

The Enemy of My Enemy

A Warhammer 40,000 Short Story

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THE MAN WAS too weak to scream as Obax Zakayo picked him up by the ankle and tossed him into the wide fanged jaws of the furnace. None of the other slaves looked up at this fresh atrocity. None dared to. The wrath of Obax Zakayo was a capricious thing; unpredictable and random and no-one in this sweltering hell could be counted safe from his spite.

The murderous giant took a lumbering step through the orange-lit nightmare of the forge temple, bellowed commands laced with grating static booming from the vox-amp built into his burnished iron shoulder guard. Yellow and black chevrons edged the plates of his power armour and hissing pipes wheezed from every joint, leaking stinking black fluids and venting puffs of steam with every step. He carried a screaming axe, its edge toothed and brutal, and a crackling energy whip writhed on the end of a mechanised claw attached to his back.

Billowing clouds of steam and exhaust gasses filled the forge, shot through with streaks of bright flames. Fat orange sparks flew from vast grinding machines and rivers of lava-hot metal streamed from colossal cauldrons - each larger than a titan's head - into grooved weapon moulds. Monstrous, debased creatures in vulcanised rubber masks with rounded glass eye sockets and ribbed piping running into tanks carried on their backs cracked barbed whips. They lurched with a twisted, mutated gait and gurgled monotone commands to the hundreds of slaves that filled the screaming forge.

That such malnourished, wretched specimens of humanity could still live and work in such a terrible place was testament to the indomitable spirit that had sustained them in the time since their capture. None amongst them knew how long it had been since they had been dragged in chains from the proud defence of an Imperial citadel to this nightmare world. A world where a black sun beat down from a sky that burned a retina-searing white and from which smoky black threads poured into a cyclopean city of such insane proportions that men had been driven mad just by gazing upon its impossible geometries for too long.

Some three thousand men had been brought to this world, called Medrengard by its inhabitants, though less than a quarter of that number still lived. Whipped, beaten and fed barely enough to survive, their incarceration was little more than a slowly enacted death sentence. The grinning face at the end of the forge's nave roared and seethed, filling the air with a screeching howl of fury. Here, an incarcerated daemon's immaterial energies drove the ceaseless hammering of giant pistons while its anger heated the furnaces with the power of a star. Golden wards carved into the floor bound the daemon to its fate, and its red eyes blazed above the forge, driving men to madness and murder.

But such was a small price, and gladly paid by the masters of the forge. A hundred slaves or more died every day, but the Iron Warriors cared not. Where a hundred died, a thousand more would be brought to work until death claimed them as well.

A TRIO OF TRACKED bulldozer engines hauled themselves into the forge, dragging rusted troughs behind them through the kneedeep ash. More of the rubber-masked mutants drove the dozers and, even before they stopped, slaves clustered around them, leaning over the edges of the troughs to scoop up handfuls of the thin, greyish gruel that slopped around their bases. Men who had once called each other brother and had fought the dark powers shoulder to shoulder, punched and kicked each other bloody as they fought for the meagre scraps their captors allowed them.

Sergeant Ellard carefully made his way through the press of bodies to where a slumped figure sat exhausted, his head drooping between his knees. Unkempt, filth-

encrusted hair that had once been blonde, but was now dull and grey covered most of the figure's ash-smeared face.

'Sir,' said Ellard, 'some food.'

The figure looked up, red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared at the sergeant through the lank rats' tails of his hair, but said nothing.

'Sir, you have to eat,'

'Why?'

'Because you'll get sick if you don't eat.'

'We're already dying, Ellard, remember? The Adeptus Mechanicus made sure of that with their damned cancers, so what's the point in postponing death?'

Ellard squatted on his haunches, still holding out his dripping hands, coolly regarding his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Leonid.

'Because we're soldiers of the 383rd Jouran Dragoons,' said Ellard. 'We don't give up until the last breath has been crushed from us.'

'Just like Corde,' said Leonid.

'What?'

'Never mind,' said Leonid, holding out his hands and allowing Ellard to pour what passed for nourishment into his hands. He looked at the grey liquid, oily patches of Emperor only knew what floating like a frothy scum on its surface. He raised his hands to his mouth and drank the foul broth, feeling the gristly lumps of meat catch in his throat. He didn't know what meat it was and didn't want to think too hard about the strongest possibility of its identity.

He felt his stomach cramp and fought the familiar urge to vomit its contents onto the ground. The carcinogens he and his regiment had been infected with were making their presence felt and Leonid closed his eyes as a jagged spike of pain ripped through his gut.

But Ellard was right, they were soldiers of Jouran and the Emperor, and they did not give up, no matter that they were all dead men who refused to lie down. He forced down the last mouthful of the gruel and watched as the Iron Warrior bastard, Obax Zakayo, marched down the length of the forge, the loathsome claw on his back cracking the energy wreathed whip into the huddled masses of slaves.

'On your feet, scum!' he bellowed. 'There's work to be done. I'll grind your bones to powder and feed you to the daemon of the forge! Up! Up!'

How could it have come to this? Though it seemed he had spent a lifetime toiling in this nightmare existence, he knew it could not have been long. A few scant months since the citadel of Hydra Cordatus had fallen to the Iron Warriors and they had been dragged off in chains to the echoing prison hulks in orbit.

His last sight of the citadel had been of its walls being cast down, its once-proud buildings in flames and the desecrated corpses of Captain Eshara's Imperial Fists scattered before the Valedictor Gate like offal. Herded like animals onto the darkened prison barges of the traitors, they had been kept chained and beaten until arriving at this terrifying place.

