors of Biel-Tan than an exarch at the head of a battle-force. Besides, Macha had made no attempt to stop Laeresh mustering his army. She had not interfered when he had clambered up on top of his Wave Serpent with his reaper launcher held into the air like a standard and led the eldar force out of the rangers' camp and into the wind-racked desert. She had simply sat silently in her gazebo, flanked by her retinue of warlocks, waiting for Aldryan to muster the rangers for her own more stealthy purpose.

As the convoy crested a high dune, the heavy black of the mon-keigh monastery loomed into view, breaking the dull, rusty monotony of the desert and marking the beginning of the mountain range beyond.

Laeresh stamped his foot against the roof of the transporter and his vehicle slowed to a halt. The bone-white plumes around his death mask fluttered and whirled in the dusty wind. The other Wave Serpents spread out into a line next to him, running along the apex of the dune with their gun barrels bristling out towards the enemy. The red sun glinted against their armoured plates in little bursts of colour.

Staring out across the desert towards the heavy and ugly edifice that had been constructed by the clumsy, dirty humans, Laeresh rolled his top lip back into a snarl of disgust. He couldn't believe that Macha had been willing to retreat from the pathetic mon-

keigh. The cry of the banshees may have pierced her confidence, but it would not shake his own resolve. The vile aliens had to be removed from the surface of this once pure and verdant world - Lsathranil's Shield must be made clean again.

War is my master, bellowed the exarch, forcing his thoughts out through the desert wind, running them through the armoured sides of the Wave Serpent transports and into the minds of the eldar warriors within. His words dripped with hatred and disgust, filling his warriors with an unspeakable, primal passion for death.

Death is my mistress, came the response, as though shouted out from a thousand voices all at once. Laeresh felt the resolve of his Aspect Warriors and the Guardians of Biel-Tan buoy his soul, lifting his resolve and fixing his spirit on the battle to come. He stared across at the solid blackness of the monastery walls, and he visualised them cracking and crumbling under the furious assault of the eldar. Even he could see the end of the mon-keigh there; he didn't need Macha to foresee his victory. It was clear and obvious. The bumbling humans were no match for the timeless wrath of the exarch of the Dark Reapers.

He stamped down once more, this time triggering a stream of light from the gun-turret next to him on the Wave Serpent's roof. The lance of brightness seared out across the desert, flashing in perfect straightness until it smashed against the huge walls of the monastery in the distance. Following the lead of their exarch, the other Dark Reaper Wave Serpent also unleashed strips of lightning through the desert air, crunching its beams into the massive shape of the mon-keigh structure. From a distance, there were few forces in the galaxy that could match the Dark Reapers.

As the pulses of lance fire streaked out of the line that ran along the crest of the dune, the green and white Wave Serpents of the Biel-Tan Guardians lurched forward, skating down the face of the dune and racing forward towards the monastery, leaving clouds of sand in their wake as they accelerated to attack speed. After a few seconds, the flashing reports of weapons fire could be seen around the base of the monastery, and ordnance started to rain down on the speeding eldar vehicles. Shells punched into the desert on all sides of the Wave Serpents, exploding into huge craters and sending great plumes of sand billowing up into the air.

THE EXPLOSIONS SHOOK the cavern, breaking stalactites from the high ceiling and sending them darting down towards the ground like stone spears. They splashed and sizzled into the pools of lava around the edge of the pit, or crashed into splinters as they struck the hard rocky ground. Concussive clouds of smoke, fire and shrapnel billowed out around the ledge, blasting heat and pressure waves out through the tributary tunnels, chasing in the wake of the fleeing eldar rangers.

Gabriel had launched the grenade cluster into the air on a tight timer and then thrown himself flat over the top of the prone figure of Father Jonas, shielding the unconscious librarian from the force of the blast and absorbing the impacts of the falling masonry against the thick armour on his own back. As the rain of debris lightened, Gabriel sprang back to his feet and ran over to where Prathios had fallen.

The chaplain was collapsed on the ground between the corpses of three eldar rangers; their blades, shattered and broken, lay in ruins across the floor. Prathios had confronted their force-swords with his Crozius and wrecked them all, ploughing through the alien technology with the power of his faith. His bolter had punched holes through the psycho-plastic armour of the eldar warriors, leaving seeping wounds in their limbs and abdomens, from which hissing, toxic blood poured into little pools around the dead. But he had suffered terrible wounds. The snipers on the ledge had almost ignored Gabriel, seeking merely to prevent the captain from assisting his chaplain, while raining goutts of shuriken down at the embattled Prathios.

He had fought valiantly and with passion, but the odds had been stacked impossibly against him. He had parried and struck with his Crozius, snapping off shots with his bolter, fighting three eldar warriors at close range and trying to contend with four more at distance. Not even the magisterial might of a Blood Ravens chaplain could stand against such terrible force.

At the last, as his body was ripped through by streams of tiny projectiles from the rifles of the snipers, Prathios had let out a great roar of defiance that echoed powerfully around the cavern and out into the surrounding tunnels. He had lashed out with his Crozius for a final time, smashing through the lancing blades of his attackers and splintering them into shards. Even as his ruined legs collapsed under his weight and he started to fall, he had tracked his bolter around the cavern, placing his last shells precisely into the flesh of the aliens around him. By the time he hit the ground, his three assailants were broken, wretched, and dying.

'Prathios,' said Gabriel, kneeling at the side of his old friend. 'Prathios, can you hear me?'

There was no reply. The chaplain lay face down on the ground with his powerful legs buckled underneath him; the thick armour around his knees had been perforated by shuriken fire and his lower legs almost severed. His ornate and ancient death mask was twisted around to one side, suggesting that his neck may have broken, and his arms were stretched out in front of him, as though reaching for the weapons that were still clutched in his hands. His arms were riddled with tiny holes where the monomolecular projectiles of the eldar snipers had ripped through his armour, flesh and bones.

'Prathios,' repeated Gabriel, refusing to believe that even such egregious wounds could bring an end to such a great warrior. He released the clasps on his own helmet and pulled it off, dropping it onto the ground next to the chaplain. Then he carefully removed Prathios's revered death mask, lifting it gently and placing it next to the fallen Marine. It was clear that the chaplain's neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, but his eyes were half open and Gabriel could see the irises jittering. He was still alive. With anger rising in his body, Gabriel stood up and looked around the cavern, absorbing the turmoil of the scene - the ruined cavern, the smashed stalactites, the eldar corpses, the rains of lava, the unconscious figure of Jonas and the ruined body of Prathios. And there, in the middle of it all, still glinting with a distant and ineffable darkness, was the shimmering black pyramid, sparkling with pristine silver hieroglyphs.

Throwing his head back and his arms out to his side, Gabriel let out a cry, drawing it up from the pit of his stomach and yelling it out into the subterranean world as a threat, a promise, and an impassioned defiance. The sound was amplified and echoed around the cavern and out into the labyrinth of tunnels.

After a few seconds, silence fell and Gabriel stood motionless, his arms still held out, as though beseeching the Emperor himself for some sign. Then, so quiet as to be almost inaudible, a single voice seemed to reply. It was a soprano, high and clear like crystal, singing directly into Gabriel's mind. The note soared into heaven, and then was joined by others, more and more of them

until there was a silvering chorus of voices. They seemed to be singing into his soul, drawing his purpose towards the Astronomican itself. He had heard these voices before, but never had they been as clear, as pristine or as beautiful as now.

'ON THE HORIZON!' called Corallis as he stared out across the sand. He was standing up on the roof of one of the Land Raiders, keeping watch for the return of the eldar forces while Tanthius organised the Blood Ravens' defences.

The huge Terminator Marine stopped what he was doing and turned to follow Corallis's line of sight. Arrayed along the crest of a dune on the horizon, he could clearly see a line of eldar vehicles glinting in the red sun as clouds of sand gusted past them. They appeared to have stopped moving, as though they were waiting to be seen before they launched their attack. On the roof of one of the Wave Serpents, Tanthius could just about make out the distinctively tall form of the crested, ornate warrior-leader. He had heard that such magnificent figures were known as exarchs, and he thrilled in anticipation of the battle to come.

'Prepare for battle,' said Tanthius calmly, his vox bead hissing and crackling with interference from all the heavy machinery. The rest of the Blood Ravens sounded in around him, confirming their readiness to defend the monastery-outpost from the xenos assault. 'Our guests have returned,' he murmured under his breath, inspecting the distant prospect of the exarch.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' The voices rang out in the desert air, unassisted by the vox units and amplifier arrays, as the Blood Ravens shouted their resolve all along the defensive line. Tanthius nodded with satisfaction.

A burst of brightness flashed on the horizon and a strip of brilliance lanced over Corallis's head, punching into the walls of the monastery behind him. After a second, another beam of energy followed the first, burning through the dusty air and smashing into the towering edifice at the backs of the Marines. In rapid succession, another flurry of beams pulsed into the wall, this time launched from multiple locations on the horizon. The walls shook under the onslaught and rains of debris fell, but the structure was sound - the Blood Ravens knew how to construct fortifications.

Under cover of the lance fire that lashed out of a few of the Wave Serpents on the horizon, Corallis and Tanthius could see the rest of the eldar convoy lurch forward, rushing down the face of the dune as it began the charge across the open desert towards the glassy and rocky ground in front of the Blood Ravens' defences.

'And so it begins again,' muttered Tanthius, signalling to the gunners in the Land Raiders to start their bombardments and bracing his own weapons ready for the combat to come.

THE ELDAR RANGER was sitting silently in the cell. Its legs were crossed and it was sitting on its heels. Its eyes were closed and its lips were working silently, as though muttering silent prayers to some unspeakable eldar god. The silence was abruptly shattered as the door to the cell burst open, smashing back against the wall with violent force, leaving the shape of Gabriel filling the doorway.

'Get up!' snapped Gabriel, taking a step into the tiny chamber.

The alien did not move. It didn't even open its eyes.

'Get up!' shouted Gabriel, his eyes burning with anger at the indefatigable composure and quiet of the creature.

Still no response.

'Get up, now!' yelled Gabriel, his fists clenching automatically as his anger started to boil. Taking another step forward, he swung a thunderous punch against the eldar's face, striking it against the side of its head and knocking it sprawling onto the ground.

'I know you can understand me, ranger,' he whispered, stooping down and lifting the alien off the ground by the collar of his cloak. 'I have spoken to your kind before. I know that you can understand me.'

Gabriel straightened his arm and slammed the eldar back against the wall of the cell, pushing his hand around the creature's neck and holding him off the ground, half-choking the infuriatingly calm alien. 'You will help us, or you will die. It is that simple,' explained Gabriel, glaring into the smooth, unwrinkled face. 'Do you understand? Do you understand!'

The alien opened its eyes and looked down at Gabriel, letting an aura of sadness wisp out through its gaze.

'I'll take that as a yes,' stated Gabriel, ignoring the melancholy eyes of the creature in his grasp. He withdrew his hand and let the eldar slump down the wall into a heap on the ground. Then he snatched at the creature's slender wrists, clamping them into the vice-like grip of his own hand, before turning and dragging the alien out of the cell, towing it behind him like a dead weight.

After nearly a kilometre of winding passageways, Gabriel kicked open the huge, heavy doors of the librarium and dragged the limp, unresisting eldar inside, striding up the central aisle towards the magnificent stained-glass windows at the far end.

With a swing of his arm, Gabriel dumped the alien into an unceremonious pile on the floor next to the old wooden table under the window.

'What does that say?' he snapped, pointing at the wraithbone tablet on the tabletop. The eldar didn't even sit up.

'What is that?' demanded Gabriel. 'This is not a game, eldar. We have no time for your tricks or your games - we are not your toys. People are dying because of this. What is it?'

The ranger stirred, propping himself up on his arms and looking up at Gabriel. The ranger's emerald eyes glowed with complicated depths, but he said nothing.

At the limit of his patience, Gabriel reached down and grasped the alien's long hair, lifting it off the ground by its scalp and thrusting its head towards the tablet, pushing its face right up against the shimmering wraithbone.

'What does it say?'

For the first time, the ranger offered some resistance, struggling against Gabriel's grip and recoiling from the tablet, pushing against the edge of the table with its arms. It shook its head, and its eyes blazed with sudden awareness and shock.

'What does it say?' demanded Gabriel, holding the creature firmly in place, ignoring its flailing attempts to get away. 'Tell me, and I'll put you back in your cell.'

The eldar thrashed impotently, rising urgency written across its face.

Ishandruir! Yngir Ishandruir!



CHAPTER TEN: COLLABORATION

IT WAS NO eldar,' said Jonas, sitting up with his legs thrown over the side of the medicae-tablet in the monastery's apothecarion. He looked older and more tired than usual, as though part of his life-force had been drained out of him by his recent traumas. In the background, he could hear the dull thuds of impacts against the walls of the monastery.

In the temporary absence of an apothecary on Rahe's Paradise, Tech-marine Ephraim of the Ninth Company was administering to the damaged librarian. He could do little more than check the integrity of the ancient armour's seals and ensure that its more mechanical features were functioning properly. Jonas had regained consciousness by himself, once he had been carried to the apothecarion and deposited on the adamantium tablet. He didn't appear to have suffered any physical wounds that his own enhanced physiology could not deal with on its own.

'You're certain?' pressed Gabriel, momentarily concerned that the great scholar's memory might be playing tricks on him: there had certainly been eldar down in the excavation, as he and Prathios knew to their cost.

'I am certain, captain,' replied Jonas, pushing himself off the edge of the tablet and trying his weight on his feet. He shook slightly with the effort, as though it took more of his strength than he anticipated to keep himself upright.

'Then what was it?' asked Gabriel, sidelining his scepticism for the time being and instinctively reaching forward to help steady the father librarian. He was certain that the eldar were at the centre of it, even if it had not been the eldar themselves that had attacked Jonas.

'I cannot say,' replied Jonas, leaning back against the heavy tablet for support but lifting his eyes to meet Gabriel's. 'But I am sure that it was no eldar trickery. I was inspecting the new find - that fascinating black pyramid - I assume that you saw it? There was nothing around. No footfalls and not even the hint of a psychic presence - the eldar give off such a psychic stench that it is almost impossible for them to take a Blood Ravens librarian by surprise. There was nothing...'

Gabriel waited as Jonas lapsed into his memories. He could see the librarian's eyes lose their focus as he stared into his own past, replaying the events of earlier that day in his mind.

'It was a shadow. Just the suggestion of a figure or a form, like the wraiths found in the ancient legends of this world. It was as though it was something not quite real, not quite alive, not quite... there at all.'

The librarian sounded wistful, as though genuinely amazed by what he had seen. Gabriel watched him carefully, unused to this kind of sentimentality from one of the Blood Ravens.

'I don't know how to describe it, Gabriel. It rushed at me, as though from everywhere at once, engulfing me in its darkness. Then it vanished, as suddenly and inexplicably as it had appeared, leaving me drained and semi-conscious on the ground.' Jonas paused, recalling something else. 'It vanished when the eldar arrived,' he realised. 'They came before you and it fled from them, as though recoiling at their stench as it flowed into the cavern.'

Gabriel nodded carefully, unsure what to make of Jonas's account. He looked over towards Ephraim, looking for some kind of sign, but the techmarine just shrugged, unable to judge whether the librarian had suffered any psychological trauma.

'Rest easy, Jonas,' said Gabriel at last, placing his hand on the librarian's shoulder. 'We will have need for your skills before this affair is finished, I am sure.' Jonas was now the only sanctioned psyker on the planet, which did not bode well for a conflict with the eldar. Even Chaplain Prathios, with his finely tuned psychic sympathies and sensitivities, had been put out of action. It was as though the eldar were systematically removing the Blood Ravens' ability to manipulate warp energy. Thinking back to the Blood Trials, Gabriel realised suddenly that the rangers had focussed their attacks on those aspirants that Prathios had suspected were psykers, including that green-eyed boy with the blond braids who kept appearing in Gabriel's mind.

Turning away from Jonas with a comradely smile, Gabriel strode over to the other side of the apothecarion, where Prathios was lying in an elaborate, ceremonial sarcophagus. His limbs had been shattered beyond the skill of anyone on Rahe's Paradise and his neck was broken. His eyes were wide and wild, although they seemed blind. The Third Company's apothecary was still light-years away aboard the *Litany of Fury*. Despite a number of attempts, Gabriel had not been able to get a message to the battle barge to try and encourage them to hurry through the Blood Trials on Trontiux III. The apothecary was needed badly, not least to tend to the grievously wounded Prathios, but also to maintain the recently erratic implants of a number of the scouts based on Rahe's Paradise, including Caleb.

In the absence of the apothecary, Gabriel had no choice other than to seal Prathios in one of the ancient sarcophagi that were kept in the walls of the monastery's chapel. He had no idea how the archaic and revered cabinets worked, but there was a legend in the pantheon of the Blood Ravens that told how the Great Father Azaraiah Vidya himself had been mortally wounded in a terrible battle against the unclean powers and then enshrined into the hallowed confines of such a device. It is recorded in the *Apocrypha Azaraiah: Travails of Vidya* that the Great Father floated freely through space for many decades, encased in the ceremonial purity of his sarcophagus, until he was finally recovered by the *Ravenous Spirit*, which was the strike cruiser of the Commander of the Watch even then.

If it had worked for the Great Father, it should work for Chaplain Prathios, thought Gabriel, holding fast to his faith as he closed the heavy lid over the face of his oldest friend.

'This is not the end, Prathios, chaplain of the Blood Ravens' Third. We will see each other again, Emperor willing,' muttered the captain in tones that only Prathios would have heard, had he been able to hear anything at all. 'The Emperor protects.'

The lid clunked shut heavily; jets of steam hissed out from around the seam as the interior of the carved and illuminated sarcophagus pressurised, sealing the chaplain in until such a time as expert help arrived.

THE CORRIDORS WERE silent. Nothing seemed to move as the row of Devastator Marines stood sentinel around the entrance to the Implantation Chamber - it was an entire squad. Their armour glinted crisply, and they held their weapons ready across their chests in pristine and perfect attention. The Ninth Company had three librarians and they were all there, standing side-by-side directly in front of the huge armoured doors with the other Marines spreading out on either side of them. The Implantation Chamber had its own separate protective field, which activated automatically when even the tiniest glitch appeared in the *Litany of Fury's* own warp shields. The Chapter Priests within worked hardest of all when the *Litany* slipped into the warp. Within that chamber was the future of the Chapter itself: not only the half-finished form of the neophyte still strapped to the ceremonial tablet, but also one of the armoured repositories of the Blood Ravens' gene-seed itself.

The *Litany* had dropped into the warp about half an hour before, heading for the Lorn system, just after Ulantus had finally dispatched Sergeant Saulh with the *Rage of Erudition* to inform Gabriel of the recent developments and to request his aid on Lorn. Captain Ulantus had waited for as long as he could before dropping into the warp, conscious that the young Ckrius was at a very vulnerable stage of his implantation. His concern was only partly for the youth himself, since he would be unusually vulnerable to the curdling insanities of the warp that engulfed the vessel, but it was mostly for the integrity of the *Litany of Fury*. Although the ancient battle barge had sailed its way through countless warp storms throughout the course of its long and venerable existence, it was never wise to be complacent about the unearthly and incomprehensible forces that swam through the empyrean, stirring time and space themselves as though they were merely water. The unspeakable powers would not be unaware of the presence of a vulnerable soul in the bowels of the *Litany*, even though it would be shielded behind the massive geller-field of the ship itself and then behind the psychic walls that were maintained around the Implantation Chamber at all times.

Ulantus had been right to be cautious. For a short time, the journey had seemed to be progressing smoothly, but, after only a few minutes in the warp, one of the *Litany's* Astropaths had collapsed, flinging itself out of its station with blood pouring out of its eyes, dead. Something had slipped through a phase variance in the ship's shield and emerged into the open and sensitive mind of the astropath. However, even the disciplined, trained, controlled mind of the astropath had been unable to contain the presence, and it had ripped itself clear of the organic container, shredding the astropath's mind, brain and eyes.

Immediately, the Implantation Chamber had locked itself down, sealing the priests, the Apothecary and the neophyte inside. But Ulantus was not about to take any chances: he dispatched the Ninth Company's librarians and a detachment of Devastator Marines to stand guard over the vital chamber. He could not afford to take the *Litany* out of the warp until it had reached its designated extraction point - there was no telling where it might emerge, and the imperative of reaching Lorn before the suspected eldar fleet drove him on.

The lights in the brightly lit corridor flickered slightly, as though a power surge threatened to overload the glow-orbs in the ceiling. In the failing light, a faint purple light shimmered out from the walls themselves, as though weak veins of power coursed through the structure of the corridors.

'Prepare yourselves,' murmured Librarian Korinth, planting the tip of his force staff onto the deck between his feet. A crackle of blue flame sparked at the gentle impact. 'It approaches.'

The librarian stood in the very centre of the line, with the imposing figures of his librarian brothers Zhaphel and Rhamah on either side of him. Unlike the majority of other Space Marine Chapters, it was not unusual for a Blood Ravens Company to have a number of librarians in it, and they were quite accustomed to fighting alongside each other.

As Korinth spoke, the Devastator Marines braced their weapons, hefting chainswords and levelling flamers along the corridor in front of them. Zhaphel took a step forward from the line, swinging his force-axe in an arc around his shoulders, loosening his muscles in anticipation of the conflict to come. Meanwhile, Rhamah remained completely motionless; he had an ornate force-sword bound into a custom-holster on his back, but he made no attempt to reach for it. Instead, the librarian stood with his arms folded defiantly across his massive chest, with tendrils of warp-fire playing around the contacts that protruded from the psychic hood which obscured much of his face. Inside the hood, his eyes burned with a startling blue.

The lights flickered again, more violently than before. At the far end of the corridor, one of the glow-orbs overloaded and exploded, shattering glass down onto the metallic floor. The rest of the lights continued to flicker and pulse, throwing the passageway into a fit of strobe-lighting. Then another orb blew, and another, raining shards of glass down into the corridor. The Marines remained motionless, with their feet planted firmly and their resolve undaunted. They were simply waiting for something to appear that they could kill.

The flashing of the lights grew faster and faster, and the frequency of exploding orbs accelerated as they drew closer to the Marines and the Implantation Chamber. After a few seconds, the line of exploding glow-orbs became a strafing run, ploughing along the ceiling and racing towards the Blood Ravens, scattering glass like shrapnel. Keeping pace with the vicious rain was a ring of purple flame that looped around the floor, walls and ceiling, burning forward towards the Marines in a crackling halo of fire.

Korinth struck his staff against the deck, sending out jabs of energy through the metal panels, making the floor buckle and buck. As the bolts of energy from his staff met the advancing halo of fire, there was an abrupt, cackling shriek, like a thousand voices raised in agony.

The walls trembled and appeared to melt as the inferno intensified and tendrils of dripping energy started to reach out into the corridor. The screams of pain echoed along the passageway, bouncing from wall to wall and crashing against the staunch Marines that stood against the wave, even as the wailing scraped and grated against their minds.

For the merest fraction of a second, the Blood Ravens awaited direction, but then Zhaphel launched himself forward, spinning his force-axe in great sweeps around his head, hacking it through the daemonic tentacles and releasing spurts of phosphorescence from the severed protrusions.

Nothing shall pass! His voice echoed into the minds of the Marines around him, filling them with resolve and certainty.

Rhamah stayed planted before the great doors, but brilliant cracks of energy flashed out from his fingertips and from around the amplifier modules in his hood, lashing out against the daemonic incursion and bringing it to a standstill. At the same time, the Devastator squad stormed forward through plumes of their own flames, brandishing chainswords and powerfists, meeting the warp-daemon with the righteous fury of the Blood Ravens.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' they yelled as they charged forward into the fray.

SINCE PRATHIOS HAD left the little cell, Ptolema had simply settled back onto the floor, drawing herself up against the back wall and pulling her chin down to her knees. Her mind raced through the implications of what she had said to the Blood Raven, wondering whether he had passed her confession along to Gabriel. Her thoughts spiralled in confusion as she tried to keep track of moral correctness: it seemed to slip and slide through her grasp even as she attempted to focus on it. Nothing would settle. Her thoughts floated freely, as though no longer even constrained by her mind. It seemed that she had lost the ability to stand in judgement over her own thoughts.

She tried to rehearse the scenario in her head: she had been sent to Rahe's Paradise on orders from the Bethle subsector of the Ordo Hereticus, charged with investigating allegations that Captain Angelos had been tainted and was consequently suffering unsanctioned visions; since arriving, she herself had started to suffer from dreams that may themselves constitute visions; assuming that Sister Senioris Meritia had suffered the same visions, she had found them so unbearable that she had been forced to kill herself in order to escape the possibility that her soul was tainted; rather than killing herself, however, or even permitting herself to be wrongfully executed for killing Meritia, Ptolema had confessed her suspicions of her own taint to the chaplain of Captain Angelos himself. Perhaps her confession had been a subconscious plea for execution? Rather than being the righteous investigator of Gabriel's alleged taint, she was now at his mercy, apparently sharing with him the affliction of which he stands charged. Even if he were guilty of all the things Isador accused him of, would this really make him any more tainted than her? Ptolema didn't feel tainted, just confused.

As she sat feverishly against the wall of her cell, muttering to herself and struggling to find order in her thoughts, the door creaked and then crashed open, smashing back against the interior wall. In the flood of light that suddenly poured into the dark, little cell, Ptolema saw the outline of a Marine. He was carrying a large block under one arm and clutched an elegant, slender, struggling figure in the other.

With a brisk movement, Gabriel tossed the eldar ranger into the cell. The alien smashed into the wall above Ptolema's head and then slumped down into a heap next to her. She recoiled instinctively, scrambling away from the creature and pressing herself up against the sidewalk.

'You will translate this, now,' asserted Gabriel, ignoring the Ptolema's panic and holding forward the tablet that he had brought with him.

Ptolema's face twitched back and forth between Gabriel and the eldar that still lay crumpled on the floor of the cell. She had no idea how to respond. Although she had been expecting to see Gabriel soon, she had thought that he would have arrived to tell her his judgement on her confession. She had assumed that his arrival would have meant her death. Instead, she found herself confined in a cell with an alien creature, with her only way out blocked by a Space Marine captain wielding an alien artefact. A sudden revulsion gripped her soul as she realised that Gabriel was demanding that she should co-operate with the alien.

'But, Captain Angelos—'

'No buts, Sister Ptolema. There is no time for buts. Just do it, now,' said Gabriel, turning his back and striding out of the cell, letting the door slam closed behind him, leaving Ptolema alone with the alien and the tablet in the dim, half-light of the cramped chamber.

VARJAK POKED HIS head out of the sand, surveying the scene around the submerged exit of the tunnel. His people had known about these tunnels for decades; they often used them to spring ambushes on neighbouring warbands that strayed too close to his village. He had been part of such killing parties more than once already, despite his youth.

In the sand and the dull, yellowing sun, Varjak's dirty blond braids acted as a kind of camouflage. As he pushed his head up into the desert, he was confident that nobody would be able to see him, unless they were right above him at exactly the wrong moment. Looking over towards the massive, black structure of the Sky Angels' fortress, Varjak could see the battle unfolding. The huge, red and gold forms of the Sky Angels themselves were meeting the sinister, slippery aliens one to one in mortal combat. It was a breathtaking and glorious sight, and Varjak's brilliant green eyes flashed with excitement as he pulled himself out of the mouth of the tunnel and lay flat against the sandy ground.

He had never seen the magnificent, godly warriors fight before. He had heard the legends, of course. As a small boy his father had recounted the legends of the Sky Angels to him, telling him that one day he might become strong enough to join their ranks if only he trained hard enough, and lived long enough.

In one of the very oldest stories of his people, it was reputed that the heavenly warriors had actually brought light into the darkness of the world. In the form of huge, winged birds, they had stolen the light from the gods of night and returned the sun to Rahe's Paradise. But that was long ago.

The eldest members of his village could remember the Sky Angels in combat, or so they claimed. They told of them meeting an invasion of grotesque greenskinned beasts with massive and undeniable force, crushing them like the galactic vermin that they were. But Varjak had always suspected that these stories were exaggerated by the decrepitude of old age. There were inconsistencies in the stories - sometimes the accounts even described the Sky Angels wearing armour of different colours. In any case, he did not believe that even the Sky Angels, who had built the massive fortress on the edge of the desert and who dropped down out of the heavens once or twice in every generation, could command such power as was attributed to them in the stories. Had he believed the stories, he may not have charged in to attack one of them during the Trials a couple of days earlier. He had simply assumed that the huge, warrior-god's presence in the arena was another part of the test, and he had launched himself at the

glorious figure without a second thought. In truth, he couldn't really remember what happened after that. He could recall seeing a clear line of attack - the god's back was to him and it was preoccupied with something else. He remembered diving forward with his blade drawn. And then he remembered waking up again on the floor of the arena, surrounded by dead and bleeding bodies. The Trials appeared to be over; the other surviving aspirants and the Sky Angels themselves had all vanished.

The side of his face was still raw and bruised, and he suspected that his cheek-bone was cracked, so he assumed that he had been struck unconscious by the warrior-god. This was Varjak's first hint that the legends may be rooted in fact.

His second hint was taking shape right in front of his eyes. Over towards the edge of the desert, in the shadow of the immense fortress, the Sky Angels were a blaze of power, charging out to meet the advancing alien threat and loosing innumerable volleys of fire from their thunderous weapons. The air itself seemed to burn, as though their combat unleashed fragments of the volcanic wrath that Varjak had seen so many times before in the mountains of Rahe's Paradise. It was as though the gods themselves had descended onto the surface of the planet to unleash an inferno on the world.

Leaning back into the mouth of the tunnel behind him, Varjak beckoned to the others to come out. Slowly and hesitantly, a small band of fellow aspirants from the Blood Trials clambered out of the tunnel into the fading desert sun. They were the warriors that had grouped around Varjak during the trials, recognising his skills and his power on an intuitive level, knowing that he would be on the victorious side. Although they were not all from his village, they had returned to the arena after it had been evacuated and had recovered the semi-conscious form of Varjak, not wanting his prone body to be mistaken for a corpse and fed into the flames of Krax-7. For his part, Varjak had accused them of stupidity: had their positions been reversed, he assured them, then he would have left them to burn, knowing that they would no longer be competition in the Blood Trials.

The ad hoc band of warriors lay pressed against the sand, letting the gusts of wind sprinkle them with desert dust and blur them into the landscape. They had been fighting in the desert all their lives, and they knew how to pass unseen.

After watching the spectacular battle for a while, a horrifying realisation began to dawn on Varjak: the Sky Angels were not winning this fight.

Despite the awesome firepower of the warrior-gods and their inspiring valour in combat, the Sky Angels had not managed to break the back of the alien advance. The bizarrely elongated and strangely elegant aliens seemed to dance and flash around the battlefield, slipping around and through assaults that should have devastated them. Whilst their odd-looking weapons made very little noise in comparison with the great war engines of the Sky Angels, they more than compensated in terms of accuracy and efficiency of fire.

In a moment of clarity, Varjak realised that the battle was a stalemate. And in that moment, his impressions about the warrior-gods that had made a home on his planet since before the time of memories came full circle. He had disbelieved the stories of their divine infallibility and incredible power, and then he had seemed to witness it firsthand. Now, he realised, it didn't matter how powerful a warrior might be, there would always be a foe worthy of him. It seemed that these extraordinary aliens could neutralise the advantage of the Sky Angels' firepower.

The battle unfolding before him was of proportions of which Varjak had never before dreamed. It was awe-inspiring, thunderous, and titanic in its scope and drama. And yet, watching the once-invincible Sky Angels struggling against the beautiful, deceitful and devious aliens, he saw them simply as warriors once again - heroic warriors like those from his own village, pitting themselves against a foe that was at least their equal, fighting with passion, faith, and desperation.

'We have to help them,' hissed Varjak, letting his whispered voice carry on the desert wind. 'We can use the tunnels.'

There was not even a murmur of dissent from his comrades and, as Varjak turned to observe their faces, he saw that they too had realised that there was more at stake in this battle than a spectacular show. The unspoken bond of a shared destiny seemed to tie Varjak and the other aspirants to the fate of the Sky Angels. As they watched their gods do battle against the foul and incomprehensible forces of the treacherous and breathtaking aliens, they began to identify them as brothers in arms, as battle-brothers of Rahe's Paradise.

THE MON-KEIGH woman stunk of fear and stupidity as she cowered in the corner of the little cell. He could smell her and it repulsed him. It was insulting enough to have been captured by one of the cumbersome humans and to have been thrown into one of their primitive cells, but to have been dumped in with a feeble mon-keigh female was the utmost humiliation. It was as though the humans were taunting him, daring him to take her life, throwing him easy prey in the hope that he would bite. Did they really think so little of him? Could they really be so conceited that they believed he would find this pathetic specimen worth his time? He twisted his body and brought himself upright, propping his back against the wall. Staring at the female, he spat, watching the viscous globule of saliva splatter against the woman's cheek, hissing with delicate toxicity.

Her eyes darted to his, meeting them with an intensity that surprised him. She hated him. He could see it clearly in her dark eyes - a hidden and concentrated fire of hatred. But it was not just hatred, he realised slowly, gazing into those surprisingly interesting eyes. There was something else, something more subtle than hate. Contempt? No, it was something else: pity.

With a slow and deliberate movement, the human female wiped his saliva from her face, leaving a raw blemish of red on her otherwise porcelain skin. She had pressed her body against the other wall, keeping it as far away from Flaetriu as she could manage. But it was not out of fear, he realised, or at least not just out of fear. She did fear him - he could smell it. He could feel the fear oozing out of her thoughts. And he had been led to expect fear from the mon-keigh, fear and hate. But he had not expected to be an object of disgust - how could these stinking, festering mon-keigh be disgusted by him? It was absurd. And he had certainly not expected pity. Of all the emotions that he had expected to sense from a degenerate primitive, pity was the very last one on the list. On what grounds could she possibly pity a superior species of life?

The woman held his gaze for a few seconds, and then he was struck by the notion that she might actually be able to see something of his own confusion in his eyes and he looked away. He regretted it immediately, cursing himself for the apparent show of weakness - he was sure that the primitive female animal would see the aversion of his eyes as a capitulation. Animals have simple and direct minds. However, when he snapped his eyes back up to confront hers again, she had already looked away. He had lost

his chance to impose himself and he was angered by it. He had been tricked by the relatively interesting eyes of the human woman - they were not as ugly or as crude as he had been expecting - and he had read too much insight into them.

And what did she think she was doing now? The stupid woman was staring down at Lsathranil's tablet, which the Blood Ravens captain had dropped so disrespectfully onto the floor. She was gazing at it and prodding it with her fingers, as though pretending to be following along with the flow of the runes - like a baby learning to read. Her face was contorted and ugly with concentration. Flaetriu laughed, amused by the pathetic scene and the ridiculousness of the female's pretence. It was his turn to feel pity, and this time it was entirely justified.

'What?' demanded PtoleMEA, snapping her round and glowering at him. 'What's so funny, outcast?' Her voice dripped with aggression and contempt, as though lashing him with torrential rain.

Flaetriu's eyes flashed and narrowed. The mon-keigh had struck out at him in his own tongue. Of course, the language was slightly confused, the grammar was bad and the pronunciation was appalling, but the sense of it was clear enough. He had never heard of such a thing in his entire life. He stopped laughing.

'You know my tongue, human?' he asked, redundantly.

'It hurts my head, but I know enough,' she replied, having already turned her face back down to the tablet. It was as though she didn't care that he was there. Or, perhaps, she simply wished that he wasn't there at all.

Flaetriu's mind flickered between abject revulsion at this living monstrosity before him and utter fascination that he seemed to have found a human female of such unusual depth. How typical, he reasoned, that the other mon-keigh had thrown this creature into their dungeons. He was sure that they would have no hope of understanding her.

'What are you hoping to do with that?' asked Flaetriu, pointing at the tablet in front of PtoleMEA.

'I am hoping to translate it,' she replied, mimicking his sentence structure like a student.

Flaetriu laughed again. Did she really think that Lsathranil's tablet could be captured in the dull, clumsy, blunt language of the mon-keigh? Had she no idea what it meant to write using the ancient and unspeakable powers of the runes?

'It is not easy,' she conceded, apparently choosing not to be offended by his scepticism. 'But our need is great.'

'Yes, the need is great,' concurred Flaetriu, nodding his assent. She was right. He wondered whether her mind could really comprehend how great the need really was. Perhaps if she knew what the tablet said, then she would be on the right path?

He suddenly remembered that Macha had once counselled him to take the mon-keigh seriously. She had even suggested that they might serve as useful allies in times of great need or terrible crisis. She had cautioned him that their motives can be pure, but their souls are full of shadows that none can recognise. They are haunted by themselves, and not one of them will ever face up to himself. But she had insisted that their motives could be pure, and that they could be guided towards the light. She had even claimed that the light might rid them of the shadows in their hearts.

'Let me help you,' said Flaetriu, the words grating even as he spoke them. This was not something that he had ever expected to say to a human and it caused him real physical pain to utter the request. Pride was not something that the eldar swallowed easily, but Flaetriu was certain that Macha would approve of his choice, even if the exarch Laeresh would not; there are some things more important than pride and more important than scouring the human stench off the planet, and Lsathranil's Shield was certainly one of those things.

The woman looked over at him, her upper lip curled into a snarl of repugnance and disbelief. If he was expecting her to say thank you, he had another thing coming.

THE BANSHEE'S CALL shall wake the dead when dark portents wax nigh, Heed them as the counsel of a seer, or a father. The Yngir, who have slept since the very birth of Chaos, Shall crawl once more from their tombs, thirsting for warmth. The war in heaven shall be as nothing to their vengeance, For the sons of Asuryan, few in number, cannot stand against them.

And the Eye of Isha shall dim, closing for all eternity; Such a gentle goddess cannot witness the atrocities they will wreak. The soulless ones shall be the harbingers of the dark fate, And then shall come the living dead, the progeny, The thirsting ones, the forever damned, And the galaxy shall run red as the blood of Eldanesh.

- Ishandruir, pages 1-2 of 3, Farseer Lsathranil, Ulthwe

'There is more,' explained PtoleMEA, her exhausted features running with perspiration as she looked up at Gabriel, framed in the cell's doorway once again. 'We have not yet had time to tackle the last page.'

'This is more than enough, Sister PtoleMEA,' said Gabriel, nodding gravely. 'We must take this information to Father Jonas, and see what he makes of it.'

He held out his hand towards PtoleMEA, who reached up to take it, letting the strength of the Space Marine pull her to her feet at last. She held the tablet tightly under her other arm, as though clinging to a baby.

Weakened and dazed by her spell of detention and intense concentration, PtoleMEA was unsteady on her feet in the flood of light, and Gabriel supported much of her weight against his arm. As they stood uneasily in the doorway, Flaetriu jumped up and dashed towards the exit. In stark contrast to the gingerly, fragile motion of PtoleMEA, his sudden movements were smooth and fleet, and he took them both by surprise.

Gabriel was his match. In a flash of glittering red, the captain's powerful arm shot out to the side, punching his fist into the stone doorframe and blocking the eldar's escape route. His other arm still supported the swaying figure of PtoleMEA.

Flaetriu slid, changing his pace and ducking down, trying to slide his slim figure under the sudden barrier, but Gabriel dropped his fist, bringing his arm crashing down on the eldar's head as the ranger tried to slip underneath it.

'I don't think so,' he said, as Flaetriu slumped to the ground under the blow.

With his other arm still holding PtoleMEA, Gabriel reached down and wrapped his hand in the dazed creature's long, thick hair. He tugged the ranger into the air, holding it suspended from its scalp. Then, without regard or effort, he flung the creature back into the cell, watching it smack into the back wall and bounce off onto the floor, where it lay motionless and dejected.

'Thank you for your help,' said Gabriel dryly, and then he slammed shut the heavy door to the tiny, dark chamber. 'He did help,' muttered Ptolemaea faintly, looking up into the fierce face of Gabriel. 'I could not have translated the text without him...' Her voice trailed off, uncertain about the wisdom of continuing her confession, and quite certain that she should not make an appeal to a Space Marine captain on behalf of an alien. As far as she was aware, Prathios had already shared her earlier confession with his captain.

'Then it is fortunate that he was here,' replied Gabriel curtly, his expression belying his words. He had no interest in Ptolemaea's sensibilities at the moment; the ruined figure of Prathios burned in his mind's eye. 'The eldar are attacking,' he added bluntly. Ptolemaea nodded weakly. She could see the passion in Gabriel's glittering eyes and she thought that she understood it better than he might imagine. He was releasing her from the cell, which meant that either Prathios had not yet passed on her confession or that Gabriel was unconcerned by it. Either way, Ptolemaea realised that they were more alike than she had wanted to admit when she first arrived on Rahe's Paradise - they both had secrets, both had communed with the eldar, but neither of them would be swayed from their duty to the Emperor. Their souls were pure, no matter what fate and aliens threw at them.



CHAPTER ELEVEN: SENTINEL

THE THUNDER OF impacts outside pulsed through the ground, resonating through the stone floors of the library and making the book stacks tremble. The sounds of battle raging in the desert added a sense of urgency as Gabriel and Jonas poured over the wraithbone tablet on the ancient wooden table under the stained-glass windows. It went against part of their natures to be sheltered away when their battle-brothers were fighting so valiantly outside. But, nowhere was the dual nature of the Blood Ravens captured more vividly than in the image of Gabriel and Jonas, bathed in the red sunlight that streamed down through the hallowed Chapter emblem that was emblazoned into the stained-glass, studying the archaic script of an alien eldar tongue while all hell was loosed around them. It was not for nothing that the Blood Ravens were famed as scholar-warriors, and never had living up to that reputation been more important than now.

'But, what does it mean, Jonas?' asked Gabriel. Impatience was rarely a virtue, but sometimes it was necessary. If they could make no sense of the tablet, then he was determined to get outside to support Tanthius and his Marines.

'This is the same rune that I saw in the cavern under the foundations: Yngir,' explained Jonas, pointing deliberately. 'I'm not sure what it means, but it appears to refer to a threat. Perhaps something buried within Rahe's Paradise itself.'

'And the great blast of darkness that transformed the desert into mica glass, should we assume that was the "banshee's call"?' asked Gabriel.

'Did it awaken these Yngir, or perhaps mark their awakening in some way?'

'It is possible, Gabriel,' mused Jonas, submerged in his thoughts and less aware of the battle that roared and thudded outside. 'It is this line here that intrigues me,' he continued thoughtfully. 'It says that we should heed this call as though it were the counsel of a seer or a father.'

'Yes?' queried Gabriel, looking distractedly back over his shoulder towards the doors to the library as they swung open. For a moment, he could see nothing in the burst of light, but then five figures strode into the central aisle. In the middle, in the lead, was the lithe and lissom shape of Ptolema. Her body-glove had been cleaned and repaired, and her limbs were covered with straps and holsters. Looking more closely, Gabriel could see that she had equipped herself with an array of bladed weapons, each bound to her body glove in a manner that he had never seen before, vaguely reminiscent of the techniques used by some of the assassins in the employ of the Ordo Hereticus. On her right thigh was a more substantial holster, and Gabriel immediately recognised the antique pistol from the alcove in Meritia's chamber. Tied around her hairless head, in place of her customary red headscarf, Ptolema had wrapped the worn and atrophied tapestry that had covered the little alcove - the emblem of the chalice and starburst centred on her forehead. Bound to her shoulders, abdomen and legs were precisely sculpted plates of armour, which must have been designed specifically to wear within the fabric of a body-glove without much external sign.

Behind Ptolema strode the magnificent Celestian warriors of the Order of Golden Light, their armour polished and sparkling as their name deserved.

'It is strange,' continued Jonas without looking round. He hardly seemed to have noticed the dramatic and unexpected entrance behind them. 'But this appears to be an appeal to us as well as to the eldar.'

'What?' asked Gabriel, dragging his eyes away from the majesty of the approaching women and turning back to Jonas and the tablet. 'What do you mean?'

'Look here,' said Jonas, pointing. 'It says to heed the banshee's call as the counsel of a seer or a father. I know of no records that speak of the eldar revering a rank known as a "father". Given where we found the tablet, it does not seem incredible that this phrase was designed to act as an imperative for us - it is the Blood Ravens who place our faith in the Great Father.'

Gabriel stared at the tablet, unable to decipher the runes but trusting in Father Jonas's interpretation. His mind raced to unravel the implications of this reading as Ptolema and the nameless Celestians arrived at the table behind him.

'Captain Angelos. We place ourselves at your disposal in this time of need,' said Ptolema formally, sweeping into a low bow as she spoke.

'Thank you, Sister Ptolema. You are most welcome here, and your timing is impeccable,' replied Gabriel, turning to greet her properly and returning the bow. Despite himself, he was impressed by the determined and battle-ready Sister of the Lost Rosetta. They may not be a militant order, but it seemed clear that Ptolema was not merely a bureaucrat. She was quite transformed from the arrogant and officious young Sister who had arrived only a few days before. 'We were just discussing the inscription that you kindly translated for us. It seems that there is more to this affair than the eldar, and it also seems that—'

'Captain,' interrupted Jonas earnestly. 'If this tablet was really written by a source that was aware it would be read by the Blood Ravens, this suggests that the mixture of Adeptus Astartes and eldar artefacts in the foundations of this monastery indicate more than simply a transitional period in the history of Rahe's Paradise.'

'You're suggesting that there was some kind of collusion?' challenged Gabriel, his soul repulsed and certain all at once.

'Perhaps,' replied Jonas, nodding slowly as a theory started to unfold in his mind.

'The author was Farseer Lsathranil of Craftworld Ulthwe,' said Ptolema, stepping up to the table to converse with Jonas.

'Who? How do you know?' asked the librarian, startled by the interruption.

'The eldar prisoner told me,' she answered matter-of-factly. 'Lsathranil knew that the Blood Ravens would be here when the tablet was uncovered. It says nothing about the conditions under which it was written, only about the foresight of the author himself. He knew that you would be here now, which doesn't mean that you were there then.'

'I see,' replied Jonas, staring at the Sister for a moment, wondering what to make of the source. He still distrusted the young Sister, and still suspected that she had something to do with the death of his friend Meritia. And, on top of that, she was claiming to have received the information from the most devious of all possible sources, an imprisoned eldar ranger. Then he realised that there was no time for scepticism and his brow furrowed as he tried to fit the new knowledge into his evolving model.

'Collusion is not finally the issue,' interjected Gabriel, cutting through the historical theorising. 'The real issue concerns the nature of the threat: these Yngir, whatever they are, must constitute a serious danger if the ancient eldar spoke of them in such terms.'

'And if they deigned to send a warning even to us,' continued Ptolemea, remembering the contempt with which Flaetriu had viewed her and all of humanity.

'We can worry about our history later, old friend,' said Gabriel, placing his hand onto the old librarian's shoulder. 'Right now we have to get down into the foundations of this site and see what these Yngir really are. The "Sons of Asuryan" may not be able to stand against them, but the Emperor's Blood Ravens will not be so easily cowed.'

Outside, a tremendous impact rocked the librarium itself, causing tomes from the top of the stacks to fall, thudding into the ground like dead birds. Faintly audible through the great walls, Gabriel could hear his Marines rally and let out a cry, followed by a blaze of noise as they threw their fury back into the faces of the eldar assailants. His heart swelled with pride even as it was flooded with frustration at being away from the action outside.

'If the message on the tablet was really meant for us both, then it seems to make little sense that the aliens are so set on annihilating us now,' muttered Gabriel as he strode past Ptolemea, heading for the doors. 'But then, sense is not something that I have come to expect from the eldar.'

'WE NEED TO close the distance on those eldar craft,' said Tanthius as javelins of light seared over his head and punched into the walls of the monastery behind him. The air was dark with constant clouds of shuriken projectiles that bounced and ricocheted off the thick armour of the Terminator squad that spearheaded the Blood Ravens' charge. Tanthius had abandoned his trench long ago, and was now standing defiantly in the very centre of the mica glass battlefield, thrashing his powerfist through the enemy at close range and letting his storm bolter spit death freely. He was searching for the exarch.

There was a deafening screech of feedback through the vox-bead, but Tanthius could not make out a voice. 'Necho?' barked the Terminator sergeant, as though trying to force his words through the intense interference with the power of volume. 'Necho, get your assault team out to those troop carriers - they're doing too much damage. Close them down.'

The vox signal hissed, whined and then cut out automatically, as though overloaded. Tanthius cursed and scanned the fray for signs that the sergeant had heard his orders. He could see the Assault squad over to one side of the battlefield, raining fire and grenades down onto a clutch of weapon batteries that the eldar had dug into the sand where the petrification ended. The batteries themselves were pulsing with emissions, as though firing waves of disruptive energy through the battlefield, and two knots of eldar warriors stood guard over them, angling their long-barrelled weapons up into the sky to confront the Marines. Necho showed no signs of moving out.

'Topheth!' yelled Tanthius, feeling the cold incision of a blade slide in between the armoured plates around his knee. Letting out a thunderous cry, the Terminator Marine thrashed out with his powerfist, spinning his upper body around to confront whatever had dared to penetrate his defences. His fist flew only millimetres above the ducking head of a darting eldar warrior, clad in the green and white armour of Biel-Tan. The creature dropped elegantly, spinning with practiced ease and letting its blade lash around in a perfect circle, bringing its crackling edge back towards Tanthius's knee once again.

Tanthius stepped aside with an agility belied by his massive stature, and he punched his fist down like a hammer, driving it into the top of the eldar's head. He didn't even feel the creature's neck snap, but he saw its head crumple down through its shoulders and bury itself in the alien's own chest cavity.

'Topheth!' he yelled again, scanning the vista for signs of the attack bikes. Then he saw them, out on the perimeter of the battle. They were bouncing and sliding over the dunes, their heavy bolters spluttering with continuous fire as they twisted and manoeuvred in pursuit of the eldar jetbikes that were skimming over the desert like flecks of emerald lightning. Asherah's Razorback had been defeated by the terrain and had been left behind; his squad had spilt out into the desert and were in the midst of a staunch defence of the venerable vehicle. Meanwhile, the eldar jetbikes seemed to be defending a couple of larger weapon platforms, which were ploughing onwards towards the core of the battle, bringing their heavier weapons into play against the Blood Ravens on the ground.

'Emperor damn it!' bellowed Tanthius, reaching forward and grasping the head of an alien fighter as it tried to dash past him, lifting it off its feet and then shredding it with a flurry of shells from his storm bolter. The vox was clearly not functioning. From behind him came the roaring hiss of ordnance being launched, and he turned to see Corallis directing the rockets from the Land Raiders that remained nestled in the shadow of the monastery. The missiles raked overhead, howling out towards the Wave Serpents on the horizon in shallow parabolas. But the eldar vehicles were too fast, sliding over the dunes and shifting position before the rockets could reach them. The shells ploughed into the sand left vacant by the slippery eldar, exploding into craters and great plumes of sand.

Almost instantly, brilliant strobes of lance fire flashed out of the Wave Serpents. It was as though they were mocking the powerful, explosive impotence of the Land Raiders, as the javelins of energy punched into the black towers of the monastery once again.

Straining his eyes out to the horizon, Tanthius saw one of the jet-black Wave Serpents pitch and twist suddenly, as though it had collided with something or was under attack. Instinctively, he snapped his head back round to check on the location of Necho's squad, but they were still entrenched in their own fire fight. Topheth was on the other side of the combat zone. Hilkiah's Devastators were a blaze of fire around the northern side of the defensive arc, holding off a frenzied attack by a host of alien creatures. Not even Gaal's Tactical squad had managed to push so far forward through the enemy lines, they were caught in the very heart of the battle, each Marine matched against two or three of the eldar warriors.

So, what was attacking the eldar vehicle? Tanthius sprayed off a volley of shells from his storm bolter, clearing a space around him so that he could look more carefully.

There seemed to be a small gang of human warriors clambering over the armoured panels of the Wave Serpent. They appeared to be armed only with blades and blunt clubbing weapons, but they were using them well, jamming them into the barrels of the vehicle's guns and attacking anything that stuck its head out of any of the hatches. Some of them looked very young and one, with long, dirty blond braids, seemed hardly more than a boy, but he appeared to be the leader, and the others followed his example with devotion and bravery.

Were they the locals? wondered Tanthius, sidestepping a lunging force-sword and clutching its blade into the irresistible grip of his pow-erfist, crushing it into splintered shards before sweeping his back-fist into the face of the alien swordsman. Where they the aspirants from the Blood Trials?

'Caleb!' he called, spotting the scout sergeant as he skidded his bike to a halt next to the Terminator, its twin-linked bolters ripping up the ground in front of it. The remnants of the scout squadron were churning through the solidified desert in a loose formation around him, spraying bolter fire in undisciplined volleys.

'Caleb - get over to that Wave Serpent and give those locals some help. They've got the right idea!' As he spoke, Tanthius saw the incredible visage of the plumed eldar exarch stride into view as it crested a glassy dune. 'Yes,' he said under his breath. 'At last.'

THE LAVA BUBBLED and roiled even more violently than usual, as though reacting to the dramatic events that were unfolding around it. Ptolema moved cautiously behind the two Space Marines, with the Celestian Sisters at her back. She had not made it this far down through the tunnels before - something had stolen her sight and her consciousness last time she had made these steps, and she was left with only the vaguest memories of something dark and terrible in the shadows. Unlike the armoured warriors around her, she was ill-protected from the tremendous, stifling heat of the volcanic world; for a while she felt feverish and nauseous, fearing that she would collapse once again.

The group arrayed themselves along the narrow ledge that ran around the circumference of the wide cavern. The pit in the middle remained ringed with fire and cascades of molten rock, and in its centre glistened the pristine and implacable black pyramid. Other than the persistent sizzles and hisses of the lava and the distant thunder of war out in the desert above, the scene was enshrouded in silence.

'The Yngir rune was etched in the ground itself,' explained Jonas, addressing his remarks to Sister Ptolema with an air of professionalism. 'It was comprised of veins of lava. When I read its name, the ground parted and revealed this pit...' His voice trailed off almost dreamily. 'And that pyramid,' he said finally, fascinated and troubled by the fact that he couldn't really remember what had happened to him after he had descended into the pit.

Ptolema nodded her understanding, her face fixing into an expression of determination as she stood there flanked by the superhuman figures of the Adeptus Astartes and Sororitas. Without waiting for their lead, Ptolema took a couple of rapid steps forward and then launched herself out over the pit, as though diving into water. As she dived forward towards the ground, she pulled her feet down into a pike and turned a gentle half-rotation over her back. By the time she hit the ground, her legs had spun round perfectly, and she landed so lightly that she made almost no sound at all. She was determined to overcome her human frailties in the stifling heat, even if only through the strength of her will. In an instant, the slight figure of Ptolema was flanked by the glittering golden armour of the Celestians - the battle-sisters landing only slightly heavier than her.

Gabriel and Jonas shared a glance, silently impressed and surprised by the dangerous and composed grace of the Sister of the Lost Rosetta. Gabriel smiled and then vaulted down into the pit to join the group, leaving Jonas standing on his own for a moment, looking down at the unusual assortment of Imperial servants collected into his excavation. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. It could have been residual concerns about his last experience down in the pit, especially since he still couldn't quite remember what had happened, but there was something in the air that made him feel uncomfortable. It was a smell. It was the faint stench of—

'Gabriel!' Jonas launched himself forward as his staff burst into life, sending a crackling blast of blue fire flashing down against the lava flow on the far wall. The lightning strike blew clear through the molten cascade and punched into the rock behind it, sending showers of stone and lava spraying over the floor.

As the librarian landed in the pit, he broke into a run, pounding across towards the point of impact with a continuous stream of energy pouring out of his staff and crashing into the far wall. Meanwhile, the rest of the group had already started firing, filling the confined space of the pit with volleys of bolter shells. But they were all firing in different directions, as though tracking separate targets around behind the veils of fire.

All at once, great streams of warp energy lashed out from behind the molten cascades, flaring from different points around the circular wall, arcing and cracking through the sulphurous air in the pit, converging on the group in its centre like jagged spokes in a giant wheel.

Gabriel threw himself against Ptolema, pushing her to the ground as a sheet of raw energy flashed over her head. He saw the Celestians diving for cover, striving to avoid contact with the treacherous energies of the warp. Only Jonas stood firm, slicing his force staff through the streams of power and disrupting their flow, redirecting them and parrying them off into the boiling lava. After a second, a number of shrouded figures stepped out of their hiding places behind the cascades of molten rock, walking slowly through the sheets of falling lava as though they were little more than waterfalls. All the time, huge pulses of warp fire lashed out of their finger tips, stabbing out towards the besieged figures in the centre of the pit, as Jonas strove to protect them all. From their positions on the ground, Gabriel and the Celestians snapped off volleys of bolter fire at the advancing warlocks, but their shells just seemed to bounce off the energy fields that surrounded the cloaked eldar.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' yelled Jonas, spinning his staff above his head and letting intense shards of power spiral off around the chamber.

Then everything started to spin. The shards of light from Jonas's staff seemed to be caught into a kind of vortex, and they began to whirl around the perimeter of the pit. For a moment, Gabriel wondered whether this was Jonas's intention, but then he saw the librarian lowering his staff in disbelief. At the same time, the channels of warp-fire that were flooding out of the fingers of the eldar warlocks started to twist and spiral, as though curdling into a whirlpool. Very quickly, the alien psykers stopped their attacks, watching in amazement as the products of their passion were whipped into a spiralling gyre.

After a couple of seconds, the flecks and lines of energy that whirled around the room started to draw in towards the centre, as though sucked into the heart of a vortex. It was only then that Gabriel realised what was at the heart of this: the mysterious black pyramid was drawing in all the loose warp energy in the pit, drinking it in as though thirsty for the power.

In a blinding flash of darkness, the last remnants of the energy trails vanished, sucked into the pyramid like matter into a vacuum, leaving the Marines, the Sisters of Battle and the eldar standing monotonous and silent.

Stop. The command was firm, reaching directly into all their minds.

HE COULDN'T BELIEVE that it was really her. Despite their encounter on the battlefield in the desert, Gabriel had still been reluctant to believe that Macha had followed him to Rahe's Paradise. Hell has no fury like a scorned eldar witch, it seemed, and he had certainly scorned her back on Tartarus.

The slender, elegant figure of the female farseer emerged from the veils of lava and flame, pushing them apart as though they were curtains and stepping out into the bottom of the pit. She did not look around the scene, but instead she focussed her unmoving, sparkling, eyes only on Gabriel as she walked towards him.

Gabriel. The name pushed through his head, gently working its way into his mind. *Gabriel - I know that you understand me.*

The warlocks had fallen back, regrouping behind the farseer like an organic and lethal wake. Meanwhile, the Marines and Sisters were back on their feet with their weapons primed and ready. Gabriel stepped forward, aiming to intercede in the farseer's advance towards the group, letting the others fall in behind him. He could sense Jonas's unrest at the sudden ceasefire, and he could hear the weapons of the Celestian Sisters snapping back and forth as they held targeting beads on each of the warlocks. But nobody fired.

'What are you doing here, farseer?' asked Gabriel, his hands twitching distrustfully over the bolter in his holster.

I might ask you the same question, Gabriel, replied Macha, using his name like an old friend.

'You might, but you won't and you don't need to,' snapped Gabriel, aware that his companions could hear his voice but not the focussed thoughts of the eldar witch.

Yes, I do know what you are doing, human. It is you who seems oblivious to the consequences of your actions. There was something self-satisfied and smug in the tone of the thoughts, leaving Gabriel's mind slightly nauseated by the sickly intrusion. Gabriel stared at her, unsure of how to proceed. He had trusted her once before, during the battle for Tartarus. He had trusted her enough to place his soul on the line at the feet of the Inquisition and the daemons of Khorne. But he knew that trusting an eldar once did not mean that he should trust her twice, especially since it was he who had betrayed that trust last time. Gazing into her complicated and fathomless emerald eyes, he wondered whether she would hold a grudge.

'Do not play with me, Macha,' he said, speaking her name. Behind him, he heard the disturbed and uncertain movements of Ptolema. *'You know what your secrets did to the galaxy last time.'* There was no reason why he had to stay on the defensive.

There was a moment of silence, but Gabriel couldn't tell whether it was caused by exasperation or amusement.

Secrets are never a problem, and they are never kept. They are always revealed to those who are in a position to know them. This is the nature of knowledge, Gabriel, as you, of all people, should know well. The problem lies in the choices made by those without knowledge and, even worse, in those made by those for whom there are no secrets at all. Knowledge and understanding are seldom the same.

'What does that mean?' asked Gabriel, his face contorted in failed resistance as the thoughts curdled through his brain.

It means that you should leave before you do anything stupid, Blood Raven. Before you do anything more stupid than you and your kind have done already. Macha's tone had changed. She was no longer playing. It was as though she were shouting into his mind, filling it with carefully restrained and controlled violence. If she were to raise the volume any further, she might kill him in an instant.

'We will not be leaving, farseer,' replied Gabriel, forcing a calmness into his voice. 'This world is part of the Imperium of Man and it is a home for the Blood Ravens. If you want it back, then you will have to take it from us.'

As he spoke, the Celestian Sisters racked their weapons and stepped up alongside him. Jonas strode forward and planted his staff between his feet. Only Ptolema was left behind Gabriel.

You think that we want this planet for ourselves? There was some amusement in the thought.

'Was Rahe's Paradise not an Exodite world, before it was cleansed of the stench of the eldar by the righteous fury of the Blood Ravens?' challenged Gabriel, sensing the desire of his comrades to do battle there and then. He may as well test a theory.

Then Macha laughed. She actually laughed out loud. It was a gesture that made her look even more alien, if only because it was such a human action.

Yes, the eldar were here once, and now you are here, Gabriel. Things change - such is the nature of time. Now the eldar have returned, so we are here together, again.

Gabriel was confused - did she want to reclaim this planet for the lost eldar empire or not?

This was once a beautiful planet, Gabriel, cloaked in jungles and forests. The eldar used to protect its beauty. Now look at it. It is ruined, and the Blood Ravens are here. We were only ever guardians, standing sentinel over the Yngir, keeping the planet free of the taint of unclean or uncontrolled minds. Now such minds are everywhere - although we have done our best to remove them.

Macha's mind seemed to direct Gabriel towards images of Ikarus and Prathios, conjuring up memories of the suspected psykers amongst the aspirants in the Blood Trials - the green-eyed youth with blond braids. Involuntarily, he turned and glanced at the defiant figure of Jonas by his side, and Ptolema shuffled uneasily behind him.

Yet you persisted. We gave you this planet, Gabriel. We gave it to the Marines who came here ten millennia ago. After our own defeat, we left it in trust. There was a war, the skies were shattered and the heavens fell, leaving the sons of Asuryan broken and too weak to stand vigil over this world. So we left. But the echoes of that time live on, resonating in the sensitive and undisciplined minds of the more receptive of your kind, where they incubate, breed, and amplify.

'The Blood Ravens were here ten millennia ago?' asked Gabriel, trying to make sense of the farseer's story. It seemed incredible. She laughed again. *The Adeptus Astartes were here. They came and built a monstrous fortress - your little monastery is but a pale imitation of that ugly edifice. It was destroyed before you were born, when the forests were burnt and the desert emerged from the ground, but you were destined to be here even then. It was to them that we left this world in trust - but your memories are short, it seems.*

'But, were they Blood Ravens?' persisted Gabriel, his mind racing off on a tangent, suddenly intrigued by the chance of discovering something new about his mysterious Chapter. He had never even heard legends that placed the Blood Ravens so far back in history.

Macha looked at him, her eyes suddenly flickering with doubt. *Blood Ravens.* She paused. *This is the name of your Marines?* She paused again, as though realising something. *There are many types of Adeptus Astartes?*

'Yes, many.'

I did not know that - you all seem the same to me.

'THE DECISION IS yours, captain. We will follow you,' stated Jonas firmly, although he lifted his gaze to check on what the eldar were doing on the other side of the pit. He didn't trust them. Just because they had agreed a temporary truce so that Gabriel could explain the situation, it didn't mean that he believed they wouldn't attack. As it was, they were standing exactly where they had been for the last half an hour - the warlocks arrayed behind the farseer in a perfect V, utterly motionless.

The Celestian Sisters stood in a line between the two Marines and Ptolema, and the eldar, forming a glittering human shield. They would not contribute to the discussion, and had signalled their willingness to follow Ptolema's lead.

'I do not think that it would be wise to trust the aliens,' continued Jonas, almost contradicting himself. 'But the decision is yours.' 'I have trusted Macha before,' murmured Gabriel, thinking out loud and avoiding Ptolema's eyes. 'If she is right about this, then we have no choice. We must work with them to prevent the ascension of these Yngir, or to confront them if they are awake already.'

'But it told you that it was responsible for the deaths of Ikarus and the aspirants. And you yourself saw what they did to Prathios. Is not vengeance a more suitable response than trust?' queried Jonas.

Gabriel was silent. 'Perhaps, Jonas. Perhaps. I do wish that Prathios were here. His guidance would be invaluable. But he is not, and we must act in a manner worthy of his memory.'

'Why did she claim that the death of your librarian was necessary?' asked Ptolema. Her thoughts were all over the place. Before he had died, Librarian Isador Akios had warned the Ordo Hereticus that Gabriel had been consorting with the eldar farseer on Tartarus - it had been one of the most damning piece of evidence that had convinced the authorities on Bethle II to dispatch Ptolema to investigate him. They had hypothesised that his unusual visions might be linked to his odd relationship with the farseer. Now, however, having collaborated with an eldar ranger to translate an ancient artefact and having suffered what may well have been visions herself, Ptolema's righteous certainty was dwindling. She felt that her soul and Gabriel's travelled a similar road, and she still clung to the hope that it was not the road to damnation.

'Ten millennia ago, the eldar left a device on this planet that regulated the psychic field around its surface,' explained Gabriel. The device was designed by a powerful farseer, who understood that the Yngir would sleep for as long as they believed that the eldar still dominated the stars. The psychic field synthesised the presence of the eldar on this planet, even after they left. It seems that the excavations of Father Jonas disturbed the device causing it to malfunction. The result was an emission of the psychic echoes of the original battles between the eldar and the Yngir on this planet, which would be picked up and amplified by receptive minds on the planet's surface—'

'—minds like those of a librarian?' asked Jonas, finishing the thought.

'Exactly, but not only librarians. Other people with latent psychic potentials or sensitivities might also be affected. People like the local aspirants in the Blood Trials, or...' Gabriel trailed off, not wanted to finish the thought out loud in front of Ptolema and the Battle Sisters. However, Ptolema nodded slowly, as though expressing an unspoken solidarity, as the images of eldar fighting in a jungle swam back into her mind.

'The eldar had to remove those minds lest they disturb the slumber of the Yngir?' concluded Ptolema, realising that the explanation fitted exactly with her own experiences.

'How could it be that the Blood Ravens have been here all this time and not realised what was under our own monastery?' asked Jonas, still reluctant to be persuaded by the alien's story.

'We have not been here all this time, Jonas,' said Gabriel, knowing that it would come as a shock to the old scholar. 'The fortress on whose remains we built our outpost was not a Blood Ravens facility. Another Chapter was here before us - a Chapter that seems to have made some kind of pact with the eldar to stand guard over the slumbering evil under the planet's crust. But the fortress was destroyed or abandoned, perhaps at the time when the forests were scoured from the face of this world. Whatever Chapter was here, it left the planet to die. But it did not die, and the Blood Ravens discovered it, making it our own, ignorant of the promises made by the servants of the Emperor before our arrival, and ignorant of what lay beneath the tectonic plates of this ruinous world.'

'Knowledge is power,' muttered Jonas, bitterly reciting the motto of the Chapter. 'The eldar farseer knew that we would be here,' he realised, 'even after all this time - it knew that it would be the Blood Ravens, not any other Chapter - the wraithbone tablet was written with us in mind... We must make amends for our ignorance.'

'And we must stand by the word of the Adeptus Astartes, in the name of the Emperor of Man,' concluded Gabriel.



CHAPTER TWELVE: CATACOMBS

'WHAT IS IT, Loren?' asked Kohath. After the unfortunate incident with Reuben, the Blood Ravens sergeant had been forced to learn the name of another serf, and he was trying to use it whenever possible. The crew on the command deck had been on edge since the still-untraced attack shortly after Captain Angelos and the others made landfall. Using their names seemed to settle their nerves.

They had been watching the faint signature flicker on the edge of the *Ravenous Spirit's* scopes for the last few minutes, since it had emerged from the warp and entered the edge of the system. It was moving fast, and seemed to be heading directly towards Rahe's Paradise.

'I'm not sure, sergeant,' replied the serf without lifting his head from the screen on his console. 'It will be within range of the resolution sensors in a few minutes, then we will be able to get a better fix on its signature.'

Despite the fact that Loren was not looking at him, Kohath nodded his response and didn't say a word. The silence was shattered almost immediately by the sound of a warning claxon.

It was a proximity alert.

Kohath spun and punched one of the controls on the main view screen. The image on the screen spun, leaving the dull red of Rahe's Paradise and wheeling through space, dragging the stars into parallaxes of motion. But he couldn't see anything that might have triggered the alarm.

'What in the Emperor's name was that?' barked Kohath, turning back to his command crew. The claxon was still sounding, and a ruddy red light was pulsing on the deck.

Nobody replied, as all heads bowed earnestly over their terminals, frantically searching for some sign of a vessel that had managed to slip past all of the *Ravenous Spirit's* long range sensors.

'I have nothing,' responded Loren at last, looking up from the glowing screen on his terminal with an expression of consternation on his face. 'There's nothing there,' he paraphrased, as though repeating it would make it seem more plausible.

'Of course there's something there!' bellowed Kohath. 'Look harder! You—' He pointed at one of the other serfs, sitting just beyond Loren at one of the terminals that had just been repaired. There was still the faint stain of blood on the floor around his seat.

'Me, sergeant?'

'Yes, you. What's your name?'

'Krayem, sergeant.'

'Very well, Krayem, what do you have for me?'

The helmsman looked down at the green, glowing screen in front of him and then back up at the Marine. 'There is something. Little more than a light distortion, but its path appears to taken it directly past our starboard side.'

'Can you track it, Krayem?' asked Kohath, repeating the name to imprint it in his brain. Loren had turned out to be useless.

'I think so, sergeant,' replied Krayem, glancing back down at the tiny shimmer on the screen. 'But it is moving very fast. Very fast.'

'Don't make excuses, just do it,' said Kohath, bringing his view screen round to match the orientation of Krayem's terminal. Sure enough, there was something there - as though a ghost-ship were skirting along the edge of reality.

'Is this the same vessel that attacked us before?' asked Kohath, squinting his eyes into the darkness, his voice grating with aggression.

'I don't think so, sergeant.' It was a nameless serf. 'The sensor signatures are different. This one is getting stronger all the time, as though it were moving towards us.'

Kohath stared at the screen without acknowledging the new intelligence. Whatever it was, it was moving away from the *Ravenous Spirit*, not towards it. But something was happening - it was as though it were gradually taking shape in front of his eyes. It was becoming less intangible and less ghostly. It looked for all the world like it was being born into the vacuum of space for the first time, as though gradually emerging from a different dimension. As it started to take on a more substantial form, it seemed to slow down, giving the impression that it could not sustain its incredible speed in the universe of the here and now.

'By the Father, what is that thing?' asked Kohath, staring as though transfixed as the elegant craft gradually resolved into its final form - a long, slender vessel with massive, swooping star-sails along three axes. At its prow, a graceful command deck protruded in the form of a crescent, with massive cannons mounted on each forward-facing point.

'Sergeant, we are being hailed by Sergeant Saulh from the *Rage of Erudition*,' chirped Loren, reluctant to interrupt the present drama but pleased to have a simple function to fulfil.

'What? Saulh? Where is he?' snapped Kohath, dragging his eyes away from the miraculous birth outside.

'The other signature, Sergeant Kohath. The one on the edge of the system - it is Sergeant Saulh aboard the strike cruiser *Rage of Erudition*!'

For a moment Kohath paused. He had received no word from Captain Ulantus that a Ninth Company strike cruiser was en route. In fact, he had received no communiques from the *Litany of Fury* since they had entered orbit around Rahe's Paradise. It was well-known that the space in that sector made astropathic communication particularly difficult, and the distant position of the planet made conventional modes of communication so slow as to be almost worthless. It was often quicker to take the message yourself. As he was pondering the arrival of Saulh, Kohath saw a school of fighter-drones pour out of the newly born vessel off his starboard side, swirling around a clutch of Shadowhunter escorts as they slid into view. They teemed out into space and banked

around in a giant shoal, bringing their weapons to bear against the *Ravenous Spirit*. At the same time, sheets of las-fire erupted from the gun batteries that ran along the side of the long, elegant ship itself. No sooner had it opened fire than its fighters also opened up, spraying the shields of the *Ravenous Spirit* with a tirade of las-bolts. As all this happened, the mother vessel itself opened up, presumably to bring its main frontal cannons into play.

'Emperor damn it!' yelled Kohath, barking orders off to the command crew, demanding evasive manoeuvres, increased shielding, return fire, and the launch of the Cobra gunships. 'Tell Saulh he is most welcome. Then tell him to haul his guns over here right now!'

THE ENTITY THAT attacked your psyker was but a wraith, a shadow of the Yngir, Gabriel. He spoke their name. And the blast in the desert was merely a warning. You must not underestimate this enemy. Our needs bring us together once again.

Gabriel tried to ignore the persistent whisperings in his mind as the group pressed on through one of the tunnels that dropped down away from the lava-encircled pit in the foundations of the monastery. In places the passageway narrowed so much that the group was forced to press into single file, and it was in such places that the lack of trust between them became evident. Nobody wanted to permit the others to walk behind them, but nobody wanted to let the other lead the way. In the end, Gabriel and Macha took the lead, walking close on each others heels. Then came Jonas and Druinir, with the others falling in behind. It was an unquiet company.

We must be careful with the psykers, Gabriel, for the Yngir will sense their movements and feel their presence. They will recoil from the fragrance of the warp, but in recoiling they will wake. And when they wake they will hunger and thirst for the warmth of the lives that woke them. But our lives will not be enough, and the Sons of Asuryan are no longer numerous enough to hold them at bay. They are the Great Enemy: we will cease to ever have been as the universe becomes severed from its own memories - so it has been written.

'Quiet,' snapped Gabriel, glaring at Macha and making the others start. Everyone thought that they were already walking in silence.

The winding tunnels were shrouded in shadows, but a faint red light seeped into them from veins of lava that flowed through the walls. The temperature was hot and the confines of the narrow spaces were stuffy with sulphur dioxide and wisps of methane. The passageways appeared to have been cut by machines in places, where they were perfectly tubular. But elsewhere they were little more than cracks and crevices in the planet's crust. From time to time the group encountered great, gaping cracks in the floor, where the rock had shifted over the millennia and rent the passageways into fractions. Through the cracks poured clouds of noxious gases, and molten rock bubbled audibly down below.

They had seen a couple more black pyramids like the one in the lava-pit, and Macha had explained that they were markers, defining the perimeter of the Yngir catacombs. The sentinel eldar had fashioned them out of the Yngir's own thirsting materials and technologies, rendering them into conductors of psychic energy, which absorbed any unusual warp discharge in their vicinity, acting to further insulate the slumbering creatures within from any fluctuations in the warp signature around the planet.

There had been other artefacts too. Some control terminals had been dug into the concave walls, forming little alcoves and side chambers off the main route. The dials and readouts had ceased functioning centuries before, perhaps even millennia before. Some of them lay half-melted and half-buried beneath solidified lava flows, as though they had grown into the walls and become fused with the inorganic structure of the catacombs themselves. Most of these devices bore the eerie imprint of eldar design, but some of them seemed almost familiar to the Blood Ravens.

Macha and her warlocks had taken it all in their stride, as though they were expecting to find the tunnel network exactly as it was. For Gabriel, however, everything was alien and almost impossibly ancient; he was unnerved by the casual disregard of the farseer towards these relics from a forgotten past. It was as though the eldar saw such things every day. Jonas was wide-eyed at the extent of the labyrinth that had been uncovered below his excavations, and amazed by the artefacts that they were studiously ignoring. Taking another couple of steps, Gabriel emerged first into a cavernously wide chamber. Stairs had been cut into the uneven floor, and the expanse of the cavern was on a number of different levels. Flights of stone steps led up to little platforms, each of which ringed and overlooked a central pedestal. The light was faint and red, just as it was in the tunnels, but here it glowed down from the high-domed ceiling in a constant and even ruddiness. Looking up as the rest of the group pushed past him into the cavern, Gabriel saw that the entire ceiling was laced with veins of flowing lava, as though they were running over an impossibly resilient glass roof.

'Gabriel, you should take a look at this,' called Jonas from the bottom of the nearest flight of stairs.

Striding to the top of the steps, Gabriel peered down at Jonas's find. It was a body. A long, elegant humanoid body, still sealed into its jet-black suit of body armour. Indeed, it may have been only the armour.

Leave it alone, human. The voice was powerful and deep, blunt and forceful in a way that Macha's was not. Druinir had drawn up next to Gabriel and was staring down at Jonas with his burning eyes only partly concealed below his hood. *You will not sully our dead with your stench.*

'Here's another one,' called Ptolemaea. She was crouching to her knees next to a different flight of steps, having dropped down to the lowest level. Apparently she was making her way towards the centre of the cavern. The Celestians had deployed themselves around her position, securing it silently.

There will be many bodies, Gabriel. But they are not your concern. Macha had descended to the lowest level of the cavern and made her way over to its centre where she was already striding up a narrow staircase towards one of the precarious little viewing platforms that overlooked the elevated pedestal in the heart of the chamber. She did not turn to face the Blood Raven, and she showed no signs of having seen what the others had found, but her thoughts pressed firmly into Gabriel's mind.

'Leave them,' said Gabriel, slowly and deliberately, directing his remarks to both Jonas and Ptolemaea. 'Secure the chamber.'

Even as his words were still echoing around the cavern, a shrill cry made everyone turn, searching for the source. It didn't take long to identify it.

Up on one of the balconies on the far side of the cavern, one of the eldar warlocks was emitting a hideous, keening scream. He was surrounded by a cackling blue energy field, which was spitting and sparking as though short-circuiting, and he seemed to be levitating a few metres above the ledge. For a couple of seconds, nobody could understand what was happening. But then there was a shimmer, like a phase shift, and a grotesque floating form appeared behind the eldar. It had an elongated spinal column that whipped up into a spiny, dragonlike tail, and its skull-like face leered down over the warlock, which now appeared skewered on two long, barbed spikes that seemed to protrude like arms from the beast's wide, skeletal shoulders.

Wraith. The thought was solid, definite, and tinged with urgency.

As one, the Celestian Sisters opened up with their bolters, sending a unified salvo smashing into the location of the hideous creature. At the same time, Druinir launched himself off the ledge next to Gabriel, and started to sprint across the wide floor of the chamber, bursts of crackling warp-fire lashing out of his fingertips towards his hapless brethren.

But the wraith just seemed to fade away, as though drifting out of phase once again. The Celestians' bolter shells tore through its shadow and impacted against the wall behind it, exploding into showers of shrapnel that ricocheted back into the thrashing warlock.

A second later and it reappeared, still clutching at the eldar psyker with the blades and scalpels that constituted its arms. But this time Druinir was ready for it, vaulting up onto the balcony and thrusting his hand through the semi-material substance of the beast's spine. There was a deafening shriek as the wraith threw back its head and brayed, dropping the warlock from its metallic talons. Then the beast simply exploded, as though it could not bear to be touched by Druinir. Vast streams of energy poured down the warlock's arm, filling the apparitional form of the wraith with dazzling warp energy until it could hold no more. Then it exploded into a rain of light, showering down from the balcony like a waterfall.

Druinir stooped down to the broken form of the other warlock, checking his vital signs. An instant later, he stood up and made a signal to Macha in the centre of the room, drawing his finger across his throat to indicate that the warlock was dead.

CALEB'S BIKE SKIDDED and bounced over the sand dunes, weaving in and out between sleets of shuriken fire and exploding craters. As he closed on the jet-black Wave Serpent, he could see the valiant efforts of the local fighters as they clambered all over the nearly impregnable armour of the eldar transporter, clattering against it with their dulling blades.

A bolt of energy slammed into the front of his bike as he crested the last dune. It shattered the front weapons and lifted the wheel clear off the ground, throwing Caleb back. The rear wheel spun as it dug down into the sand, suddenly bearing the entire weight of the bike and Marine. Then it gripped abruptly, pushing the rear of the bike forward and under the front, turning the bike over in a flurry of sand. Caleb fell back off the saddle and then rolled clear as the bike came crashing down.

Scrambling to his feet, the scout checked behind him and realised for the first time that he was the only member of his squad to have made it this far. The main battle was still raging behind him, and he could see clearly see the inferno of destruction that ringed Tanthius and his Terminator squadron in the heart of the theatre.

Tugging his bolter out of its holster, Caleb started down the other side of the dune, snapping off shots against the Wave Serpent as he went, being careful not to hit the other human warriors that were swarming all over the vehicle.

'For the Great Father,' he muttered under his breath.

As the Wave Serpent pitched violently to one side, trying to find an angle for another blast at the monastery, a hatch opened up at the back, folding down onto the ground, and a squad of black-clad eldar warriors came storming out. They didn't even pause to take aim, but instantly turned and started spraying the outside of the Wave Serpent with projectiles from their reaper launchers. Before Caleb could do anything, two or three of the local warriors were already dead. They lost their grip on the transporter as their limbs were lacerated by fire from the Dark Reapers, falling helplessly into the sand where they were crushed under the antigravitic field of the vehicle itself.

Caleb loosed a volley from his bolter, and watched one of the eldar warriors stumble and fall as the shell punched through the armour on his leg. Immediately, a youth with blond braids saw his chance and leapt off the roof of the Wave Serpent, crashing down onto the wounded eldar and driving his blade down through the hairline seal at the base of the alien's helmet.