Leonid knew that the galaxy was a big place, with many strange and incredible sights, but this was something else entirely. Hoary old veterans told tales of worlds located in a horrifying place known as the Eye of Terror, where mighty daemons and the followers of the Ruinous Powers ruled supreme. They spoke of insane worlds where gods whose name could never be spoken held sway over all before them and who shaped their worlds to their lunatic whims. Like others, he had laughed at these tales, though there had always been an edge of fear to the laughter. What if they were true?

Now he knew they were.

The shadow of Obax Zakayo swallowed him, the monster in dark iron armour thrown into silhouette by the fires of the furnace.

'You. Slave. Stand up,' ordered the Iron Warrior.

Leonid rose to his feet. To disobey Obax Zakayo was to die and, as wretched as their lot was, he was damned if he'd die at this bastard's hands.

The Iron Warrior leaned down, the hot breath from his helmet's rebreather making Leonid gag and the yellow light from his visor bathing him in a sickly glow.

'Slaves bring you food. You are their leader?'

'I was,' nodded Leonid. 'Not now.'

Obax Zakayo laughed, the noise a harsh grating that scraped along Leonid's nerves like a rusty blade. He plucked at a tattered epaulette on Leonid's shoulder, wiping away a film of grease and ash to reveal the faded gold shoulder boards of a lieutenant colonel.

'You let yourself be captured,' said Obax Zakayo. 'The gods of battle will mock you for all eternity, slave.'

'Better that than be damned for all eternity,' snapped Leonid.

'Damned?' chuckled Obax Zakayo, as though hearing the word for the first time.

'Perhaps, but I am immortal. Powerful. What are you?'

Leonid said nothing, feeling his hatred swell, but keeping a tight grip on its power. Hot pain suffused his limbs and though he was weary beyond measure, he stood firm in the face of the taunting Iron Warrior.

From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of furtive movement and heard a muffled cry over the heavy hammering of the forge and the roar of the imprisoned daemon. Obax Zakayo caught the motion and turned in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of a swinging iron bar before it hammered into his helmet.

Leonid ducked back as the traitor dropped to one knee.

A group of scrawny slaves clambered across the engine block of the lead trough-hauler, dragging the masked creatures from within and bludgeoning them with jagged lumps of hardened ore. The daemon forge howled in glee at the slaughter, its wailings rising to a screaming gale.

Gunshots filled the forge and a handful of slaves went down. Blood spurted, spilling into the hissing weapon moulds and filling the air with its stink. Mutants tried to reverse the remaining two trough-haulers, but the enraged slaves were upon them, tearing them apart with a fury borne from months and months of systematic abuse and torture.

Sergeant Ellard reacted first, running over to join the slaves clambering across the nearest trough-hauler.

'Turn it around!' he bellowed, pointing to the forge's main doors, which were being dragged shut by gangs of twisted mutants. Leonid grinned ferally, realising that this was their chance, when a powerful spasm tore through his stomach and doubled him up in pain. He dropped to his knees and vomited the putrid gruel he had eaten, feeling his stomach contract as it tried to expel his stomach lining.

A fierce madness seized the slaves as they beat their tormenters to bloody ruin, tears of released horror streaking their filth-encrusted faces. Giant cauldrons of molten metal passed overhead as one of the Jouran slaves finally managed to take control of the lumbering vehicle. The trough-hauler lurched forwards, its tracks spinning clouds of choking ash into the air.

Leonid watched as the cheering slaves clambered aboard, whooping in savage joy as it headed towards the exit and the burning white sky beyond.

Then Obax Zakayo regained his feet and raised his arm, a mass of twisting pipes, hissing vents and gun barrels. Leonid tried to shout a warning, but the pain in his belly had stolen his voice. Foot-long tongues of flame blasted from Obax Zakayo's arm, explosive bolts ripping across the side of the troughhauler, spilling slaves and blood to the ground. Screams and cries of pain echoed through the forge as the Iron Warrior worked the killing fire of his weapon over the slaves.

'No!' cried Leonid. 'Stop!'

Obax Zakayo laughed in the face of Leonid's protestations, reaching down to haul the former lieutenant colonel to his feet to better witness the slaughter. Blood and viscera coated the sides of the trough hauler as it slewed over to the side of the forge, the top of its driver's head blasted clear. Slaves scattered before the Iron Warrior's lethal retaliation, abandoning the troughhauler to find cover.

Leonid twisted in his captor's grip, watching as the trough-hauler slammed into the stanchions supporting the greased rails carrying the vast cauldrons of molten metal. The vehicle wasn't moving quickly, but its sheer mass was enough to rip the stanchion from its

moorings and crumple it with its momentum. The cauldron currently traversing the forge swayed in slow motion, tipping slowly to one side before toppling from the rails and dropping to the floor.

A wave of fiery liquid spilled out, magma-hot ore turning flesh, bone and metal to stinking clouds of vapour in a heartbeat. Scores of slaves perished in seconds, the trough-hauler dissolving into hissing molten slag. Rivers of red hot metal rolled onwards in a deadly tide, the intricately carved runes of embossed gold on the floor flashing to steam under the heat.

As the river of molten metal rolled onwards to the forge mouth, yet more of the runes were obliterated and the roaring of the bound daemon in the forge rose to fresh heights of relish as more and more of the wards imprisoning it were destroyed.

Suddenly realising what must happen, Obax Zakayo dropped Leonid and ran for the forge's exit, leaving the gasping Jouran coughing and spluttering as the hissing metal began cooling and slowing its advance.

But by then the damage was done.

The last rune dissolved and the daemon broke free.

Imprisoned for millennia, the scion of the warp was in no mood to be merciful and lashed out in blind fury, a frothing miasma of black light with a swirling vortex of forms and geometries twisting through its nebulous matter. Those closest to the daemon drew breath to scream, but did not have time to do so the flesh sloughed from their bones.