But this was not a battle that the primitive human warriors could win, and Caleb was fully aware that he could not hold off a squadron of Aspect Warriors all by himself.

As though triggered by a sudden and secret signal, the locals leapt clear of the eldar vehicle and ran. They scattered in all directions, leaving the eldar unsure about which way to fire. And, by the time the Dark Reapers had organised themselves, the local warriors had vanished.

Caleb shared the eldar's amazement as he scanned the desert for some sign of the human fighters. One moment they had been running through the sand, and the next they had gone, as though swallowed up by the desert itself.

After a couple of seconds, Caleb's amazement was replaced by resolve as he realised that he was now the only fighter left to confront the eldar squadron and the Wave Serpent. One by one, the Aspect Warriors turned to face him, as they too realised that he was their last target. Even the secondary gun turrets on the transporter tracked round to his position.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he yelled, stepping forward and letting loose with his bolter. If this was going to be his end, he would make it something worthy of the Blood Ravens.

The last thing he saw was the report of nine reaper launchers as their muzzles flashed with discharge. Then everything went black.

MACHA PAUSED, LOOKING down from her elevated position, half way up one of the staircases in the centre of the chamber, and an aura of tension and trepidation seemed to emanate from her. It was as though she were holding her breath. Druinir's poise matched that of the farseer. They were waiting for something.

No more. Macha was decisive. She could feel something shifting in the atmosphere of the catacombs. *No more warp casting, Druinir. We cannot risk waking more of the Yngir. Lsathranil's Shield cannot nullify our presence within the catacombs themselves - assuming that it is still functioning, at least partially.*

I understand, farseer.

Gabriel. Inform your librarian not to use his staff. His clumsiness may cause more damage than good.

The captain looked up at Macha, fixing her with his narrowed eyes. Did she really think that she could talk to him like that? He was not her lackey, and he would not stand for the dispersions that she cast on Jonas. In the entire Blood Ravens Chapter, there were only a handful of librarians more experienced than Jonas Urelie.

As he glowered up towards the farseer, she simply turned away from him and continued to make her way up the stone steps towards one of the elevated platforms. Either she was unaware of the offence that her arrogance was causing the Blood Ravens, or she didn't care. Whatever the case, Gabriel grated his teeth in annoyance as he realised that he had little choice but to listen to the alien witch - neither he nor Jonas understood the nature of the enemy that they faced. Having followed the eldar farseer this far, it would be irrational to doubt her instruction now. Despite the logic of the situation, Gabriel hated his conclusion.

'Jonas. We must not disturb the slumbering enemy - stow your staff.' He called the request down to the floor of the cavern, making the librarian look up.

'As you command, captain,' replied Jonas, nodding smartly and making it clear that he was obeying Gabriel rather than anyone else. 'But you had better tell those warlocks to do the sa—'

Before he could finish, a stutter of bolter fire erupted from the knot of battle Sisters that had collected around PtoleMEA. The little golden group was flanked on both sides by huge arachnoid creatures that scuttled in aggressive agitation, twitching their long, flexible metallic limbs and stabbing forward with their front legs, lancing them towards the Sisters of Battle like spears. Under their dark hooded carapaces, hundreds of tiny, glittering eyes shone out in dizzying patterns.

As Gabriel vaulted down from his ledge and charged across towards the fray, he realised that the tomb spyders had emerged from previously hidden alcoves cut into the stonework around the central pedestal in the cavern. It was as though they were guarding it. The Celestian Sisters were ablaze with fire as Gabriel arrived, each parrying the thrashing arachnid legs with their blades and lashing back at the spidery forms with volleys of bolter fire, which seemed to bounce harmlessly off the hardened carapaces. PtoleMEA was also alive with action, leaping and flipping away from the metallic limbs, and hacking into them with her own blades.

With an abrupt crunch, one of the arachnid legs punctured the stomach of a Golden Sister, lifting her off her feet and into the air. The Celestian did not cry out or yell as the cold, alien talon skewered her abdomen: all that Gabriel could hear was a sharp intake of breath. She didn't even break the rhythm of her fire, as her bolter continued to cough and splutter against the armoured shell of the creature. Her Sisters turned their weapons onto the offending spyder, momentarily ignoring the other one - leaving it to Gabriel and Jonas, who had just come storming in with his bolter flaring.

As the spyder's legs thrashed and interlaced, PtoleMEA saw her chance and sprung forward, grasping hold of one of its legs and flinging herself up onto the back of the giant insectoid. Once there, she instantly unclasped one of the long blades that was strapped to her thigh and drove it down into the creature's carapace, cracking it open with sheer will power. Using the blade's hilt as a piton, she then threw herself around in front of the ghastly arachnid, swinging from one arm only a metre away from the hundreds of eyes that were hidden under its armoured hood. With her other arm, she unholstered the antique pistol that she had taken from Meritia's chamber and levelled it into the spyder's reeling eyes.

'For the Order and the Emperor,' she whispered, squeezing the trigger and watching the explosive shells punch directly into the creature's face.

The impacts made the giant spyder shudder and twitch, staggering back under the point-blank onslaught. It thrashed its legs wildly, casting the skewered Battle Sister off one of its talons and sending her skidding to the ground. Then a series of little explosions strafed along under its carapace, as though PtoleMEA had started a chain-reaction. After a couple of seconds, a tremendous keening erupted from the beast and its power-core detonated, blowing the grotesque spyder into lethal metallic shards. As PtoleMEA pulled herself back onto her feet, she saw the ruined remains of the creature spread out over the ground. The second spyder was still twitching with the last remnants of its life, but its legs were all shattered and its belly was pressed helplessly into the dirt. Father Jonas was standing on its back with his force staff plunged deeply into its innards. He muttered a few words and a brilliant light pulsed for a fraction of second, then the beast exploded into a metallic rain.

Looking up, PtoleMEA could see the figure of Gabriel already striding up the steps towards the eldar farseer, who was nearly at the platform at the top of stairs. Propped up against the bottom steps, PtoleMEA could see the heroic Celestian Sister with blood coursed out of the gaping wound in her stomach. Dropping down onto her knees in front of her, PtoleMEA checked the Battle Sister for signs of life, but she was dead.

'Sister PtoleMEA,' said Jonas, striding over towards her, as though taking her into his confidence. 'These spiders - I have heard stories of them before.'

PtoleMEA stood to her feet and bowed silently to the dead Celestian before turning to face the librarian. 'Yes,' she agreed. 'They are described in the *Apocrypha of the Nightbringer*. It is a forbidden text,' she continued, eying the librarian with a mixture of distrust and confession.

'Are they not described as tomb spyders, as guardians of their master's tombs?' asked Jonas.

'Yes, they are thought to protect the enshrined remains of unspeakably ancient lords - a lost species known as the necron. I have never heard of anyone actually confronting a living example,' said PtoleMEA, looking around the chamber for signs of further threats. Something told her that there would be more than two of these things. As though to confirm her suspicions, she saw the two remaining warlocks patrolling the perimeter.

'Necron. Yngir?' wondered Jonas out loud. 'Do you suppose that the ancient eldar buried a necron lord in these catacombs?' he asked, drawing the evidence together into an exciting conclusion.

As one, PtoleMEA and Jonas looked up towards the figure of Macha as she approached the platform at the top of the long flight of steps. Gabriel was nearly running now, trying to catch up with her.

BETWEEN THEM, THE two Blood Ravens strike cruisers easily outclassed the single Dragon-class eldar cruiser. Their heavy weapons batteries were pounding at the alien's armoured shielding, and the fleet of Cobra gun-ships that had emptied out of the launch bays of both the *Ravenous Spirit* and the *Rage of Erudition* were engaging the Shadowhunter escorts four to one.

'Sergeant Kohath?' crackled a voice over the vox link, as the image of a Blood Raven sergeant flickered onto the view screen.

'Ah yes, Sergeant Saulh. Good of you to join us,' replied Kohath calmly. His confidence had returned as the tide of the battle had tipped dearly in his favour. He was not fond of space battles - like most Space Marines, he preferred to meet the Emperor's enemies with his feet on the ground and a bolter in his hands - but victory always had a sweet taste.

'It seems that Captain Angelos was correct about the eldar, sergeant,' said Saulh, a look of earnest concern darkening his features.

'Of course,' replied Kohath simply. Taking note of the other's expression, he continued. 'Were you not sent to offer assistance in the battle on the surface, sergeant?'

'No, Kohath. I was sent to request the assistance of the Third Company in the Lorn system. Captain Ulantus is en route as we speak, but the *Litany of Fury* is experiencing some problems in the warp. He sent me to request that Captain Angelos cut short the trials on Rahe's Paradise and make speed to Lorn V. The greenskins are already on the ground, and it appears that an eldar fleet will arrive shortly.'

More eldar? The significance of the coincidence struggled to resolve itself in Kohath's mind.

'As you can see, Saulh, we have our hands full here at the moment. I don't think that the captain will be sending any assistance today. Besides,' added Kohath, faintly amused by the request after Ulantus had been so disparaging about Gabriel's departure for Rahe's Paradise, 'I have not been able to make any contact with the captain for several hours. Something is interfering with our signals down to the planet.'

Saulh nodded. 'Yes, we were also unable to make contact with you after you entered this system. Hence my presence now.'

'What is your complement of Marines, sergeant?' asked Kohath, aware that he was basically on his own aboard the *Ravenous Spirit*.

'Just one squad. The rest of the Ninth are still aboard the *Litany*, en route to Lorn V'

'Understood. After we have dispatched these aliens, perhaps you would be kind enough to send a landing party down to the surface to inform Captain Angelos of the situation—'

'Sergeant!' yelled Loren, cutting him off. 'Incoming!'

Kohath punched the controls of the view screen, vaporising the image of Saulh and replacing it with an external view. He could see that the *Rage of Erudition* had seen the new arrivals already. The cruiser was pitching around to face the two charging vessels, and a flurry of torpedoes had already been loosed from its frontal batteries. But the alien vessels were faster, and flashes of las-fire were already streaking towards the two Blood Ravens vessels. At the same time, shoals of little fighters were pouring out of the two new vessels, filling the surrounding space with darting flecks of light.

'Return fire!' commanded Kohath. 'And brace for impact,' he added, making sure that his priorities were correct.

One of the las-bolts struck the *Ravenous Spirit* square on its nose, rocking the command deck and reigniting the fires that been extinguished only hours before. But the torpedoes were away, and Kohath saw them punch into the side of the jet-black eldar cruiser as it banked and started to pull away from the combat zone, presumably preparing for another attack run. The other newcomer was ablaze with light already, as though made out of pure energy. It swooped and fluttered like a giant phoenix, spitting out goutts of warp fire into the gyring confusion of the dogfights that now raged all around.

'Tell me that these were the signatures that we saw before!' yelled Kohath, without turning to the nameless serf. This was already more than he had bargained for, and the possibility that there was another eldar cruiser out there in the darkness filled him with trepidation.

'One of them is, yes sergeant,' came the reply. 'The other one doesn't seem to have a signature at all.'

'Great,' muttered Kohath as the *Ravenous Spirit* came about, and the starboard weapons batteries opened up once again, shredding the surrounding space with explosive shells and sheets of las-fire.

On the view screen, Kohath could see that the *Rage of Erudition* had evaded the first attack from the incoming eldar, and it was charging off in the wake of the jet-black Void Dragon that Kohath had hit, spraying its hide with las-fire and sending volleys of torpedoes chasing in its wake.

Meanwhile, the *Ravenous Spirit* was caught in between the two other cruisers and the fighter swarms were massing around it.

'Damn it,' snapped Kohath, as he started to wish he was on the ground with a bolter once again. 'I guess that Lorn will have to wait a bit longer.'

WATCHING THE VIEW screen without satisfaction, Uldreth, Exarch of the Dire Avengers, glowered. He felt as though he had been tricked into coming to Lsathranirs Shield. He had not forbidden Macha to leave - and would not have been able to even had he desired to do so. And he had not been able to prevent that untrustworthy Dark Reaper from escorting the farseer. But he had been adamant that the resources of the Bahzhakhain would not be misdirected on this futile flight of fantasy. The rest of the Seer Council had been clear about the threat posed in the Lorn system. That was the location of greatest need.

He had been adamant, but never certain. Passion and truth make uncomfortable partners in the eldar mind.

Having watched Macha and Laeresh vanish into the webway, and then seeing Taldeer take the Bahzhakhain in the opposite direction towards Lorn, Uldreth had cursed himself. He had cursed his decisions. He had cursed his indecisiveness. He had cursed the fact that it was down to him to make these decisions, but cursed even more the idea that somebody else might have done better. Finally, alone in meditation in his private chambers, high up in one of the aspiring spires of Biel-Tan itself, Uldreth had cursed himself for being so passionate and so blind. No matter what the history was between himself and Macha, he should not let it interfere with the security of Biel-Tan or with the responsibilities handed down through the Court of the Young King. If he were honest with himself, he could not even remember the source of the tension between the three of them - his passions raged in a rootless and dangerous way. He just knew that Laeresh and Macha drove him to distraction.

So, Uldreth had organised a force from his own Aspect Temple and set out in the wake of Macha and Laeresh, guiding his Ghost Dragon cruiser through the labyrinthine webways himself. If there was even the slightest chance that Macha's visions foreshadowed the future, then he had no choice but to act on them. That is what it meant to be the future. He muttered and grumbled all the way, realising that it took a separation of days and light-years for him to deign to agree with Laeresh on that point.

When he had entered the system and seen the mon-keigh strike cruiser unchallenged in orbit around the key planet, his rage had been heightened once again. He reasoned that it could mean only one of two things: either the mon-keigh had destroyed Macha and Laeresh, which meant that he had let them go to their deaths; or the unpredictable farseer had come to Lsathranil's shield precisely to rendezvous with her pet mon-keigh, which meant that Uldreth had been foolish to follow her after all.

Unable to raise Macha with any type of communication, he had charged into battle immediately, calculating that destroying the mon-keigh cruiser would resolve his problem either way. In his rage, he hadn't even noticed the arrival of the second pedestrian vessel on the edge of system.

Finally, when he was beginning to realise that even his *Avenging Sword* could not stand against two mon-keigh strike cruisers simultaneously, the *Eternal Star* and the *Reaper's Blade* had emerged from the dark side of the planet and engaged the enemy, turning the tide of the battle once again. To his disgust, however, this meant that they had been in orbit the whole time, and that they had suffered the aliens to live. He discovered from their pilots that Macha herself had ordered them not to attack the humans until they received further word from her. But they had heard nothing since she had descended to the planet's surface, and they could not stand by and watch an eldar Ghost Dragon struggling for its life.

Uldreth cursed again - things didn't appear to have become any simpler since his arrival. As usual, proximity to the farseer made everything seem very complicated. As the space battle raged around him, Uldreth's mind raged with unquiet thoughts: the old Fire Dragon, Draconir, had been right after all - Macha's vision had been realised despite the decision of the Court to ignore it - Uldreth had lost his wager with the fiery exarch, and now he must win the war against these filthy mon-keigh.

TANTHIUS STOPPED. DESPITE the jumble of combat in between them, he could see the grotesquely beautiful eldar exarch clearly, its bone-white plumes fluttering dramatically in the desert wind. The two massive warriors glared at each other across the fray, unperturbed by the rest of the battle, focussing their intent on each other. The other combatants seemed to steer clear of them, leaving little pockets of clarity in the sand and glass around each of them, as though the rest of the combatants knew that these warriors were destined for each other.

For a moment they were motionless, as though preparing themselves for what was to come. Then, with movements meant to be so imperceptible that the other would not really be able to discern them, they both nodded fractionally - conceding these hints of respect for the finest warrior on each side of the conflict.

Tanthius grinned, unaware of the sickly smile that creased the face of his opponent at the same time.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor,' he murmured under his breath, still not moving.

As Laeresh watched the mon-keigh machine-warrior, he could not help but be impressed by its composure. It was certainly a magnificent sight, ablaze in the reds and golds of its kind, towering out of the frenzy of combat like a beacon in a tumultuous sea. A worthy opponent - even Macha could not deny him this battle. He lived for moments like this, but they came so very infrequently. The last time that he could remember the thrill of not knowing whether he would prevail in battle he was facing a daemon prince of Slaanesh - against whom there was much more at stake than merely victory or defeat. Today, facing the undeniable might of a Blood Ravens Terminator, Laeresh once again felt the keening of war in his soul. Once again, he could hear the whispered words of Maugan Ra, the Harvester of Souls - *war is my master, death my mistress*. For the first time in decades, those words resounded through his being, as though filling him with the power of the Phoenix Lord himself.

The decadent courtier Uldreth Avenger was not his master, and the beautiful Macha was not his mistress. He was Laeresh, exarch of the Dark Reapers, and he answered to nobody but fate itself.

'War is my master,' he murmured, bringing his reaper cannon into both hands, his incisors stabbing down into his smiling lower lip and drawing trickles of blood down his chin. 'Death is my mistress,' he hissed, squeezing the trigger at exactly the same moment as he saw the flashing report of the storm bolter in the Terminator's hand.

IT WAS CLEAR that the alien witch knew what she was doing. She had made her way up the stone steps towards that platform as soon as she had entered the cavern, and Gabriel was not about to let her get away with any kind of trickery. He may have agreed to co-operate for the purposes of this sortie into the catacombs, but that did not mean that he trusted her. Even as the last of the tomb spyders were dying on the cavern floor, Gabriel was running up the steps towards Macha.

When he was halfway up, a call from Jonas made him pause and turn. The old librarian had left the remains of the arachnids and was patrolling the floor; he had found something. He was squatting down on the ground behind a bank of machines, inspecting something laid out on the floor. From where he was, Gabriel could just about make out a pair of dirty red boots sticking out the side of the bank. He activated the vox-bead, but a rush of static squealed into his ear and he snapped it off again. With his hand, he signalled to Jonas that he would be back shortly, and then he turned to continue his way up the steps. As he climbed, he couldn't shake the thought that there did seem to be something unusual about those boots.

To his surprise, he was caught by the athletic, sprinting figure of Ptolema before he reached the top. They shared a silent glance and the two of them approached Macha together.

The farseer was inspecting an ancient and arcane control panel that protruded from the stone in the floor of the platform. It still appeared to have power, and the dials glowed with a faint light. A series of switches were blinking, but they were marked with runes that Gabriel could not read.

Macha clicked the switches, and a hum started up in the distance, like a generator coming on line. Gradually, the lights under the control dials grew brighter, until they shed light up into the farseer's alien beauty. Then the chamber itself started to grow lighter, as though artificial lights that had been fixed into the walls at some forgotten time in the past were being revived.

The device has been dormant for centuries, whispered Macha's thoughts. Without maintenance work, it failed ages ago. You should have taken better care of it, Gabriel. Its protective field - this psychic prison - has been gradually decaying all this time. It is a wonder that the Yngir did not ascend centuries ago.

She clicked a few more switches and the cavern burst into brightness. In the distance, all around, the hum of power coursing through ancient circuits could be heard.

I pray that we are not too late.

As the light flooded around the cavern, the pedestal in the middle of the room started to rise up towards the three figures on the platform. It spiralled gently as it rose, as though unscrewing itself from the ground. For the first time, Gabriel noticed that a large, black sarcophagus was resting in the middle of it, shimmering with an ineffable light. It was longer than a man or an eldar, but otherwise seemed to be shaped for a vaguely human occupant.

After a few seconds, the sarcophagus reached the same height as the platform, and Macha stepped forward onto the stone pedestal that supported it. She stooped over the glimmering sarcophagus, running her fingers gingerly over its surface as though checking it for breaches, cracks or blemishes. It was perfectly smooth, without any ornamentation of any kind on its surface. There was not a single mark, rune or hieroglyph. It was the simplest, purest and least ornamented object that they had seen in the entire complex. But under the surface, swimming like fish in the depths of a black ocean, runes and purity seals flashed and curdled, flowing around the casket like streams of other-worldly power.

Macha rose and turned back to the other two, her face calm with relief.

He is yet undisturbed.

As her thoughts slipped into their minds, the new light in the cavern suddenly dimmed. At the same time, a javelin of blue flashed out of Macha's eyes and plunged into Gabriel's face, making him stagger back in shock. The stream pulsed continuously, holding Gabriel upright and binding him to the farseer. Almost at once, the beam split and a pulse shot into Ptolemea's eyes, uniting the three of them into a single pulsing triangle. For a few seconds, the triangle was unbroken, and a flood of images coursed around it, filling their heads with dying stars, vortexes of darkness, and screams from the dying in an epic space battle: a darkly glittering humanoid figure hovered momentarily in front of the sun.

Then the triangle of energy fizzled out and the three slumped to the ground, dazed and confused; not even Macha seemed to know what had happened. After a few more seconds, the lights went up again in the cavern and everything seemed stable.

Gabriel climbed to his feet, shaking his head to clear his thoughts and to ensure his balance. Ptolemea had lost consciousness at his feet, and Macha seemed weakened by the unexpected ordeal. With an unanticipated feeling of compassion, Gabriel reached down and helped Macha to her feet. Then he picked Ptolemea up with his other arm, and the three of them set off down the long, narrow staircase.

When they reached the bottom, Jonas was waiting. 'Captain, before we leave, I really think that you should look at this,' he said, his face animated and excited.

'What is it, Jonas? We really must leave now,' said Gabriel wearily. Although he could not explain why, his soul was tired. And he was certain that they needed to get off Rahe's Paradise before any more damage was done.

Macha said nothing as Druinir took her off Gabriel's arm. She looked gaunt and weak, and she hung off the warlock like a dead weight.

'It's a suit of armour,' explained Jonas, indicating the figure that he had found behind the bank of machines. 'It was a Space Marine.'



CHAPTER THIRTEEN: REAPER

'IS HE ALRIGHT?' The voice was faint - not distant, just whispered in the darkness.

'I'm not sure. How can you tell?' The reply was closer.

There were at least two people in the darkness around him, but Caleb felt sure that he could sense the presence of a larger number. For some reason, his occulobe was malfunctioning again, and he could not make out any shapes in the poor light. He could only just see the narrow confines of the curving walls that reached around him. He was lying on the ground, but did not quite fit in the width of the space, so he was partly propped up against one of the sloping walls. Where in the Father's name was he? For the time being, he decided not to move.

'Does he have a pulse?'

'I can't feel one. He seems to be made out of some kind of metal.'

Small hands were wrapped around his right wrist, as though searching for a pulse in his armoured gauntlet. After a moment or two, the hands started to move towards his bolter, which he could still feel clenched into his fist.

'I don't think so,' snapped Caleb, forcing himself upright and snatching his weapon across to where he imagined the face of his captor to be.

To his surprise, Caleb caught a faint glimpse of a young face in the shadows as a beam of light reflected off his bolter. It quickly recoiled away from him, vanishing into the darkness, but it left a vivid impression in his mind: it was one of the youths that had been attacking the Wave Serpent - the one with the blond braids who had finished off one of the Aspect Warriors with a dagger. 'Where am I?' asked Caleb, looking about blindly, hoping that the boy would recognise him as an ally. He lowered his bolter to the ground and tried to stand, but the ceiling of the confined tunnel was too low and he ended up stooped over into an uncomfortable hunch.

'You're under the desert, Sky Angel,' came the faceless reply from the darkness. 'In one of the old tunnels.'

Caleb looked around him, his eyes still not adjusting to the dark. Nonetheless, he could see the truth of it. Holding out his arms to his sides, he could feel the curving walls of the narrow, tubular tunnel. Judging by the sound of his voice, the local warrior-boy was crouched in the shadows just south of him. With a sudden motion, Caleb shot out his left hand and caught the boy by his neck, lifting him off his feet and bringing him closer to his own face.

'How did I get here?' he asked, almost whispering.

'You fell, Sky Angel,' answered the youth, his wide green eyes flashing with excitement, not fear. 'You fell into one of the access shoots.'

Of course, he had been on the cusp of death, facing a squad of Aspect Warriors in the desert; he had taken a bounding step towards his foe and then fallen straight down into the desert. Thinking back, Caleb remembered that the local warriors themselves had vanished mysteriously shortly before, presumably by making use of similar tunnels under the desert.

The scout sergeant nodded. 'What's your name, boy?'

'I am called Varjak, Sky Angel,' replied the youth, still dangling from Caleb's fist. 'These are my battle-brothers,' he added, gesturing behind him with his arm.

'I am Scout Sergeant Caleb of the Blood Ravens, Varjak,' said Caleb, placing the youth back on the ground. 'I should thank you for your assistance in this battle, but I must ask you for more help. Tell me, how extensive are these tunnels under the desert?'

TANTHIUS TWISTED TO the side and arched his back down towards the ground, letting the sleet of projectiles hiss past him. They scraped across the armoured plates on his chest, sizzling with toxic heat and inscribing gashes through the embossed raven's wings. He dropped his left hand to the ground behind him and caught his weight before he overbalanced, bringing his storm bolter around in his right hand at the same time and loosing an explosive response.

Pushing himself back up to his feet, Tanthius saw the exarch flip backwards as the volley of shells closed. The timing was immaculate: the darkly armoured eldar warrior leant back as the shells reached its chest, dropping its head and hands down to the ground behind it and letting the explosive rounds skim over its chest armour and slide just over its neck as it leant its head back.

An instant later and its legs cycled over its handstand, bringing it back up onto its feet with its reaper cannon ready in its hands once again. Immediately, another burst of monomolecular projectiles lashed out of its weapon towards Tanthius.

The Terminator sergeant was getting frustrated by this ostentatious exchange, impressive though the alien was proving to be. They could exchange long-range fire like this all day; he had to find some way of closing the distance.

As he sidestepped the eldar hail, he squeezed off another volley from his storm bolter and broke into a run, trying to rein in the slippery exarch. But for every step forward taken by Tanthius, the eldar took one back, turning flips and summersaults to maintain a constant distance. It seemed determined to conduct this fight at a range of a hundred metres, as though this was the only kind of combat it was comfortable with. If the alien really wanted to keep the range constant so badly, then Tanthius was all the more determined to shorten it.

Storming forwards, Tanthius detached a clutch of grenades from his belt and lobbed them into a high curve, letting them pitch up over the eldar warrior as it flipped and turned underneath them, somehow slipping around every shell that whined past it. But Tanthius wasn't expecting to hit the alien with those shots.

As the grenades dropped down behind the tumbling exarch, the rounds that had slid past it stabbed into them, detonating them into a huge burst of flame and shrapnel, blasting a concussive wave into the charging figure of the Terminator and sending the incredibly elegant alien stumbling to a halt.

Taking his chance, Tanthius crashed forward through the other combatants in the field, wading through them with single-minded determination, ploughing on towards the temporarily stunned exarch, scattering eldar warriors as he went. With each stride he fired off volleys of shells from his bolter, trying to keep the alien tied down as he closed the range.

With about twenty metres still to go, the exarch finally recovered its composure and started to return fire. It was moving less smoothly than before, as though suffering some kind of concussion from the unexpected explosion, but it was still a match for the screeching ballistics of Tanthius.

The distance had closed, but Tanthius was still too far away to bring his powerfist into play or to make the most of his brute power. If anything, the situation was now worse for the huge Terminator, since he had reduced his own margin for error. The eldar exarch was a slender and dextrous creature, and the closer range did not prevent it from responding quickly enough to his fire. But Tanthius was heavy and even cumbersome in his Terminator suit; the reduced range made it almost impossible for him to move quickly enough to avoid the rapid fire of the alien. He had to close the final distance to capitalise on his strengths.

Suddenly dropping to its knees, the exarch levelled its reaper cannon and took careful aim. Seizing his opportunity, Tanthius charged forward, letting his bolter spit freely in barely controlled blasts as he stormed towards the stationary exarch. Twenty metres were rapidly reduced to ten, then five - and Tanthius primed his powerfist in anticipation - then the spray of projectiles from the alien's weapon slammed into his chest, arresting his forward motion and racking him with shards of agony.

For a second, Tanthius's vision blurred, as though the impacts had somehow interfered with the visual systems in his helmet. He stopped charging and lunged to the side, trying to throw off the alien's aim while he waited for his sight to return. Another constellation of burning shards slid through the flesh in his leg, passing through the ancient armour with incredible ease.

Thrashing out instinctively, Tanthius caught hold of a slender arm in the grip of his powerfist and yanked it into the air. Turning his bolter, he blasted into the suspended body, spending twenty explosive rounds into its abdomen before his helmet's vision finally crackled and settled back into place.

In an instant, he realised that the bloody stump of an eldar arm in his hand was not that of the exarch, and he cast it into the sea of battle with disgust. Another rain of toxic shards made him turn as they sunk into his ribcage. He brought his storm bolter around and returned fire instantly, without taking the time to aim precisely or even to check the line of sight - he simply refused to let the alien take unanswered shots at a Blood Ravens Terminator. The exarch was back on one knee with its weapon braced securely, but now it was nearly fifty metres away again.

Tanthius growled and then roared in defiance. He would not be outgunned by a slippery alien wretch - not even by an eldar exarch. Clicking his storm bolter onto full-manual, he took careful aim and squeezed off three shots, one to the creature's right, one directly at it, and the other just to its left. The staggered timing caught the exarch just as he had hoped: as the first shot sizzled past its face, the second made it twitch to its left, where the third punched straight into its shoulder, digging down into the psychoplastic armour and detonating into a cluster of vicious shards which shredded the alien's muscle.

'Game on,' grinned Tanthius, striding forward to close the gap once again, keeping his storm bolter trained on the creature and placing occasional shots to keep it out of its comfort zone.

THE SHADOWHUNTER ESCORT ships rolled and dived in breathtaking shoals, shimmering like tropical fish as they flicked through sunbeams and darted in between lances of las-fire. The Cobra gunboats that spiralled after them were no match for their speed or agility, and they were also outnumbered by the fleet alien ships.

Through the view screen on the command deck of the *Ravenous Spirit*, Kohath watched the dogfights develop into a mist around his cruiser. Not for the first time, he wished that Gabriel had taken him down to the planet's surface with the landing party - space battles were not the perfect domain for the Adeptus Astartes, and he was not wholly comfortable. The *Spirit's* Cobras were performing well, and their kill-rate appeared to be slightly better than that of the eldar; the sergeant was silently impressed at the abilities of the Third Company's pilot-serfs - desperation could make geniuses of anyone. However, the eldar would not be held off for long, and eventually their superior numbers and technology would prove decisive: something had to be done now.

The *Ravenous Spirit* was taking heavy punishment, trapped in between the firing solutions of two of the eldar cruisers. The command deck was already bathed in flames as a number of the control terminals burned. But Kohath had faith in the ancient machine spirit of his vessel - he knew that it would hold together long enough to take at least one of these xenos aberrations down with it. He was virtually the only Marine onboard, so even if he had to scuttle the venerable cruiser and ram it into one of the eldar boats, it would only cost the Chapter the gene-seed of a single Marine. For the first time, he was grateful that Gabriel had taken all the others down to the surface - their absence widened his tactical options in the last resort.

The ship was trembling and convulsing with constant fire, taking impaas on both sides and loosing torpedoes and las-fire in equal measure. The *Ravenous Spirit* had been involved in innumerable battles in its time, and it had not survived this long by being fragile; its weapons batteries were ablaze like infernos along the length of either side, dousing the enemy cruisers with unrelenting tirades of violence. At the same time, Kohath was swinging the venerable vessel around in tight arcs, striving to bring its main frontal cannons into play, and hoping that the movement would throw off the targeting of the eldar weapons.

In the distance, through the quagmire of circling dogfights that surrounded the *Spirit* like a shroud, the sergeant could see the streaking shape of the *Rage of Erudition* still in pursuit of the jet-black alien cruiser, which appeared to have lost some power to its engines after Kohath had landed his torpedoes into its flank. Saulh was closing on it gradually, prowling after it like a lion stalking wounded prey.

As he watched, Kohath saw the black, eldar Dragon bank around and head back in towards the main combat zone, accelerating slightly as though starting an attack mn. It seemed to be ignoring the *Rage of Erudition* completely, shmging off its attacks as though they were merely petty annoyances, making no attempt to engage the hunter that stalked after it.

The intention of the eldar pilot was clear, and, on the bridge of the *Spirit*, Kohath nodded to himself in understanding. The wounded Dragon was doing exactly the same thing that Kohath himself had just been contemplating: assuming that its most valuable crew had already been dispatched down to the surface, the wounded, sleek vessel was offering and expecting no quarter. If it had to sacrifice itself to destroy the humans and save its brethren, then it would be done.

Nonetheless, Kohath was not about to let his own vessel become the victim of such desperate but honourable tactics. It was already taking more damage than it could possibly sustain and a full frontal assault from the third cruiser might be the end of it - its prow armour was already in shreds after the first attacks by that same cruiser.

'Loren. Turn us ninety degrees to the port - let's see what damage we can do to one of these other cruisers with our frontal arrays,' said Kohath slowly, realising that the *Spirit* would not survive the attack run from the closing Dragon cruiser, and deciding to see what damage could be done to one of the others before it arrived.

As the view screen pitched around, Kohath could just about make out the report of las-fire lashing out from the *Rage of Erudition* as it charged into pursuit of the black Dragon once again, spraying its engine vents with lance beams and torpedoes, striving to hobble it before it could reach the *Spirit*. Both vessels were charging in towards the *Spirit* at incredible speeds, and Kohath realised that the black Dragon would be unable to avoid ploughing into the *Spirit* if both vessels were still in one piece when it arrived.

'May the Father and the Emperor give you speed, Saulh,' muttered Kohath, permitting himself the slim hope that the *Rage of Erudition* would catch the speeding alien cruiser. Then the image slid off the edge of the screen and the radiant glow of the wraithship emerged onto the other side. Streams of crackling lightning were arcing out of its strangely fluid form, like tendrils of the warp itself.

'Krayem - check that the geller-field is operational and reinforce its phase variance over the prow,' snapped the sergeant, wondering whether the unusual enemy was really using pulses of the warp as weapons.

'Give me torpedoes. Give me all the torpedoes!' he yelled.

THE CORRIDOR IN front of the Implantation Chamber was alive with purple fire and the crackling energy discharge that lashed out of the librarians. Zhaphel was an inferno of motion, sweeping his force-axe into spins and arcs, slicing through the reaching tentacles of warp that quested for purchase around his limbs. Meanwhile, Korinth spun his staff above his head, spilling goutts of flame and power through the corridor like a critical centrifuge - where the shards of loose energy sunk into the warp tendrils, they shrivelled and withdrew back into the walls. And Rhamah remained implacable in front of the heavy, armoured doors to the chamber itself, blue fire dancing across the nodules in his psychic hood and lashes of flame leaping from his fingertips.

The daemonic energies in the walls were struggling to reach resolution, aspiring into congealed pools in the metal structure of the passageway, screaming and cackling with the frustrated desire to find birth in the material confines of the *Litany of Fury*. But the librarians shattered and dispersed the energies, ruining their patterns before they could resolve themselves properly. Ghostly shapes reached into the corridor, covering the walls in the suggestions of faces and limbs, as though daemonic souls were fighting each other for a place in the light.

Nothing shall pass! Yelled the voice of Zhaphel, directly into the minds of the Marines as the Devastator squad took up firing positions along the middle of the corridor itself, facing the walls on both sides and dousing them with flames.

As they fought, tendrils of power started to course through the floor, like burning, purple veins. They flowed down the passageway under the boots of the Marines, heading for the doors at the end of the corridor, before which stood the magnificent figure of Rhamah, alive with psychic power of his own.

By the time the Devastators noticed the daemonic flow under their feet, the veins had already started to wrap and mesh around their boots, rooting them into the deck. Meanwhile, great sheets of energy poured out of Rhamah's psychic hood and his fingertips, gushing down onto the floor and forming a pool of power that checked the advance of the daemonic flows, flooding the end of the corridor with his own energy.

After a few seconds, Korinth and Zhaphel realised that the tendrils in the middle of the corridor were getting weaker and fewer, as though their power was being drained by efforts elsewhere. Looking back down the passageway, they saw the veins coruscating through the floor, enwrapping the feet of the Devastators and questing forward towards Rhamah and the Implantation Chamber beyond. In an instant they understood what was happening, and they broke into a run, storming back down the corridor towards their librarian brother, hacking and slicing through the tendrils that dragged at their armour, seeking to slow their progress.

But the pool of warp energy that was collecting in front of Rhamah was already too big. It was drawing in all the tendrils from the corridor, concentrating them and mixing them into a single, nauseating reservoir of warp. It was flooding out over the floor, sheening like an oil slick, and from its heart there reached arms and talons, as though it were a doorway into the warp itself.

Like an inevitable tide, the waves of the pool lapped out towards the feet of Rhamah, who still stood unmoving on its coast, a breakwater barring its progress towards the Implantation Chamber, psychic lashes flashing out from the amplifier arrays in his hood, holding back the waves with sheer will power. But the pool was growing and edging closer with each second.

By now, the Devastator squad had also realised that their enemy was slipping away from them, oozing along the floor under their feet. As Korinth and Zhaphel stormed past them, they turned together and saw what was happening at the end of the corridor:

Rhamah was ablaze with psychic brilliance, like a human angel standing guardian before the great doors of the Implantation Chamber. His arms were held out to his sides and his eyes burned with unearthly power, as blinding blue energy flowed out of his embrace, crashing down into the daemonic pool at his feet. As far as they could tell, the librarian had still not moved his boots.

Just as the eyes of the entire squad fell on him, Rhamah looked up to check on the proximity of his librarian-brothers, the burning light in his eyes flickering for a moment; they were charging towards him, but were still a few seconds away. As though making up his mind in that instant, Rhamah lowered his left hand and pointed a great blast of energy down into the pool. At the same time, he lifted his right arm above his head and grasped the hilt of his ornate force-sword, lifting it slowly and deliberately out of its holster on his back. He flipped it in his hand until its point faced vertically down in front of him.

'No!' yelled the storming figure of Zhaphel as he saw what Rhamah was about to do.

With a flicker, the enormous power of Rhamah's psychic onslaught faltered and blinked out, as he clasped the hilt of his force-sword into both hands. Immediately, the waves of warp from the pool at his feet started to wash forwards, lapping at the toes of his boots.

'No!' cried Korinth as he charged forwards, knowing that he could not reach his battle-brother in time.

With a flash and a cry, Rhamah drove his blade down into the deck in front of him, pushing it through the pool of warp energy and plunging its length into the metal panels below.

A tremendous, blinding explosion of light blasted through the corridor, knocking Korinth and Zhaphel off their feet as they ran, and forcing the Devastators to lean into the torrent. Then, as the light faded, they saw the radiant figure of Rhamah on one knee, his hands still clasped around the hilt of his sword, the end of which was still submerged in the deck. The daemonic pool raged and bubbled around him, spitting fragments of purple fire into the air as grotesque arms reached out and grasped at the librarian's limbs.

The daemonic forces keened and shrieked in a final effort, flinging tentacles and tendrils around the dramatic form of Rhamah, enveloping him in lashes of purple flame. Finally, he stood to his feet and pulled his sword clear of the pool, holding it up in front of him, touching its blade to his forehead in a salute to his battle-brothers. Then he vanished, yanked down through the pool-portal itself, dragging the tendrils and reaching limbs of the daemonic forces with him. As he disappeared from view, the warp pool and the veins of power seemed to be sucked after him, like matter into a vacuum, leaving the corridor suddenly quiet and immaculately clean once again.

Korinth and Zhaphel climbed back to their feet and stared at the last few metres that separated them from the doors to the Implantation Chamber. The space was completely empty, and they bowed their heads in despair and pride as an awed silence coursed through the passageway.

PAIN SPIKED THROUGH his shoulder as he reeled backwards. The mon-keigh's weapon was clumsy and slow, but it packed a real punch, realised Laeresh, as he let the force of the impact turn him and knock him off his feet. There was no point in trying to resist such force: he dropped his other shoulder and rolled with the blast.

As he returned to his feet, Laeresh caught a glimpse of red out of the corner of his eye and he dived instantly into another roll, tugging his power-sword out of its holster as he turned head over heels. The instant his feet hit the ground, he pivoted on the spot, spinning with his sword held out horizontally, defining an elegant killing zone around him. But the sword found no target.

The huge shape of the Blood Ravens Terminator stood just out of range of his sword, its spluttering gun held forward in an approximate aim. As he watched, Laeresh saw the pistol cough and a single shell flash out of its barrel towards him. Instinctively, the exarch twitched his shoulder to twist his body aside and to bring his own reaper cannon back into play, but a sharp pain reminded him that his shoulder was already shredded. As he winced, the shell punched into the body of his own weapon, detonating against the metallic material of his cannon and shattering it into a spray of black shards. The impact knocked him back, pushing him off balance and sending him crashing to the ground on his back.

Rolling backwards, Laeresh pushed his legs over his head and flipped back up onto his feet, his blade held out in front of him to keep the massive Terminator at bay. But the huge, human machine-warrior was already charging forward. It stepped inside Laeresh's killing zone and swatted his blade aside with a crackling powerfist, snatching its gun-barrel up into Laeresh's face and squeezing the trigger from point-blank range.

But Laeresh was not finished yet. Rather than retreating under the onslaught, the exarch dropped and dived forward, letting the bolter shell sizzle over his head as he lanced his sword into the heavily armoured leg of the Terminator. The blade dragged over the surface of the armour, scoring through the outer layers but failing to dig in. Nonetheless, the diving weight of Laeresh's body smashed into the mon-keigh's knees and knocked its legs out from beneath it.

Both warriors crashed to the ground, stunned by the impacts and by the sudden change in the duel's range. Laeresh was first back on his feet, but his poise was off and his shredded shoulder had been completely ruined by the impact against the Terminator's legs. He held his sword out in one hand, pointing its blade at the struggling form of the massive machine-warrior that was trying to clamber back onto its feet. Its huge bulk was to its detriment in the soft sand.

This is no time for pity, realised Laeresh as he watched the travails of his worthy opponent. 'War is my master,' he hissed, staggering forward towards the vulnerable mon-keigh. 'Death is my mistress,' he cried, raising his sword above his head for the deathblow.

His elevated blade glinted with a burst of crimson as it caught the desert sun, just before it flashed down towards the neck of the struggling human warrior, leaving an arc of red light in its wake.

As the blade dropped, Laeresh grinned, turning his top lip into a snarl. Perhaps this mon-keigh monstrosity was not such a threat to him after all: *death is my mistress*.

The blade bit down into the Terminator's armour, sparking and spitting with power. But it did not cut through the ancient panels.

At the same time, the human warrior abandoned his fight to stand up and let himself fall back into the sand, turning over onto its back as it fell. In one smooth movement, he reached up with its powerfist and grasped Laeresh's blade, tugging him down towards the ground. Simultaneously, it brought up its gun, pushing it into Laeresh's face and clicking the trigger.

As his eyes opened wide and flashed with glorious defeat, the last thing that Laeresh heard was the warcry of his human foe: 'For the Great Father and the Emperor!'

THE ASTARTES CRUISER had pitched away from the *Avenging Sword*, presumably to bring its frontal arrays to bear against the wraithship, *Eternal Star*, which pulsed and flowed with energy on the other side of the human vessel. Uldreth had been confident that they had caught the mon-keigh in their crossfire, and for a few moments he struggled to understand the purpose of the alien cruiser's manoeuvre. Then he saw the swooping shape of the Dark Reaper Void Dragon speeding in from out of the sun, and he

understood: the humans were resigned to their deaths, and they were determined to take as many sacred eldar souls with them as they could.

Despite his revulsion at the thought of losing precious waystones at the hands of the mon-keigh, Uldreth felt a tinge of admiration for the valour of the human fighters. He stamped it out quickly, as though it were a naked flame in the dark and dry forests of his soul.

Lasfire poured out of the frontal lances of the *Avenging Sword*, now bursting into explosions and punching into the armour around the engine vents at the rear of the Astartes cruiser. All he had to do was wait for the *Reaper's Blade* to scythe into the side of the human vessel, and that would mean the end of both the strike cruiser and the irritating Dark Reaper Void Dragon. Uldreth smiled uneasily at the prospect of ending so many problems so efficiently.

As he watched, he saw the side batteries of the Space Marine cruiser open up against the sleek, incoming shape of the *Reaper's Blade*, loosing torrents of torpedoes and las-fire directly into the speeding Dragon's path, even as its frontal arrays unleashed an inferno of fire against the *Eternal Star*. At exactly the same moment, he saw the image of the second Astartes cruiser leering into view behind the *Blade*, spraying its engines with fire and strafing lines of explosions.

The already-wounded black Dragon was slowing rapidly, as though its engines had virtually failed, and the second mon-keigh vessel was closing on it quickly. From his vantage point, Uldreth could see a line of explosions racing through the rear of the Dark Reapers' ancient ship, and he suddenly realised that its death-charge might not reach the trapped mon-keigh cruiser.

Checking the status of the *Eternal Star* one last time, Uldreth cursed the Dark Reapers and tore his own *Avenging Sword* away from the confrontation with the rear of the Space Marine cruiser. He had to shake the second vessel off the tail of the *Reaper's Blade* so that its sacrifice would not be in vain - it had to be given the chance to charge into glorious death against the side of the mon-keigh warship.

'Death is their mistress,' he muttered cynically as the *Avenging Sword* banked round and flashed off to intercept the predator on the *Blade's* tail.

No sooner had Uldreth pulled away than a cold wind blew through his soul, whispering faint agonies into his mind: *death is my mistress*. At first he thought it was merely a consequence of his own words. He had taken the sacred words of Maugan Ra in vain. But then he realised that the psychic voice was not his. Yet it was familiar to him, as though it spoke to something deep within his being, something lost, forgotten or misremembered.

It was Laeresh. His cry resounded and echoed around Uldreth's head, touching something profound and beautiful in his soul, sparking recollections of the times they had shared before they had ascended into the glorious visages of exarchs of Khaine. Before he could rationalise the unexpected wash of thoughts, Uldreth felt tears seeping out of his eyes. The Dark Reaper was dead. Somewhere down on the planet's surface, Laeresh lay slain in the desert.

As though sensing the abrupt flood of tragedy that pulsed out from the planet, the *Reaper's Blade* seemed to slow even more, gradually falling to a stop, hanging in space between the frontal lances of the predator behind it and the side batteries of its own prey in front of it. The mon-keigh vessels, finding the dark Dragon unexpectedly prone and caught in their crossfire, loosed everything they had at the ancient and beautiful Void Dragon.

No! thundered Uldreth's thoughts. *No! You know not what you do, humans!*

All at once, the shielding around the *Blade* collapsed, and the mon-keigh torpedoes tore into its hull, drilling their way in towards the power core. A series of smaller explosions shook the ship, sending plates of armour spiralling out into space. And then a colossal detonation blew the *Reaper's Blade* in two, cracking it through the middle and breaking it like the branch of a tree. The physical explosion was immense, sending rings of shock waves and flame searing out through the star system. But the proportions of the psychic blast were incomparably terrible. The spirit pool of the ancient vessel contained the souls of thousands of eldar warriors, stored there in the hope that they would one day be reunited with their brethren in the infinity circuit of the lost craftworld of Altansar. Not for millennia had the Dark Reapers given their dark souls over to Biel-Tan, and for all those thousands of years they had collected themselves into their own spirit pool.

Now those pristine souls were sent screaming out into the vacuum of space, skirting the abyss of the immaterium, clawing at the ledge of the material realm, desperately striving to keep themselves from the salivating jaws of the warp daemons that lay in wait on the other side, circling like sharks around a droplet of blood. The immense wave of shrieking and wailing souls crashed out of the wrecked ship and smashed across the planet below, smothering the atmosphere in psychic radiance, making the planet itself seem to shudder in horror.

GABRIEL LEANT INTO the boulder that blocked the tunnel and pushed it out into the sunlight beyond. It rolled freely for a few metres, dropping away down the slight incline that led into the arena of the grand Blood Ravens amphitheatre. The remaining members of the party squinted into the sudden flood of light as they walked out of the subterranean network at last.

The Yngir lord is sleeping still, Gabriel, but we must all leave this place. Any further psychic disturbances may occasion their ascension, and we are no longer in a position to protect the galaxy from their icy wrath.

The Blood Ravens captain turned to face the unspeakable, fragile beauty of the farseer once again. He looked into her eyes and saw the emerald fires burning with deep, passionate certainty. Ptolema was by his side, and Jonas had already taken a few steps out into the arena. The surviving Celestians were glittering in glorious golds in the sunlight, one of them carrying their fallen Sister over her shoulder.

Macha was weak and broken, slumped against the shoulder of one of her warlocks. Only one other warlock remained from her party, and Gabriel was fully aware of the favourable mathematics of the situation. If he wanted to, he could kill the aliens there and then, and Macha knew it. Was that why she now thought in such conciliatory tones? Was her present vulnerability the source of her apparent willingness to make an equal deal with the humans that she professed to despise? If she had really reset the psychic prison around the planet, why did they need to leave now? Gabriel's mind raced with questions and suspicions, but he saw only sincerity and certainty in the farseer's breathtaking eyes.

As Gabriel considered his response, a flurry of movement in the rocks around the tunnel exit made him lift his bolter instinctively. Standing out of the rubble, partly concealed under the flickering camouflage of his cameleoline cloak, was the eldar ranger that Gabriel had captured last time he had been in the arena. He looked bruised and wounded, his armour was dirty and scratched and his cloak was ragged.

For a moment, Gabriel froze with his bolter aimed directly at the alien's head. He fought against his instincts to pull the trigger, realising that there might still be more at stake on Rahe's Paradise than the Imperium's command to suffer not the alien to live. Glancing to the side, he was relieved to see that the Celestian Sisters had responded in exactly the same way.

Pausing for a moment, as though merely to test Gabriel's resolve, Flaetriu stepped forward and approached Macha, kneeling on the ground in front of her and speaking in a tongue that Gabriel could not understand. He could see that the farseer was pleased to see this ranger, and for some reason that made him a little uneasy.

A small group of other rangers stepped out of their hiding places in the rocks, and presented themselves to the farseer, using low, sweeping bows.

'Flaetriu is explaining that you treated him poorly,' whispered Ptolema, pressing herself against Gabriel in order to talk without being overheard. 'He said that he tried to warn us about the shield. The other rangers - one is called Aldryan, I think - they rescued him from the monastery while the battle raged in the desert.'

Gabriel nodded his understanding but kept his gaze on Macha, watching the expression in her eyes change. He was fully aware that the mathematical advantage had now swayed away from him again, and that it would be hard to maintain this truce amidst charges of mistreatment and with a battle still raging between the two sides on the far side of the monastery.

After a few seconds, Macha turned her gaze back on Gabriel, the emerald fires within burning with a different sort of passion. *It seems that I have overestimated you again, Gabriel, but the battle is not your doing, just as it is not mine. The Reapers were destined to fight you, and thus you fight them. We must bring this to an end, now, before it gets even more out of hand—*

A piercing scream stabbed into Gabriel's head, making him throw his hands up to his ears in an effort to shut out the agonising noise. His eyes closed in a reflex reaction as his mind strove to battle the intrusion, but he forced them open again in order to return the gaze of his attacker - he would not be cowed by the farseer, not after everything they had already been through.

To his astonishment, he saw that the eldar were all in the same position, each clutching at their heads as though being tortured from within. Macha had slumped to the ground as her warlock had released his arm, clutching at his own head in obvious pain, and she was writhing.

It was not her; something else was happening.

At his side, Ptolema was clearly suffering the same thing. Gabriel closed his eyes and concentrated on the scream. He let it echo and ricochet around his mind, trying to catch glimpses of it, but it was like nothing he had ever felt before. It was a death-knell of some kind, but in a language that was utterly alien to him, even the gentlest tones of which wracked him with pain. Then he saw it, just a couple of words flickering on the very edge of his comprehension: death my mistress.

As suddenly as it had started, the psychic death cry ceased, leaving a backwash of silence flooding into their minds as everyone climbed back to their feet.

But then a real explosion shook the amphitheatre, and the group turned to see one of the majestic towers of the Blood Ravens monastery explode into a rain of rubble, as though blasted by a constant tirade of rockets that had finally broken through the heavy stone armour.

At the same time, high up in the atmosphere, another explosion flashed brilliantly, like a dying star. Tiny fragments of wreckage started falling through the stratosphere, streaking the sky with burning meteor trails. And then a wave of coruscating blue energy washed over the heavens, pulsing across from one side to the other, like a terrible aurora. Little flecks of the startling blue fell down into the atmosphere, sizzling and shrieking as they flashed and jiggled like dying fairies. In the aftermath of the explosion, a hideous background of screaming voices whirled around the planet, as though the atmosphere had suddenly been riddled with tortured souls.

As he looked down from the incredible sky, Gabriel saw Macha's face only centimetres from his own, her eyes flaring with hatred and anger.

What have you done, human!? What have you done? The souls of the Dark Reapers will damn us all, you fool. The only way to trust you is to kill you - something that I should have done on Tartarus.

Macha lifted her hands and clasped them around Gabriel's face, holding him as though about to kiss him, but wracking his head with agony as streams of sha'iel flooded through her arms into his brain.

Immediately, the Celestian Sisters opened up with their bolters, snapping off shells at the rangers that quickly scattered back into the cover of the fallen rocks. Jonas lashed out with his staff, sending goutts of burning energy crashing into the remaining warlocks.

Ptolema stood for a moment, watching the short-lived alliance collapse around her. She saw the alien farseer and Gabriel locked in a lethal embrace and she realised that she could not let the captain die. She may have come to Rahe's Paradise to investigate allegations of his taint, but now she felt as though the fate of her own soul was tied inextricably to his. She could not let him die like this; it would be like condemning herself to a life of deceit and dishonesty.

Diving forward, Ptolema crashed into Macha and pushed her away from the stunned figure of Gabriel, letting her momentum carry them both down into a heap on the ground. Landing on top of the farseer, Ptolema whipped a slender dagger out of a holster along her shoulder-blade and plunged it down into the alien's chest. It sunk in down to its hilt, and Macha screamed with the shock. Her reflex reaction was to fire out her hand into the other woman's face, planting her open palm over her beautiful, porcelain features.

Muttering something inaudible, Macha's eyes squinted and a pulse of emerald fire flashed up through her arm, smashing Ptolema in the face and throwing her up into the air. Continuing to mutter her words of power, Macha remained laying on the ground and the dagger slowly withdrew out of her flesh. In less than a second, the blade flipped round and shot upwards, plunging deeply into

Ptolemea's heart as she fell back down towards the ground. Her dark eyes bulged and her mouth opened as she slumped down on top of the farseer once again, dead.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN: PYROCLASM

AS THE CHAOS of battle persisted in the desert in front of the crumbling Blood Ravens monastery, a deep rumbling sound pulsed through the ground and the mountainous form of Krax-7 behind the edifice trembled visibly. The sand in the desert started to shift and the dunes began to collapse. The mica glass that still sheened under much of the battlefield cracked and splintered, unable to shift with the waves of subterranean movement that shunted under the ground.

Corallis turned from his vantage point on the roof of his Land Raider and glanced at the unstable volcano behind the monastery. He could see rocks and boulders cascading down its sides, and avalanches beginning to grip the lower reaches of the great mountain. He had seen enough volcanoes on Rahe's Paradise to know what was about to happen.

Turning back to the battlefield, he could see the distant figure of Tanthius struggling to his feet. The huge Terminator sergeant was limping slightly as he started to make his way back towards the main battle; he had overshot the centre of the conflict during his pursuit of the magnificent, plumed eldar warrior, which now lay dead on the ground behind the hulking figure of Tanthius. The other eldar fighting in the field seemed to have fallen into a slump following Tanthius's victory, and their numbers were beginning to dwindle as the Blood Ravens rallied, capitalising on the opportunity. Even the destruction of one of the monastery towers did not seem to raise the aliens' spirits. Corallis had heard that they were an emotional species, and this behaviour seemed to confirm the rumours.

Only a couple of minutes earlier, Corallis had seen strange streaks of blue light flash through the upper atmosphere, and he wondered whether Kohath was engaged in a fight that mirrored this one on the ground. He smiled slightly at the thought of the sergeant cursing the serfs on the command deck and wishing that he was down on the planet's surface with a bolter in his hand. Despite his protestations, however, Kohath was a fine ship's commander, and Gabriel had left him in charge of the *Ravenous Spirit* for a reason. Corallis had faith that the *Spirit* would put up a valiant fight, no matter what the odds.

Finally, Krax-7 convulsed and blew its top, spitting great chunks of rock up into the sky, splintering hundreds of tonnes of mountain-top as effortlessly as casting grains of sand. The huge tumbling boulders flew out in all directions, some of them looping out over the monastery and smashing down into the field of battle, as though the planet itself were launching ordnance in retaliation to the violence being done to it. The stone ballistics crunched down against the mica glass, pounding out craters and spraying the battlefield with lethal, black shards of glass, shredding the armour of Blood Ravens and eldar alike - the volcano showed no discrimination.

As the masonry rained down, a huge superheated mushroom of smoke, ash and debris plumed up from the peak, rapidly expanding to obscure the sky and blot out the light of the red sun. Even as he watched, Corallis could see the pyroclastic flow surging down the sides of the volcano, engulfing everything in its path. He could even hear it as it shunted the air along before it, driving it at speeds greater than sound. In a matter of seconds it rolled over the towering monastery, swamping it like a tsunami and then driving on into the desert beyond, blasting chunks of masonry off the once-impenetrable towers and throwing them like primitive projectiles.

There was nothing that he could do other than brace himself against the Land Raider as the supersonic surge of heat and ash ploughed on into the desert, rolling over the combatants and submerging them into volcanic darkness. The battlefield simply vanished from view, and even the keen eyes of Corallis could see little further than the end of his own arm. He couldn't even see the great, burning rivers of lava that were streaming down the sides of Krax-7.

THE TUNNEL SHOOK and debris fell from the ceiling, raining down onto the stooped figure of Caleb as he tried to keep pace with the local warriors that jogged along in front of him, their smaller bodies easily fitting through the confined and twisting spaces. They ran with practiced ease, always knowing the right turn when a junction was reached, always knowing where to put their feet when the ground grew treacherous.

The thunderous impacts of combat above made the tunnels unstable, but something had changed. No longer were the passageways trembling with persistent dull shocks, but abrupt and powerfully violent movements wracked the ground, twisting it and running it through with giant fault lines, cracking the tunnels into fragments. Something other than war was threatening the integrity of the desert.

A huge and sudden quake cracked through the ground, throwing the local warriors off their feet and causing Caleb to stumble. Cracks and faults appeared in the ceiling of the tunnel, small at first but rapidly expanding and dashing along its length.

'Move!' yelled Caleb, reaching down and grasping hold of two fallen warriors, hefting them under his arms and charging along the passageway. 'Cave-in!'

The other warriors were back on their feet and running, this time chasing after the pounding shape of the Blood Ravens scout, who barrelled along through the confined space as it shook, debris crashing down against his armour in ever-increasing quantities.

Another massive explosion rocked the tunnel and large sections of the roof collapsed all at once. Caleb took another couple of giant strides and then dived forward, launching himself headlong through the last few metres, tumbling out into a wider, rocky chamber at the end of the passage, throwing the two warriors out from under his arms as he flew.

A suddenly muffled scream made Caleb turn as he pushed himself up off the ground in the cavern, showers of sand cascading down his armour. Looking back into the tunnel from which the group had just emerged, he could see the outstretched hand of one of the local warriors, reaching out of a wall of fallen sand and rock. The hand was tense and, for a couple of seconds, its fingers

twitched. A few of the other locals ran back to the tunnel and started to scrape and scratch at the landslide that had swamped their comrade, but then the reaching fingers fell limp and they stopped digging, collapsing in exhaustion against the fatal wall of sand. The sound of falling rock and sand gradually subsided, leaving the group struggling for breath in the underground cavern. 'What was that, Sky Angel?' asked Varjak, walking over to Caleb. 'I've never seen the tunnels behave like that before.' 'I'm not sure, Varjak. But I don't think that it was a weapon. It might have been a volcanic eruption - perhaps even Krax-7 itself, judging by the proximity. We need to get above ground,' replied Caleb, his eyes already scanning the perimeter of the cave for exit tunnels.

The fine, granular sound of falling debris was beginning to fade, and it seemed that whatever had caused the cave-in had subsided for the time being. But then a new sound started to hum through the subterranean network. At first it sounded like another rockslide, or perhaps a series of them in far-off tunnels, but then it grew louder, as though drawing closer. After a few seconds, it began to resolve itself from a dull clattering into a higher pitched hum, almost an insect-like buzz.

'What's that noise?' asked Caleb, scanning the heavy shadows that riddled the various cave-mouths and tunnels that peppered the perimeter of the cavern. He dropped his eyes to meet the sparkling greens of Varjak's, hoping that the local boy would be familiar with the odd sound.

'I don't know, Sky Angel,' replied the youth, turning away from Caleb and trying to locate the direction from which the noise was emanating. The bizarre, metallic hum seemed to come from everywhere at once as it echoed and bounced around the complicated and restricted acoustic space. 'I've never heard it before.'

The scraping buzz grew louder and more intense, drawing in around them from the darkness of the surrounding tunnels. The dull, rattling hum started to develop a metallic edge, as though hundreds of delicate sheets of metal were rubbing against one another. A faint shimmer caught Caleb's keen eyes and he strained his vision into the shadows beyond the mouth of one of the widest passageways. The darkness seemed to move, as though it were composed of thousands of tiny little flecks of shadow. But he couldn't see anything decisive, even as the hum grew louder and began to make the unprotected ears of the locals ache.

'We should leave,' said Caleb, still not understanding what was happening but deciding that ignorance and curiosity should not always be identical. 'Varjak - which way to the surface?'

The boy pointed to one of the smaller tunnels set into the far wall, and Caleb strode over towards it immediately. Peering up through the narrow, tubular passageway, he could see the faint red light of the local sun seeping down, and he nodded decisively. 'Everyone out!'

As he spoke, there was a sudden shift in the quality of the background noise, as though whatever was generating it had broken through a barrier and had emerged into an area with open acoustics. Turning on his heel, Caleb heard a scream and saw a roiling cloud of black flecks emerging out of the wide tunnel mouth on the other side of the chamber. The cloud was swarming around one of the locals, and he was screaming. Even as he watched, Caleb could see the boy's flesh vanishing before his eyes: little spots of blood appeared on his skin, rapidly stretching out into cuts and gashes, then into open wounds. Eventually, parts of the screaming youth's skull and skeleton became visible, glinting with specks of white in amongst the teeming and glittering shadows that swarmed around him. The other locals just stared in disbelief.

Breaking the transfixed horror of the scene, Varjak dashed forward and took a swing with his long-bladed dagger, sweeping it through the cloud of little scarab beetles and driving into the neck of his doomed comrade. The insects parted around the plunging blade, letting it slip through between them as though offering no resistance at all. The screaming stopped instantly as the boy's head crashed down into the sand - his body slumping into a heap next to it.

As the beetles swarmed around the fallen corpse and feasted on its flesh, consuming it in a matter of seconds, the warriors turned and dashed up into the exit tunnel. Caleb paused for a moment at the mouth of the passage, watching the little metallic insects work their way through the flesh of the fallen warrior. It was disgusting, but his mind was plagued by questions and doubts. What in the name of the Great Father was going on? He had never heard of anything like these shimmering, black beetle-like scarabs. They appeared to be made of metal, as though they were artificial constructions, like tiny insectoid robots, and there were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands in the swarm.

As he watched, the rustle of carapace on carapace grew even louder as more of the beedes flooded into the cavern. They started to pour out of the tunnels all around, coating the walls, the ceiling and the floor, pluming out into the middle of the space as though riding the wave of an explosion further under the ground.

Caleb had seen enough and he turned again, dashing up through the exit tunnel in pursuit of the local warriors, questing for the sun. Behind him, he could hear the deafening rattle and rustle of carapaces flooding into the narrow passageway.

AS KRAX-7 BLEW, Tanthius looked back towards the magnificent black walls of the Blood Ravens' monastery. One of its towers had been destroyed by the continuous fire from the Wave Serpents in the desert, but the eldar transports were now under siege from squads of Marines, and they no longer had any time for long range assaults on the huge edifice. Necho's Assault squad was pestering one of them from the sky, dousing it with fire, and Topheth's attack bikes were engaging the other, whilst fending off the counter-attacks of the alien jetbikes. The battle appeared to have swung in favour of the Blood Ravens since Tanthius himself had defeated the exarch.

The pyroclastic flow surged down the face of Krax-7, enveloping the towering shape of the monastery in voluminous clouds of ash in a matter of seconds. Tanthius paused, balancing his weight carefully on the damaged mechanical sinews of his armoured legs. As the cloud billowed out in the desert, finally swallowing the monastery and then the first lines of the Blood Ravens' defences, including the figure of Corallis on the roof of one of the Land Raiders, Tanthius scanned the battlefield quickly, trying to assess what needed to be done before the visibility vanished.

Then the superheated cloud of ash and debris blasted through the theatre, lifting huge gusts of sand and blasting them out into the desert. For a few seconds, the whole scene went black, lost in the smoke and volcanic dust.

Even when the strong desert winds finally blew the ash away, thinning it into a fine mist, the battlefield was still cast in semi-darkness. The ash was caught in the atmosphere itself, obscuring the sun and rendering the planet's surface an unearthly grey. But Tanthius could see the monastery once again, and beyond it he could clearly make out the streams of lava that poured down the sides of Krax-7.

The ground uembled with an aftershock, and Tanthius started to make his way back towards the last vestiges of the battle, half-dragging his damaged limbs as he went.

The ground bucked again, and the sand started to subside, slipping down into itself as though the desert were caving into some lost underground chambers. Tanthius swayed with the motion, pausing as huge cracks appeared in the mica glass up ahead of him. The whole scene seemed to shake and vibrate. Even the towering form of the monastery trembled, as though the entire tectonic plate was shifting.

Through the ashen atmosphere, Tanthius could see patches of intense, black smoke wafting up into the air, seeping out of cracks in the ground and then billowing out across the battlefield. As he watched one them drift slowly over towards the ruined Razorback and the Tactical Marines of Sergeant Asherah, who were engaged in the final stages of a fire-fight with a dwindling contingent of eldar Aspect Warriors, an odd humming noise struck up in his ears.

Assuming that the noise was being generated by parts damaged during the fight with the exarch, Tanthius punched the side of his helmet to try and clear the interference. It made no difference and, after a moment, the noise grew louder.

As the smoke cloud approached his position, Tanthius could see that Asherah turned to face it, breaking off his fight with the eldar and turning his flamer against the cloud itself. One by one, the other Marines in his squad did the same thing, turning their backs on the eldar and spraying fire into the advancing cloud. For a few seconds, the eldar lowered their weapons and watched the Blood Ravens' behaviour, but then they rapidly raised their guns again and opened fire. Although they were firing towards Asherah's squad, Tanthius realised that they were not firing at them - hails of shuriken projectiles hissed past the sergeant's position and zipped into the growing, dark cloud, sending up little sparks as the monomolecular projectiles struck pieces of flying metal. The hum grew louder and more of the dark clouds seeped up from the desert as cracks started to appear all over the ground.

Tanthius swept his eyes across the dim, misty battlefield and noticed that wherever the clouds appeared the Marines and eldar stopped fighting each other and turned their weapons on the clouds together. What was going on? He wasn't close enough to see. Even as he watched, he saw the cloud near Asherah billow and shift under the tirade of fire, but then it morphed around the impacts and reached out towards the sergeant, touching him with a shadowy tendril. The Marine flinched away from its touch, as though stung, but the tentacle of darkness followed after his movements as though attached to his gauntlet. And the tendril grew thicker, pulsing with darkness as more of the cloud flowed along its line and started to engulf Asherah's hand, then his arm.

The Tactical squad hesitated, unwilling to fire on their sergeant, and in the lull the cloud engulfed him completely. The eldar were not so reticent, and they continued to unleash shuriken into the obscure form, forcing a couple of Marines to turn and threaten them with their bolters. For a few seconds, the armoured shape of the Marine thrashed against the cloud, lashing out with his weapons in almost random abandon. Then, quite suddenly, the thrashing stopped and Asherah slumped to the ground. A couple of moments later and his armour was rent asunder, and pieces of it went scurrying off across the sand before vanishing down into newly opened crevices. After little more than ten seconds, there was no trace of the sergeant left at all, and the cloud of tiny black fragments billowed up once again, heading for the other Marines in his squad.

Turning in confusion, Tanthius could see similar scenes unfolding all over the battlefield. Blood Ravens and eldar were both being picked apart by these dark, buzzing clouds of what now appeared to be insects of some kind.

As Krax-7 continued to erupt, the ground continued to shake, and more and more of these swarms were emerging from the cracks and crevices that were opening up all over the battlefield, darkening the already ashen sky. But there were other shapes emerging from the ground now - humanoid shapes clambering out of holes and pulling each other up out of weeping gashes in the sand. In the dim, foggy light, it took Tanthius a couple of seconds to recognise the profile of Caleb emerging from the ground in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by a small group of human warriors.

However, Caleb's warband was not the only group of figures emerging from the depths. Here and there, as lava began to bubble up through the gashes in the earth, Tanthius could make out odd, inhuman, skeletal figures rising out of the sand, climbing out of the streams of molten rock as though they were water. The sinister creatures carried long barrelled weapons, the likes of which Tanthius had never seen before.

The eldar in the field seemed to recognise the dark, sinister warriors immediately, and they all turned their weapons on the newcomers, leaving the Blood Ravens to deal with the swarms of scarab beetles that still drifted through the air. But the eldar shurikens just bounced harmlessly off the mysterious warriors, ricocheting in little metallic sparks, as though their skeletal forms were composed entirely of some kind of metal.

Slowly and deliberately, one of the metal skeletons lifted its own weapon and pointed it at a white and emerald eldar Guardian. A stream of glittering darkness flashed out of the barrel and crashed into the elegant alien as it struggled to move aside, catching it in its ribs. The stream instantly spread out, creeping and flowing all over the eldar warrior, coating it completely in a shimmering, silver darkness in less than a second. A fraction of a second later, the darkness blinked and evaporated into the air, leaving the flickering image of an atrophied and decomposed eldar where the Guardian had been. The image flickered and then vanished, leaving nothing of the alien at all.

Tanthius lumbered into a run, dragging his damaged limbs across the trembling, lava-riddled, smoke-enshrouded battlefield. In the distance, he could see the Blood Ravens' monastery rocking and cracking as the movements in the ground became more violent. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he was certain that the Blood Ravens should get off Rahe's Paradise as quickly as possible. He had never before seen warriors that could climb imperviously out of magma and resist eldar fire as though it were nothing, and he had certainly never seen weapons that could vaporise an eldar Guardian in less than a second. Whatever was ascending out of the bowels of the planet, Tanthius had a very bad feeling about it.

DESPITE HIS NATURAL instincts and his horror, Gabriel knelt down at Macha's side. The wound in the farseer's abdomen was bleeding copiously, and it looked as though she would die from loss of blood. All around him, Gabriel could hear the fury of the fire-fight between the Celestian Sisters, Jonas and the eldar, but he paid it no mind. The ground was trembling violently and great wafts of sulphurous gas were billowing out of the huge fissure that rent the arena in two. Lava was beginning to bubble to the surface, and very soon the amphitheatre would be little more than a pool of molten rock.

Gabriel. The thought was weak and tremulous. Gabriel could sense the effort being put into formulating thoughts that he could understand.

Gabriel, it is shifting. The Yngir lord is awaking. Can you not feel it? Look at the signs, Gabriel, look at the progeny. The living dead, the thirsting ones, the forever damned are walking in the desert once more. You have... we have failed, Gabriel.

The thoughts faded into silence, and Gabriel looked deeply into the wounded farseer's eyes, seeing the emerald flames flicker on the point of extinction. His own eyes flicked to the pale, beautiful face of Ptolema, who was laying in the sand next to Macha, her own dagger still protruding from her chest. There was a confused sadness in his heart - he had not trusted the young Sister of the Lost Rosetta, but he had become sure that they understood each other. As for Macha, Gabriel was neither sure that he understood her nor that he ever could.

The souls of the Reapers, Gabriel. Thousands of them. They have breached Lsathranil's Shield and the Yngir will ascend to consume us. You have released them. They shall be the harbingers of the dark fate, and the galaxy shall run red as the blood of Eldanesh.

'What must we do?' asked Gabriel, whispering his heretical thoughts in to the beautiful farseer's ear. As he spoke, a thunderous crack split the arena along a new axis and a burst of red lava spurted out of the ground like a fountain. At the same time, a river of molten rock flowing down from the peak of Krax-7 breached the wall of the amphitheatre and spilt into the arena.

'We must leave this place,' he said, scooping the farseer into his arms and turning to face Jonas.

'Jonas, we must leave. Sisters - stand down. I know that you can understand me,' he continued, turning to the warlocks from Macha's retinue - they had stopped fighting as soon as Gabriel had picked up their farseer. 'And you know that I am right. We must leave this place, now.'

Druinir glared at Gabriel, his eyes burning with revulsion and hatred and his fingers still crackling with blue light. As he stared, the looming monastery behind them shuddered and then the second tower collapsed. The ground started to buckle and shake as though something massive were pushing up from underneath. Lava burst out from new cracks and holes that opened up all over the arena.

The warlock nodded, and the other eldar lowered their weapons.

Gabriel returned the nod then turned sharply to his librarian. 'Jonas - which is the quickest way to the Thunderhawks? We need to get off the planet and deal with it from space. Sound the retreat.' As he spoke, Gabriel watched the remaining Celestians gather up the body of Ptolema.

When he turned back to the eldar, he found Druinir standing directly behind him, staring fiercely into his face. *I will take the farseer.* There was a hostile pause. *Thank you, Blood Raven.*

'WHAT IN THE name of the Great Father was that?' bellowed Kohath, turning rapidly away from the main view screen and shouting his demand to his command crew. 'Well? What the hell was it?'

Together with the charging *Rage of Erudition*, the *Ravenous Spirit* had destroyed the jet-black eldar cruiser, but it had exploded in a completely unexpected way, sending rings of warp energy lashing out through the system and raining down into the atmosphere of Rahe's Paradise. Immediately afterwards, the shimmering wraithship onto which Kohath had turned all of his guns had suddenly flickered and then flashed away, darting through the neighbouring space like an agile bird of prey, avoiding an entire salvo of torpedoes from the *Spirit*. Simultaneously, the Ghost Dragon that had been inflicting such heavy damage on the engine blocks at the rear of the *Spirit* suddenly disengaged.

For a moment, everything was quiet.

'Sergeant Kohath - what in the Emperor's name is going on?' The face of Saulh resolved itself onto the view screen as the *Rage of Erudition* pulled into formation next to the *Spirit*.

'I have no idea, Saulh, but we're working on it,' said Kohath gruffly, surveying his crew expectantly. 'Well?' he prompted. 'Anyone?'

There was no reply. Loren and Krayem exchanged glances with each other and then looked down at their terminals.

'Sergeant—' began the familiar but still nameless serf. 'I think that you should take a look at the planet.'

'Bring it up,' sighed Kohath, shaking his head in disappointment and turning back to the view screen. Saulh's face rippled and then vanished, to be replaced by the ruddy image of Rahe's Paradise. It filled the screen with a deep, blood red. A plume of black had erupted around a constellation of volcanoes on the equator, but it looked like little more than a normal, albeit rather large eruption. 'Well?' challenged Kohath, unimpressed. 'What am I supposed to be looking at?'

The image on the screen chimed, shifted and zoomed, as though pulling a section of the planet closer to the *Ravenous Spirit*. It showed a close-up of the quadrant near the foothills of the volcanic mountains, where the Blood Ravens' monastery was based. He waited for the image-systems to filter out the ash-clouds in the atmosphere. For a moment, Kohath thought that the sensors were malfunctioning and he impatiently made some manual adjustments to resolve the clouds and interference patterns. But then it gradually dawned on him that the clouds were what he was supposed to be looking at.

'By the throne...' he murmured, watching the shimmering shadows spill out over the landscape around the location of the monastery. It was certainly true that Krax-7 was the volcano that had erupted, but he had never seen anything like this before.

'Saulh, are you getting this?'

'Yes, sergeant. What's going on down there?' crackled the voice of Saulh over the vox.

'Sergeant Kohath,' said Loren, reluctant to interrupt but sure that he had some important news.

'Yes?' snapped Kohath, pulling his eyes away from the mysterious events on the planet.

'There appear to be some vessels launching from the surface.'

'What sort of vessels?' asked Kohath, suspicious.

There was a pause. 'All sorts of vessels, sergeant. Captain Angelos's Thunderhawk appears to be amongst them, but there are also some eldar signatures - perhaps Vampire Raiders - and there are also...' he trailed off.

'Yes?'

'There are also some signatures that I have never seen before. They are moving faster than any of ours. Faster even than the eldar Vampires.'

'Where?' demanded Kohath. 'Where are these vessels launching?'

'That's just it, sergeant, they're everywhere. It's as though they're spilling out of the planet itself. Some of them are already breaking out of the atmosphere.'

The image on the view screen snowed into nonsense and then resolved itself again, showing a section of the upper atmosphere.

The eldar wraithship and the Ghost Dragon were just visible on the edge of the screen, and they were streaking towards its centre with their remaining Shadowhunter escorts in tow. Little bursts of light started to spark in the atmosphere as lightning-fast vessels burst out of it. No sooner were they birthed into space than the eldar opened fire at them, lashing out with tirades of torpedoes and las-fire, dousing the planet's atmosphere in flames. But the little silvery-black gunships flashed through the fire as though impermeable to it. Then, after only a few seconds, they returned fire.

'By the throne...' gasped Kohath as he saw the kind of damage that the little ships could do.

FROM THE CONTROL room of his Thunderhawk, Gabriel watched the sleek shape of the eldar Vampire Raider bank and then flash up into the atmosphere. It was out of sight in a matter of seconds, carrying Macha and her warlocks back up to their cruiser in orbit.

'Kohath. Sergeant Kohath,' repeated Gabriel, punching his fist down into the terminal next to the vox-array. 'Emperor damn it, Kohath. Where the hell are you?'

'Perhaps the vox will work when we break the cloud layer?' offered Corallis.

'Perhaps,' replied Gabriel, unconvinced. He strained his eyes back down to the surface of the planet. All of the surviving Blood Ravens had been brought on board the Thunderhawks and now there was little trace of their presence on the surface of the planet at all. Instead, the desert was awash with lava, sulphurous gases and rolling pyroclastic surges. Partially hidden in the smoky darkness were swarms of little scarab beetles, which seemed intent on dismantling any mechanical device that they came across, be it of Imperial or eldar origin. The mysterious, metallic, skeletal warriors stalked the desert like the undead, but all of their prey was dead or gone already.

'And we thought that it was a meteor strike that wiped out the forests,' murmured Ionas, shaking his head in disbelief. 'All this time, a necron catacomb was hidden under our very noses. How could we have been so blind, Gabriel?'

As the librarian spoke, a thunderous noise cracked through the atmosphere, pulling everyone's attention down to the diminishing form of the crumbling monastery-outpost. As they watched, the monastery itself seemed to heave and lift. The ground around it cracked and splintered, and the once-magnificent black edifice lurched up into the air, sending huge chunks of masonry and sections of towers scattering out into the desert. Then a great explosion of darkness erupted in the heart of the monastery, blasting its remaining walls into streams of vapour as a shimmering black shape emerged from within.

The levitating craft was shaped like a crescent, with a series of little pyramidal structures running around its rim. In the very centre was a larger pyramid - presumably housing the control decks. It eased slowly into the air, as debris rained down from its edges, crashing back into the craterous ruins of the Blood Ravens' facility and into the desert.

'Get us back to the *Ravenous Spirit*,' said Gabriel calmly. 'We are going to need some bigger guns than we have here.'

With that, the Thunderhawk angled steeply and then roared up into the stratosphere, tracing the wispy contrail left by the speedy exit of the Vampire Raider.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN: ASCENSION

AS THE THUNDERHAWK blasted out of the atmosphere, Gabriel's eyes widened at the scene that greeted them in orbit. The vacuum was riddled with las-fire and spiralling dogfights. Torpedoes flashed through the combat zone, exploding into brilliant stars. It was a mire of space combat, the like of which Gabriel had not seen for decades.

'Captain Angelos,' crackled an unknown voice through the vox. 'We are here to escort you back to the *Ravenous Spirit*.'

Gabriel clicked the view screen to a portside orientation and saw a detachment of Cobra gunships drop into formation alongside his Thunderhawk. The Thunderhawk may pack a considerable punch as a planetary assault craft, but it was slow and cumbersome in space - little more than a sitting duck.

'My thanks, pilot,' replied Gabriel.

Clicking the view screen back to a forward view, Gabriel watched the battle unfolding. There must have been nearly a dozen of fleet, eldar Shad: owhunters, flashing and rolling in elegant formations, unleashing las-fire and torpedoes in vast numbers. He had seen such craft in action before, and he knew that they were easily a match for anything that the Imperial Navy could field against them. Just off to the side of the main battle, Gabriel could see the glorious, glowing shape of a wraithship, its cannons flaring and pulses of warp energy flaring from its beautifully curving wingtips. There was also a second eldar cruiser - part of the so-called Dragon-class, thought Gabriel. It was slightly withdrawn from the battle, but its weapons were working hard in support of its smaller escorts.

For a moment, Gabriel was struck by a sudden horror that there were so few Cobra gunships in the fray. It looked as though the eldar were winning. But then the glorious shape of the *Ravenous Spirit* loomed into view, with an almost complete complement of Cobras hanging in space off its starboard side. They appeared to be utterly uninvolved in the fight.

Gabriel affected a double-take, looking back into the quagmire of combat and trying to resolve his confusion. If the eldar were not fighting the Blood Ravens, who were they fighting? He could hardly make out an enemy at all, although it was clear that something was moving through the void at incredible speeds, making even the Shadowhunters look pedestrian. Whatever they were, they were small, manoeuvrable and extremely fast, flashing through the mire like shimmering flecks of shadow.

'What are those things?' asked Gabriel, vocalising his question without thinking about it as he squinted into the light-flecked darkness.