Leonid rolled aside as a dark tendril slashed the ground, leaving a hissing residue in its wake. A whipping, octopoid form writhed in the dark light, feeding on the powerful energies of fear and hate swirling around the inside of the forge. Streamers of black, oily matter whiplashed around the forge, slicing men to bloody ribbons and lifting others high into the air.

Skeletal husks dropped to the floor, bled dry of their souls and Leonid scrambled onto a growling piece of machinery to escape the creeping tide of cooling – though still fearsomely hot – molten metal. Throughout the forge, slaves scrambled for high ground, fighting like animals to secure their safety. Men hurled one another into the fires in desperate attempts to prolong their own lives.

The darkness flailed like madness given form, expanding and solidifying tentacles of dark matter smashing through the walls and roof of the forge as easily as a man might destroy a doll's house. With a tortured shriek of shearing metal, the latticed girders of the roof and far wall buckled and tumbled to the floor. Leonid covered his head with his arms as smaller fragments and sheets of corrugated iron crashed down around him, praying to the God-Emperor that he might survive this carnage.

Long seconds passed before he realised that he was still alive and the screaming daemon was silent. He risked a glance through his fingers, seeing the burning white sky through the giant tear the vengeful daemon had ripped through the walls of the forge. Of the daemon itself, there was no sign, save a spot of darkness flaring into the sky.

Leonid grimaced in pain. Staring too long at that impossible sky was like staring directly into the sun, and he wrenched his gaze from its hateful brightness.

Little remained of the trough-haulers save hissing piles of molten metal. Here and there flames licked across the bones and charred limbs of slaves and mutants protruding from the hissing ore. The dull throbbing of the forge faded as the daemon-powered engines slowly ground to a halt, the hammers and pistons starved and useless.

As Leonid took stock of the devastation the escaped daemon had wreaked, he was relieved to see Sergeant Ellard pull himself from behind the ruins of a giant milling machine.

Scores had died in the abortive – and unplanned – escape attempt, and those who had survived were too stupefied to take advantage of the momentary lack of overseers.

Leonid knew he had seconds at best to capitalise on the situation when the forge doors crashed open and a dozen Iron Warriors were thrown into stark relief by the bone-white sky.

Whatever chance they might once have had vanished like ash on the wind.

LEONID KEPT HIS eyes glued to the bleak, grey rockcrete platform, whorls of dust and ash describing wind-blown spirals before him. He tried to shut out the hateful screams of the sleepers as the burning sky blazed white above them, beating down with fierce brightness, the dark hole of the sun rippling like a baleful eye. Fellow slaves and Jourans were pressed tightly around him, the stench of unwashed bodies, blood and fear mingling to create a heady cocktail of aromas.

The former lieutenant colonel shivered as daemonic scents gusted through them, expelled like corpse-breath from the newly formed tunnel mouths.

He risked a glance into its haunted blackness, feeling a splintering pain in his head as his limited senses tried to comprehend the shifting images of multiple realities intersecting with the sound of clashing blades and bells.

He felt every molecule in his body vibrate as the resonant frequencies of this dimensional abscess widened, rippling waves of sickness and filth spreading from this wound in spacetime.

He could feel a terrible imminence, like the tension in the fabric of the sky before a storm. Something was coming. Something so dark and ancient that his mind could not even begin to comprehend the scope of its evil.

Then Obax Zakayo moved between him and the tunnel and its spell was broken.

'You sense it's coming intersection don't you, slave? The Omphalos Daemonium.'

Leonid did not answer, his guts clamping in pain at the sound of such damned syllables given voice and wishing again that he had died on the journey to this cursed place.

The failed escape attempt in the forge had been paid for in the blood of his former soldiers. Obax Zakayo strode through the cowering survivors of the daemon's escape, clubbing slaves to death with each sweep of his fist. Slaves were dragged from their hiding places and hurled onto spinning lathes, pressed into crushers or lowered into steaming vats of ore. Limbs were ground to gory stumps and bones crushed to powder within the jellied ruin of their flesh. No pain went unexplored and no form of suffering was omitted from the Iron Warriors' retribution. Within minutes, hundreds were dead, slaughtered to sate the traitors' lust for pain and humiliation.

Obax Zakayo had lifted Leonid from the ground and held him before his battered visor.

'You are their leader.'

'No,' gasped Leonid. 'I told you, I don't-'

'They still look at you as their leader,'

interrupted the Iron Warrior. 'For this I will kill some of them now. Keep your men in line or I will kill all of them. Not you, though. Just them. All of them.'

'But-'

'Silence,' snarled Obax Zakayo. 'Just do it. You are no use here now that the daemon has gone. You are to be taken to the Warsmith Honsou and put to work in his weapon-shops. Try and escape from him and you will not be dealt with so lightly.'

Marched from the devastated forge, those slaves not fed inch by inch to the machines had been driven out into a twisting labyrinth of fortifications crowned with blades and kilometres of deep trenches lined with corrugated sheets of metal. Forests of razorwire linked armoured blockhouses and pillboxes bristling with heavy artillery pieces and guns that defied all proportion and reason.

The rumble of artillery fire was a constant drone at the edge of hearing, but who was fighting and why was a mystery. Dozens of slaves died en route to whatever fate awaited them at the hands of the Warsmith Honsou, dropping in exhaustion or starvation or from the merciless beatings and random killings inflicted by Obax Zakayo.

The gruelling death march continued for days though on a world such as this, where the sun never set and the skies never darkened, time was an absurd notion. Each day brought fresh horrors and new obscenities: roads lined with eviscerated bodies - human, alien and some so grossly misshapen as to defy any classification of form. Towers of skulls, harvest fields of billowing flesh and great monoliths raised with the scrimshawed bones of the dead.

Leonid saw that each step brought them closer to a range of brooding, smoke wreathed mountains, their topmost peaks lost in the brightness of the sky and obscured by a layer of dark clouds. Pillars of coiling, sentient smoke rose from the plains around the mountains, called by some nameless attraction to conceal whatever terrors and wonders lurked above in the darkness.

No matter their course, the sinister mountains always drew closer and Leonid knew with dreadful certainty that they were their destination. In the same realisation, he also knew that none of them would survive to reach the heights of those dreadful peaks.

Each glimpse of the desolate mountains through the twisting circumvallation simultaneously fascinated and repulsed him. The citadel of Hydra Cordatus had been constructed by an unknown genius of military architecture, though compared to the monstrous fortifications raised on this world, it was a mere trifle - a footnote to the dark grandeur of this world's defences. Leonid doubted that anything could penetrate these redoubts or that any foe could cast down its walls.

Finally, their march had come to an end. A barbed gate of bronze led into a rectangular, earthen arena, fully a kilometre wide and twice that in length. From somewhere nearby he could hear screaming; wails of the damned in torment that set his teeth on edge and seemed to pierce his skull with lancing, glass shards of pain. The ground underfoot was surprisingly soft and loamy, crimson liquid oozing from the water-logged earth. As Leonid looked more closely, he saw that the ground was not water-logged, but soaked in fresh spilled blood, bones and grinning skulls gleaming whitely through the red ground.

His mind reeled at the prospect. How many must have been drained of their lifeblood to irrigate such a vast space so thoroughly? How many arteries had been emptied to satiate the vile thirst of this dark, dark earth?

Leonid's stomach knotted in disgust, but he had nothing in his belly to expel and dry heaved as the awful stench of fresh blood filled his senses. Sergeant Ellard held him upright as they marched across thick, timber duckboards to the centre of this place, this killing ground.

Was that it? Was this a place of execution? Had they been brought here so that their blood might mingle with the thousands who had already been drained?

He shook off Ellard's hand, determined to meet whatever fate the Iron Warriors had planned for them on his feet and unaided. As they drew nearer to the centre of the arena, Leonid saw a long strip of rockcrete had been built atop the blood-soaked ground and dull, bloody rail tracks laid, running across the middle of the arena and ending at opposite walls. As they mounted the steps to the rockcrete platform, the source of the screaming was finally revealed to the Jouran slaves.

Each sleeper laid between the rail tracks writhed in agony; a jigsaw of bodies and limbs knotted together by some dark sorcery, screaming in lunatic fever-dreams, their cries like a choir of banshees. Eyes and mouths churning in the fluid matter of each sleeper gave piteous voice to their suffering before being forced from form to formlessness that another soul might vent its endless purgatory.

Men dropped to their knees, weeping at this fresh vileness, the frayed ends of their sanity unable to bear any more. Obax Zakayo hurled them from the platform, spinning the gibbering madmen to land in red splashes. No sooner had they landed than fleshless, bony hands reached up through the dark earth, clawing and grasping at their bodies and dragging them below the surface to whatever fate awaited them beneath.

Leonid tried to shut out the gurgling cries of the doomed men who drowned in the bloody ground to feed the rapacious souls beneath.

He shut his eyes...

Splintering crystals of alternate existences clash and jangle, detaching from the walls of one plane and shifting their position to resonate at a different frequency. Echoes in time allow the planes to shift and change; altering the angles of reality to allow the dimensions to unlock, dancing in a ballet of all possibilities.

...and cried out, his eyes snapping open again, dizzy and disorientated. He reached out to grab Ellard, steadying himself on his sergeant.

'Sir?'

'Emperor 's blood!' hissed Leonid, looking around the death arena. He felt a sickening vibration deep in his bones as a restlessness rippled through the ground. The jagged stumps of bone jutting through the ground retreated into its sanguineous depths and the screaming sleepers howled with renewed anguish.

Where the rail tracks vanished into the walls of this vast courtyard, streamers of multi-coloured matter were oozing from the stonework.

Rippling spirals of reflective light coiled from the mortar, twisting the image behind like a warped lens. The walls seemed to stretch, as though being sucked into an unseen vortex behind, until there was nothing left but a rippling veil of impenetrable darkness, a tunnel into madness ringed with screaming faces.

Warped realms, a universe and lifetimes distant, flow together, joining all points in time on the bronze bloodtracks. On a journey that leads everywhere and begins nowhere, the Omphalos Daemonium pushes itself from nothingness to form. Snaking from its daemonic womb and leaving nothing but barren rape and death in its wake.

Obax Zakayo laughed, though Leonid could feel the fear that lurked beneath. And the Omphalos Daemonium came.

THOUGH HIS screaming flesh had warned him of the might and power of its evil, it had been but the merest hints of the thing's diabolical majesty. Roaring from the tunnel mouth like a brazen juggernaut of the end times, the Omphalos Daemonium shrieked along the bloodtracks towards the horrified slaves.

Some tried to run: they were struck down. Some dropped dead with fright while others curled into foetal balls and soiled themselves like newborns.

Leonid dropped to his knees at the sight of the monstrous daemon engine. 'It is fitting that you give homage,' nodded Obax Zakayo.

Vast bone-pistons drove it forward, iron and steel flanks heaving with immaterial energies. Bloody steam leaked from every demented, skull-faced rivet as wheels of tortured souls ground the tracks beneath it to feast on the oozing blood of the dead earth.