'I do not know their name or class, captain,' said Jonas, standing beside Gabriel at the view screen. 'But the Imperium has confronted them before, though only rarely, and never with much success. They are necron vessels, Gabriel,' he added, as though sharing a secret.

'That's not very reassuring, Jonas,' replied Gabriel dryly.

'Sergeant Kohath,' said Gabriel, clicking the channel on the vox. 'Sergeant Kohath - why are you not assisting the eldar in this fight?'

There was a long hiss of static and then silence. For a moment Gabriel wondered whether the vox was still not operating properly, but then a reply came.

'Captain Angelos - good to hear your voice again.' It was Kohath. 'We have only just disengaged from battle with the eldar, captain. I had not anticipated your preference to join them at this time.' There was a note of scepticism in his voice. 'Sergeant Saulh of the Ninth is here with the *Rage of Erudition*, captain. He came with a request from Captain Ulantus that we should make speed for the Lorn system - it seems that the greenskins have invaded. I thought that we might make our way there now that the eldar are otherwise engaged, captain.'

Gabriel smiled. He liked Kohath - he was a straightforward military man and always spoke his mind. Saulh was a different matter, but his opinion was of no concern to the Commander of the Watch. 'We will not be going to Lorn just yet, sergeant,' he replied.

'And I will receive your report on the fight with the eldar later. For now, you will direct your Cobra gunships to assist in the battle against the necron. Do you understand me, sergeant?'

There was another cackle of hesitation. 'Necron, captain?' Kohath's voice betrayed his surprise.

'Do you understand me, sergeant?' repeated Gabriel.

'Yes, captain. It will be done. Preparations are already underway for your return aboard the *Ravenous Spirit*.'

'Very good, sergeant,' replied Gabriel, clicking off the vox and turning back to the battle outside. As he watched, a line of Cobra gunships streamed into the fray, engaging the impossibly rapid Dirge Raiders as best they could.

STRIDING BACK ONTO the command deck of his strike cruiser, Gabriel surveyed the mess that Kohath had left him with. A number of the terminals were shattered and burnt out. There were stains of dried blood on the deck and at least three of the crew were missing.

'I see that you have been busy in my absence, sergeant,' said Gabriel, nodding his greeting to Kohath as the sergeant turned from the main view screen.

'It has not been uneventful, captain,' conceded Kohath, bowing efficiently.

Outside, the spiralling gyre of the space battle was still raging. No matter how many of the Dirge Raiders that the Shadowhunters and Cobras destroyed, dozens more flashed out of the planet's ever-darkening atmosphere to replace them. It was as though there was an entire fleet hidden in the bowels of the planet, waiting to be born into the cold abyss of space.

The Blood Ravens Cobras were suffering more casualties than the eldar Shadowhunters; they were only just fast enough to deal with the eldar vessels, and these necron fighters put the other aliens' vessels to shame.

'Loren, take us closer to the action,' snapped Gabriel. 'And Krayem, tell the gunners to provide fire in support of our Cobras.' Gabriel paused for a moment. 'Where's Reuben?' he asked.

IN THE SHADOWS of his command deck, Uldreth watched the Vampire Raiders flash out of the planet's atmosphere and head directly for the effervescent form of the *Eternal Star*, skirting the edge of the combat with elegant accomplishment. He knew that Macha was on board one of them, and his soul was a curdling mix of relief and anger. He was naturally relieved that Biel-Tan's farseer was still alive, but he could not dampen his resentment about his own conduct in this increasingly messy affair. Macha had been right from the start. Laeresh had been right. Even the old Fire Dragon, Draconir, had been right. The space battle at Lsanthranil's Shield was here and now, in the present, where it had always been - waiting for the past to catch up with it. A little while later, Uldreth also watched the ugly shapes of the Blood Ravens Thunderhawks roar out into orbit, ploughing their way clumsily into the midst of the battle on their way back to one of the strike cruisers that had ended the *Reaper's Blade* and spilled its spirit pool into the atmosphere of the tomb world.

His lips curled into a snarl. The mon-keigh had always been thorns in the bubbles of space-time, ruining the perfect futures that the farseers had tried to sculpt for the sons of Asuryan. He hissed involuntarily, venting his disgust in a physical form as it boiled out of his mind: *how could the farseer believe that these ignorant, clumsy fools could do anything other than harm? Disaster followed them like diseased rats.*

A sudden convulsion pulsed through orbit, rippling out from the planet as another vessel started to push its way slowly out of the atmosphere. A tiny point of shimmering black was the first thing to break the atmosphere, like the tip of an iceberg. It grew slowly, with the atmosphere bursting into flames on all sides of it as the pyramid pushed out into space. A moment later, and the broad, crescent-shaped hull of the Shroud Cruiser pressed up into the troposphere, highlighted in an aura of burning ozone. *Macha!* Uldreth's thoughts were urgent and precisely directed. *Macha! He has ascended!*

The *Avenging Sword* disengaged its cannons from its support role in the dogfights and redirected them down towards the emerging Shroud Cruiser, knowing that the Yngir lord was encased within it. At exactly the same time, the weapons of the *Eternal Star* also turned down to atmosphere, pounding it with tirades of violence.

Even as the Shroud pulled clear of the planet and into orbit, with lashes of fire and torpedoes bouncing off its hull, entire squadrons of Dirge Raiders zipped out of the atmosphere in its wake, flashing straight into the mire of combat with the Shadowhunters and the lumbering mon-keigh gunships.

Starting slowly the Shroud quickly gathered pace as it accelerated off towards the sun, apparently ignoring the continuous bombardment to which it was being subjected by the eldar cruisers.

'SERGEANT SAULH - HOLD this position and provide assistance to the Cobras,' said Gabriel. 'I assume that the Exterminatus array is still functioning aboard the *Rage of Erudition*, sergeant?'

'Yes, captain. It remains undamaged,' replied Saulh, his image crackling and snowing on the view screen.

'You are to fire on Rahe's Paradise when you are ready,' directed Gabriel firmly. This was not the first time that he had ordered the destruction of a planet, but perhaps that was why it felt like such a weight of responsibility. 'We can no longer leave it intact - its labyrinthine structure is riddled with slumbering necron. It must be destroyed.'

'But captain...' Saulh's voice faded out, as though he wasn't quite sure what to say. 'Captain Angelos, what evidence do we have of contamination on such a scale? We cannot just exterminate entire planets, Gabriel.'

Gabriel sighed, looking out through another view screen at the tumbling, curdling space battle developing outside. 'There is evidence enough, sergeant. And I myself am certain. The responsibility is mine,' he said. Just as it was on Cyrene, he added in his mind. 'And you are quite wrong, Saulh. We can exterminate entire planets. It is the righteous wrath of the Emperor himself that we bring to bear against Rahe's Paradise - and it is in his honour that we must do what we were pledged to do many millennia ago.'

'As you say, captain,' replied Saulh, not convinced but duty-bound to obey. 'It will be done.'

'You are sure about this, Gabriel?' asked Jonas, standing at his captain's shoulder. 'The eldar witch is not to be trusted.'

'Can you doubt your own eyes, Jonas? Look out there! I am not doing this because Macha told me to, I am doing it because it is right! Look at the floods of Dirges. Even if we stop their reinforcements, the destruction of the planet will have been justified.'

Gabriel clicked the main view screen back to the scene of battle and watched the necron cruiser accelerating off towards the sun with the two eldar cruisers in pursuit. 'We must assist her,' he said. 'Loren - take us into the sun.'

THE SHROUD CRUISER closed on the star as hostile fire rained onto it from its eldar hunters. It was beginning to suffer under the onslaught and it started to rotate to face them. Even as he watched, Uldreth could see dark sunspots appearing on the red star behind the Shroud and thin solar flares lashing out from its burning surface like massive storms. He knew what was coming. The sunspots grew and darkened as the solar flares lengthened and strengthened, reaching out towards the Shroud as it pitched up vertically in front of the star. Then in an incredible burst of power, a searing flare exploded out from the sun striking the central pyramidal structure on the Shroud, from where it was refracted into a constellation of beams that flashed through the other pyramid-prisms on its hull, lighting the vessel like a brilliant, geometric star of its own. Then, the beams reconverged on the central pyramid and combined into a single bolt, lashing out at the *Eternal Star* as a blinding lightning-arc.

The wraithship quaked under the impact, spiralling backwards, out of control.

No! yelled Uldreth into the warp, watching Macha's cruiser tumbling uncontrollably through space.

Just as he screamed, his own vessel returned fire, throwing everything it had into the side of the Shroud.

At the same time, a flood of fire lashed into the Yngir cruiser from another side, and Uldreth snatched his head around to see the roaring engines of a Blood Ravens strike cruiser blasting into the blind side of the Shroud, throwing las-fire and torpedoes at the

nearly impregnable hull. It was also firing some kind of bombardment cannon that was probably designed for planetary assaults, but its shells were punching into the armoured plates of the Shroud and detonating inside.

In a matter of seconds, part of the central pyramid on the Yngir cruiser exploded and cracked off, sending the concentrated beams of solar power crackling for uncontrolled targets. The lightning arcs lashed out into space, striking the *Avenging Sword* with a wild and crackling whip of power, but then turning back on themselves and engulfing the Shroud itself.

The vessel convulsed and shook, throbbing with an overload of power, and then detonated right in its core. The silvery black Shroud Cruiser erupted into flames of darkness and then blew apart, sending lethal shards and shadows hurtling out through the system. For a moment, silhouetted against the dying sun, where the Shroud had once been, there was the shimmering figure of a glorious humanoid - like a star god caught in his own inferno. And then it was gone.

THE LAST OF the Dirge Raiders spiralled down into the atmosphere of Rahe's Paradise, flames pouring from its engine vents and armoured plates free falling from its hull. Beneath its fall, the planet's surface was vaguely visible beneath the clouds of toxic smoke and viral contagions that roiled around in the atmosphere. The Exterminatus arrays had caused all of the volcanoes around the equator to erupt at once, spilling the planet's core out onto its surface and effectively turning the entire world inside out. For good measure, the epic bombardment had continued, throwing viral and bacterial agents down into the mix to ensure that nothing could survive, even if it could swim in molten rock and breath sulphur. In a matter of minutes, the atmosphere had been completely eaten away and then, in less than an hour, the planet's structural integrity collapsed and it simply fell apart, scattering itself into asteroids and meteorites.

Gabriel watched the planet die with confidence. This time he knew that he had done the right thing. It would, in any case, be only a matter of days before the local star would collapse in on itself and turn supernova. The necron lord had destabilised it enough, even in that short period of exposure. Emperor only knows what harm it could have done had it escaped the system.

Clicking the view screen, Gabriel watched the speeding form of the eldar Ghost Dragon flash after the tumbling wraithship. It had departed without a word only an instant after Gabriel had destroyed the necron cruiser. Not a single word, and certainly no thanks.

THE *LITANY OF FURY* lurched out of the warp on the edge of the Lorn system, and its corridors fell into sudden silence. Ulantus punched the release on the great doors of the Implantation Chamber and stepped inside, letting gusts of noxious gases flood out into the pristine, brightly lit passageway outside.

Lying on the ceremonial tablet in the middle of the chamber, with the apothecary fussing around him with dull, dirty surgical instruments, struggled the scarred and horrified figure of Ckrius. He had survived the warp jump, it seemed. Walking around to the side of the adamantium table, Ulantus saw that the boy's head had been cut open from ear to ear in order to expose the upper half of his brain.

The apothecary bowed slightly to the captain as he lay the flat, circular sus-an membrane into the neophyte's skull, and Ulantus smiled at the irony. In a few years time, that membrane would enable Ckrius to drop into a state of suspended animation in the event of extreme physical trauma. It was the same technology as was used in stasis sarcophagi for Marines irredeemably injured in the course of duty - they could be kept alive almost indefinitely, until a dreadnought shell became available and they could be transplanted into a new, entirely mechanical body. For a moment, Ulantus wondered whether Ckrius might enjoy the irony of the trauma he was experiencing in order to enable him to survive even more trauma later on.

'Captain, we are entering the Lorn system now,' reported Korinth, bowing as he entered the sacred space of the Implantation Chamber. 'You are needed on the command deck.'

'Of course,' replied Ulantus, nodding and following the librarian out.

As he walked onto the command deck, Captain Ulantus cursed the Commander of the Watch once again. There was no sign of the *Ravenous Spirit* anywhere in the system. Not even Saulh was there in the *Rage of Erudition*. Gabriel had probably roped him in to some kind of fanciful scheme on Rahe's Paradise.

But the system was far from empty. There was space trash and debris drifting all over the outer reaches of the system - sure signs that the foul greenskins had passed this way - and the fifth planet was a veritable blaze of activity. The Imperial Navy had vessels in orbit, where they had already engaged the ork fleet.

'Captain Ulantus,' reported a serf on the command deck. 'There are incoming vessels.'

'Show me,' snapped Ulantus, flicking the view screen.

He watched the eldar fleet slip gracefully into real space and then accelerate towards him. If Gabriel had really wanted to confront the eldar, he should have come to Lorn where he's needed, thought Ulantus bitterly, instead of running off to Rahe's Paradise on some fanciful errand. Not for the first time, Ulantus cursed the cavalier Commander of the Watch.

'Prepare for battle,' he said calmly. 'It seems that we must do battle with Gabriel's eldar after all,' he added quietly, although not quite to himself.

'IT WAS NOT a complete loss, captain,' said Tanthius, as Techmarine Ephraim tended to his damaged armour. 'We did come away with a number of very able aspirants. Caleb managed to save a group of six local warriors, including a young psyker called Varjak, whom Jonas feels will make a fine librarian one day.'

'That is just as well, old friend. Our visit to Rahe's Paradise was more expensive than I anticipated. We can afford no more losses on this scale. The Third Company is skating perilously close to the line,' replied Gabriel thoughtfully. The fact that Rahe's Paradise was the third recruitment planet in a row that had cost more Blood Ravens than it had recruited was not lost on him.

'We will survive,' said Tanthius evenly. 'It is to our credit that we fight to the brink of our own annihilation,' he added with pride. 'There are not many others who could claim the same.'

'No, there are not many - and that may well be the point, Tanthius,' said Gabriel, smiling weakly. 'Rest well, old friend,' he said, turning and walking out of the apothecarion.

Pushing open the great doors to the *Ravenous Spirit's* chapel, Gabriel strode down the central aisle. On the altar at the front was the ornate sarcophagus in which Chaplain Prathios had been laid to rest. This would be his place of honour until such a time as he was called again from his sleep.

'My old friend,' said Gabriel, kneeling before the altar to the Emperor but addressing his words to the entombed husk of Prathios. 'We need your guidance now, more than ever. Our numbers are diminishing, and yet I led our Company into this battle. Somehow I knew that it was waiting for us, and I brought us here...' he trailed off, not wanting to finish his thoughts.

Closing his eyes, Gabriel tried to let his mind relax. He tried to fill his soul with light. He waited for the first hints of the Astronomican once again, but there was nothing.

Gabriel. Gabriel, I know that you can hear me. We have little choice when the future is laid out in the past. But decisions are not always about casting into this pre-emptive future-space. Your decisions are your own, Gabriel, even if your choices can never be. Gabriel's eyes snapped open. For a moment he had caught sight of Macha, sitting cross-legged in the darkness of a small circular chamber. Her dazzling emerald eyes were shaded behind long, elegant lashes, and her lips had been working silently - or perhaps forming words different from those that appeared in his head. So, she had survived the necron's lightning arc and the assault of Ptolemaea. Despite himself, Gabriel was pleased by the thought.

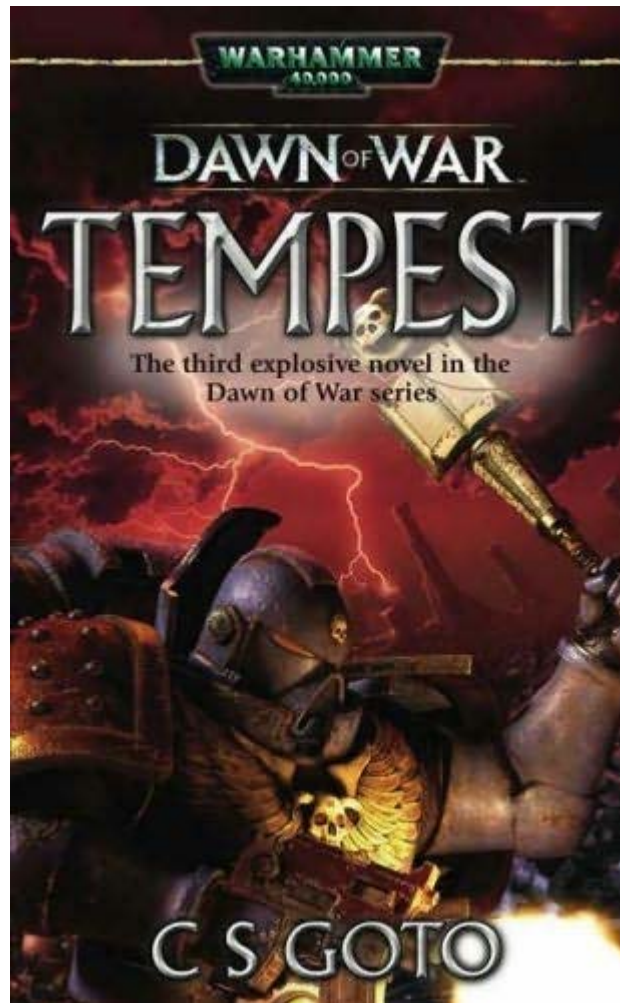
Closing his eyes once again, a single silver voice struck a note in his head. It was high and majestic, glorious like a solo soprano, soaring and perfect. After a few seconds, a second voice joined it, even higher and more crisp. Then a third and a fourth, deepening the harmony into something profound and resonant, putting his soul at ease once again.

A great crash broke his reverie and Gabriel turned his head to see the silhouette of Corallis in the wide open doorway at the other end of the aisle. 'I am sorry to disturb you captain,' he bowed. 'But Captain Ulantus is insisting that we make haste for Lorn V immediately. It seems that he is under attack, captain.'

'Understood,' replied Gabriel, climbing to his feet and striding back towards Corallis.

'The orks?'

'No, captain. The eldar.'



DAWN OF WAR: TEMPEST



CHAPTER ONE: VAIROCANUM

THE HEAT WAS sudden and intense, as though I had been thrown from the coolness of gentle night air into the fury of a blast furnace. All at once, I could feel my senses coming alive: my skin prickled beneath the familiar ceramic touch of my armour, and my face burned as though it were on fire. There was nothing but light - radiant, searing and unbearable - piercing through to the back of my closed eyes, dragging me into consciousness like a beacon bringing a ship to shore.

Flicking open instinctively, my eyes merely filled my head with lancing agonies as the dazzling light crashed against my unguarded retinas. Still, I could see nothing, only the burning, red, bloody brightness of an intense sun that dominated my vision as though I were blind. My mind raced for images of darkness, trying to bring cool salve into my boiling thoughts, but the heat incinerated every thought, as though my head were an inferno in which nothing could survive.

Am I blind? The thoughts spiralled through the boiling convections, making me nauseous and dizzy. For a moment I thought that I was on my feet, but then my balance seemed to flip and turn, and the ground ran over my back like simmering water, scalding me through the panels of my armour, trickling through the joints against the scarred and leathery skin beneath.

No. Blindness is being lost in the darkness. Here I am surrounded by light. Without another thought, I lifted my left hand to my face and felt the darkness of a shadow fall over my blistered skin. The light against my eyes shifted and the temperature on my face dropped by a fraction of a degree. Cracking open my eyes once again, a burst of darkness cut into my mind as the silhouette of my hand burnt its image into my retina, like a moon eclipsing the sun.

"My weapon". The thought exploded into my head, extinguishing the flames that wracked my mind like dynamite blowing out a forest fire. Nothing else mattered.

Reaching urgently around behind my shoulder, my hand plunged into a sea of burning granules as it quested for the hilt of my sword. *I'm lying on sand - this must be a desert!* But the hilt was not there. I rolled onto my side and felt the sizzling sand cascade across my back as I checked the sheath for its ancient blade. Nothing. It was not there.

Blood was pulsing through my neck, running close to the surface of the skin in an attempt to cool my body, and I could feel the labour of my secondary heart pounding in my chest.

Am I injured? I couldn't tell - all of my senses were swamped by the heat. I slumped back onto my back, folding my arm across my face to shade the exposed skin from the relentless assault of the desert sun.

After a few seconds, fragments of memories started to flicker past my eyes.

How did I get here? They were questions more than memories, but they implied memories: *I was somewhere else before - this is not where I am supposed to be. I am someone who belongs elsewhere.*

That single notion lingered in my mind, as though all trains of thought led directly back to it: *I - who am I?* It was like a black hole sucking everything else in.

There were no answers. The clearest image in my head was of an ornate and ancient sword, and I felt sure that the beautiful item was mine. It was important to me. Integral. It was part of who I was, and I felt its absence like an icy, physical wound.

Instinctively, I reached again with my hand, letting the flames of the sun lap against my raw face once more, hoping faintly that I would find the hilt this time and, with it, find something of myself.

Nothing.

Without thinking, I snatched my right hand down to my thigh. *I should have a bolt pistol in that holster.* The realisation was not quite a memory; it was more like an assertion about the proper state of my being. I should have a sword on my back and a pistol against my leg: that was what it meant to be me. But the holster was empty and my bare fingers found nothing except the hiss of scorchingly hot ceramite, as my fingertips burnt against the armour fitted over my leg.

There must be something. I must have a weapon. A memory stirred and my hands darted to the fixtures and fittings that were moulded into the band around the waist of my armour. With my eyes still closed, my fingers danced across the surface with a muscle memory of their own; they knew what they were looking for. After a second, a wave of relief eased through me, like a wash of cool water. *A combat knife.* The metallic hilt burnt my fingers and the palm of my hand, but I gripped it with the certainty and strength with which a lame man might hold his cane.

Then the heat overcame me once again, and the searing light blinked into the darkness of unconsciousness.

THE SKY SWIRLED with purple clouds, spiralling into whirling nebulae against the heavy, deep red of the darkening atmosphere above. The air had cooled, and I could feel the crack of a thin layer of ice as I snapped open my eyes. Perspiration had frozen across my face, forming a delicate and brittle second skin. It was freezing cold.

The sand beneath me crackled as I shifted my weight, flexing my aching shoulders to bring sensation back into the muscles that were sealed within the ice-encrusted shell of my armour. The servos that assisted shoulder movement whined for a moment, as though they had been frozen in place after a long period of inaction. The joints between the armoured plates had been sealed by ice after layers of sand had insinuated their way into the cracks.

Like bones crunching back into place, the armour broke through the pathetic resistance of the elements, and I could feel freedom return to my motions. The mechanical augmentation felt strangely natural. As my muscles flexed and power returned to the auto-reactive plates over my shoulders, warmth began to flood through the rest of my body. Something had shifted in my physiology, triggering a chemical release that raised my body temperature. *I should understand this process, but I have forgotten its name.*

As I climbed to my feet, splinters of icy shards exploded out of the joints in my arms and legs, but my body already felt warm and strong within its super-augmented shell. Only my face felt strange: cold and exposed, as though it had been stripped of its very skin. A sense of vulnerability made me reach for my head, but in place of icy ceramite I found the brittle and moist touch of ice-coated, blistered and scarred skin. An icy, metallic stud stood proud of my left temple.

I should have a helmet. That much I could remember. *Something is missing.* Then I remembered the missing sword and bolt pistol. In my other hand, I registered the metallic touch of the hilt of a combat knife. Memories of searing heat and desert-blindness flashed back through my mind. *Where am I?*

Behind me, the desert stretched out to the horizon, barren and featureless, rolling with shifting dunes as the bitter wind toyed with incoherent clouds of dust. The scene was tinged with red from the dying light of three local stars, each just vanishing over the horizon and filling the sky with a wash of bloody light. The sand radiated an eerie paleness. I could not tell whether this was the natural colour of the desert, or a trick of faltering light, but I was certain about one thing. This is *a lost world*.

A narrow channel had been blown through the sand; it started in a crater about two hundred metres away and ended at my feet. From the look of it, it had been made by the impact and slide of a fast-moving, solid body. Perhaps it was the impact scar of a meteor. *Or perhaps the signature of my own arrival on this planet?*

Scanning the rest of the horizon and turning in the opposite direction, the desert dropped away sharply into a ravine. I was standing on the lip of a sheer cliff. Far below, the foot of the cliff-face was lost in deepest shadow, making it almost impossible to estimate the depth of the fall.

On the other side of the wide ravine, the landscape rolled and swept out into the darkness that shrouded the distant horizon, from whence the touch of the triple suns had already withdrawn. The dim, undulating dunes were punctuated with occasional tors and rocky protrusions, and great, jagged, black lashes through the sand suggested that other ravines broke the desert in the vaguely discernable distance. The icy wind scraped through the sand like the serrated breath of death itself.

Is this whole place dead? The thought had only just formed when a glint of light from the shadows at the base of the cliff caught my eyes. It was little more than a flash, just a flicker of reflected light, as though dancing in the eyes of a predator.

Did it move? I could feel my pupils dilate as my brain drew as much light as possible out of the surroundings, sucking it in like tiny, depth-less black holes. In a reflex reaction, I squinted, and suddenly the light in the scene shifted, as though enhanced by something in my own brain. The bottom of the ravine zoomed up towards me, tinted in an overexposed, pale blue; it was as though my eyes were reeling in it. The sudden flush of nausea and vertigo lasted for only a fraction of moment, and then I realised that this was natural.

My eyes are the eyes of the Emperor. The words formed effortlessly in my mind, as though I had recited this thought over and over again until it had become part of me. But I couldn't make sense of it. *The Emperor?* Who was this man that strove to dominate my thoughts?

At the base of the cliff, half buried in the sand as though it had dropped directly out of heaven, my enhanced vision could discern the elegant shape of a sword. A large warstone jewel glinted darkly from the pommel of the hilt, and intricate, alien runes glowed faintly as they snaked around the half concealed blade. It gave off a barely visible green light, as though it were a living entity that pulsed with veins of energy in place of blood.

Vairocanum. It was my sword. Its name slid silently into my thoughts, like burning oil, singeing incomprehensible, runic shapes into the fabric of my mind. It was calling for me, reminding me that it should never have been forgotten, pressing its presence into my very being as though it were a necessary part of me.

As I stared down at *Vairocanum*, watching the green glow wax and wane as eddies of dust and sand drifted past it, flickers of other images started to pulse through my thoughts. The sight of the sword triggered a flood of memories. They flashed like visions being projected intermittently into my mind. I could see other people. Giant, armoured warriors like myself. They were battling something unimaginable. Vague, amorphous shapes were reaching out of the walls, thrashing towards them and burning with daemoniac passions. The warriors fought and then ran, turning towards me and charging. They yelled, screaming, brandishing their weapons as they stormed forwards. But before they could reach me, I plunged the burning *Vairocanum* into the deck at my feet, and everything vanished.

The darkness of my memory faded gradually into the near-darkness of the desert. I found myself unmoved and unmoving, still standing on the edge of the cliff, staring down at the oddly enhanced image of my once-lost force-sword, half buried in the pale blue sands of an unknown, alien desert.

Vairocanum. The word sat comfortably in my brain. It felt like it belonged; I trusted it.

Self-consciously, I raised my hand over my shoulder and felt the empty sheath on my back. *Vairocanum.* It was one of the missing pieces, and it was as good a place to start as any. The cold, metal combat knife in my other hand felt lifeless and pathetic. *I need my sword.*

THERE WERE AT least three ways to descend the cliff: about a kilometre to the south I could see a rift in the structure of the ravine, and, given the geological composition of the landscape, I was sure that such a rift would be accompanied by rock falls and sand slides that would provide an easy path down to the valley floor. The deductions came naturally to mind, requiring no concentration or conscious effort. For a moment I wondered whether this strange landscape was familiar to me, but then I realised something quite simple. *I have been trained to understand terrain.*

The rift in the ravine held my interest for less than a couple of seconds. It would take me away from *Vairocanum* before bringing me back to her. I would lose sight of her very quickly, especially in the rapidly failing light. And the journey would not be a rapid one: the sand was loose and deep, and my heavy boots would sink significantly with each step; the going would be hard. I had no idea when I might have access to water or nourishment, so the exertion and the extra time would be wasteful and foolish. *Besides, I must not leave the sword - it is all I have.*

A better way down was more direct. The cliff beneath my feet was rocky and riddled with cracks. Tufts of vegetation had drilled their roots into the surface, suggesting that there would be handholds in the cliff, and that its composition was likely to be sedimentary - sandstone perhaps. *I should be able to hack out handholds with my knife, if I need to.* The climb looked challenging, especially in the icy dark, but I felt confident that I had made harder climbs before, even though I could not remember them. *I must not leave the sword.*

As I stood on the brink of the climb, a third possibility suggested itself to me like a secret revelation. *I might survive the fall.* Holding my hands out in front of my face, I studied the strong, heat-scarred fingers; the large combat knife looked tiny in my fist, even as it glinted with the last rays of the third red sun. The armoured panels that covered my arms were scratched and dented, but they seemed immovably fixed, as though they were somehow grafted to my body. The ceramite plates looked heavy and formidable, and yet I could not feel their weight at all. It was as though they were made of the air itself. *The armour supports its own weight. It does not sap my strength; it gives strength to me.*

Glancing back over my shoulder towards the last of the setting suns, I considered the deep impact channel that had been ploughed through the desert up to my feet. *I'll survived that, the drop from this cliff would be nothing.*

As I watched, the third sun finally dipped below the horizon and the last of its ruddy light vanished from the surface of the desert. For a moment, a heavy dark shroud hung over the scene, obscuring everything beneath a veil. But then, as though activated by a silent and secret command, two pale red moons emerged from behind the roiling clouds; one massive like a fourth sun, and the other little more than the reflection of an eye. All at once the sky was alive with points of light, as the gently swirling clouds parted and shifted to reveal unknown constellations of stars and raging tempests of nebulae. *Where is this place?* The sands of the desert were cast into myriad colours, each grain a pale reflection of the glory of the stars above.

Vairocanum. The thought brought me back to the top of the cliff, prodding back into my mind like the pain of a phantom-limb. *'I'm wasting time.* The one thing that I was sure about, the one thing that I knew had a place in my life, the one thing that I could name was at the base of that cliff. Everything else seemed vague and poisoned by conjecture, ignorance and disremembrance. Resolution settled into my mind: *I am a warrior, and I must have my sword.* Taking a single step backwards and then two rapid steps forwards, I vaulted off the top of the cliff and down into the darkness below.

THE FROZEN DESERT rose up to meet me like a solid and impenetrable block of ice. As my feet punched into its surface I could feel the frozen structure crack and shatter beneath me. The ground frost exploded instantly, scattering shards of ice and fragments of congealed sand in all directions, as though they were being evacuated from a blast crater. With the ice-hard surface thoroughly ruined, my legs ploughed down into the softer sand beneath; it decelerated me rapidly as it compacted under the force of my impact.

I hardly felt that landing at all. The dynamism felt right. *I am the sword of the Great Father.* The phrase emerged out the darkness like a flaming torch in my brain; it was instinctive and I knew that I believed it instantly, but the words rang hollow like distant bells. *The Great Father?*

Vairocanum... The name pressed into my mind persistently and relentlessly. My eyes snapped to the north as I pulled myself out the sand and onto my feet. I could see the hilt clearly now, with the warstone pommel glinting with dark complexity in the shadows of the night and the runes burning with eerie green power. After a couple of strides, I fell to my knees before the faintly glowing blade, bowing my head before it as though to an idol. It stood upright like a statue; its hilt and half its blade protruding up out of the sand, with the rest buried firmly in the frozen desert.

'I am the Sword of Vidya.' The words whispered from my lips automatically, as though they were the beginning of a mantra or prayer that I had taken inside my being and internalised so strongly that they had transcended even the shackles of memory. *I am the sword of the Great Father and my eyes are the eyes of the Emperor. When I gaze upon the unrighteous, I shall visit upon them the tempest of truth and lay waste to their souls.*

'For knowledge is power, and I will guard it with my life... and my sword.'

My words caught the frozen breath of the desert and drifted across the sand.

The snaking runes along the length of the blade seemed to beckon to me, luminous and sparkling in the icy night air. They curdled and swam through the metallic substance, as though the heart of the blade was composed of a fiery liquid, seductively confined in the shape of an ancient sword. The script slipped and flowed from one pattern to the next, inscribing a narrative and a history into my head in a language that I suddenly understood.

The runic characters became suddenly vivid, burning with an emerald passion that I knew I had seen many times before. It felt forbidden and exhilarating. I could feel the power pulsing into the sand beneath my knees. The sword called out to me, using a name that I could barely hear; it was as though the desert wind itself was eroding a word from the cliff-face by my side. *Rhamah.* I recognised it. *I am Rhamah - the touch of death.* It was dear and obvious all at once, like something that could never be forgotten. With a sense of ceremony that I could not explain, I carefully tucked my combat knife back into its harness before reaching for the hilt of the great sword. Despite the freezing, arctic cold of the desert night, the grip felt warm to my touch, as though my fingers were closing around the thin neck of a traitor or a long forgotten lover.

At my touch, delicate tendrils of energy started to quest out of the warstone pommel, questing over my hand and creeping towards my forearm. The intricate green flows prickled against my skin, filling my veins with an electric energy that I recognised at once. It was like life returning to me.

On my feet, I grasped the hilt in both hands and pulled to free it from the frozen clutches of the sand. But it didn't move. Half of the blade's length was submerged and fused into the desert, and the icy sand seemed reluctant to release it.

I pulled again, wrenching *Vairocanum* out of the ground and thrusting it into the air above my head like a prize. Heavy shards of frozen sand showered over me, peppering my armoured shoulders like hail stones. Looking up at last, I could see the pale red light of the moons dancing over the greening blade, swirling like clouds in the substance of the ancient sword.

A sudden and sharp pain lanced through my arms.

It's broken! The thought was a dagger.

About a third of the blade was missing, broken off roughly on a jagged diagonal. For a moment I thought that I had inflicted this terrible wound myself, as I had prised the sword free of the desert. But there was no way that *Vairocanum* could be ruined by sand. *Something must have happened before we came to this place.*

Images and memories of the warriors charging towards me, flanked by the nebulous and terrible daemonic forms that were pouring out of the walls, returned to my mind. I plunged *Vairocanum* into the deck and the threat vanished. *Did I break her after all?*

Spinning the blade in an effortless and natural flourish, I returned it to its place on my back, feeling the reassuring and solid presence of the sword in its sheath once again. *Now I am ready for this world: I bring the touch of death, the sword of Vidya.*

THE NIGHT WAS as short as the desert was vast. I walked directly away from the cliff-face, using it as a point of reference in the continuously shifting landscape of dunes, but before the cliff had even vanished over the horizon behind me one of the suns had clawed its way into the sky ahead. I walked directly into its fierce gaze, trudging silently through the sand without pause, hesitation or rest.

As the first sun crested the horizon, the shift in temperature was sudden and extreme. In the distance, a strip of dust-cloud was whipped up along the line where the rapidly heating air touched the icy sand. It rolled and charged forwards, keeping pace with the daybreak, shattering the ice and the frozen desert in a relentless storm, ploughing up the sand behind the rapidly advancing morning light.

I glanced up at the scene, squinting my eyes against the distant but gathering wind. I might have dropped to the ground or flung myself behind a dune for cover, but something deep in my brain told me that there was no need. This was a storm that I could weather. As it thundered towards me, I simply raised an arm to shield my eyes from the maelstrom of sand, and walked on through it.

The temperature soared as the cloud broke over me. I could feel the air seethe against the skin of my face and hands. But the rest of my body seemed to register no change at all. Neither the wind nor the sand nor the heat penetrated my armour, and, after a couple of seconds, even the exposed skin of my face was regulated back to normality.

Pausing, I looked back over my shoulder at the diminishing image of the cliff-face behind me, with the storm wall rolling towards it. By my own calculations, I had walked about fifteen kilometres in twenty minutes, through a frozen desert in arctic temperatures, and yet I was not even breathing hard. I could not remember the last time I had eaten or drunk, and yet I felt strong and full of energy. The maelstrom of superheated sand had blasted past me, and I had hardly even noticed. And none of this felt strange to me. *I am the will of the Emperor, incarnate and terrible.*

A massive explosion sounded ahead of me and I returned my eyes to the horizon. The second sun had just lurched into the sky. It was vastly bigger than its junior cousin, and its impact on the desert was immeasurably more powerful. The horizon had erupted into a frenzy of sand storms, perhaps reaching a kilometre in height, which threatened even to obscure the sun as it rose rapidly into the sky. The massive tide thundered through the desert towards me, ripping the dunes from the ground and sucking them into incredible waves of convection.

In one movement I unsheathed *Vairocanum* from my back and dove to the ground, plunging the damaged blade deeply into the desert until it struck rock beneath the sand. As the infernal storm blasted into me and rolled over me, pressing me flat against the ground like a tidal wave pummelling me into the seabed, I gripped the hilt of my sword and trusted in its strength to anchor me. The roaring of the wind pounded into my ears, but for a brief moment I thought that I could hear something else screaming through the air. Peering up through the turmoil of sand, the blood-red sky was almost obliterated by the abrasive air. Even so, I was certain that my eyes could detect the movement of a metallic flash skirting the billowing clouds in the lower atmosphere. It was akin to a tiny burst of light, refracted instantly through the entire colour spectrum. *My eyes are the eyes of the Emperor... I am not alone here.*

They are looking for me. The storm cleared as quickly as it had arrived, leaving the desert shrouded in a floating and gradually settling mist of searing sand. A delicate, wispy contrail was still faintly visible, disappearing into the clouds over the easterly horizon, vanishing behind a rugged, rocky peak that jabbed out of the desert and partly obscured the tardy, third sun as it started to rise. *That is the best vantage point.* Spinning the wounded *Vairocanum* back into its holster on my back, and ignoring the third sand storm as it barrelled over me, I set off for the mountain.

NIGHT WAS ALREADY falling by the time I crested the mountain. Dusk had settled over the desert like a ruddy blanket, transforming the scene into a sandy swamp of bloody images. The temperature was dropping rapidly, cooling from the blistering and inhuman heat of the day to the freezing, inhuman cold of the night. For a few moments, just as the suns touched the far horizon and their radiation burst into myriad shades of red, the temperature would have been bearable for an unarmoured human. But those moments passed quickly, and I paid them no mind.

Throughout the long climb, there had not been a single sign of the return of whatever craft had flashed through the lashes of the desert storm that morning. Part of me began to wonder whether I had actually seen a ship streaking through the troposphere, or whether my rapidly thawing brain had hallucinated it. However, such doubts were almost immediately overridden by a deep seated sense of certainty in my own senses; somehow I simply knew that I was not mistaken. It was neither intuition nor arrogance, but merely a certainty that the nature of my senses was not such that they could be tricked.

My eyes are the eyes of the Emperor. I turned the thought over and over in my mind as I climbed, feeling its weight and its peculiar gravity. This Emperor had power in my thoughts and over them, even though he had no form in my memory. If my eyes were his, then somehow I knew that they were beyond the trickery of mirage and fatigue.

But the Emperor was not alone in my thoughts. The name "Vidya" kept returning to me, flashing through my mind like a comet, as though it were a sign that I should recognise. And then there was the battle in which *Vairocanum* was damaged. I could vaguely

recall the blue-helmeted visages of the other warriors in that vision, as they charged towards me with their weapons crackling with warp light. I recalled a sense of resolve: I would not let the ship fall. However, my mind was not certain about whether the threat to the ship was the warriors or the nebulous snakes of warp fury that oozed through the corridor behind them. They blurred into a single, thundering force, charging at me as I plunged *Vairocanum* into the deck and... and then I had found myself reaching for my sword, blistered and cooking, lying in the midday sun in this Throne-forsaken desert.

I am the sword of Vidya. What did that mean?

On the summit of the mountain, I looked out towards the eastern horizon, which was already clothed in the midnight blues and purples of the gathering night. As far as I could see, barren mountains aspired into the sky, rippling out into the distance. The landscape was cut through with arid canyons and desolate valleys, each hidden in the deepening shadows of the mountains and cliffs that flanked them. There was no sign of a city, a base or an airstrip. There was no sign of the vessel that I was sure that I had seen. *It could be anywhere.* Any one of the ravines could hide a landing pad, a dwelling, an entire city.

Behind me, the desert rolled out like a red carpet, touching the horizon at the kiss of the largest sun. The cliff on which I had started the day had already disappeared from view, even from the vantage point offered by this mountaintop. In the space of one short day, I had walked further than the eye could see - further even than the enhanced and flawless eyes of the Emperor could discern.

Even as I watched, I could hear the crackling of ice as it started to form over the surface of the peak, expanding the moisture that had been dragged out of the clouds and trapped between the grains of sand during the day. Then the suns finally vanished over the western horizon and the mountain was almost instantly encrusted in ice. I could see a wave of frost sheen over the desert towards the still-glowing horizon, making the sand sparkle faintly in the emerging moonlight.

The whole world seemed to freeze as night finally fell.

But my thoughts were far from frozen. They raced, burning my mind's eye with half-forgotten and disremembered images, making me feverish. *I should remember more.* I could feel a sudden urgency, as though something in my soul was rebelling against my ignorance; it felt like an aberration, as though I was offensive to myself. My feelings lurched ahead of my thoughts, bringing me understanding that I could not rationalise. *This is not right... Knowledge is power, guard it well.* The phrase rang hollow, as though I was mocking myself.

Instinctively, I pulled *Vairocanum* off my back and held it up before me, feeling the solid reassurance of its familiar form and letting my eyes trace its contours against the deepening hue of the roiling sky. An ineffable calm seemed to flow out of the faintly glowing blade, filling my mind with cursive runes and ideas that were not yet properly formed. It whispered to me in a tongue that I should have understood, and in a tone so delicate that it was almost seductive, forcing me to quieten my thoughts in order to pay it the attention it craved. The warpstone in the pommel glittered darkly as I narrowed my eyes and stared into its depths.

I must quieten my mind - I am deaf to myself, and I know more than I think.

Turning *Vairocanum* end over end, I plunged it down into the rock at my feet. The ground cracked and flashed under the sharp impact, but it accepted the sudden violation, holding the blade of the sword upright before me like an altarpiece. Without taking my eyes off the warpstone pommel, I sank to my knees before this single physical connection with my past.

Kneeling alone on a freezing, moonlit mountaintop, stranded on an unknown, barren and alien world, I silenced my mind and let my thoughts plunge into the depths of the warp-jewel, searching it for images of the past, of the present, and of myself.

Knowledge is power, and in ignorance we are nothing more than beasts, offensive to the gaze of the Great Father.



CHAPTER TWO: MIRAGE

DEEP IN THE impregnable heart of the *Litany of Fury*, suspended in a high orbit around Lorn V, the cavernous, hemispherical Sanctorium Arcanum resounded with the voices of priests, mystics and astropaths. The choir patrolled the circuits of the ambulatories that encircled the central altar, which was held aloft in a single beam of silver light that pierced down from the sky dome at the apex of the massive, curving ceiling.

A mist of incense wafted through the gently moving air, swirling into a spiral around the altarpiece, stirred into motion by the perambulations of the choir, and a deep resonant chanting pulsed through the space, sending visible ripples through the mist. Directly above the altar piece, captured in the beam that shone down from the ceiling, was a sphere of luminous, pearlescent energy. Light danced and curdled over its surface, and it sheened as though slick with oil. Delicate tendrils of silvering light snaked up into the glowing pearl, feeding out of the blind, sunken and gaunt eye-sockets of a number of the peripatetic, green-robed astropaths. As the energy flows converged, the silvery pearl shimmered and pulsed, as though alive with the combined powers of the astropaths and the psychic chanting of the choir telepathica. Soaring sounds and radiant light seemed to congeal through the eerie, incense-veiled mist, forming the very heart of the ancient and venerable battle-barge.

Laid on the altar itself, like a holy relic, Korinth and Zhaphel could see a fragment of ancient metal. It was an elegant point, like the tip of a sword, but the thick end was jagged and broken, as though it had been snapped unceremoniously from the blade of a once-magnificent weapon. The two Librarians stood behind the altar, on the elevated podium of the apse that overlooked the ritual affairs of the Sanctorium. From there, they could observe the perpetual chanting of the pledged priests of the Adeptus Telepathica, as they orbited the relic on the altar, performing the rites of the Summoning of Exodus. The relic itself glowed with a faint, alien green light, as though feeding on and transforming the psychic energy that filled the dense, fragrant atmosphere.

Only specially inducted Librarians of the Secret Orders of Psykana were permitted to enter the Sanctorium, and the sight of it never failed to inspire a sense of awe into the souls of Korinth and Zhaphel. The last time they had taken up the podium, many years before, there had been four of them in the Ninth Company: Brother-Librarian Bherald had ascended into the light of the Emperor's gaze toward the end of the Cyrene campaign, leading a detachment of battle-brothers in support of the captain of the Third Company, Gabriel Angelos, Commander of the Watch, as he cleansed that forsaken world. Brother-Librarian Rhamah had fallen only days ago, standing with Korinth and Zhaphel against the warp daemons that had assailed the Implantation Chamber of the *Litany*, as the massive battle-barge had made its way through the warp to defend the Lorn system. The sword fragment that lay on the altar was all that was left of the once-magnificent warrior.

The Blood Ravens were an ancient and profound organisation, and they were unusually well-connected within the various institutions of the Emperor's Imperium. The Sanctorium and its associated rites were a product of one such relationship. In many ways, the Blood Ravens' position within the networks and matrices of the Administratum was rivalled only by that of the legendary Imperial Fists. However, whilst the Fists could trace the origins of their political acumen all the way back to their once and great originator, the Primarch Rogal Dorn, the Blood Ravens had no real knowledge of their origins. The identity of their primarch had been lost or obscured in the records of history many millennia ago, and their place in the Imperium was now guaranteed only by their industry, labour and spirit, rather than resting on the laurels of a magnificent and half misremembered past.

Despite the angst of ignorance that struck into the soul of every Blood Raven, the Chapter was fiercely proud of the fact that its greatness was in the present, based entirely on the merits of its current deeds. In dark moments, the Secret Masters of the Chapter might acknowledge a repressed but seething resentment at the persistent renown of the Imperial Fists, when it was the Blood Ravens that had actually achieved most in the last couple of millennia; the Fists were so arrogant that they probably didn't even know it.

As far as Korinth was aware, the Sanctorium Arcanum was unique. He was certain, in any case, that even the magnificent *Phalanx* of the Imperial Fists had no such facility hidden in its monstrous form. Its existence was the result of an unusual and intimate connection between the Blood Ravens and the Scholastia Psykana. In many ways it was an aspect of the complementary natures of the Inquisition and the Blood Ravens, who shared an interest in esoteric and historical knowledge. Indeed, the Blood Ravens had a number of mutually beneficial relationships with certain branches of the Inquisition and Ecclesiarchy, particularly with the Adeptus Sororitas of the Ordo Dialogous.

Korinth's old mentor, Librarian Father Jonas Urelie, who was seconded to the outpost-monastery on Rahe's Paradise, had launched a number of joint research projects with the Sisters of the Lost Rosetta.

The arrangement with the Scholastia Psykana was of an entirely different nature. In the hidden lore of the Blood Ravens Secret Order of Psykana, it was theorised that the existence of the Sanctorium demonstrated that the Blood Ravens were actually a Chapter dear to the undying soul of the Emperor of Man. An ancient and revered document, known as the *Apocrypha of the Un-Founding*, allegedly penned by Azariah Vidya himself, the first recorded Father Librarian of the Chapter, argued that this was why the history of the Blood Ravens was so obscure. The authenticity of the document had never been substantiated, but its argument was whispered in the folklore of the Chapter.

The *Un-Founding* suggested that agents close to the Golden Throne had acted to obscure the history of the Blood Ravens. Azariah suggested that the Chapter's true origins were not actually absent from Imperial record, but deliberately lost, or hidden, perhaps even by psychic means. Hence, Azariah and the Blood Ravens searched for all kinds of knowledge in order to help them to see through this veil of ignorance.

The *Un-Founding* suggested that this quest would be heretical only if the knowledge were sought for the self-serving purpose of disseminating it throughout the Imperium, risking conflict with other Chapters. Azariah argued that the Emperor had never meant for the Blood Ravens to be ignorant of their own origins but had merely sought to hide them from his other sons, and Great Father Vidya had insisted that such knowledge was entirely appropriate as long as it remained within the secretive confines of the secret orders of the Chapter. *It is enough that we should know the face of the Emperor-for others it may be the face of insanity or death.* Korinth was well-aware of these legends as he stared down at the shattered fragment of his battle-brother's sword, watching the telepaths and astropaths chant and perambulate, performing the Summoning of Exodus. He was also aware that the unusually high number of psykers in the Blood Ravens Chapter lent some support to those who argued that they were the Chapter closest to the nature of the Emperor himself: who but the Blood Ravens could really claim to reflect the psychic grandeur of the Emperor? In the not-too-distant past, the rogue Librarian Father Phraius had broken away from the leadership of Chapter Master Izaria, dragging a squad of Librarians into heresy as he declared his nature identical to that of the Emperor himself and thus free from the confines of the Chapter and the Codex. The formidable Izaria had unleashed his fury against the renegade Librarians and crushed them almost single-handedly. But Phraius was not a solitary example; a similar incident had happened more recently, involving the Third Company Librarian, Isador Akios, on the planet of Tartarus.

The chapel of every battle-barge in the Chapter was fitted with an immense Bell of Souls, which tolled one hundred times every day to commemorate the lost souls of fallen battle-brothers. It was said that the practice originated early in M.38 when the entire Fifth Company, under the leadership of the magnificent Librarian-Captain Lucius, had been lost in the warp storm of the Maelstrom. The present Fifth Company still wore badges of shame and penitence, which suggested that something other than an accident befell Lucius and his battle-brothers. No records of the events survived, but the Fifth Company became known as "The Fated" thereafter, and the Secret Masters of the Chapter had seen to it that they had fewer Librarians than the other companies in modern times. Whispered rumours amongst the more puritanical Librarians of the Chapter implied that Lucius had led his company into the Maelstrom on purpose.

The sphere of energy pulsed and spun in the middle of the shaft of light, rotating above the altar and the last remnants of Rhamah's great weapon. It was traditional for the remains of a lost Librarian of the Secret Order of Psykana to be laid to rest on the altar of the Sanctorium for one hundred days. The pearl of psychic energy above the altar acted like a beacon for lost souls, and it was not unknown for the soul of a Blood Ravens Librarian to return to his body within the hundred days, as though guided by the Astronomican itself, summoned back from its exodus. A blade-fragment would not be enough; Korinth and Zhaphel knew that Rhamah was lost, despite the relentless efforts of the choir.

The telepaths and astropaths of the choir worked in shifts so that the litanies and chants never fell silent even for a moment. As one group shuffled around the smoky ambulatories, chanting and pouring their psychic energies into the swirling and radiant pearl, another two cohorts were sitting in meditation along the pews beneath the elevated apse, preparing themselves for their exertions.

Each of the psykers had been recruited directly from the Scholastia Psykana on Terra itself. The Blood Ravens maintained a special relationship with the Adeptus Telepathica and a certain number of its most talented students were reserved for service in the Sanctorium Arcanum aboard the mighty *Litany of Fury*.

Indeed, like the Inquisition and the mysterious Grey Knights Chapter of Space Marines, the Blood Ravens drew a number of primary psykers from the Scholastia Psykana as potential Librarians; without a fixed homeworld, the Blood Ravens actively sought alternative sources of neophytes and, thanks to its excellent position within the Administratum, it was able to draw on powerful and unusual pools of talent. Korinth himself had once walked the hallowed corridors of the Scholastia on Terra.

However, the Blood Ravens held another unique contract with the Adeptus Telepathica, according to which they would also take a small number of secondary psykers from the Scholastia, some of whom would undergo the Soul Binding ceremony necessary to render them into astropaths capable of transmitting messages through the warp. These psykers were then sent to serve in the Sanctorium of the *Litany of Fury*, the battle-barge of the Blood Ravens Commander of the Watch.

Although their precise function aboard that venerable vessel was shrouded in myth, legend and apocrypha, the dominant theory within the Secret Orders of Psykana was that the psykers acted as a kind of mobile repeater station for the Astronomican itself, spreading the voice of the silver choir into the farthest and darkest reaches of the galaxy. But like so many rituals and technologies, the precise origins and function of the Sanctorium were lost in the tempests of history.

As Korinth watched the perambulations of the psychic choir, he could almost imagine the huge, hollow sphere of the Chamber of the Astronomican itself, carved out of the interior of a single mountain and filled with tens of thousands of faces of the Chosen, the astropaths who literally emptied their souls into the blazing beacon of light that riddled the psychic realms throughout the galaxy, anchoring the Imperium in the divine grace of the Emperor. Despite its own magnificence, the Sanctorium Arcanum paled in comparison - it was little more than a distant echo of that glorious monument, whether or not there was any real connection between the two. Nonetheless, Korinth knew the pride that flooded the hearts of the Librarians who had been inducted into the Secret Orders of Psykana in the Blood Ravens; even an echo of the Emperor's choir was an affiliation that no other Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes could claim.

In the centre of the chanting, the incense and the ambulatories, the simple metallic fragment of Rhamah's sword glowed a faint and lonely green. Korinth and Zhaphel whispered silent prayers for their fallen brother, while the Blood Ravens and the Emperor himself called out for his soul. Even though there seemed no chance that the Librarian could have survived the rupture in the warp that had sucked him out of the *Litany of Fury*, there were very few places in the galaxy that could obscure the call of the Astronomican. If he was alive, there was still hope: neither the Emperor nor the Blood Ravens ever abandoned their own. The rites of the Summoning of Exodus would continue for one hundred days, but thereafter the choir telepathica of the Sanctorium would never cease their psychic beacon.

AS THE FIRST sun broke the horizon, whipping up the sand into a rolling storm once again, the light burst against the jewel of warpstone that was set into the pommel of my sword. It split into an infinite spray of darkly sparkling refractions, dazzling me for a moment; I lifted my gaze from its complicated depths and cast it out towards the reddening sky. My mind was calm and my thoughts had found a measure of peace after the icy hours of meditation on the mountaintop. The voices and images that had plagued my brain had been brought under control, but only in the sense that ghosts and spectres appear tamed by the daylight. Although my mind felt my own once again, it was still pestered by more questions than answers, and doubts lurked just below the surface of my consciousness, lying in wait like sharks.

There were a constellation of facts of which I felt sure: first there was *Vairocanum*, my sword, which sang into my soul like an ancient companion; then there was the armour that encased my body, which was fused so closely to my skin that it might have been an organic outgrowth of my own genetic structure; and then there was my body itself, which seemed to function so perfectly and with such incredible strength and stamina. Of all of these things I was certain. They were undeniable, physical aspects of my being, and I had found my peace with them during the cold night. Of the other things that emerged into my thoughts, I was less certain. They had less physical presence, and I was less confident about their necessary validity.

The Emperor swam through my mind with the figure of a warrior that I named the Great Father, Vidya, the Seeker of Truth. I could perceive a number of resemblances between their images and myself, and from this I had deduced that either I had been made in their image, or that I had imagined them in mine. Either way, it seemed clear that my three physical certainties supported the image of myself as a warrior - it did not seem unlikely, therefore, that I was in the service of some greater power. Given the tremendous force of their images in my mind, I supposed that the Emperor and Vidya were either the greatest of my patrons, or my worst enemies.

Of the faltering and inconsistent memory of the battle in which *Vairocanum* had been broken, I had not been able to reach any further conclusions. My deductions appeared to be contingent upon my interpretation of the role and importance of the Emperor and of the Great Father since, like them, the warriors in my vision resembled me in a number of significant ways. This left an open question in my memory-frazzled mind: if I were to encounter others like myself, would they be friends or foes?

Another contrail! The air-vessel has returned.

Even after hours on my knees in meditation, my legs sprang easily and powerfully, pushing me to my feet as though my muscles were already warm and supple.

No, this one is higher than the other one, and slower. The previous flyer had skirted rapidly over the crest of the sand storms, flittering through the lower levels of the troposphere, like a fast atmospheric craft. But the new contrail was higher, perhaps even as high as the thermosphere. Specks of flame coughed out at the head of the line of wispy cloud, suggesting that the craft was firing powerful engines or still burning as it dropped down through the thickening air of the outer atmosphere. *It's descending.*

They're going to land.

Tugging *Vairocanum* out of the rock and spinning her into my back-holster, I paused to calculate the trajectory of the landing craft and then vaulted off the peak of the mountain, jumping and sliding my way between the shelves that protruded from the sheer face of the east-facing side, skidding and skating my way through the rolling sand storm kicked up by the second and third suns as they crested the horizon.

The descent took only a matter of seconds. When I hit the ground, I was already running, hurdling the rocks and traversing the dunes, checking my bearings against the thickening contrail above me as the vessel dropped through the ozone layer of the stratosphere. The delicate white line of cloud behind the craft was developing a darker tinge, like an oily black lining. For a moment, I wondered whether the craft was in trouble. *That is no engine failure - someone inside that vessel is producing the darkness himself.* The realisation struck me suddenly, but I did not break my stride.

THE SOFT SAND of the rapidly heating desert quickly gave way to increasingly dense constellations of rocks and outcroppings. From a distance, the landscape had appeared like a smooth, sandy, gradually ascending slope, but as I moved towards the horizon, the smooth surfaces revealed themselves to be massive sandstone pavements, riddled with scars and fissures that cracked through the ground and aspired to undermine my footing. The ground in the fissures, between the slowly rising level of the stone-surface, remained at desert-level, thick with soft drifts of sand.

As I ran through the early phases of the slowly rising sandstone matrix, keeping the descending gunship in sight above me, I vaulted the smaller rocks, darting between the larger boulders and jagged stone protrusions until the lattice-like patterns of rock grew too dense and too high for me to move through efficiently.

Weaving and twisting to keep pace with the cloud-cloaked ship above, it began to occur to me that the increasingly solid and massive rock formations would provide excellent defences against a ground assault, since they would force even a small force to slow down, almost to the point of completely losing its momentum. A larger force with any kind of heavy equipment or vehicles would simply not be able to get through; nature was one of the very finest military architects. *Nature is the master of design, and knowledge is the master of nature.* The thought was self-evidently true; it resounded with pride and power. *But nature has no will, and this landscape can serve no conscious design; it defends nothing.*

After several minutes of scraping and squeezing through the diminishing cracks and crevices between the rocks that now towered over my head, I stopped running. It was as though I were trying to run through the cracked and fragmented foothills of a massive mountain, driving myself through deepening fissures that had been blasted out of the foundations by centuries of unchecked desert winds. The forest of rocky walls grew massive around me, and the clefts between them grew narrower and narrower as I pushed on, making the light dim, the temperature drop, and the darkness draw in like a mist. Looking up, I could no longer see the gunship, only the sickly wisp of its thickening contrail cutting across the brilliantly lit slit between the sheer stone walls. I wasn't even sure whether I was running in the right direction any more.

I need to get above this maze; not even the Emperor's eyes can see through stone. But the sides of the rocks were sheer and smooth, blasted into a featureless sheen by the relentless erosion of the desert wind. I ran my hands impatiently over the stone,

feeling the slight unevenness of the sandblasted surface. My fingers clawed experimentally at the sandstone, testing its density to see whether I could rip out handholds or stab them through with my combat knife. The surface crumbled under the strength of my fingers, and I realised in frustration that even if I could cut a hold it would not support my weight.

High above, I could hear the decelerating whine of the gunship as it banked and started to drop. The distinctive hiss and burn of retros firing told me that the ship was preparing to land, but the sound echoed and bounced through the stones around me and I couldn't tell from which direction it was coming from. Looking up and training my eyes against the bright bloodiness of the sky, I could see nothing other than the whirl of sickly clouds.

The frustration crept up on me like a predator. I could feel it stalking around the dark recesses of my mind, whispering and murmuring like a ghost in the shadows. *I am better than this.* The whispering voices prodded and cajoled; they mocked me, telling me that a few rocks should not be an obstacle to an Angel of Death.

I am an Angel of Death! The surprising thought was immediately comfortable in my head, resonating with warmth and pertinence. With a cry that rose from my stomach, I leapt into the air, reaching out with one hand above my head. I felt my fingers clasp the top lip of the stone, and I pulled, yanking my body up the rock face and flipping my legs over my head in a smooth arc. The ruddy, red light burst all around me as I cleared the rock-line and landed on top of the sandstone pavement. Instantly, my eyes scanned the sky and identified the distant, descending form of the gunship. Keeping my gaze fixed on the vessel, I started to mn again, jumping and springing automatically over the wide cracks and crevices in the sloping ground.

I made that jump like it was nothing. The thought tumbled about my head as I ran, distracting me and jabbing me with its significance. *That rock was more than twice my height.* My skin still tingled with an unrealised power. *I could have gone higher.*

THE SPLINTERED, SLOPING, rocky pavement suddenly fell away at my feet, leaving me standing on a sheer precipice. With my eyes still fixed on the contrail of the gunship ahead, I skidded to a halt. Before me, a wide and roughly circular valley filled the foreground. It might have been cut down into the sandstone pavement, submerged from any ground-based line of sight, visible only from the air or from the very edge of the cliff that swept around the entire perimeter.

This rocky maze might be a defensive configuration after all. I had known it all along.

The wide, crater-like valley was filled with stone structures. Hundreds of towers and monoliths rose towards the sky, and hundreds more low-rise rocks were scattered around their bases. At first glance, the arrangement looked like a town or a city, with winding streets and broad boulevards twisting around the stone structures. But on closer inspection it was impossible to tell whether the rocky protrusions were natural formations or artificial constructions. Immediately, my mind ran back through the cracks and fissures of the rocky maze beneath my feet. *What kind of architecture is this - so perfect that it seems like nature itself?*

The stone city blended into the ground, like nothing more than an unusual pattern of rocks. Straining my eyes, as I had learnt to do, I could enhance the image before me, and I could see subtle details etched into the sides of the spires and towers. There were windows and balconies. Gargoyles and images etched in relief adorned the sides of the edifices. Rather than being straight or carved into a grid, the streets were winding and latticed, after a vision of cracked rocks. They were punctuated with small constellations of rock, and I could see now that those had been subtly fashioned into breathtaking statues and dry fountains of sand.

A burst of fire from the sky brought my thoughts back to me, and I realised that I must look vivid and incongruous standing on the lip of the valley: massive, shining and blue. About a quarter of the way around the perimeter of the circular valley, the gunship flared with flame as its thrusters fired and it started the last stages of its descent. If anyone in that ship were to glance over in this direction, they would be able to see me clearly.

I ducked low, dropping down into one of the crevices that laced the ground, catching my weight with fingers that gripped the edge of the surface while my feet found purchase on a narrow shelf that jutted out of the sheer drop. From there I could still see the billowing, purpling clouds that plumed around the gunship, but I was confident that I had fallen out of their sight.

The ship rotated on its axis, hovering heavily. *They had found a place to land.* Then another thought struck me: *They couldn't see this city from the sky.* They must have been looking for it; that was the only way to explain the erratic, inefficient and cumbersome hovering.

Such architecture and camouflage - who could have lived in this place. There was no sign of movement in the city. *Is the city as dead as the desert?*

With a natural confidence and an animal strength that still surprised me, I reached hand over hand and started to move, letting my body hang from my grip on the lip of the cliffs that formed the perimeter of the city, hidden within the matrix of cracks but heading over towards the landing craft.

PRESSED INTO A fissure in the rocks, I watched the heavy gunship manoeuvre; it was searching for the ideal landing spot amongst the rocky outcrops of the barren desert landscape, as the clouds in the sky above it started to thicken. The pale pinks and sickly purples began to swirl and billow into darkness, as though a pool of black ink had been dropped into the roiling mass, spilling out of the fire-enshrouded gunship.

The ship itself was a radiant mix of startling blues and dazzling gold, hanging in the air with heavy menace, pouring flames out of its thrusters just to maintain its position and demonstrate its disregard for the force of gravity. As the sky darkened around it, I could sense the defiance seeping down from it like black rain.

And then the rain really started to fall: great, solid, black droplets of acidic moisture fell from the gathering darkness, drilling into the sand and fizzing, staining it in random speckles.

As I stared up at the gunship, half hidden in one of the dense rock formations that jutted down into the sandstone around a wide, level clearing in which I presumed the ship was about to land, the rain scraped dryly across my face. *There is no moisture in this rain - it is dry as bones.* It didn't feel like rain at all.

The gunship hovered on its thrusters, blasting jets of furious heat down into the growing inferno of the barren landscape; the flames and the intricate golden markings glittered brilliantly against the sickly, swirling dark around it. It was like a massive, cumbersome and ugly bird of prey, and I realised in that instant that it was looking for something. The analogy of the predator stuck in my mind, and I withdrew deeper into the cracked rocks, pressing my body out of sight in an attempt to avoid becoming prey for the monstrous bird. I was not sure that it had not seen me on the opposite cliff-face.

In the absence of certainty, caution is a wise man's valour. The maxim emerged naturally into my mind, and I almost smiled at its appropriateness: the gunship could have been sent by my brothers to take me home, but it could also have been something else entirely.

Uncertainty is the seed of all knowledge - it is the catalyst of investigation.

The gunship's engines thundered and whined as the vessel dropped down onto the cracked, rocky pavement. Clouds of sand erupted from the down drafts, blowing a series of cavities into the soft sandstone beneath the flaring vents. Black rain sleeted down all around it, as though it were thickening the air itself to cushion the descent of the ungainly craft. Dark clouds billowed and roiled in nauseating patterns, pluming out of the armoured plating of the vessel as though sucked into the atmosphere by osmosis. A crackling, blue energy coursed over the surface of the gunship, defining its contours in a pulsating matrix of forked lightning. Shrouded in the commotion of darkness, the vessel was all but invisible as it touched down into the mist of sand.

As the engines cut, the turmoil of dust began to settle and the black rain eased, as though the air was relaxing its efforts. The crackling lines of energy flickered and snapped, fading slightly, as the clouds of dark mist thinned noticeably.

Leaning out from my hiding place in amongst the rocks, I could see the shape of the gunship emerging from the commotion.

It's a Thunderhawk. The name was lurking at the fore of my mind, waiting to be given a voice. *That means that there are Space Marines in there.* The knowledge was based on suddenly remembered experience; I had been in such vehicles myself, many times. The memories flooded back into my mind, riddling my brain with new images of blood red Space Marines and alien worlds.

Thoughts of death and violence filled the scenes: *I am the sword of Vidya.*

As the desert wind gusted past the Thunderhawk, it blew a moment of clarity across the hull, revealing a vivid blue and gold crest that I did not recognise. Glancing down at the dirty, dented and scratched blue armour on my own arms, I tried to reconcile the memories of the blood-red Marines with the gold-tinted, blue crest on the Thunderhawk.

In my vision, the two warriors that charged towards me in amongst the daemonic fury were clad in blue power armour, but I could not tally their image with the golden dragon-serpent that swirled around the blue emblem on the gunship. Something did not feel right.

Until I have more knowledge about the intentions of these strangers, I will remain in their shadows. Knowledge is power.

The dark plumes of dissipating smoke that curdled more thinly through the waterless rain were tinged with an ineffable purple, and something in my soul stirred with primordial knowledge as I watched the unusual gases and energies intermixing.

The vapours touched something in my soul. I knew that I had seen patterns and phenomena like this before, and I knew that they represented something special or rare in the world. The oscillating purple veins seemed to whisper and hiss with esoteric knowledge, and I could feel them tugging at my mind like threads of thought. *I know this power; it is mine - it is part of me, just as Vairocanum is part of me.* I could taste it on my tongue and in my breath. An unknown spice thickened the air and fragranced it with something intoxicating. It tasted like... power.

Pressing myself back into the fissure in the rocks, standing on a ledge above a steep drop, out of sight of the landing craft and submerged in the heavy darkness of deep shadow, I stared down at my hands. They were only suggestions in the darkness, dimly lit and almost imperceptible. Normal eyes would have seen nothing at all.

I am the eyes of the Emperor. The thought rolled over and over in my head, as though generating gravity like a spinning planet. I inhaled deeply, calming my mind and drawing a fine mist of purpling vapour into my throat. Something in my mouth shifted and I could feel my physiology change subtly, but only after my lungs had seemed to lurch into flames and my eyes flashed.

There was a tiny blue spark. It seemed to flare out of the tip of my index finger. My eyes squinted sharply, but my mind reeled back to calm, as though something inside me had expected the startling event.

The little flame vanished as soon as it appeared, but I reached over and felt the fingertip with my other hand. An instant later and a sticky thread of blue energy arced across from the fingertip to the back of the other hand, creating a pool of viscous, crackling fluid that quickly grew and spread to cover my entire hand. The submerged skin tingled slightly, but it remained cool and supple. Clasping my hands together, the invigorating energy instantly spread to cover them both, and it started to send shimmering tendrils questing up my arms. I could feel the power pulsing and growing as the light consumed my body; my eyes widened with a sudden realisation and appreciation of my nature. My soul thrilled in the heart of the gathering power and I could feel my eyes begin to flare with energy.

These are the Emperor's eyes. The thought fought for prevalence in my mind, forcing out another voice that urged caution and quiet. I could feel a certain mania descending over me, engulfing my senses and teasing me with promises and visions of the future, even as the purpling and noxious cloud started to fill the crevice in the rock. The power flooded out around me, filling the cleft in the rock with a pool of shimmering blue, banishing the darkness and the shadows and rendering the space radiant, like a fragment of heaven.

But I am not alone with these powers. The memory of the black and purple smoke-enshrouded Thunderhawk jabbed into my mind, intruding on my reverie. Still dizzy from the unexpected and sudden rush of power, for a moment I could not work out whether the thought of a powerful psyker in the Thunderhawk held portents of rivalry or comradeship. Of one new thing I was certain: my world had become a much bigger and more fantastical place over the course of the last few minutes.



CHAPTER THREE: TALDEER

THE ICE-PLANET of Lorn V spun slowly like a massive comet, pockmarked and scarred by dirty patches of urban decay and huge impact craters. It was an unassuming planet, in many ways little more than a backwater. But the damage that had been stamped onto its surface suggested that its importance was belied by its unremarkable history.

As the *Ravenous Spirit* ploughed into the outer reaches of the Lorn system, Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens Third Company, the Commander of the Watch, stood on the bloody and fire-damaged control deck and gazed out at the floating debris that littered the sector. Tumbling chunks of splintered asteroids raced past the strike cruiser as it advanced towards the central planets, as though they had been thrown out from the heart of the system by a massive explosion.

In his mind's eye, Gabriel could still see the smoking remains of Rahe's Paradise, upon which he had ordered the Exterminatus shortly before. The rain of ruined rock that clattered against the *Spirit's* armoured plating echoed the hail of destruction that had befallen that ill-fated world.

Intermixed amongst the rubble and the asteroids, Gabriel noticed the crude and cumbersome hulks of ork space vessels. They were little more than massive wrecks even when fully operational, and they floated like gargantuan pieces of refuse, aimless and wretched. Huge holes had been blasted through a number of the craft. Others bore the distinctive imprints of more precise destruction: rows of small puncture wounds around the engine blocks and command decks, or delicate gashes where surgical strikes had excised the essential systems from the vast floating corpses.

Standing at the captain's side, the Father Librarian Jonas Urelie stared with undiminished awe at the scene. The veteran Librarian had been based at the outpost monastery on Rahe's Paradise for over four decades before it had been annihilated, and he had not seen destruction on this interstellar scale for even longer. Somewhere in his soul he had hoped that he would meet the end of his days delving into the forgotten history of the Blood Ravens on that isolated, volcanic and desolate world. The slower pace of life had suited him, as the atrophies of old age had started to work their decay on his ambitions as much as on his abilities. It was not a dishonourable posting: the research had been important - more important than he could possibly have imagined - and Rahe's Paradise had provided a reliable if small stream of recruits for the Chapter. However, over the last few days, Jonas's world had been exploded, quite literally.

'These are not just ork wrecks, Gabriel.'

The captain nodded. He had already seen the broken and twisted forms of damaged Imperial pattern vessels and Furies. Here and there, he even thought that he could make out the distinctive shapes of salvageable Cobra fighter gunships.

'It seems that the situadon in Lorn was more serious than we had imagined,' confessed Gabriel, turning slightly with a smile of resignation on his scarred and tired face. He knew that the Blood Ravens would have been blamed if the Imperium had suffered a loss in this system, and he also knew that any such loss would have been his responsibility. No matter what had happened at Rahe's Paradise, Gabriel had taken the *Ravenous Spirit* and most of the surviving Third Company halfway across the galaxy on a blind hunch. Captain Ulantus of the Ninth Company, with whom the Third shared the magnificent battle-barge *Litany of Fury*, had been right to disapprove of his departure, and a defeat for the Blood Ravens at Lorn would certainly have proven the straight-laced captain's point.

'There are eldar ships amongst the detritus, captain. Did you notice?'

Gabriel shook his head slightly and frowned, fatigue creasing his features. 'No, old friend.' He turned back to the large viewing screen that dominated the front wall of the control room. 'But it does not surprise me at all. Those devious aliens always seem to be one step ahead of us.'

Jonas heard the weariness in his battle-brother's voice and let his own eyes drift off the viewscreen to inspect his comrade's face. The captain looked tired and exhausted; his normally sparkling blue-green eyes were dull and lifeless, as though there were no soul enlivening them from within.

'It is not your fault, Gabriel.' Even to him the words seemed hollow and inadequate.

The captain breathed the suggestion of a smile, and his eyes squinted with what might have been pain. 'Perhaps not, father.' His tone betrayed his thoughts.

The Librarian hesitated for a moment. Although he was one of the oldest and most experienced Marines in the Blood Ravens, he was no Chaplain and he knew his limitations; he was not sure that he was properly equipped to offer counsel to his friend, even if Gabriel had asked for it... which he hadn't. The Commander of the Watch had been through more than most could bear, and Jonas was well aware of how heavily he had leaned on Chaplain Prathios for support and guidance over the last few years. On top of everything else that had happened, Gabriel now had to deal with the fact that Prathios was returning from Rahe's Paradise in a sarcophagus, entombed in the chapel of the *Ravenous Spirit*. He was not entirely dead, but he would never see normal service again - the best he could hope for would be to serve the Great Father and the Emperor in battle as a dreadnought. He was certainly of no use to Gabriel's conscience any more.

In the distance, in a close orbit around the fifth planet of the system, the massive and glorious shape of the *Litany of Fury* began to appear. It looked like a small, malformed moon cresting the horizon of Lorn V. The radiant, blood-red insignia was emblazoned across the prow and the sides of the hull; the black raven's wings were spread broadly around the glistening droplet of blood at their centre. It was a sight to warm the hearts of all aboard the *Ravenous Spirit*. All around the battle-barge, dusty detritus and shards of scrap metal spiralled down into the upper atmosphere of the planet, speckling the world with a rain of fire. It was like a victory salute, or a symphony of welcome.

'It appears that Captain Ulantus was victorious,' offered Jonas, meaning the observation to console the troubled Commander of the Watch, but conscious that it may have the opposite effect.

'Yes,' replied Gabriel, his jaw clenched as he stared out towards the magnificent vessel. 'Ulantus is an admirable Astartes.'

Jonas flinched inwardly, conscious of the note of self-reproach that struck through the captain's words; his attempt at consolation had failed completely. 'You did what you had to do, Gabriel. Had you not gone to Rahe's Paradise, we cannot know what horrors would have been unleashed on the galaxy. You did your duty, just as Ulantus did his.'

With slow determination, Gabriel turned his face away from the viewscreen, bringing his eyes to meet those of Jonas.

For a second, Jonas thought that the captain was not going to say anything, but then his eyes narrowed and flashed with a violent, electric blue: 'You will notice, father, that Lorn V continues to revolve around this star, devastated though it may be... The same cannot be said of Rahe's Paradise.'

There was poison and violence in Gabriel's voice; Jonas took an involuntary step away from the captain. He felt the furtive glances and the sudden tension amongst the serfs in the control room. Sergeant Kohath, who had been given command of the strike cruiser for the voyage to Lorn, snapped into alertness at the far side of the command chamber.

'You did what had to be done, Gabriel,' pressed Jonas calmly. His voice was lowered almost to a whisper. 'Ulantus would have done the same, had he been in your shoes.' The veteran Librarian watched the captain carefully, searching for signs that his aggression was fuelled by something other than self-reproach. The fierce blue stare held him like a magnetic field.

'He was not in my shoes, Jonas,' said Gabriel, finally dropping his shoulders and turning back to the viewscreen. 'That is entirely the point.'

Kohath and Jonas exchanged a concerned look. Neither of them were ignorant of the venerable captain's recent experiences; both of them had heard the whispered rumours about his state of mind. They shared the awkward moment in silence, turning their attention back to the space graveyard that was scrolling past the main viewscreen. Something caught their eyes almost simultaneously.

'That's a Space Marine frigate!'

'No. But the pattern is close. It looks heavily modified,' corrected Kohath efficiently. He nodded to Loren, one of the command-deck serfs whose name he had taken the trouble to memorise, but the man was already poring over a glowing terminal, checking the vessel's signature.

The main viewscreen flickered and changed, bringing up a magnified image of the side of the frigate. The heraldry was clear and instantly recognisable to everyone aboard the *Ravenous Spirit*: an emerald green, three-headed hydra. Next to the icon was the many pointed star of Chaos, with the words *Hydra Dominatus* etched crudely through its heart.

'The Alpha Legion,' muttered Kohath, giving a gruff voice to the thoughts of the others. 'Typical.'

'Did Ulantus mention anything about the involvement of Alpha Marines?' Jonas turned his question towards Kohath, since Gabriel's fixed jaw had offered no response to the discovery.

'No, nothing. But he also failed to mention the Ultramarines...' Kohath's voice trailed off as he nodded towards the spinning wreckage of the Chaos frigate. The legendary blue sheen of a battle-scarred Ultramarines crest tumbled into view as the vessel rotated. In immaculate, cursive, High Gothic, the name *Dominatus Regalis* was emblazoned beneath the Chapter icon.

There was a long silence as the significance of this discovery gradually made itself felt. The three Blood Ravens gazed at the Ultramarines frigate and tried to imagine what could have happened to permit a detachment from the cursed Alpha Legion to board and take over the vessel. It was not inconceivable that the *Dominatus* had been taken in a previous engagement between the two forces, but the emerald hydra glistened with such brightness that it might just have been painted that day.

In the back of his mind, the veteran Librarian could vaguely remember reading a secret and forbidden text, buried in the deepest vaults of the great library of the *Omnis Arcanum*, the near-mythical Librarianum Sanctorum. It was an Inquisitorial file written by the infamous witch-hunter, Inquisitor Girreaux. As far as Jonas was aware, the copy of the file aboard the venerable fortress monastery was the only copy outside the hallowed halls of the Ordo Hereticus; having such good relations with the Inquisition had a great many benefits.

The file was a record of the charges against the Ordo Malleus Inquisitor Kravin pressed by Girreaux himself after the Ikrilla Conclave, at which the impassioned Kravin had warned that, unlike the other traitorous Chaos Marines who had fled into the Eye of Terror, the Alpha Legion was recruiting neophytes from within the Imperium, just like the loyal Space Marine Chapters. Girreaux had charged Kravin with heresy, arguing that the once-respected inquisitor was in league with the Alpha Legionaries, and that he was attempting to sow the seeds of panic and suspicion into the Imperium.

More important, however, was the fact that Kravin was the only Imperial researcher to have made any significant headway into the secretive history of the Alpha Legion. Indeed, it was on his research that the Inquisition and the Blood Ravens based their understanding of the origins of that mysterious Chapter. If Girreaux was right, then the Imperium's understanding of the Alpha Legion would have to be reconsidered.

Interestingly enough, one of the only possible sources that could corroborate Kravin's stories was the extensive archives of the Ultramarines. Despite the renowned scholarship of the Blood Ravens, however, not even they had access to the archives of other Chapters of Space Marines.

In his early work, Kravin had postulated that the Alpha Legion and the Ultramarines had been at loggerheads right from the start. Alpharius, the youngest of the primarchs, had felt patronised by the righteousness of Guilliman, Primarch of the Ultramarines, even before the Great Heresy, and he had rejected the teachings of the *Codex Astartes*. Whether or not this was true, it was indisputable that Alpharius deliberately sought out Guilliman in the Eastern Fringe during the galactic civil war that followed Warmaster Horus's great treachery.

The epic battle of Eskrador was depicted on frescos and murals all over the system, since it was there that Guilliman finally slew the traitorous Alpharius. However, the battle was certainly not a victory for the Ultramarines, who were driven from the planet by the cunning of the remaining Alpha Legionaries, suffering immense losses. In some tomes of Imperial history, Eskrador was

counted amongst the greatest ever defeats visited on the Ultramarines, since they were bested by superior strategy rather than greater numbers.

As the ruined and mutilated frigate tumbled, free-floating amongst the debris on the viewscreen, Jonas sighed slightly. Given their particular history, it should be no great surprise to learn that the Ultramarines had rushed to confront the Alpha Legion on Lorn V, but he knew that this would be no consolation for Gabriel. The Blood Ravens also had a long history of conflict with these Chaos Marines; Gabriel himself had recently done battle with them on Tartarus. The Librarian could imagine the chagrin of Ulantus if he had arrived too late or if he had been forced to share the field with the Ultramarines because the *Litany of Fury's* battle company - Gabriel's Third - had vanished off to the other side of the galaxy. Gabriel would blame himself for any such shame.

'Send a message to Ulantus,' said Gabriel, breaking the silence and turning away from the screen. 'Tell him that we will be there presently, and instruct him that I will expect a thorough debriefing on arrival.' He paused for a moment. 'Also, inquire about the status of our young neophyte... We need all the recruits we can get,' he added under his breath. 'If I am needed, I will be in the chapel with Prathios.'

THE NOXIOUS AND pungent gases swirled into an eddy as the heavy doors to the Implantation Chamber hissed open, admitting Captain Ulantus into one of the most sacred and secure parts of the *Litany of Fury*. A harmony of chanting broke over him, as a wave of litanies washed out from the Chapter Priests who were ensconced within the ritually purified space. The captain paused in the doorway, touching his fist to his heart and bowing slightly at the shimmering, blood-red, stylized raven that shone down from the apex of the portal on the far side of the chamber.

A clutch of automatic defence cannons clucked and whirred as they tracked his motion from their mountings amidst the archaic runic script that ran around the portal's archway.

Ulantus inhaled deeply, taking the poisonous gas fully into lungs without concern for its toxicity. He had long since learned to trust in the functioning of his multi-lung, which filtered all the toxins out of the air before it was infused into his bloodstream. After all, it was not long ago that he had watched the apothecary insert this organ into the cramped chest cavity of Ckrius, the young neophyte who still lay broken and horrified on the surgical table in the centre of the chamber.

The youth was undergoing the most brutal transformation imaginable - the transformation from boyhood into one of the Adeptus Astartes, one of the Emperor's own Angels of Death - and he was being pushed through the process at an incredible, unnatural speed. The Blood Ravens could no longer afford the luxury of waiting years for their neophytes to grow into their implants. Their numbers were getting dangerously low, and they had to take the risk of a number of shortcuts, despite the terrible dangers inherent in such a move. Young Ckrius was an experiment in more than one way.

As the captain entered the sacred space and the door clanked shut behind him, the apothecary looked up from his work and nodded a brief acknowledgement. Although the Blood Ravens observed strict discipline at all times, apothecaries were always excused from the formalities of salutes and official greetings while they were at work; even the smallest hesitation or error might result in the death of their patient. In this case, the young man lying on the tablet was certainly more important to the Chapter than any ritual courtesies - he was a future Blood Raven. The shrouded and cloaked surgeon was a cacophony of chattering augmetic arms and chinking, glittering instruments.

A black, hemispherical Melanchromic organ was clutched into one of the apothecary's real hands while a series of mechanical forceps and automated scalpels chattered across Ckrius's scarred and bloody chest. The cluster of little incisions must have been painful, but the neophyte's face showed no signs of discomfort; next to what he had been through already, this was nothing. However, the apothecary suddenly stabbed a large metal blade into the youth's chest and swept it into a broad arc, defining a semi-circle from shoulder to waist.

Another metal hand reached down and peeled back the perforated skin, revealing the rapidly developing musculature of the would-be Marine's chest. Ckrius scrunched his eyes against the sudden, tearing pain, but did not cry out.

With smoothly choreographed motions, the apothecary pressed the Melanchromic hemisphere down into the neophyte's chest whilst drawing out threads of nerves from its slick surface. With incredible precision and dexterity, the numerous augmetic limbs positioned and fused the nerve endings into the underside of the skin-flap, hardwiring the organ into the youth's epidermis. In the future, the Space Marine's skin would act as a sensitive radiation sensor, triggering changes in the pigment and colour shielding of exposed skin to protect the Marine from atmospheric radiation, thus shielding him from the poisoning and cancers caused by solar activity or dirty weapons.

The very instant that all the nerves were fixed, the apothecary slapped the skin back over Ckrius's chest, nodded briskly towards Ulantus, and then turned away, shuffling into the shadows, leaving the terrible torn skin to heal by itself. If Ckrius could not survive this wound, he was of no use to the Blood Ravens anyway.

Captain Ulantus watched the apothecary disappear into his sanctum through a hidden door to one side of the Implantation Chamber. None except the apothecary were permitted to enter the Sanctum Medicae that adjoined the sacred room, and Ulantus found himself wondering about what the hidden space contained. He was aware that there were a number of secrets hidden within the massive structure of the *Litany of Fury*, and he permitted himself a faint smile at the irony that the investigative and scholarly Blood Ravens were expected to respect the open secrecy of these places. He knew, for instance, that two of his Librarians, Korinth and Zhaphel, were even then involved in a secret ritual in the Sanctorium Arcanum, into which none but specially initiated Librarians were permitted access. Ulantus knew that the ceremony had something to do with the fall of Librarian Rhamah during the difficult trip through the warp on the way to the Lorn system, but he had not asked any further questions.

Librarians occupied a special and revered place in the Blood Ravens, and Ulantus knew better than to pry too closely into their affairs. He knew the dangers of getting too close to the Librarian Fatherhood, and he had his suspicions about the insidious effect that such proximity was having on the Commander of the Watch. He had heard the whispered rumours about Captain Angelos's state of mind. There were so many Librarians in the Blood Ravens that Ulantus often wondered whether the Fatherhood tended to forget the potential evils and contagion of the unharnessed warp. If he had needed any reminder, then the journey to Lorn was

more than sufficient, as Rhamah had sacrificed himself defending the Implantation Chamber from the daemonic forces of the warp.

The doors hissed open abruptly, sending a shaft of light piercing through the smoky fumes from the battle-scarred corridor outside. Sergeant Saulh stood imposingly in the doorway. He had arrived back from Rahe's Paradise aboard the *Rage of Erudition* only hours before. Ulantus had sent him to bring the cavalier Commander of the Watch back to Lorn to assist in the fight against the greenskins and the eldar. Unfortunately, neither Saulh nor Gabriel had made it back in time to be of any help; but Ulantus had not even asked for a debriefing from his sergeant about the events that had waylaid them at Rahe's Paradise. His patience with the celebrated captain had worn thin, almost to the point of breaking completely.

'Sergeant?' Ulantus turned his head to greet Saulh, and the light burst into reflected stars off his grey eyes.

'The *Ravenous Spirit* has entered the system. Captain Angelos sends word that he will be here presently. He inquired after Ckrius, captain.'

Saulh's tone was unusually formal. Before his recent mission to rein in the flighty Captain Angelos, Saulh had shared Ulantus's distrust for him. However, he had returned from Rahe's Paradise with a new-found respect and faith in the Commander of the Watch: Gabriel had been right about the threat to that distant world, after all. Despite his position as Ulantus's favoured sergeant in the Ninth Company, Saulh felt his sympathies beginning to shift away from the straight-laced Captain Ulantus and towards the flamboyant Captain of the Third Company. Heroism had a knack of obscuring suspicion.

'Very good, sergeant,' replied Ulantus curtly. He turned his attention back to the youth that was strapped to the ceremonial tablet in the centre of the room. 'Inform the good captain that the neophyte is still alive. Tell him...' He trailed off. 'Never mind.'

'Is there something else, sergeant?' Saulh had not moved.

'Yes, captain. The Commander of the Watch has requested an immediate debriefing on his arrival.' Saulh delivered his line like a messenger, conscious of the effect that the order would have on Ulantus.

The captain's jaw clenched and his eyes fixed on the suffering of the neophyte. He could not believe the arrogance of Gabriel: after everything that had happened since he went gallivanting off to Rahe's Paradise, leaving him to command the *Litany* against orks, eldar, Alpha Legionaries, and even necron at severely reduced strength and without a battle company. Although he would hate to admit it, if it hadn't been for the timely arrival of a detachment of Ultramarines, the day might yet have been lost. Whatever it was that had occupied Gabriel and his Third Company at Rahe's Paradise, it had better have been nothing short of Armageddon. 'Of course, sergeant,' he said smoothly. 'Inform the captain that we will be ready for him.'

AS THE *RAVENOUS SPIRIT* advanced through the Lorn system, closing on Lorn V and the glorious form of the *Litany of Fury* that hung in a low orbit around that central planet, Jonas and Kohath remained glued to the main viewscreen on the control deck. The space debris grew thicker as the cruiser pushed deeper into the system, and the two Blood Ravens were increasingly surprised by the scale of the conflict that could have left so much wreckage and destruction in its wake.

In amongst the metallic debris and the tumbling rock, Jonas could identify chunks of greenskin vessels, Cobra fighter gunships, Fury fighters and eldar Shadowhunters. However, there were also fragments of darker material glittering like shadows in the starlight. Even as they watched, the mysterious debris continued to disintegrate and dissolve into the void.

'Kohath, can you identify that material?'

The sergeant nodded briskly, realising that the unknown shards of darkness could present a security threat. He flicked a signal to Loren, who was already performing the necessary cogitations at one of the terminals.

'We have encountered this before, sergeant.' Loren's voice seemed thin and sibilant in the company of the Space Marines. 'In the battle of Rahe's Paradise, the necron Dirge-class fighters were made of something like this.'

Knowledge was one of the Blood Ravens' great advantages: their Space Marines and serf pledge-workers were each fully educated in the vessel classifications used by the Adeptus Astartes, the Imperial Navy, and their major enemies. After the battle of Rahe's Paradise, Captain Angelos had made sure that the crew of the *Ravenous Spirit* were thoroughly drilled on the various known classes of necron vessels, including the Dirge fighters that had given them so much trouble in the battle. The material from which these fighters were constructed had eluded all attempts at analysis, a fact that was noteworthy in itself.

Kohath and Jonas turned as one.

'Are you saying that the necron have been here too?'

'That is what the data suggests, sergeant. Yes.'

The Librarian and sergeant shared a look with one another before turning back to the viewscreen, their minds racing with questions. They had gone decades without even hearing rumours about the ascension of the necron, and now it seemed that the Blood Ravens had encountered them twice in two simultaneous battles on opposite sides of the galaxy. Coincidence was the last word on their minds.

'We should inform the captain,' said Kohath, citing due process as much as opinion.

'I'm not sure that we need to disturb him now, sergeant,' replied Jonas, letting his voice deepen with the implication of significance. 'He is in the chapel preparing for his arrival on the *Litany of Fury*. He may... need a little time.' In the absence of Prathios, Jonas felt a certain paternal kinship towards Gabriel - somebody had to look out for him at this difficult time. Sergeant Kohath turned to face Jonas, meeting his eyes and staring evenly into them. Procedure was very clear in situations like this: any evidence of a new threat or information that changed the strategic orientation of a situation should be reported to the commanding officer at once. However, despite his own straightforward nature, Kohath had to concede that the *Ravenous Spirit* was no ordinary Blood Ravens cruiser. Under the leadership of Captain Angelos, the venerable vessel had witnessed the massaging of a number of conventions and procedures. The idiosyncrasies of the captain were echoed in the operations of his strike cruiser.

'Very well,' grunted the sergeant. 'We are well within range of the *Litany of Fury* and we may assume that hostilities in this system have been neutralised already.'

'Indeed,' said Jonas, flicking his eye brows to indicate the viewscreen once again. Emerging from behind the distant and monstrous, glowing gas-giant of Lorn VII, half hidden by a cluster of asteroids and ork war-wrecks, was the sleek and beautiful shape of an eldar cruiser. The long, slender craft bore the green and white markings of the Biel-Tan. Its elegant, great star-sloop, which swept out of the stern like a massive dorsal fin, was holed in three separate places, including a yawning rupture that had torn a third of it clear away. However, the worst damage had been reserved for the breathlessly curving prow, under which could still be seen the remnants of the pulsar lance and other weapons batteries. The whole front end of the vessel had been blasted away, as though it had been pummelled into submission and then destruction by a relentless and impossibly powerful barrage of fire.

'What could have caused such damage?' asked Jonas as Kohath turned to inspect the distant and improbable wreck. The sergeant didn't answer. He just screwed up his face in consternation. Whatever had happened here, he was certain that the *Ravenous Spirit* should have been part of it. No matter how much good they had done at Rahe's Paradise, they should never have left Ulantus and the *Litany* to deal with this kind of enemy on their own.

Something was moving on the other side of the wreckage. Tiny threads of purple and blue energy flickered and glistened like droplets of water cascading down a pane of glass. For a moment, Jonas wondered whether a group of powerful psykers had survived the wreckage of the eldar cruiser, shielded in some kind of miraculous psychic bubble. But as he watched, it became clear that the arcs and streams of energy were not coming from within the husk of the eldar cruiser but from behind it.

'Loren,' said Jonas calmly, remembering the name that Kohath had used. 'Can you enhance and magnify image-sector 18.K?'

The viewscreen panned and zoomed, clicking into focus once again. The image enhancers dragged the cruiser closer, pulling it in from the far side of the stellar system, and looking through the massive rupture in its dorsal fin, framing the screen with the ragged edges of the hole.

'Can we get any closer?' asked Jonas, taking a step towards the screen and peering at the poorly resolved picture. The energy trails swirled faintly, and the fabric of space itself seemed to shift and stir slightly in the surrounding area, as though something were moving just under the surface of reality.

'What do you see, Jonas?' Kohath was looking from the viewscreen to Jonas and then back again. His expression betrayed his confusion: he could not see the odd warp patterns eddying on the far side of the eldar vessel.

'I'm not sure, sergeant,' answered Jonas honestly, as Loren tweaked the focus and pushed the magnification even further. 'But it is possible that we are not entirely alone in this system... Perhaps it is time to alert the captain after all.'

One the nameless serfs jumped to attention and hurried from the control room to find the Commander of the Watch.

Even as Jonas spoke the words, an explosion of power erupted on the screen, as though massive engines had suddenly awoken and ignited. At the same time, the curdling tendrils of warp power spun suddenly into a giant and hypnotic spiral. A bulky Astartes frigate lurched out of the distant shadow of the eldar cruiser and plunged into the spinning whirlpool with its engines pouring power into its wake. For a moment it began to roll with the motion of the warp vortex, spinning along its axis like a bullet. But then, as abruptly as it had appeared, the ship seemed to explode into a rain of light and darkness. The vortex flared violently and then vanished, leaving the bright haze of light to fade gradually from the overexposed viewscreen, returning the scene to a star-riddled blackness once again.

'What in the name of the Great Father was that?' Kohath spun and started to bark orders around the control room, making sure that the *Ravenous Spirit* would be ready for battle if necessary.

'I don't know, sergeant. Loren?' Jonas turned hopefully to the serf.

'It only registered on our sensor arrays for a fraction of second, Father Librarian. Its signature was an approximate match with a Nova-class frigate.'

'Not one of ours, surely,' muttered Kohath in restrained disbelief.

'No, sergeant. The match was very rough. Whoever was in that frigate has modified it heavily.'

'Alpha Legion?' queried Kohath, looking to Jonas.

'No, I don't think so, sergeant,' answered the Librarian. 'Did you notice the psychic halo? Whoever was in that frigate managed to generate a massive warp field just before the ship exploded. I have never heard of Alpha Legion sorcerers with that kind of power. In any case, the markings on the hull were blue and gold, from what I could see.'

'Are you sure that it exploded?' Kohath sounded sceptical of the old Librarian. The sergeant may not be a psyker, but he knew space combat and he knew that no frigate in the galaxy would explode like that. 'I also noticed the touch of blue, Jonas. Perhaps it was a stolen Ultramarines vessel, like the one we saw earlier?'

THE HATCH-DOORS cracked open and released a hiss of steam into one of the landing bays of the *Litany of Fury*. The door detached and lowered like a ramp, clanking solidly against the deck, revealing the smoke-shrouded figure of Captain Angelos standing in the shuttle's hatchway. He paused, surveying the dock; it was much as he had left it before running off to Rahe's Paradise. Like then, there was nobody there to honour him; except for a few servitors, the landing bay was almost completely deserted.

'I'm sure that Ulantus has a great many things to attend to, captain,' said Jonas, pressing his hand reassuringly onto Gabriel's shoulder.

'I'm sure he does,' answered Gabriel matter-of-factly. He turned back into the transportation bay of the shuttle and inspected the assembled honour guard. It was a glittering and glorious ensemble of red and gold. The towering form of Tanthius, the imposing Terminator sergeant, dominated the interior, making it seem cramped and poorly designed. His ancient armour had been polished to the point of radiance. He was flanked by Veteran Sergeant Corallis, whose bionics gleamed brilliantly down the right side of his abdomen. Behind them was the spidery shape of Techmarine Ephraim, whose augmetic arms were glistening like silver. And finally, there was the young scout, Caleb, one of the few survivors from Jonas's Paradise squad. His chest was thrown out with a fierce pride that spoke of the honour that Gabriel had bestowed on him by including him in the escort.

There was one person missing, reflected Gabriel, setting his jaw with concentrated and stoic strength. Each of the four Space Marines had a hand clasped around one of the poles that ran along the length of an ornate sarcophagus that hovered between them. The casket was sealed against the atmosphere so that its internal environment could be carefully controlled, and the broken body within could be preserved.

This was the last homecoming of Prathios, Chaplain of the Blood Ravens Third Company.

Gabriel hesitated, forming words in his mind, wanting to say something about the scale of their loss. But there was too much. Prathios had been his friend for longer than he could remember. He had been a guide and a battle-brother, the guardian of his soul in times of darkness.

It had been Prathios, many decades before, who had first recruited the young Gabriel Angelos into the Blood Ravens, setting the great captain's feet on the road of service to the Emperor. Aside from the Great Father and the Emperor himself, there was nobody to whom Gabriel owed more. His eyes glinted as he turned back to the hatchway, and then they narrowed in disgust at the discourtesy done to the valiant chaplain by Ulantus's absence. The return of a great hero should be marked with ceremony and honour, even in a time of strife. Ulantus should have sent an honour guard, at least.

Silence filled the transportation bay and flooded down the ramp into the dock of the *Litany of Fury*. Gabriel let the silence prevail, realising that it was more eloquent than any words that he could craft. After waiting for a long moment, he strode down the ramp with Jonas, their boots resounding against the metal. Behind him, he could hear the solemn progress of the others as they carried Prathios back into the *Litany* once again.

AS GABRIEL PUNCHED the door and strode into the Apothecarion, Captain Ulantus lifted his head and turned to face him. The two Marines held each other's gaze for a second, before Ulantus nodded slightly and then turned away again. He was busy with a patient on the far side of the hall, stooping over them attentively and shielding their form from the newcomers in the doorway. Meanwhile, Gabriel twisted his head to the side and made a signal with one hand, bringing Jonas into the wide, low chamber alongside him. The others remained outside, standing in a guard of honour around the sarcophagus that bore Chaplain Prathios. Looking around the medical facility, Gabriel could understand the kind of action that Ulantus had engaged in his absence. There were Marines held in a number of the suspensor harnesses, most of the beds were occupied, and the apothecary himself was rushing from one case to the next, barking quiet instructions to his staff of serfs and servitors. With the Third Company on the other side of the galaxy, the Ninth had certainly been pulling its weight in the Lorn system.

After a couple of seconds, Apothecary Medicus saw Gabriel and hurried over to greet him, striding in between the beds and suspensors with accustomed ease. Without his long black shroud and heavy hood, Gabriel would hardly have recognised the unusually shaped Marine, in his bone-white armour with dozens of chattering mechanical augmentations protruding from various parts of his abdomen. His accomplished and confident manner was quite at odds with the dark and severe persona that he adopted during his work in the Implantation Chamber. Ritual and ceremony had a powerful place in the life of the Blood Ravens.

'Captain, it is good to see that you have returned undamaged.' Medicus bowed. 'As you can see, we have more than our fair share of damage already. The space battle was costly to all sides, captain, and we should be grateful that the planetary assault was all but over by the time we arrived. I am not sure that the Ninth could have absorbed any more casualties.'

'I can see that you are busy, Medicus,' answered Gabriel, noncommittally, but Jonas could sense the unease in his manner. 'We too have some injuries that will require your attention in due course. However, we also have a special case for you, which you will deal with before all others.'

Gabriel's tone was not lost on the apothecary. 'As you wish, Captain Angelos.'

Raising his hand, Gabriel beckoned to the Marines waiting outside. With slow solemnity, Tanthius and Corallis led the sarcophagus through the doors of the Apothecarion. All eyes turned to observe the procession. Even Captain Ulantus looked up from his business and turned to face it. After a moment, he straightened himself up and marched across the hall to join the group. Saying nothing, he simply bowed his head in respect as the sarcophagus was manoeuvred into position in the midst of a complicated array of instruments and terminals.

'Chaplain Prathios has been badly injured. The damage was beyond the skill of Techmarine Ephraim, but he was confident that it would not be completely beyond your own expertise, Medicus. Even if his body cannot be saved, his soul and gene-seed remain strong. He deserves the honour of fighting in the Emperor's service once again.' Gabriel spoke as though delivering a report: stiff and formal, without emotion. The tone was incongruous in the setting, and unbefitting the closeness of the relationship that they all knew he had shared with the chaplain. For once, the captain's defences were transparent to everyone.

'Of course, captain.' The gravity of the task was clear and heavy; Medicus bowed deeply. The Blood Ravens were beginning to suffer from a serious lack of recruits, and Medicus knew better than most that they could not afford to let Marines slip out of service if there was any way to save them. It had been nearly a decade since he had performed the Rites of Enshrinement - the irreversible process that implanted the ruined form of a Space Marine into an ancient and glorious Dreadnought, wherein he would live out his days as the half-living incarnation of the Emperor's warhammer. If there was a Marine that deserved this great honour, it was Prathios.

There was a long, respectful moment of silence before Tanthius spoke. 'And what of young Ckrius, Medicus?' The half-suppressed anxiety in his voice was stark in comparison with the massive form of the Terminator armour. 'Has our small friend made it this far?'

Medicus smiled slightly and nodded to Tanthius. The apothecary had been touched by the concern of the mighty Terminator ever since he had brought the neophyte aboard the *Litany of Fury*, saving him from the smoking remains of Tartarus all that time ago. He liked Tanthius; despite his massive size and formidable power, he was a genuine and compassionate human being.

'Ckrius is doing well, Tanthius. The Melanchromic organ has just been implanted; all the other zygotes have taken perfectly. He heals quickly, and his body has not rejected any of the implants. I am most hopeful about this one.'

Despite the solemn atmosphere of the Apothecarion, Tanthius grinned. 'That is the best news we've had for a long time, Medicus.'

'We have a number of candidates for the implantations from Rahe's Paradise,' Jonas added, remembering the youths that had fought alongside the Blood Ravens on that ill-fated planet. There was one in particular, a boy called Varjak with startling green eyes and blond braids; he might make a Librarian one day.

'Very good, father,' answered the apothecary. 'The Great Father knows that we need them.'

'We all know that we need them.' Ulantus's voice was flat and heavy, and it crushed the life out of the conversation. He was standing just to one side of the group, paying due respect to the entombed chaplain. 'Prathios was a fine Marine, Gabriel. He will be missed. I am sorry for this loss. However, we have lost many fine battle-brothers over the last couple of days, and this may not yet be the time for grieving their passing.'

Gabriel turned slowly, dragging his eyes from the sarcophagus to cut into Ulantus's face. 'Thank you for your kindness, captain.' The others felt the tension between the two captains like a storm cloud gathering around them.

'You are right, of course, that this is not yet time for grief or for honouring the dead. Perhaps it is at least time for debriefing, however. I would like to be made aware of events in Lorn during my absence.' Gabriel's voice was taut, and Jonas watched his eyes closely as he spoke, searching them for ill portents.

Gabriel?

Something flickered in Gabriel's face, as though a sudden thought had struck him.

'Captain? Are you alright?' Jonas's concern drew the attention of the others.

Ulantus eyed him suspiciously. 'Are you having another vision, Gabriel?' His question dripped with sarcasm, and it bordered on insubordination. The massive form of Tanthius flinched visibly at the slight to his captain.

'It's alright, Tanthius. I'm fine... I just thought—'

Gabriel? Is that really you?

Gabriel looked around the faces of his companions, but it was clear that none of them had heard the voice. Jonas and Tanthius returned his inquiring look with expressions of concern; they had seen Gabriel like this before, and he knew it - he also knew how it must look to them, let alone to the straight-laced and bitter Captain Ulantus.

Gabriel. Macha? Where is Macha?

Pushing the perplexed Ulantus gently aside, Gabriel walked slowly across the Apothecarion, oblivious to the confused and concerned eyes of the others burning into his back. Without realising it, he was retracing the path that Ulantus himself had taken when he had strolled over to pay his respect to Prathios. Finding himself standing over a low, white-sheeted bed, Gabriel peered down at the slender body obscured under the covers. It didn't look like a Space Marine's body.

With sudden realisation, the captain grabbed the corner of the sheet and yanked it off the bed, casting it aside into a billowing parachute. Lying on the bed, barely clothed and shivering, was the bruised and bleeding body of an eldar female. Her depthless, dark green eyes shone like pools of ocean in her pale face, while her long, fair hair cascaded roughly over her pallid shoulders. She looked petrified and wracked with agony.

Gabriel!

The thought was like a scream in his mind, deafening and painful.

'It's alright, I can hear you,' he said; his voice was calming, little more than a whisper. 'It's alright now, I'm here.'

Back on the other side of the Apothecarion, the others looked at each other and then back at Gabriel. They could not hear the thoughts of the eldar witch, and the Commander of the Watch appeared to be talking to himself. Without knowing that she was there, he had walked directly over to the alien sorcerer, as though he had been drawn to her by some invisible force.

Ulantus watched Gabriel carefully before addressing the others. He nodded slightly, as though something had just been confirmed to him. His voice was low and serious, as if he were making a concession or a confession. 'She has been asking for him ever since we picked her up. His name is the only word that we have been able to get out of her.'



CHAPTER FOUR: PRODIGY

'SHE APPEARED ON the *Litany* just as her own vessel was finally destroyed. You must have seen the wreckage of the Dragonship around Lorn VII, Gabriel? That was her cruiser. It suffered terrible damage, and we think that she was the only survivor. I'm not sure how she got aboard the *Litany*: none of the intrusion detectors sounded. Korinth found her in the Sanctorium Arcanum, when he went to prepare the sacred chamber for the rituals to mark the passing of Librarian Rhamah. The astropaths were not disturbed, and the beacon continued unblemished, but the farseer was broken and unconscious on the floor next to the central altar. He took her directly to the Apothecarion, and she has been there ever since. She has said nothing that made sense to our ears...' Ulantus hesitated, as though unsure of how his next words would affect the Commander of the Watch. 'Nothing except your name, captain.'

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully. He was kneeling at the altar of the *Litany of Fury's* chapel, gazing up at the iconography that transformed the place into a testament to the glory of the Blood Ravens and to the divine grace of the Emperor himself. The visage of Azariah Vidya, the Great Father, stared down at him from the dimly lit heights above the altar, peering into his soul and searching for the faintest fragments of doubt or moral failing.

'Do you spend much time in here, Ulantus?'

The open, confessional tone took Ulantus by surprise. He had been expecting a wall of resistance and defiance from the commander. At the very least, he had expected the great captain to respond to what he had said.

'I pay my respects and chant my prayers, as is my duty. Of late, there has been less time for the observances than I might have liked, but I am not remiss in my reverence, despite the toils of war.' Ulantus measured his answer carefully, unsure of whether he was being tested or entrapped.

Gabriel nodded again, keeping his eyes elevated. He didn't look at Ulantus, and it was almost as though he was talking to himself. 'And what does the Emperor tell you, Captain Ulantus? What strength does he give to you in return for your humility and obeisance?'

Standing behind the captain of the Third Company, Ulantus looked down at him. 'I'm not sure that I understand your question, Gabriel.'

'When you pray to the Emperor, or to our own Great Father, do they answer you, Ulantus? Do you hear them speak to you, as you hear me speaking now?' As though to emphasise the point, Gabriel lowered his eyes and turned, glancing up into the face of his comrade. 'What do they give you in return for your humiliations?'

'I do not offer humiliation, Gabriel. I offer service. When I drop to my knees before these figures, I do not do it out of fear or expectation. I do it out of gratitude and duty. Neither the Great Father nor the Emperor owe me anything - they have already given me purpose. They have put light into my life, and I strive always to be worthy of their sight in that light.' Ulantus paused, unsure of the purpose of this exchange; Gabriel had ordered a debriefing in the chapel, and this was unlike any debriefing he had ever known. 'What is this about, Gabriel?'

There was a long silence. 'I have never knelt in this chapel without Prathios, Ulantus. Never. Not once in my whole life have I been aboard the *Litany of Fury* without my chaplain.'

'We have all suffered loss, Gabriel. All of us. It is part of our burden.'

'I understand loss, captain. Better than you could ever know.' Staring up into the startling, ruby eyes of Great Father Vidya, Gabriel could see the tortured faces and screaming souls of the people of Cyrene - *his* people. He could see the life flickering out of the eyes of his friend, Librarian Isador Akios, as he withdrew his own blade from the dying body. He could see the smoking remains of three planets misting over his conscience like a dense fog of remorse and suffering. First Cyrene, then Tartarus, and finally Rahe's Paradise. He had put them all to the sword. 'I am the sword of Vidya,' he muttered, almost unconsciously.

'As are we all,' intoned Ulantus, nodding with understanding. He was not unaware of the controversial deeds of the Commander of the Watch, and he could only imagine the inner turmoil that such things could cause. If ever a Space Marine was in need of a chaplain, it was Gabriel.

'So, you hear nothing?'

'I hear the echoes of my soul, and that is enough guidance for the pure of heart.' Ulantus's answer was crisp and perfect. He might have been reading from one of Prathios's own sermons. 'For my soul is bathed in the light of the Emperor, and through it I hear his words as though they were my own.'

'You always know what is right, Ulantus? Is the will of the Emperor and the Great Father always so clear, so unambiguous to you?'

'Yes, Gabriel. Always.'

'Are there no other voices?' Gabriel stared intensely into Ulantus's eyes as he asked the question, transforming it into a challenge or a plea.

'No. There are no other voices,' answered Ulantus with level calm, meeting Gabriel's challenge without flinching.

Nodding with a forlorn silence, Gabriel turned his attention back to the altar. 'That is as it should be, captain,' he muttered almost inaudibly. 'Now, tell me of the battle of Lorn.'

'As you wish, captain,' replied Ulantus, shaking his head slightly as though to clear it and pulling himself to attention. 'Shortly after dispatching the *Rage of Erudition* to inform you of the situation, the *Litany* entered the Lorn system. It was immediately clear that the fifth planet was besieged by the greenskins. A force from the Imperial Navy was engaging its orbital fleet, and

Imperial Guard Commander Sturnn reported that that ground battle was turning a corner. It seems that we were not the first of the Adeptus Astartes to reach the scene, captain. Of course, the *Litany* laid in a course for Lorn V to provide assistance. Before we could clear Lorn VII, however, we were caught by a fleet of eldar fighters. They engaged us at range and prevented us from closing on the planet. It seems that they were concerned that we should not reach Lorn V

'Did they attempt to communicate with you?'

'No captain, they simply opened fire.'

'Continue.'

'As suddenly as they had appeared, the eldar fleet disengaged. At the same time, a report came from Commander Sturnn that the greenskins had been routed and that the battle was won. It seems that the Imperial Guard had recovered a Dominatus-class titan - a rare and almost unknown class of titan - and a squad of Ultramarines under the command of Chaplain Varnus had air-dropped a crew for it. The titan had fallen centuries before in defence of the capital city of Talorn. As you might imagine, the titan changed the tide of the battle.'

'I see,' said Gabriel, rocking back on his heels and standing to his feet. 'Your account leaves a number of questions unanswered, captain. In particular, I should ask about the eldar farseer in the Apothecarion. I would also like to know about the involvement of the forces of Chaos - we identified a number of Chaos wrecks in the outer reaches of the Lorn system.'

'With due respect, Captain Angelos, my report is not yet finished. We do not yet know the reason or extent of the involvement of the Chaos forces. Intelligence suggests that the Alpha Legion were active on the planet's surface, but little has been confirmed. At the instant that Sturnn's report came in, we identified a new threat emerging from the dark side of the planet. The eldar fleet engaged it immediately, without hesitation. On the planet's surface, Sturnn reported that a new enemy was decimating his positions. After a few moments, we identified the new assailants as...' Ulantus hesitated, as though afraid that his words might not be believed. 'They were necron, captain.'

'And you fought them in co-operation with the eldar fleet?'

'Yes, captain. It seemed the only way.'

'Indeed, it probably was the only way to ensure victory.'

'You don't seem surprised to hear this news, Gabriel.'

'We also met the necron menace at Rahe's Paradise. I am not surprised to hear that you have encountered them, but I am concerned to hear that the Blood Ravens have now fought them twice, simultaneously on opposite sides of the galaxy and in alliance with the Biel-Tan eldar. In what circumstances did the farseer gain access to the *Litany*.'

Gabriel's thoughts raced back to the image of Farseer Macha, the eldar witch-queen with whom he had unearthed the necron on Rahe's Paradise. He wondered whether she had anything to do with this. Despite the distance and the impossibility of the timing, he would not be surprised to hear that she was here.

'The space battle was fierce, and the eldar fought with an intensity and passion that even we could not match. The necron were destroyed, but the cost was great: nearly every eldar vessel in the fleet was destroyed. Just at the point of the destruction of the flagship, the eldar farseer somehow transported aboard the *Litany*. Since then, she has done nothing but ask for you.'

'You have not yet been down to the surface of the planet?'

'No, captain. There has not yet been the time or the need.'

'Did Sturnn report any archeological activity?'

'He has made no such report, but we understand that he has been in communication with the Ordo Xenos in this sector. Why do you ask?'

'On Rahe's Paradise, Father Jonas stumbled across a necron tomb under the outpost monastery as he was excavating. The eldar intervened in an attempt to prevent the ascension of their ancient enemies.'

'It appears that they did not succeed, captain.'

'Indeed not. However, I wonder whether something similar was happening here.'

'Perhaps, but the coincidences would be too staggering. We are scholars, Gabriel, and this sounds like sloppy thinking. We must research the possible connections between Rahe's Paradise and Lorn...' Ulantus let the thought slide; the most obvious connection between them was standing directly in front of him. 'Besides,' he added, 'your explanation would suggest that the affair was over now that the necron had been defeated. Why then would the farseer have boarded our vessel, and why would she be calling for you? There must be some other explanation.'

THE PHANTOM RAPTOR'S engines lay dormant as the heavily modified Nova-class frigate floated in the massive, sleek shadow of the eldar Dragonship. The dirty, las-scarred and impact-pocked vessel drifted freely, almost indistinguishable from a huge chunk of space debris in the vast space graveyard of the Lorn system.

Only on very close inspection did it become clear that the dirt, grime and damage that seemed to coat the vessel were actually intricate and winding litanies, etched into the armoured plates in ancient and near-unintelligible runes. Deep blue and golden fins and flaps extended from the hull, breaking up the outline and signature of the vessel, designed to frustrate the sensor-arrays of the false Emperor's space cruisers.

A dull psychic field shimmered around the hull, masking the psychic resonance of the once-human forms within; the entire ship was effectively a warp-blank, all but invisible to psykers. The only deliberately distinguishing features of the vessel were the perfect, circular ocean-blue crests that sported a golden dragon-serpent chasing its own tail; there were three of them spaced around the hull. No attempt had been made to hide or obscure the icons. Indeed, they appeared to be the only parts of the hull that had been recently cleaned and properly repaired.

The space around the *Phantom Raptor* seemed to shiver, as though repulsed by its presence. Icy threads of burning warp energy danced imperceptibly through the muggy vacuum of real space, questing for a touch from the ancient and potent vessel.

Something was being drawn out of the immaterium towards the powers that curdled and roiled in the hidden chambers within the

frigate. It was causing the fabric of space around it to buckle and twist, like the clashing of tectonic plates beginning to push up ranges of invisible mountains.

Enshrined in the Cyclopean Hall of Sorcery, hidden in the depths of the *Phantom Raptor*, the mightiest of sorcerers, Ahriman the Unchanging, held his hands out to the stars and beseeched them to fall into the chamber. Power crackled between his outstretched arms, filling the profound darkness of the spherical chamber with an eerie invasion of purpling light. Ahriman himself floated, cruciform, in the centre of the sphere, with energy coursing from his limbs and spiralling around him in the darkness, holding him in the epicentre of the psychically conductive space. All around him, the Cyclopean Hall seemed to open out to the heavens: although the chamber was constructed at the very heart of the *Phantom Raptor*, protected behind dozens of metres of armoured plating and hidden within a labyrinth of spiralling corridors that swept around it in ever decreasing circles, it was as though there were no walls at all.

The stars glittered directly into the Great Cyclopean Eye as Ahriman revolved slowly in its centre. It was as though he were suspended directly in space, the *Phantom Raptor* little more than a ghost around him, merely a psychological comfort. He could see the wreck of the eldar Dragonship looming massively, dominating the view from one side of the chamber but somehow within it. Beyond it, despite being blocked by the form of the alien vessel and out of sight, the sorcerer could see the shape of an Astartes cruiser, emblazoned with a blood-red raven.

He knew that they could not see him - he was a phantom in the darkness, at one with the tempest of warp and space that roiled around him, just beyond visibility. He knew that the arrogant Space Marines would think the *Phantom* was little more than another chunk of space junk - they had neither the wit nor the intellect to understand or recognise his presence, let alone his scheme. Like the Emperor himself, all those millennia ago, his intellectually-stunted, retarded Marines knew nothing of the true power of the warp.

Ahriman's eyes widened and burned. Flames of warpfire flickered and lapped from his eyelashes before streams of energy burst out of his eyes and mouth. The thickening, lashing tendrils of fiery power quivered and thrashed like high voltage cables in a storm. They latched onto a shape in the unseen dimensions of the immaterium, grasping it and crackling around its form, digging roots into it like daemonic maggots into pallid flesh.

The effort of the sorcery tore at Ahriman's soul, searing his mind with symphonies of agony. He roared with terrible ecstasy, letting the pain fill him, ripping gashes into his very being and riddling him with the daemonic substance of the warp itself; he was becoming one with the immaterium. At the edge of hearing, he could just discern the dull, rhythmic chanting of his cabal of sorcerers, who knelt in a deferential and dedicated ring around the hall, invisible in all but voice to Ahriman in its heart.

Their voices swirled and congealed, stirring through the Eye like a wisp of colour in an iris, giving strength and stamina to the master sorcerer as he fought with the currents of the warp. He could see the galaxy shift around him as the stars started to spiral in towards the Cyclopean Hall - the Great Eye of Ahriman.

His tendrils of warp energy were now firmly secured around their target, and Ahriman wailed with effort as he dragged the edifice through the immaterium, tugging and yanking and hauling it towards the material realm. He could feel its resistance to his power. The eldar had rooted it with artistic precision, and he strained against its incongruous solidity in the immaterial environment. It felt like a burning poker in his hands, and he could feel the outpouring of power from his body begin to singe and blister his skin. Beyond visibility, daemonic creatures started to swim and writhe, responding to the sorcerer's whispered prayers, promises, and threats. They descended on the ancient eldar aberration, tearing at it with unreal claws and pummeling it with their feral forms. The realms were merging around him, even as he floated and revolved, imperial and impervious, untouched and majestic in the Cyclopean Eye.

All at once, the chorus from the cabal soared to new heights and Ahriman thundered his defiance, throwing the last reserves of the culminated power of the Prodigal Sons through the rupturing interface between the realms. The daemonic beasts of the warp brayed in symphony, conjoining with the supreme effort of the master sorcerer. In the fury, Ahriman felt the webway portal give way, twisting around under the pressured onslaught, and he roared with the very last of his strength, bringing the portal closer and closer through the immaterium until he could see it flickering on the edge of reality just beyond the prow of the *Phantom Raptor*. Consciousness started to ebb from Ahriman's mind. He could feel his grip on the arcane, alien structure beginning to slip. But he held it fast, supporting its ethereal weight on the shoulders of millennia of research, scholarship, wisdom and sorcerous power. He gasped the last words of ancient and agonising incantations, bringing the daemonic host to a final level of frenzied devotion. He grasped the eldar structure with his unbreakable, disciplined will, and anchored it for a fraction of a moment with the gravity of his overburdened and dark soul. He had waited for this for too long. He had searched for centuries for this chance. Nothing, not the eldar, not the necron, and certainly not the stunted Adeptus Astartes, would take it away from him.

As his eyes flared and his mouth poured rivers of cacophonous power into the unreal space of the Cyclopean Eye, he felt the *Phantom's* engine come on line. In his mind, he could see the flowing lines of the sensor arrays from the Astartes cruiser flash round to scan the sudden energy source. But then the *Phantom's* engines fired and roared, and it lurched forward into the flickering, shimmering webway portal that Ahriman held open with the raw power of his will, supported by the teeming daemonic host that pleaded for his touch. As the frigate plunged through the rupture in the material realm, it seemed to explode in all directions at once, and Ahriman watched the show like a spectral shower, grinning in the heart of his own Great Eye.

THE YOUTH WAS almost unrecognisable from the energetic and overconfident Guardsman that Tanthius had met on Tartarus. His eyes had lost the glistening sheen that had characterised his desperate fight for survival against the greenskins on his homeworld. Tanthius smiled as he recalled the way that the impetuous and foolhardy boy had dropped down off the roof of a tank onto the back of an ork, determined to drive his pathetic knife into the brute's neck. Such passion. Such courage. He had seen the glint in Ckrius's eyes even then, but now it was gone. Instead, those eyes sparkled with a deeply buried suffering; he was old before his time. His body, once strong and fit like the best of young men, was now scarred and broken, run through with implants and augmentations. A web of tubes and wires was punched into his abdomen, limbs and head, pumping him full of chemicals and

toxins, some designed to enhance his development, others designed to test his defences against poisons. He could die at any time, and he probably wanted to. Without the hypno-conditioning that was pouring constantly into his mind, his brain would have given up the fight ages before. Meanwhile, his muscle bulk had grown beyond normal proportions, but the growth was not yet even, so he appeared malformed like a mutant or freak.

His transformation was happening very fast, which heightened the risks of mutation and implant-rejection. Uneven muscle development was the least of Ckrius's worries.

As Tanthius watched in silence, the apothecary carefully cauterised the wound that he had opened up under Ckrius's jaw, where the little neu-roglottis had been implanted. Thinking that the neophyte was making good progress, Medicus had decided to introduce the poison-detector at the same time as the oolitic kidney, since the two organs worked in combination and inserting them together made it less likely that they would reject each other later on.

Nonetheless, making two implants at the same time was unusual, particularly at such an advanced stage of the neophyte's transformation. It was even more than usually traumatic for the patient. In the early stages, organs such as the ossmodula and biscopea implants were sometimes introduced at the same time as the secondary heart, but such a process was as much a test of the resilience of the neophyte as a surgical necessity.

At the start of the process, the apothecary just needed to know whether the aspirant had the constitution to see it through. Towards the end, however, a new tenderness and compassion entered Medicus's manner: not only had he caused and witnessed the incredible suffering of the neophyte, and hence had developed a measure of compassion for the youth, but also the loss of an aspirant Space Marine at this late stage of the process would be costly both in terms of resources and time. It took time to grow the implants. It took skill and effort to implant them. Very soon, the progenoids themselves would be implanted; this was no longer a time for needless waste.

Medicus checked the wound one last time and then, satisfied that it had healed already, he turned and left the Implantation Chamber, leaving Tanthius alone with the semi-conscious Ckrius.

'Do you wish you were dead?' Tanthius's voice was low and gravelly. He whispered in through the ceremonial, noxious gases that wafted around the chamber, letting his words reach Ckrius without shocking him. But even from the edge of the chamber, the Terminator sergeant could see the neophyte's eyes widen at the sound of his voice. This was probably the first time that anyone had addressed him directly since he was first strapped to that tablet. Since that fateful day, when Tanthius had deposited him on the *Litany of Fury* as the rubble of Tartarus hailed against its massive hull, Ckrius had merely been an experimental body, little more than a slab of meat.

Taking a couple of steps closer to the tablet, Tanthius repeated himself. 'Ckrius, do you wish you were dead?'

That was his name. He remembered it now. They had called him Ckrius once, before it had all begun. Would they call him that again, once it was all over - if it was ever all over?

'I know you can hear me, son. I remember the voice that I heard when I was strapped down on that tablet. It is a voice that I will never forget, though it is now forever silenced... forever only in my memory.'

'I... I can hear you.' The voice rasped, like glass being dragged through sand. 'When will it... end?'

'It will not end, young Ckrius.' There was no point in lying to him now. 'Do not trust to hope that the pain will stop. But one day you will learn to embrace it. It will burn into your soul in every waking moment, reminding you that you are alive, and that you live for only one purpose. You are being remade to serve that purpose fully, with your entire being, as an Angel of Death.'

'I... I... can't.' The wretched voice grated and hissed as blood gurgled in his raw, sliced throat. As though to demonstrate his desperation, Ckrius attempted to flex his bulging arms, but they merely shuddered and convulsed, like a corpse twitching with electric current. He had no control, and his body was not yet formed. He could no longer even strain at the shackles that gripped his wrists and ankles.

'Do you wish you were dead?' asked Tanthius again, taking the last step to bring himself next to Ckrius's feverish face. 'I can end it now, if that is your wish. I can end this suffering.'

The massive Terminator sergeant loomed over the neophyte, staring calmly down into his crazed eyes. 'We are not savages, Ckrius. You give yourself willing to us, or we do not take you at all. Know this: this is the last choice we will ever ask you to make. Service is a matter of choice, but it offers no choices.'

Ckrius's eyes twitched and shook in their sockets as hysteria wrestled with his reason. The sergeant had seen this before, and he could remember the frenzy of thoughts that were assailing the youth's tortured, damaged and mutilated mind. At this point, the neophyte was beyond rational thought - the human brain can only withstand so much pain and suffering before its grip on reason and sanity grow too weak to be meaningful. But it was not a rational answer that Tanthius was waiting for; he was waiting for a cry from this boy's soul. He wanted to hear the word of the Emperor touch this youth's lips. With all of the architecture of rational thought stripped away, Tanthius wanted to know who young Ckrius really was after all.

All Blood Ravens were asked to make this decision at this point in their transformation. It was called the "Constitutio Fatum" - the fateful choice. Long and tortuous justifications and rationalisations of this principle filled hundreds of shelves in the Librarium Sanctorum aboard the glorious fortress monastery of *Omnis Arcanum*. The orthodox treatise, penned originally by the Great Father Azariah Vidya himself, argued that this moment of choice represented the only instant in a human being's life when his soul could be subjected directly to the light of the Emperor.

Stripped of dignity, physical integrity and mental fortitude, the only thing left for a mind was truth. According to tradition, the question should be posed by the veteran Blood Raven with the closest bond with the neophyte. In most cases, this meant the chaplain. However, Tanthius had discovered Ckrius on Tartarus; he had brought the youth aboard the *Litany* and had watched over his progress. The Terminator sergeant was the closest thing to a father that Ckrius had in the Chapter.

If Ckrius's soul was found wanting, despite the gene-compatibility and resilience of his body, Tanthius would kill him. In the past, a number of Librarians in the Blood Ravens had argued that this was a waste of an able neophyte. They pointed out that most Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes require no such choice from their aspirants - indeed, some Chapters actively coerced gene-

compatible neophytes, effectively forcing them to become Marines, by which time their fates were sealed. To discard a neophyte at Ckrius's stage of transformation was costly, foolish, and unnecessary.

But the Great Father had been clear and adamant. No matter how low Blood Ravens' numbers became, and no matter how desperately the Chapter needed to recruit new battle-brothers, they should never compromise on the purity of their neophyte's souls. It was subsequently suggested that Vidya had been so adamant about this because of the special nature of the Blood Ravens: they were scholars and researchers, who spent much of their time immersed in the forbidden and secret teachings of ancient times or alien species. Only the purest of heart would be able to keep the grace and light of the Emperor always in mind, even in the face of the greatest temptations and the most powerful of knowledge. Vidya's "Constitutio" helped to ensure that the Blood Ravens would not slide into heresy.

'Well? Shall I end it for you now?' Tanthius's eyes glistened with a mixture of pity and resolve.

There was a long silence, broken only by the gurgling, rasping breath of the neophyte. 'No! The choice is not mine to make. I am the sword of Vidya.'

A faint smile of relief creased Tanthius's features. 'As you wish, young Blood Raven.'

THE SAND STORM had thinned to little more than a shifting mist of dust since the Thunderhawk had touched down onto the cracked, rocky slope. The gunship's thrusters had been cut, leaving only the wind to whip the sand up from the desert, disturbing the layer that shifted constantly over the barren rock. Even the wind was broken by the ring of tors and boulders that surrounded the landing site, offering the vessel a little cover from the elements and from any prying sensors that might have been trained around the outskirts of the strangely deserted, alien city that dropped away into the bottom of the circular valley to the east. The rocky cleft in which I had pressed myself offered me some measure of cover, and I was reasonably sure that whomever was inside the Thunderhawk would not be able to see me directly. Whether or not they had sensors that would be able to detect my presence, I had no idea.

If they are looking for me, then I will be found. On the other hand, if they were here for some other reason, then I was confident that they would not notice.

It is only the rare mind that notices the unexpected.

The maxim was just sitting there in my thoughts, like the face of an old friend. As soon as I saw it, I recognised it as the first truism of the Scholastia Librarium, where I was once trained in the ways of knowledge and scholarship. Images of great columns aspiring into majestic, illuminated vaulted ceilings, soaring above endless rows of document stacks blossomed into my mind.

A pang of nostalgia gripped my heart, and I realised that the librarium was important to me, as though it was an essential part of my being. *Strip away the confusions of knowledge and you are left with only one thing: the truth.*

A flicker of genuine pain troubled my soul at the thought of having forgotten even that place. It was like forgetting home. *Home? I had forgotten that too.*

A loud metallic crack drew my attention back to the gunship in the clearing. The prow of the Thunderhawk had shifted forward, revealing a wide joint all the way around its nose. A ring of smoke or steam hissed out of the gap, circling the vessel like a vertical halo before dissipating the wind. The nose creaked and then tilted back, pivoting along the roof-line, revealing the mechanical grind of a ramp dropping down to the ground from within. It was like watching a massive metal beast snarling.

As I watched, a dark, sickly, nauseating cloud of emotion seemed to plume out of the interior of the vessel. It was hardly visible, except as a slight haze disturbing the sand-filled mist. But I could feel it emanating briefly from the open prow of the Thunderhawk.

Instinctively, my mind jumped into an alertness that took me momentarily by surprise. *I have defences against this thing.* The realisation was accompanied by a new clarity in my sight, as though my mind was somehow filtering out the chaotic whirl of sickening energy that ran out of the gunship like an ocean spray.

Striding down the ramp in the wake of the invisible energy flows, his heavy boots resounding solidly against the metal, was a magnificent and formidable figure. He must have stood over two metres tall. Like me, he was adorned in an ornate and breathtaking suit of blue power armour. Like me, he had no helmet, although a great gold and blue crest rose out of his shoulders framing his head from behind. Nonetheless, like mine, his face was exposed to the abrasive sand. However, from my hiding place in the rocks, it seemed that the mist of sand parted around him; not a single grain appeared to touch his oddly shifting skin. I strained my eyes, employing the trick of optical enhancement without giving it a second thought. However, despite being only fifty metres or so away from the stranger, I could not make out his facial features. It was as though he didn't have a real face at all. His skin seemed to shift and swim before my gaze. It was at once both pale as porcelain and dark as ash. It gave him an immense gravity, as though the entire planet was suddenly drawn into orbit around him, but it also made him seem entirely translucent and insubstantial. More than that, however, I found that I simply couldn't look at his skin for long enough to see it properly; my eyes kept slipping off his form, drawn into his own eyes like matter into dying stars. And they were such eyes! I could see no eyeballs; there were only complicated, intense blue infernos, flickering and spitting like shards of warp fire.

As the awesome sorcerer reached the bottom of the landing ramp, he paused and looked around, surveying the landscape as though he were drawing it all into his thoughts, mapping the scene in his head, possessing it like a creation of his own. Behind him, in the shadows of the interior of the Thunderhawk, I could hear the clattering of other people preparing to disembark. Then, after a few seconds, a squad of blue- and gold-armoured warriors strode down the ramp, each carrying assortments of heavy kit and arcane equipment. Like the awesome sorcerer himself, each of the Marines sported elaborate crests, which plumed up behind their exposed heads. None of them appeared to have helmets, but there was something disconcerting about all of their faces, as though they were lingering on the very edges of reality.

The squad parted around the sorcerer, like a stream rushing around an immovable boulder, and then set to work erecting machinery and emplacements in front of the Thunderhawk, as though establishing a camp. Meanwhile, those inferno-eyes

continued to scan the surroundings. As I watched them sparkling and sweeping the rockscape, a realisation struck me. *He's looking for me. He knows I'm here!*

As soon as the thought leapt into my mind, the sorcerer turned his head directly towards where I was hiding, bringing his flaming blue eyes straight into mine until I thought that I could feel the heat of his warp-fire burning into my irises.

I stepped back instantly, pressing my back harder against the rocky resistance of the interior of the cleft behind me, dropping my face into the shadow of the crevice. Although the spitting fires of his eyes had seemed to settle on me, I was not sure whether he had seen me. Something in my mind stirred, telling me that he knew I was near, but I could not tell whether he had yet spied me with the mundane realities of sight.

The trained mind sees things that cannot be seen: the Emperor's eyes are beyond nerves and flesh.

My mind raced: should I reveal myself to these strangers? There was something familiar about them, but my soul did not rejoice in their image. There was no sense of nostalgia, no sense of homecoming when I had finally seen the magnificent sorcerer striding out of the Thunderhawk. My intuition told me that these were not my brothers, even while my reason railed against me, telling me that I could recognise at least something of myself and my nature in the stature of these impressive warriors: if there was nobody else on this lost world, then I would be foolish to let these strangers pass. *But there are things more important than finding a home: finding truth. It is better to perish in truth than to live in delusion.*

I peered out from the crevice once again, still unsure about how to proceed. What had I expected to do once the gunship had landed? Suddenly the whole enterprise seemed foolish and ill-considered. Why had I followed the landing craft if I had not wanted to make contact with its occupants? If only my mind would clear and return to myself - I needed my memories now, perhaps even more than I needed *Vairocanum*.

The towering figure of the sorcerer was striding away from the rapidly constructed camp, marching directly towards my position but leaving his battle-brothers behind him. His eyes flared ineffably, like miniature galaxies swirling hypnotically as he approached.

Hidden in the shadows of the cleft, I carefully drew my sword from its holster on my back, clasping it into both hands in readiness. I would not go out to meet this sorcerer, but I would be ready for him if he made the mistake of trying to root me out like an animal. *I am the sword of Vidya.*

Even as I watched, I saw a sudden flicker of red light over on the other side of the clearing, beyond the approaching stranger. The sorcerer stopped instantly, turning his head away from my position, back around towards the apparition. Another light appeared, shimmering like a multicoloured flame. It danced for a second and then vanished. By now, the rest of the sorcerer's squad had noticed the unusual patterns of light; they were abandoning their work on the camp and reaching for their weapons.

With emphatic slowness, the sorcerer turned his warpfire eyes back in my direction. For a long moment, I thought that he was staring straight into my face. But then he turned briskly and strode back through his camp, hefting a long, heavy black staff from an ornate case that had been laid across a makeshift altar for him. As soon as he clutched it into his hands, the staff burst into life, sizzling with unspeakable energies.

The other warriors fell in behind their leader, and they broke into a run towards the location of the multicoloured, flickering lights. After a second or two, they all opened fire with their weapons, unleashing a relentless and furious barrage into the rocks, shredding them into explosive hails of shrapnel and masonry.

The strange, unearthly flickering lights vanished almost immediately.

Taking advantage of the distraction, whatever it was, I eased myself out of the crevice and darted across to the cusp of the valley, sheathing *Vairocanum* before dropping off the cliff and spinning to catch myself on the lip with my fingertips. Quickly spotting a ledge beneath my feet, I let go of the cliff and dropped a few metres onto the stone shelf below. The impact of my boots rang hollow, as though there was nothing beneath the stone ledge but air.

Cut into the cliff-face under the shelf was a shallow cave, obscured completely from above by the ledge itself. Gripping the lip of the ledge, I kicked into a handstand and let my weight roll me over in a slow somersault. Pivoting around my grip, I spun down into the cave, hitting the uneven rocky ground and rolling to stop against the back wall.

He will not look for me here. Safety embraced me like a cloak of shadowy anonymity. As I sat back against the dry wall of the cave, hidden in the sheer cliff-face that dropped down into the strange, circular valley, my mind leapt back up to the mysterious sorcerer in the clearing above me. *What caused those lights? Their timing was too perfect - they were designed to give me chance to escape.*

Looking out of the cave mouth, I could see the ancient, alien city below me. It may have been a trick of the light, as the three suns started to drop once again over the distant horizon and their beams were refracted into spectrums by the rock formations around the crest of the valley, but I thought that I could see a faint flickering of multicoloured lights dancing into the outskirts of the city. For a moment, the flickering motion paused, and I thought that I could discern the nearly-human shapes of a group of lithe figures. They appeared to be checking behind them, perhaps to ensure that they were not being followed into the city. Then they vanished into a blur of lights once again.

Perhaps the sorcerer and I are not alone on this planet after all. It seems that I was not the only one tracking that Thunderhawk.

IT HAD BEEN many years since Father Librarian Jonas Urelie had walked through the ornamental portal of the Sanctarium Arcanum. Indeed, it had been several decades since he was last aboard the battle-barge *Litany of Fury*. Before entering the sacred chamber, he paused under the lintel, on which was engraved a single raven's wing, its tips dripping with blood. Inhaling deeply, he tasted the incense-clouded air and let it ease into his bloodstream, allowing the rhythmic and elevated chorus of astropaths, telepaths and mystics to intoxicate his senses for a moment. During his time on Rahe's Paradise, the father Librarian had neglected the ceremonial aspect of his nature; in relative isolation, it had been all but impossible to maintain the range of rituals that defined the routine of the Blood Ravens in normal circumstances.

There had been a time, long ago, when Jonas had relished the ritualistic significance of this hallowed space. Indeed, when he had first been elevated to the rank of father Librarian, he had been given responsibility over the rituals and ceremonies of the Secret Orders of Psykana. In many ways, this was a homecoming for the aging Blood Raven, and his deep breath on the doorstep filled him with mixed emotions.

Smiling faintly, the Librarian stepped into the Sanctarium, letting the portal drop shut behind him. He heard the once-familiar grinding of heavy bolts clanking into place, and he knew that a complicated array of purity seals was also clicking into position around the perimeter of the door. The Sanctarium was almost impregnable to physical and psychic attacks; not even the Implantation Chamber itself, where the Blood Ravens stored its precious gene-seed, could boast defences of the same magnitude. However, its best defence was its secrecy: potential enemies of the Imperium would have no idea that such an unusual and important chamber existed hidden within the depths of an Adeptus Astartes battle-barge. They would not be able to detect its presence with any kinds of sensors or psychic channels. Only the all-seeing eyes of the Emperor himself could see the gleaming, silverying pearl of energy that rotated in the centre of the hemispherical chamber.

Jonas knew that the purpose of the pearlescent Beacon Psykana was far from certain. It was one of the many innovations of the Great Father, Azariah Vidya, who had arranged for it to be built several millennia before. Like so many of Vidya's designs, however, their real purpose and meaning had been lost in the ensuing centuries, buried beneath piles of treatises and tracts by lesser scholars who thought that they could interpret the actions of their Great Father. One of the great travesties of the Blood Ravens Chapter was the over-profusion of mediocre and confusing scholarship that obfuscates more than it reveals. Such was the price the revered Chapter paid for its emphasis on the importance of scholarly pursuits.

Jonas himself had taught a number of young Librarians that the pearl of pure psychic energy in the Sanctarium Arcanum was linked in some way to the Emperor's silver choir: the Blood Ravens had been entrusted with a sacred and unique mission to spread the pristine symphony of the Astronomican throughout the farthest reaches of the uncharted galaxy.

During his time of contemplation and research on Rahe's Paradise, Jonas had begun to realise that this explanation was probably unfounded. In a long and heated debate with Sister Senioris Meritia, of the Order of the Lost Rosetta, Jonas had realised that the effectiveness of the Astronomican rested on the fact that it was absolutely stationary - or rather than its position marked the absolute point of the centre of the Imperium at any one time. The Astronomican called out to all the souls of the Emperor's chosen, guiding them back into the sight of the Emperor himself. If the Beacon Psykana was really a booster for this signal, then its constant and relentless perambulations around the galaxy would destroy the purpose of the Astronomican completely.

Nevertheless, it remained true that Vidya had sealed a number of unusual and highly privileged contracts with the Adeptus Telepathica in order to maintain the beacon. Whatever it was, it was obviously something that the very highest authorities on Terra itself wanted to see maintained.

One theory that Jonas still found plausible was that Vidya had designed the Beacon Psykana to provide a light for the lost Fifth Company - the so-called "Fated" - who vanished into the Maelstrom three thousand years before. However, the Fifth Company had been lost nearly a thousand years after the death of Vidya. Any such purpose for the beacon would therefore require a foresight so immense that it seemed unlikely that even a great Librarian of the immense learning and power of Vidya could have planned for it. Unlikely and impossible are allied, but they are not identical.

Like so many things that Jonas had encountered in his long and honourable career, he had to confess that the truth of the Beacon Psykana had probably been lost to the Blood Ravens long ago. Perhaps the Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica on Terra would remember its real purpose, but Jonas suspected that even he simply placed his faith in the ongoing echoes of historical brilliance: in the end, historical scholarship was about repeating and maintaining the practices of the past, and the Beacon Psykana was exactly one such practice.

In the absence of certain knowledge about its real purpose, everyone worked to maintain it as though it were of essential and vital importance for the Chapter and the Imperium. Meanwhile, the Librarians of the Blood Ravens concocted numerous hypotheses about its value and function.

It was another disadvantage of a scholarly nature that Jonas and the Blood Ravens more generally found it harder to accept conventions on faith than just about any of the other Chapters. During the epic battle of Geadion Secundus, in which the Blood Ravens and Black Templars had repelled a massive force of Thousand Sons Chaos Marines, Jonas had been amazed and repulsed by the mindless, unquestioning and simple way in which his allies had embraced the Imperial dogma. He had nearly come to blows with the Templar Chaplain Broec when Broec had accused him of heresy with his persistent questions and doubts. The self-righteous and unreflective chaplain had gone so far as to accuse Jonas of being little better than one of the Thousand Sons themselves, searching for arcane knowledge with no respect for the higher callings of faith or belief.

'Father Urelie.' The familiar voice made Jonas look up towards the elevated apse on the other side of the altar. 'You are most welcome here, once again.' It was Korinth. The Librarian, who had once been a student of Jonas, was standing on the apse in support of the choir for the ceremony of the Summoning of Exodus. Jonas recognised the positions immediately; he had conducted this ritual himself many times. Too many times, he reflected.

Korinth was not alone. A second Librarian stood next to him, deep in contemplation and reverence, long grey hair cascading over his shoulders. Jonas did not recognise him, but presumed that he was Yupres Zhaphel, one of the most recent additions to the cadre of the Orders Psykana. Despite his youth, his reputation was already formidable. Jonas had heard the rumours of the unusual force-axe that Zhaphel used in combat - it was said that he had recovered it from a research expedition on the planet of Dorian Prime, a world that had been lost for millennia behind the veil of a vast warp storm and whose residents, once normal human citizens of the Imperium, had become stunted and malformed by the bizarre gravitational effects of the storm. Their metalwork was beyond compare in the known galaxy, but the planet had been lost to the warp once again before their resources could be properly exploited by the Blood Ravens.

'Librarians Korinth and Zhaphel,' nodded Jonas, greeting them as old friends in the intimate manner appropriate to fellow initiates into the Order Psykana. The veteran Librarian made his way around the ambulatories, circumventing the silverying pearl of energy

in the heart of the chamber, and climbed the polished stairs up to the apse, where he bowed briefly to the Librarians. 'The Summoning of the Exodus does you both honour,' he said, startled slightly by the mismatched eyes of Korinth, one ruby red and the other black as pitch; every time he looked into them, it was like the first time. 'It demonstrates your regard for your battle-brothers.' In the back of his mind, Jonas wondered whether this was the only value of the ceremony and whether it was in fact all that Vidya had in mind when he instigated it.

'It honours neither of us,' replied Korinth, returning the bow. 'The honour belongs to Librarian Rhamah, who was lost defending our heritage. The ceremony is for him, not for us.'

Jonas nodded in acknowledgement; that was a suitable response. 'How did he fall, brothers?'

'During the warp jump into the Lorn system, the *Litany* was assailed by daemons. Somehow they breached our Geller field and penetrated the hull. Rhamah fell defending the Implantation Chamber and our gene-seed. It is to him that our survival is owed.' Korinth's report moved from pride to hesitancy.

Jonas nodded solemnly, showing his appreciation of the deed of Rhamah. 'You have reason to believe that he can hear the Rites of Summoning?' As he asked, the father Librarian looked down towards the altar and saw the sword fragment that lay on it, glowing an eerie shade of green. 'Is that all that remains of him?' It was certainly unusual to have so little, and to be left with something that seemed so alien.

'The manner of his fall was... singular,' replied Korinth carefully, studying the features of his former teacher. 'We believe that he is lost, but not that he is dead.'

Jonas raised an eye-brow and turned back to Korinth.

'At the moment of greatest peril, Rhamah plunged his blade into the fabric of space and tore it asunder, opening a breach into the warp through which he fell, dragging the thirsting tendrils of daemons with him. When the tear sealed itself behind him, the daemons had vanished and that blade fragment was all that was left of our brother.'

Jonas gazed evenly at his one-time student. 'As you say, his fall was indeed singular. Let us place our faith in the Great Father that his soul can still hear the call of our beacon.'

DARKNESS CROWDED THE Apothecarion, drawing in around the beds like heavy curtains of privacy, leaving the wounded and the sick to suffer without humiliation. Whenever Medicus and his staff of specialist servitors were not busy at work, the lights were dimmed to the point of darkness for the sanity and recuperation of the patients. Rest was not something that came easily to Blood Ravens, whose ability to sleep was thwarted by a defect in their cataleptean node. Hence, peace and darkness was as much as they could hope for, even whilst recovering from injury.

Gabriel picked his way between the beds carefully and silently, trying not to alert anyone to his presence, and doing his best to avoid the motion sensors that would trigger the glow-globes in the low ceiling. Despite the darkness, Gabriel's well-honed eyes could make out nearly everything in the expansive room, and he recognised many of the faces in the beds that he passed. So many Blood Ravens had been injured in the battle of Lorn. None of them were sleeping, but most had closed their eyes. Even so, Gabriel could see their reactions twitching as their sensitive ears detected his motion in the room - they would assume that he was Medicus.

A few of the open eyes were startled when they saw who it was that was creeping in between them; none had expected to see the Commander of the Watch slipping so stealthily through his own ship. One or two attempted to climb out of their beds to stand to attention, but Gabriel calmed them, pressing his hand to their shoulders and making them lie down again. This was not the time for such ceremony.

Gabriel!

The thought was like a shout in the dark, but Gabriel knew that he was the only one who could hear it. He found the eldar witch's bed and crouched down next to her pillow. She was writhing in pain and sweat, only half covered by the blood-soaked sheets that had been twisted and wrung with moisture. Casting his eyes over the suffering body, Gabriel realised that she was not receiving the level of care that he would have expected from Medicus; she lay neglected and pain-wracked, and the apothecary was clearly waiting for her to die.

'I am sorry for your pain,' whispered Gabriel, although he understood why Medicus would not waste his time or resources on an alien, especially when so many battle-brothers required his attention. It was a minor miracle that the eldar had not simply been killed when she was discovered. His name had saved her.

Gabriel! You are here. Macha was right. You are here. Macha. Gabriel. They are coming. They are rising. They were here. They are gone. Defeat. Victory. The beginning and the end...

The seer was delirious and feverish. Her head was snapping back and forth, and her eyes were wild as though stricken with panic. Gabriel reached over and took her jaw in his hand, guiding her face around to meet his own.

'I am here, eldar,' he whispered. 'What can you tell me?'

The old enemy. They return - the cry of the banshee is heard.

'We have heard it too, eldar,' muttered Gabriel, recalling that phrase from the ancient tablet on Rahe's Paradise. It foreshadowed the appearance of the necron there, but victory had belonged to the Blood Ravens and the Biel-Tan eldar under the guidance of the troublesome Farseer Macha. 'But the threat has been defeated.'

Perhaps, but we must be certain. The portal may yet have been destroyed.

'Portal?' Gabriel realised that they were talking on cross-purposes. 'There was no portal at Rahe's Paradise.'

The portal is here, human. Lorn houses a gateway to the ancient webway, an access point to Arcadia, the planet of law. The Yngir seek to close all such doorways, to cut off the Sons of Asuryan from our roots and our power; only then can they complete their terrible purpose and bring darkness perpetual.

The necron were here for your portal, eldar?'

Yes, but does it survive? So many died. So much blood has been spilled. So many waystones have been lost to into the mire of sha'iel. But does it survive?

The necron are gone. Your battle was won.'

The Yngir cannot die, human. They can be merely confined. Our battle is lost if the portal is gone. All that death for nothing. Without it and the others, the balance of the galaxy will shift, and the Yngir will return. Macha knew this too - she should have been here. Why could she not see this? Ash-ruulnah - the blindness of sight.

'We know nothing of your portal, eldar.'

You must take me down to the surface of Lorn. There we will verify the condition of the Arcadian Gate.

Gabriel stared into the twitching and shifting eyes of the bloody and sweating eldar seer. She lacked focus, and he feared for the condition of her alien mind. Were she a human, he would dismiss her words as the rantings of the insane. But she was no human, and his experiences with the eldar had already taught him the folly of treating them as people. Macha, the farseer from Tartarus and Rahe's Paradise, had revealed much about the eldar of Biel-Tan, and Gabriel knew better than to ignore their warnings now. Ulantus would not understand, but Gabriel would do as this alien desired.

'Who are you, eldar?'

I am Taldeer - servant of Biel-Tan, of the court of the farseer.



CHAPTER FIVE: SOLITAIRE

TUMBLING THROUGH THE freezing vacuum of deep space, the Wraithship *Eternal Star* spiralled and twisted out of control. Energy bled from a terrible wound that had been punched into its hull, hissing out into the void and spinning the vessel even more violently. The characteristic, ethereal sheen of the Wraithship fluctuated and oscillated, as though its life-force was ebbing away in the uncontrolled turmoil of the fall. Its massive star wings fluttered and twitched, like those of a dying bird, but they could not restore stability to the tumbling ship. Deep within the heart of the ship, the injured and bleeding Farseer Macha sat in meditation, trying to restore order to her racing thoughts and to her errant ship.

Flashing along in its wake sped the sleek and dark form of the Ghost Dragon, *Avenging Sword*. The Biel-Tan Exarch of the Dire Avengers Aspect Temple, Uldreth, stood silently on the control deck of the cruiser, willing it to greater speeds in pursuit of his farseer. As his eyes flared with emerald fires, his mind eddied and gyred through a confusion of emotions.

Watching the tumbling, uncontrolled flight of the *Eternal Star* ahead of him, Uldreth could not suppress the feeling that it was all his fault. In the back of his mind he could hear the gloating voice of the old Fire Dragon Exarch, Draconir, taunting him with accusations.

Uldreth could not deny the words that he had spat with such venom into the midst of the Court of the Young King, back on Biel-Tan before all this had begun. He had challenged the court, insulting the older, slower and more pedestrian exarchs. Draconir had warned him then, but he had not listened; the passion of his youth and the arrogance of his aspect had blinded him to the wisdom of the old dragon. And there had also been something else; if Uldreth were honest with himself, he knew that his anxiety about catching the Wraithship contained more than simple concern for the farseer of Biel-Tan - there was a personal investment in Macha that he refused to acknowledge but that fed oil into the fires of his soul.

Had this infernal affair involved anyone other than Macha, Uldreth might well have listened to reason. The realisation filled him with resentment and self-loathing, and he toyed instinctively with calling off the chase and letting the *Eternal Star* tumble into oblivion.

His own words haunted his memory. He had stood in the Court of the Young King on Biel-Tan and told the other exarchs that he did not believe in Macha. He had swung their views away from her and forced them to embrace the visions of lesser seers. Instead of sending support with the senior farseer to Lsathranil's Shield - the cursed planet that the mon-keigh called Rahe's Paradise - he had twisted their wills, and the Swordwind army had been dispatched with Taldeer to Lorn. The young seer Taldeer had seen an ork invasion of that once-majestic exodite world; she had requested that the Bahzhakhain be dispatched to repel this terrible insult to the heritage of the Sons of Asuryan.

Uldreth had laughed at the choice. He had laughed, stating that there was no choice to make: the threat to Lorn was substantive and real; Macha's visions of Lsathranil's Shield were vague and formless. He had scoffed about the role of the Seer Council on Biel-Tan, provoking the exarchs with challenges to their identity as warriors: *We do not need the anachronism of the seer council - we are warriors, for Khaine's sake!*

He had been so certain that Macha was wrong - or, at least, he had been so determined to prove her wrong - that he had voiced a test. He had challenged her and the Court of the Young King together, removing all hope of a real choice and trapping them into the wrong course. 'Let us devise a test,' he had said, thinking to humble Macha once and for all. He had protested that the actions of the Court should make no difference to the patterns of the future if the visions of Farseer Macha were really as potent and formidable as Draconir and the others seemed to claim.

He had railed that there should be no need to act on her insight, since the battle that she had seen raging in the murky and mysterious future of Lsathranil's Shield should happen whether or not the Court of the Young King decided to send army to fight it; otherwise her vision was little more than an impotent and fanciful daydream. Hence, Uldreth had ordered the Bahzhakhain - the Swordwind of Biel-Tan - to follow Taldeer to Lorn, leaving Macha to set sail for Lsathranil's Shield with only the support of that cursed and damned Dark Reaper, Laeresh. 'I propose that we decide to ignore Macha's vision,' he had said, filled with vitriol. 'If we end up fighting for Lsathranil's Shield anyway, thenceforth I will bow to your greater wisdom, Draconir of the Fire Dragons.' And there had been such a fight for Lsathranil's Shield; even the long-lost eldar gods of old would have gloried in the confrontation with the ancient foe. Uldreth's test had riddled his own soul with guilt and failure: Macha had been right after all. If he ever made it back to Biel-Tan, Uldreth would have to concede that Draconir, the old Fire Dragon exarch, had been right to place his faith in the archaic institution of the farseer.

Uldreth Avenger - I know that you can hear me.

The thoughts pushed easily into his head, breaking him out of his self-indulgence.

Farseer! His mind raced with intense emotions of relief and anxiety. Although Macha was ensconced in the glittering *Eternal Star*, which tumbled and spun through the void ahead of Uldreth's *Avenging Sword*, he recognised her thoughts and his soul leapt at their touch.

Uldreth, the blame is not yours. She had known the Dire Avenger for longer than most could remember, and she knew what would be in his mind. *The future is a roiling intermixture of pathways and possibilities, and this one opened more inevitably the further down it we progressed. Your decisions did not make this worse, they just made it into what it was. Even without your choices, the future will unfold; you cannot escape from time. Without you, the Swordwind may have descended on Lsathranil's Shield... but I may have spun off into oblivion forever. Besides, even without the Bahzhakhain the victory was ours: your choices brought you here, and the Yngir were defeated in this system.*

Staring out the main viewscreen of the control chamber, Uldreth watched as the *Eternal Star*, a brilliant fiery wing in the darkness, stabilised suddenly and then dropped its speed to almost nothing. In immediate response, the *Avenging Sword* cut its engines and came to a near-halt, instantly matching the velocity of the startling Wraithship as though the two ships were organically fused. *It does not matter who was right, Uldreth. It only matters what we do about our mistakes. Pride is the affliction of our kind, Avenger, and it defines your own calling. Enact vengeance for your errors, but do not visit it upon yourself. Your conscience is clear, since you are here revealing the very future that you professed to deny. We are judged by our actions, and yours have already done you credit - beyond our emotions we can find the truth of our selves.*

Macha's tone was deep and insistent; Uldreth had heard it before, and he resented its patronising undertones. He was not some simple courtier that would be cowed by the words of the farseer; he had known her before she had become embroiled in the greatness and awe of her position. He knew her. She had no need to patronise him. And yet her words soothed his troubled mind and brought a measure of calm to his anxiety. Part of him snarled at the fact that she could affect him so much, despite his resistance and his consciousness of what she attempted.

I am sorry, Macha. I should not have doubted you, he replied.

You are wrong, Uldreth Avenger: it is your place to doubt and your duty to question. Without challenges and tests, the complacency of our people grows into a tyranny of its own. You should not apologise for saving us from ourselves.

But my doubts brought us so perilously close to disaster, he thought back.

Yet your pride did not prevent you from coming to my aid.

You knew that I could not desert you, Macha. Despite the circumstances, Uldreth could not hide the genuine affection in his tone. *Yes, I knew it.* Macha had affection too, but its nature seemed maternal and condescending and it infuriated Uldreth, who instantly regretted his moment of weakness. There was silence.

Whatever the past, muttered Uldreth dismissively, *the enemy is defeated now.*

We should not find our conclusions so frivolously, Uldreth of the Dire Avengers, Macha replied. *Victory and defeat are not such convenient categories in the myriad nodes of the future. Even the Old Ones could not find victory in their wars against the ancient enemy. They found only a momentary peace. I fear that we have found even less than that. The Yngir do not ascend without contingencies - there may be ripples in time and space that we have not yet seen. There may have been ripples even before the ascension. Perhaps those are what Taldeer saw in the Lorn system. Perhaps, my reproach-ridden Avenger, you were yet right to send the Tempest of Blades to Lorn. We both know what lies just under the surface of that ancient, exodite world.*

THE DESCENT DOWN the cliff face to the valley floor was a simple matter, but finding a route that kept me continuously hidden from any eyes above me was harder. There were numerous ledges and overhangs, and I dropped beneath them as rapidly as I could. I was learning the limits of my physiology as I went, and I soon discovered that my body could withstand long drops and that my arms could catch my weight even after a fall of a dozen metres.

From time to time, when I thought that I had missed a ledge, or that I had caught myself too late and that I would tear my shoulder out of joint, I felt the electric pulse of an unknown energy gather strength in my body, reinforcing my shoulder or guiding my weight suddenly onto a shelf. In my mind, I muttered words of thanks and litanies of power, praising the Great Father and the Emperor for my body, armour and mind.

Once I had reached the valley floor, I turned and inspected the townscape that filled the basin. It was even more unusual than it had appeared from the top of the cliff. The buildings around the circumference were low-rise and wide, sweeping around the outskirts of the city in both directions. They seemed to be made of stone, but it was as though each had been carved out of a single piece.

The doorways and window-holes had been cut out of the unbroken lines of the walls, and there were no joints between the walls and ceilings, nor between the walls and the ground. Each aspect of the buildings flowed naturally into the next, as though the shapes had emerged out of the rocky landscape all by themselves.

I made a mental note about the skill of the architects that had designed and built these structures: *II they have mastered buildings in this way, what would their skill have produced as weaponry?*

Further in towards the centre of the city, the buildings grew higher and more impressive, sculpting the skyline into a massive cone or pyramid, aspiring to the sky in the very heart and dropping away to ground-level at the edges. Looking up, however, I could see that the very highest structures in the downtown area were actually the same height as the cliffs that surrounded the town on all sides. There was nothing that stood proud of the valley; everything was contained and hidden in the circular basin. I marvelled at the genius of the urban design: *A good defence is not to be seen, but better still is to be hidden in plain view.*

The streets were empty and deserted, and yet they seemed pristine and perfect, as though people had been navigating them only hours or even minutes before. Something about the atmosphere in the city made it seem as though it had only recently been abandoned, if it had been abandoned at all.

For a moment, my mind flickered with memories of other towns that I had been in: they were deserted and evacuated. People's belongings were left strewn in the streets and psychic wisps of pain hung around street corners; abandoned vehicles burned, overturned on the pavements, and others were crashed and exploded in the carelessness of haste; smoke, flames and cries riddled the town; the resonant, metallic thunder of siege engines rumbled through the ground.

But this city was different: an ancient and implacable calm hung in the air like an invisible, tranquilising cloud. A faint breeze drew itself through the streets like a wave of natural air-conditioning, presumably pulled into the town by the cracked rock formations of the surrounding cliffs and by the perfectly designed street plan of the city itself.

What manner of city is this? It was unlike any town that I had been in before.

Even as I paused to consider the city, the sparkle of myriad lights caught my attention once again. The multicoloured flutterings that I had seen around the sorcerer's camp and again on the edge of the city had continued at irregular intervals through the streets. They flickered like a refraction spectrum, glittering against the pale stone walls, always just at the limit of my vision.

Darting into a narrow side-alley, I broke into a run. It was already clear to me that the lights were leading me (or were they luring me?) towards the centre of the town, so I swept through the complex of streets and alleys, endeavouring to emerge back in the main street ahead of the sparkling constellation.

The best way to avoid a trap is to spring one of your own.

Even the side-alleys were pristine and clean, as though they had just been sandblasted and white-washed. There were no obstacles for me to jump over or duck under, the alleys were just wide enough to accommodate my broad shoulders, and the run through the city was so simple that it aroused my suspicions. Why would a city so well designed for defence be so easy to navigate?

As I emerged out into the main street once again, I found the clutch of shimmering lights still ahead of me, as though I had no made up any ground at all. The lights flickered momentarily, as though beckoning to me or waiting for me to catch up, and then they were gone again.

I am not tracking these things; they are leading me somewhere. Thinking back to the way that the lights had intervened in front of the sorcerer's Thunderhawk on the cliff-top, I decided to assume that whatever these lights were, their intentions were probably benign.

Trust is the preserve of the unwary.

Following the bizarre light formations through the widening streets and boulevards of the alien city, I quietly drew *Vairocanum* into my hands. No matter how benign the light clusters might seem, I would not be taken unawares in this strange place.

The lights directed me through a twisting and circuitous path, taking me off the main thoroughfare and back onto it, circling around sections of breathtaking beauty and leading me through the plainest and least ostentatious of the streets.

The route was confusing and labyrinthine, and it took me some time to realise that we were heading gradually towards the centre of the city, in ever decreasing spirals. I wondered whether the tortuous route was designed to hide parts of the city from my eyes, but it also occurred to me that it might have been designed to protect me from the dangers that lie in wait in some sections of the town.