Deep within its insane structure, it might have once resembled an ancient steam-driven locomotive, but unknown forces and warped energies had transformed it into something else entirely. The thunder of its arrival could be felt by senses beyond the pitiful five known to humankind, echoing through the planes of reality that existed and intersected within the Eye of Terror, where such things were the norm rather than the incredible.

Behind it came a tender of dark iron and a juddering procession of boxcars, their timbers stained with aeons of blood and ordure. Leonid knew somehow how that millions had been carried to their deaths in these hellish containers; carried to whatever loathsome destination this horrifying machine desired and then exterminated. The Omphalos Daemonium slowed, the sleepers driven beyond sound in their torment as the towering daemon engine halted at the edge of the platform.

Leonid wept tears of blood, his bladder and bowel voiding as the power and evil of the daemon engine swept through him. He thought he heard booming laughter and the grinding squeal of warped timber doors sliding open on runners rusted with blood.

He rolled onto his back, seeing gusts of blood-laced steam hiss from the armoured hide of the Omphalos Daemonium. Brazen laughter rippled through the tendrils of steam as they writhed on some evil business of their own. Each tendril thickened and became more solid as they wormed through the writhing forms of the slaves on the platform.

One lifted a sobbing man from the ground, wrapping itself around his body like a snake. Like quicksilver, the other tendrils whipped over, latching onto the body and attacking it like predators in a feeding frenzy until there was nothing left.

Leonid blinked, too numb with horror to react as he saw the tendrils of smoke vanish and eight figures appear standing in their place. They wore grey, featureless boiler-suits and knee-high boots with silver buckles along the shins. Each carried a fearsome array of knives, hooks and saws on their leather belts.

Their faces were human in proportion only, flensed of the disguise of skin and glistening with revealed musculature. Crude stitches crisscrossed their skulls and, as they turned their heads as though hunting by scent, Leonid saw they were utterly featureless save for distended and fanged mouths. They had no eyes, nose or ears, only discoloured, cancerous swellings that bulged and rippled beneath their fleshless skulls.

The daemons circulated through the slaves, selecting men at random and lifting them from the ground to snap their spines and fasten fanged jaws to the blackened and swollen melanoma on their necks. Leonid pressed his hands to his ears as the daemons suckled on the cancers that grew and multiplied within the bodies of the Jouran slaves.

One passed within a metre of Leonid and he felt a suffocating fear rise up in him, though he could barely believe that his terror could rise to greater heights.

He saw its patchwork face swing towards him the tumourous tissue in its neck bulging with a horrid appetite as its blackened fingers reached for him, gripping his tattered uniform and hauling him upright. Its touch felt like rotted meat, wriggling with the suggestion of maggots and freshly hatched larvae. Its dead skin mask was inches from his face, its breath like a furnace of cadavers. It moved its undulating face around his, as though tasting his scent.

'The Sarcomata favour you,' hissed Obax Zakayo. 'Corruption of the flesh given form and purpose, the malignancies devouring your body are the choicest sweetmeats to them.'

Leonid waited for death, but the Omphalos Daemonium had greater purpose for him than mere murder, roaring in impatience as the Sarcomata's mouth descended to the swellings on his neck. The daemon hissed in submission before tossing him through the doors of the boxcar directly behind the Omphalos Daemonium. He landed on a carpet of decomposing matter that stank of excrement and blood.

Their loathsome hunger sated for the moment, the Sarcomata herded the rest of the slaves into the boxcars, packing them in tightly before shutting them in the darkness with nothing but their terror for company.

'WHERE DO you think they're taking us?' said Ellard. 'I don't know, sergeant,' replied Leonid, 'but I heard that bastard Obax Zakayo mention a name. Honsou, I think.'

'Honsou?'

'Aye, that's what it sounded like.'

'I've heard that name before,' said Ellard.

'You have? Where?'

'On the prison hulks that brought us here. By the sound of it, I think he was their war leader on Hydra Cordatus.'

Leonid shivered, remembering the sight of the Iron Warriors' leader as he stood before the walls of the citadel. Captain Eshara had called him a Warsmith and Leonid remembered the blasted rune standard and the nauseous terror that settled in his belly at the sight of such an ancient and terrible warrior. If they were truly to be delivered into the hands of such a monstrous being, then perhaps death at the hands of the Sarcomata would have been preferable to this stinking hell. Nearly a hundred men were packed tightly into a boxcar made to carry half that number, and the stench was an assault on the senses. So crammed were they that each man was forced to stand upright, pressed tightly against his comrades, unable to make more than the smallest movement. Men wept and wailed, slatted shafts of bright light dopplering through the warped timbers of the boxcar as the daemon engine rattled and clattered its way up into the mountains.

Leonid could taste smoke in the air and an acrid tang of electrical build-up, like he'd felt deep in the Machine Temple of the citadel. He pressed his face to a blade of light, peering out into the bright day. Ash-stained rocks flashed past, green sparks flaring from the soul wheels as they carried the Omphalos Daemonium higher.

The dark layer of clouds drew nearer, parting every now and then to reveal a tantalising glimpse of a jagged spire, a bladed bastion or a gun-studded redoubt. As the daemon engine began turning in a long, lazy curve, Leonid saw that their route carried them across an impossible bridge of dizzying proportions. Thousands of girders and beams were laced together in a gravity defying structural lattice that spanned a gorge of gargantuan proportions. Its bottom was lost to sight, roiling mists and screeching beasts swooping through in its lightning-filled depths.

'We have to get out of here, sergeant.'

'I know. But how?'

'I don't know yet, but we're all dead men if we stay.'

'Most of the men I know who would have been handy in a fight died in the forge temple. We don't have much in the way of forces.'