My mind could not settle in the alien atmosphere of the streets, and I found myself unable to determine the motives of whatever was leading me. Doubt was not something that sat comfortably in my thoughts, and I felt increasingly anxious as I drew closer to the heart of the city.

After an age of walking, I emerged into a wide plaza. The buildings on each side of the elliptical space soared into the sky, aspiring like spires. The speckle of lights had vanished about half an hour before, leaving me to wander the last few streets unguided and unmolested. And such streets they were: wide and sweeping like the great boulevards of Qulus Trine, the wealthy merchants' world that was protected on all sides by massive orbital fortresses, manned by a private army but overseen by the Emperor's gaze in the form of the Blood Ravens Eighth Company, whose glorious battle-barge *Ominous Insight* had made the Qulus system into its home.

A succession of images of that prosperous and vainglorious world cycled through my memory, triggered by the grandeur of my surroundings: I had been to Qulus Trine more than once, it seemed. But I had never been in a city like this before: there was no bustle of business and no pompous processions of wealth, not a single soul stirred through the gorgeous streets or in the windows and doors. It was like an imitation of a town, more like a ghost or a pristine memory than a real city.

On the far side of the piazza was a giant domed building. A tall, conical spire erupted out of the cunue of its curving roof, with its tip pushing up amongst the tallest towers of the city, like a giant tree crowning the canopy of an immense forest. Following the line of the cone back down to the ground, I noticed that there was a dark opening in the front of the dome. It was positioned at the top of a flight of steps, which were proportioned almost perfectly for a humanoid to ascend them with ease. Somewhere in the shadows within, I thought that I saw the glittering of movement.

I sprang up the last of the steps and pressed myself against the frame of the arch which opened up into the cavernous interior of the massive dome. Edging inside, I found that the circumference of the circular hall was denned by a single, sweeping ambulatory, which was separated from the main domed space by a row of columns. It was akin to a large, domed cloister. The central space was completely empty, although a single beam of red sunlight lanced down from the apex of the dome, defining a circle in the very heart of the hall, like a droplet of blood.

Judging from the position of the beam, I guessed that it was focussed directly down the entire height of the spire above. Such precision in the design and on such a scale - the architects of this place were clearly superior artists.

Scanning my eyes around the shadows that swept the edge of the hall, deepening behind each of the pillars, I could see no signs of movement or life. In fact, there was no sign that life had ever touched its magic fingers into this place. It was so quiet that I could hear the perfectly channelled and controlled breeze easing over the steps outside.

In such an atmosphere, I would not have been surprised to see the floor plume with dust as I stepped out towards the centre of the room. Yet there was not a speck of dust or dirt on the ground in the hall. It was immaculate, and I left no footprints. This was not simply a recently cleaned hall, it was a place that had never known dirt. What is dirt if not matter misplaced? Yet there is nothing misplaced in this city. The thought made me pause. If everything was so perfectly positioned, if nothing was out of place, then I had been engineered into this place at this time.

The realisation sent a sudden shiver through my spine. Now that the thought had occurred to me, it seemed so obvious that I couldn't believe my own stupidity. As I unsheathed *Vairocanum*, I cursed the ease with which I had been distracted by the beauty and elegance of the city.

At exactly that moment, as though responding to the shift in my own mood, the patterns of light that had lured me into the domed hall started to flutter and flicker against the curving wall opposite the entrance. The moments of light were brighter than before, and their colours more vivid as they danced and flashed in intricate patterns. I lowered my sword out in front of me, holding it into a guard between myself and the swimming fragments of light. As I did so, the lights suddenly blurred and spread, multiplying around the hall until the walls of the entire ambulatory were ablaze with flecks of colour and motion.

Spinning on the spot and moving reflexively into the spotlight at the centre of the hall, I tried to keep myself equidistant from all the walls. In my hands, *Vairocanum* started to glow with renewed vigour and heat, spilling flecks and flashes of green light into the down-blast of blood red in which I had posed. The alien runes along the blade pulsed with life, as though coming alive in response to the threat that encircled us. With a flourish, I swept the sword into a circle around me, whipping it out and around my head in a spin.

Rather than deterring the light, this action seemed to urge the dancing fragments into greater frenzies of motion. The flecks moved faster and with more energy, burning brighter than ever. As I watched, a number of flushes of light congealed and brightened; they started to form into more solid and familiar shapes. The more I moved in the spotlight, the more intense and vivid became the motions of the light-shapes, until I began to recognise flashes of rapidly moving arms and catch glimpses of dancing legs. The shadowy ambulatories around the chamber were alive with spectres of light.

I turned faster and faster, trying to keep the whole of the perimeter under surveillance at the same time, but my motion only inspired even greater movements from the emerging figures. Stopping abruptly, I stepped out of the red spotlight and lurched forward towards the archway that led back out into the piazza outside.

As I took the steps, the light-forms whisked around the hall and collected in front of me, as though to block my route out. With *Vairocanum* in front of me, I held my ground as the light-forms advanced towards me, gradually resolving into more solid forms. After a couple of seconds, the blur of multicoloured light that had sheened over the archway, obscuring my view of the plaza outside, had transformed into three ranks of humanoid creatures. Each of them was dressed ostentatiously in fantastical colours, and each carried some kind of weapon - swords, staffs, whips and glaives.

They were inhumanly tall and elegant, and their faces were paler and more perfect than the city itself. Their eyes burned like distant stars, and their ears drew up into graceful points. And they moved. They moved perpetually and without apparent effort, dancing and drifting and swaying as though not entirely of this realm.

The relentless motion gave the fantastical troupe the air of the ocean, and I could feel its hypnotic effects on my mind, like an intoxicant or a sedative. Although I cut out with *Vairocanum*, lashing across in front of myself as I staggered backwards towards the spotlight of blood, my mind was already racing and confused and I struck nothing but air. Piercing and discombobulating sounds started to echo around the dome, and I realised instantly how lethal the acoustics in that hall could be. I stumbled back under the sudden sensory assault just as plumes of varicoloured gases exploded from grenades all around me, partially obscuring my view of the elegant, sickly, dancing aliens that closed in around me.

The scent of the gas conspired with the tumult of noise and the whirl of lights to confuse my senses utterly. In a matter of seconds, I felt *Vairocanum* fall from my hand, as though in slow motion, and then I lost my balance completely, falling backward and crashing to the ground in the spotlight at the very centre of the theatre. Stunned and startled, I looked up into the blinding shaft of bloody light and lost consciousness.

ON THE ALTAR in the desert, in front of the open nose of the Thunderhawk, there shimmered an image of a book. It was laced with an eerie green-blue light and it oscillated gently, as though caught in a soft breeze. The squad of Prodigal Son Chaos Marines were fanned into a crescent around the altar, facing back in towards their gunship, and Ahriman himself stood before the altar, his arms outstretched to the triple red suns above, his eyes burning with warfire.

Glaring up into the heavens as though defying the power of suns, the great sorcerer muttered a series of inaudible words. All around him, the rest of the Prodigal Sons leaned in slightly, trying to discern what their magnificent leader had said, but the wind dissolved the sounds and carried them out of ear-shot. Besides, Ahriman had not meant them to hear; there was not one amongst them who did not seek Ahriman's power for his own.

In the distant past, Ahriman had sought the knowledge of the galaxy for himself and for his brothers; he had stood proudly at the side of Magnus himself, bathing in the swirling pools of information and knowledge unearthed by the misguided primarch and his Thousand Sons.

But there came a day when Ahriman's knowledge challenged even that of Magnus, just as the power of Magnus had once rivalled even that of the False Emperor of Man: as prodigal sons are fated to overcome their fathers. The key was knowledge itself, and Ahriman had learned quickly that he should be more cautious than his old master about with whom he shared his knowledge: unlike Magnus, Ahriman would not be cast aside by one of his own Prodigal Sons. There was no Book of Ahriman to be stolen from him, as he had once acquired the Book of Magnus.

Even as they dispersed and evaporated, the words ascended into the sky, like puffs of smoke signalling to some far off power. The sky darkened noticeably, almost at once. With his gaze unbroken, Ahriman could see the triple stars deepen their colour and dim, as though responding to his commands. At the same time, the cloudless sky began to condense and vaporise. From horizon to horizon, the air started to swirl in a massive, slow vortex, as though the atmosphere itself were being unscrewed from the planet below. Wisps of purple and gold cirrus clouds started to appear, pulled into long, thin strips by the atmospheric motion.

Ahriman stood motionless at the epicentre of the furor that was gathering around him, his arms beseeching the unseen powers of heaven while his whispered and sibilant words provoked agents beyond the comprehension of normal men. He was a powerful psyker, and it suited his purposes for his Space Marines to believe the rumours that he rivalled the power of Magnus and the Emperor himself.

In truth, however, most of Ahriman's power came from the allies that he could enlist. Over the long centuries and millennia, the unmatched sorcerer had learnt the keys that unlocked many secrets: he could call upon the aid of daemons without exposing his soul to their thirst, binding them to his will and his purpose; he could seduce service from the lithe and terrible daemonettes, promising them pleasures that he would never have to fulfil; and he could speak the hidden words that stirred the warp itself, bringing the raw, depersonalised power of the empyrean into his service for short periods of time.

He had required all of these assets to break the moorings of the portal into the eldar webway at Lorn, and yet his Space Marines grasped only that he had accomplished it with his own power. The irony of cultivating such stupidity in these ostensible searchers

of truth was not wasted on Ahriman, but the preservation of his own power was a still higher imperative: if they had his knowledge, they would have his power too. If they learnt too much, Ahriman would kill them himself. If knowledge was power, then Ahriman, Sorcerer Lord of the Prodigal Sons, was its ultimate guardian.

The sky darkened until it seemed that night was falling prematurely on Arcadia. However, the searing and insufferable heat of the day persisted, as though the shroud over the triple suns was nothing more than an illusion. With a slow movement, Ahriman looked down from the sky and placed his gaze onto the glowing image of a book on the altar. He muttered some more inaudible words, asking the local powers to show him the location of the sacred tome. His Marines watched expectantly, but nothing happened.

Silence fell, as though the desert wind itself were holding its breath. In his mind, Ahriman smiled: he knew that nothing was more glorious and suggestive of power than a dramatic, tension-riddled pause. He waited for a couple of seconds, and then completed his incantation.

The rocks under the altar started to tremble and quake, making the altar shake and shift with increasing violence. At precisely that moment, Ahriman nodded a signal to the Sorcerer Obysis, his sergeant, who started to chant the Litany of Placation. His voice was joined immediately by those of the other Prodigal Sons, who each knew the possible consequences of their failure to contain the eruption of power. The choral sound swept around the altar in the ritual crescent, presenting a barrier of sound and will.

With a groan of cracking rock, the altar convulsed with a sickly energy and then exploded, sending shards of stone and metal raining out over the Prodigal Sons, leaving the holographic book hanging momentarily in the air before it flickered and vanished. In place of the altar, a vertical stream of electric blue fountained out of the ground into the sky, like a fiery pillar reaching for the heavens. It would have visible for dozens of kilometres in every direction, searing out of the desert like the finger of god. At the same time, the rocky ground started to crack and crumble away. The collapse started at the point that used to support the altar, then spread like a growing cave-in, clawing away the ground in a wide crescent, stopping at the boots of the Sorcerer Lord and his Prodigal Sons. In place of the rock, sand bubbled and seethed to the surface, like oil gushing up from a drill-hole. It bubbled and frothed at the surface, overflowing the hole and lapping at the feet of the warriors who chanted and muttered the words necessary to hem it in.

Glowing with his blazing eyes, Ahriman barked a sudden command at the roiling mass of sand, making it flinch and ripple as though repulsed by his words. But then the chaos of sand started to form into vaguely recognisable shapes, each held together by the unearthly bonds of warp and the unspeakable, glittering will of the empyrean.

After a moment, the forms resolved into a three-dimensional map of a circular, almost conical city. Then it exploded into turmoil again. Suddenly there were buildings and streets, market places and great, towering cathedrals. The shapes shifted and reformed, as though guiding Ahriman through an unknown city, showing a route to him that would lead him to what he sought. As the sorcerer lord was shown a wide plaza with a vast domed hall dominating one side of it, the holographic book suddenly reappeared in the mire of sand. It pulsed and glowed with a vague green presence, only half visible through the sandy walls of the dome.

Ahriman let the suggestion of a smile play over his lips as his inferno-eyes burned into the image of the book: *The Tome of Karebennian*. The book was a mythical guide to the location of the fabled Black Library of the ancient eldar; even the foolish old Magnus the Red had never believed that the book was anything more than a legend. But Ahriman had always been a finer scholar than his primarch, and centuries of research had finally paid off. Since his expulsion from the Planet of the Sorcerers, Ahriman had taken his cabal on a rage of erudition, plundering ancient tombs, acquiring forbidden tomes, unearthing magical artefacts, and discovering the most talented of psykers. Even Magnus would not have thought it possible, but he had found Arcadia, and now he would find *Karebennian* too. After that, there was nothing that could keep him away from the Black Library, the impossibly ancient repository of the wisdom of the eldar.

The image of the book sizzled and glittered in the sandscape, but then the shimmering light shifted slightly, as though it had been blurred. Other flecks of light danced through the sand, sparkling and whirling like fireflies or refractions through a prism. After a fraction of a second, one of the Prodigal Sons stopped chanting and unsheathed an ornate force-sword, brandishing it and flourishing it into defensive stances. Then another Marine tugged twin bolters from holsters against his legs, snapping them back and forth at targets that never quite seemed real. Suddenly, all of the Marines had abandoned the Litany of Placation, and the sandscape erupted into a massive, diffuse mist that covered them all. Meanwhile, the Prodigal Sons had braced their weapons and Ahriman himself had his infamous Black Staff poised ready for combat.

Fleet, multi-coloured shapes danced through the sandstorm with incredible speed and grace, never pausing long enough to present a definite target for the Prodigal Sons. But it was clear that the shapes were not simply tricks of the light: the flashes of arms and legs, the glint of bright eyes, and the eerie songs of battle betrayed a humanoid threat.

Without waiting to identify the mysterious assailants, Ahriman grinned, letting his mouth open to reveal burning blue teeth, like rows of warp shards. His eyes flared with the sudden thrill of combat. Taking his Black Staff by one end, he spun it around his head, letting a stream of crackling energy lash out into a circle around him. A couple of his own Prodigal Sons shrieked in pain, but Ahriman's infernal grin broadened as he poured more and more power into his spiralling inferno.

'I WILL NOT ask you again, General Sturmn. The captain is not accustomed to being kept waiting.' Scout Sergeant Corallis held the general's eye for a moment, making sure that he was aware that the Blood Ravens did not fall under the same command hierarchy as the Imperial Guard. With his one remaining eye, Sturmn glared back at the partially reconstructed, half-mechanised sergeant, making sure that he was aware that he was not intimidated by the Adeptus Astartes. He had seen them before.

'We fight for the same Emperor, sergeant. I mean no obstruction to your captain.' The officers behind him smiled nervously, proud of their general's composure but anxious lest he had gone too far with his pompous manner. 'The problem - if we can really call it a problem - is that we were not expecting to see you, Blood Raven.'

'And why is this a problem? Many Guardsmen will go through their entire lives without seeing a Space Marine—'

'And others will become Space Marines themselves, sergeant. Do not lecture me about the nature of the Adeptus Astartes. I did not become a general in the *Imperial* Guards without becoming familiar with your functions and practices.' Sturnn cut off Corallis in mid-sentence, and there was something about his tone that the sergeant didn't like: he knew that the Guard were fiercely proud of their name and the association it implied with the Emperor, but Sturnn had bitten down on the word "Imperial" as though it were a bullet. 'The Adeptus Astartes and even the Blood Ravens themselves are not unknown to me. I am not as uninformed as you may think.'

'It is gratifying to know that our reputation precedes us, general,' nodded Corallis with a show of graciousness. 'Then you will appreciate the imperativeness of cooperation.'

'Is that a threat, Blood Raven? You would do well not to threaten one of the Emperor's generals.' The theatrics betrayed the fact that only days before Sturnn had been a captain; his promotion was a field-promotion only, but his officers knew that field-promotions were the ones that really counted.

Corallis was taken aback. He had certainly not meant to imply a threat with his words, but only to indicate the likely importance of their presence on Lorn V.

Why would Sturnn interpret him with such a lack of charity? What had the general heard about the Blood Ravens?

'Forgive me, general. It was not my intention to appear hostile. Please explain your problem, and we will see what can be done to solve it.'

Sturnn regarded him for a moment. 'Very well, sergeant. You are not the first of the Adeptus Astartes to have made landfall on Lorn V in the last few days. The first squad called themselves Ultramarines and claimed command of our forces, turning our own plans into ruin. We killed them - does this surprise you?'

Corallis stared at the general in horror. He glanced back over his shoulder towards Gabriel and the figure of the eldar farseer who was slumped in between the captain and Librarian Jonas.

'*You* laid hands on the Ultramarines!' Disbelief fought with the violence of restraint in Corallis's voice, and his hand twitched over the holstered bolter on his leg.

Sturnn tilted his head, as though assessing the sergeant's reaction. 'We killed the Marines in question. We surrounded them in the command tent and then blew them to pieces. Dozens of our own men sacrificed themselves so that the traitors would not suspect the plan.'

'Traitors? I cannot believe that the Sons of Guilliman were traitors to the Emperor or the sacred tenets of the Codex Astartes.'

'Have you heard enough then?' said the general. 'What?'

'Have you heard enough? Do you condemn Lorn and the Cadian 412th already?' The general was goading him.

'Who were those Marines?' snapped Corallis, unwilling to believe the report.

'Ah, that is the right question, Sergeant Corallis.' Sturnn smiled as though relieved. 'I do not know who they were, but it seems that they were merely disguised as Ultramarines to deceive us and usurp our command structure. These are the markings that were borne on their shoulder plates after we scratched the blue paint from their dead forms.'

Sturnn flicked a signal and one of the officers behind him threw a shoulder guard onto the ground in front of Corallis.

The Blood Raven stepped aside so that Gabriel and Jonas could see the evidence: they recognised the green hydra immediately - it was the insignia of the Alpha Legion. This was not uncharacteristic behaviour by the deceitful traitor Marines.

'As I say,' continued Sturnn, 'we identified them quickly and then eliminated them.'

'They were traitors - Alpha Legionnaires - they do not follow the Imperial creed. You were right to turn on them, general.' Corallis paused as a realisation sank in. 'And you suspect the same of us?' He flinched as he spoke, with genuine repulsion written across his face. The story made sense, and it explained the wrecked Ultramarines' cruiser on the edge of the system, which had crude Alpha Legion markings hacked into it.

'No. The battle here is won, as you can see,' said Sturnn, sweeping his hand out towards the smoking remains of the ice-encrusted battlefield. 'But the Ultramarines did come. They brought us a control team for the Dominatus titan. It seems odd to me that the Blood Ravens should arrive now, demanding access to the site where the titan was found.'

'I see,' nodded Corallis, not quite sure what might be the point of this exchange. 'But I fail to see your problem.'

'I never said that there was a problem, sergeant. In fact, I explicitly said that I should not call it a problem.' Sturnn smirked. 'I said merely that we had not been expecting you, and that we know enough of the Blood Ravens to understand that your arrival is not always... fortuitous.'

Sturnn had chosen that word carefully, and Corallis picked up on the deliberate ambiguity. What had this man heard about the Blood Ravens, he wondered. Perhaps more importantly, how had he heard whatever he had heard? It was possible, supposed Corallis, that this General Sturnn had some connections with the Inquisition - Ullan had implied as much.

It was certainly the case that a number of factions within the Ordo Xenos would be interested in keeping track on the movements and activities of the Blood Ravens Third Company, especially after the affairs on Tartarus when one of their own inquisitors was lost whilst under the Blood Ravens' protection. Hence, it was not altogether impossible that Sturnn had been briefed before their arrival.

It was also possible that one of the officers of the Ultramarines contingent was similarly connected, and that he had passed on dubious information to the general when they learnt that the Blood Ravens were en route. Chaplain Varnus was certainly well-connected.

Whatever the case, the pointed nature of Sturnn's comment implied that he had little faith in the judgement or honour of the Blood Ravens. This was the only way to explain the way that Sturnn tried to test Corallis's response to the Cadian 412th's treatment of the alleged Ultramarines: would the Blood Ravens wait for an explanation or simply blow the place and leave?

Corallis fought back the urge to kill the general on the spot for slighting the honour of his Chapter. 'We do not seek a role in this conflict, General Sturnn, and it is clear to us that you have secured the theatre already. Nonetheless, we must request access to the

site of the excavation of the Dominatus titan. There is reason to suppose that there is more to that site than even that venerable machine.'

'I can assure you that my men examined the site thoroughly. What kind of reason would you have to doubt this?' As he spoke, Sturnn let his eyes fall past Corallis and alight on the sickly, broken shape of Taldeer.

'We have our reasons, and they need not concern you, general. Will you give us access or... not?' Corallis could be ambiguous too. His patience was wearing thin.

WITH TALDEER HANGING off his shoulder, limp and almost weightless, Gabriel pushed through the cordon that marked off the excavation site. Jonas and Corallis followed behind, with Sturnn striding along between them, making a show of being escorted by the massive Space Marines. The encampment was ringed by a series of Hellhound tanks, gunnery emplacements and several full squadrons of Armoured Fist troops. Given that the titan had been removed days before, the security around the site certainly suggested that Sturnn knew something else of value remained within the cordon.

After a few steps, the ground fell away into a wide pit. Mounds of earth and piles of rock around the perimeter suggested that the cavity had been excavated only recently. The bottom of the crater was uneven and skewed; to one side a wide, low tunnel had been hacked out of the wall of the pit, leading off under the ground. Even from the rim of the crater, Gabriel could see the half exposed runic markings that poked through over the apex of the tunnel mouth. They had not been fully uncovered, as though a decision had been made to ignore them. Gabriel bristled at the casual disregard for knowledge acquisition that the site demonstrated. 'You located the titan inside that tributary?'

'No captain. The titan was uncovered in the main pit.' Sturnn gestured around the crater, implying the great size of the titan and the impossibility that it could have been pushed through that tunnel.

'Of course,' answered Gabriel. 'And what of the tunnel?'

'Our engineers unearthed it when they drilled the trial hole in this area. We made it about one hundred metres along its length before a second team found the titan in this area in front of the tunnel's mouth.'

'I understand. Did your men finish excavating the tunnel even so?' Gabriel's tone suggested that he doubted that the Guardmen would have understood the importance of such exploration.

'We pushed the tunnel through into a large chamber under the ice, but it appeared empty... We were at war, captain. It was not the time for searching for trinkets.'

Gabriel just nodded. He understood Sturnn's position on this, and he knew that it would be shared by most men in his position. However, Gabriel's view was radically different.

'Did you establish why the Dominatus titan was preserved at the mouth of this tunnel?'

'We supposed that it was guarding the inner chamber,' conceded Sturnn, realising the direction of Gabriel's questions.

'And you yourselves are guarding the tunnel entrance now? It seems that you suspect the chamber holds more than mere trinkets, general.'

Nodding slowly, Sturnn sighed. 'The ice of Lorn V is riddled with caverns and tunnels, captain. A number of them resemble this, and some are marked by that foul alien scrawl. Legends suggest that the eldar once lived here, long ago, before the ice and the wrath of the Emperor purified this world.' Sturnn's eyes twitched to the eldar farseer and discomfort settled over his face. 'I am sure that you would know more about this, Captain Angelos.'

'Perhaps,' replied Gabriel as Jonas and Corallis vaulted down into the pit to investigate the arch over the tunnel, leaving the captain alone with Sturnn and Taldeer. 'Have you set up cordons around all of these sites?'

'No, captain. We do not have either the time, the resources or the inclination to do so. This is the only site that we are defending.'

'Why this one?'

'Because of the titan, captain. Even to a lowly general in the Imperial Guard, a titan guarding an eldar artefact seemed unusual. I notified Inquisitor Tsensheer of the Ordo Xenos, and then established the cordon while we awaited his arrival. I have had dealings with Tsensheer before,' Sturnn added significantly. 'He is a good man with a strong and far-reaching interest in these things.' The mention of the Ordo Xenos made Gabriel flinch slightly; he had bad memories of a Xenos inquisitor, Mordecai Toth, on Tartarus, and he did not need to think about the events of that troublesome campaign now. 'I am sure he is, general. And has your inquisitor arrived yet?'

The general watched Gabriel's reaction carefully, noting the discomfort that lingered just below his features. 'No, captain. He is not here yet. We expect him imminently.'

'I see,' replied Gabriel, relieved. 'You were right to guard this site in preference to the others,' he continued, his mind snapping back to Rahe's Paradise, where an Adeptus Astartes outpost had been constructed over the remains of an eldar facility. The significance of an Imperial guard over this site should not be underestimated. 'You were right, also, to summon the inquisitor.'

'Thank you, captain.' Sturnn's tone suggested that he didn't feel as though he needed the approval of the Space Marine.

'Nonetheless, general, I'm sure that you will permit us to investigate this before Inquisitor Tsensheer arrives.' Gabriel nodded down towards the figures of Jonas and Corallis, who had already uncovered the rest of the archway around the tunnel and were busy translating the ancient eldar text that spidered across it.

'I am not sure—'

Before Sturnn could finish his objection, Gabriel stepped off the lip of the crater, skidding and jumping down its sheer sides, cradling the farseer in his arms.

THE TUNNEL WAS straight and direct. Its sides curved smoothly into a perfectly formed tube through the ice, and a pale eerie light suffused through the passageway. *I have been here before, Gabriel.*

Taldeer used the captain's name as though she knew him well. The effect was destabilising at first, but Gabriel was quickly getting used to the presumptuous manner of the aliens.

Long ago, before the ice. This world was verdant and brilliant. A pearl in the ancient eldar empire.

The farseer's thoughts were weak and wispy, like breaths of smoke in Gabriel's mind. As she muttered, the captain carried her through the tunnel and emerged into the cavernous ice-chamber of which Sturmn had spoken. The floor was polished to a sheen, as though it was cleaned and maintained every day. The huge domed ceiling was similarly pristine; the pale blue ice was unblemished, uncracked and unmarked, even after thousands of years of neglect.

This is the place, Gabriel. This is the location of the portal.

As her thoughts formed in his head, Taldeer struggled out of his arms and stood onto her own feet on the ice.

'Jonas. What do you make of this place?' asked Gabriel.

As he surveyed the echoing bubble of ice, Gabriel could see nothing of significance. He wondered whether the eldar witch was too sick to really understand what she was doing, and whether the gruff, military-minded Sturmn was actually right about this place.

The Librarian was gazing around the chamber with wonder written over his face. He was clearly awed by something invisible to Gabriel. 'It's amazing Gabriel.' His eyes twinkled with wonder. 'It's amazing.'

A gentle melody flowed into the ice-cave. It was quiet at first - little more than a whispered and melancholy song. But the acoustics of the chamber turned the notes back on themselves, boosting them, shifting them and enhancing them, bringing echoes into harmony with themselves. The solitary voice of Taldeer rapidly built into a chorus, as though the cave were filled with eldar seers, each chanting and singing with exquisite beauty. After a matter of seconds, the ice itself hummed and resounded with the ineffable, alien music.

Stand back.

The thought pushed through the music into the minds of each of the Space Marines, making them step back away from the centre of the cavern. As they did so, cracks of light flashed through the ice-dome, riddling the massive curving ceiling with intricate patterns of energy. Runes wrote themselves across the dome, appearing and vanishing as though written in the sands of a wind-swept desert. Then the runes ran into images and pictures. Maps and star-charts spiralled around the vast cavernous chamber, searing through the ice in flashes of blue and green.

Abruptly, the images blinked out, leaving the cave empty and cold once again. But Taldeer's chorus continued to ring out. After a few moments, columns of electric blue started to rise up around the domed roof, each aspiring towards the apex of the dome. As the columns converged, power trickled down from the apex in a gentle shower of warp energy. The trickle became a stream and then a torrent. In a matter of seconds, the whole hall was a storm of warp fire, swirling like a tempest.

The polished ice of the walls and floor acted like mirrors, reflecting the maelstrom off to infinity in all directions, until the Space Marines felt their balance failing, standing in the heart of an infinite warp storm. In the centre of the floor, a structure started to appear through the rain. It was an arch, a giant gate that stretched almost to the ceiling. The archway was inscribed with burning runes, and the whole structure flickered and spat as though it was struggling to find resolution.

Taldeer's voice reached new heights amidst the tumult. Tearing his eyes away from the spectacle that was raging before him, Gabriel stole a glance at the farseer. He could see her strength failing and her skin beginning to shrivel. The effort was killing her, but her eyes blazed with concentration and determination, all thoughts for her own survival vanished.

It's no good. The eldar's thoughts were breathless and exhausted. The portal is ruined. Your stupid Sturmn has destroyed it. It reeks of mon-keigh, as though you had ripped it from its very moorings. The Yngir need not complete their Great Work, if you will complete it for them, human!

The effort was finally too much, and Taldeer collapsed down to the ice. The chorus of echoes continued for a few seconds after the singing stopped, but then a gradual silence unfurled itself into the cavern. The warp fire flickered and blinked out of existence, and the ghostly, incomplete portal itself remained for only a second. At exactly the instant that the portal vanished, a solitary figure walked directly out of its centre, stepping into the freezing air of the cave and striding down a flight of invisible steps to the polished ground.

The eldar warrior was unlike any that Gabriel had seen before, and instinctively the three Space Marines reached for their weapons.

Taldeer's eyes widened in shock and fear, and she struggled to drag her body back over the ice, pulling herself away from the newcomer as though repulsed by his very presence.

Karebennian!

The word slammed into Gabriel's mind, and he could sense the terror that flooded out of Taldeer. In response, Gabriel braced his bolter and took aim. The eldar Solitaire cocked its head to one side, as though curious about what the Space Marine was going to do. Unphased, Gabriel squeezed the trigger and let a volley of bolter shells fly.

No! Taldeer's protest came too late.

With a smooth and incredible movement, the Solitaire spun around the shells, letting one pass to his left, another to his right, and he bent backwards under the last, letting it flash over his face and impact into the ice-wall behind him. Finishing the spin with a flourish that resembled a bow, Karebennian grinned at the prostrate farseer. He paused for a moment, as though letting the drama of his entrance seep into the consciousness of his audience, then he produced two long-bladed weapons. One in each hand, he started to dance with them. He vaulted and flipped, spun and spiralled, sometimes flashing into a multicoloured blur, at other times falling into abject stillness. In the ice-mirrors of the cave, the solitary Harlequin appeared as a troupe of thousands; the farseer and the Space Marines looked on, captivated.



CHAPTER SIX: HERESY

A SENSATION OF stony cold pounded against the back of my head, making my eyes squint even before I opened them. The dull, monotonous ache of a concussion resounded in my brain, muddling my thoughts as my senses gradually swam back into coherence. Before any other thought, my hand swept up to my shoulder, searching for the metallic comfort of a hilt: *Vairocanum*. My sword was exactly where it should be, strapped into its holster across my back, but the instant of relief was immediately followed by a wave of confusion.

I dropped her. I could remember it clearly. In the misty and confused images of my short-term memory, the moment at which *Vairocanum* had slipped from my fingers and clattered to the ground shone like a beacon of certainty. *She had been glowing intensely, as though surrounded by invisible but familiar energies. Then I dropped her.* The pain of loss hit me suddenly, like an icy blade between my ribs. The memory swam: I had fallen almost straight afterwards, nauseous and staggering like a drunken youth. The kaleidoscoping lights had penetrated my brain, exciting neural nodes that I had thought long dormant, leaving me stunned and unable to function. It was as though I had succumbed to a fit. *What could have done this to an Angel of Death? Embrace your questions - they will bring you to power in the end.*

My eyes snapped open instantly; those were not my thoughts. There was a silent and only half-repressed menace lurking in the words as they pressed into my mind, cold, heavy and non-negotiable.

'Who are you?' I tried to roll away from the kneeling figure, reaching around for my sword as I turned. But pain lanced into my head, making my body lurch into rigidity, as though a massive electrical charge had been suddenly passed through my muscles. *Vairocanum* was only half-unsheathed when my fingers involuntarily released her once again. I slumped back onto my back, staring up at the face of death.

Rest.

There was no malice in the word, but it offered no space for doubts or questions. I would rest; it was simply a statement of what would happen, as though the mind from which the thought emerged was certain of what the future held for me.

Narrowing my eyes in an attempt to bring the face into proper focus, I nodded slightly, letting the looming figure think that I would not challenge his vision. No matter how hard I concentrated, however, I could not bring the face into focus - it remained blurred and ill-defined, as though it were not entirely present, or perhaps present in a different way from the rest of the warrior's magnificently armoured body. The phantoms of the warrior's face echoed those of the formidable sorcerer that I had seen emerging from the Thunderhawk in the desert. *They have found me.*

'You didn't answer my question.'

I did not offer to give you answers, came the logical reply. I merely told you to embrace your questions.

'What use are questions without answers?'

You misunderstand the priorities, Son of Ahriman. Answers are of no use without questions, but questions are most helpful when we do not yet have their solutions.

Son of Ahriman? 'What did you call me?' The name rang a distant and deep bell in my mind, but I could not resolve the memory.

Did you recognise yourself in what I said?

There was a note of satisfaction in the thought, I could tell.

I called you a Son of Ahriman. We are brothers, you and I.

There was the suggestion of a smile on the spectral face. It was the first time that I had seen the features of the face move, and a thick feeling of nausea rippled through my stomach. The warrior's lips did not move as he spoke his thoughts into my head, and this flicker of emotion took me by surprise, making my eyes widen slightly.

'Brothers?' It was too incredible to believe.

Of course. How else can you explain our presence here? We were searching for you - you were lost to us. It has been many years since we have seen another brother.

As I stared up at the malformed and eerie face, it occurred to me that it was unbelievable to think that this warrior and I would be just coincidentally on this forsaken alien world at the same time. Inspecting his armour, I realised that it was not entirely dissimilar from my own: it was predominantly blue and covered in a series of esoteric, runic seals; it appeared to have been constructed out of the same materials, and its structure was broadly the same. It seemed clear that the designer of both had been trying to solve the same problems; it was not impossible to believe that they had been designed and built by the same people.

Do not fear the weapon, fear the soul of its wielder.

The maxim prodded into my thoughts from somewhere in my subconscious; it rang like a caution or a warning. The mysterious warrior's ghostly face did not shift, but I could tell that he was peering through my eyes, trying to see into my thoughts. I had not seen my own face for a long time, and I could not remember what it looked like, but I remembered the blistering pain of sun-burn in the desert, and I could not imagine that this warrior's face was affected by any natural forms of heat.

And there were differences in our armour as well: his was a slightly darker blue, and was touched with gold. It had a fiery serpent etched into one of the massive shoulder guards; and behind his head was a tall crest that stood nearly half a metre proud of his shoulders. My own armour was paler blue, although still with lines of gold, and it was bedecked with glorious wings on the shoulder guard. There was no crest framing my face.

'I will keep that question in mind, friend. Since it seems that questions are more useful than answers at this point.' I pushed myself up into a sitting position and stared at the warrior that knelt implacably at my side.

As you say. The face grinned, as though unable to contain its glee.

THE EVENTS ON the planet's surface swam through Gabriel's mind as he knelt in quiet contemplation before the altar in the chapel of the *Litany of Fury*, letting the atmosphere of reverence and stillness flow over him. He needed the space for thinking, and he needed a little emotional stability. The last few months and years had drawn him thin, like a ghost of his former self.

No matter how many times he told himself that these doubts and pains had no place in the mind of a Space Marine captain, his thoughts kept falling back into the basic and inalienable humanity of his condition. He was simply unsure that he could cope with the responsibility of killing entire planets, watching his family fry, and putting his own friends to the sword.

Nobody, not even a Blood Ravens captain, should have to do these things. Prathios used to tell him that the Emperor was really the guardian of his soul, sending out lances of immaculate brilliance from the Astronomican to show him truth and radiance in the darkness. Without Prathios, Gabriel found these ideas increasingly hard to stomach: did the benevolence of the Emperor really excuse him from responsibility for his own actions? He was one of the Emperor's Angels of Death, but he was still Gabriel.

The captain had no way to understand the events that had unfolded down on the surface of Lorn V. Part of his soul screamed out to him that it was a blessing that the eldar portal had been destroyed - the deceitful and manipulative aliens were not to be trusted. He, of all people, was well aware of the machinations and subtlety of the elegant race. He knew that Ulantus would consider the matter finished: the necron had been defeated and the eldar were dead. It was the perfect conclusion to a trying battle. But the universe contained more complicated problems than merely life and death. It was not simply light and darkness. There were shades of grey and spectrums of colour spread out between the infinite stars.

If Taldeer was right about the consequences of the portal's destruction, then Gabriel had a responsibility to act on that knowledge. By the grace of the Great Father, he was a Blood Raven, if he could not act on new knowledge, then he was a traitor to himself and his forebears: knowledge is power. He had to consider the source of the information, of course, but he had learned something of the ways of the eldar and their connections with the necron on Rahe's Paradise. In his heart, he believed Taldeer. He believed her with the kind of certainty that he had once believed in the immaculate light of the Astronomican. He simply *knew* that she was right about this.

Staring up at the awesome images of the Great Father Vidya above the altar, Gabriel felt his soul shiver. What would he have done in my position, wondered Gabriel, his eyes beseeching the icon for an answer. In the ancient texts, those supposedly penned by the Great Father himself, there could be found detailed treatises on the nature of knowledge and the various merits accumulated in its pursuit. However, as far as Gabriel could remember, Vidya never went so far as to concede that the good could be served from heretical sources.

Nonetheless, these grey areas, and the colourful extravagance represented so perfectly by the eldar Harlequin on Lorn, were of little concern to Vidya. For him, there was only the light of knowledge itself and then the dark of ignorance. His work and his example offered little in the way of guidance or comfort to Gabriel. Would following the pleas of the eldar witch mean betraying the Emperor and the Imperium? Was Gabriel right to believe that there was a greater good to be done than the defence of Lorn against the aliens? Was this battle over, or just beginning?

'If only Prathios were here,' muttered the captain, talking to himself in the darkness. 'He would know the right words.'

Hanging his head in a moment of despair, Gabriel's thoughts shifted to his one-time friend and battle-brother, Librarian Isador Akios. The two of them had been through so much together, even performing in the Blood Trials together on Cyrene, all those long years before.

Gabriel had learned to trust the erudite and wise Librarian, placing his life into his hands on many occasions. And then, on Tartarus, Gabriel had been forced to execute his friend. Isador had succumbed to the thirst for forbidden knowledge, craving the power that was the product of knowledge rather than the knowledge itself. There was a line that Gabriel recognised instinctively, and Isador had been lured over that line by the temptations of daemons and their servants.

On Tartarus, Gabriel had shown no confusion, and he had executed his oldest friend, believing implicitly and unquestioningly that he was acting as the Sword of Vidya. He had seen the light of the Astronomican, and he had *known* what to do.

And now it seemed that Gabriel had lost sight of that perfect, indelible, moral line. Yet his soul still cried out for it, beseeching the darkness around him for guidance. He *wanted* to do the right thing, but he was no longer certain what that was. The weight of his deeds pressed down on his conscience, curdling his certainties and compressing his thoughts into doubts.

'I do not seek the power of the eldar,' he whispered, reassuring himself as he looked up into the impenetrable eyes of Vidya. 'I do not seek to place their knowledge into my soul. But...' His muttered words trailed into silence as he struggled to find the crucial end of his sentence; everything depended on that "but".

'But... I *know* that the eldar witch is telling the truth about the portal and the necron threat. By acting on her knowledge, I am defending the Imperium. The battle for Lorn is not yet won. Sturnn and Ulantus are acting out of ignorance, and I would sin against my nature, against you, and against the Emperor himself if I did not attempt to act within the light of superior knowledge.' He paused, letting his breath calm and permitting the dark silence to enshroud him once again. 'But... they will not believe me. My method is poor and my conclusions are based on instincts, not on reason. I would not believe me.'

Lowering his gaze, Gabriel closed his eyes and knelt in the private darkness of his own head. He let his thoughts swim and shift, watching them pass through his consciousness like ships on an ocean, waiting for them to settle into some kind of equilibrium. Then, somewhere deep in his subconscious, he saw a flicker of light. It was faint, like the merest suggestion of a distant reflection. But it trembled and shivered with a living nature. At the same moment, a quiet, barely audible note pierced the darkness. It was like the sound of silver. After a few seconds, the light began to pulse with energy in his mind, and the single, silvering note grew into a lance of sound.

Focussing his thoughts, Gabriel drew the light closer to his mind's eye, opening himself to it, dropping his innate resistance to the presence of this intrusion. He had seen it before, many times, but always in moments of crisis. He knew that it was the light of the Emperor himself. This was the Astronomican reaching for him, reassuring him with the brilliance of the Imperial faith, confirming

his righteousness. He had seen it on Cyrene. He had seen it on Tartarus. And he had even seen it on Rahe's Paradise. It was the beacon that drew him towards the good.

The single, pristine tone became a harmony. It was a chorus, filling his head with platinum light and angelic music, leaving his senses in rapture. He opened his soul in relief and release, letting the symphony consume him. But then something shifted in the music. A tone fell flat, and another spiked into sharpness. Dissonance oscillated through the chorus, shattering the pristine sound like a spray of bullets through a pane of glass. The voices trembled and broke, breaking away into separate melodies that devastated the harmony, each aspiring to subsume the next.

Faces started to flicker in the light, flashing like strobed memories. Peaceful at first, the faces gradually grew ugly and contorted, twisting into daemonic images of fury and rage. They screamed, releasing infernos of pain into Gabriel's head, and for a moment he saw the face of his father burning in the fires of Cyrene. Isador's death rattle spat through the sound, reverberating like the chiming of a great bell.

It was a tempest of emotions and thoughts, and Gabriel threw himself forward, trying to drag himself out of the heart of the maelstrom. He lurched and crashed his head against the chapel's altar, cracking a gouge out of his already scarred forehead. The blood rushed out over his eyes, turning the phantom, mental lights momentarily into floods of blood, before the Larraman cells in his enhanced blood clotted and sealed the wound. The impact jolted him free of the vision and left him lying prostrate at the foot of the altar, sweating and panting for breath.

'Prathios...' he muttered, with his cheek pressed against the cold flagstones. 'What should I do?'

'BY THE THRONE, Gabriel, I can't believe that you're even considering this!' Ulantus stood in the centre of the control deck, his face white with fury and disbelief.

'And I, for my part, Captain Ulantus, cannot believe that you are challenging my authority aboard this vessel.' Gabriel's eyes flashed with restrained indignation. 'The last time I checked, it was Gabriel not Ulantus who was Commander of the Watch.' 'This is not a game of ranks, *commander*. I can hardly be blamed for voicing my concern about this plan. The *Litany of Fury* may be the base for our exalted Third Company, but you are not alone on this venerable old vessel. I know my position, and I know that you are overstepping your authority here.' Ulantus held his eyes on Gabriel, deliberately not casting around for the eyes of the other Space Marines on deck.

'Is this really a question of authority, Ulantus? Or is there something else bothering you?'

The Captain of the Ninth Company smiled in despair, finally looking around as though appealing to the control crew and the command squad for sympathy. 'Are you really going to make me say this, Gabriel? Do we really need to go there?'

'Yes, captain, I think we do.'

'We all know what the problem is here, captain,' began Ulantus. He hesitated slightly, as though weighing the gravity of his next words. 'The problem... the problem is not your authority... the problem is your judgement.'

'So there it is,' replied Gabriel quietly, narrowing his bright eyes into slits of reflected light. 'You wanted me to say it. So it is said.' The silence on the control deck was intense and solid, as though the chamber had been flooded with an ocean of white-noise.

Behind Gabriel, Jonas and Corallis stood shoulder to shoulder; their jaws were clenched and their hands lingered over the hilts of weapons. Behind them towered the massive form of Tanthius, still resplendent in his Terminator armour, completely blocking the only way in and out of the room. The strategy was obvious and bordered on heresy aboard a battle-barge: if this was going to come down to violence between battle-brothers, Gabriel had his back covered. He knew that he could trust his friends, even in a potential conflict with another ranking Blood Raven - that was why they were his friends.

'What *exactly* do you find offensive about my judgement, Ulantus. And, more importantly, why should I care about it?'

The expression on Ulantus's face betrayed his emotions; he simply could not believe that he was having this conversation. The issues seemed to be as obvious as a supernova. For a moment, he found himself wishing that there was an inquisitor present to make the obvious allegations; he had never wished for such a thing in his life before. How could Gabriel be so blind? It was as though the eminent captain was actually challenging Ulantus to make some accusations.

'The specifics are of no matter at this time, captain,' replied Ulantus, trying to evade the issue.

He did not want the rift between them to grow any wider. He could not believe that Gabriel was so far gone down the slippery road to heresy that he would actually take control of the battle-barge by force, but then he had also not believed that the good captain would try to force him to accuse him of heresy in front of an array of witnesses.

'You are wrong, captain,' replied Gabriel. 'The specifics are entirely the point. If you are going to refuse to let me take the *Litany*, then both I and the other Masters of this Chapter are entitled to understand the reasons for your... reticence.'

'*You* accuse *me* of having questionable motives!' The anger spilled out at last. 'How dare you, Gabriel! How dare you? Who was it who vanished off to Rahe's Paradise with no good reason, leaving me to pick up the pieces on Trontix III and then engage multiple enemy forces here in the Lorn system? Who was it who subsequently demolished Rahe's Paradise altogether, without even a word of consultation with the Chapter Masters? Come to that, Gabriel, who was it who exterminated all life on Tartarus and Cyrene.'

As soon as he had said the words, Ulantus knew that he had gone too far. It was not his place to challenge the strategic decisions made by another commanding officer in the field, especially not those of a senior officer and the Commander of the Watch. He knew as well as anyone that decisions had to be made quickly and assertively, and that the burdens of command carried punishments of conscience as well as privileges.

'All I am saying, Gabriel,' he continued with a hint of contrition, 'is that you need to be a little more forthcoming about your reasons for taking this vessel back out into deep space. It is needed here to ensure the security and stability of Lorn V. Without good reasons, I cannot condone this course of action, and I will oppose it as best I can.'

As though on cue, two of Ulantus's sergeants rose out of their seats on the control deck and turned to face the group. Saulh, who was standing just behind Ulantus, planted his feet a little more securely against the deck.

'How do you propose to oppose me, Captain Ulantus?' Gabriel's eyes shone with daring. He was goading the junior officer, forcing him to reveal how far he was willing to go. If Ulantus acted now, it would be mutiny, and everyone knew it.

'By the Father, Gabriel! Why do you think that General Sturnn distrusted you so much? He has his own contacts in the Inquisition... This Tsensheer of the Ordo Xenos... Even this field officer of the Imperial Guard is now suspicious... about your record. No wonder he didn't want to co-operate with you! Can't you see, Gabriel? Can't you see what this is doing to the Blood Ravens themselves? By the Throne, we're talking about the Inquisition, Gabriel!' Ulantus sighed, as though realising that he had nothing left to lose. 'Gabriel - you should have seen the reaction of the Cadians when the Ultramarines arrived. Sturnn welcomed them as saviours—'

'Sturnn was mistaken about them, wasn't he.'

'That's not the point—'

'It's entirely the point. Sturnn is not a reliable standard of judgement. He welcomed the fraudulent Ultramarines, and he was suspicious about us. Why should I care about this?'

'You should care about the reputation and conduct of your Chapter, Gabriel. You are a Blood Raven before all else. Your actions reflect on all of us. I cannot let you behave as though you are somehow independent of us - you are not. This ship is not yours, it is given in trust to the Commander of the Watch. You cannot simply make it the base for your personal crusade against the eldar... or for the eldar, or whatever the hell it is that you think you're doing with those cursed aliens.'

In the next second, Corallis and Saulh both lurched forward, tugging their bolt pistols out of their holsters and levelling them, Corallis at Ulantus and Saulh at Corallis. Accusations of heresy demanded action, even if that action might also look like heresy.

'You will not talk to Captain Angelos in this way,' grated Corallis through gritted teeth.

'And you will not level your weapon at Captain Ulantus on his own bridge,' countered Saulh.

Gabriel made no attempt to make Corallis stand down, and he ignored Saulh completely. He was sure that he was standing on the right side of the law. 'Exactly what are you saying, captain? Are you accusing me of being in league with a defiled alien species? Are you accusing me of heresy, Ulantus? Is that what is happening here?'

LYING ACROSS THE altar under the swirling pearl of the Beacon Psykana, the sword fragment flared and pulsed with darker energies. A deep green light emanated from its heart, rising and falling rhythmically like the breath of a sleeping beast. It was its own kind of beacon, radiating an eerie green silence into the Sanctarium Arcanum, sullyng the sacred space with an unspeakable and unidentifiable pollution.

From the elevated podium in the apse, Korinth and Zhaphel looked on as the choir telepathica continued its ritual chants. The green-robed astropaths shuffled around the ambulatories with their gaunt, blind faces staring blankly ahead of them. Streams of psychic radiance streamed out of them, converging on the perpetually spinning gyroscope of the Beacon Psykana, which revolved beautifully and impossibly in the air above the altar.

The Summoning of the Exodus had been performed countless times in that ritual space, and the Librarians of the Secret Order of Psykana were always there to oversee it.

Even though this was only the second time that Korinth and Zhaphel had played such a central role, they were certain that things were not developing as they should. The first time had been the ceremony for Brother-Librarian Bherald, who had passed out of this world at the end of the Cyrene campaign. Korinth and Zhaphel had placed his helmet onto the altar and had watched over it for one hundred days, observing the rites and privileges afforded to a Librarian of the Order Psykana.

Despite the professed purpose of the Summoning, they had not expected Bherald to return to them, and they had performed their duties as exercises in respect and meditation. After the requisite period of time had passed, the Brother-Librarians of the Order had committed the helmet to rest, and Bherald's name was finally entered on the Wall of Accolades as a honoured Blood Raven lost to Chapter.

With Rhamah, things were different. They had no bodily remains; they had only this shattered fragment from his sword - the famed *Vairocanum*, that had once been the weapon of a mighty eldar warrior. It was the first time that an alien artefact had even been brought into the Sanctarium, and the Librarians were uncertain about the possible consequences of having done so. In the backs of their minds, they had wondered whether they were performing a kind of sacrilege. But they had little choice: neglecting or refusing to perform the Summoning of Exodus would have been tantamount to insulting the eternal soul of Rhamah and damning it to remain forever out of the Emperor's sight. They reasoned that it would be better to commit a small evil in order to achieve a greater good, so the ceremony had gone ahead.

As the shard of metal pulsed and glowed, surrounded by the swirling chants and energy flows of the choir telepathica, Korinth could see an elegant thread of silver being pulled down out of the Beacon Psykana. It grew with slow determination in tiny increments, expanding gradually down towards the sword fragment on the altar beneath the pearlescent sphere. It was as though something in the metallic shard was calling out to the pristine psychic signal and drawing it in, like a spider reeling in its web to reach its prey. And all the time the green glow in the blade fragment grew brighter and more intense.

'I do not trust this alien material, Zhaphel. It responds with its own energy, instead of conducting that of the Beacon towards our lost brother.'

Zhaphel nodded slowly, his gaze absorbed completely by the scene before him. His lips whispered a continuous thread of litanies into the prayer-riddled air and his eyes glistened as though looking upon a distant light. 'I share your concerns.' He was a man of few words.

The wizened and aging Librarian Jonas Urelie, once one of the keepers of the Order Psykana, had also expressed his surprise about the presence of an eldar relic on the altar when he had visited the Sanctarium to pay his respects. He had not offered any opinion about the appropriateness of it as a connection with the lost Librarian, but had simply noted that it was an unusually small item around which to conduct the ceremony. In hindsight, Korinth realised that his old mentor's response had been guarded; it was

no longer his place or his right to challenge the rites of Summoning - he had been away in isolation on Rahe's Paradise for many years - and he was a dutiful Space Marine. Perhaps Jonas also had concerns about the alien relic.

As they watched, the silver thread that extended out of the bottom of the beacon gradually thickened into a stream, with energy coursing down towards the sword-shard, which pulsed and ebbed with a swelling life of its own. The stream broke into a river, pouring the pristine silver energy out of the spherical beacon in such quantities that it appeared to be draining it completely. Then, without warning, the orb convulsed and spluttered and a tidal wave of energy crashed down out of the beacon, flooding over the oscillating energy field of the sword fragment and engulfing it in a torrent of mercurial silver.

Korinth and Zhaphel stood transfixed, unable to process what was happening. In all the centuries of its existence, they had never heard of anything like this having happened before. As far as they knew, the Beacon Psykana had burnt undimmed and unbroken since the days of Vidya himself, fuelled by the minds and souls of the brightest and best that the Scholastia Psykana could produce. And now, under their stewardship, it spat and ran thin like a viscous fountain.

For their part, the circling astropaths and the choir telepathica continued to chant and process around the turmoil of energy, with threads of silver still running from their blind faces up into the spluttering, misshapen orb.

They continued for a while as though nothing had happened, splashing through the ripples of energy that ebbed and flowed over the floor, like a tide lapping at their feet. If anything, their chant grew louder and the amount of energy that they were sacrificing into the beacon swelled. After a few seconds, other telepaths and astropaths emerged from the shadows beyond the ambulatories, where the reserves rested before it was their turn to take over in the service of the beacon. But rather than replacing the procession, the newcomers joined it, swelling its ranks and adding their voices to the harmonies and their wills to the flood of energy that struggled to keep the beacon alight.

The two Librarians looked down from the elevated podium in the apse with horror dawning onto their features. The beacon was still burning, but it had ruptured utterly, and as much energy spilled out of it onto the altar as was thrown into it by the heavily reinforced choir. It took all of the reserves of the entire choir telepathica just to keep the pearl of energy flickering with life. In the midst of the torrent, the sword fragment glowed and radiated life, but it hissed and fizzled under the flood of silvering energy, as though the two energies were rejecting each other. The downpour from the beacon bubbled and blistered as it struck the alien shard, and it seemed clear to Korinth that Rhamah's unusual weapon was the cause of the tumult. He took a step back away from the edge of the podium before darting forward and vaulting off the lip, splashing down into the waves of energy that lapped across the floor of the Sanctitorium. Pushing in between the ambulating astropaths, the Librarian strode towards the altar spinning his staff into readiness.

'No, wait!' bellowed Zhaphel from the podium as Korinth brought his staff back in an arc, ready to smash it into the shard of metal on the altar.

Korinth hesitated, looking up at his battle-brother for an explanation. 'Look,' stated Zhaphel simply.

Turning back to the roiling, curdling confusion of energy on the altar, Korinth let his eyes focus more deeply into the myriad reflections. There were other colours hidden in the depths - not only silver and alien green. Flecks of red and blue swam in random patterns, questing for coherence in dizzying whirls. As he stared into the mire, Korinth watched the colours swim into recognisable shapes; after a few seconds his eyes widened in recognition. It was Rhamah. The lost Blood Raven was prone in a desert, surrounded by crackling and impenetrable energy fields. His helmet was missing, and Korinth could see his battle-brother's face blistering in the heat.

As he watched, Korinth saw the eddying swirls of ineffable energy lance and spike into Rhamah's eyes, bursting them open into a maniacal gleam. The eyes expanded suddenly until Korinth could see nothing else in the mess of mercury, and he had to avert his own eyes from the chaotic intensity of the massive stare.

'I REMEMBER LIGHTS... They danced and riddled my mind.' I struggled to find the words to express the memories that rushed back into my head. There was a mixture of humiliation and intrigue in my thoughts as I realised that whatever had caused those lights was probably an even greater threat to me than the stranger who knelt at my side.

Yes, brother, there were lights. The aliens lured you into this trap, tempting your soul down from the cliff-top and into this forsaken city. We found you just in time.

Once again I stared into the Space Marine's face, trying to find the inexpressible comfort of familiarity in his implacable eyes. They shone back at me without light, as though sketched in by a clever but soulless artist. Every time I looked at him, I felt as though I was looking upon a different man, as though myriad souls were competing for expression on his face; all the time, a seething sea of souls simmered below the surface.

'I was like this when you found me?'

Yes, brother. We found you already unconscious, with your blade drawn and discarded. The aliens filled this hall, dancing their decadence and profanation into the fabric of this theatre. The shadows themselves conspired against you as the alien sorceries worked their magic on your broken mind. They gave you answers to questions that you had never thought to ask... which is why you were so vulnerable to them. You need to ask more questions, Son of Ahriman. The boundaries around your thoughts make you weak.

'And, what happened to the aliens?' I asked, trying to assimilate the information that the stranger kept pushing into my head.

I was not comfortable with this kind of communication, and I found it difficult to take possession of the thoughts that ran through my mind. I needed to feel that they were mine, that I had interrogated them and indigenised them before I could let them settle back into my memory, otherwise it would be as though this strange Marine were simply giving me knowledge and memories that I had not considered - he would be changing me from within, making me into somebody else.

Stay out of my mind! It was a subconscious impulse; the thought fired out of my head like a volley from an automatic defence cannon. The stranger had gone too far, and my primal instincts suddenly kicked in where my will had failed me.

The Space Marine's face twitched slightly, like a candle flickering in a sudden draft. His eyes narrowed in marked displeasure. 'The aliens are dead, friend. Look around.'

As he spoke, the Marine gestured with a glittering, golden gauntlet, indicating the circumference of the circular hall.

For the first time, I noticed the slick patterns of red blood that coated his fingertips, and I saw the destruction that had been wrought around the once-beautiful hall. There were slim, humanoid bodies, snapped and broken, slumped into bloody piles around the perimeter of the chamber. Each of the corpses wore brightly coloured and immaculately fitted armour. One or two of the aliens had made it to within a few strides of my position, but they lay prostrate on the ground at the end of a sliding wake of blood, their bodies shredded with bolter fire and ripped open with energy gashes. Their hands were outstretched before them, as though they had been reaching for me when the fire had punched into them.

'Come,' said the Marine, rising to his feet at last. He had watched carefully as I had taken in the scene around me, and something in my reaction had brought him to a decision. 'The Great Lord will want to see you now. He left clear instructions that you should be brought to him when you awoke. It has been so long since last we encountered a brother on our travels. You will come with me, now.'

The Great Lord? Did he meant the Great Father? Are we brothers after all? Taking a final look at the blood-drenched scene around me, I clambered to my feet and stood before the Marine. Our physiques were comparable; we were of similar height and build, and our armour gave us both the same air of formidable strength. Despite facing each other directly, neither of us stepped back. In both of our minds, this was a moment of test.

'Where is this lord?' I asked, challenging him to turn and lead the way.

BEDECKED IN HIS ancient and glorious Terminator armour, Tanthius stepped past Gabriel to flank Corallis, positioning himself between the raised weapons and his captain.

'Lower your weapon, sergeant,' he said to Saulh, his voice low and rumbling like a landslide. But Saulh's resolve did not waver and his gaze did not shift from Corallis. 'Sergeant,' he repeated. 'This is mutiny and it is heresy. You were there at Rahe's Paradise. You saw what happened. You know that Captain Angelos was right then, and you must suspect that he is right now. Lower your weapon.'

Saulh eye-checked his own captain, looking for direction, and Ulantus nodded slowly. With a complicated mixture of deliberate slowness, reluctance and relief, Saulh lowered his pistol to his side. He did not holster it. How had it come to this?

For his part, Corallis showed no signs of having noticed the release of tension, and he remained alert, his eyes burning with intensity and his pistol trained on Ulantus's head.

'I do not question your intentions, Gabriel,' said Ulantus, letting his eyes reveal the desperateness of the situation. 'But you must see this from my point of view.'

'Must I? Again you seem to fail to appreciate your position on this ship, captain. There is very little that I *must* do for you, short of preventing you from being flushed out into space. The Chapter Masters have faith in my judgment, which is why I am Commander of the Watch and you are not. Are you questioning their judgment too, even if not their intentions?'

'It is not my place to question such things,' conceded Ulantus, feeling the teeth of the trap snap closed around him. 'Explain what you need, *commander*, and I will see what can realistically be done to support you without compromising the position of the Blood Ravens in the Lorn system. This is my warzone, Gabriel, and I will not permit the Ninth Company to be left short.'

'Very well,' said Gabriel calmly, nodding to Corallis to lower his weapon. 'It is imperative that we return to the place in the warp where you lost Librarian Rhamah. It seems likely that there is a rupture in the fabric of the eldar webway at that point. I intend to enter the webway and follow its course. I am given to understand that its terminus is an ancient eldar world of knowledge, and it would be unwise to permit it to fall into less well-intentioned hands.'

Despite his scepticism, Ulantus was still a Blood Raven, and the mention of a world of lost eldar knowledge made his eyes sparkle with interest. 'You have said this much already, captain. I assume that the source of your information on this topic is the injured alien witch?'

'Taldeer, yes.' Gabriel was unphased; they had dealt with this question already, and Ulantus knew better than to start that argument again.

'And how will we find this rupture? Our Navigator made no mention of seeing the webway during the trip through the warp. Indeed, I can recall only myths and legends of any such sightings - are you sure that it is even possible for a Navigator to see this devious alien structure?'

'Taldeer will navigate the ship.'

A stunned silence gripped the control deck. Even Corallis and Tanthius slowly turned their faces towards their captain, staring at him in disbelief; they had not heard this part of the plan. It was bad enough that Gabriel insisted on giving the creature a name, but giving her a ship was beyond belief.

'She is the only one capable of locating the rupture and manoeuvring the *Litany* into place. Without her guidance, this mission comes to nothing,' explained Gabriel, ignoring the incredulity and outrage of his battle-brothers.

'You would rest the future of this venerable vessel in the mind of an alien witch, Commander of the Watch?' Ulantus's eyes had narrowed into slits of disgust.

'I believe that she is trustworthy in this regard. It is not in her interests to lure us into a trap. Her fleet engaged the necron in this sector in order to prevent them from closing the webway portal unearthed by General Sturmn - that portal was the entrance to the route that we must find. The eldar know this ancient enemy, and they know that it fears their control over the immaterium more than anything else. You must also have read the legends, Ulantus? And you are aware of what happened on Rahe's Paradise. The presence of the eldar and their esoteric lore is the key to the suppression of the necron.'

Ulantus hesitated. 'Was the portal destroyed?'

'Yes, but not by the necron.'

'Then by whom?'

A deep, slow voice from behind Gabriel made the group turn. 'We saw a Chaos frigate amongst the wreckage as we passed through the Lorn system. It was not an Alpha Legion vessel, and it was shrouded in psychic energy. We have reason to believe that a powerful sorcerer aboard that vessel may have ruptured the webway and somehow disabled the portal.' Jonas's tone was even and heavy with the authority of scholarship.

'Father Librarian Urelie,' nodded Ulantus, showing his respect for the aging Librarian. 'Forgive me for asking, but what reason do you have to suspect this?'

'We saw the vessel vanish into a warp rift. What we witnessed would be consistent with the explanation provided by the Harlequin,' explained Jonas.

'Harlequin?' Ulantus stared; this was getting worse all the time. 'Harlequin, captain?'

'When we went down to the surface of Lorn, General Sturmn showed us the webway portal that his men had excavated. Taldeer attempted to activate the portal, but the attempt failed because the portal was damaged. She assumed that the necron had been successful. However, an eldar Harlequin emerged from the ruins of the portal—'

'Do you really expect me to believe all of this, Gabriel? Can't you see how incredible this story is?'

'These are incredible times, Ulantus. Taldeer interpreted the Harlequin's dance to mean that a group of Chaos Marines had already made landfall on the ancient eldar world - they shattered the portal as they wrenched it from the planet's surface. The fear is that these Marines will make use of the untold esoteric knowledge hidden on that world. We cannot permit this to happen, Ulantus.'

Ulantus shook his head slowly. He had heard of the Harlequins. There were one or two tomes dedicated to them in the great librarium of the *Omnis Arcanum*, but nobody really believed that they were real. All of the evidence had been collected from fragments of forbidden eldar texts, assembled and reconstructed by agents of the Ordo Xenos in times long ago.

It was widely accepted amongst the most learned of the Blood Ravens Librarians that the Harlequins were part of eldar mythology - little more than characters from folklore that appeared in children's stories. They were supposed to be the guardians of the mythic Black Library - the eldar's grand repository of wisdom and erudition. They were the sentinels that stood guard over the timeless knowledge of the ancient race. But nobody had ever actually *seen* one.

'What do you expect me to say, Gabriel? Do you expect me to let you take the *Litany of Fury* out of a warzone, under the guidance of an alien witch, in pursuit of an unknown alien planet and an enemy that was identified by a mythological creature?'

'Yes,' nodded Gabriel. 'That is what I expect.'

'Why? Why should I do this?' Ulantus looked at Gabriel as though he were insane. 'I cannot do this, Gabriel. You *must* see it. This is not a question of your authority or even your judgment. This is a question of your sanity!'

With crisp efficiency, Corallis snapped his pistol back up into Ulantus's face. 'You will watch your tongue, captain.'

The control deck teetered on the brink of the abyss of heresy once again.

At the same moment, Saulh's pistol was levelled at Corallis, and Tanthius darted forward, forcing himself between the two sergeants and swatting Saulh's pistol with the palm of his gauntlet.

'I understand your concerns, Ulantus,' answered Gabriel, letting his mind drift momentarily back to his visions in the chapel. 'But you must understand that I do not need your approval, I merely demand your compliance.' He made no attempt to make Corallis or Tanthius stand down. 'The best solution here is a compromise: I will record your objections, and I will take my strike cruiser, the *Ravenous Spirit*, on this mission, leaving you with the *Litany* to consolidate this field of victory. You should be aware, Captain Ulantus, that your actions in this matter will not pass unnoticed.'

'You should also be aware of this, Captain Angelos. But it will be as you say.' With that, Ulantus strode past Tanthius and off the control deck.

Saulh flicked his eyes from Corallis to Tanthius, as though looking for something hidden in their purpose, and then he marched off after his captain, leaving the officers of the Third Company in command of the bridge.

THE SPACE MARINE pushed the massive double-doors, leaning into them to shift their immense weight. They cracked open and then gave way, swinging away from us in a cloud of dazzling dust, as the brilliant red light of the triple suns poured out of the ancient room beyond.

I should wait to be summoned. Something in the air told me that I should be careful of the man who waited for me beyond those doors. It was not merely the seriousness of the deference that was suddenly and completely affected by the Space Marine who had escorted me from the grand, circular hall twenty storeys below; there was a subtle power in the air itself, as though it were charged with unspeakable energies just beyond the confines of this reality. It felt as though an electric anticipation was oozing out of the immaterium and into this realm, permeating the very air that I breathed. Whoever waited in the room ahead, he was surrounded by an incalculable field of power.

No, you should merely enter. Unless... unless you are afraid of me.

For the second time, I was shocked to feel the presence of another's thoughts where I anticipated only my own. I chastised myself silently, feeling the weakness of my control and the vulnerabilities of my mind. Whoever this was, he should not be able to read my thoughts so easily, and he should certainly not be able to plant his own into my mind so effortlessly.

I will not fear what I do not know. Ignorance is the spark of curiosity, not of fear, I replied *Noble sentiments, indeed. You have come to the right place, friend of Ahriman.*

The thoughts were of an entirely different quality from those of the Marine that had knelt with me in the hall. These were heavy and light all at once. It was like having chilled mercury poured through my mind.

The words were icy and yet liquid, viscous without being sticky, substantial but sparkling with reflections.

It was not an alien voice. It didn't even feel external to my head. It felt as though it entered my mind from some forgotten place in the depths of my soul, rather than trying to prod and force its way in from outside. It felt comfortable and nauseating all at once, like too much rich food.

In front of me, the Space Marine stood with his back to one of the doors, holding it open. He nodded with his spectral, eerie head, gesturing for me to enter the room.

I held his shimmering eyes for a moment, and then walked through the door way, my strides filled with resolve and confidence. The doors clanged shut behind me, with the Marine on the outside. I did not look round.

'Welcome.'

For a moment I could not locate the origins of the deep, resonant voice. It seemed to echo around the room, as though refracted and reflected from thousands of mirrors. I turned with slow deliberation, letting my eyes scan over the hundreds of aisles of books and scrolls that filled the room. Great shafts of red light poured in from the circular window cavity that dominated the far wall, casting the thousands of shelves and millions of books into a bloody hue.

There was movement beyond the window opening, presumably from a balcony outside, and an impressive silhouette appeared into the blaze of red light, obliterating the suns. It paused without entering the room.

'You are welcome here, friend of Ahriman. Do you bring questions with you?'

I squinted against the flood of light that the figure wore as an aura, raising one hand to shield my eyes.

'Yes, I have many questions.' The name of Ahriman suddenly seemed to make a connection in my memory. I knew that name. It meant something to me. I had heard it before, or read it in some forgotten manuscript. My mind coated it in a sense of urgency, as though it knew that the name itself was important or dangerous, but I could not remember what it meant.

'You wish to know who I am?' The figure in the light did not move, but his voice seemed to shift freely around the room - at once behind me, beside me and in front of me.

'You are Ahriman,' I replied, realising that it must be true even as I spoke.

'And you?' There was a new quality in the strangely disembodied voice, but I could not tell whether it was surprise or pleasure.

'Are you a friend of Ahriman?'

'You have said so. I am better at questions than answers today.'

'As you say, so it is.'

He's testing me, checking my responses. Is he playing? No, this is too serious: he suspects something.

What do you think I suspect of you, friend?

'As I said, I am not good at answers today.' I cursed inwardly for letting the stranger into my mind. *I must keep my guard - I do not trust this one. He is more subtle than his Marines. His thoughts carry death in their undertones.*

'Where is this place?' I asked, taking my eyes off the silhouette and looking around the librarium.

There was a pause, and I imagined a smile on the indiscernible face. 'You have many questions, I'm sure.'

'That is not an answer.'

'What makes you think that I have any answers for you?'

'Did you bring me here to ask *me* questions? I have no answers for you, Ahriman. I don't even have answers for myself *I don't even know who I am.*

'You are Rhamah, a lost brother of Ahriman.' I nodded. *Yes. He has some answers after all.*

This place is part of the fabled Arcadian Librarium, one of the most extensive repositories of knowledge in the galaxy.'

Ahriman stepped into the room as he spoke, emerging from his own silhouette as he moved away from the flood of light in the window. The golden details on his deep blue armour shone with life, bursting into ruby radiance as the light of the triple suns bounced off the purity seals. The armour was inscribed from boots to shoulder guards in intricate, cursive scripts, only some of which were recognisably human, and only a few of which I could understand. I realised immediately that this was the sorcerer that I had seen in front of the Thunderhawk in the desert. 'And this room,' he continued, waving a casual and encompassing hand, 'is perhaps the most valuable room on the entire planet. It is the resting place of the *Legend of Lanthrilaq!*

Ahriman strode over to a heavy stone desk between the book stacks. It was covered in piles of manuscripts, tomes and scrolls. The great sorcerer tossed a few volumes aside, checking their spines casually, and then he pushed a whole pile off onto the ground, disregarding the ancient tomes as though they were little more than irrelevances.

Picking up one of the remaining books, he turned and offered it to me, holding it out like a gift. 'You have heard of this book, I'm sure.'

I shook my head and took a step towards him, reaching out my hand to take the book. 'I do not remember.' But something stirred in my memory; the name meant something to me, although I could not yet recall its significance. I knew that I could not resist the offer to touch such an ancient text. Its lure was sufficient to momentarily overcome my suspicions about the mysterious sorcerer. As my fingers closed around the edge of the book and I began to pull it out of his grasp, I felt Ahriman resist me. For a moment, we stood alone in the blood-lit librarium, our fingers only centimetres apart as we both gripped the tome. Delicate tendrils of energy arced between our hands, dancing over the dusty cover of the book. I wondered whether Ahriman had suddenly changed his mind and decided not to let me hold the book, but then I looked up into his face and saw the truth.

It was a face unlike any that I had ever seen.

With a faint smile, the features tensed suddenly and then relaxed. At the same moment, the book slid from Ahriman's grasp and I withdrew it, taking a step back to put some distance between me and the sorcerer, holding his inexplicable gaze all the time.

'Lanthrilaq the Swift was one of the great eldar warriors that once did battle with the star god, Kaelis Ra. It is said that he wielded one of the hundred Blades of Vaul in that epic duel.'

I carried the book over towards the circular window, holding it carefully into the flood of ruddy light. The cover glittered with runes and images that had been etched delicately into the dark material. I could make out the phonetic ideograms for Lanthrilaq - the swift one. They were run through by the image of a glorious blade, striking diagonally across the cover. The blade was damaged and chipped; its tip was missing completely, but it was decorated with a breathless whirl of alien characters that seemed to charge even its image with life and energy. On the jewel of the pommel there was a single runic symbol: Vaul - the smith-god of the ancient eldar.

'In times long ago, before even our Emperor drew breath in this galaxy, it is said that the Death-Bringer brought portents of the eldar's demise,' continued Ahriman. He was speaking slowly and with affected drama, watching me study the book, waiting for a response.

What does he want me to say? He mentioned "our Emperor", but his words were chilled and tinged with something other than reverence - or, perhaps, with something in addition to reverence. Who is this Ahriman?

None could stand before the might of this star-god, for it carried the scythe of death itself. The blood of entire systems could not slake its thirst, and the greatest of eldar heroes fell under its blade. But the ancient eldar were cunning, and they knew that there was more than one way to humble a god - this is their first great teaching to us, my friend: even gods can be shown humility. Through their whispered cunning, the eldar turned the c'tan against themselves, and they watched as the galaxy degenerated into unholy feasts of star-flesh. But Kaelis Ra saw the plan and turned his own wrath against the c'tan that betrayed his cause. The Nightbringer butchered its own kin, laying waste to the stars themselves in order to bring the necrontyr back into line. Meanwhile, the eldar were not idle. Their greatest warrior, Kaela Mensha Khaine consulted with the Laughing God and his Harlequins, receiving wisdom and advice. Then he struck a bargain with Vaul, the smith-god, commissioning him to forge one hundred blade-wraiths - swords of such glorious craftsmanship and power that they could slay the gods themselves. These were the legendary Blades of Vaul. With rage incandescent in his soul, Khaine led one hundred of his finest warriors in a final stand against Kaelis Ra. Each of the eldar faced hordes of silvered necrontyr so vast that the horizon glittered like the heavens in all directions. Yet, armed with the blade-wraiths, the eldar warriors knew no dread and no fear. They formed into a sweeping circle, each defending the back of another, and they fought like mythical heroes for seven days and seven nights, never tiring or falling back. But then the ring was broken. Lanthrilag the Swifft grew suddenly tired and drained of energy. His face turned pale and his features became gaunt. In an explosion of darkness, his blade-wraith cracked, falling from his hands into the corpse-strewn earth.'

I could feel Ahriman's eyes on me as he spoke, but I did not look at him. My attention was captured by the image of the broken eldar blade on the cover of the book, and saw that it resembled the now mutilated form of *Vairocanum*. I realised that the sorcerer could see the association growing in my mind.

Vaul had tricked the eldar; one of his blades was imperfect and flawed. The energies that pulsed and glowed within its mystical structure were imbalanced and unstable. Vaul had tricked Khaine, leaving him vulnerable to the wrath of the Nightbringer. Lanthrilag fell and Khaine's formation was mined. What followed was little more than a slaughter - the eldar heroes fell one after the other, valiant in their desperate and futile fight, as the thousands of silvering necrontyr overran their position. Their blades were shattered and ruined, falling into the rivers of blood as sparkling shards. Only Khaine himself stood above the fray, his spear flashing like lightning. On the point of his own exhaustion, Khaine came face to face with Kaelis Ra. At the last, as the Nightbringer's scythe sliced toward his neck, Khaine remembered the words of the Laughing God and he danced inside the blow, thrusting forward with his lightning spear and skewering Kaelis Ra just as his form solidified in order to land his own strike. The star god screamed and exploded into a rain of silver. The scattering essence of the Nightbringer shredded the teeming necrontyr, vaporising them and rendering the world into a mercurial flood, leaving only Khaine standing, howling his costly victory to the heavens.'

'Why are you telling me this story, Ahriman?' I asked, finally looking up from the book. The sorcerer was leaning against the stone desk with a heavy book in each hand, casually glancing at the pages as though mildly indifferent to the ancient knowledge that they contained. His manner sent a chill through my spine.

Is he suggesting that I am a weak link, like Lanthrilag? Perhaps he implies that I have been cheated by those whom I have trusted?

'What do you find in that tale, friend?'

'Is this a test?'

'Everything is a test. There are treasures hidden in all our words and in every story. The test of our power is whether we can identify and find those treasures.'

'The story is about Lanthrilag's blade,' I concluded quickly.

'How so?'

'We know that the other ninety-nine blades were destroyed, but Lanthrilag's fell from his hands whilst only damaged. The story does not say anything about what happened to it after the battle. We might suppose that it still exists in some form.'

Ahriman's face shifted into a smile. 'Very good, friend Rhamah. What is not told is often more important than what is pushed into our faces.'

'You suppose that this blade is here?'

'Supposition is bad scholarship; I would not presume. But its location is certainly worthy of investigation.'

'Why would you want to find this blade? Do you seek to wield it for yourself, Ahriman? Should we not exercise judgement about the types of treasures that are appropriate for us to possess? Some types of knowledge are too dangerous, no matter what their potential power.'

'Why should we be deprived of such things? We are not responsible for the mistakes of others, nor for the existence of any artefacts. We are responsible only for what we choose to do: knowledge is never dangerous on its own, friend Rhamah. Despite its imperfections, this is clearly a weapon of immense power, fashioned by the hands of a god. Certainly this is a blade worthy of Ahriman. I would be as blind as a fool not to recognise this. At the very least, we have a responsibility to investigate.'

I watched the sorcerer's eyes light up as he talked about the lost blade. He cast the two books from his hands, sending them skidding across the floor, and his face glowed with a sudden and maniacal flush of life, just talking about the ancient eldar artefact seemed to animate him, and a shimmering energy field flickered into life, oscillating around his body like an aura. But there was something about his attitude that disturbed me. I shared his excitement about the possibility of discovering more about ancient and forgotten lore, but I felt an instinctive sense of scepticism about utilising one of Vaul's blades: it was a treacherous and alien artefact, with no place in the hands of one of the Emperor's angels. *Knowledge is power.*

Exactly so. The thought was Ahriman's but it resounded in my mind as though it originated there. I had only just met this charismatic sorcerer, but already he was inside my mind, planting the seeds of a thirst for new knowledge and wisdom. 'Knowledge has many guardians,' I began, studying the sorcerer's unreal features as they shifted and moved over his face. I wondered whether we understood this role in the same way. 'Should I assume that the dead eldar in the hall downstairs were the guardians of this library?'

'That would seem to be a sensible conclusion.'

As Ahriman spoke, a flicker of blue flashed between the shafts of red light. A fluttering of green danced between two of the book stacks, and a blur of darkness streaked past the window. Instinctively, I tugged *Vairocanum* from its sheath and turned, tracking the vague and indiscernible movements. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ahriman lift his force staff from the desk, a broad grin cracking through his shimmering face. He turned, bringing his staff around in an ostentatious flourish, and then stepped back towards me. As the swirling colours started to solidify all around us, crystallising into the recognisable shapes of eldar Harlequins, I found myself standing back to back with Ahriman, surrounded by a ring of alien menace.

'Knowledge is power!' I yelled, hearing my words echoed from the mouth of the great sorcerer behind me. Then I sprang forward towards the Death Jesters, bringing *Vairocanum* around in a punishing arc.



CHAPTER SEVEN: RUPTURE

"ANY RUPTURE IN the webway is like a magnet for all the daemonic energies of the warp. To begin with, it might be little bigger than a man, perhaps torn out of the fabric of the timeless maze by the blaze of a force weapon, or perhaps it might grow from the tiniest of imperfections in the structure itself, gradually eroding and expanding throughout the millennia by the persistent and desperate thirst of the chaotic powers.

Time passes strangely in the warp, if it can be said to pass at all, but that does not mean that it is a static or changeless realm. The real character of the immaterium is Chaotic; it contains time and space, but not in the ordered and predictable ways that they are contained in the material realms.

In the ancient texts of the eldar farseers, now hidden in the depths of the fabled Black Library, it was once hypothesised that the warp was an expression of the terrible responsibilities of the farseers themselves. It contains images, echoes and reflections of the myriad time lines that penetrate reality, swirling and congealing around possibilities that seem satisfactory according to the natures of whatever unspeakable beings could be satisfied.

In the story of the Great Fall of the eldar, it is told how the daemon of Slaanesh was given form in the warp because of the lascivious, decadent and thirsty turn in the consciousness of the eldar themselves. As soon as the daemon roared into existence, it had suddenly always been there, and the farseers of the eldar people suddenly realised that they had always known that it was there, lurking on the fringes of their vision, waiting to emerge into a fully shaped nightmare.

The webway itself is only partly contained within the warp, although it has no existence outside the immaterium. It is an artefact from the golden days of the eldar empire, criss-crossing the galaxy like an intricate, dew-dappled spider's web. It is a maze and a labyrinth. It is a network of tunnels and passages, some as small as a man and others so large that a great space fleet could pass through unconstrained.

Like the foresight of the farseers and the emergence of Slaanesh, the webway is a testament to the profound and intimate connections between the eldar and the warp itself. The project to harness the spaceless and timeless warp was the greatest of the ancient eldar's achievements. To travel through the webway is to traverse the warp itself, insulated and protected by the golden passages of material space that the eldar managed to stabilise.

The ancient and glorious fleets of the Sons of Asuryan could blink across the galaxy in an instant, dropping into the webway in the eastern rim and emerging almost instantaneously in the cusp of the western arc; the trip through the warp was literally timeless when perceived from the material realm.

In the impossibly ancient past, at the time when the wars between the Old Ones and the Star Gods raged, the webway was the salvation of the eldar and the bane of the c'tan. The terror of the night, Kaelis Ra, vowed to return and destroy the structure that riddled the universe with the psychic curse of the eldar. Although the Nightbringer fell under the shining spear of Khaine, its vow remains to be fulfilled."

Extract from The Quest for the Black Library, author unknown. Fragments of the original text recovered by Librarian Jonas Urelie of the Blood Ravens, and stored aboard the Omnis Arcanum Librarium Sanctorum, 23.1274:c.XVII)

A RED LIGHT PULSED on the bridge, and a harsh klaxon pounded out an intrusion alert. Something alien had penetrated into the very heart of the Third Company's strike cruiser.

The *Ravenous Spirit* streaked through the timeless dimensions of the warp, ripping through the tempests and storms of uncontrolled energy that roiled and lashed around the venerable hull. The control deck was strangely silent, as the crew sat transfixed, staring at their terminals like an audience watching an intricate performance. The vessel was being controlled from elsewhere, and there was nothing that the serfs could do but watch. Aside from the persistent alarm, nothing in the chamber suggested that the *Spirit* was in peril; the crew appeared calm and there was only one Blood Raven officer at his station. Sergeant Kohath stood immovably in the centre of the deck, his eyes fixed on the dizzying kaleidoscope of colours that whirled and smeared across the main viewscreen. Yet there was something inexplicable in the air, a tension that held the scene on the cusp of a flashing red hysteria.

'Loren?' growled Kohath without shifting his gaze. 'Anything?'

'No, sergeant. Nothing that I can detect... But these sensors are not designed—'

'—to work in the warp,' cut in Kohath irritably. 'Yes, I know.'

Loren nodded silently, understanding the sergeant's brusque manner. None of them liked what was happening, but it was certainly not the place of a pledged-serf to question the plans of the Commander of the Watch. He knew the meaning of his pledge, and he was proud to be in service. However, he had never anticipated that pledging service to the Blood Ravens and the Emperor would place him under the power of an alien witch. The serf was accustomed to feeling powerless: his function was to follow the orders of the commanding officer without question, hesitation, or error. But this was an impotence of an entirely different nature: the *Ravenous Spirit* had been placed under the control of an alien consciousness, and even the Blood Ravens themselves had lost their usually implacable sense of control. It was like being in free-fall, waiting for the final impact.

In the klaxon-punctuated silence, the image on the viewscreen shifted and changed suddenly. A thin streak of gold lanced across the monitor, a band of radiance cutting through the quagmire of sickly colours and swirling darkness. Whilst all the other shapes

and images seemed to swim and morph freely in nauseatingly chaotic patterns, the tube of gold appeared solid and material. As they watched, the golden tube thickened and grew larger until it dominated the screen.

'Loren?'

'I guess that's it, sergeant. The regular sensors are still non-functional.'

Kohath watched for a few more seconds, noting the way in which the curdling tendrils of colour in the void around the lance of gold lapped and licked at its structure. Momentary flashes of light revealed the ghosts of beastly figures clambering over the golden surface, clawing at its integrity with a violent hunger. The eldar witch had done something to the imaging system; it projected the visions from her mind's eye. They were seeing what she was seeing.

'Captain,' said Kohath, clicking the *Spirit's* vox-relay to open a channel to the Navigatorium. A blast of static fed back into the control room. 'Captain Angelos,' he repeated, 'it appears that we have found the webway.'

THE ELDAR SEER was tiny in the massive throne, held high on a pedestal in the centre of the vast Navigatorium that domed up out of the top of the *Ravenous Spirit*. Her figure looked almost impossibly slight and fragile, and her pale complexion had taken on the hue of death. A maze of wires, pipes and connections studded her limp body, trailing off into the walls and into the ceiling, and plugging directly into the labyrinthine structure of the throne itself. She was hard wired into the very soul of the ancient vessel, feeling its passage through the warp as though it were her own. Every few seconds, she flinched and shuddered, as though shivering against the touch of a profound cold, making the myriad wires shake and oscillate like tendrils.

Gabriel watched the pain and suffering of the eldar witch. Despite himself, he felt some pangs of sympathy for the frail female, and his mind wandered back to the agonies of the young neophyte, Ckrius, who still laid strapped to the adamantium operating table in the Implantation Chamber of the *Litany of Fury*. So much pain.

The captain's eye-lids twitched involuntarily and closed for a moment, giving his mind a fraction of a second of darkness in which to fill his thoughts full of images of terror and suffering. The vivid memory of Isador's face flickered and vanished, replaced by the rain of melting flesh that fell from the bodies of the people of Cyrene.

A reassuringly firm hand gripped his shoulder, and Gabriel realised that he was swaying slightly. Although his eyes were wide open, his vision was tinged with a wash of silver light. At the touch from Jonas, the light flickered and vanished abruptly.

'Gabriel - are you alright?' asked Jonas, steadying his captain and eying him with concern. He remembered the incident on Rahe's Paradise, when Gabriel had collapsed during the Blood Trials.

'Fine, father. Thank you.' If he had to be deprived of the counsel and companionship of both Prathios and Isador, he was relieved to have the wizened old Librarian at his side.

Standing behind the captain, Librarians Korinth and Zhaphel exchanged glances. They had heard the rumours about Gabriel, but they had not taken them too seriously, and they had certainly not thought that they would witness any of the symptoms so quickly. A moment of physical weakness hardly constituted an act of heresy, but it was highly unusual for a Blood Raven to display any kind of unprovoked frailty. The two Ninth Company Librarians had only been aboard the *Ravenous Spirit* for a couple of hours, but already they were beginning to understand that the Commander of the Watch and Captain of the Third Company was no ordinary Marine.

Bound into the Navigator's throne, Taldeer twitched then spasmed. Her slender muscles tensed and her limbs snapped straight, transforming her into a rigid board. A disembodied moan echoed through the domed chamber, but it did not seem to originate from the eldar's throat.

Immediately, Techmarine Ephraim darted forward, pressing the eldar seer down into the throne with his human arms whilst the mechanical augmetics chattered and whirled between the various couplings and connectors that linked the female alien to the heart of the *Spirit*. It was as though the ancient vessel was trying to reject the alien incursion, like a body rejecting an incompatible organ. But the *Ravenous Spirit* was already deeply immersed in the warp; if the eldar witch were ejected from the seat of the Navigator now, then the entire vessel and all of its crew would be lost. Even if he had to hold the alien in place with the brute strength of his arms, Ephraim would ensure that she could not break loose. Pain wracked her features, and her suffering was obvious to them all, but Ephraim's concern was for the machine spirit of the *Spirit* itself; if safe passage meant the death of the eldar witch, then so be it. Her agonies meant nothing.

In the back of his mind Ephraim toyed with the possibility of throwing the relay and cutting the eldar out of the control circuit - the regular Navigator was already strapped into the back-up station in the *Litany's* stern. If things got too bad, at least he had this option, although he could not throw the switch without the approval of Captain Angelos, no matter what the circumstances.

'Brother Librarian Korinth,' said Jonas, turning to face the Ninth Company Marine. It was as though the father Librarian could sense the constellation of doubts in the younger Librarian's mind. 'Focus is the key to insight. See whether you and Brother Zhaphel can be of assistance in this.'

The Librarians nodded crisply and strode up the spiral of steps towards the throne, where Ephraim continued to work on the tortured form of Taldeer. They stood to either side of the alien, towering over her twisted and slight body, letting the mechanical arms of the Techmarine twitch and flutter around her head and torso, keeping the connectors tight and secure.

'She is being rejected,' muttered Ephraim, hardly looking up from his work as the two Librarians took up positions beside him.

'The *Spirit* will not accept her presence here, and the interface was not designed with an alien psyker in mind. The connections are flimsy and malformed, and the psychic resonances are off-kilter. I am amazed that she had managed to stay engaged for so long.'

Korinth nodded with understanding. It was bad enough that the vessel had been forced into the warp without a Navigator in the throne; many ships would have rebelled from the very start of this process. But to be made dependent on an alien mind and alien eyes might in itself be enough to bring the cmiser to the point of self-destruction. All over the *Spirit*, through its twisting corridors, antechambers, docks and control rooms, intrusion alarms were pulsing and klaxons were sounding. The ship thought that it was under attack from within, even as it found itself plunged into the dizzying, immaterial mire of the warp itself outside.

Looking down into the alien's contorted and beautiful face, Korinth felt a mixture of emotions competing for his will. He had never been this close to an eldar seer before, and a deep seated hatred and disgust seethed in his heart. A race-memory, hardwired into his being, awoke without provocation. He felt a wave of revulsion and offence flowing over him, and the corner of his lip snarled involuntarily. *Of course the ship is rejecting this wretched creature. She is the damned and the heretic. She is the ancient foe of the Emperor. She is the genesis of cursed erudition, that which leads our disciplined minds into the abyss.*

The thoughts were only half contained in his head, and Zhaphel looked across at his battle-brother, noting the expression of repugnance that scarred his face. *You are not being asked to trust this creature; you are being asked to trust the Commander of the Watch.*

But I do not trust him, Zhaphel. And neither do you. Being asked to trust the untrustworthy is little more than a test of loyalty, and this is no time for games. Korinth looked up from the wretched, broken body and fixed Zhaphel with his uneven dark eyes. *You and I both know why we are here.*

The other Librarian held his battle-brother's red and black gaze for a moment, letting him see the fires that simmered behind his own golden eyes. The delicate metallic emblem of the Order Psykana glinted from behind locks of his long, grey hair like a third eye, just above his left temple.

He nodded slowly. After what had happened in the Sanctorium Arcanum, what choice did they have? Even Captain Ulantus had been forced to let them go, despite his insistence that Captain Angelos had simply gone insane. Korinth and Zhaphel had impressed upon him the urgency and secrecy of their responsibility to the Order Psykana, and they had suggested that they might be released temporarily into the command of Father Librarian Jonas Urelie, who had recently returned to the Third Company. Begrudgingly, Ulantus had conceded this, and he had accepted that the Librarians were unable to tell him the reasons for their actions.

It was not unprecedented for an entire squad of Blood Ravens Librarians to be formed under the semi-autonomous command of a father Librarian; indeed, this was the usual manner in which the Order Psykana deployed its unique power. To some extent, because of its complicated and intricate connections through the Ecclesiarchy and Scholastia Psykana, back even to the grandest halls of Terra itself, the Secret Orders of Psykana resembled an entrenched organisation in its own right: it had its own internal hierarchy and a distinct sense of purpose.

In practice, however, every single Librarian in the Order was a Blood Raven before anything else. Moving from the Ninth Company to join a team under the command of Jonas Urelie was little different from being seconded into the Third Company itself, under the command of Gabriel Angelos. Ulantus had known this, and he had hated being forced to release two of his most powerful Librarians into the service of the unsavoury Commander of the Watch; too many decisions had been taken out of his hands over the course of the last day, and he was furious with indignation and frustration.

A piercing cry cracked through the Navagatorium as the eldar seer's body went rigid, straining up against the tubes, wires, and restraints. She thrashed against the weight of Ephraim as he pressed down on her chest. Despite his massively superior strength, the Techmarine was struggling to keep the slight alien from ripping clear of the throne.

The shrill scream echoed around the chamber, cutting shivers from the spines of the Blood Ravens. Zhaphel planted the palm of his hand on the alien's face and slammed her head back against the adamantium structure of the throne itself, silencing the scream and making her body fall suddenly limp. The warning klaxons stopped abruptly.

Turning in the sudden silence, the Librarian could see Gabriel pounding up the spiral stairs towards the throne.

'What did you do, Librarian?' he demanded.

Before Zhaphel could answer, Gabriel was on his knees at the side of the eldar witch. He gripped her hand in one of his own, and reached for her blood smeared face. Just then, Jonas caught up with him and joined the group around the throne. They all looked down at the tiny form of the alien creature, broken, bleeding and shattered by the agonies of the warp and the hostility of the *Ravenous Spirit*.

'Is she dead, captain?' asked Jonas, giving words to fill the silence.

With an eruption of noise, the incursion alarms suddenly started again, and the witch's eyes flicked open so unexpectedly that the Space Marines started.

Gabriel. It is filled with horror! Her fathomless eyes seemed to contain the warp itself, and Gabriel could see the daemonic tempest that raged around the webway as though it were reflected in the deep black of her pupils.

VAIROCANUM SPARKED AND flared as it collided with the shimmering blades that protruded out of the back of the alien's hands. The eldar Harlequin twisted rapidly, but did not turn away. Instead, the lithe warrior darted inside the arc of my sword, punching forward with its other fist, which was tipped with a long, sharpened barrel. There was no time for me to parry or retreat. As the fleet figure threw its weight into the counter-attack, I dropped my shoulder and let myself fall forward into a roll, flipping over the top of the bizarre weapon.

Rolling back onto my feet, I swung *Vairocanum* back in a wide crescent, turning in time to see the glowing blade slice perfectly through the alien's throat. But there was no blood and there was no deathly scream. Instead, the eldar warrior flickered slightly, like a holographic projection that my sword had momentarily disturbed. At the same instant, I caught sight of a movement to one side. Out the corner of my eye, I saw the same alien warrior lunging at me, its terrible, skull-like face grinning with insane excitement.

Two places at once! The realisation struck me just before the pointed barrel of the Harlequin's weapon. I felt a dull pain punch into my abdomen, and I realised that the weapon had just kissed the surface of my armour but had failed to break through. Glancing down, I saw a fibrous web erupt out of the barrel, sending tiny tendrils questing over the surface of my armour, searching for seams and weaknesses.

But when I looked up again, the Harlequin was not where it should have been. Even though I could feel the scraping impact of the Harlequin's Kiss on the right hand side of my armour, the eldar warrior appeared to be dancing off to the left, leaving a multicoloured blur of light in its wake.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I spun *Vairocanum* vertically, bringing it around in a defensive circle in front of me, ensuring that it would slice through anything that was pressing against me. Although the Harlequin appeared to be several metres away, I felt my blade bite into its gauntleted arm, and I pushed the sword through the resistance offered by the alien's bones. This time there was a shriek of pain. The holographic image of the eldar flickered again and one of its hands faded away. A clattering impact next to my feet told me that I had severed the deceitful creature's forearm.

'They have some kind of holographic camouflage.' I didn't want Ahriman to be taken unawares. I could feel the movements of the sorcerer behind me, as he did battle with others from the Harlequin troupe.

Yes. Holo-suits. Ahriman could give the technology a name. *They mask the fighter and project his image elsewhere.*

Ahriman was a blaze of power. His force staff swirled and spun, spilling lances of warp fire into jagged forks of lightning, which ripped through the mire of misperception that surrounded the two Marines. The holographic images flickered and faded, pulsing with inconsistency as the sorcerer's power interfered with their signal. At the same time, the Harlequin troupe itself wavered and glimmered into intermittent visibility. There were probably twenty of them in the librarium, each leaping and dancing with incredible vitality and menace.

I braced my sword and turned to stand at Ahriman's shoulder. Here and there between the book stacks, I could see the dizzying distortion patterns that had lured me there in the first place. They shimmered and burst into blindingly bright shards of multicoloured light, filling my thoughts with nausea.

Domino-fields. Ahriman gave them a name too, as though sensing my question before I could give it a voice. *It's a blanket light disruptor. The deceitful wretches are hidden in that cloud of light somewhere.* As the thoughts entered my head, I saw a massive javelin of power stab out from Ahriman's staff and pound into the myriad lights. They blinked momentarily as an explosion incinerated several shelves of books, but then they shone even more brilliantly again, as though unaffected by Ahriman's blast. Several of the oddly coloured Harlequins suddenly stopped their continuous and disorientating movement, turning their hideous masks towards us, letting us gaze upon the steady and unflinching horror of their features. For a fraction of a second, neither Ahriman nor I moved; we just stared at the face of death itself, recognising in the features of those alien tricksters the horror of our own condition. It was as though our fears were somehow amplified and projected by the masks.

A fraction of a second was all that the aliens needed, and they charged forward in a cacophony of yells, shrieks and ululations. Somehow their masks seemed to swell and grow to unnatural sizes, as though threatening to fill our entire field of vision, seducing our eyes with their horror and overwhelming our senses. But under cover of this illusionary onslaught, powerblades and riveblades slashed and jostled towards us.

Shoulder to shoulder, Ahriman and I crashed forwards into the tempest of blades, lashing and thrashing with staff, sword and javelins of warp power. At that instant, the doors to the librarium burst open, cracking off their hinges and crashing to the floor. Without turning, we knew that a squad of Prodigal Sons had heard the battle and had come to reinforce us. Battle-brothers. Immediately, volleys of bolter fire started to whine past my head, punching into the discombobulating, ever-shifting formation of Harlequins.

FOR A LONG moment Korinth stood in silence, as though teetering on the cusp between obedience and defiance. He had joined the *Ravenous Spirit* with full knowledge about the reputation of the eccentric Captain Angelos. After the events that had transpired in the Sanctorium Arcanum, he and Zhaphel had agreed that they had no choice but to return to the place where Rhamah had vanished. The lore of the Exodus of the Summoning was very clear about the necessary responses to anomalies in the ceremony. Captain Angelos and the *Ravenous Spirit* were the only conceivable way back. However, nothing had prepared him for the full scale of Angelos's vision.

'This course of action is insane.' There, it was said. The low resonant tones echoed slowly through the cavernous space of the docking bay, bouncing lethargically off the hulls of the Thunderhawks that lay dormant. The bay pulsed with red warning lights and a steady, mind-dulling siren wailed persistently. Although the alien witch had been severed from the control loop and replaced by the Navigator in the stem-based backup throne, the ship was still suffering the trauma of submersion in the warp and the aftershocks of the violations by the eldar mind.

Nobody offered any response to Korinth's objections. They just ignored him, busying themselves with heavy equipment and supplies, loading them into the nearest Thunderhawk and then bracing them into harnesses for the journey. A gaggle of servitors and serfs milled around the hull, directed by sharp shouts from Techmarine Ephraim. They were making some modifications to the structure of the gunship, adding a series of new sensor-arrays and shield relays.

Korinth turned to Zhaphel, who was standing to one side of the Thunderhawk with his Dorian force-axe slung imposingly over his shoulder. Under his other arm was his helmet. His golden eyes glinted from behind a careless mess of hair, and the mark of the Order Psykana shimmered faintly like a third eye, but he did not turn to meet his battle-brother's gaze. He appeared lost in contemplation, watching the events unfold before him as though quite detached from them.

This is a step too far, Yupres. Surely you can see that. It is one thing to have faith in the captain or even to obey him, but it is quite another to condone foolishness or even heresy.

Very slowly, Zhaphel turned his head towards Korinth, bringing his golden eyes to meet the uneven, red and black gaze of his comrade. He said nothing, but his silence said it all. Nobody ever called him Yupres any more; it was the name that his mother had given him when he was born. It didn't belong to him any more. The galaxy had changed utterly since the last time that anyone had uttered that name, and he had changed even more.

We are explorers, Korinth. We are bound by duty and by nature. And that was it. No arguments, just statements of fact. *There will be no talk of heresy today.*

A rush of movement from the other Space Marines next to the Thunderhawk's ramp drew the Librarian's attention over to the main hangar doors. They rolled open, withdrawing into the ceiling of the docking bay to reveal an unlikely group of figures. Captain Angelos was there with Father Librarian Urelie and Apothecary Medicus. Between them they were carrying a large, heavy throne, in which was slumped the broken and contorted figure of the eldar seer. Even from that distance, Korinth could see the toxic, alien blood coursing out of the wounds that had opened up around the couplings and connectors that had been pushed into the witch's flesh. If she had been human, Korinth would have given her up for dead.

Tanthius and Corallis leapt down from the interior of the Thunderhawk and dashed over to assist their captain, pounding across the metal floor with heavy boots.

As the group approached the gunship, Gabriel and Jonas broke away, letting the others carry the alien up the ramp into the Thunderhawk, trusting that they would take appropriate care of her.

'Ephraim,' called Gabriel, looking up onto the roof of the gunship to find the Techmarine in the eerie pulsing red light. 'You will be needed inside. She is here.'

'As you wish, captain,' replied Ephraim, vaulting down and swinging himself around into the open hatch.

At last, Gabriel turned to face Korinth. 'I am honoured that you will be joining us, Librarian Korinth. Jonas speaks most highly of your abilities. I am sure that you will be an asset to us in the difficult times ahead.' For a moment, the captain was perturbed by the Librarian's mismatched, red and black eyes.

Korinth bowed uneasily. 'Thank you, captain.'

On the fringe of the greetings, Zhaphel nodded his silent assent.

'Captain...'

'Yes, Librarian. Speak your mind. There can be no doubts after this. It is a step with no guarantees of return. Besides,' he smiled weakly, 'questions are what make us Blood Ravens.'

Korinth nodded, acknowledging the captain's integrity despite his prejudices. 'I have concerns about this course of action, captain. Placing the alien in charge of the *Spirit* was further than most servants of the Emperor would be prepared to travel on this road, but I can understand your reasoning. That is why we are here,' he said, implicitly including Zhaphel. 'But this is no longer merely a question of accepting the guidance of an alien. This Thunderhawk is simply incapable of functioning in the warp - it has no warp shields and is too small to have any fitted. Even with the best guidance in the world, I do not think that this course of action is anything other than suicide.'

Gabriel nodded gravely. 'I understand your concerns, Korinth, and I share them. I cannot allay your fears with words of reason; I can only appeal to your faith. I *know* that this will work. My faith is not based on the words of Taldeer, but rather on the certainties of the Emperor's will. I have... I have seen the Emperor's approval.'

Korinth's uneven eyes flashed with shock, and Zhaphel took an involuntary step towards them. Even Jonas looked pained.

'You claim to have seen the Emperor's will?' Korinth made no attempt to disguise his incredulity. He had previously dismissed the whispered rumours about the captain's visions as malicious lies designed to further discredit the Commander of the Watch.

Rumours had a tendency to morph and swell, as though they had lives of their own - scholars had to cultivate a healthy scepticism about them. But Gabriel was not an astropath, not even a sanctioned psyker; to receive any kinds of visions would be grounds for prosecution by the Ordo Hereticus.

'Do not misunderstand me, Librarian,' continued Gabriel, seeing the change in Korinth's eyes and feeling the abrupt increase in tension from the other Librarians. He weighed his words, but there was no apology or doubt in them. This is the intuition of a scholar. The greatest advances in our knowledge have been made through leaps of intuition. Rational thought and deduction can take us only so far - using them we can never move beyond the evidence that we have at hand. Yet it would be foolish to believe that we have in our possession all of the possible evidence about any issue. Even the great Librarium Sanctorum on the *Omnis Arcanum* has gaps in its records, holes in the historical archive, entire systems about which nothing is known at all. Ignorance of a thing does not mean that it is not real; it means only that we have not yet discovered it. Is it not the task of the explorer and the researcher to discover the undiscovered... to reach for the unknown with the certainty - the faith - that it is there?'

'This is not a question of faith, Angelos,' said Zhaphel. There was a complicated respect beneath his gruff address. 'Not in you, not in the Emperor. This is a question of technology. The Thunderhawk cannot shield us from the daemonic energies of the warp. At best, we will die fighting.'

'That is always the best that we can hope for, Zhaphel.' Gabriel smiled.

'The problem is that the rupture in the webway is too small for the *Ravenous Spirit* to fit through,' said Jonas, realising that the captain was not addressing the concerns of the Librarians. It was almost as though Gabriel didn't understand the nature of their concerns, which worried the father Librarian. 'The eldar seer has brought us this far, and our trust in her has proven to be justified. Of this much we can be certain, brothers; as you saw, the journey has been at a great personal cost to her. In order to enter the webway and follow it to our destination, we have no choice but to attempt it in a smaller vessel. The Thunderhawks are all we have.' He paused.

Brothers, I would not ask this of anyone, but you are sworn to complete the Summoning of the Exodus - if Rhamah can still be recovered, then this is our only chance. The tear in the webway was probably caused by his fall. All of our fates lie beyond this choice - we should make this stand together. Who better than the Librarians of the Order Psykana should stand against the warp?

'The Thunderhawk has been modified according to the specifications of Taldeer. The eldar have superior knowledge of the warp, and we should not be afraid to acknowledge this,' continued Gabriel, aware that his position on this matter was more than controversial. 'Seer Taldeer says that she will be able to protect a gunship as small as a Thunderhawk for a short period. The *Ravenous Spirit* is close enough to the breach in the webway to ensure only a brief exposure to the warp before the Thunderhawk penetrates the structure. Once inside, we will be shielded by the architecture of the webway itself. She will need your support, Librarians. This is not an impossible task.'

'Captain!' The call came from inside the hull of the Thunderhawk. After a couple of seconds, Corallis appeared at the top of the ramp. 'The alien is in place. Medicius and Ephraim have installed her, and the Litanies of Pacification have been performed to honour the vessel's machine spirit. Medicius is about to return to the Implantation Chamber to oversee the next phase of the young Ckrius's treatment. We are as ready as we will ever be, captain.'

'Thank you, sergeant,' nodded Gabriel, turning back to regard the Librarians, waiting for their judgment. 'Well, brothers?' There was a long pause. 'It will be as you say, captain,' said Zhaphel finally. He nodded deferentially and then strode up the ramp into the Thunderhawk.

Korinth watched his battle-brother ascend into the gunship and then dropped his uneven eyes back into the blue-green sheen of Gabriel's gaze. For a number of seconds he said nothing, simply staring into Gabriel's eyes, searching for a sign of corruption or of purity. Then he turned slowly to face Jonas. *We will see this done. Knowledge is power.* He was resolved. Bowing sharply he strode up the ramp after Zhaphel.

THE BROKEN AND bloodied bodies of eldar Harlequins littered the floor of the librarium. With their holo-suits and domino-fields destroyed, the aliens looked effete and feeble; their dramatic and menacing visage was reduced to pantomime, and their bright colours were dulled by the ichorous coat of toxic blood. Intermixed amongst the turgid eldar bodies were the magnificent shapes of a handful of Prodigal Sons, each having fallen in the craze of battle in the librarium. A couple of the Marines were still alive, but they had terrible slash-wounds inflicted by the eldar powerblades. Two of the dead Marines were ruined beyond recognition. They had been riddled with fire from the Harlequins' shrieker cannons, filling their superhuman blood stream with virulent toxins that excited the nervous system into overdrive: their armour had cracked and blown apart from the inside as their bodies had exploded from within.

Only a single Harlequin remained alive. It had been backed into a dark corner of the librarium, in amongst the book stacks. A knot of five Prodigal Sons were arrayed in a crescent around it preventing it from escaping, jabbing it occasionally with their blades and shooting random volleys of bolter shells into the floor, walls and ceiling around it. For its part, the alien looked wracked with fear and panic, but it emitted no sound at all. It merely stared, wide-eyed and maniacal, like a caged animal.

It makes no noise. It looked different from the Harlequins in the rest of the troupe. The colours on its armour were more understated and subtle; its build was even more delicate but its movements were so graceful that they seemed like poetry. Standing in the midst of the corpses, I watched Ahriman stride over towards the prisoner, trampling over the bodies of eldar and Marines without regard.

Distaur.

The word floated easily into my mind, as though Ahriman were answering my unspoken questions once again. He showed no sign of paying me any attention, and his back was to me. I wondered whether he was sharing his knowledge with all of the Marines in the room. *Distaur - it means "mime". These are unusual and rare specimens, my sons. We should treat it carefully.*

As Ahriman approached, the formation of Prodigal Sons parted to let him through. With a single stride, the sorcerer brought himself close to the Harlequin mime, watching it squirm and writhe in an attempt to keep some distance between them. For a few moments, Ahriman did nothing; close enough to feel the creature's breath, he just watched the discomfort of the alien, as though he were studying its reactions. Then suddenly, without provocation or warning, Ahriman's hand shot out and clasped around the eldar's throat. He lifted the creature easily into the air, bringing its masked face level with his own unearthly features, feeling its limbs twitching and tensing against the violence being done to its neck.

Distaur — mime — let's see whether you are really mute, or whether there is anything you can tell us about this place.

THE GLITTERING WRAITHSHIP *Eternal Star* flashed into the outskirts of the Lorn system, its wings swept back like a speeding raptor. In close formation behind it was the sleek and dark form of the Ghost Dragon, *Avenging Sword*. The two eldar cruisers decelerated rapidly as they entered planetary space, checking their movement against the complex gravitational forces and suddenly surrounded by chunks of tumbling space debris.

Deep within the shimmering structure of the *Eternal Star*, Farseer Macha sat in focussed mediation. Her Wraithship fluttered and flashed in accord with her will, darting and weaving through the outskirts of the system, sliding in between the asteroids and rolling chunks of junk. The cruiser's movement was organic and fluid, as though it were a living entity, or an extension of the farseer's will.

On the bridge of his Ghost Dragon, Uldreth the Avenger kept his eyes on the ethereal gleam of Macha's vessel. He marvelled at its beauty and elegance. Wraithships were rare and ancient vessels, and Uldreth never ceased to be awed by their bird-like grace - the *Eternal Star* touched something primeval in his soul, speaking to him of the nature of his people. In comparison, his sleek and dangerous Dragon-class cruiser seemed cold and overly technological; it swerved and manoeuvred with perfect precision in the wake of the farseer's ship. For a moment, Uldreth realised that his appreciation of the Wraithship was intermixed in his mind with a sense of the beauty of Macha herself. He realised that his heart was still filled with relief that the farseer was alive.

The *Avenging Sword* snapped abmptly to one side, rolling over on its axis as though in an evasive manoeuvre. Flicking his attention away from the dancing light of the *Eternal Star*, Uldreth suddenly realised what had happened in the Lorn system. The whole system was littered with wreckage and debris. Ruined cruisers and gunships tumbled lifelessly through the void. There were clumsy mon-keigh vessels intermixed with the ruined shapes of shattered Shadowhunters. Massive and unspeakably ugly greenskin hulks bled fuel as they slowly disintegrated. Spinning chunks of rock rained past the *Sword* like asteroids, but they had such velocity that they must have been the debris scattered after a massive explosion.

As the eldar cruisers approached Lorn VII, a monstrous glowering gas giant of a planet, Uldreth's heart sank. Emerging from the far side of the planet, locked into a declining orbit by the gravitational pull of the vast planet, the exarch saw the familiar shape of a Dragon-class cruiser, emblazoned with the iconography of Biel-Tan. The long, slender craft was lifeless. Its majestic star-sloop, which projected out of the hull like the dorsal fin of a predatory fish, was torn and holed. The weapons batteries at the prow had

been completely blown away, leaving the fuselage ruptured and gaping into the void of space. The entire front end of the once-beautiful vessel had been pummelled into hideousness.

Uldreth recognised the cruiser at once. It was the *Exaltation*; one of the most ancient vessels from the Biel-Tan fleet, built so long ago that not even the oldest of the craftworld could remember its origins. Legend told that its name was given in honour of Khaine himself: it was a weapon worthy of his praise; its violence exalted the Bloody-Handed God. It was Taldeer's ship.

This is not your doing. Macha's thoughts were calm and full of compassion, but they pressed forcefully into Uldreth's mind. She knew him well, and she knew how he would react to these revelations.

Scans of the rest of the system revealed that there was not a single functioning Biel-Tan vessel, other than the two cruisers.

However, the sensors indicated the presence of Yngir technology, mostly in the form of fragmented and inconsistent signals.

What have I done? Uldreth's mind recoiled, his sense of guilt overriding his reason until he was unable to engage with Macha's thoughts. Remorse and regret hammered into his head, obliterating the farseer's attempts at reassurance. *The Yngir were here too.*

Taldeer saw this and she embraced her visions. You could not stand in her way, Uldreth of the Dire Avengers. You sent her with a glorious army at her disposal. You were right. Not even I could see the echoes of the ascension in Lorn. Not even I could see beyond the battles of Lsathranil's Shield. We made our choices, and now we are here. You cannot be blamed for a lack of far-sight

- if there is guilt here, it is mine alone. But the question is not what we should have done differently in the past; it is rather what we can do to shape the future into our favour. The past is untouchable; the future is yet to be chosen. There was a pause, as though Macha were concentrating. *Taldeer's role in the future has not yet been eradicated. This is not yet over.*

As the cruisers approached the wreckage of the *Exaltation* they cleared the horizon of Lorn VII. In the distance, in a tight orbit around the fifth planet, Uldreth and Macha could see a small, malformed moon, glinting with metallic menace. Automatically magnified by their viewscreens, they could see that it was no moon. The massive, cumbersome and ugly shape was a mon-keigh vessel - recognisable as a battle-barge. It appeared slightly damaged, but scans showed that it was fully operational. Debris and damaged vessels floated in a loose orbit around it, sometimes crashing against its armour or plunging down into the atmosphere of the planet like a rain of fire. A familiar insignia was emblazoned across the hull: a glistening droplet of blood-red was surrounded by broad black wings. Macha had seen that symbol before. *Gabriel.*

Even across the distance of space that separated the two eldar cruisers, the farseer could sense the wave of hostility and suspicion that flooded out of Uldreth's mind as the mon-keigh vessel appeared on their screens.

THE WARP ROILED with curdling energies, twisting itself into a thickening mire of congealing clouds and reaching tendrils. The pristine golden tube of the webway was assailed on all sides, as though the daemonic forces could sense that it was a possible route out of their limbo and into the material realms. The little breach in its structure was alive with unearthly colours and violence, as though the warp itself were being drawn through it in a massive swirling vortex.

It was an ocean of Chaos being drained through a plug. The rupture seemed to function like a hole in a pressurised cabin, sucking monstrous forms through a gap that was only a fraction of their size, compressing them and tearing them asunder, igniting infernos of warp fire that blazed and licked at the opening. But the daemons poured against the webway, clawing and lashing at each other and the structure itself, in a desperate, thirsty passion for birth into the materium.

Something seemed to prevent them from getting through, as though the breach had been ward-sealed from the inside. A twinkling sheen was collecting around the tear within the golden tube, glittering like a constellation of tiny, crystalline stars - like little warp spiders trying to pull a silken-web over the breach to patch it.

From the control deck of the *Ravenous Spirit*, Sergeant Kohath watched the rugged but diminishing shape of the Blood Ravens Thunderhawk; it was tiny in the fury of the daemonic tempest as it dropped away from the cruiser. The little gunship had no warp engines and only limited manoeuvrability in the immaterial mire - the *Spirit* had ejected it like a drop-pod, setting its path and then jettisoning it like a projectile towards the raging breach in the webway.

From the very first moment that it had emerged from the shielded hull of the *Spirit*, the Thunderhawk had been like a magnet in a sea of molten iron. It was as though the energy flows of the warp itself had suddenly shifted, and a massive current of Chaotic forms had washed back from the webway, crashing over the tiny gunship like a tidal wave of hate and ferocity. Kohath had never seen anything like it.

The viewscreen began to flicker and the image started to dissolve; whatever the eldar witch had done to the sensor arrays of the *Ravenous Spirit* could clearly not function without her presence.

'Stabilise the picture, Loren,' snapped Kohath, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen as the Thunderhawk was ripped into a spin by the lash of a great, vaporous, snaking tendril of energy.

'There is nothing I can do, sergeant,' answered the serf. 'The image should not be there at all, according to our instruments.'

As the picture cracked and fizzed into incoherence, the last image that Kohath saw was of a giant, ghostly, incisor-riddled mouth emerging out of the chaos of ethereal forms and yawning around the tumbling, uncontrolled shape of the Thunderhawk. The jaw tensed, as though gathering into solidity, and then it snapped closed. The viewscreen hissed, crackled and then went black.

ONE OF THE heavy, stone desks had been dragged across into the pool of red light that flooded through the circular window cavity of the librarium. The Harlequin mime had been strapped to its surface and was pinned by four Marines, each holding one of its limbs in place. The thin, rubbery armour over the alien's chest had been sliced open and peeled back, exposing its porcelain skin.

In turn, the skin had been cut, burnt and shredded until it was awash with bloody colours, almost as vibrant as the eldar's armour itself. The alien's mask had been removed, and I could clearly see its startling blue eyes bulge with each incision.

Ahriman circled the table slowly, muttering quietly to himself in a tongue that I recognised but could not fully recall. He was lost in concentration, and seemed to be almost oblivious to the presence of the dying Harlequin on the table next to him. But as he muttered the secret words of his forgotten language, more cuts and gashes appeared in the flesh of the prisoner, each wider and

deeper than the last until blood started to ooze out of the joints in the creature's armour, pooling on the table and then on the floor below.

But the Harlequin said nothing. It made no sound at all. Its eyes bulged and widened with each stroke of the invisible knife; it was clear that the alien was suffering terrible pain.

'What do you hope to achieve through this?' I asked, daring to interrupt Ahriman's litanies or spells. 'You haven't even asked any questions.'

The sorcerer showed no signs of having heard me, and continued his circuit around the table. One of the Prodigal Sons glanced up from the prisoner and fixed me with a hollow, cold and ineffable gaze, cautioning me into silence. His features shifted slightly as I looked at them, as though they were not really fixed into place on his face.

'Ahriman! Answer me! What are you trying to do?' I was shouting. My confusion and frustration was building to a head. I felt suddenly and starkly out of place amongst these Marines. 'Ask it a question, Emperor damn you!'

My words echoed in muffled tones around the librarium, murmuring through the sudden and oppressive silence. Ahriman stopped circling the Harlequin and turned his face towards me. At the same time, each of the other Prodigal Sons released the alien and pulled themselves to their full height, looking over at me with vacant eyes. Their faces swam like watercolours in the rain. The hostility palpitated in the air.

Friend of Ahriman, began the sorcerer, a slick smile creasing his ghostly features. *Rhamah of the Sacred Blood, what would you have me ask this creature? Should I ask it for the secrets of the Arcadian Librarium? Should I ask it where they have hidden the broken blade of Lanthrilaq?*

'Ask what you need to know,' I stated simply. If you do not ask, it will tell you nothing. Our power resides in our choice of questions.

'Need?' he laughed. It was a sick, gurgling noise from a distant place. 'What do I need to know from this wretched creature? What could this twisted and broken alien possibly know that I do not know already? Do you know nothing of me, Librarian Rhamah?' *It is not what we need, but what we desire to know that brings us power.*

'If you need nothing from this thing, kill it and be done with it.' *Its very existence is offensive to the Emperor and this ritualistic play merely prolongs its existence.* 'Why must it suffer this way if it need not? We are wasting our time.'

'I am testing a theory. I need not, but I desire to. How else do we learn the secrets that lead us beyond self-preservation and into the grandeur of power itself? Desire is the father of innovation and greatness. Need merely births solutions.'

'What is your theory? What are you hoping to prove?'

'I suspect that this *distaure*, this mime, can speak. My hypothesis is that it will do so when it reaches its pain threshold. This is part of a general theory that I have tested many times before, and it appears to hold true: all life forms change their nature after they experience a certain amount of pain. Of course, the thresholds vary by species and training, but the general theory appears to be sound.'

You are torturing this mute creature to see whether it will become something else? Something that can talk, I asked?

Exactly. You boil water and it becomes steam. Extremes make things change. Remember this, Rhamah, Son of Ahriman: extremes change everything. We must always explore the limits of ourselves and our knowledge; to place limits on exploration is to live a lie.

I watched the sorcerer as he turned away and continued to circle the desk. His Prodigal Sons returned to their positions, stooped over the hapless alien prisoner, clamping its limbs to the corners of the table. For a few more seconds I watched the cuts and the gashes continue to appear across the Harlequin's silent body, seeing its sparkling blue eyes bulge in agony even as the life drained out of them. Just as I turned away, one of the eyeballs ruptured and a wide cut ripped across the eldar's face, covering his features in ocular liquids and blood.

I strode away from the desk and the bloody red light of the triple suns, moving deeper into the librarium, letting the heavy shadows of the book stacks shroud me. Just as I passed out of sight, I heard the mime scream and cry out for mercy.

He can talk after all.

WHEN CAPTAIN ULANTUS strode onto the control deck of the *Litany of Fury* the glittering shapes of two eldar cruisers already loomed large on the main viewscreen. The captain had been summoned back to the bridge by Sergeant Saulh as soon as the alien vessels were first sighted emerging out of the shadow of Lorn VII.

Ulantus had been down in the Implantation Chamber, watching Apothecary Medicus perform the next operation on their most recent and promising neophyte, the young Guardsman Ckrius. Despite or perhaps because of the tumult of war that had gripped the Third and Ninth Companies of Blood Ravens, attention to these ritual details was vitally important for the future of the Chapter.

'What do they want, sergeant?' asked Ulantus, positioning himself in the middle of the deck and gazing at the image of the elegant cruisers as they prowled around the *Litany* like sharks.

'Unknown, captain. We have received no communications.'

Ulantus shook his head in a wave of disbelief. 'Throne damn him,' he muttered under his breath, silently cursing the Commander of the Watch for leaving him to deal with this on his own, again.

'Have you asked them what they want, sergeant?' There was irritation in Ulantus's voice.

'No, captain.'

'Then ask them.' He shouldn't have had to say it.

There was a moment of silence, and then a squeal of feedback cut through the control deck as the servitors struggled to find the appropriate frequencies. A loud whine was followed by the hiss of static and then a click into silence.

'We have no way of reaching them. Their communications arrays appear incompatible with our own.'

'Great,' snarled Ulantus.

As he spoke, the viewscreen flickered and snowed as though a signal were interfering with the image. Gradually, a pale face became discernable behind the interference, patterns, but the picture rolled and shivered as though projected from an ancient movie-reel.

'Stabilise that screen,' snapped the captain. 'Locate the origin of the new signal, and stabilise the transmission. Bring us into phase.' The snow and the rolling stopped suddenly, revealing the porcelain face of a painfully beautiful female eldar, her eyes alive with emerald fire.

'Gabriel.' The tone was bizarre, making the familiar name sound like an alien word. There was no doubt in the voice, and it was not a question. Its uncomfortable assertiveness verged on being a command-tone.

'I am Captain Ulantus of the Blood Ravens Ninth, commander of the *Litany of Fury*. Identity yourself and your purpose,' replied Ulantus, ignoring the farseer's opening word.

'Gabriel?' This time the word was a question, or at least a doubt. The eldar female's face creased slightly, as though she were confused or in pain. At that instant, Ulantus found himself wondering whether she was injured or exerting herself. For a flicker of a second, he felt sympathy for her efforts. Somewhere in his mind, he thought that he could hear the whispering of her voice trying to communicate with him. He shut it out resolutely.

'No, I am not Captain Angelos. I am Captain Ulantus,' he repeated, feeling suddenly that his own identity was somehow inadequate when compared with that of the Commander of the Watch.

'Gabriel.' The word pressed forcefully. It suggested that the alien had understood him, but that she expected Gabriel to be brought before her.

'He is not here.'

'Where?'

'Who are you?' Ulantus was not going to be treated like Gabriel's secretary.

'Macha.' The name meant nothing to Ulantus. 'Farseer of Biel-Tan. Where is Gabriel?' Macha's face twisted with pain as she tried to form the human sounds of High Gothic.

'He is not here, alien. What do you want?' Finally, revulsion settled into Ulantus's mind as he realised that these offences to the Emperor were asking for Gabriel as though they were acquaintances. Anger tinged his thoughts: Gabriel was worse than he had thought.

'What happened here? All dead?'

'The ores are dead. The eldar are dead. Many of our own are also dead.'

'And the Yngir?'

Ulantus hesitated. 'Yngir?' The sound was ugly and he could not form it properly.

'The... necron?' Macha tried the name like an experiment.

'Yes, the necron are dead too. Your people helped us,' conceded Ulantus, nodding his head in an instinctive show of respect for the deeds of warriors.

'Not dead. There is no dying for the Yngir. You destroyed the portal on the planet. When the Yngir return, things will be worse.'

His argument with Gabriel spun back through Ulantus's mind, and for the first time he began to wonder whether the Commander of the Watch might not be losing his mind. 'It was not us who destroyed the webway portal.'

'But the ruination stinks like humans,' hissed Macha, clearly unconvinced. 'I can smell your minds in the warp even as it spills into the ruptured portal.'

'It was not us. We have reason to believe that there were other humans in this area after the battle - powerful psykers.'

'Why should I believe you, human? You would like to see my people suffer and die.'

'You are right, alien. But this is not our doing.'

'Without the portal, much knowledge is lost. Much hope is lost. The future grows darker.'

Ulantus hesitated, unsure about how much to reveal to this alien witch. He could see her pain and for a moment he realised the potential value of her knowledge. 'Your Gabriel has gone in search of that knowledge.'

Macha's eyes flashed. 'Gabriel?'

'He has taken one of your own - an eldar witch like you - and is searching for an alternative way into the webway.'

'Taldeer is alive?' There was a mixture of relief and concern written across Macha's alien features.

'She is with Gabriel.'

'They must move quickly.'

THE INTERIOR OF the Thunderhawk was groaning with effort. Its structure vibrated and shuddered, like a body immersed in deep cold, and a persistent moan of bending metal filled the compartments. The familiar thunder of the gunship's engines was completely absent - they were not even firing. If there had been any up for them to fall down from in the warp, the vessel would simply be dropping.

'Integrity?' asked Gabriel calmly, looking around the walls of the transportation compartment that dominated the interior of the craft. He thought that he could see the metal warping and bending, as though it had been heated to the point of malleability.

'Holding, captain,' answered Ephraim, his augmetic arms blurring across the dials and switches of one of the monitor-terminals. 'Just.'

'Just is good enough,' replied Gabriel with a faint smile. He glanced over towards the hatch that led into the small control chamber, little more than a cockpit. It was shut and sealed, but every few seconds Gabriel could see flashes of something that wasn't light bursting within the confines of that tiny space; the brightness pulsed through the armoured hatch as though it were made of paper. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear piercing cries and screams, but he could not tell whether they emanated from the cockpit or from outside the Thunderhawk. He couldn't even tell whether they were cries from within his own head; perhaps they were the voices of reason rebelling against his actions.

Turning away from the hatch, beyond which Taldeer and the three Blood Ravens Librarians toiled in a secret and terrible Rite of Sanctification, exhausting themselves to preserve the little gunship from the immense psychic pressures of the warp outside, Gabriel looked towards the rear of the compartment. There, in full battle armour with weapons primed and shining, stood the magnificent figure of Tanthius, his legs astride and braced against the rocking motion of the vessel. Next to him, Corallis appeared light and nimble, despite the majesty of his own ancient power armour.

The two sergeants stood sentinel over the main exit-hatchway, unflinching like guardian angels waiting at the gates of hell. As the ship rocked and rumbled, making the hatch-frame shift and warp, the seam around the frame glowed and flashed like the fire of a star probing into the confined darkness.

'And so even the righteous heart is besieged by the blinding light of false knowledge,' muttered Gabriel, only half to himself. The famous lines would be familiar to all the Blood Ravens. 'Falsity is like an ocean that presses around solitary moments of truth, threatening to overwhelm or blind the seekers of knowledge, to eradicate them in an instant of self-deceiving brilliance.'

'Knowledge is power; it guards our souls - guard it well,' chanted the others in response, completing the Prayer of Resolve that had been left to them by the Great Father after he had vanquished the renegade Father Librarian Phraius.

A sharp keening shrielled suddenly through the floor, sending tremulous waves of energy pulsing up through the Space Marines' armoured boots. A roll of thunderous noise crashed along in its wake, rippling through the metallic plating over the floor as though rendering it liquid, firing the rivets out from the edges of the panels like shrapnel.

Gabriel turned just in time to see the cockpit hatchway buckle and shudder. A brilliant flash of deep purple laced through the structure, like radioactive veins. Then the metal hatch bulged like a diaphragm, expanding and contracting as though the cockpit beyond was gasping for breath as it suffocated. Claws, talons and snarling faces began to form in the metal, pressing out into the compartment and stretching the fabric of the hatch-door behind them.

Then nothing. Suddenly the hatch was smooth, cold and grey again. The rest of the compartment had dropped into silence; even the creaking and moaning of the gunship's joints had stopped. The Space Marines shifted their weight, instinctively checking their weapons with unconscious movements of their fingers. The silence was eerie and unsettling.

Taking a step towards the cockpit, Gabriel felt his boot sink slightly into the metallic deck, as though it had been rendered slightly spongiform in all the chaos. Lifting his foot carefully, he observed threads of metal as they stretched and stuck to the sole. He stepped back, checking the ground around him as it shimmered and rippled faintly, like the surface of pristine, still water. Behind him, he could hear the muffled and squelching sounds of Tanthius and Corallis as they began to fight against the unexpected gravity that seemed to push them inevitably down into the metallic quagmire.

They were sinking into the hull of the ship. Looking back into the liquid deck, Gabriel saw that it was now thick with blood.

A sudden explosion rocked the Thunderhawk as the cockpit hatch blew off its hinges and rocketed through the rear compartment. It didn't spin; it just ploughed through the chamber like a waste compactor. Gabriel and Corallis dove immediately, rolling flat under the accelerating mass. Knee-deep in the swamp-like deck because of the incredible weight of his Terminator armour, Tanthius was unable to dodge to the side. Without pausing for thought, the Terminator sergeant threw his powerfist into the slamming door and brought it to an instant and abrupt halt. It clanked and splashed down into deck at his knees, a massive, fist-shaped dent protruding from the centre of it.

Rolling back to his feet, Gabriel started towards the cockpit, but a Shockwave of sound blasted him to a standstill, like the fury of a hurricane funnelled into the narrow fuselage of a Thunderhawk. The sound filled the entire audio spectrum, shrieking through the audible range and screaming directly into his mind, obliterating his thoughts even as its physical force smashed him to a halt. Framed by the ruined hatchway, Gabriel could see the origin of the torrential onslaught: Taldeer stood bolt upright with her hands pressed against the lintel and her feet braced against the floor. The sinewy muscles in her slender limbs were taut and bulging with exertion. Her neck was knotted with protruding veins and her mouth was stretched into a contorted, rigid and unnatural cave. But it was her eyes that commanded the scene: they had gone. In their place there were simply two gaping cavities, rimmed with a thick, bloody ichor.

She was screaming.

Tearing his own eyes away from the forceful horror of the eldar seer, Gabriel could see the frenzied action that raged behind her. The bizarre throne structure that had been crudely fashioned and jammed into the navigational arrays was engulfed in a blaze of translucent, green flames.

Trails of emerald fire stretched out from the unnatural construction and jabbed into the back of the screaming seer, as the connectors and psychic amplifiers sizzled and spat with unearthly venom. Great blasts of brilliant blue warpfire arced across the cockpit, fizzing and crashing into vaguely discernable forms. From his vantage point, Gabriel could just see the swirling tips of two force staffs and a great axe, hacking through the mire and dispensing sheets of raw power.

Before he could make sense of the scene, a rolling cloud of energy crashed out of the cockpit, blasting into the larger compartment and swamping Gabriel in a wash of pain and nausea. Behind it came the charging figure of Zhaphel, vaulting past the shrieking alien witch with his force axe cutting crescents of purity into the tidal assault, breaking up the force of the wave before it could engulf his brother Marines.

Volleys of fire erupted instantly from Tanthius and Corallis, sending bolter shells hissing through the confined space and punching into the already heaving walls of the Thunderhawk. The daemonic energies swirled and mingled, curdling into the relative density of material form even as the shells and axe-blows dispersed them.

After a sudden, gurgling pause in her screams, Taldeer yelled something incoherent in a tongue that Gabriel did not know. Her voice was shrill and wracked with pain, but there was a new quality to the sound that even Gabriel could recognise. She had been shot.

As the psychic screaming commenced, slightly weaker than before, Gabriel ripped his chainsword into life and whirled it around his head, clearing a moment of clarity in the mists of Chaos for him to assess the situation. A gaping wound had appeared in the

side of the alien's abdomen, as though she had been shot at close range by a bolter. Judging from the position of the wound, Gabriel reckoned that the shell had probably ricocheted off the bulkhead and then punched into her kidneys, if eldar had kidneys. 'Jonas!' yelled the captain over the tumult of gunfire, energy discharge and screams. 'Jonas! How much further?'

'Imminent, captain,' barked the father Librarian, hacking out with his force staff and shredding a tendril-like shape as he appeared in the hatchway. 'We were on the cusp of the webway when our shielding failed. The warp pressure was simply too great - the creatures seem to feed on the breach. There are too many of them. Too much energy for us to repel.'

'Trajectory?' asked Gabriel, thrashing his chainsword out in a low sweep to eviscerate the rapidly solidifying, snarling form of a warpbeast.

'Set and fixed, captain,' replied Jonas, reaching Gabriel and turning so that they could fight back to back. 'We should just drop through the hole.'

A loud, resounding crack filled the compartment and shook the structure of the gunship. The ceiling and floor buckled and cracked as though the Thunderhawk were being snapped in two. Jagged dents protruded up through the metal, bending the deck and roof into the imprint of giant teeth, as though the entire gunship had been bitten into the mouth of a monstrous and gargantuan warpbeast.

Gravity failed and the vessel seemed to spin, although it was impossible to tell whether it was the Thunderhawk or the Marines that tumbled hopelessly out of control. As the controlled atmosphere of the cabin ruptured, a torrent of sickly, immaterial force poured into the compartment through the cracks, flooding the vessel with the thirsty, lascivious spirit of purest Chaos.

SILENCE AND DARKNESS. A faint, barely visible, green light pulsed weakly. The air was cold and thin; there was insufficient oxygen to sustain life and the temperature was approaching absolute zero. There was the discernable hiss of escaping gas. Gabriel shook the disorientation out of his mind and realised that the green light indicated a structural breach - the Thunderhawk had lost its integrity. He pushed himself up off the deck, noting that gravity had returned, and surveyed the ruins of his gunship.

The impressive shape of Zhaphel stood in the hatchway to the cockpit. The Librarian usually preferred not to wear his helmet, but now it was firmly secured against the lethal environment. He had leant his axe against the hatch-frame and was stooped over the broken form of Taldeer. A pool of thick blood surrounded the prone alien, hissing with a faint toxicity against the icy metal floor. In the cockpit beyond, Gabriel could see the back of Korinth as he worked at the controls of the Thunderhawk. The ruins of the eldar's throne-based shield-array had been pushed unceremoniously aside.

The main compartment was in ruins. Techmarine Ephraim was already busy trying to repair some of the worst structural damage; his metallic augmetics chattered and flashed with welding torches and rivet guns, pasting armoured panels back into place like patchwork. The massive form of Tanthius reached up to the ceiling and held the joists and trusses in place for the Techmarine to work on.

The broken and cracked floor was dented with the convex imprints of massive incisors and it was slick with a noxious mixture of alien blood and daemonic refuse. In the extreme cold, the congealing liquids were sickly and viscous, studded with frozen crystals like glittering jewels.

Slumped on the floor were the bulky forms of Jonas and Corallis. They were both beginning to stir from beneath a thick layer of freezing ichor, which coated their armour like a pernicious gloss. Corallis had been tossed into the air and smashed against the ceiling of the compartment just as its structure had been breached; the aging Jonas, recently dragged out of his effective retirement on Rahe's Paradise, had simply fought until he had dropped.

'Sound in,' said Gabriel calmly, realising that everyone was accounted for. 'Korinth,' he added, calling through the hatch into the cockpit as the others confirmed their status. 'What happened?'

'We're in, captain,' replied the Librarian, looking back over his shoulder. 'As we dropped through the breach into the webway, we re-entered material space, leaving the warp violence behind. What a remarkable achievement - a passage of stable, material space through the tempest of the warp,' he said shaking his head. 'And we were just in time,' he added, casting his eyes around the wrecked gunship. 'We could not have survived another moment in the warp without any shields.'

'Captain,' said Zhaphel standing to his feet in the hatchway and cutting off Gabriel's line of sight into the cockpit. 'If you want the alien to survive...' He trailed off, unsure of how to finish the sentiment. 'She has served her purpose by providing a measure of shielding for us.'

Gabriel hastened over to the broken form of Taldeer, who was lying in a frozen pool of her own blood. Her eye cavities trickled with tissue and her abdomen was a shredded mess of flesh and shrapnel. As he knelt at her side, Gabriel could see her mouth moving as though she were trying to form words, but all he could hear was the coarse rasping of her breath and the persistent rattle of blood in her throat. For a moment, Gabriel thought that he was gazing upon the insanity of the warp itself; he had seen Imperial Navigators reduced to wretched and ruined vegetables by tumultuous journeys through the warp, and Taldeer could have been one of them.

'Get her off the floor,' snapped Gabriel. 'Her fate will be the same as ours.'



CHAPTER EIGHT: HARLEQUIN

AND AS THE *Great Enemy* feasted on the souls of the Sons of Asuryan, there was one who stood aside from the feast and laughed like a jester, watching as the newly birthed daemon slaked his thirst with the souls of his kin. He laughed until the hallowed halls of Arcadia shook, his mirth riddling the magnificent walls with jewels and radiant light. He laughed as his enfeebled kinsmen fought in vain, falling like wheat before the scythe. He laughed at the earnest seriousness of Kaela Mensha Khaine, as he swirled and battled the undeniable daemon. He laughed as his fear-gripped kinsmen took to the skies in their monstrous craftworlds, aiming to flee from their own natures and from the unquenchable thirst that they had loosed on the galaxy. He laughed as the daemon of Slaanesh turned its hungry and lascivious eyes onto him. He laughed in the face of damnation, ridiculing the grandiloquence and pomp, finding nothing but amusement in the drama and the death that unravelled around him. He laughed, knowing that his kinsmen had brought this ruination upon themselves, knowing that this knowledge made him different. And Slaanesh could find no sustenance in the grinning and mocking face of the Laughing God. As the craftworld eldar fled to the heavens, the Daemon of Passion eyed the Great Jester with cold detachment and disdain, and then threw itself into their pursuit. And so the Laughing God laughed until his stomach ruptured and his tears fell, spilling his life force over the corpse-strewn floor of his amphitheatre; where each droplet fell, a giggling eldar Harlequin was returned to the living.

Excerpt from The Mythic Remembrances of 'Wraelle, by Rafaellus Kneg, Heirosavant of the Callidus Temple (901.M41).

A GENTLE MUSIC resounded through the stone amphitheatre. It pulsed and vibrated through the masonry, pushing its way through the legs of the assembly and making itself felt in the hearts of the throng. The rhythm was fluid and without passion; it skipped and stumbled with the aura of childish play. It was uneven, as though intoxicated. It was jilted, as though drunk on its own magic. With a slow explosion of light, a single figure appeared in the centre of the stage, sparking a susurrant of whispers throughout the auditorium: *athesdan*, high warlock, the narrator and grand story-teller. The figure was hazed behind his dathedi shield, shrouded in millions of pin-pricks of light, and his face was utterly featureless, as though a black scarf had been pulled smooth across it. The form of the *athesdan* was to be formless; he was the facilitator of the story, not the story itself. The music faded out of hearing, but the auditorium continued to throb and pulse with its uneven rhythms, as though it persisted in frequencies inaudible even to sensitive eldar ears. The silence moved the hall in unspeakable ways. 'Tears fall today as though tomorrow might never be, as though the swift of foot would be lost in the sea, as though Eldanesh were brought humble to his knees, and as though the Laughing God were laughing at thee.'

As the song began, it seemed that stars rose out of the balconies, soaring out above the stage in myriad colours, filling the amphitheatre with radiant light. They revolved slowly in an intricate formation, like a mechanical planetarium or orrery being set to a precise moment in time. Then the colours exploded into showers, falling away from the suspended forms of Harlequin troupers, who spun and flipped and spiralled down to the ground. At the same time, others sprang out of the stage, leaping from trap doors and dancing into the fray until the stage was awash with colour and motion, like a primordial ocean. A massive explosion of light obliterated the scene into blindness. As the shadows and colours returned, the stage was transformed: *cegorach*, the Great Harlequin, stood to one side, laughing with a guttural power. His laughter echoed through the silence and obliterated the gentle rhythms that had persisted through the stonework.

The centre of the stage showed a battle. On one side were the silvered host of the Ancient Foe, glittering and white like the stars from which they were born. And on the other stood the noble, eldar kings of old - Ulthanash and Eldanesh flourished their swords with breathtaking grace, while Jaeriela the Thrice-Blessed danced the Spear Thrill with joyous abandon, and Lanthrilaq the Swift knelt in penitence for the flaws that lay in his nature and in his fate, face held up for the audience to see his veil of tears. In the heart of the ancient heroes stood Khaine himself, his shining spear dripping with the decimation of stars and Yngir.

On the far side of the stage, opposite the image of the Great Harlequin, Kaelis Ra, the Deathbringer, was stooped over the corpses of his diminishing troops, feasting on their star-birthed flesh. The Great Harlequin could not restrain his mirth, and he pointed and laughed, ridiculing the Star God without restraint, even as he slaughtered its own silvering minions.

Looking up from his unholy feast of star-flesh, Kaelis Ra saw that he had been tricked by the Soul Dancers of the Cegorach: he saw his platinum hordes depleted and dying; he saw that his thirst had been misdirected by the cunning of the Great Trickster. And his fury knew no slaking.

With a great bound, the trouper playing the Death-bringer vaulted into the air. He was lifted high with the assistance of the inertia pivot fitted to his belt, somersaulting into the centre of the stage, scattering the Yngir and eldar warriors in all directions, slaying the beautiful Jaeriela with a single venomous glance.

Suddenly the motion on the stage stopped. It was as though the moment in time had been frozen: warriors were held in mid strike, and dancers were caught in mid air as they spun and flipped. The silence of death gripped the auditorium, and even the laughter of the Great Harlequin was gone.

From the front of the stage, the narrator sung once again.

At the turning of the tides came the Swords of Vaul, the Blade Wraiths of the Smith God held death in their thrall. But the flaws of one became the doom of them all, with Lanthrilag the Swift's inevitable fall.

Life returned to the stage as the performance lurched back into motion. The battle roiled and raged for a few minutes, as the troupers on both sides demonstrated their effortless prowess with blades and projectiles. But suddenly Lanthrilag fell to his knees at the front of the stage, holding his Vaulish blade before him like an offering to the audience. It was chipped and dripping with death, but the tip had been snapped off, making it blunt and worthless.

Tears of blood streamed down the Swift's face as he realised what this failure would mean. Behind him, their formation broken, the eldar heroes fell in swathes. Eldanesh was the first to die, and the audience watched in horror as his soul was freed from his body only to be consumed by the Bringer of Death. Then it was Ulthanash that fell, sliced in half by the scythe of Kaelis Ra. The trouper playing Khaine let out a terrible roar, repelling the silvered hordes with the sheer force of his fury. In desperate hate and anger, he lowered his shining spear and charged at the Star God, refusing to concede defeat, refusing to be beaten by the treachery of Vaul's blade.

The stage turned instantly black. All the lights were extinguished, and each of the Harlequins deactivated the glittering projections from their dathedi shields. The audience never saw Khaine's spear pierce the chest of Kaelis Ra. The only figures left illuminated were Lanthrilag at the lip of the stage, staring up in beseeching despair, and the Great Harlequin himself, grinning broadly at the back of the stage.

There was complete silence as the image of the Great Harlequin began to fade into blackness, gradually vanishing from the stage as the trouper dimmed his shield. At the same time, almost imperceptibly, the lonely image of Lanthrilag started to change. It was subtle at first, just a slight creasing of the lips. Soon it was a smirk, and then a grin. Out of the utter silence emerged a barely audible chuckle. The audience heard it without knowing it; it seeped into them, transforming the desperation of the scene into a tragic comedy without anyone understanding why. After a few more seconds, the image of Lanthrilag had been transformed into that of the Great Harlequin himself, clutching the broken Blade Wraith in his hands and laughing without restraint or fear.

THE LIGHTS IN the auditorium came up, revealing the troupe in a ceremonial formation on the stage. The performance was over, and they received the rapture of the audience like plants soaking up the sun. The troupe's Great Harlequin, Eldarec the Mirthful, remained kneeling at the front of the stage, turning Lanthrilag's blade in his hands, gazing at its shattered splendour with a faint smile.

The Dance of Lanthrilag was the only way to summon the blade from its place of rest, and it had been a long time since Eldarec had felt its touch against his skin. The dance was like an elaborate combination lock, opening up the immaterial vaults in which the Harlequins sequestered the ancient treasures over which they stood sentinel.

It didn't matter where in the galaxy the dance was performed - the troupe travelled widely through the domains of the craftworld eldar and their darker cousins - it would always open the vault to the flawed Vaulish blade; time and space moved differently on the Harlequins' stage. Here on Arcadia, where the audience was entirely comprised of inanimate, grinning mannequins and the handful of Harlequins not involved in the dance, the rite was comically easy.

'The mon-keigh are here,' said Eldarec, rising to his feet to address the audience, seeing the living masks of troupers shifting amongst the inanimate faces of the mannequins. The amphitheatre was instantly transformed into a council hall. 'We knew that they would come one day, that the sacred ground of Arcadia would eventually be sullied by their ugly, earnest boots.'

'Why are they here?' a voice called from the balcony. A grim-faced Harlequin rose to his feet, standing out of an immobile and sinister row of grinning mannequins. 'Do they know where they are?'

'The young races have no sense of the value of things, but they act with such passionate confidence. Although the old races know this value too well, their fear of its power leads to impotence,' answered Eldarec, smiling in pleasure at his circular response.

There was silence. None knew how to reply.

'There are many things in this place that the mon-keigh know nothing about. We must ensure that these things remain hidden.

There are other things here that they may have come to find.' The Great Harlequin turned the Blade Wraith in his hands, admiring its flawed form. 'And we must deny them these things.'

'We are few. They are many.' Murmurs of discussion rippled around the auditorium, as though even the life-sized mannequins were enjoined in the conspiracy.

'Not so many that our numbers seem small,' countered Eldarec, his lips curling into a playful smile.

'And we are not alone.' The voice was low and resonant, echoing around the amphitheatre with profound drama. It was an expert projection by a powerful trouper, but its origin was lost in its pervasiveness.

Eldarec's smile fixed for a moment, losing its sincere vitality. He glanced around the hall, taking in the faces and masks of each of his troupe. They appeared suddenly worried and tense, their expressions becoming fixed like those of the mannequins. They knew whose voice this was - he could be the mannequin next to them. They knew as well as Eldarec did. Discomfort and fear fell over the theatre.

'Show yourself, Karebennian!' commanded the Great Harlequin from the stage. 'This is no time for your tricks.'

'Quite wrong,' echoed the reply, as though from everywhere at once. 'This is the perfect time for tricks. It may be the time for nothing else.'

The voice of the Harlequin Solitaire rumbled and rolled around the theatre, tumbling with playful menace, making the Harlequins in the audience shuffle and eye-check the dolls around them. Then there was a flash of darkness and shadow, and Karebennian faded into visibility next to Eldarec. It was as though he had just climbed out of the webway itself, emerging onto the stage through an immaterial trapdoor.

Eldarec recoiled slightly, edging away from the newcomer with an obvious mix of disdain, awe and fear. The Solitaire was well known to the Harlequins of Arcadia; he had passed through the Ritual of Laughter with them long ago, emerging on the other side of that rite of passage free from the temptations and clutches of Slaanesh. But there had been something different about him even

then, something dark and depthless that set him apart from his kinsmen in the masque. There had been whispers that his spirit had been touched by the essence of the Laughing God himself. In the Great Dances of the Mythic Cycles, he was drawn towards the forbidden roles until eventually his mask began to take on the terrible, daemonic visage of Slaanesh.

Shunned by his troupe and shunning them in return, Karebennian had condemned himself to the wilderness, plunging into the webway and vanishing from Arcadia for a hundred years. He lived the life of a solitary wanderer and a troubadour, dancing the matrix of the webway and losing himself in the infinite complexities of time and space, becoming one with the ancient structure itself. It was said that he even found his way to the Black Library.

Then, one fateful day, he had felt a force calling into his soul, screaming and singing and laughing at his solitary existence, drawing him back onto the stage of his people. He had flashed through the labyrinthine webway and reappeared on Arcadia in the midst of a performance of the legendary tale of the Birth of the Great Enemy, the most dangerous of all Harlequin masques. He had sprung out of an unknown and hidden portal onto the stage, immediately and naturally taking on the role of Slaanesh itself - the one role that even the Great Harlequin could not adopt without being driven into insanity. It was then that the Harlequins of Arcadia realised that Karebennian was a Solitaire - the vagabond troubadour, the lonesome traveller, the wandering warrior poet of legend.

Since then he had appeared from time to time to bring news of the other sons of Isha, and each time he had struck the souls of his kinsmen with awe and fear. Whispered legends told of how he flitted between the craftworlds and exodite colonies, how he stood guard over one of the myriad portals into the Black Library itself, and even of how he made no distinction between the eldar and their darkling cousins, performing for each in their appropriate time and place. It was said that his name was known by the leaders of every eldar and dark eldar cluster in the galaxy.

'Karebennian,' said Elderac, watching the shifting pleasures cycle over the Solitaire's mask. 'Your presence here is unexpected, as always.'

'Thank you, Elderac the Mirthful.' The answer was almost a song, turning the respectful language back on itself, and producing a uncomfortable lilt.

Karebennian bowed with such ostentation that it resembled pantomime. There was the show of deference, but there was nothing earnest in it. Everything was a performance.

'There will be no further masques today, Solitaire.'

'I do not come to dance with you, cegorach,' he replied, using the ancient term for the Great Harlequin, playing with its syllables as though it were a puzzle. 'I come with news. There are mon-keigh feet in the sands of Arcadia.'

'We know this,' answered Elderac. 'We are taking precautions to keep those things that are secret hidden, and to hide those things that appear to be plain to see.'

Glancing down at the Blade Wraith in Elderac's hands, a flicker of emotion wisped over the Solitaire's mask. He nodded. 'The blade of Lanthrilag is not to be surrendered to these animals. But I suspect that the mon-keigh seek other treasures. They will take what knowledge they can, for knowledge is pleasure and knowledge is power. We must guard it well. They must not be permitted to find the portal to the Black Library.'

'The mon-keigh are strong. There is a sorcerer amongst them that is known to us. A powerful and ancient soul, rich in knowledge that should have been forbidden to it. It thirsts for more and it is hard to resist.'

'Yes, Ahriman. We have met before.'

'You have defeated him before?'

'We have met, and we both dance the webway yet.' The Solitaire's answer was ambiguous. 'We are not alone in this fight, cegorach. I have met with a seer of Biel-Tan, and she has promised to send aid. Her *Bahzhakhain* - the Tempest of Blades - was in ruins, but her soul spoke of other defenders of truth; she will bring them to our side. The sorcerer and his mon-keigh soldiers may have found their way to Arcadia, but we will ensure that they do not leave. If the exits are clear, then they must be obscured. Knowledge is power, and it is not to be shared with these mammalian primates.'

The troupe remained in silence, always unsure of how to respond to the elliptical speech of the Solitaire, never wholly convinced that his words contained less artistry than truth. For the Harlequins, life was a performance art.

'It will be as you have said,' announced Eldarec with grave seriousness, shaking his head forlornly and looking down at the ground. Then suddenly he erupted into mirth as a broad grin cracked across his mask. The mock earnestness vanished and laughter rolled around the auditorium; the dramatic atmosphere was broken once again. With a hint of theatrics, the Great Harlequin reached out and embraced Karebennian like a long lost friend.

The Solitaire did not laugh; it was a cheap trick.

THE DESERT SHONE red in the reflected light of the triple suns, as the Thunderhawk dropped through the atmosphere. It was a smoking ruin of dull metal, dripping flames out of its burners and scattering hull fragments in sparking rains. Entire sections of the fuselage ruptured and buckled as the gunship ploughed through the stratosphere, flaring into brilliance before breaking free and tumbling down to the ground. The Thunderhawk was falling apart even as it descended towards the barren surface of Arcadia. 'Engines?' asked Gabriel, his voice hissing with static as the vox-beads in the squad's helmets crackled through the ionosphere. Blasts of air and waves of pressure crashed through the shredded compartments, throwing equipment and shattered parts of the structure against the Space Marines. Flames licked out of gashes in the terminals and deck, filling the interior of the gunship with an inferno of heat, smoke and flickering light. Gabriel stood in the middle of the main compartment, letting the tempest rage around him as though unwilling to acknowledge its force.

'Failing.' Ephraim was lying on his back at the rear of the compartment, his abdomen half-hidden under a torn and exposed bulkhead. His multiple, metallic arms were chittering and working in the cavity above his head, and jets of simmering oil were venting across his armour.

'How long?'

'Seconds.' Ephraim pushed himself clear of the wrecked engine block and clambered to his feet, fires burning intermittently over his arms and chest, where the oil was rendered incendiary by the harsh wind.

Only Korinth remained in the cockpit, trying to restore some element of control to the plummeting gunship. He struggled with the controls, but to no effect; the stabilisers and thrusters had failed completely as the Thunderhawk had punched into the fiery atmosphere. It was little more than a massive, flaming dead-weight crashing towards the ground.

'Distance,' demanded Gabriel, unmoving in the centre of the deck.

With one arm clamped around a bent structural truss in the wall, Corallis hung out of the ruined side of the Thunderhawk, catching himself at an angle so that he could assess the distance of the vertical drop beneath the plummeting gunship. 'Two thousand metres.'

Something on the distant but rapidly approaching ground caught Corallis's enhanced and well trained eyes, glinting like a treasure under the ocean. 'Captain - there is another gunship in the desert. It looks like a Thunderhawk. Not one of ours...' He hesitated for a second. 'And the ground... it's incredible.' Corallis strained his eyes to work out the intricate cracks, valleys and patterns that had been carved into the surface of the planet below. He couldn't work out whether the work was the result of natural or artificial processes, and he couldn't even work out what he was looking at. 'It's incredible,' he repeated.

Before Gabriel could react, an impact shook the craft suddenly, sending the remaining equipment skidding across the deck and making the Marines check their balance. It was followed in rapid succession by two more hits.

'Tanthius?' asked Gabriel, remaining in the centre of the burning deck.

'Some kind of projectile - non-explosive. Could be a primitive cannon or an advanced cluster cannon of some kind.' The Terminator sergeant peered out of the other side of the Thunderhawk, trying to catch a glimpse of what had hit them. 'I cannot see the source.'

They come... The thoughts were weak and feeble, hardly even discern-able in the chaos of the plummeting gunship.

Gabriel's immovability faltered as the rasping thoughts made themselves felt. 'She's still alive,' he snapped, striding through the flames towards the broken shape of Taldeer, who was strapped and restrained in one of the crash-harnesses.

For a split second, Zhaphel and Jonas exchanged glances, then Jonas moved to help the captain as he stooped down over the bleeding body of the alien. Zhaphel watched them for a moment and then moved over to one of the brutal gashes in the cabin wall, staring out into the rush of red air outside.

'Nightwings,' he said, identifying the sleek, swift fighters that spiralled through the atmosphere around the dropping dead-weight of the Thunderhawk. The ruby radiance of the triple suns burst around the speeding shapes, rendering them into silhouettes. The swept wings of the fighters were slowly pushing forward as the crafts slowed to engagement speed. Blasts of dark projectiles hissed out of the dual-pronged noses, and lines of lasfire streaked out from under their fuselages.

'Eldar fighters?' Corallis swung himself back inside the compartment and hurried over to Zhaphel to confirm the identification.

'Captain,' said the veteran scout, peering out of the holed hull. 'Four Nightwings, but they are not alone.'

Intermixed in the formation of the curved and smoothly shaped Nightwings were two other vessels. Their design was not wholly different, with wide, elegant, sweeping wings around a central fuselage. But the outlines were not smooth like those of the Nightwings; instead they were barbed and bristling with spiked features. There was something brutal and menacing about their shape that set them apart from the other fighters.

'Ravens,' said Corallis with foreboding.

They come for me. Taldeer's thoughts were weak.

Stooped over her blind and bleeding body, Gabriel looked back at Corallis.

'You're sure?' His voice betrayed his confusion and concern. Ravens were dark eldar fighters; to see them in formation with eldar Nightwings was unprecedented. Although a number of theories suggested that the two alien races were distant kin, Gabriel had never heard of any sightings of them co-operating. It had always been supposed that the two species were mortal enemies, opposed in nature and ideology.

As though to answer Gabriel's question, a hail of splinter fire from one of the Ravens rattled and crashed against the crumbling fuselage of the Thunderhawk, followed by the sizzling and explosive impact of a Nightwing's bright lance.

The alien fighters screamed past the Thunderhawk, ripping through the air over and under the mined gunship, sending Corallis and Zhaphel rushing to the other side of the compartment to see the fighters peeling out of formation and turning back for another attack run.

With the light of the triple suns no longer behind them, the fighters leapt out of silhouette and into bizarre multicoloured glory. The usually black Ravens were coated in brilliant colours, daubed across their barbed yet elegant hulls in an ostentatious and vaguely comic display. Similarly, the sleek Nightwings, which were usually painted into the intricate, disciplined and uniform patterns of a craftworld army, were splattered with eclectic and brightly coloured patterns. The unlikely squadron appeared to cohere in its random and colourful abandon.

They come for me, Gabriel. I can hear them calling. The rillietann - they are singing in my mind!

'Rillietann?' asked Gabriel, distracted from the impacts and the quaking Thunderhawk by Taldeer's thoughts. The word seemed familiar to him, but he could not place it.

'What did you say?' asked Jonas, looking up from the dying seer as debris and sparks rained down over the captain next to him. 'Rillietann?'

'Yes. Does that mean anything to you, father?'

'It's an eldar word. Harlequins,' answered Jonas, rising to his feet and striding over to Corallis and Zhaphel. 'They are Harlequin fighters. That explains why there is such a mixture of gunships. Conventional wisdom suggests that the Harlequins maintain relations with all of their various kin, both the eldar and the dark eldar. It seems that evidence now bears out the theory.'

As he spoke, lances of fire speared through the already shredded Thunderhawk, blasting chunks of hull and armoured panels clear out the other side of the gunship. A second later and the gloriously rag-tag squadron roared past the dropping Thunderhawk once again, banking up into the largest of the suns before turning for another run.

The coughing engines started to splutter and falter, then they simply cut out, leaving the Thunderhawk in complete freefall. At the same time another barrage of fire punched through the increasingly flimsy armour around the hull, dragging blasts of wind into the compartment and whipping the flames into new levels of intensity. The whistle of wind resisting the acceleration of gravity began to fill the cabin.

They come for me.

'Instruct them to stop,' said Gabriel, taking the prone and almost lifeless body of Taldeer by her shoulders.

They do not obey me. They are the rillietann and answer only to cegorach. They are outside the society of eldar. They come for me, but they do not come at my bidding.

Suddenly the attack ceased. Aside from the crackling of fires and the whistling of the wind, silence abmptly embraced the interior of the Thunderhawk.

'They've broken off the attack,' said Tanthius, watching the fighters as they held their position about a thousand metres away.

'They're matching our velocity - keeping pace with the fall.'

'Korinth?' asked Gabriel, letting Taldeer's body slump back into the harness as he hurried into the cockpit. 'Can you land this thing?'

The Librarian looked back over his shoulder at the captain, his visor reflecting the flaming ruin that wracked the main compartment behind Gabriel and his helmet obscuring the look of incredulity that flashed over his face. 'No,' he said.

THE BODY OF the Harlequin mime went suddenly limp. Its feet swung back and forth in the stream of ruddy light that pushed in through the circular window of the librarium. The noose of rope around its neck was looped up over the lintel that ran over the top of the window cavity. Thickening blood coursed down its cut and violated body, dripping into a growing pool beneath its feet. If it hadn't been dead when it was strung up, it was dead now.

Sitting at the stone desk next to the alien's feet, the great sorcerer Ahriman leant casually over an open book. He had been staring at same page for some time as though reading and re-reading the same passage over and over again, undistracted by the hanging eldar corpse that swung gently in the breeze next to him.

The rest of the surviving Prodigal Sons had already left the librarium, clearing the worst of the carnage away so that their venerated leader might study the secrets of the ancient eldar tomes in peace. Ahriman had sent two of them on an errand, directing them down into the lowest vaults of the librarium, hidden within the foundations of the tower, where he thought that they might find the fabled Arcadian web-maps, allegedly drawn up by the Harlequin troupes as they flittered and darted throughout the galaxy.

You wish to know what I am reading?

Standing in the heavy shadow of one of the book-stacks, hidden from the ruby light of the suns, I had said nothing and Ahriman had not looked up.

You cannot resist the question can you, friend of Ahriman? I can feel the interrogation in your mind. Why do you not ask?

I stepped out of the shadow, letting the blood-drenched light of the triple suns flood over me and transform my armour into an imperial purple. 'Why did you hang the mime?'

It was of no further use.

He didn't move, but just carried on studying the page. It was as though my question meant nothing at all. I felt a wash of disapproval and disappointment flow out of the great sorcerer. *That is not the most interesting question, friend of Ahriman.*

'You wish me to ask about what it said?'

No. The content of its speech was never the point of this experiment. You know this. Ahriman lifted his head slightly, showing me the wide-eyed, vacant horror of his shifting mask. As I looked, the patterns on his face seemed to swim and then whirl abruptly back into a conventional shape, resembling human features once again. He smiled faintly, as though aware that it might be an appropriate expression. *Knowledge is its own goal, my friend. Once it is achieved, its means become irrelevant.*

Looking up from the ghastly visage of the sorcerer, I watched the eviscerated and ruined shape of the half-stripped mime as it swung gently, blood still running down its body and dripping from its toes. I felt no sympathy for the alien creature - its very existence felt deeply offensive in ways that I did not feel needed to be rationalised. There was not even anything particularly repulsive about the violence that had been done to the creature's body; although I could not remember the details, I was sure that I had seen far more terrible mutilations of life-forms for which I had some measure of sympathy in the past. However, something in my soul rebelled against the scene.

'Knowledge is power, Ahriman, and power brings responsibility.' *Your actions show the mark of arbitrariness, not responsibility.* I realised that this was what I found discomforting. 'Your experiment served no purpose. Knowing that the mime can speak but asking it no questions is an exploitation of your power, not a use of it.'