'You think I don't know that, Ellard?' snapped Leonid. 'Even if we die trying it's got to be better than what we're being taken to. The forge of Obax Zakayo was bad enough. I don't want to find out what this Honsou's going to be like.'

Ellard nodded and rested his head wearily against the wall of the boxcar, staring out into the desolate landscape. Deep lines ringed his eyes and Leonid noticed for the first time how haggard his sergeant had become. Like most officers, Leonid had relied heavily on his sergeants to run his company, and none more so than Ellard. To see a man of such formidable physical presence reduced to such a wasted creature was dispiriting in the extreme. Leonid yawned, suddenly bone-deep tired and felt his eyelids drooping. Dimly he heard a series of dull cracks, like gunfire, but was too weary to react.

'Get down, sir!' called Ellard, leaping forward to drag Leonid to the floor of the boxcar. Tightly-packed bodies hampered his efforts, but the sergeant's strength, though diminished, was still prodigious, and he was able to bundle his commanding officer to the ground.

'What the hell are you doing?' asked Leonid.

'Stay down!'

Leonid rolled onto one elbow as the sides of the boxcar exploded inwards with fist-sized bullet impacts. Shafts of light speared in as the bullets stitched a path across the side of the boxcar, slashing bloody paths through the packed slaves. Blood and screams filled the air as men jerked like mad things under the fusillade. Gunsmoke drifted through the bedlam-filled car. Dead men slumped against one another, held upright by the press of bodies. Blood pooled on the floor, swilling out the doors as Leonid heard a thunderous impact on the roof of the boxcar.

'What the hell's going on?'

'I think we're under attack, sir. Or being rescued. I'm not sure which.'

A crackling trio of blades punched through the bronze roof of the boxcar and a massive fist tore the sheet metal back as though it was no more than paper.

Silhouetted against the dazzling whiteness of the sky was a huge figure in midnight black power armour. A Space Marine...

Sudden hope flared as the figure shouted, 'Slaves! Rise up and fight! Fight the Iron Warriors!'

Leonid clambered to his feet, fresh energy filling his limbs at this answer to his prayers. The Space Marine looked up along the length of the train and said, 'Hurry. The Sarcomata will gather soon.'

Laughing hysterically in relief and released fear, Leonid began climbing to freedom, the splintered holes in the side of the boxcar providing ample hand and foot holds. He pushed his head above the level of the roof, relishing the cleansing feeling of the wind whipping through his hair. He hauled himself through the hole the Space Marine had torn in the roof and pushed himself to

his knees, reaching down to help Ellard.

The sky blazed white above them, the black sun beating down with greasy dark tendrils to somewhere beyond yet another range of mountains. Leonid forced his gaze from the sight as the energy claws retreated into the Space Marine's gauntlet.

Looking closer, Leonid saw that the warrior's armour was a far cry from the gleaming brilliance of the Imperial Fists he had seen on Hydra Cordatus; ravaged with dents, scarred and patched in dozens of places with crude grafts and filler. Hot vapours vented at his shoulders from the nozzles of a massive jump pack, and a white symbol – a bird of prey of some kind – had been painted over with a jagged red cross. His helmet bore a similar symbol across his visor.

Looking along the length of the boxcars, Leonid saw yet more of the Space Marines. Clad in an eclectic mix of colours and styles of armour, almost all of them bore a different Chapter symbol

on their shoulder guards. They pulled slaves from captivity and herded them towards the rear of the daemon engine's boxcars and, glancing down into the filthy prison he had escaped from,

Leonid saw that he and Ellard were the only two to follow the Space Marine's order to climb out. Perhaps forty men remained, staring up with terrified eyes at the armoured warrior.

'Who are you?' shouted Leonid over the roar of the wind.

'I am Ardaric Vaanes of the Red Corsairs,' said the warrior, drawing a pistol. 'Get behind me.'

Leonid and Ellard scrambled across the roof, hugging its rough surface closely.

Leonid risked a glance over the edge of the roof and experienced a moment's sick vertigo as he stared down

into the abyss the daemon engine was crossing. He rolled onto his back in time to see Obax Zakayo clamber onto the roof, his lashing energy whip coiling above his helmeted head.

'Look out!' shouted Leonid as the whip cracked.

Vaanes brought up his arm to deflect the blow, the crackling lash ensnaring his limb and discharging a powerful corona of blue light. Ardaric Vaanes grunted in pain, his pistol clattering to the roof of the boxcar and skidding to the edge.

The Space Marine backed away from the giant Iron Warrior, risking a glance at Leonid and Ellard.

'Get to the front!' he shouted. 'You have to stop this daemon-thing before we reach the gatehouse. Go now!'

Obax Zakayo's whip lashed again, driving Vaanes to his knees as Leonid and Ellard scrambled along the roof to peer over the bladed front of the boxcar. The Iron Warrior took a ponderous step towards the convulsing Space Marine, his mechanised claw reaching out to snap his neck.

Vaanes roared and thrust with his lightning-sheathed blades. Obax Zakayo batted the blow aside with his axe as his mechanised claw clamped on Vaanes's gorget.

'You renegades dare try to steal the slaves of Warsmith Honsou?' snarled Obax Zakayo. 'For this you must die.'

The claw tightened on the Space Marine's neck, and Leonid heard the crack of ceramite over the rushing wind. White sunlight glinted off metal and he saw the Space Marine's pistol juddering at the edge of the boxcar's roof.

He reached over and dragged the heavy gun closer, amazed at its bulk and weight. Too heavy for him to fire onehanded, he rolled onto his back, cradling the gun to his chest and supporting its weight on his forearm.