The formulaic smile cracked a little wider, as though genuine amusement had suddenly worked its way into the sorcerer's expression. *Exploitation depends on your point of view, friend. Your exploitation is my use, it seems. Power and knowledge intermix and co-substantiate each other: knowledge is power, as you, of all people, know very well. Power is the employment of knowledge - of what use is knowledge if it remains passive and unexercised? It withers into impotence. We must test our knowledge with our power at every opportunity; how else will you know the truth of your theories? Your exploitation is my science.*

'I am not sure that I appreciate this science of exploitation, Ahriman.'

Your uncertainty demands a test of its own! This is precisely the point - your questions define your quest for certainties. Which brings us back to the matter at hand: what is it that you want to ask of me now?

I hesitated, unsure that my concerns had really been addressed. 'I assume that your book is *The Legend of Lanthrilaq*. I further assume that you are searching for clues about the possible location of the lost blade-wraith. My question, naturally, is whether you are having any success?'

Success is the result of tests, my friend, not of theories - as we have just been discussing. But I have the suggestion of a theory; it is beginning to take shape into something that can be tested. Ahriman's smile broadened.

GABRIEL PUSHED HIMSELF out of the sand and rose to his feet, turning immediately to see the wreckage of the crashed Thunderhawk erupt into flames. The nose of the once-glorious gunship was buried in the desert, and its rear stuck up into the air, venting fire and flame. A deep channel had been cut into the surface of the desert where the Thunderhawk had ploughed down into the sand, skidding and digging its way to a gradual, fiery standstill.

Sweeping his eyes around the surrounding terrain, Gabriel could see the glints of red armour that identified Corallis, Ephraim and the massive form of Tanthius, their shapes obscured against the radiance of the triple suns that were dropping towards the horizon behind them. The blue of the Librarians, purpled by the red suns, shone from various points in the desert. The squad had bailed out of the gunship just as it hit the ground, tumbling and rolling through the sand. Now they were dispersed along the impact trail of the flaming vessel.

'Report,' said Gabriel, punching the side of his helmet as the vox-bead whistled and hissed in protest. 'Ravens, report,' he repeated. The only response was the crackling and howling of static.

A series of dark specks appeared on the horizon, like sunspots on the surfaces of the three local stars, distracting Gabriel for a moment. He stared into the blinding, ruddy light of the suns, watching the tiny movements of shadow shift slightly. They grew almost imperceptibly larger as he watched. Whatever they were, they were speeding towards the crash, low and fast over the desert, coming out of the suns as though to hide their approach. They were too low to be the Nightwings or Ravens returning. Dropping his eyes back into the desert, Gabriel saw that the other Blood Ravens had also spotted the skimmer vehicles on the horizon. Tanthius, Corallis and Ephraim had already formed a firing line, with the towering form of the Terminator armour looming up behind the Scout and the Techmarine.

Over to the east, the cadre of three Librarians had shaped up into a loose formation; Gabriel could see traces of crackling blue energy enshrouding the group like an aura of power. He nodded silently to himself, realising how privileged he was to have three Librarians of the Order Psykana with him. It was not unusual for Blood Ravens combat squads to include one or more Librarians, and there were even occasions on which the Chapter could field entire squadrons of these magnificent psykers.

Gabriel himself had once authorised a strike force of Psykana Librarians to raid an immobilised dark eldar cruiser on the edges of the Circuitrine nebula - the then youthful Jonas Urelie had led the mission. However, concentrations of Order Psykana Librarians very rarely formed within normal combat groupings - their mysterious and secretive order reserved the right to organise itself into battle formations when the need was dire. It was no secret that the Order defined dire need in slightly different terms from the rest of the Chapter. Hence, Gabriel felt the privilege of their presence and the awe of their co-ordinated and glorious power.

Gabriel... The thoughts died almost as soon as they entered his head.

Taldeer! She was still alive. Turning his attention to the downed wreckage of the Thunderhawk, Gabriel saw the flames licking out of every crack and gash, and thick, black smoke billowing out of the engines. They had left the eldar seer strapped into a crash harness as the gunship had dug down into the sand, thinking her dead.

Gabriel. There was hardly any strength in the thought at all, and Gabriel found himself unmoved. He gazed over at the smouldering wreck and performed a mental calculation. Although he was no Techmarine, he was reasonably certain that a Thunderhawk that had sustained that much damaged, including a critical impact to the engine block, would explode within a few minutes. He reasoned that they had abandoned the gunship nearly two minutes before, which meant that the explosion was probably imminent.

As the sound of Tanthius's storm bolter barked through the desert air, followed by the distinctive rattle of Corallis's Ephraim's bolters, Gabriel realised that even he had to draw a line somewhere. He had spent so long trying to convince his battle-brothers to follow his unconventional instincts, and therefore to follow this eldar seer, that he had almost forgotten his own disdain for the alien.

The battle cries of the rest of the Blood Ravens broke through into Gabriel's helmet, crackling and hissing with intermittency and static as his vox-bead spluttered unreliably. He could hear the thunder in Tanthius's voice and he could imagine the fury of power being unleashed by the knot of Psykana Librarians. In the background, he was also aware of the sleet of tiny shuriken projectiles being loosed by the speeding Vypers as they flashed out of the suns. But he did not look round; his eyes were fixed on the inferno that was gathering in the downed Thunderhawk, enshrouding the dying eldar seer in a thick death-mask of smoke and toxins. In a moment of self-knowledge he realised that he was not going to save the alien witch, and that he would be wrong to try.

'Venoms.' The word hissed and whistled through the vox, and this time Gabriel turned in time to see a squadron of skimmers pass between the two groupings of Blood Ravens, splintering off into two streams, one banking to the left and the other to the right, each circling around to get behind their targets and to separate their fire.

The skimmers looked similar to eldar Vypers, except that they were daubed with the vulgar, multicoloured patterns that had distinguished the Nightwings and Ravens, marking them out as Harlequin vehicles. As he watched them speed through the gusts of sand that blew across the desert, Gabriel realised that it was hard to calculate exactly where they were. Despite the garish colours, their outlines seemed vague and hazy, as though they were indistinct or improperly resolved.

Volleys of bolter fire from the Blood Ravens sliced through them, making the Venoms flicker like projections but failing to make any impact on the skimmers themselves. The sleek vessels obviously employed some kind of holo-field to disrupt their shape.

A spluttering eruption turned Gabriel's attention back towards the downed Thunderhawk and the helpless, dying thought of Taldeer.

Gabriel.

It was little more than a rasping whisper at the back of his mind as the engines finally detonated, blowing the exposed rear of the gunship apart and drilling its prow even deeper into the sand. Massive chunks of metallic debris were thrown out of the wreckage, like molten rock from a volcano, and smaller shards of red-hot shrapnel were sent sizzling through the desert air, radiating from the blast in the midst of the concussive wave of pressure.

As the debris rattled against his armour, Gabriel silenced his mind for a moment half-wondering whether Taldeer's thoughts would still be there. But there was only a faint silvering voice in the silence - it was a gentle and angelic tone, and Gabriel had heard it many times before. He closed his eyes for a second, letting the soaring, pristine tones of the silver choir fill his soul. Just as the immaculate light rose into his eyes, the voices turned to screams and the silver started to run with blood.

Gabriel snapped open his eyes, wild and fierce, immediately clamping them onto the tempest of flames, smoke and molten metal that was once his Thunderhawk. Somewhere in that inferno, the eldar seer had died, having been rendered bloodied and ruined to bring the Blood Ravens to this place. He had left her for dead: death to the alien. Something in his soul rang hollow as his thoughts gave voice to the ancient and indisputable mantra.

WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, I turned away from the grinning sorcerer and walked back into the heavy shadows of the aisles between the book stacks. For several minutes, I walked in silence letting the fecund atmosphere of erudition gradually overcome the confusion and anger that Ahriman had instilled into my mind. Something deep within me stirred and arose in opposition to the sorcerer's manner and his reasoning, but I could not find the words to express my opposition. And without the right words, a scholar's opposition is meaningless - I would be left merely with my sword, which is nothing but a vulgar and primitive substitute, a rearrangement of words. Yet I was the sword of Vidya, and *Vairocanum* felt reassuringly solid on my back.

I knew that I could confront Ahriman's logic. I knew it with the kind of certainty that could only have been born out of rehearsal and accomplishment. The flaws in his thinking jabbed at my mind, prodding my subconscious to remember the appropriate retorts and rebuttals. I had been trained to combat this approach to knowledge; the synapses in my brain had become hardwired into adamant opposition. But I simply could not remember what to say. Memories stirred without ever really reaching resolution; they shifted and swam, falling in and out of focus like the Harlequin troupers that had danced and died amongst these very books.

At random, I stopped and pulled down a book from the shelf nearest to me. It was the action of indolence, little more than a reflex in the presence of books. I didn't even look at the cover, but just stood turning the book in my hands, as though it were a prop to help me think.

Knowledge is power. The Harlequins guard it with their lives, and Ahriman seeks it at the cost of their lives. The Harlequins die, knowledge is transferred, but at what cost to Ahriman? What does he trade for his knowledge and his power? Surely he must sacrifice something for this gain?

What is loss and what is gain? Turn it on its head again and again. Both will result in agony and pain.

The thoughts came from everywhere at once, whirling around my head and making me spin on my heel. My eyes twitched and scanned the bookstacks, searching for a Prodigal Son Marine, or even for Ahriman himself. But something told me that the thoughts were not human - even less human than the thoughts of Ahriman.

Can you see without looking and know without thought? You spin and turn like the kinsmen you fought. In a web of confusion I see you are caught.

'Who are you?' I hissed, trying not to raise my voice for fear that I would be overheard.

Who are you? That's a better question.

I turned again and again, sweeping my eyes through the shelves and pouring my consciousness down the shadowy aisles, searching for a shape or a movement. But there was nothing. Instinctively, I reached over my shoulder and clasped the hilt of *Vairocanum*, pulling it gently and silently over my head.

With a sword in one hand and in the other a book, like a vision of justice and valour you look. Did your Emperor look thus when the galaxy he shook?

'Enough riddles. Show yourself My patience ran into frustration, but something told me that I should not call for assistance from the other Marines. *My Emperor. I am an Angel of Death - Adeptus Astartes. I am the sword of Vidya.*

Why are you here, Angel of Death?

As the thoughts appeared, so a figure stepped out of the shadows into the faint light between the stacks. It was a Harlequin, but unlike any of those that I had seen. Its face swam like a prehistoric ocean, cycling through primeval emotions and projecting them into terrible expressions. It swayed and moved, as though constitutionally unable to remain still. If anything, it showed even more grace and innate elegance than the other Harlequins I had killed that day.

I slid *Vairocanum* out in front of me, letting its faintly glowing blade define the space between us, keeping the alien at a distance while I weighed up its intent.

Ah, Vairocanum. I have not seen this blade in many centuries.

The thoughts startled me and I felt my eyes widen.

How sad to see it broken now, like the blade of Lanthrilag himself. I remember when it was glorious and whole, slicing through the silvering hordes with untempered fury. I remember it in the hands of Lavena the Joyful... before she fell into tragedy.

'Who are you?' The question was the most powerful demand I could make.

Who are you? Who am I? I have many names amongst the sons and daughters of Isha. The rillietann call me Karebennian, so here on Arcadia that will suffice as my name.

The name set bells ringing in my mined memory. When I had first seen Ahriman in the desert, he had been performing some kind of rite using a book. My mind's eye scanned back through the images stored in my short-term memory: *The Tome of Karebennian*. It was a legendary guidebook, supposedly containing a description of one of the routes to the fabled Black Library itself. Ahriman had found it and used it to get to Arcadia. *Was this the author of the Tome of Karebennian?*

You have heard of my book, Angel of Death? I had thought it lost long ago. Many of your lifetimes have passed since it was taken from me by a sorcerer who is not unknown to you. I thought that it would have taken him longer to understand it well enough to find his way here.

'You speak of Ahriman?'

That is what I called him then and I believe it is his name still. Are you a friend to this Ahriman?

The words were rich with suggestions, leading my suspicions in many directions at once. I could not fathom the motives of this quizzical and dire alien. Its question brought my own doubts home to me.

Am I a friend of Ahriman? He had called me that so often that part of my mind had made its peace with the idea. Yet the prodding of this alien awoke me to my credulity. 'I do not remember knowing him well enough to call myself his friend.'

Do you stand with him, Sword of Vidya?

As I considered the various possible implications of the question, I heard heavy footfalls approaching through the aisles behind me. Keeping *Vairocanum* outstretched before me, I turned to glance back over my shoulder. There was nobody there, but the footsteps grew louder and closer. Turning back again, Karebennian was gone. I stood with *Vairocanum* held forth at nothing more than a patch of shadow.

What are you looking for, friend of Ahriman?

It was the great sorcerer himself.

Flipping my blade into its sheath, I turned on my heels to face Ahriman as his heavy footsteps brought him striding up the aisle towards me. Instinctively, I flicked open the book that I had been gripping in my hand, and I looked up from its pages in affected surprise.

'There is much of value and interest in this place, Ahriman. I am an explorer of knowledge, just like you.'

Just like me? The thoughts were tinged with mirth and scepticism. *Indeed. So, my young friend, what have you found in this labyrinth of treasures?*

Without waiting for an answer, Ahriman reached forwards and flipped the cover of my book so that it closed in my hand. He turned his head, as though to read the upside down title. *Very interesting. I wondered whether you might find this.*

I suddenly realised that I had no idea what the book was; I hadn't even bothered to read its title since I pulled it down off the shelf earlier. As Ahriman's hand closed around its spine and started to pull it away, I snapped my eyes down to its cover. What I saw there made my heart jump. There was a picture of an ancient heraldic crest: wide, black raven's wings flanked a bead of blood, which appeared to be represented by an encrusted ruby. The script was runic, probably of eldar origin, and I did not have time to decipher the meaning before Ahriman had the unlikely treasure in his hands. He cracked open the ancient covers and leafed casually through the pages. *I have seen a copy of this before*, he conceded. *I owned one for a long time; it was in my personal library. I wonder what its meaning might be for you, Angel of Vidya. As I recall, I took my copy off a seer from Biel-Tan. She seemed to have an unusual fascination for these things.*

My mind was racing. I had seen that icon before. A variation on it was inscribed into my own armour. The sight of it made something spark and kindle in my soul, as though a tidal wave of memories were poised behind a massive dam, waiting to break through. And I had given it up so easily. I had picked it up in complete ignorance and then surrendered it without so much as a word. At that moment, I realised that I hated Ahriman and his intense, smug presumption. *Is he testing me again? Why must everything be a test?*

Because everything is a test. Ahriman's eyes widened into depthless cavities, daring me to look into his soul.

THE VENOMS FLASHED over the desert, whipping up plumes of sand into tunnels of mist and haze that obscured their outlines even more. They banked and peeled away from predictable formations, screeching in between the knots of Blood Ravens and then returning to attack them from behind. Hails of shuriken fire erupted from the twin-linked catapults on either side of the skimmers' fuselage. As the vehicles closed, Gabriel could see five or six Harlequin troupers on the open-topped gun-deck of each, all of the garishly colourful aliens brandishing long blades and rifles.

Watching carefully, Gabriel realised that he couldn't make a precise head count: he concentrated his attention on one of the Venoms as it wove and threaded its way through volleys of bolter fire from Tanthius, Corallis and Ephraim. The gun-platform phased and shimmered, partially obscured by the sand-haze and the burst of red sunlight from behind it, but Gabriel focussed on the dancing figures that rode on its back. He counted four armed troupers. Then the Venom banked, twisdnng in mid flight to bring its main canons back round. Looking again, Gabriel could see six Harlequins on the gun-deck. It bobbed and skidded through three hundred and sixty degrees, spraying shuriken fire in a full circle before conduing to charge the Blood Ravens. Gabriel saw only three troupers on the gun-deck. It was entrancing and horrifying all at once.

Meanwhile, the Blood Ravens were in retreat. They had held their ground with fierce determination, but only long enough to reach a proper understanding of their enemy's tactics. It was not the way of the Blood Ravens to stand and fight in an unsustainable position, and it had not taken Tanthius long to realise that they would not last long in the open desert against a squadron of Venoms.

Several hundred metres away, the phalanx of Librarians had reached the same conclusion. For a few moments, they had wondered whether retaining two separate firing points might serve to dissipate the Harlequins' attacks, but it had become quickly obvious that that eclectic and wild attacking style of the aliens actually favoured multiple targets. The Harlequins whooped, sung and cackled as their Venoms charged through the desert between the two target groups - they were enjoying themselves.

Almost at the same moment, Tanthius and Father Urelie had signalled the retreat. The two groups moved diagonally across the sand, maintaining their firing solutions while they closed on each other and on Gabriel's position near the smouldering and ruined Thunderhawk. They both realised that the wreckage was the only type of cover available to them, and they both suspected that a single concentrated bank of fire would be more effective against the Venoms than their split fire power.

'How many do you count?' asked Gabriel as Tanthius took up a position at his shoulder. The four Marines had clambered into the wreckage of the Thunderhawk and were using its ruined hull to protect their flanks and rear. Flames rose up around them and licked against their armour, half-hiding their blood-red shapes in the heat haze.

'Six Venoms with four in each,' answered Tanthius, tracking one of the skimmers and unleashing a constant barrage of fire from his storm bolter. His voice was tense with anger; his hit ratio was incredibly low, which was not something to which he was accustomed.

Gabriel nodded, sharing the Terminator sergeant's frustration. 'I make it five, with between three and six occupants per Venom. Corallis?'

'They seem to change, captain. I can't decide on a fixed number. And I can't track their trajectories either - my shells either fall short or fly past. It's as though they are not where they appear to be, captain.' The veteran scout, who had been elevated directly out of the scout company into the command squad because of his prodigious talents and impeccable service record, was reaching the brink of his patience.

'These cursed holo-fields,' grumbled Ephraim, yelling his frustration into the wake of a volley of bolter fire. 'Their armour may be feeble, but it doesn't matter if you can't hit the wretches!'

'This effect is not only the result of holo-fields, brothers,' said Jonas as the Librarians found their way into the gunship's wreckage. 'There is some kind of warp charge held in those skimmers - I can see it. It cycles, building to a crescendo every few seconds. Then the Venom actually dips fractionally into the warp and re-emerges into a slightly different point in space. The movement is slight, but for a second the gun-platform is literally nowhere at all, and then it reappears on a fractionally different trajectory, which throws off our aim.'

'Phase fields,' confirmed Korinth, turning his staff in a slow spin to deflect a flurry of shrieking shuriken that perforated the weakened armour of the wreckage around them. Next to him, the unflinching figure of Zhaphel stood engulfed in flames, his ancient force axe slung casually over his shoulder.

As the Blood Ravens watched, the Venoms swept into a single attack line in the middle distance and then accelerated towards the downed Thunderhawk. The Harlequins opened fire the instant that they came into range, sending sheets of shuriken hissing along in front of them, drilling them into the remnants of the gunship's armour. Their velocity did not seem to slow, but they flickered and lurched, as though rendered in strobes of light, leaping closer with each phase shift.

The Space Marines waited for the Venoms to veer away, knowing that their most vulnerable points lay at the rear, in the engines themselves. But this time the Venoms showed no sign of turning or slowing. They ploughed relentlessly towards the Thunderhawk, as though they were going to ram it, unleashing torrents of fire in ever increasing intensity as they closed.

Suddenly they stopped. They stopped dead, less than twenty metres from the edge of the wreckage. There was no deceleration and no wavering. They just stopped and their weapons fell silent. Lithe, colourful figures sprang out of each of the four Venoms, arraying themselves in front of their vehicles in various theatrical poses. They held a range of bladed weapons and a number of rifles, but none of them moved to attack. They appeared as though frozen in time.

Wind blew through the space that separated the aliens from the Space Marines, and red dust clouds passed between them.

As the gust of wind died down, a single figure could be seen walking through the no-man's land. It was a slight, female form, staggering and stumbling as though walking required an incredible effort of will and balance. It was walking out of the lapping flames at the edge of the wreckage and towards the alien lines.

'Taldeer!' Gabriel gasped with genuine emotion. He had thought she was dead. He had thought that he had let her die, that he had killed her - another death on his conscience.

As though hearing his call, the eldar seer stopped and turned. She gazed back into the flames and ruination of the Thunderhawk, her eyeless cavities black and cavernous in her elegant, blood-stained face. It was the face of death itself.

Gabriel.

She dropped to her knees in the sand, unable to maintain her blind balance any more. Gabriel lurched forwards, vaulting over the armoured panels that provided his cover and rushing forwards through the flames.

'Gabriel!' yelled Jonas in disbelief. 'Gabriel, what in Vidya's name are you doing?'

The Commander of the Watch ignored the father Librarian and strode on through the flames and the clouds of sand. Out in the desert, he could see a leaping figure dart out from the Harlequin line and dance towards the fallen seer. It flipped and tumbled, moving with exquisite ease over the sand as though it were weightless. Gabriel ploughed through the desert, raising plumes of sand from the impacts of his heavy boots.

Before he reached her, Gabriel saw Taldeer fall forwards onto her face in the desert. By the time he knelt at her side and rolled her onto her back, she appeared dead. There was a shimmer of light, like a corona around her body, and then she simply faded away.

You have done this, human. The thoughts were cold and heavy, like ancient ice.

Looking up, Gabriel saw the contorted and terrible features of death projected on the rictus mask of the Harlequin Shadowseer staring down at him. There was pure hatred and terror held in that expression, as though it had been conjured as a weapon in itself. As he rose to his feet, towering over the slender form of the Harlequin, Gabriel could not wrest his eyes from the alien's mask. But the mask swam and shifted as he watched. Then it seemed to split into two, cracking the Shadowseer down the middle as though he were multiplying by fission or mitosis. Two Shadowseers split into four and then four into eight, until Gabriel thought that he would be surrounded. He shook his head, knowing at some level that this was a trick, but it was not being played on his eyes. Somehow, the Shadowseer was playing tricks directly on his mind.

Ripping his chainsword from its holster against his leg, Gabriel roared and thrashed it into a crescent, pushing it through the multiplying images. His head was beginning to throb and pound. Glittering lights swam in front of his eyes, but he couldn't tell whether they were actually dancing in his head. His spluttering chainsword hacked through a couple of the Shadowseers, making them flicker and falter, but they spun backwards with the others, leaping out of range.

Roaring again, trying to force the intmsion out of his mind by sheer power of will and volume, Gabriel lurched forwards again, thrashing at the leering faces of the menacing aliens. At the same time, volleys of bolter fire lashed past his head, shredding the multiple images, which flickered but remained in place. Behind him, Gabriel could faintly hear the stampede of boots as the other Blood Ravens broke cover and stormed to support their beleaguered captain. But he heard them as though they were in another world. Ahead, behind the growing wall of Shadowseers, Gabriel could sense the movement of the other Harlequins dashing towards him. Clusters of grenades detonated all around, sending sparkling fields of colour and spiralling images emptying through the desert, like hallucinations.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' he yelled, struggling to focus his mind and bring his roiling thoughts under control. As he charged towards the central figure in the line of Shadowseers, conscious that he was leading his Marines in their attack, a grenade fell through the alien's immaterial body from behind. It detonated in the air just in front of Gabriel and he dove to the ground, throwing himself flat. But he never hit the sand. In place of an explosion of fire, a wave of gravitational disruption crashed over the captain, leaving him struggling to maintain his balance and holding him fractionally above the ground. His mind swam, riddled with sparkling lights and a single, silvering voice that he thought he recognised. For the first time in nearly a century he felt helpless and lost, and his mind reached for the security of the silver tone.

For a moment it was like he was swimming in the air, and then the Harlequins were upon him.



CHAPTER NINE: ASCENSION

A VOLLEY OF bolter fire punched into the rear of the rapidly retreating Venom. Its holo-field flickered and crackled intermittently, as though it were shorting out as it pitched and shook through the desert, weaving erratically through the smoking remains of the other skimmers. The triple suns of Arcadia started to dip below the horizon in front of it, and a sudden blast of cold air rippled through the desert.

Korinth lowered his staff and yelled into the wake of the fleeing skimmer, sending a jagged spear of warp energy cracking into its rear vents, making the image splutter and flash violently. It pulsed and convulsed, as though bursting into darkness, and then vanished completely as the warp field ruptured and exploded.

The Blood Ravens were surrounded by the smoking ruins of Venoms. Behind them was the wreckage of their Thunderhawk, which had crashed into the desert, utterly ruined. Fires blazed uncontrollably in its carcass, sending shimmering heat waves pulsing over the surface of the desert, even as the Arcadian suns vanished and a hideous cold descended on the planet.

The corpses of Harlequins were scattered over the sand, broken and wretched, riddled with bolter holes and warp scars. In the midst of the battle, Zhaphel had noticed that unlike their eldar brethren, the Harlequins had made no effort to recover the waystones from their fallen kinsmen. Stooping down over one of the corpses, the Librarian rolled it onto its back and inspected its ruined armour: there was no waystone set into the chest. The Harlequins obviously had some other way of protecting their souls from the lust of their daemons.

Staring after the vanished Venom, Gabriel saw the suns dip below the horizon and felt the blast of icy night roll over him. His sealed armour adjusted to the terrible cold in an instant, but the fractional delay was enough for him to realise the extent of the climatic change that had just engulfed his team.

Looking down at his feet, the Blood Ravens captain saw the indentation in the sand where wretched and mined body of Taldeer had fallen, before it had vanished. Her body had looked utterly violated and lifeless. The cavities that had once held such radiant eyes had been dark and vacant. Surely she had died? But Gabriel had thought that of her once before.

As he watched, a sudden blast of icy wind whistled over her imprint in the sand, and froze it into the surface of the desert, coating the indentation in an instant, delicate and glittering array of crystals.

'Which way?' asked Gabriel, turning and stomping through the sand towards Corallis. 'We have to get moving.'

Sitting on the twisted remains of a skimmer, the scout sergeant nodded, looking up from his damaged augmetic arm. One of the Harlequin blades had punctured his forearm and forced its way through the bionics until it was hilt-deep. After the encounter with the eldar of Biel-Tan on Tartarus, Corallis had lost most of his right-hand side. Now the Harlequins of Arcadia had ruptured his replacement, augmetic arm as well. The sergeant inspected the wound for a moment longer and then gripped the hilt of the blade with his other hand and ripped it out of his arm. An electric crackle and spark danced in the suddenly open wound momentarily. 'The rock aberrations were to the south,' explained Corallis. 'If there is a settlement in this region of the desert, then it will be there.'

'And the other Thunderhawk?' asked Jonas, his voice tinged with a dark concern.

'I don't think that it lies between us and the settlement, father,' replied Corallis, trying to remember the exact scene that he had seen from the plummeting gunship. 'Do you want to investigate it, captain?'

Gabriel appeared to ignore the question. He pulled himself upright and turned to scan the horizon. 'No,' he said, finally, as though struggling against his naturally inquisitive tendencies. 'The important thing is what those Space Marines are doing now - the Thunderhawk itself is of little concern to us. If we need to know about the occupants of that gunship, we will find them soon enough - probably in the settlement you speak of. The urgencies of time must provoke leaps of faith in us all, sergeant. South, then.'

Without waiting for responses from the others, Gabriel strode off through the icy desert, the flickering light of his burning Thunderhawk lapping against his blood-red armour.

THE FROZEN DESERT held crisp indentations that suggested a dozen footprints. Corallis stooped and inspected them in the near darkness.

'There are three groups of prints, captain: perhaps a squad tracking an individual of similar size and weight.' He paused and looked up at Gabriel. 'They look like the prints of Space Marines.'

The captain nodded, staring ahead into the outskirts of the stone city that had gradually emerged from the labyrinthine matrix of rock formations in the desert. He realised immediately that whatever intelligence had designed this city, it was a military mind: the entire city was immaculately camouflaged into its environment, and the approach through the rocks was narrow and twisting - the perfect defensive formation.

Not for the first time, Gabriel found himself struck with admiration for the ingenuity of the eldar.

'You mentioned three sets of prints, sergeant?' he asked finally, looking down at the crouching form of the scout.

'Yes, captain. But the third is completely different: much smaller and lighter - they hardly leave any prints at all. Their trail is intermittent and broken, as though they were leaping or vanishing completely from time to time.'

'Harlequins?'

'Very likely, captain.'

'What are they doing?'

'It appears that they are tailing the individual Marine. They are not distracted by the trail of the squad, which suggests that they moved ahead of that squad or that they were able to differentiate between the hunters and the prey.'

An unspoken question hung in the air.

'It is Rhamah?' Zhaphel broke the moment of silence and gave voice to the idea that was lingering in all the minds of the Librarians of the Order Psykana.

'It is possible,' confirmed Corallis, rising to his feet. 'Whoever they are, they all went into the city.'

THE PICTURE FIZZED and then died into black, but Macha left her eyes fixed on the blank screen for a few more seconds. Her mind was racing and her spirit was ill at ease. For a moment she had thought that there was hope: the mon-keigh captain that had appeared on the screen had looked just like Gabriel. She had been sure that it was him, and had struggled to understand why his mind had become so closed to her. But then she had realised that it was not Gabriel at all - this "Ulantus" was a quite different creature. Although she had always known that the primitive mammals displayed certain amounts of individuality, she had become accustomed to seeing them as an undistinguished mass of animals.

Except for Gabriel. He had been different from the start. The farseer had seen the distant echoes of his mind reflected in myriad futures, and she could hear its clumsy resonance in many lines of the past. Gabriel and his Blood Ravens had a significance that was not shared by others of his species. Now that Macha had finally realised how to recognise and differentiate between the mon-keigh warriors, she found that Gabriel had already vanished into the warp with Taldeer - *with Taldeer!*

That young seer could not know the significance of the mammal that she accompanied. She had not been there on Rahe's Paradise. She had not even witnessed the events on Tartarus. Whilst her soul was pure enough, her mind was not yet fully formed. For her, Gabriel was little more than another generic mon-keigh: either she would underestimate him and suffer the consequences, or she would glimpse his potential and bring an even worse fate upon herself.

Finally turning away from the viewscreen, Macha folded herself back into her meditation posture on the podium in her chambers. Around her, she could feel the pulses of anxiety and readiness that flashed around the wraithbone infrastructure of her cruiser. Nothing happened aboard the *Eternal Star* without its echo or feedback reaching the mind of the farseer in her chamber. She nodded inwardly, satisfied that her crew were alert to the possible dangers represented by the massive but cumbersome Astartes battle-barge that loomed in space directly before them. They knew that the humans could outgun them, especially at this range, but they also knew how to prevent the situation from deteriorating to the point when a point-blank exchange would become necessary.

For her part, Macha infused the *Star* with calm - she did not believe that this Ulantus would want another battle. His mind was exhausted with anger and accusations, but they were not levelled at the Sons of Asuryan. If she had read his alien features correctly, Macha believed that the captain's ire was directed towards Gabriel himself, which she found mysterious and impossible to fathom.

Even though she knew that the mon-keigh found the eldar enigmatic and difficult to understand, Macha often found herself amused by the irony of the fact that she found those simple mammals so very difficult to comprehend as well. Their base emotions and primitive urges had been abandoned by the children of Isha many millennia before. Gazing into their volatile, vulgar and violent souls was like gazing back in time, to the very origins of the eldar species, when the Old Ones had first called them into being.

Without touching them, with merely a movement of her glittering, emerald eyes, Macha cast her rune-stones out before her and closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her eye-lids, she could see the image of the stones as they began to levitate off the shining wraithbone surface and spiral into a vortex. They spun faster and faster, dragging the air in the chamber into a whirl as they began to glow with an unearthly green. The farseer could feel the disturbance they caused in the material and immaterial space of her circular chamber as they flashed past her face, aspiring for the apex of the sweeping, convex ceiling.

Something jabbed into her mind, jogging her concentration suddenly like a single raindrop into a desert. A flicker of feedback from the *Eternal Star* splashed into her thoughts: one of the sensor arrays had picked up a disturbance in the local star. A sunspot had appeared without warning, and great fountains of radioactive solar flares had been discharged, spouting out of the yellow inferno like eruptions.

She put the thoughts aside. The sensors of the *Eternal Star* were interlaced into the capillaries of space itself: they picked up any and all shifts in the material realm. The ancient vessel was organically fused with the space through which it sailed, just as it was effectively an extension of Macha's own being. It served to mediate her experience of the world. Had the solar flares failed to make their presence felt in the farseer's mind, then there would have been something wrong.

With a last effort of concentration, Macha flicked open her eyes and sent the runes scattering through the space before her. They snapped suddenly into motionlessness, as though some kind of stasis field were suddenly activated to freeze their movement. Some of them hung suspended in the air, while others lay prone on the wraithbone deck. Some of them glowed green with energy and life, while others were dull and without lustre.

Cocking her head slightly, Macha inspected the patterns, mentally discarding the dead stones and those that had clattered impotently to the ground. If the runes themselves had no power, then the futures they emblemised in the present lacked all potency; this was not the time for her to be worried about the most unlikely of eventualities.

Rillietann. Vault. Cegorach. Arebennian.

The runic symbols for the ancient words glistened and revolved slowly. As Macha let her mind rest on each of them, they started to swirl and swim, intermingling and mixing with each other in complex patterns that it had taken her centuries to master. It was as though they were dancing for her, enacting one of the great mythic cycles: in the elegant and smooth motions, Macha saw the unfolding of the Myth of the Birth of Fear - only the tragic hero Lanthrilag was missing from the scene.

As she watched the display, letting the movements and ideas slip easily into her consciousness, two more stones started to shimmer and click against the wraithbone deck where they had lain dead. They vibrated rapidly, as though willing themselves back into life, until one of them burst into green and flew up into the spiralling pattern of the other runes.

Mon-keigh.

Macha raised an uneasy eyebrow. It was highly unusual for stones that had fallen dormant in the casting to return into the formation. Although the runes always formed a multi-dimensional pattern, often spread through a discreet period of time, it was nearly always the case that all the active stones were active from the start. A late comer was a disruption - it was an unwelcome fate.

Just as she had processed the intrusion of the humans into the ancient mythical cycle, the second regenerating stone sprang up into the pattern. It burned more brightly than all the others, flaring and colliding with the other stones as though seeking to eradicate them all or drive them from the ritual space.

Shafts of physical pain stabbed into Macha's eyes as she watched the new stone burn and crash, scattering the others out of her concentration and sending them skidding and clattering to the ground. After a few seconds, only it and the *Mon-keigh* remained. It flashed before her eyes and then stopped in space, spinning on its vertical axis like a gyroscope, burning its runic symbol into the farseer's pupils.

Yngir.

Macha's eyes widened.

Farseer! Uldreth's mind was angled and sharp; his thoughts carried an edge of urgency.

Disoriented for a moment, Macha's mind raced and tumbled. She struggled to drag her thoughts out of the runic future and return them to the present. Finally, snapping her eyes shut, she heard the last of the mnes sizzle and then drop to the ground. When she opened them again, all of the stones lay motionless and dormant before her knees. She sighed heavily.

Yes, Uldreth Avenger, she replied at last. You are concerned about the activity in the star? You are right - the Yngir are returning. The mon-keigh were presumptuous in their claims to have killed them. Their energy is reforming, and the star will give them birth once again. How long do we have, Macha?, asked Uldreth?

The farseer looked down at the stones. They were cracked and shattered, some of them beyond recognition. The *Mon-keigh* rune was chipped, and a single crack ran through the middle of it, as though splitting it into two. Only the *Yngir* remained undamaged. *Not long enough, my Avenger. Not long enough. We should inform the mon-keigh. They will not be aware of these developments. They may yet be of use in all this.*

AS THE SQUAD of Blood Ravens emerged out of the labyrinth of rock formadons that surrounded the unusual and circular stone city, Gabriel drew his Space Marines to a halt. The outskirts of the settlement were comprised of low-rise, stone dwellings, standing in sharp contrast with the massive cliffs that defined the circumference of the city, but the roofline steadily heightened towards the city centre, giving the impression of town planning around a conical theme. Many of the roofs actually sloped to match the gradient. The effect was truly breathtaking, making the city appear as though it had been cut down into the ground rather than built up out of it.

Because of the sloping, conical design, the Blood Ravens could see the street plan reflected in the layout of the roofs, and they noticed immediately how the stone streets wound in intricate and complicated patterns, as though designed deliberately to confuse and disorientate an attacking force.

'This place was all but invisible from the air,' muttered Corallis, his mind leaping back to the scene that he had seen from the plummeting Thunderhawk. 'It just looked like an unusual rock formation.'

'That is clearly the idea,' replied Korinth, scanning the townscape with admiration.

'And yet you recognised it as a possible settlement, sergeant,' smiled Gabriel, unsurprised by the competence of his scout sergeant. It was not for nothing that Corallis had been elevated to his current rank directly out of the scout company.

'Look at this place, Gabriel,' began Jonas as he unclasped his helmet and gazed at the vista before them. 'Do you know where we are?'

Gabriel saw the look of wonder on the Librarian's face and recognised the spark of excitement that had appeared in the old veteran's eyes.

'You know this place, father?'

'I have heard of places like this, Gabriel, but I never thought that I would live to see the day when I would walk in the streets of such a city. It makes the excavations on Rahe's Paradise seem pathetic.'

'Taldeer said that it was an ancient world of knowledge - she called it Arcadia,' nodded Gabriel, unclipping his own helmet to share the moment with his old friend. 'She led me to believe that it contained... sensitive information.'

Jonas shook his head and a smile crept across his face. 'I suspect that is a masterful understatement.' He opened his mouth as though to speak again, but then closed it. A moment of silence hung between them.

This is Arcadia. Zhaphel and Korinth showed no signs of having heard the thoughts of the father Librarian, but they were the only ones who could.

Yes. They agreed.

'I have heard of this place,' continued Jonas at length, without looking into Gabriel's eyes. 'The architecture is unmistakably eldar, as you can see. And the temple roofs,' he continued, pointing distinctly to the domed rooftops that punctuated the unusual skyline, 'appear to indicate that they were built to honour the mythical Laughing God of the ancient ones. Do you know what that means, Gabriel?'

The captain shook his head. 'Tell me, father. Your knowledge is superior to mine.'

'This is a Harlequin settlement - a world of knowledge that is hidden even from the eldar of the craftworlds. The Order Psykana have been searching for such a place for centuries; it is said that the Harlequins possess knowledge of rifts in the time-space

continuum - they can travel both through time and space, utilising the timelessness of the warp. An influential thesis in our Order suggests that this knowledge will provide the key for the recovery of the Fated Fifth.'

As he spoke, Zhaphel and Korinth turned to face Jonas, clearly surprised that the Librarian father was revealing so much, even to the Commander of the Watch.

Gabriel nodded, accepting the wisdom of his old friend without questions or doubt. He had complete confidence in the old Librarian's scholarship and erudition. 'Is this the reason why the Chaos Marines would be interested in this place? Or why Taldeer would be so adamant that we should get here?'

There was a pause. 'I doubt it, captain, but it is possible.'

'Other reasons?'

'It seems likely that a lost eldar world of knowledge would house many technologies that could be used as weapons by the unscrupulous or indiscriminating. 'This is exactly the kind of place that traitors to the Emperor could find assistance in their dark quests. It seems unlikely that the degenerate Marines of a Chaos Legion would realise that there were things of even greater value here.'

'Taldeer spoke of a sword.'

Jonas looked at Gabriel, searching his eyes for a sign. 'The Sword of Vault, yes.'

Korinth and Zhaphel shifted in visible unease. They had not expected the father Librarian to be so forthcoming to anyone outside the Order Psykana, not even to Captain Angelos.

'It is a mythical blade. A rare and forbidden volume recovered from the ruins of one of the smaller Callidus Temples in the outskirts of the Orphean sector contains a record of the myth: *The Fall of Lanthrilaq*. Evidently, one of the Callidus heirosavants, Rafaellus Kneg, extracted the tale from a captured Harlequin mime called "Wraelle".'

'Mime? I thought that the mimes were incapable of speech,' interrupted Ephraim, taking an interest in the possibility of technical knowledge being revealed to them on this planet.

'Yes, that is the standard, orthodox position,' agreed Jonas nodding. 'It seems that the agents of the Callidus Temple suspected that this position was flawed, and they sought to test their theory. As it turns out, it transpired that they were right. By the end of the intensionation, 'Wraelle had divulged details of a number of the mythic cycles over which the Harlequins appear to stand sentinel. One of them was the Fall of Lanthrilaq.'

Tanthius leaned forward, bringing the massive bulk of the Terminator armour into close proximity. 'Just tell us about the sword, Jonas. This is not the time for legends and myths. Just tell us about the sword so that we can get off this alien, forsaken rock.'

'It is said that Lanthrilaq once bore a heavenly blade - one of the fabled Blade Wraiths constructed by the eldar smith-god, Vault. Whilst the other blades were destroyed in the ancient battles with the necron, it is rumoured that Lanthrilaq's blade fell shattered from his hand, never to be found.'

'Never to be found? Then why should we believe that it is here?' Tanthius was growing impatient, standing on the edge of a tangibly real alien city and having to listen to children's stories about eldar gods and their broken swords.

Jonas glanced over towards Korinth and Zhaphel, as though looking for support, but they showed no signs of reaction.

'We have reason to believe that brother Librarian Rhamah may have been drawn to the location of the last Sword of Vault,' he conceded, as though confessing something terrible.

There was a long silence as the others waited for Jonas to continue. As they waited, the first of the triple suns crested the horizon and sent a sudden, soft sheet of red light unfurling through the streets of the stone city, apparently flooding it with blood.

'Brother Rhamah has an eldar blade of his own - the *Vairocanum*. It is an ancient and famous sword, once wielded by the Harlequin warlock Lavena the Joyful. But one day Lavena fell under the onslaught of a force more glorious than anything she had encountered before: the Great Father, Vidya himself - the Seeker of Truth - fell upon Lavena and clove her life force in two, ending the Harlequin raids of Qulus Trine. After his victory, Vidya gave the wealthy Qulus system to the Eighth Company and took *Vairocanum* as his own prize.'

'Rhamah has the sword of Vidya himself?' Tanthius was stunned.

'In a manner of speaking,' offered Korinth. If Jonas was going to reveal so much, he would at least seek to rectify any misunderstandings. 'In fact, the Great Father never wielded *Vairocanum*. We are not sure why, and Vidya left no records to explain his reasons, as far as we know. Instead, he left the blade in trust to the Order Psykana.'

'And we stood as its guardians for many centuries,' interjected Zhaphel, removing his helmet at last, letting his long grey hair fall loosely in front of his golden eyes. 'It was held in the...' He trailed off, apparently unwilling to finish the sentence.

'It was held in the Psykana Armorium, hidden in one of the psychically shielded subchambers of the Sanctorium Arcanum aboard the *Litany of Fury*,' said Jonas, meeting Gabriel's eyes levelly and watching the reaction of the Commander of the Watch carefully.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at the mention of a secret armoury hidden in the bowels of his own battle-barge, but he said nothing to interrupt the father Librarian.

'This armoury contains only force weapons, most of which have been procured throughout the ages by Blood Ravens Librarians in encounters with the eldar. Some, in fact, have been bequeathed to us voluntarily.'

Gabriel shook his head. 'Does Ulantus know about this place?' He smiled broadly at the sudden realisation that the straight-laced captain was currently in command of potentially the most heretical battle-barge in any Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.

The three Librarians exchanged glances. 'No, captain,' answered Korinth firmly. 'Ulantus knows nothing of this. Nobody except the initiated of the Order Psykana have ever been permitted this knowledge.'

'Knowledge is power, but ignorance is safety,' murmured Tanthius under his breath. He didn't like this at all.

'Why?' The abrupt question came from Ephraim.

'Why what?' asked Jonas.

'Why was the sword committed to that Armorium? We have a number of force weapons in the other armouries in the fleet.'

'The Psykana Armorium is more than merely an armoury, brother Ephraim. It acts as a conduit for the psychic potentials of the weapons it holds, channelling them into the Beacon Psykana itself, amplifying the psychic signal that pulses in the heart of the Blood Ravens.

'After a certain period, the weapons become psychically fused with the beacon. When new Librarians are initiated into the order, they are free to select one of the weapons as their own. Carrying this weapon with us ensures that we retain a permanent connection with the beacon at all times - this means that we can draw on its power at times of need, but it also means that the beacon can draw on us. This is partly how the Summoning of the Exodus functions.'

Gabriel nodded. He felt that he had known this already. For an instant, his mind flashed with half misremembered images of the Astronomican, and he wondered whether there was any connection between these dubious moments of unsanctioned psychic awareness and the secret beacon held in the core of his battle-barge. With so much psychic energy confined within the structure of a space vessel, surely there would be some unexpected or uncontrollable consequences?

'What does this have to do with Rhamah coming to this planet?' asked Corallis, his clear headedness bringing the conversation back on track.

'In the legend of the Fall of Lanthrilaq,' began Jonas, turning to address the sergeant who had once lain under him on Rahe's Paradise, 'Lanthrilaq's blade is broken in combat with the necron. Afterwards, Lanthrilaq is slain and his imperfect blade falls to the ground on an unknown planet. However, the fragment that broke off his blade has a story of its own. It was found shortly afterwards by Lavena the Joyful, who had it re-forged into a new blade: "The Touch of Death".'

'*Vairocanum*,' realised Corallis.

'Exactly. Rhamah's blade contains part of the essence of the last Blade Wraith.'

'Its nature is now divergent - it is tied both to our Beacon Psykana and to its origins as part of the imperfect blade of Lanthrilaq. It is perhaps because of this that the Great Father chose not to wield the blade himself - he was aware of the dangers,' explained Korinth.

'But Rhamah chose the blade?' asked Tanthius, his concern for the moral choices of the Blood Ravens coming to the fore once again.

'The blade chose him,' answered Zhaphel simply.

'When he plunged it down into the deck of the *Litany of Fury* while we were struggling through the warp, perhaps *Vairocanum* saw a chance to return to its source,' said Korinth.

'It can be no coincidence that *Vairocanum* snapped in exactly the same way as Lanthrilaq's blade. Coincidences are for the weak-minded and the ignorant,' continued Zhaphel. 'Even the remaining fragment of *Vairocanum* was so potent with psychic power that it overwhelmed the beacon when we attempted the Summoning of the Exodus. Neither Rhamah nor the rest of the sword are lost. If anything, their powers have grown since their fall.'

'We can only assume that this is because they are drawing close to the psychic home of *Vairocanum*,' concluded Jonas. 'That is why we think that Rhamah is here on this planet, and why the Sword of Vaul is here too. The presence of the Harlequins supports our theory, and the interest of the Traitor Marines is also circumstantial support.'

Gabriel looked his old friend directly in the eyes and saw the constancy of his purpose. The explanation had been an act of trust and confession; Gabriel had never asked and would never have asked Jonas to betray the details of the Order Psykana. As scholars, the Blood Ravens were fully aware of the value, importance and power of secrets.

Shifting his attention to the other two Librarians, he realised that they were taking a big risk. They had never served under him before, and he was fully aware that their opinion of him was probably shaped by the rumours that circulated through the Ninth Company under the command of Ulantus. Now, it seemed, they were on even ground.

As he looked from one to the other, the last of the Arcadian suns broke the horizon and a blinding blast of red light and heat swept across them, bathing them in a shower of burning sand. At that moment, Gabriel found himself wondering whether Taldeer had known all of this from the start.

Clicking his helmet back into place to protect his eyes and face from the harsh elements, Gabriel activated the vox bead. 'It's getting late. Let's find out what other secrets we can explode in this city.'

DOZENS OF FAKE grins glared down onto the stage. It was almost impossible to differentiate the Harlequins in the stands from the mannequins that simply made up the numbers when the audience appeared overly thin. It was thin today.

'They have come, Eldarec. The mon-keigh have come in greater numbers.' The voice echoed down from the highest balcony in the amphitheatre, bouncing around the acoustics until it appeared to have no origin at all. It might even have come from one of the lifeless, smiling mannequins. Such was how it should be for the voice of the chorus: impersonal but insightful.

'They tried to kill the farseer, Eldarec!'

'She was alive on the surface of Arcadia - and then they tried to kill her!'

'We were there!'

'We watched her fall before the ugly and clumsy violence of the mon-keigh!'

'Karebennian was wrong, Eldarec! He is not to be trusted. The seekers of truth bring death not assistance in our fight.'

'The mon-keigh are all the same - they have no place on Arcadia!'

'The Karebennian is deceitful - he is a trickster. The mon-keigh must die.'

'We must prepare for war, Eldarec! We must purge the surface of Arcadia!'

'The Solitaire takes the role of the Great Enemy and leads us to our doom!'

The lights in the theatre flickered and flashed then a controlled explosion detonated in the middle of the stage. As the smoke cleared, the lithe yet solid shape of Karebennian was revealed.

'Oh cegorach,' he began, 'it is true that the mon-keigh have landed in greater numbers. But it is not true that the newcomers are the same as those who have taken up position in the ancient repository.'

'They tried to kill the farseer, Karebennian,' countered Eldarec.

'It is true that the farseer suffered, but the cause of her injuries is not unclouded, cegorach. She was not killed - I saw to that. She led the mon-keigh here, and I believe that she did so willingly. Her mind spoke of the seekers of truth - we have encountered such creatures before. Lavena the Joyful once danced with their leader.'

'And she was killed, a fate that may yet befall this Taldeer of yours.' Eldarec's tone was grave despite the sudden grin that cracked across his mask.

'How can you tell them apart, Solitaire?' The shout echoed out of the audience; it carried accusations as much as interrogations. Swirling to face the audience, Karebennian swooped into a leap and then a bow. 'One of them carries the *Vairocanum*.' His words were like song and his movements seemed to enact the drama of the Blade Wraith all over again. 'I have seen it.'

There was a hush of silence.

'They come for our resources, as once they came for the sword!' The call ricocheted and bounced around the stands.

'There is no trust amongst such animals. The farseer was wrong to bring them here.'

'Whatever differences you see between them: they are all the same! They come for our power!'

'Knowledge is power!'

'We should rid Arcadia of their stench!'

'We go to battle!'

'Commence the Dance of War!'

The call to arms echoed with the support of dozens of voices, as the sound whirled around the amphitheatre, gathering volume and power.

'I will not dance this dance with you,' said Karebennian, walking to the front of the stage and slumping, cross-legged to the ground. 'There is no harmony in this move. All great symphonies contain moments of rest and calm: this should be such a moment. We should wait before we act rashly: the mon-keigh may surprise us yet.'

Eldarec watched the Harlequin troupe spring to its feet in the stands, flipping and leaping their way down to the stage, leaving the grinning mannequins immobile and sinister in their seats. As the troupe started to assemble on the stage behind the Solitaire, Eldarec threw his head back and laughed, filling the arena with the rattling, guttural sound of mirth.

'If you will not join us, you will be alone, Karebennian.'

'Such is the path of the Solitaire.' There was no joy in his voice as he faded slowly out of visibility.

The Great Harlequin took up the centre of the stage and raised the Sword of Lanthrilag above his head in a dramatic pose. As he did so, the rest of the troupe fell into position around him, each striking a combat stance that seemed frozen in time, as though the theatre had suddenly been thrown back into the dimness of history to the point at which Lanthrilag and Eldanesh had mustered their greatest heroes to confront the soulless evil of the Yngir. Gradually, the troupe's dathedi-shields powered up and their images were actually transformed to resemble the mighty host that once laid waste to the silvering minions of the star gods.

A series of dull impacts reverberated through the theatre and then a distant explosion shook the stage. Immediately, the rattle of gunfire and the hiss of warp discharge filled the background of the performance on stage. For a moment, the troupers wondered whether this was a new trick of the Great Harlequin, designed to make their posturing even more dramatic. But then cracks began to appear in the ceiling of the amphitheatre, sending dust and debris raining down onto the stage. More explosions sounded, and the theatre rocked.

In a sudden plume of flame, Karebennian reappeared at the edge of the stage, still cross-legged on the floor, facing up into the mannequin-filled audience.

'The mon-keigh have engaged each other. They are in the plaza in front of the main repository.'

THE COMMAND DECK of the *Litany of Fury* was silent. Captain Ulantus stared at the blank viewscreen as his mind raced to try and make sense of what was going on. It seemed like only hours before that he had been engaged in the simple and unambiguous affair of war: the *Litany of Fury* had proven itself once again in battle against the orks and even the necron. It now hung massively in orbit around the devastated spoils - Lorn V.

However, life was more complicated than war, even for a captain in the Emperor's Adeptus Astartes. The presence of two fully-armed eldar cruisers in tight formation just off the stern of his battle-barge was not something that Ulantus was comfortable with. Although he was relatively confident that they would be no match for the awesome firepower of the *Litany*, especially from such close range, the mere presence of the aliens made him feel uncomfortable. In a moment of insight, Ulantus realised that his discomfort was proof of his steadfast spirit: he was not Captain Angelos, and the presence of the eldar *should* fill him with righteous revulsion. His discomfort was his shield against heresy.

But the alien witch had confirmed many of the things that the errant Captain Angelos had claimed before he had gone gallivanting into the warp with the other eldar seer. The coincidence was simply too striking, and Ulantus was too much a Blood Raven to let such a coincidence pass unmarked.

'Coincidences are for the weak-minded and the ignorant,' he muttered to himself, echoing the words of the Great Father himself, still staring at the blank blackness of the viewscreen.

He considered the facts: it was true that there had been a webway portal on the surface of Lorn V. This had been confirmed by General Sturmn independently of Gabriel and the alien seer. It was further confirmed by the covert arrival of an Ordo Xenos inquisitor, the furtive Tsensheer, who had been summoned by Sturmn when the Cadians first discovered the site of the portal. Tsensheer had studiously avoided all contact with the Blood Ravens since arriving in the Lorn system, which made Ulantus both suspicious and angry: Gabriel's reputation tarnished everything he touched. It would not be appropriate for Ulantus to contact the inquisitor himself - to do so would be to suggest that his lines of communication with the Blood Ravens Commander of the Watch were obscured in some way, which would fuel rather than dispell any rumours about the current state of the Blood Ravens. It was

undoubtable that the direct and straight-forward Sturnn would have informed Tsensheer that Captain Angelos had already been down to the surface with an eldar seer in tow.

Not for the first time, Ulantus cursed the Commander of the Watch under his breath.

It was also true that the portal had been disabled in some way, but that neither the Blood Ravens nor the Cadian Guard had done anything that could have achieved this result. Gabriel had spoken about the presence of a Nova-class frigate out near Lorn VII, and had implied that it might have been a Chaos vessel that had somehow ruptured the portal from a distance. Leaving aside the question of who those Traitor Marines might have been and why they might have wanted to disable a webway portal, Ulantus had ordered the scan-array servitors to go back through the records of the mid-range scanners for the last day, and they had indeed shown the abrupt presence and sudden disappearance of a frigate-sized vessel around Lorn VII at about the time the *Ravenous Spirit* had entered the system.

The biggest hole in Gabriel's account of events, however, had been the leap from these factual observations to the assertion that the destruction of the webway portal was simultaneously an opportunity for the unidentified Traitor Marines to find a way to an ancient, lost eldar planet of forbidden knowledge and power.

Gabriel had made this leap on the basis of information gifted to him by an alien witch who, until merely hours before the appearance of the necron menace, had been assaulting the *Litany of Fury*.

Ulantus turned away from the viewscreen and strode towards the exit of the control deck, deciding that he should go and check on the progress of the young neophyte, Ckrius, in the Implantation Chamber. He needed to see something material and controllable, something that spoke of the future of the Blood Ravens in a more affirmative manner. Something uncomplicated by the affairs of Gabriel Angelos.

As he walked he realised that Farseer Macha had basically confirmed Gabriel's story. He wasn't sure what to make of the realisation. Thinking back to his conversation with the alien, Ulantus realised that he had referred to Captain Angelos as "Your Gabriel", when speaking to the farseer. It had been an unconscious move, but he wondered whether it revealed something deep-seated about his views concerning the commander.

The farseer had implied that the destruction of the portal would bring doom to Lorn. She had said that Gabriel and the other seer had to move quickly. But she had not said why.

As the blast doors hissed and clunked closed behind him, Ulantus found himself wondering whether he should try to re-contact the eldar farseer to find some answers to this question: with the orks and necrons defeated, what could possibly be the threat to the Lorn system now?

Behind him, Ulantus heard the blast doors unpressurise and hiss open once again.

'Captain Ulantus,' called Sauhl, stepping out of the control room after him. 'You should see this.'

Ulantus stopped at the end of the corridor and turned back to face his sergeant. 'See what, Sauhl?'

'The sun, captain. It's... it's changing.'

THE SOUND OF gunfire drew me through the sweeping, circular window cavity in the wall of the librarium and out onto the balcony beyond. The light of the three red suns streamed into my face as I emerged out of the shadow of the countless book stacks housed within the great reading-room. I held my hand to my face to shade my eyes from the glare and stepped up to the stone balustrade that ran in a beautiful arc, matching the crescent-shaped sweep of the balcony's floor.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust - the brilliant sunlight jostled through the long, thin streets and emerged into the plaza below the balcony like the beams of a laser, bursting into blinding radiance against every polished or metallic surface. I could see two groups of figures moving around the piazza: one group was growing as reinforcements stormed out of the gates that led into the building below me. The other group, on the far side of the square, was smaller and more isolated.

What is happening here? Who are those soldiers?

Good questions, friend, answered Ahriman. He was leaning against the wall of the librarium at the far edge of the balcony, watching the developing battle and bathing in the radiance of the bloody suns. In the startling light, his face seemed almost translucent.

Those are not Harlequins. The newcomers were much bigger than the eldar warriors and their movements were heavier. Even against the bursting light of the suns, I could see that their armour was not characterised by the multicoloured patterns of the Harlequins, but by solid colorations in red and gold. Two or three of them appeared to be in blue. And the armour was much more solid than anything employed by the Harlequins. Their weapons coughed and barked with a familiar gravity and resonance. *They look like Space Marines.*

Yes, young friend. They look like Space Marines. All of this knowledge acts like a beacon for the thirsty and for the seekers of power. If there is anything worth dying for, it is knowledge. Ahriman leant over the edge of the balcony for a moment, watching a volley of shells crash into the wall below and blow great chunks of masonry down into the piazza. Then he turned and peered back into the librarium through the circular arch. *If nobody else wanted this, how could we be sure of its value?*

I stared down into the blaze of sunlight, which was now hazed with smoke from the explosions and fires that had erupted around the plaza. Something about this scene felt wrong. *Ahriman is not surprised by this battle. He expected it. He needed it to happen - it is like an affirmation of his success.*

'You were expecting them?' I asked.

We did not start this fight, young sword of Vidya. My Prodigal Sons are merely defending themselves. Those Blood Ravens drew the first blood. The great sorcerer had stepped back through the archway into the librarium, as though the unravelling battle was already boring him.

Blood Ravens? The words struck me like daggers and then worked their way deeper in my mind, cutting through my thoughts like a chainsword.

We are merely defending ourselves and the knowledge that has fallen into our keeping. Knowledge is power, young Blood Raven, and we must guard it well. The great sorcerer paused for a moment, as though to let the significance of his words sink in. Then he stooped over the desk in front of the window, with his back to the balcony, and proceeded to inspect one of the books that he had left there before the battle had drawn him outside. *You must understand, friend of Ahriman, that I am doing no more nor less than they would have done in my position: I am protecting this knowledge from agents that will not understand it, or who will use it for the wrong purposes. In protecting it, I am protecting myself. What else could you expect me to do?*

Blood Ravens? The Sword of Vidya? My mind span with the words, as though I had heard them for the first time, or as though a fever had dredged them out of my deepest being and thrown them sizzling into my consciousness. Half remembered images of the red Space Marines charging towards me in the daemonic corridor flashed through my mind. *Blood Ravens.*

I staggered slightly, catching my weight against the stone balustrade. *Who am I? I am the sword of Vidya.* My eyes dropped to the heraldic icon etched into my own blue armour: black raven's wings with a pristine droplet of blood in their heart. My mind raced to the image on the cover of the book that I had found in the librarium.

Coincidences are for the weak-minded and the ignorant.

The maxim came from nowhere, as though I had known it forever.

Instinctively, I pulled *Vairocanum* from its sheath and held it up before me, as the battle for the courtyard continued to rage below. Its broken blade glowed an eerie green. I stared at it, letting my mind embrace its image. Something shifted in my thoughts, drawing my spirit down towards the blue-clad Blood Ravens in the piazza - it was as though the blade itself had some connection with them.

I am a Blood Raven...

Yes, friend of Ahriman, you are a Blood Raven. The sorcerer was leaning back against the desk, letting the flood of red sunlight wash over him as he turned a book over and over in his hands. *But we are not so different, you and I.*

I lowered *Vairocanum* so that it pointed directly at the great sorcerer, but I did not move. Instead, I looked down into the plaza and watched the battle rage for a few more seconds. The Blood Ravens and the Prodigal Sons were exchanging fire across the courtyard, but both groups were in heavy cover and most of the damage appeared to be to the beautiful stone structures of the city itself. *Such a waste.*

Looking back up at Ahriman's smiling, calm, unearthly face, I had no idea who I was at all. With my memory still shot to pieces, I could not deny that I felt some affinity for this seeker of knowledge. Something inside me thrilled at his esoteric power; it spoke directly to my being. Did I really need to make an enemy of this Ahriman? We had stood shoulder to shoulder against the Harlequins.

No, friend of Ahriman, there is no need for us to fight. Except in the mind - for it is in the mind where the most important battles are always fought. The Prodigal Sons are always open to new seekers of knowledge - how else can we survive? We are not so different, you and I, Librarian - you simply deny that part of you which I embrace happily. You need not fight with your own nature, Rhamah, just as you need not fight with me: the only meaningful fight is in your head.

As his words slipped easily into my mind, Ahriman rose from the desk and took two strides towards me. Drawing to a halt at the tip of *Vairocanum* he reached out his hand. *We were not always so different, friend of Ahriman.*

In his outstretched hand was the book that I had found in the librarium, with the Blood Ravens insignia on the cover.

There was a time, long ago before the Change, when the Thousand Sons of Magnus the Red wore the blood-red armour of their primarch. But times change. Everything changes. We have changed. This is one of the constant laws of our chaotic times. The key is to learn how to control the changes, how to master them and transform them to your own advantage. Do you think that it is coincidence that the Librarians of your Blood Ravens wear the blue armour of the Prodigal Sons and the Rubric of Ahriman? We are the seekers of truth, friend of Ahriman. We need only ever confront each other with our minds.

Keeping *Vairocanum* between us, I took the book from Ahriman's hand.



CHAPTER TEN: CONTESTATION

ON THE FAR side of the piazza was a grand, domed building. Arising out of its smoothly curving roof was a conical spire, like a giant finger pointing into the heavens. To one side was a high-rising tower, bristling with balconies and elegantly circular windows. The sheet of red light from the triple suns washed over one face of the tower, transforming it into a ruddy, reflected blaze. Somewhere near the top, Corallis could just about make out two figures on one of the balconies. They appeared to be clad in blue power armour, marking them out as Space Marines.

When he turned to inform the others, Corallis found that the three Librarians of the Order Psykana were already staring up at the figures.

A dark opening in the base of the domed hall, at the top of a flight of white, stone steps that rose out of the piazza, marked an entrance into the complex. The stairs were strewn with the bloodied and broken bodies of Harlequin troupers, some slumped into piles and others lying prostrate down the steps. At the top of the steps were a series of statues and monuments, some of which resembled humanoids - humans, eldar and dark eldar, all intermixed together - but most of them appeared to depict creatures of the warp, vile and snarling with vicious beauty. Like the other artistic structures that decorated the pristine streets of the unusual alien city, these inspired a mixture of awe and disgust from the Blood Ravens.

Hidden in amongst the statues and gargoyles outside the great hall was a squad of Space Marines. It was almost impossible to determine how many there were, since the statues provided more than ample cover for them, and they never attacked all at once.

When the Blood Ravens had first emerged into the piazza, they had seen two of them standing sentinel in front of the entrance to the hall. However, as the first shots had been fired, those two had thrown themselves into cover and a flood of blues and golds and washed out of the dark entrance, flowing behind the monuments. There might have been one or two squads.

However many there were, there were more than enough to frustrate the attempts of the Blood Ravens to cross the piazza. Instead, the two sides were exchanging sporadic fire, most of which seemed to inflict damage only on the stone monuments behind which they had adopted cover.

'Jonas,' called Gabriel, leaning his back against a statue of a giant deathmask, which was grinning in the bloody sunlight even as chunks of it were blown off by occasional bolter shells. 'Jonas? Tanthius? Can you hear me?'

The father Librarian nodded from behind the wreckage of some kind of stone animal. He was crouched with Zhaphel and Korinth as the three Librarians attempted to assess the situation. 'Yes, captain. I hear you.' As he spoke, Korinth broke cover and unleashed a javelin of warp fire across the piazza, smashing it into the image of a leaping warp beast and blasting its head into shrapnel.

'Assessment?' asked Gabriel. 'Do we need to go around?'

'Stalemate, captain,' replied Tanthius, who was standing between two statues of dramatic eldar heroes, each of them with swords outstretched to the skies. He held his storm bolter before him and was unloading a relentless tirade of explosive shells towards the Traitor Marines at the top of the steps. He did not believe that a Terminator sergeant should be seen to take cover. 'We need to flank them before they flank us.'

As he spoke, the whistle of a grenade cut through the air. He watched it arc out from within the shadows of the hall's entrance, rising and then falling in a steep parabola before it clinked onto the ground in front of one of the statues next to him. He stepped calmly to one side and watched as it detonated only a fraction of a second later, blowing most of the statue's base into rubble and revealing the crouching figure of Corallis behind it. As though this presented them with a new opportunity, Corallis and Tanthius open fire together, sending hails of bolter fire sleeting back across the piazza.

Gabriel nodded. 'Who are they, Jonas? Who are we fighting?'

'The yellow and blue markings are reminiscent of the Thousand Sons, captain,' offered Korinth as lightning poured from his staff to provide cover for Zhaphel, who was storming towards the huge, ornate, stone fountain in the centre of the piazza. 'That would also explain their interest in this world: who other than the Thousand Sons would go through all this trouble for a lost eldar library?'

'We would,' said Gabriel, with forced amusement.

'It is possible,' responded Jonas, ignoring the captain's tone, 'that these Marines were once Thousand Sons. But look at them more closely: they have no helmets. According to the most ancient records, the Thousand Sons became fused into their armour in the days after the Rubric of Ahriman. Only a small group escaped the devastating effects of that great and terrible spell. Only they can remove their helmets. These Marines must descend from those who were the children of Ahriman himself.'

'The Rubric of Ahriman?' asked Gabriel, his memory stirring faintly at the mention of the ancient spell.

'Yes, aboard the *Omnis Arcanum* we are fortunate enough to have one of the few remaining copies of the *Grimoire Hereticus*, in which the Rubric is described as a spell of such unimaginable power that even daemonic horrors fled before the singular roaring tempest of magic unleashed by Ahriman and his cabal,' explained Jonas.

'Ahriman was so desperate to escape the mutating touch of Tzeentch that he cast a spell which rendered his battle-brothers into little more than hollow automata - beneath their power armour the bodies of the Thousand Sons withered away into dust. Without bodies, what could there be to become mutated or corrupted,' added Zhaphel as he skidded to a halt under the cover of the great fountain.

The vox channel hissed with sudden static. 'They became pure consciousness?' asked Gabriel.

'Perhaps that is a rather too generous way to phrase it, captain,' replied Jonas cautiously. 'Better that we should call them inorganic abominations.'

'Of course. But this Ahriman - he escaped the effects of the spell?'

'Yes, so the *Grimoire* reports. Ahriman escaped the effects of the spell, but was banished from the Planet of Sorcerers by Magnus the Red himself, condemned to wander the Eye of Terror seeking clues as to the nature of Tzeentch.'

'He searches for knowledge of magic,' concluded Gabriel, recalling some of the rest of the story from his time in the Librarium Sanctomm. 'As I recall, he refuses to acknowledge that he is a servant of the Chaotic Powers - is that correct? He claims, rather, that he is a servant of knowledge itself - searching for it in its purest and most unadulterated forms across the galaxy.'

'We need not acknowledge our nature in order to be who we are, Gabriel. Such acknowledgement is an act of truth with which not all seekers of knowledge are comfortable.' Jonas's voice was suddenly grave. 'Do not confuse this seeker of knowledge with our own Great Father's search for truth. Truth is something with boundaries in the moral and the real. Knowledge is not always so bounded, especially knowledge of the power of Chaos. The Emperor himself decreed this division in the Edicts of Nikaea - remember that. Ahriman may not acknowledge his service to Tzeentch, but his very existence does violence to the memory of our Great Father and to the word of the Emperor of Man.'

'Enough preaching, Jonas,' snapped Gabriel, suddenly angry as he realised that he had only ever permitted Prathios to speak to him in this way before. 'You are not our chaplain.' He regretted his words as soon as he spoke them. 'Tell us what you know of the tactics of these Sons of Ahriman: what do they want here?'

'The *Tactica Adeptus Chaotica*, which has been assembled in the Librarium Sanctorum, contains very little on the Thousand Sons, except to indicate that they are well known for seeking to avoid direct fire-fights at close range, presumably because this nullifies the advantages offered by their impressive sorcery skills. It notes, I believe, that we should expect illusion, misdirection and feint. If possible, they will avoid armed conflict altogether: their objectives are rarely mere destruction.' Jonas's tone was efficient and clipped.

'Objectives?'

A sudden silence descended on the plaza as the bolter fire stopped abruptly. Without hesitation, Gabriel stepped out from his cover and stared across the pot-holed piazza towards the statues around the top of the steps that led into the grand hall. There was a blur of motion, and flashes of blue and gold streaked between the monuments.

'They're moving out?' suggested Corallis. 'Perhaps trying to get around to our flanks?'

'Or perhaps trying to make us think that,' replied Gabriel, raising his bolter and taking careful aim. He squeezed the trigger and watched the shell screech across the plaza and slide between the legs of one of the heroic eldar statues, behind which the Traitor Marines had been encamped. There was a metallic chink followed by a small explosion as the shell impacted against ceramite armour. Then a bank of fire erupted from the top of the steps, raining back down towards the exposed Blood Ravens.

'Objectives?' asked Gabriel again, stepping back behind cover.

'Two are possible - one is likely. One is the generation of followers. Because of the Rubric of Ahriman, it is unknown how the Thousand Sons are able to replenish their ranks. They seem to seek to foster cults on dozens of worlds at the same time, cultivating magi who can contribute in some way to the power of the Legion. This network is called the Prodigal Sons of Ahriman - and the name is also used by the Space Marines closest to the terrible sorcerer.'

'Unlikely to be the objective in this case,' agreed Gabriel.

'Agreed. The most likely is that these Prodigal Sons are searching for a specific artefact or artefacts. It is reputed that Ahriman himself conducts raids on museums, librariums, scholaria and reclusia all over the galaxy, searching for items of power and knowledge.'

'The Sword of Lanthrilq,' concluded Gabriel swiftly. 'Taldeer was right. So these Marines are not trying to kill us, they're just trying to buy some time for their brethren to find the Blade Wraith? They are a diversion.'

'Corallis - see if you can get around behind that hall and find another way in. If we can do this without fighting, we will. In the meantime, we will provide a diversion of our own. Tanthius, if you please.'

As Corallis sprinted back out into the plaza, Tanthius strode forward towards the fountain behind which Zhaphel had taken cover. Korinth stepped out of cover and dashed to flank the massive Terminator sergeant, letting his force staff spit and hurl warp flames in a continuous barrage against the statues as he ran. By the time he reached Tanthius, Zhaphel had taken up a position on the other side of him. The three of them formed a short, blazing, firing-line in the very centre of the plaza. Storm bolter shells whined in a relentless tirade while lashes of warp fire crashed out of Korinth's staff. Zhaphel raised his force axe above his head and then drove it down into the flagstones. As the axe-head struck, it sent a crackling line of lightning jousting through the ground and up the steps, exploding the legs from one of the statuesque warp beasts that served as cover for the Prodigal Sons.

'Gabriel. There is another possibility,' said Jonas, catching the captain just as he broke cover and started to advance to join the others.

He paused and turned. 'Yes?'

'Have you ever heard of the Sacking of the Etiamnun Reclusium?'

'No, Jonas. Should I have?'

'The story is not shared with many outside the Order. Etiamnun III was a small, distant world on the edge of the Eastern Fringe - a barren and inhospitable planet. Not wholly dissimilar from Rahe's Paradise, in some ways.'

'Father, is this really the time for a history lesson?'

Bolter shells whistled past them, and the battle cries of Tanthius, Ephraim and the other Librarians could be clearly heard as they unleashed the fury of the Blood Ravens against the Prodigal Sons.

'This is important, Gabriel. You need to be aware: I am not your chaplain, but I am your Librarian.'

Gabriel nodded. Jonas was right. They were Blood Ravens, and they were nothing without knowledge.

'The population of Etiamnun III was limited to a few recluses in the reclusium, which was established in the ancient and forgotten past on a site... on a site bequeathed to the Imperium by the eldar of Altanzar, before that craftworld was lost to the Eye of Terror.'

For a number of decades now, the world has fallen under the direct protection of the Order Psykana. It appears almost completely insignificant, but its worth is immeasurable.'

'The Order Psykana has a force sufficient for the defence of a world?' Gabriel's astonishment was obvious. In front of him, he could see and hear the destruction being wrought by Korinth and Zhaphel together, and he wondered how many such Librarians would be needed to stand sentinel over a small, backwater world.

'That is not the point of this story, Gabriel. Another time. About a century ago, the reclusium was attacked by a force of Thousand Sons Marines, apparently led by a terrible sorcerer lord. They conquered it easily, since it had no defences other than its obscurity.'

'I don't understand why I need to know this, Jonas. If there is a point, get to it.'

The sorcerer lord led his Marines deep in the mountain complex that lay under the reclusium. In its heart he found what he had come for: the central chamber housed a long hidden and all-but-forgotten portal into the eldar webway.

The Order Psykana was summoned to expel the sorcerer, but by the time we arrived the sorcerer was gone, vanished into the webway. Left behind in the hurry was a handwritten copy of a book, *The Tome of Karebennian*. You have probably heard of that book, Gabriel? It's supposed to show the various routes through the webway to the Black Library of the eldar. That is what the Thousand Sons are looking for, Gabriel.'

'What happened to the book, Jonas? Is this also hidden away in some secret chamber of the Order Psykana?'

'We destroyed it, of course, Gabriel.' Jonas's voice betrayed genuine surprise at the question. 'Why would we keep such a thing?'

The quest for knowledge of alien sorcery was explicitly forbidden by the Edicts of Nikaea, as you know. We are not sons of Ahriman, Gabriel, we are the children of Vidya. We seek truth, not merely knowledge for its own sake.'

'I see,' nodded Gabriel, not entirely convinced by this logic. 'Then the book is gone.'

'I said it was a copy, Gabriel. It was a hand-written copy. Another sorcerer from the Thousand Sons, possibly Ahriman himself, must have one of the originals. Whoever found Arcadia knew that the webway portal on Lorn V would lead them here. Whoever these Prodigal Sons are, it seems likely that they have seen a copy of *The Tome of Karebennian*, and they are probably here for more than the Sword of Lanthrilag.'

STEPPING BACK INSIDE the librarium and forcing my shoulder past Ahriman, I flipped *Vairocanum* back into its holster on my back. Sitting into one of the stone chairs, I pushed aside the other books that Ahriman had collected onto the desk in front of the window, sending a couple of them fluttering heavily down to the ground. The sorcerer did not protest against my actions, but he watched me carefully with an amused and patronising smile playing about his face.

Gazing down at the cover of the book, I saw the now-familiar insignia of the Blood Ravens emblazoned on the ancient boards. As I had noticed before, the script on the cover was eldar in origin, and it sported a number of runes that I could not recognise.

As I stared at them, wracking my brain for memories that could be of help, Ahriman drew up a chair and sat down opposite me, casting a heavy shadow over the book and rendering himself into a stark silhouette against the red light of the suns outside.

Quezul'reah.

'What?'

'The runes,' he explained, as though teaching a child how to read. 'They say *Quezul'reah*.'

I looked from the sorcerer to the book and back again.

'It means the *Un-Founding*. I'm sure that you have heard of it.' Ahriman's smile was fixed. 'As I recall, your Azariah Vidya once held a copy of this book. If I remember correctly, he even wrote a commentary on it. What was it called?'

'*The Apocrypha of the Un-Founding*,' I replied, remembering the name as soon as the sorcerer asked the question. *I have seen that book. It is one of the foundational texts of the Order Psykana.* 'How do you know this?'

'Ahriman knows all things, son of Ahriman. I knew Vidya better than you might expect, young sword of Vidya.'

I held the sorcerer's ghostly eyes for a moment, trying to see through them into whatever semblance of a soul resided within.

Something inside me rebelled against his words. *He's lying to me. He can see fragments of my memory and he's playing with me.* But I couldn't work out why. *What does he want from me?*

Just as I was about to speak, the heavy doors to the librarium crashed open and three Prodigal Sons rushed through them. Their armour was scratched and carbon-scarred. One of them was clutching a large, oversized tome, which he slammed victoriously onto the desk in front of Ahriman, utterly obscuring my book beneath it.

'You will forgive our intrusion, my lord,' muttered the book carrier as he sank into a smart bow.

'Will I, Obyis?' But Ahriman had already forgotten about the sorcerer-Marine. He was running his fingers over the cover of the book, feeling every crease and crack in its ancient covers, his eyes burning with excitement.

'It was precisely where you said it would be, Lord Ahriman,' continued Obyis, unphased and still hopeful of reward.

'Of course it was,' muttered the sorcerer lord, without any great attention.

'There was some resistance. We lost two battle-brothers.'

'Indeed,' replied Ahriman, cracking open the cover with intimate care. A broad smile cut across his face as he saw the first page of the book. 'Still, some things are worth dying for,' he said, looking up at the bowed Prodigal Sons at last. 'Signal to the others, Obyis. We are moving out.'

'Yes lord.' The three Marines bowed briskly and then ran back out of the librarium.

I watched the scene unfold before me, the thought of the *Quezul'reah* gradually and reluctantly fading from my mind. These were the Marines that Ahriman had dispatched to find the webway navigational charts, which were alluded to in the *Tome of Karebennian*.

Judging from the size of the tome with which they had returned, and looking at the expression that hazed over Ahriman's face, they had found the book of charts. Despite my animosity towards the sorcerer and my frustration about the *Quezul'reah*, I was

gradually overwhelmed by the desire to see the book. *It has probably never been graced by the attention of human eyes.* In the back of my mind there was another thought, silent and secret in my soul: *I am the eyes of the Emperor.*

'You are right, friend of Ahriman - never before have we seen a book like this. It is for knowledge such as this that Ahriman has scoured the galaxy for unspoken centuries... for millennia. Even the riddles of that Emperor-cursed Karebennian could not keep me from this forever.'

Pushing my chair back, I rose and walked around behind the sorcerer, leaning over his shoulder to view the open pages of the book, my eyes gazing onto the same images, as one. There was a slight ripple of tension in Ahriman's shoulders, as though my presence there repulsed or worried him. Whether he was unaccustomed to allowing people behind him, or whether he was simply unused to sharing the content of his books, the tension dropped away quickly as we pored over the text and charts together.

THE RATE OF fire from the Prodigal Sons dropped suddenly and Gabriel held up his fist to indicate that the Blood Ravens around the fountain should cease fire. The air was thick with dust, debris and smoke, which wafted through the blood-red atmosphere, reducing visibility to only a few metres. In between wafts of noxious clouds, Gabriel could catch glimpses of the ruined statues that once stood in defiant magnificence before the entrance to the great hall. Little flecks of colour told him that there was movement: moments of blue and gold flashed and dashed between the statues, but their density was diminishing. After a few seconds, he could see no colour at all, just the white of the stone and the dirty pock marks of explosions. By the time the dust had begun to settle, it looked as though the Prodigal Sons had gone.

Gabriel opened his fist and flicked two signals: one sending Korinth dashing out into the square to the east, curving round and up the steps on that side; the other sending Zhaphel on a mirrored path to the west.

Once they were in position on either side of the dark entrance into the grand hall, they nodded their readiness and the rest of the Blood Ravens broke cover and charged up the centre of the steps, with Gabriel the first to crest the stairs. Without pausing, the captain burst through the open entrance, dropping his weight into a roll as he crossed the threshold and coming up with his bolter trained into the darkness around him. Behind him, he could hear the solid footfalls of the other Blood Ravens moving in support. 'Light,' snapped Gabriel as he realised that the darkness was too dense even for his enhanced eyes. There was a single shaft of red light in what he assumed was the centre of the chamber, piercing down out of the ceiling. Immediately, Gabriel assumed that it was running down the heart of the unusual conical spire that protruded out of the roof of the dome. Despite the danger of his situation, he made a mental note about the incredible architectural achievements demonstrated in this alien city.

There was a murmured whisper from one of the Librarians behind him, and then a faint bluish light hazed into the grand, domed hall. It revealed a wide, circular chamber, with an ambulatory running all the way around the circumference, shrouded in the shadows of the pillars that divided it from the main part of the chamber.

With the benefit of the faint light that glowed off the tip of Korinth's staff, Gabriel could make out the shape of a figure crouched in the shadows on the far side of the cavernous chamber. As soon as his eyes alighted on the figure, it seemed to realise that it had been seen and rose to its feet, bowing slightly.

'They ran straight through here, captain,' hissed the voice of Corallis into the vox. 'There is a smaller entrance through a passageway to the north,' he explained, pointing a faintly visible arm to one side. 'I made it inside just as they were retreating through this chamber, and I decided to wait for you to follow.'

'Very good, sergeant. How many were they?' Gabriel rose to his feet and began to stride out across the floor towards the scout sergeant.

'I'm not sure, captain,' replied Corallis. 'They moved strangely, making it difficult to assess their numbers precisely. But not many. No more than a squad.'

'And where did they go?' asked Captain Angelos, reaching the shaft of red light in the centre of the room and passing his own red, gauntleted hand back and forth through the beam.

'There is an entrance to the tower over there,' pointed Corallis, indicating an area of deeper shadow on one side of the cavernous hall. 'They filed through the doors and then bolted them from the other side. I presume that they anticipated that you would attempt to follow them.'

'They anticipated correctly,' answered Gabriel, smiling weakly. Hunting Traitor Marines was devoid of ethical dilemmas for him, and he enjoyed the rare moment of certainty. 'Tanthius. Ephraim,' he added, turning back to the rest of the Blood Ravens as they began to fan out around the chamber to secure it. 'See what you can do about the doors. Quietly is better, but open is better than dosed.'

The Techmarine and the Terminator sergeant broke off their sweep, nodded, and then strode purposefully across the chamber towards the large, black doors that barred the way into the tower.

'Father Urelie,' said Gabriel formally. 'Any ideas about this place?'

Jonas was walking around the circular chamber in a decreasing spiral, his head scanning all of the beautiful architectural features that specked the massive domed ceiling, the pillars that supported it, and the ambulatory that swept simply around the perimeter.

'It is breathtaking, captain,' he concluded.

Despite himself, Gabriel smiled a little. Jonas Urelie had once requested a secondment to the backwater world of Rahe's Paradise so that he could lose himself in the search for the truth about the origins of the Blood Ravens; he had willingly given up the life of an Angel of Death, arguing that he had grown too old for tearing around the galaxy in pursuit of divine vengeance and righteousness.

How ironic that his first mission since Rahe's Paradise was destroyed found him here, surrounded by more archaic knowledge than he might ever have seen before in his long and exalted career as a Blood Ravens Librarian. Of course he would find this breathtaking, reflected Gabriel; his awe was somehow reassuring. It *was* breathtaking - to take this place lightly would be to fail to appreciate its value.

'Have you noticed, Gabriel?' continued the Librarian, pointing up at the domed ceiling. 'Have you noticed how they have constructed this remarkable roof?'

Gabriel smiled again and stepped away from the shaft of vertical, red light so that his eyes would not be dazzled as he looked up. As his vision adjusted to the dim, bluish light that lit the curving ceiling, Gabriel's heart leapt.

'It's full of books, Gabriel! This is part of a massive librarium. This is the great hall that leads into the legendary Arcadian Librarium!' The father Librarian's excitement was undisguised.

Sure enough, the massive dome was comprised of thousands of concentric rings of book shelves, each packed with so many books that they would defy any attempt to count or catalogue. They were so densely and perfectly organised that a casual observer would not even notice that their spines were anything other than intricately patterned ceiling tiles.

'How are they prevented from falling?' asked Korinth, who had abandoned his sweep of the huge chamber in favour of sharing the wonder. 'The angles are all wrong. The books should fall.'

The shelves at the very top of the dome - the ones that ran most tightly around the hole through which shone the shaft of red light - were effectively vertical, and the books on those shelves appeared to defy gravity.

They are held in place because they are in their correct place. Everything tends towards its home, human, as you know. Things can be summoned back to their rightful place, even after an exodus. This is because the galaxy dislikes the out-of-place. It wants returns and homecomings.

Many things are bound to others - just as wills and souls can be bound into brotherhoods or cabab.

These books are at home here, and here they stay, whether gravity seeks to relocate them or not.

The Librarians and Gabriel turned as one, each drawing their weapons and spinning into combat readiness. The thoughts had not come from any of them; they were unfamiliar, cold, insidious and powerful thoughts.

Standing casually in the shaft of red light, as though spot-lit on a stage, was a figure that Gabriel, Jonas and Corallis had seen before. Although it didn't appear to be moving, it somehow seemed to swim and shift as they looked at it, giving it the impression of being a hologram or a trick of the red light.

The last time I saw you, Gabriel, you were in more auspicious company.

'The seer has gone,' said Gabriel bluntly. He recognised Karebennian from the ice cave on Lorn V, but he had not realised that the Solitaire could communicate in words. It had danced for Taldeer.

'Captain?' queried Corallis, looking from Gabriel to Karebennian with his bolter drawn. He could only hear Gabriel's words but was conscious that the Librarians were waiting for something, poised.

I saw her fall, human. You tried to kill her.

'No!' Gabriel shouted. 'It was not our doing. We brought her here, and your Harlequins attacked us. They attacked her in the desert. You killed her, Karebennian!'

She is not dead, Blood Raven - no thanks to you. But her fall speaks ill of your intentions, Blood Raven. She fell because you came here. Karebennian's answer was elliptical and indirect. Gabriel could not tell whether it was a concession or a further accusation.

The Solitaire began to shift its weight, as though it was uncomfortable remaining still for so long. The movement made the Ravens twitchy.

'Her fall speaks ill of your judgement,' retorted Gabriel, hearing echoes of a familiar conversation in the back of his mind. 'My intentions are not the issue here.'

Then why are you here, Gabriel, friend of Macha?

'We came out of trust, and we ask for the same from you.' Gabriel deliberately said nothing about the appellation. How did this Solitaire know Macha, and what did he know of her relationship with him? A thought struck him. 'Is Macha... dead?'

The Solitaire spun with a sudden release of energy, and then froze into an abrupt and elegant position.

No, not dead, human. She is waiting for you at Lorn.

'Macha is in the Lorn system?' Gabriel's mind raced with the possible implications. 'Has she made contact with the Blood Ravens?'

She has spoken with your servants, Gabriel of the Hidden Heart. They all await your return. Many things are bound to others.

'Why do they wait for me?' asked Gabriel, myriad possibilities cycling through his confused mind.

The Yngir have returned to Lorn. The souls of the Biel-Tan and the radiance of your infinity pool have drawn them back into material space. They seek to finish their Great Task. Macha awaits your assistance, Gabriel. They need your help.

What do you mean by our "infinity pool", alien? Korinth's thoughts interrupted the exchange with an edge of hostility and suspicion. A visible tension gripped Jonas and Zhaphel.

'What does she expect me to do?' asked Gabriel, ignoring his Librarians.

She hopes that your intentions are pure, human. Then you will do what is required of you.

There was a pause as Karebennian cocked his head to one side and looked quizzically at the Commander of the Watch. *What do you want from this place, Gabriel?*

Gabriel undipped his helmet and laughed. He looked up into the towering dome of knowledge that swept over their heads. It was almost as though he could see the knowledge and power seeping out of the bindings themselves.

He sighed. A place like this was a Blood Raven's dream - Gabriel himself had led countless expeditions into the Eye of Terror and into the bowels of ancient, abandoned planets looking for lost artefacts and forbidden or hidden knowledge. It was through such enterprises that the magnificent Librarium Sanctorum on the *Omnis Arcanum* had been assembled; it was now one of the finest and most celebrated librarium anywhere in the Imperium.

The Blood Ravens revelled in their scholarship - in the absence of a clear and concrete story of their own origins, they prided themselves on their knowledge of all other things: knowledge of the other had gradually become a substitute for knowledge of self. It was an unquenchable thirst.

He looked back down at the shifting and deceitful mask of Karebennian. 'We have come for our battle-brother. He was lost to us, and we have reason to believe that he is here.' Gabriel realised that this was the truth. 'We are also here because your Taldeer impressed upon us the importance of our coming to this place. There are others here whose wills may not be as trustworthy as ours.'

I have seen the others. One of them is known to me. His will is simple and clear. I understand it well - I have been aware of him for longer than you can imagine. Are you really so different from these others, I wonder? One who is with them resembles you more closely than you might want to realise.

'We do not hide from our natures, Karebennian. Those Prodigal Sons want nothing but power from this place. They do not care about the consequences. And they certainly do not care about the plight of Macha or of Lorn. If you see no difference between them and us, then you should stand aside and detain us no longer. You suggested that we were in a greater hurry than even we ourselves had realised.' Gabriel racked his bolter and turned to move away. 'Ephraim! What progress on those doors?'
Wait. There is something that you must know.

SAULH POINTED AT the main viewscreen on the control deck of the *Litany of Fury* and said nothing. Words were redundant.

'By the Throne, sergeant,' muttered Captain Ulantus. 'What in the Vidya's name is happening to that star?'

A constellation of sunspots was clustered near the star's equator. They were black against the radioactive radiance of the sun, but they appeared to shift and shimmer, as though possessing their own power. Massive fiery storms were raging around the perimeter of the star, spilling fountains of thermal radiation and superheated hydrogen through the orbits of the inner planets of the Lorn system. Lorn I was already beginning to die, as its atmosphere started to bleed away under the onslaught, leaving the rocky surface of the planet exposed to the rain of fire and radiation. Its colour was gradually shifting towards an inferno of orange, even as the star began to swell and its colour darkened towards red.

'It's dying, captain.'

'I can see that, Saulh. But how, why?'

'We can't tell. All the probes indicate that it is well within the average lifespan for a star of this size and constituency. Something appears to be draining it of energy, literally bleeding it dry.'

'What about the aliens?' Ulantus's mind leapt immediately to suspicion.

'The eldar? Their vessels have not moved, captain. And we can detect no connections between them and the star.'

'Where is the energy drain focussed?'

'On the far side of the sun, captain. We should be able to see it shortly, when the orbit of Lorn V swings us around the next sector of the ellipse.'

'I'm not sure that we should wait that long, sergeant. Bring the engines on line. Let's take a look.'

'As you wish, captain,' replied Saulh, nodding a signal to one of the serfs at the main control bank.

As the image on the viewscreen began to move, reflecting the sudden motion of the *Litany of Fury*, the picture began to snow and disassemble. Interference patterns hissed across the image, breaking up the picture until it was hardly discernable.

'Sergeant?' prompted Ulantus, waiting for an explanation or a solution.

'Working on it, captain. It looks as though—'

Saulh's voice was cut off by a loud squeal of static and feedback that resounded around the control deck. At the same time, the image on the viewscreen flickered and then snapped into focus, showing the porcelain face of the eldar farseer once again.

'Captain Ulantus,' nodded Macha, making a visible effort to remember and pronounce his name.

'Alien,' replied Ulantus, his irritation obvious. 'Your timing is terrible. You are interfering with the *Litany's* viewers. Desist at once.'

Macha's face was untroubled by the captain's words. She ignored him as though his protests were utterly insignificant. 'You must realise your failure, human. The Yngir are returning. Look to the star. They draw its strength into themselves, waiting to be reborn into the materium.'

'We destroyed the necron fleet, alien. Had any of them survived, your own kin would have confirmed this.'

'No, not destroyed. The Yngir are not a foe that can be destroyed with the weapons of mon-keigh. The silvering hordes return and return until they are put to death by the spear of Khaine, or by the wraith blades of Vaul himself. Where is Gabriel?'

Ulantus growled. 'Sergeant, kill this connection. We have more important things to worry about than the rantings of an alien witch. Captain Angelos may place his faith in these creatures, but I will place mine in the Great Father, in the Emperor's light, and in the righteous bombardment cannons of this battle-barge. Kill this connection and bring us around to the far side of the sun; let's see what is really happening with our own eyes.'

SNAPPING THE OVERSIZED book of charts shut, Ahriman rose abruptly to his feet as the rest of the Prodigal Sons burst through the doors into the librarium. Quickly scanning the piles of books that had been discarded onto the floor by the side of the desk, he reached down and extracted one other tome before turning to address his Marines, who had rapidly arrayed themselves into formation before him.

I stood to one side, watching the scene unfold like an observer of a piece of theatre.

'Brothers,' he began, with a broad smile playing over his shifting, ghostly features. 'This is a reckoning day. We have searched for this world for many centuries, following the leads left for us by the treacherous and devious minds of the aliens in their vulgar and misconceived tomes of poorly directed knowledge. And now we are presented with an embarrassment of riches as reward for our diligence and intellectual labour. Here, in this hand,' he said, raising the large book of webway charts, 'I hold the key to our final destination. And here, in the other hand,' he added, holding up the *Legend of Lanthrilag*, 'I hold the encrypted directions to the location of the last of the Blade Wraiths of Vaul.'

This is the day when Ahriman and his Prodigal Sons will finally take the knowledge and the power for which we have been searching, for which we have been dying, for which we have been killing. Neither the effete Harlequin guardians nor the misguided Blood Ravens can prevent this now.' The last words were directed towards me, and I nodded in affirmation, believing them to be true.

'My lord,' asked one of the sorcerer-Marines. I recognised him as Obysis, the one sent by Ahriman to recover the book of webway charts. 'Do we have time to achieve both goals? Should we not merely choose the greater and concentrate on that? Once we have found the Black Library, will not the blade of Lanthrilag pale into insignificance? The Blood Ravens draw near,' he added, casting a furtive and untrusting glance at me.

'It is always good to ask questions, Obysis,' smiled Ahriman with menace glinting off his phantom teeth. 'Questions are the ground-spring of knowledge, after all. But it is usually unwise to question *me*. Do you question me, Obysis, sorcerer of Ahriman's cabal?'

'I... I do not question your intentions, Lord Ahriman. I merely ask about the possibility of success.'

'So you question my judgement? Is that it?'

Obysis hesitated visibly, unsure whether this was the kind of contestation that Ahriman would reward or punish. He decided, wisely, to err on the side of caution. 'No, my lord. Your judgement is superior to my own, which is why you are Ahriman and I remain Obysis.'

'Yes, Obysis, greater power is the result of greater knowledge. Let that be your lesson for today, and let mine be the recovery of the Blade Wraith and the discovery of the Black Library. We have come too far to let either of these slip through our fingers now. When there is power hidden in knowledge, then I will make it mine: the sword of Lanthrilag will be in these hands before we leave Arcadia!'

If knowledge is worth anything, it is worth dying for. The thoughts came unbidden to my mind.

I will not be dying today - but a few other deaths would be a price that Ahriman could afford to pay.

'And it is worth killing for,' grinned Ahriman, glancing at Obysis with mock subtlety. Then he turned and strode out of the librarium, with the Prodigal Sons falling into formation behind him. Before I could think about what to do, I found myself being swept along with them.

An explosion from far below told us that the Blood Ravens had broken through the security doors at the base of the tower.

THE GRAND AMPHITHEATRE of Arcadia was alive with motion. In the centre of the stage, Eldarec, the Great Harlequin, had established a podium on which he had prominently displayed the sword of Lanthrilag, so that it could be clearly seen from even the very highest of the balconies.

A gentle music had already begun to resound reassuringly through the stonework of the ancient arena, and the chorus troupers were already in place in the pit under the stage, singing and chanting the earliest stages of the mythic cycle, *The Death and Re-Birth of Hope*.

The stage itself was teeming with Harlequins, each rushing to prepare the props and trap-doors that would be required for their individual performances in the forthcoming play. The *margorachs*, Death Jesters, dashed for their emplacements, letting their dathedi fields cycle and flicker through the various masks that they would have to don during the performance, settling eventually into the visage of death itself. The *distaur*, the mimes, flipped and somersaulted around the back of the stage, preparing their supple bodies for the contortions and exertions that would soon be required of them.

At the same time, the *athesdan*, the high warlock, flicked his mask to the image of the great story-teller, a distant echo of the face of the Laughing God himself, and positioned himself in amongst a cadre of *esdainn*, the warlocks who would support his telling of the story with resonating voices to fill out the sound, and with moments of magic to show the wizardry of the theatre.

Only Eldarec himself sat in silence and inactivity. He had positioned himself at the very front of the stage, with his legs hanging down into the chorus pit below. He had never played the Laughing God in this mythic cycle before, and he was mulling the risks in his mind. Any performance that involved so many of the *rillietann* was potentially hazardous for his sanity, since he had to hold the entire play in his mind, directing the action as it unfolded. But *The Death and Re-Birth of Hope* involved players from outside his control - creatures from beyond the reaches of Arcadia, mammals that had no sensitivities for the artistry of the sons of Isha or the spawn of Cegorach. The risk was considerable, but death was a price worthy of high art.

Up in the balconies, more troupers had positioned themselves in amongst the mannequins, giving the impression that the amphitheatre was full of eyes. They had adjusted their dathedi-fields to project images of the mannequins themselves, so that the living and inanimate members of the audience were indistinguishable - each of them grinning in sinister anticipation. At some point during the performance, Eldarec knew that the troupers in the audience would have a role to play. It was the way with all the best shows: the audience doesn't realise that it is part of a fabrication until it is too late to escape from it. Art, reality and death are the perfect blend.

'They are coming!' The voice echoed down from one of the highest balconies as one of the look-outs spotted the approaching mon-keigh.

'And so begins the play of our time,' said Eldarec, springing to his feet and turning in a slow circle so as to address every soul in the amphitheatre. 'And like the best of all beginnings, this one commences in darkness.'

With that, the stage blinked into emptiness, as though all of the troupers had suddenly vanished. All that was visible was the slight electric shimmer of dozens of dathedi fields shielding the Harlequins from the light. In the audience, only the mannequins were still visible.

With Eldarec apparently alone at the front of the stage, the house lights went out.

KAREBENNIAN'S MOVEMENTS WERE slow and deliberate compared with those that Gabriel had seen in the ice cave on Lorn V. It was as though he were speaking very slowly, for a foreigner or a slow-witted fool. His body shifted and flowed under the radiant,

red spotlight in the ornate and breathless hall, twisting into impossible contortions. Then suddenly his body seemed to explode, shedding fragments of light in all directions, like a rain of silver, making the Blood Ravens step backwards, instinctively moving out of range.

Each of the silvered fragments planted itself like a seed into the flagstones, before taking root and growing into recognisable shapes. After only a few seconds, a dozen silvering necron warriors shimmered into being, each of them swaying in sympathy with the movements of the Solitaire. But then Karebennian swirled into a vortex, transforming his image almost beyond recognition. His shape cycled through the appearances of several eldar heroes, with every one of them hacking out towards the silvering horde with blades and spears, until his form finally fixed on that of Lanthrilaq the Swift.

At the same time, the cavernous space within the great hall shifted and pulsed, as though the Solitaire's performance were eliciting sympathy from the building itself, drawing in the inanimate surroundings with the magical captivation of his solitary performance. The walls appeared to move and morph, taking on the shape of tiered seating, stands, and balconies, until the great hall appeared transformed into an intimate amphitheatre, with Karebennian alone on the stage in the midst of a battle with the silver host. The Blood Ravens reeled, turning on their heels, struggling to make sense of the shifting sensory data around them. But Karebennian continued to draw their attention, holding them in his thrall while he flipped and swooped through the combat postures of the legendary, tragic hero.

Finally, having slain a number of the ancient enemies, Lanthrilaq lay dying on the flagstones, bathed in the blood-red shower of light. His blade fell dramatically from his hands as he collapsed to the ground, turning over and over in slow motion, as though art were working against the force of gravity.

It clattered against the stone, chipping and splintering its already imperfect shape, splashing into a pool of Lanthrilaq's blood.

The Blood Ravens stared at the fallen sword, momentarily unable to take their eyes from it. Enchanted by the power of tragedy, and by the sudden on-rush of hope that the existence of the flawed blade represented for the future.

'The Blade Wraith of Lanthrilaq,' muttered Jonas.

His words shattered the illusion, bringing the other Blood Ravens back into the cold, stone, great hall. The amphitheatre was gone, as had the silvering hordes of the necron.

Looking up from the image of the broken blade, Gabriel searched for Karebennian, his mind riddled with questions and awe, but the Solitaire had vanished too. When he looked back down into the pool of red light at the base of the shaft, Gabriel saw that the sword had gone. The Blood Ravens stood alone in the cavernous hall once again.

An explosion from the shadows to one side of the hall told them that Ephraim's attempts to open the doors had failed, and that Tanthius had succeeded. 'Quietly is better, but open is better than closed,' mused Gabriel to himself.

Collecting his thoughts, Gabriel turned to his squad. 'We need to find that amphitheatre,' he said, striding off towards the tower of the library.



CHAPTER ELEVEN: DEATH AND REBIRTH

THE STAR WAS bleeding.

As the *Litany of Fury* powered around a tight solar-orbit, it rapidly brought the far side of the sun into view. Tendrils of gleaming matter were questing out from its gyring form, and the rotation of the massive sun was slowing visibly. Huge sunspots speckled its fiery surface, but each appeared to be riddled with tiny stars, as though they were actually holes through the substance of the sun itself, revealing the space beyond. Infernos of solar storms erupted from the star's surface, throwing radiation and fire out into the Lorn system, bathing the floating wreckage and debris with heat and reactive energy.

The snaking tendrils of starlight whipped and lashed into the vacuum, filling it with streaks of silvering light. After a while, the questing tendrils seemed to latch on to flecks of debris, cracking into them and filling them with iridescence. Even as Ulantus watched, the main viewscreen on the control deck of the *Litany of Fury*, he saw the apparent debris flare and catch, reforming into recognisable shapes, as though flicking back into life. After a few more moments, he could see the distant specks flash with power as their engines came back online. The immobilised necron vessels seemed to be drawing power directly from the sun, bleeding it dry so that they might live again.

With the viewscreen magnifying the distant image, Ulantus checked the images against the vessel-categorisation charts just to be certain, and he could see that perhaps ten or fifteen of the smaller, Dirge-class raiders were already back in motion. A couple of slightly larger Jackals had come online, and all the raiders were spiralling around a group of crescent-shaped Shroud-class cruisers, which remained dark and lifeless, despite the arcs of lightning that poured energy into the pyramidal structures that encrusted their surfaces.

'Sergeant,' said Ulantus with a calmness that belied his internal turmoil. 'See whether you can contact the *Ravenous Spirit*. Tell Captain Angelos that his presence is required in the Lorn system. Code your message "imperative".'

'As you wish, captain,' answered Saulh, nodding briskly and turning to leave.

'And Saulh,' continued Ulantus, as though reluctant to voice the next sentence. 'If you can match their frequency, try to raise the eldar vessels. We may need their help.'

'Yes, captain.'

Then get back to the *Rage of Erudition* and prepare it for battle. Let us hope that repairs have been completed since our last encounter with these cursed necron. We will need all the firepower we can muster.

'Gunnery. Target torpedoes and bombardment canons onto one of the Shrouds. Fire when ready. And keep firing until there is nothing left.'

'Helm. Keep us on this course. The closer we can get, the more damage our heavy weapons will do.'

THE AMPHITHEATRE WAS shrouded in darkness and quiet as we entered. Ahriman paused for a moment at the side of the stage, keeping us arranged behind him, and looked up around the balconies. He muttered a few words of power and a reddish glow erupted from his Black Staff, filling the arena with a moody and bloody light.

All around the stage, tiers of seats and balconies rose up towards the invisibly distant ceiling. There must have been room for an audience of tens of thousands.

Staring up into the stands as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I thought I could see hundreds of eyes staring back at me.

Hundreds of half-hidden figures sat in the balconies, their eyes glinting and their teeth sparkling in the suggestions of grins.

Before I could process the image properly, a bank of spotlights clunked and then hummed into life, blasting bright white light down onto the stage and dazzling us, forcing us to turn away from the audience and shade our eyes for a moment.

'And so begins the play of our times, in which hope will die and be reborn anew!' The voice echoed and bounced around the stage, as though it were being chanted by dozens of mouths, fractionally out of synchronisation. 'In the beginning there was darkness, but into that darkness from the realms beyond shone light.'

Whispered murmurs pulsed around the audience, invisible beyond the brilliance of the stage lights. Then a low, throbbing music arose out of the stone beneath our feet, beating through the ceramite of our boots with an odd, syncopated rhythm.

A shaft of red light came down from the ceiling striking the very centre of the stage like a magnificent column. Held on a podium within the light was a glittering but broken sword, sparkling with jewels of crimson, like droplets of blood. The rest of the stage remained empty, but the murmurs of the invisible audience grew slightly louder and a single note of an alien melody joined the rhythmic undertones of the background music. It was a pristine and silvering note, like a fleck of starlight on a cloudy night.

Ahriman took a step forwards towards the blade, gazing around himself cautiously. In all the long centuries of his search for knowledge, he had never encountered anything like this before.

I watched him take another step towards the Blade Wraith in the centre of the stage, and noticed that the other Prodigal Sons did not follow him. They remained at the edge of the stage, as though waiting in the wings for a signal.

Looking out towards the audience, squinting my eyes against the light, I thought that I could see sporadic, eager faces dispersed throughout the stands. They were grinning, as though anticipating something unexpected.

When Ahriman took another step, a figure shimmered into being at the front of the stage. The crested and vividly coloured Great Harlequin had his back to the sorcerer lord, his arms held out before him, as though beseeching the audience.

Ahriman turned his head and a look of momentary confusion crossed his ghostly face. He didn't understand what was happening. Looking from the Great Harlequin to the Blade Wraith and back again, I could see that Ahriman was trying to work out whether the aliens were attempting to defend their treasure or not.

Is this performance just an exercise in illusion and misdirection? Is it supposed to compensate for a lack of real defences? Are the Harlequins so few that they dare not confront the power of Ahriman? The questions were in my head just as they were in Ahriman's.

Finally, his patience exhausted, Ahriman's face gnarled into a grimace of frustration and anger. He drove his Black Staff down into the surface of the stage and sent a crack of lightning pulsing through the ground towards the Great Harlequin. At the same time, a lance of energy lashed out of the top of his staff and smashed into the spotlights that dazzled the stage area, shattering them and plunging the amphitheatre into relative darkness.

As the curtain of shadow descended onto the stage, the Great Harlequin sprang into the air, turning an impossibly slow flip as Ahriman's blast passed beneath him, as though gravity had been partially suspended for a moment. When his feet touched the stage once again, a troupe of Harlequins appeared around him at stage-front, glittering into visibility like a host of multi-coloured stars. They each snapped into combat poses, blades and barrels held with dramatic poise.

A cheer erupted from the audience, filling the amphitheatre with audio waves that pulsed and vibrated powerfully through the air and the stonework. The grinning faces on the balconies remained eerily immobile, as though fixed into place. But here and there in between them appeared the menacing smiles of Death Jesters with tripod-mounted shrieker cannons and brightlances.

Ahriman swept his eyes around the unfolding scene and laughed. *Is this the best defence that the Laughing God can muster?* He howled with dramatic rage, spinning his Black Staff over his head and letting arcs of raw warp power pour out of its tips, spraying it around the theatre and into the stands. As though on cue, the rest of the Prodigal Sons charged forwards on the stage, bracing their weapons and training them up into the audience to confront the Death Jesters.

'And so it is that hope is killed!' The invisible narrator's voice echoed powerfully around the arena, tinged with a mixture of amusement and menace.

At precisely that moment, an explosion fired on the far side of the amphitheatre, blowing masonry and debris across the stage.

Even before the smoke had cleared, a squad of Space Marines came storming out of the rough hole where once a stage door had been, spilling out onto the far side of the stage, on the other side of the spot-lit Blade Wraith.

Drawing *Vairocanum*, I charged forward to join the Prodigal Sons in their stand against the decreasingly favourable odds. I felt the hum and pulse of power course into my blade, and I saw the faint green glow from its runes diffuse into the shadow-thickened air.

Almost instantly, volleys of bolter fire erupted from the red-armoured Blood Ravens as they established themselves on stage-left. Three blue-clad Librarians lashed out with arcs of blue energy. The Prodigal Sons, on stage-right, returned fire at once, reducing the stage instantly to a hail of shells and a mire of warp power. Meanwhile, the Great Harlequin and his troupe quietly faded out of sight once again as tremendous cheers crashed down out of the auditorium.

I know those Space Marines. The thought hit me like a bolter shell.

I know those Space Marines. It cycled round and around in my mind, blinding me to all other thoughts and impulses. Something moved in my soul, shifting my will and binding me to forgotten oaths. *I know those Space Marines.*

I stopped half way across the stage, in the middle of a charge with *Vairocanum* brandished above my head, my mind racing with sudden and profound indecision. I stood between the Ahriman and his Prodigal Sons on one side and the Blood Ravens on the other, centre stage before the Blade Wraith of Lanthrilaq itself.

My head was suddenly assailed with competing voices and thoughts: *Come home to us, lost son of Vidya; we are more similar than you know, friend of Ahriman; this is the death of hope; coincidences are for the weak-minded and the ignorant; I am the sword of Vidya; knowledge is power; friend of Ahriman... eyes of the Emperor... come home... everything wants to return home... Vairocanum... Lanthrilaq...*

Bolter shells and energy blasts scorched past my face as I dropped to my knees in the centre of the stage, staring up into the insane, maniacal grinning faces of the audience. As I stared, a troupe of Harlequins shimmered into being at the front of the stage. In the fore was the Solitaire that I had seen in the library, his mask shifting through numerous guises and expressions, as though searching for the most appropriate visage of death.

Karebennian!

Screaming projectiles and javelins of brightlance fire started to sizzle down from the Death Jester emplacements on the balconies, raining toxins and laser heat onto the stage. Cheers and screeches of excitement resounded around the arena, as though the acoustics amplified the sound itself into deafening weapons.

As the flagstones beneath my knees trembled and cracked under the relentless onslaught from all sides, I watched Karebennian's mask slide into a seductive abhorrence as he adopted the guise of Slaanesh - the role of power that was reserved only for Solitaires. As the images of the troupers behind him began to morph and shift into inconstancy, I saw them leap and dance towards me in patterns of breathtaking beauty and unpredictability. In a matter of seconds, I found myself gazing into the face of Slaanesh itself, and saw the laughing reflection of my addled soul staring back at me.

THE AVENGING SWORD flashed around the sun with the *Eternal Star* in close formation behind it. The message from the mon-keigh vessel had been garbled and incoherent, but Macha didn't need to understand the ramblings of primitive mammals to know that the Yngir were regenerating on the far side of the local star. Uldreth, the exarch of the Dire Avengers, had needed little more than a hint of shifting chemical and thermal patterns in the sun to recognise the danger.

As the eldar cruisers swept around to the other side of the star, the exarch and farseer saw exactly what they had feared. The energy of the sun was bleeding out into space. It was being conducted through the crystalline prisms on the decks of the dormant Yngir vessels and then focussed into their energy circuits. The effect was not dissimilar from that seen on terrestrial battlefields

when the Yngir deployed the so-called "resurrection orbs", which were basically micro-scaled star-fusion devices. The only difference here was scale.

Assessment? Macha's thoughts crossed the vacuum of space between her *Eternal Star* and the *Avenging Sword* instantaneously. It was precisely such phenomena that drove the Yngir into their ancient and endless frenzies of hatred.

I can see twenty raiders and four cruisers already online, replied Uldreth, his mind sharply angled and focussed on the battle to come. He had already sent hundreds of Biel-Tan eldar to their deaths in the Lorn system, and he was not about to lose any more to the ancient enemy. The Dire Avengers were not noted for their penchant for mercy or forgetfulness.

I concur.

There is something else, added Uldreth as a series of explosions detonated over the shimmering surface of one of the Shroud cruisers. The Avenger tracked the line of fire back on a curving trajectory in a tight orbit. Judging from the nature of the explosions, he assumed that the mon-keigh battle-barge had commenced bombardment of the cmisers before coming properly into range. From his position, the battle-barge was not yet even visible around the sun.

I can see it too. Macha's mind was full of concern.

Uldreth concentrated and stared through the dazzling threads of lightning and starlight that interlaced across the face of the rapidly re-energising Yngir fleet. Behind the cmisers, shrouded in the dark of the vacuum and constructed out of a mysterious and utterly non-reflective metallic substance, he could just make out the outline of another ship. It was bigger than the others, much bigger. It resembled a massive cross, brisling with gun batteries and the distinctive emplacements for gauss particle whips and lightning arcs. Protruding from the sharpened nose was the vaguely visible suggestion of a star-pulse generator. *It's a Harvest Ship.* The realisation filled Uldreth with horror and determination simultaneously. *Scythe-class, I think.*

Agreed. Confirmed Macha without emotion. *It is not yet online.*

I am deploying the Sword's complement of Shadowhunters to engage the Dirge and Jackal raiders.

Concentrate on the Jackals, Uldreth. They are equipped with portals - We do not want to be caught up in boarding actions.
Understood.

Macha watched the flotilla of escort vessels spill out of the *Avenging Sword* and accelerate off towards the startling collection of Yngir ships. For the first time she allowed her thoughts to move from the questions of whether and when the threat of the Yngir would arise and she started to wonder why they would arise so closely together in time and yet so far apart in space. The coincidence of the ascension at Lsathranil's Shield and this one in the Lorn system was simply too great to be ignored: coincidences are ignored only by the weak-minded or the ignorant, she reminded herself.

There was something deceptive and deliberate about the coincidence that made her suspicious. Uldreth had focussed his passions on the mon-keigh, blaming them for awakening the long-dormant enemy. And he blamed himself for decisions that he had been given no choice but to make. But Macha had to see beyond these intimate emotions: the ancient enemy was not petty or vindictive on this small scale. The Yngir's ambitions were grand to the point that their realisation would mean the end of the sons of Asuryan altogether. Their hatred was focussed against living, organic matter itself, but especially against the psychic race of the eldar.

Macha could not discount the possibility that the ascension at Lsathranil's Shield was a diversion designed to split the forces of Biel-Tan so that the Swordwind might be defeated: the whole psychic strength of a united Biel-Tan would be awesome to behold, and perhaps not even the Yngir could stand against it. At least not yet.

But if this were the case, the implications were terrible. Macha had heard rumours of the return of the Deceiver - Mephet'ran - the star-god that had once tricked Kaelis Ra into turning against his own silvering hordes, convincing him to feast on the flesh of the Yngir themselves. She had seen the Harlequins of Arcadia perform the Masque of the Deceiver, and listened to Eldarec narrate the many myths of his return.

The Harlequins, sons of the Laughing God, had mixed and complicated emotions about the Deceiver - admiration and terror gripped their souls at the mention of his name, and only Eldarec himself was able to perform his part in the masques. Sometimes they told stories of the Deceiver's exploits as though they were the deeds of the Laughing God himself.

Of all the lords of the Yngir, only the Deceiver might have the wit for this kind of galaxy-spanning performance.

Together with the Solitaire, Karebennian, Eldarec had once performed the *Dance of Mephet'ran and Vaul* in the grand amphitheatre of Biel-Tan. In that dance, the Deceiver took on various organic forms to lure the living into his service. In the dance, the Deceiver's objective was to convince the living to destroy or banish all of the weapons and talismans that had been constructed by Vaul, the smith god, to prepare the way for his return. He found the psychic resonance of the Vaulish artefacts offensive.

It was certainly true that the talismans had been lost, and all but one of the Blades of Vaul had also fallen out of the memory of the children of Isha. As the numbers of the eldar dwindled throughout the galaxy, Macha felt sure that the Deceiver would be plotting his return and testing the water. The Yngir could taste the cross-pollution of materium and immaterium; it was like poison to them. But as the light of the eldar faded from the galaxy, so the interflow of the warp into real space would begin to dwindle, providing a more conducive environment for the return of the ancient foe.

But somehow she could not make all the pieces fit. There was not quite enough for her to be sure of anything, and the frustration drove her to the point of anger. The Yngir were without souls, and this made them almost impossible to see clearly in the myriad unfolding futures and pasts of the present. She hated them, and hated that she could not master them or even fully grasp them.

As she sat in her mediation chamber, watching the viewscreen that was trained on the emergent, shimmering Yngir fleet, she noticed the massive form of the *Litany of Fury* crest the outline of the dying sun, with its cannons and torpedoes firing relentlessly.

In her mind's eye, she could see the radiance of the psychic presence in the heart of that ugly vessel, and she wondered whether the Blood Ravens were really aware of the value of the beacon that they so industriously and studiously maintained there. Even Gabriel did not really seem to understand, despite her persistent efforts to reveal the truth to him.

There had been a mon-keigh warrior once, long ago, who had understood the need for psychic radiance in the galaxy, especially in a galaxy from which the eldar were rapidly fading. But those primitive mammals lived such short lives, even the most promising of them.

Whether the humans understood their power or not, Macha was certain that the regenerating Yngir could see the brilliance of the psychic pool in the *Litany of Fury*, and that they would seek to extinguish it as quickly as they possibly could. In comparison with the cumbersome and heavy mon-keigh battle-barge, her virtually immaterial, glittering Wraithship, *Eternal Star*, seemed fleeting and ethereal.

Gabriel, hurry home.

AS THE DOORS into the amphitheatre blew, Gabriel charged forward through the smoke and the scattering debris. The dance of the Solitaire had been clear and unambiguous about the location of the sword of Lanthrilaq, and Gabriel was determined that it should not fall into the hands of the Prodigal Sons. Such a weapon could do untold evil in the wrong hands.

Storming out of the smoke, Gabriel found himself emerging onto the stage of a massive amphitheatre. The stands were dimly lit but riddled with the grinning faces of eldar Harlequins. The stage was alive with motion and action. A terrible sorcerer lord was standing on the other side of it, with a squad of Prodigal Sons behind him. He was spinning his staff in a blaze of fury, sending sheets of warpfire lashing out around the stage. Over to the right, at the front of the stage, Gabriel caught a fleeting glance of a troupe of Harlequin warriors before they quickly faded from view, leaving the stage to the Space Marines.

Flashing a couple of rapid hand signals, Gabriel deployed the rest of his squad into a firing arc behind him. The engagement was unexpectedly sudden and furiously intense at short range. Tanthius stomped up towards the back of the stage, his storm bolter coughing and spluttering with discharging shells. At the same time, Korinth and Zhaphel peeled down to stage-front, hurling crackling blasts of warp energy across towards the Prodigal Sons. Jonas strode up to Gabriel's shoulder, adding the fury of his own force staff to the repeated rattling of Gabriel's bolter, concentrating his fire on the sorcerer lord himself.

Gabriel - It's Ahriman!

Meanwhile, Corallis and Ephraim took up support positions behind them, loosing relentless volleys of bolter fire across the stage. Return fire, projectiles, bolter shells and energy blasts pinged and ricocheted off their armour, scarring the ceramite and cracking through the reinforced panels. At this range with virtually no cover neither the Blood Ravens nor the Prodigal Sons would last long.

In the tempest of combat, Gabriel noticed that heavy weapons fire was raining down from the balconies. Through the smoke, recoil flashes and explosions of light, he could just about discern the shapes of Death Jesters, laughing and grinning at gun emplacements in the stands. It seemed that the Harlequins were helping him.

Pulling a grenade from his belt, Gabriel hurled it across the stage and watched it detonate behind the formation of Prodigal Sons, throwing one of them off his feet and raining shrapnel over the backs of the others.

Suddenly, Jonas's staff fell silent and the father Librarian staggered slightly, taking half a step forward before catching his weight. In a moment of concern, Gabriel lurched to the side and caught his old friend's shoulder, steadying him in the face of the enemy, worrying that he had been hit. But Jonas shrugged his captain's hand away.

'Gabriel. It's Rhamah.' There was a sinking horror in the Librarian's voice.

Without knowing where to look, Gabriel scanned the blue and gold Prodigal Sons. Charging out of their formation was a single Space Marine. For a moment, Gabriel failed to recognise the difference in his insignia and markings; the smoke and commotion of combat obscured more than proximity revealed. But after a second of stunned concentration, Gabriel realised that the sword-wielding Marine was a Blood Ravens Librarian. He was brandishing the broken sword of *Vairocanum* and charging directly at him.

Another second passed before Korinth and Zhaphel realised who it was, and they also froze in shock and horror, letting their force weapons die in their hands, unable to process the scene before them.

In the lull, Sorcerer Lord Ahriman brayed with laughter and lashed out with renewed violence against the Blood Ravens, coating them in an agonising wave of warp fire. His ghostly features were alive with the pleasure of power and combat. He seemed to thrill in the confusion that wracked his foes.

At the same moment, Rhamah broke his charge, coming to a standstill in the centre of the stage with *Vairocanum* still held aloft. He froze, as though suddenly wracked with indecision, staring at Gabriel and Jonas, then shifting his eyes to Korinth and Zhaphel. His body trembled, as though he were fighting with his own instincts and struggling to control himself. Then, all at once, it seemed as though his strength deserted him and he sank down onto his knees.

'Brother Rhamah!' yelled Gabriel, taking a step towards the desperate and immobile Librarian. 'Brother Rhamah, we have come to take you home!'

A dramatic melody rose suddenly from under the stage, echoing around the arena with psychic resonance. And, as though conjured by the music, Karebennian shimmered into being at the front of the stage, flanked on both sides by a gaudily coloured troupe of Harlequin warriors. They struck theatrical poses then advanced up the stage directly towards the kneeling Rhamah, spinning and rolling and ducking around the hail of fire that continued to rain down from the balconies behind them.

Rhamah stared into Karebennian's face, as though transfixed, rising to his feet as the Solitaire closed on his position. With a movement of dramatic grandeur, the Librarian raised *Vairocanum* over his head and poised himself ready to strike, but it was not clear in which direction his blade was going to drop. His face scanned slowly from side to side, taking in Ahriman on one side and Gabriel on the other, before returning it to the hideous visage of Karebennian himself.

Without missing a step, the Solitaire sprang past Rhamah, spinning into a whirl as though rolling around him on his way to confront Ahriman. But there was a flash of metal in the roll, and Karebennian left death in his wake. Before Rhamah had the chance to move, one of the Solitaire's arm-mounted riveblades had sliced into his stomach and the other had parted his head from his neck.

As Karebennian bounded on without looking back, Rhamah's decapitated body slumped to the ground and his head rolled gorily off the front of the stage, leaving a trail of thickening blood behind it.

A great cheer arose from the stands and a rhythmic beating started to thunder and resonate through the stonework as the audience thumped its feet in appreciation and awe.

Seeing one of his Blood Ravens cut down, Gabriel roared his fury into the performance and charged forwards, casting his bolter aside and ripping his chainsword into life. Jonas, Korinth and Zhaphel responded simultaneously, each storming towards the centre of the stage to engage the Prodigal Sons at close range.

However, by the time that Gabriel had taken the few steps needed to place him stage-centre, Karebennian had already leapt into the path of Ahriman, placing himself between the sorcerer lord and the Blade Wraith. His troupers had deployed around them, separating them from the rest of the fray as though defining a distinct and exclusive theatre of combat for the great heroes.

Gabriel paused, unsure about how to proceed. The Solitaire's actions seemed to make no sense. First it had led the Blood Ravens to this stage, then it had killed Rhamah with breathless ease, and now it was engaged in a duel with the Sorcerer Lord Ahriman. The Commander of the Watch could not understand the alien's motivations.

Looking down at his feet, Gabriel saw the broken and cracked form of *Vairocanum* lying in a pool of Rhamah's blood, fallen just out of the dead Librarian's grasp. Instinctively, the captain stooped and picked up the sacred weapon, closing his grip around the hilt and feeling its power flow into his being. The blade ignited into a fierce green glow as Gabriel cast his spluttering chainsword aside and raised the force weapon into both hands.

As he held the broken blade aloft, Gabriel could vaguely hear the rapture of the audience in the stands. He could hear a swell of music erupt from under the stage, and he could make out a single, silvery note piercing the harmonious cacophony. The sound seemed to carry him away from the stage and the battle. It was a sound that he had heard before, a pristine and silvery tone that had riddled and guided his thoughts many times before. He opened his mind to the music, and let the silver note become a flood of platinum light in his head.

There was a time when he had thought that the Astronomican was reaching for him and offering him guidance, but now he didn't know whether it was the Emperor's light or the light of Vidya that gave him direction, calling him home and guiding his judgement.

'And so it is that hope is re-born!' The narrator's voice was dim and almost inaudible against the din.

'CAPTAIN, THERE IS a communication from General Sturmn on Lorn V. He reports that necron warriors are on the ground. He requests support.'

'I think the general is on his own for the time being. Send my apologies.' Ulantus smiled without humour.

Warning daxons wailed and red lights pulsed all throughout the *Litany of Fury*. While the space battle raged outside, with the eldar cmisers and the *Rage of Erudition* attacking the Shrouds while the Shadowhunters and Cobra fighters spiralled in dogfights with the impossibly rapid flecks of darkness that were the Dirge and Jackal raiders, the cross-like Harvester ship had pulled into closer proximity with the *Litany*.

'Concentrate all fire on the Scythe-class Harvester - torpedoes and weapons batteries,' bellowed Ulantus from the bridge. He was ignoring the proximity warnings, assuming that there was some kind of malfunction in the distancing cogitators. The Harvester was still several thousand metres away, and he could see no danger of collision or boarding from that range. Besides, given the huge mass superiority of the *Litany*, a collision could only possibly be to their own advantage. The main disadvantage of the closing range was that they were now too close to employ the bombardment cannons without risking damaging the *Litany* with explosive concussion.

Torpedoes and lasfire pummelled against the surface of the necron vessel, but somehow it managed to escape serious damage. It appeared to perform no evasive manoeuvres, and yet the punishing tirade of fire just slipped off its armour, like light bouncing off a mirror. Its hull was immaculately black, to the point of virtual invisibility; it seemed to wrap space around it, reflecting vision back on itself or bending it around the vessel so that a clear conception of its shape and size was almost impossible. Just as sensors could not quite grasp the vessel's dimensions, so weapons failed to find much purchase against its unusual, metallic skin.

'Any word from the *Ravenous Spirit*?' snapped Ulantus, cursing the absent Commander of the Watch yet again.

'Where in Vidya's name are you, Gabriel?'

'They are closing on the fringes of the Lorn system, captain. Sergeant Kohath is in command. Captain Angelos is not with them. Estimated arrival: fifteen minutes.'

'Kohath is coming without the commander?'

'Yes, captain.'

Ulantus paused for thought. If Gabriel was not aboard his strike cruiser, then where the hell was he? An electric crack blew the question out of his mind as the control deck rocked violently.

'Throne! What was that?'

'Some kind of particle whip, captain, amplified to incredible power. The necrons appear to be drawing their fire-power directly from the sun.'

Another blast punched into the prow of the *Litany*, this time with a thunderous explosion that sent reverberations rippling throughout the massive vessel's infrastructure.

Ulantus watched as the huge column of dark light pulsed out of the nose of the Harvester and drilled into the *Litany*. It was a weapon unlike any he had ever encountered.

'Bring the planetary bombardment cannons to bear!'

'Captain, we're too close—'

'This is not a request!'

A huge roar erupted from the turret-mounted linear accelerators as a salvo of heavy, magma-bomb warheads powered through the intervening space between the *Litany of Fury* and the Harvester. As they impacted against the deceptively spindly necron vessel, they detonated into massive infernos, coating the entire craft in roiling magma and blasting it several hundred metres back away from the *Litany*. A couple of seconds later, the backwash from the explosion crashed into the prow of the *Litany* itself, throwing superheated radioactivity across the thick shields and making the massive vessel pitch slightly. For ten seconds the viewscreens snowed into blackness.

'Damage reports!' snapped Ulantus, pushing one of the control deck serfs aside and studying the readouts that chattered up on his terminal. 'Damage?'

Then the screens clicked back on line and Ulantus bit down on his teeth, clenching his jaw. The Harvester had moved even closer, and it appeared to have suffered only cosmetic damage.

'Captain! We have a hull breach in the prow. Sector 17.a.392. Captain - we are being boarded!'

AHRIMAN LAUGHED AT the slender and sinister Solitaire as it flipped and danced around him, flourishing its riveblades with unspeakable elegance. The great sorcerer did not even bother to turn and track Karebennian's movements; he simply stood unmoving and implacable, leaning slightly on the absolute lightlessness of his Black Staff. The two figures dominated the centre of the stage, ringed by a troupe of Harlequins that framed them as a dramatic focus and separated them from the ongoing fury of the exchange between the Blood Ravens and the Prodigal Sons. The battle between the Marines seemed to have been reduced to a sideshow, and the audience's unmoving eyes appeared transfixed by the epic clash between sorcerer lord and Solitaire.

Have you forgotten already, Karebennian? Ahriman's spectral face twisted into a mirth-ridden sneer, but the Solitaire's only response was a spiralling leap that the sorcerer blocked easily with his staff. *Do you not remember how this ended last time we met?*

I remember that we live to fight today. Karebennian's answer was accompanied by a feint and a lunge which slipped past the Black Staff and stabbed into the covers of the book of webway charts that Ahriman held in his offhand.

Ahriman sneered in indignation. *You are not worthy of me, web-walker.* He hefted the book into the air and then kicked out at the Solitaire, crunching his boot into the Harlequin's abdomen and sending him skidding off over the stage. The book, still impaled on Karebennian's riveblades, was shredded into tatters by the violence of the movement, and scraps of paper billowed up into the air like confetti.

The audience gasped.

I will not be frustrated by you again, Karebennian! Ahriman shrieked, spinning his staff and then jabbing it out towards the cmmpled Solitaire, focussing all of his hatred and resentment into one strike. A vicious and intense blast of warp lightning lanced out of the Black Staff and engulfed the fallen alien.

Karebennian screamed in ways that Ahriman had never heard before. His agony cut all the Marines and Harlequins to the bone, bringing the battle to a standstill and arresting the music that had throbbed throughout the performance. Wisps of smoke and gas rose from the charred remains of the Solitaire's body, as though his soul were seeping away into the shadows.

Finally. Ahriman turned away from the corpse of the alien and started back towards the shaft of red light in which he had seen the Blade Wraith.

But in place of the sword, sitting on the podium under the blaze of red was Eldarec, the Great Harlequin himself. A wide and jovial smile played over his features and, as the terrible lord of sorcery approached, his smile cracked into a broad grin, and he threw his head back to laugh. The Blade Wraith was gone.



CHAPTER TWELVE: MOCKERY

'CASUALTIES?' BARKED ULANTUS as the warning sirens continued to sound. Fires had ignited under a number of terminals and monitors on the control deck, and several of the viewscreens were either cracked or malfunctioning.

'Fourteen battle-brothers in the prow section, captain. They fell before we could seal off the quadrant. The blast doors into the next hull segment are holding, but will not hold forever. The boarding action has stalled, it has not be repelled.'

'And out there?' The captain turned his head to indicate the main frontal viewscreen on which the space battle was raging.

'Eleven Cobra fighters.'

'And the eldar?'

'Unknown, captain. The two cruisers are sustaining heavy damage, and a number of their Shadowhunter escorts have been destroyed. We have unconfirmed reports that one of the cruisers may have been boarded.'

'And what about the necron, officer? Are we taking them with us?'

'Many of the smaller raiders have been immobilised, captain.'

'That's it?'

'Many immobilised.'

'That's it?'

'Yes, captain.'

'I see. And where is the *Ravenous Spirit*?'

'On route.'

'Distance?'

'She is just clearing Lorn III, captain. Arrival is imminent.'

Ulantus sighed and looked around the bridge of the venerable battle-barge. He had never thought that any enemy could reduce the pride of Vidya to a smoking wreck, especially not on his watch. Part of him rebelled against the responsibility, and Gabriel's face swam into his mind. If anyone was to blame, it was the erratic and unreliable Commander of the Watch. He had told Angelos not to go. He had attempted to force him to stay. But the famously cavalier captain had pulled rank and insisted that he should be permitted to take his strike cruiser on another of his secret eldar trysts. One day he would make Gabriel answer for his actions. If the *Litany of Fury* were to fall, he would make sure that the Chapter Masters knew that it was Gabriel who had abandoned it in its moment of greatest peril.

'There is nothing more I can do here,' he murmured, half to himself. 'You, Sergeant Abraim.' The Marine standing sentinel by the blast doors nodded his acknowledgement. 'The bridge is yours. I am needed in the prow.' Nobody will be able to accuse me of shirking my duty in the face of the enemy, he vowed to himself. 'Maintain fire against the Harvester. If that blows, then this is over.'

With that, Ulantus strode purposefully off the control deck of the *Litany of Fury* and rushed off towards the embattled prow.

AS THE LIGHT and the music faded, a pulse of laughter flooded over the stage, as though the entire auditorium were united in mockery or amusement. The house lights came up slowly; it was as though the performance had ended and the Harlequins expected everyone to leave.

Gabriel blinked the silvering light out of his eyes and lowered the sword from above his head, bringing it down in front of him. In the newly constant glow of the house lights, he inspected the blade and realised that it was no longer broken. The cracked and chipped form had become whole, and the missing shard from the tip had somehow been recast.

'Hope is reborn as the sword is made whole once again. Vaul bowed with a flourish and the Laughing God, Cegorach the Wise, chuckled with mirth. It is always as it would be.'

A voice inside his head muttered familiar words: *I am the sword of Vidya.*

That sword is mine, Blood Raven.

Gabriel tore his eyes away from the glimmering, enchanting blade and turned on his heels. The thoughts were harsh and abrasive, unlike any that he had experienced before. They hurt him.

If you give it to me, then there will be no problem between us. You can save us all much suffering, friend of Ahriman.

The sorcerer lord stood further upstage, in front of the red spotlight, in which sat the Great Harlequin, rolling with laughter.

Gabriel could see immediately that the Blade Wraith was gone from its podium, and he realised in that instant that he was holding it in his hands. Something had happened during the Harlequin masque, some kind of transference or homecoming; the Blade Wraith and *Vairocanum* had been made whole.

Everything tends towards its home, human, as you know. The thoughts were not Ahriman's, though they were no longer Karebennian's.

Some sort of mockery of their dance had seen the performance unite what had been broken and bring perfection out of what had once been flawed. It was as though the dance had itself been part of the forging process for the incomplete blade. It all began to make sense to the Blood Ravens captain.

'I am not your friend, Ahriman of the Prodigal Sons. I am Gabriel Angelos of Vidya's Blood Ravens - between us is the problem of truth.'

A snigger cackled around the audience.

The sorcerer's ghostly face was a fury of fiery eyes and fierce hostility. There was insanity flickering over his wild features as he glowered at the captain. For a moment, Gabriel thought that Ahriman was simply going to launch himself into the attack and he tested the weight of the ancient blade of power in his hands, but then a sudden calm shifted over the sorcerer's spectral features. *We are not so very different, you and I, Gabriel. We are the same. Why must we fight when there is so much knowledge here to go around. We can share it. The real enemy here is them.* Ahriman smiled smoothly and spun his Black Staff to indicate the Harlequins that were gradually appearing into a wide ring around them on the stage. He pointed up into the stands where the Death Jesters pointed back with their heavy weapons and the mannequins grinned inanely.

Gabriel swept his eyes around the scene, as though following the direction of the sorcerer. He saw his own battle-brothers standing ready around him, all of them poised on the point of righteous fury, each of them ready to die if he gave the word. He saw the Prodigal Sons arrayed to one side of the stage, formed into a solid and implacable firing line, their ghostly faces set into concentrated outrage. Two of them lay motionless at the feet of their comrades.

Before Gabriel lay the mutilated and broken bodies of Rhamah and Karebennian, and the stage was speckled with the corpses of Harlequins that he had not even noticed before.

'No,' said Gabriel slowly and firmly. 'We are nothing alike, you and I. I seek knowledge only in the service of the Emperor, only for the protection of the Imperium, for the glory of the Golden Throne, and in the name of Vidya.'

'There will be no sharing today, Ahriman. I want no part in this.'

Gabriel hefted the Blade Wraith in one hand, feeling its ineffable lightness, as though it were actually weightless, as he gestured towards the slaughter around him.

There was a slow murmur from around the auditorium, and a gentle music glided into the range of human hearing. At the same time, dozens of Harlequin troupers shimmered into visibility around the stage, surrounding the Marines with rings of bristling blades. In the audience, hundreds more faces seemed to appear between the grinning faces of the mannequins, as though the sons of the Laughing God had been merely in hiding during the performance, so as not to interfere with the show. Now they were showing themselves and their appreciation. Applause thundered around the arena. Hundreds then thousands of Harlequins were staring down onto the stage.

Ahriman's smile set fixedly and then slowly transformed into a scowl of anger. His eyes flared with fury and his Black Staff began to burn with unspeakable powers. His mouth worked silently, spilling out incantations that had not been heard for centuries, calling out for assistance from the minions of the warp, dragging his daemonic servants towards the materium and attempting to press them into service. The air around the stage started to condense and whirl, making the Harlequins suddenly nervous. This was not in the script.

THE WRAITHSHIP TREMBLED and convulsed under the relentless assault, and Macha flinched in physical pain with each of the critical strikes against her *Eternal Star*. Although she was hidden away in her meditation chamber, she could feel each crack of a Shroud cruiser's lightning arc, and each attempt of a Jackal's portal projectors to open up a space for a boarding movement. She could even feel the tread of each footstep as her crew ran through the maze of wraithbone corridors.

She ducked and twisted violently, throwing the *Star* into a spin and plunging it down under the anticipated lash of a lightning arc. Pulling the nose up, Macha gasped suddenly and squinted her eyes in intense concentration, pouring her will and her fury into the massive discharge from the prow-mounted pulsar lance exactly as she loosed the keel-launched torpedoes.

The barrage punched and punched again into the already weakened armour of the Shroud, finally rupturing its hull and sending it spinning out of control. Its momentum carried it crashing into its sister ship, which had been deployed in a tight formation on its wing.

Screaming with lust for the kill, Macha loosed another volley of torpedoes, which plunged through the holes in the armour of the first Shroud and detonated inside. The vessel convulsed and then exploded from within, shredding its sister ship in the spray of superheated, metallic debris. Whatever the necron made their spacecraft from, it seemed that it was also the best material to use to attack their vessels.

Twisting again, her eyes wild with passion, Macha sent her Wraithship spinning into a wide sweep, trying to flank one of the remaining Shrouds that was engaging Uldreth's *Avenging Sword*.

Uldreth Avenger! Have you been boarded?

Farseer - yes. A small boarding party made it through a portal before we could disrupt its phase variance. My Aspect Warriors have engaged the enemy and the compartment has been sealed, she replied.

Farseer, continued Uldreth. You must engage the Harvester. The mon-keigh will not be able to defeat it on their own. Once the Harvester falls, this battle is won. Without it, the Yngir lose their leadership.

Macha nodded in silent assent. She knew that the Avenger was right; she had never doubted his military good sense. The Scythe-class Harvester was indeed the key to this battle. The ancient eldar had named it after the scythe of Kaelis Ra, the bringer of death, because although its appearance was fearsome, its removal constituted the hobbling of a Yngir attack.

Clicking her viewscreen, Macha saw a second Blood Ravens strike cruiser blazing around the sun, its prow cannons already firing on the Harvester that continued to pummel the *Litany of Fury*.

Gabriel? she called, but there was no answer.

She scanned through the mon-keigh frequencies. 'Gabriel? Is that you?'

A whistle of static echoed incongruously around her mediation chamber. Then an ugly human voice. 'This is Sergeant Kohath of the Blood Ravens strike cruiser *Ravenous Spirit*. How may we be of assistance?'

Then a second voice. 'Sergeant Kohath. Glad you could make it.'

'Abraim? Where is Captain Ulantus?'

'We have been boarded, Kohath. The captain is leading the counter-strike.'

'I understand. Where do you need us?'

'The captain ordered that all weapons be focussed on the Harvester, sergeant.'

'As you wish.'

Macha listened to the alien conversation, letting its ugly and painful tones pollute her meditation chamber for reasons of expedience. At least the humans seemed to know the right tactics for this battle, she thought, reassuring herself. But she also realised that the Yngir were indeed aiming to extinguish the psychic beacon hidden within the *Litany of Fury*: they had been boarded already. She wondered for the second time whether the presence of the Blood Ravens at both Lsathranil's Shield and Lorn was more than coincidence. The time-lines of the future-past were riddled with possible coincidences, some more powerful and pregnant than others. Perhaps the Deceiver or the Laughing God himself was smiling in the background to all this?

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she banked the *Eternal Star* and threw it into the approach towards the Harvester vessel. At exactly that moment, a barrage of living energy tendrils latched on to the bottom of her hull and ripped the Wraithship apart.

AS THE CURRENTS of warp power began to swirl and eddy around the stage, focussed on the central figure of the terrible sorcerer lord, Ahriman, the Great Harlequin vaulted up and out of the shaft of light on stage-centre. He flipped up over the head of Ahriman and landed before him, directly between the sorcerer and Gabriel, a wide grin still etched into the elaborate mask. He spoke loudly in a tongue that even Ahriman had never heard before, making his troupers stamp their feet and throw their own voices into a chorus. Soon, the amphitheatre was flooded with a thunderous, rhythmical alien noise that drowned out all other sounds, swamping even the incantations of the sorcerer lord. Tendrils of Harlequin magic threaded around the area, intermixing and interlacing the minds of the troupe into a giant web of psychic energy that served as a containment field around the stage.

Ahriman's own chanting turned into a howl of frustration.

Eldarec stopped his song, and the other Harlequins let it drop into the background, chanting quietly without ever letting a gap or hole appear in the blanket of psychic noise.

In between Ahriman and Gabriel, Eldarec bowed flamboyantly.

With all things in the future, we cannot see beyond our choices. We may hear the music, or listen to the voices. But the future is forged through our own devices. And in our choice of the future, the present is retold. We learn about the deeds of the foolish and the bold. We know whose heart is true, and which one is cold.

And so a choice.

As the thoughts made themselves felt in the minds of Ahriman and Gabriel, the Harlequins on the stage started to leap and dance, tumbling and twisting through a series of closely orchestrated movements. They sprang and jumped, climbing up on top of each other, balancing like acrobats. In a matter of seconds, they had formed two vertical circles, one on each side of the stage, each comprised of a ring of Harlequin troupers.

At a word from Eldarec, the rings suddenly pulsed and flooded with a sheen of warp energy, transforming them into portals, framed by the laughing features of dozens of Harlequin masks.

Now choose. Eldarec gestured for Ahriman to look into the portals, offering him a way off Arcadia and out of the terrible Harlequin theatre, offering him his life.

The sorcerer lord looked at Eldarec for a moment, narrowing his eyes with suspicion and hatred. It seemed that the Harlequins had knowledge and power beyond even the comprehension of Ahriman. Then he nodded, as though in acknowledgement.

In one of the portals, Ahriman saw the great Black Gates of the fabled Black Library. They morphed and shifted uneasily, as though not really existing in the conventional or material sense. Within their mythical structure Ahriman could see myriad stars glittering, as though the library held the entire galaxy within its glorious and ineffable gates.

The sorcerer's eyes widened with lust, but something made him turn to inspect the other portal. If the Harlequins could tempt him off their planet with a webway route to the Black Library, what else could they be offering him? He could think of nothing that could possibly match the value of this gift, but something in his dark soul told him that they might know of something even more glorious that had remained hidden to him for all this time. There was always something better.

It took several seconds for Ahriman's ghostly eyes to make sense of the image in the other portal. It was muddled and spluttering with lights. It was a confusion of fire and lashes of electric blue. He inclined his head slightly, trying to decipher the movements, as though they were some form of alien script. But then he realised that he was gazing on a space battle. Looking more closely, he could see the flickering and flitting forms of eldar escorts spiralling into dogfights with necron raiders. He could see an embattled Blood Ravens battle-barge beginning to list and break apart under a barrage of fire from a necron Harvester.

He grinned and then laughed. The irony was almost too much for him. He laughed a loud and powerful laugh, letting his voice reverberate dramatically around the auditorium, enjoying the moment of theatre.

'There is no choice,' he said. 'Knowledge is power.' He flicked a quick signal to Obysis, indicating that the Prodigal Sons should follow him, then stepped into the first portal. The rest of his Marines charged in after him, splashing through the warp field and vanishing from the face of Arcadia.

And we guard it well. Eldarec's thoughts were full of mirth as he finished the maxim for Ahriman. Despite appearances, the portal did not lead to the Black Library.

A great cheer arose around the auditorium. It was loud and thunderous at first, and Gabriel thought that he could hear the rapture of thousands of celebrating souls. But the sound thinned quickly, tumbling into a skeletal clapping. Looking up around the balconies, the Blood Ravens could see the Harlequins in the audience vanishing quickly, as though they had never been there.

Their numbers reduced from thousands to hundreds, to dozens, to merely a few Death Jesters sitting amongst the sinister echoes of their kin - the fixed grins of the mannequins.

At the same time, the troupers on stage thinned to a handful, and Eldarec slumped suddenly, clearly exhausted by the effort of maintaining the charade. The Great Harlequin had projected an elaborate show and drawn a sorcerer lord into his play, but now he was hard pressed even to maintain his balance. As the apparently healthy holographic troupers faded away, so too the corpses of

dozens of dead Harlequins began to appear all over the stage. The scene of carnage was terrible. The Harlequins of Arcadia had paid a terrible price.

Gabriel looked around him in confusion and concern. He could see his Librarians and Marines doing the same thing - they were amazed by the scale of the deception and appalled by the reality that lay hidden behind it.

Eldarec laughed weakly, a trickle of blood gurgling in his throat. *Choose, Gabriel of the Hidden Heart. Show us that the mon-keigh are not all the same.*

Gabriel smiled faintly and nodded. He did not turn to beckon the other Blood Ravens - he knew that they would follow him. He sheathed the Blade Wraith, bowed briskly, with controlled theatricality, and strode directly into the faltering, fading portal.

ON THE MAIN viewscreens of the *Ravenous Spirit*, Sergeant Kohath saw the beautiful and familiar Wraithship explode. He watched the rain of light that it left in space scatter and fade until there was not even the memory of it left. He had no love for the alien farseer that he had learnt to associate with that vessel, but this was not the time to welcome the destruction of allies, however temporary and untrustworthy they might be. Besides, Captain Angelos had trusted her, and his judgement had always been good enough for Kohath.

'Concentrate the prow cannons on the Harvester, Loren,' he said, standing firmly in the middle of the bridge in his usual position of authority and confidence. 'How many Thunderhawks do we have operational?'

'Four, sergeant,' answered Loren instantly.

'Let's get those out there to run guard duty before we get boarded by these sly undead aliens. Inform the port and starboard batteries to be alert. That Harvester is spilling Jackals all over the place.'

'Yes, sergeant,' snapped Loren crisply.

'And, Loren?'

'Yes?'

'See about putting me in touch with the *Rage of Erudition*. Let's see what Saulh has been up to in our absence.'

Kohath could see the *Rage* performing a slow axial roll off to the port-side of the Harvester. It was bleeding energy out of its prow-mounted weapons and it appeared that its engines had failed. Port and starboard batteries were firing intermittently, but largely to repel the persistent attentions of the smaller raiding craft that flitted around the cruiser like scavengers around a dying animal.

Several Jackals were circling tightly around the powerless but venerable vessel, and Kohath knew enough about the tactics and abilities of the necron to be aware that this probably meant that the *Rage* had been boarded. The Jackals packed portal projection arrays that acted as unusually precise teleporters. Dozens of necron warriors would already be aboard.

'Loren. Any word from Saulh?'

'Nothing, sergeant.'

Kohath exhaled through his nose and clenched his jaw. He hated space battles. He hated not having solid ground beneath his feet. He hated not being able to see, hear and feel the crunching death of his enemies. But most of all he hated the impotence that came with distance: although he could see what was happening to the *Rage of Erudition*, there was almost nothing that he could do about it. His own rage, his righteous anger and his will to impose vengeance on all those aberrations to the Emperor's sight, these things had to be held in check. He could not storm over to the *Rage of Erudition* and throttle the damned necron with his bare hands, much as he would have liked to.

Instead, he had to stand on the bridge of his own strike cruiser and let its frontal cannons pound away ineffectively at an alien vessel that was steadily taking the Third Company's battle-barge apart. Meanwhile, Captain Ulantus was the only one in the front line, actually taking the fight to the necron warriors themselves, fighting them hand to hand in the bowels of the *Litany of Fury* herself.

Further away from the sun, just beyond the point where Macha's Wraithship had been ripped apart, Kohath could see the valiant struggle of an eldar Dragon cruiser as it twisted and spun around the multiple assaults of two Shroud cmisers. Its weapons were ablaze with fire, and sheets of rockets spilled continuously out of all of its launchers. It appeared as the very incarnation of fury and vengeance, but Kohath could see that it would be no match for the two Shrouds in the end. Not even the eldar could maintain such ferocity forever, and the soulless necron could absorb the punishment until the eldar crew exhausted itself.

Surveying the theatre of battle into which he had just thrust the *Ravenous Spirit*, Kohath realised that this was not a battle that the Blood Ravens could win. They simply did not have the weaponry or the numbers to overcome the necron menace.

THE BLAST DOORS of the sealed prow section of the *Litany of Fury* were glowing red-hot. They would not hold much longer.

When he had arrived at the barricades, Captain Ulantus had found his men and Space Marines in disarray. The remnants of two Devastator squads had formed up into a single firing line across the main corridor. They had been reduced to seven battle-brothers, and an entire third squad had already been lost in the attempt to repel the boarders.

The regular, pledged human crew of the *Litany* had mustered themselves for her defence. They had dragged fixings and furniture, bed-frames, doors, old cogitators, ammunition canisters, equipment crates and anything else they could lay their hands on and they had thrown them all into the main corridor in front of the blast doors in an attempt to slow down the advance of the necron warriors. Then the guards and sentries of the prow sections had assembled into militias and manned the make-shift barricade with rifles, pistols and grenades. It was not only the Space Marines of the Blood Ravens Ninth Company who could fight for the survival of their venerable ship. The pledged workers of the *Litany of Fury* had families to defend.

When Ulantus had strode down the corridor, his heavy boots clanging against the metallic floor, the men and Marines had been staring at the slowly melting blast doors in utter silence, waiting for the necron to break through. The sight of the captain, down in the bowels of the ship, ready to the face the boarding action along side his men, filled the ad hoc force with a sudden hope.

Without pausing, Ulantus had ripped his chainsword into life in one hand and drawn his bolt pistol with the other. He had vaulted over the makeshift barricade and marched to the front of the Devastator line. The pledged workers on the barricade cheered, and the surviving Devastator sergeant nodded his acknowledgement.

As the blast doors finally ruptured, Ulantus roared with defiance, triggering the first volley of fire from the Devastators. An immense bank of bolter fire lashed out of the firing line, shredding the remnants of the doors and the first of the necron warriors that emerged through the smoke. A hail of grenades bounced and rolled into the breach, where they detonated and filled the lost prow sections with blazing infernos of shrapnel.

When the firing stopped, another cheer arose from the barricade. Smoke plumed and billowed out of the mined blast doors, but no necrons emerged from the devastation. Hope washed over the defenders in a cruel wave.

An almost inaudible scratching noise started to scrape through the structure of the corridor. It grew louder and louder, scraping and rustling until it became a metallic din. Little flecks of black appeared on the floor in front of the blast doors. They looked like beetles or roaches, scurrying across the ground. There were dozens of them, then hundreds spilling out into the corridor. Hundreds rapidly became thousands, pouring out of the breach towards Ulantus and the Devastator Marines. Then a thunderous cacophony of beating wings erupted from the breach and a great cloud of flying scarabs burst out of the smoke, like a solid black, gleaming cloud of sharpened metal.

Flamers erupted into life and bolters spat shells relentlessly, but the scarabs swarmed around the attacks and engulfed the firing line, flowing up, over and through the barricades. Ulantus hacked out with his chainsword, smashing hundreds of the alien beedes and swatting them away as they tried to gnaw through his armour. Behind him, he could hear the screams of the unarmoured fighters on the barricade as they were eaten alive. Dropped grenades suddenly detonated, blowing sections of the barricades away and mercifully killing the militiamen that no longer had arms with which to throw them.

Ulantus yelled into the swarm, defying it with his own fury. The remaining Devastators were ablaze with fire, pouring flames and shells into the metallic cloud in disciplined volleys and then undisciplined tirades. The fight was desperate and brutal.

As the swarm swept over them and passed through into the corridors beyond, Ulantus keyed his vox bead and ordered the next section of the hull sealed behind them. He could hear the next set of blast doors close and seal further down the corridor, and then he could just about make out the metallic scurrying of scarabs as they clattered up against them in frustration.

Heavier metal thuds brought the captain's attention back to the breached doors before him. Diffuse clouds of scarabs were still flying out of the rupture, but Ulantus could see several sets of burning red eyes approaching in the darkness beyond. As he watched, momentarily transfixed, the skeletal form of a necron warrior strode out of the shadows and placed its first foot in the brightness of Ulantus's corridor. Its soulless eyes burnt with hellfire as it fired its long-barrelled weapon from its hip.

The gauss flayer struck the Devastator at Ulantus's shoulder and for a moment it seemed to have no effect. There was no pressure behind the strike and the Space Marine held his ground. But then the vox was suddenly filled with screams as the Marine's armour fizzled and then dissolved away, exposing his raw skin and muscles, which were consumed atom by atom. After less than a second, even his bones were suddenly rendered into dust.

'For the Great Father and the Emperor!' yelled Ulantus, loosing a tirade of fire from his bolter and charging forward at the warrior with his chainsword spluttering thirstily.

'SERGEANT KOHATH. WE have an intrusion,' reported Loren, poring over a faintly glowing terminal on the bridge of the *Ravenous Spirit*.

The sergeant nodded, actually relieved that he would not simply have to stand on the bridge and wait for his cruiser to be exhausted of ammunition and then destroyed. 'Location?' he asked, already striding towards the door.

'The Apothecarion.'

Kohath paused in the doorway, just as the blast doors slid open in front of him; he was surprised by this report. But then he shrugged and stepped through the doors, letting them hiss closed behind him again. He clicked the vox bead in his helmet as he sealed it into place, breaking into a run along the corridor.

'Loren - you have the bridge.'

'Me, sergeant? Yes, sergeant.'

That's what comes of being the only serf whose name I can remember, thought Kohath, permitting himself a smile as the elevator doors slid open and he ran out towards the Apothecarion.

He paused for a moment outside the sealed doors and checked his bolter. This was so much better than a space battle, he thought, and then he punched the door release.

The doors clicked and then hissed as the medical facility beyond depressurised and released a cloud of sanitising gases. Without hesitating, Kohath strode through the doors, snatching his bolter from side to side to cover the wide room inside.

It was empty and white. Nothing moved.

He waited, keeping his gun braced.

Nothing.

Then there was something. It was not a noise, but it was more than a silence. He quietened his breathing and concentrated on his hearing.

Nothing. But there was definitively something. It was a weak, non-noise.

Gabriel.

There it was again. *Gabriel.*

With his bolter held out before him, Kohath stalked through the deserted Apothecarion, searching for the source of the disruption. As he pulled back one of the white curtains that had been swept around one the treatment tables, the sergeant froze.

Gabriel.

It was the farseer, Macha. She was bloodied and scarred. Her emerald eyes ran with tears and her diaphanous clothes were torn and shredded. She looked up at Sergeant Kohath with desperation in her eyes. She was pleading with him.

Gabriel?

Kohath undipped his helmet and looked down at the farseer, his heart racing with mixed emotions. Overriding everything was the feeling that he had somehow been cheated of his last great battle. He had not come running down into the depths of the *Ravenous Spirit* in response to an intrusion alarm merely to play nurse-maid to an injured alien, no matter how beautiful she was. She was beautiful. But even her beauty made him angry - it was an uncomfortable, forbidden, alien beauty that filled him with as much disgust as appreciation.

'You survived, then.' That much was clear. He recalled that the other seer, Taldeer, had also managed to escape from the destruction of her ship into the relative safety of a Blood Ravens Apothecarion. He didn't know what else to say. 'Captain Angelos did not return.'

Macha gazed at him as though showing him her soul in the depths of her emerald eyes. Then she nodded. Perhaps she understood. She stood to her feet and gestured that she would follow the sergeant.

'Gabriel,' she said. This time it was a statement of fact.

AS THEY WERE approaching the blastdoors that separated the control deck from the corridor, Kohath clicked his vox again.

'Loren. I'm returning to the bridge. You may return to your station.'

'I am already in my station, sergeant.' The reply confused him. Perhaps he had been wrong to expect the serf to take command of a strike cruiser?

The doors hissed and slid open, and Kohath strode onto the control deck, with Macha walking along behind him.

'Greetings sergeant,' said Gabriel calmly, turning from his position at the main viewscreen to face Kohath and Macha. 'Good of you to join us. And Farseer Macha - I might have expected to find you here too.'

'Captain... I... I don't understand.' Kohath looked from the captain to the other familiar faces on the bridge: Tanthius, Corallis, Jonas, Ephraim, Korinth and Zhaphel. They were all back.

'It is of no importance at the moment, sergeant.'

Gabriel. You survived the tests of the rielletann. Do you bring the Blade Wraith? Macha pushed past Kohath and walked directly up to Gabriel, staring directly into his blue-green eyes.

'Yes, farseer, I have the Blade of Vault.' Gabriel unsheathed the legendary blade and laid it across his palms for Macha to inspect.

'But I confess that I have no idea what to do with it.'

It is a sword like any other, Gabriel, and yet like no other. It must be wielded as no other blade. She was gazing at it without looking up at him, but she paused suddenly. *Gabriel, it is whole again.*

'What do I need to do?' he asked, genuinely willing to do as the farseer told him. For the first time in his life, he realised that there was some knowledge, some genuine and essential knowledge, that was only possessed by aliens. In his search for truth, he would have to accept that he could never possess it all for himself.

The others waited, each of them willing to listen to the guidance of the farseer.

Macha nodded and smiled, lifting the blade out of Gabriel's hands and turning it easily in her own. She rotated it fluidly, spinning it and flourishing it with practiced ease. *It is a beautiful blade.*

She looked up at the viewscreen behind Gabriel and saw the destruction and devastation. Although it was still firing, the *Litany of Fury* was beginning to list to one side under the onslaught from the necron Harvester. The *Rage of Erudition* appeared to have lost all power, and was being picked apart by a shoal of raiders from the outside and a knot of necron warriors from the inside. The *Avenging Star* was still fighting, but its fury was diminished and the two Shrouds were gradually beginning to assert their superiority.

It is time to end this, Gabriel. The Dance of Lanthrilag the Swift is the masque of the death and rebirth of hope. Today we have seen its rebirth. She smiled again, the familiar expression seeming utterly alien on her blood-riddled, porcelain face. *We are the children of Lanthrilag, and it is to us that this blade must pass. I will see the dance completed. This is the Blade Wraith of Vault, and the Yngir will cower before it.*

With that, Macha stepped back from Gabriel and held the sword to her chest. She folded her arms around it and whispered something inaudible in a tongue that none of them recognised. The blade burst suddenly into green flames, but they did not burn her. She muttered some more indiscernible sounds and the flames flared still more brightly, expanding into a radiant aura that swept around her figure, transfiguring her into a being of pure psychic energy.

Thank you, Gabriel. The thoughts did not feel like hers any more.

An explosion of light ripped through the control room, dazzling the Blood Ravens momentarily. When it faded, Macha was gone. Turning to the viewscreen, they could see a pulse of green warpfire unlike anything they had ever witnessed before, like a gash torn through into the immaterium itself, as though the blade had somehow ripped through the boundaries between realms. The tear stretched out of the prow of the *Ravenous Spirit* all the way to the hull of the necron Harvester, where it was joined by a fork of similar energy arcing out of the heart of the *Litany of Fury*.

As soon as the energy touched the hull of the Scythe cruiser, its armour buckled and folded, as though the merest touch of that force was enough to repel the pristine and perfect material technology of the necron. The Harvester folded and crumpled, collapsing back in on itself as though it were being reduced into a two dimensional form. Then, in a sudden explosion of darkness, the Harvester imploded, sucking the great rips of fire into a massive vortex that spiralled momentarily, dragging the Dirge raiders, the remaining Jackals and the Shrouds into a tempest of immaterial fury that consumed them in a single gulp. After a second, there was nothing left but the gently floating wreckage of Blood Ravens vessels and the limping shape of an eldar cruiser. All vestiges of the necron were gone.

APOTHECARY MEDICIUS EMERGED from the Implantation Chamber and moved quickly between the patients in the *Litany of Fury's* Apothecarion. He found Captain Angelos standing at the side of a fallen Space Marine and stood a short distance away, waiting for the appropriate moment to approach the Commander of the Watch.

Gabriel looked down at the battered and bloodied form of Ulantus. His body had been recovered from the forward sections of the prow sector after the boarding action had finally been repelled. It was broken and ruined, but it would not be beyond the expertise of Medicius to bring the straight-laced captain back to full operational strength.

Gabriel watched the unconscious Ulantus for a moment then nodded. He had done the right thing - Gabriel would leave the *Litany* in his hands again, if he had to.

'Captain Angelos,' said Medicius as Gabriel turned away from Ulantus. 'There is someone I think you should meet.'

The captain followed the bustling apothecary through the cluttered and overfull Apothecarion. There had been many casualties over the last few days, and Medicius had his work cut out for him. They paused momentarily next to the sarcophagus that still held the body of Chaplain Prathios in stasis. Gabriel placed his hand onto the casket and whispered something that Medicius did not hear.

At the far side of the Apothecarion was a flimsy, white door which led through into a consultation chamber. Medicius paused in front of it and waited for Gabriel to catch up. Then he clicked the release on the door, turned, and hurried back to see to his patients.

The door slid open and Gabriel stepped inside.

'Captain Angelos. Scout Ckrius Qurius reporting for active duty.'

Gabriel looked at the stranger for a few seconds, not recognising the scarred and wizened face that was protruding from the immaculate and highly polished armour of the scout. 'Ckrius?' he said eventually, suddenly realising who this was. 'Ckrius, is that really you?'

As he gazed at the new Blood Ravens scout, he felt a wave of relief wash over his soul. As long as strong new warriors were surviving the implantation process, even in such an accelerated and sub-optimal form, there was hope for the future of the battered and beaten Chapter. Recruits like the young Ckrius, plucked out of the smouldering remains of Tartarus, held the fate of the Blood Ravens in his hands.

Looking down at the new scout's hands, as though ready to shake one of them, Gabriel's eyes widened in horror. In place of hands, Ckrius had grown strange fleshy stumps with a series of intertwining tendrils protruding where fingers should have been. The tendrils swayed delicately and interlaced into a sequence of solid forms that approximated hands.

'Scout Ckrius,' snapped Gabriel, recoiling automatically from the sight of the mutation, as he realised that the rapidity of the implantation process had clearly exacted a cost on the former Guardsman. He hesitated, weighing up the possible alternatives in his head. He thought back through the incredible pain and suffering that the neophyte had endured, all the tests that he had passed, and finally thought back to the spirit that the youthful fighter had shown against the orks when he had first encountered him on Tartarus. Finally, he thought of the empty berths that were scattered throughout the *Litany of Fury*, and he reached a decision.

'Find some gauntlets for those immediately.'