He pulled the trigger, the recoil hurling the gun from his hands. He rolled and grabbed the pistol's oversized grip before the weapon could tumble into the abyss below.

But his shot was accurate, or at least accurate enough to matter. It struck the visor of Obax Zakayo's helmet and spun him around. The claw choking Ardaric Vaanes released its grip and the Space

Marine leapt to his feet to face the Iron Warrior.

'Go! Quickly!' he bellowed, pointing further along the bloodtracks. 'I told you to stop this thing before we reach the gatehouse!'

Leonid turned and gazed through the dark smog ahead, not truly believing the sight before his eyes.

Emerging from the darkness ahead was a fortification built into the mountain from dark madness, standing in defiance of all reason. Its steeped towers wounded the sky, its massive gateway a snarling void that swallowed the tracks the Omphalos Daemonium travelled upon. Its walls were darkened, bloodstained stone, veined with unnatural colours that should not exist and which burned themselves upon the retina. Lightning leapt between its towers and the clanking of great engines and machines echoed like thunder from beyond its walls. And this was but a gatehouse?

'Blood of the saints!' whispered Ellard.

'I couldn't agree more,' said Leonid.

The clash of weapons behind them and the sight of the monolithic fortress drove them on and the two Jourans slithered forwards on their bellies to the end of the boxcar. A miasma of evil and

uncounted aeons of torment pulsed from the howling daemon engine, and Leonid felt blood drip from his nose and ears the closer they crawled.

He pushed himself up, ready to make his way onto the daemon engine. A horrifying, bloodstained tender was coupled between it and the boxcars, filled with dismembered corpses. Red steam trailed from the thundering engine, spinning like bloody streamers as the Sarcomata feasted on the cadavers.

'We'll need to move quickly,' said Ellard.

Leonid nodded and swallowed his disgust, dropping into the oozing carpet of bodies. The tender lurched on the bloodtracks and he fell, throwing his arms out before him and sinking knee

deep in gore and severed limbs. Ellard dropped next to him and pulled him upright. Together they waded unsteadily through the bodies, corpse gases and semi-coagulated blood misting the air with every step. The tendrils of bloody steam slithered around them, more solid than smoke had any business being.

'Emperor forgive us,' said Ellard as a slack, dead face rolled over under his boot.

Leonid gratefully reached the end of the tender, keeping an eye on the circling smoke.

He hauled himself over the lip of the tender, turning back to help his sergeant.

A ghostly face swam out of the smoke, a fleshless patchwork of musculature with no features save a fang-filled mouth.

'Hurry!' shouted Leonid, dropping Ardaric Vaanes' pistol behind him and dragging Ellard forward. Wraith-like arms wrapped themselves around the sergeant's shoulders and began pulling. Only partly formed, the Sarcomata's strength was not the equal of the two Jourans, and Leonid hauled Ellard from the tender with one last desperate heave.

The two men collapsed on the iron deck at the back of the Omphalos Daemonium, a bronze doorway rattling in its frame behind them. Leonid could see no handle, tasting ashes and the scent of burning flesh gusting through an iron grille at its top. Solidifying smoke-trail bodies of the Sarcomata began climbing from the tender, hissing with hunger at these fresh morsels.

The two Jourans backed into the door, Leonid dropping to one knee to recover the fallen pistol.

One of the Sarcomata pounced towards him, clawed arms reaching for his neck.

The pistol boomed and ripped the top of the daemon's head off. Daemonic blood splashed the door, the metal undulating as the blood hissed and vanished like droplets on a hot skillet. The entire doorframe rippled and, as Leonid fell back against the door, it opened as though freshly unlocked.

He sprawled into a blisteringly hot engine room, Ellard wasting no time in following him inside and slamming the door shut behind him. The door buckled in its frame as the Sarcomata hurled themselves against it, desperate to feast on the cancers within them. Leonid could feel their hunger as a physical thing as he groggily pushed himself to his feet.

As he saw where their desperate flight had taken them, he wondered whether they might have been better off taking their chances with the Sarcomata. The interior of the daemon engine defied geometry, impossibly stretching beyond the limits of vision to either side, a sweltering, red-lit hell

cavern, larger than the forge temple of Obax Zakayo. A wide-doored firebox roared and seethed, tended by a giant in a clanking, mechanical suit of riveted power armour and thick, vulcanised rubber. Over its ancient iron armour, it wore a blood-stiffened apron, and a crown of metal horns sprouted from a conical helmet with a raised visor.

Muttered doggerel and guttural curses spat from beneath the helmet as the figure approached a long line of dangling chains and pulleys, each with a limbless human torso skewered on a rusted hook. The figure stabbed a long billhook into a headless torso and thrust it into the firebox. He stoked the daemon engine with flesh and blood, and belching stacks spewed ashen bodies into the air.

'There...' said the figure, its voice rasping and hoarse. 'What need I incantations or words? Word magic is poor man's sorcery; it is flesh magic that is strong. Flesh powers ye, blood sustains ye and I bind thee.'

'What the hell is this?' said Leonid, casting uneasy glances over his shoulder at the rattling door.

Though his words were spoken in a whisper, the armoured giant stiffened and turned quickly to face them, its butcher's blade held out before it.

'Well then, what's this? The Sarcomata come knocking at my door and flesh comes to throw itself in the fires? Good flesh, helpful flesh. Much better than the deadmorsels we get...'

Leonid raised the pistol and said, 'Who are you?'

'Me?' said the giant, swinging his blade from side to side. 'I's the Slaughterman. Iron Warrior true. Cut and slice, cut and slice. Flesh for the machine. Blood for the cogs and flesh for the fires.'

The firebox growled, clawed tongues of flame slashing in vain at the giant's turned back. He chuckled, the sound sending shivers up the Jourans' spines, and shouted over his shoulder.

'No, no, no, you won't be eating my skin and bones, daemon. Thrash and struggle all you want. Bloodmeat for me, deadflesh for you.'

'You feed this thing bodies?' said Ellard, his revulsion plain.

'Yes, deadflesh feed the daemon, two hooks ready for you two. Fresh meat for me. I will cut you up nicely, dress your flesh with reverence, and sup your blood as it spills onto me. Now come here like good flesh so I can chop you.'

The Slaughterman beckoned with an encrusted gauntlet.

Leonid raised Vaanes's pistol and said, 'I don't think so. Just stop this thing and I won't kill you.'

The Slaughterman laughed, and shook his head as he advanced towards Leonid. 'You kill me? No, you are meat, nothing more. We will talk no more and you will die.'

Leonid fired the pistol, the bolt striking the Slaughterman square in the chest. Sparks flew and a frothing gruel of fluid and matter dribbled down his filthy apron. The giant snarled, his blackened features twisted in rage.

'You shot me,' he said. 'I cut you to death slowly now. Cut your flesh screaming into morsels that I will feed you. I will feed you your feet, your legs and then your arms. And then I will give you to the Omphalos Daemonium and you will know true pain.'

Leonid fired again, but this time the bolt was smashed aside by the Slaughterman's billhook.

With a roar, the Slaughterman charged, his giant blade sweeping down to cleave Leonid in two. Leonid ducked and rolled aside, the billhook scraping a flaring gouge in the floor.

Ellard ran behind the Slaughterman, desperately searching for a weapon, as Leonid stood and fired again. The bullets went wide, smacking wetly into the hanging torsos and blowing them apart from the inside.

'No!' shouted the Slaughterman. 'Not the deadflesh. Bad flesh must stop. Needs to be chopped quick.'

The giant Iron Warrior turned as Leonid backed into the swaying cadavers, firing into the butcher's rack of meat, ripping them from their hooks in a hail of bullets.

The Slaughterman wailed and roared, his billhook slashing a path through the meat towards his prey. Leonid kept the trigger pulled until the hammer slammed down on an empty chamber. Bloody hooks swung and jangled before him, scraps of meat still sliding down the dark metal. One hook slid to the floor, a looping pile of chains rattling down from the winch above. As the Slaughterman pushed the last cadaver aside and stood face to face with Leonid, he saw Ellard standing beside the levers that controlled the chain pulley mechanism. The firebox seethed in hunger behind the Slaughterman.

Leonid reached down and grabbed the hook, holding it before him like a weapon.

'Bad flesh, you. No reverence for you now. Chop, chop, chop. Deadflesh.'

The Slaughterman leaned down, and Leonid could finally see his face beneath the conical, horned helmet. Vacant and puffy, his features were curiously childlike, with a rotten-toothed grin and rheumy eyes that spoke of an unthinking cruelty.

One meaty gauntlet reached down, scooping up Leonid before he could dodge aside and lifting him from the ground. He grunted in pain as the giant lifted him up.

'Bad flesh,' said the Slaughterman. 'Won't even wet my blade with you. Just bite you into pieces.'

The Slaughterman's jaws cracked as they opened, stretching and swelling as if to swallow him whole. Foetid breath, reeking of decomposing matter, wafted from the depths and Leonid gagged, kicking at the Slaughterman's gut in desperation

As the Slaughterman's jaws reached down towards him, Leonid swung the butcher's hook upwards in a vicious arc.

Bone splintered as the iron point punched through the giant's jawbone before exploding through his eye-socket.

Leonid fell to the floor as the Slaughterman howled in pain, the chain attached to the end of the hook pulling taut as Ellard frantically cranked the winch. The Slaughterman dropped his weapon and scabbled at the barb, black blood spraying from the wound as he sought to pull some slack in the chain.

But Ellard was having none of it, reeling the Slaughterman in, winching the chain screechingly along its rails and dragging the wounded giant towards the firebox. His howls were piteous, but Leonid had no sympathy for the monstrous cannibal.

Daemonic flames leapt from the firebox, blazing claws slashing at the Slaughterman's back. He screamed, fighting to get clear, but the tormented daemon had him and was not about to release its grip. Incandescent flames enveloped the Slaughterman and he was dragged into the inferno of the daemon's Firebox. Soon he was lost to sight and the heavy iron door slammed shut behind him as the maniacal daemon within wreaked its terrible vengeance on its captor.

No sooner had the firebox's door shut than the vast bone-pistons slowed and the hissing Machineries released scalding bursts of steam. The orange glow that pervaded the

engine room faded and the impossible geometries of the chamber began returning to those dimensions that did not baffle the senses.

Leonid dropped to his knees, exhausted beyond words as the horror of the past few days threatened to overwhelm him. Ellard stumbled over to him and offered him his hand.

'I can't believe it. We got him.'

'Yes, sergeant, we did. Well done.'

'Now what do we do? Is this thing stopping?'

'Certainly feels like it.'

Leonid glanced over at the bronze door they had come through. Strangely, the thudding booms of the Sarcomata had ceased. Was their very existence somehow linked to the daemon within the firebox or even the Slaughterman himself? Even as he formed the thought, the door exploded inwards and Ardaric Vaanes stood framed in the white light of the sky.

'You did it,' he said, sounding surprised.

'Yes, we did,' agreed Leonid. 'Did you kill Obax Zakayo?'

'No, but he's gone. Gone with the rest of the boxcars.'

'What are you talking about?' said Leonid, limping towards the door.

As he and Ellard left the Slaughterman's domain, they saw that the tender was all that was left attached to the Omphalos Daemonium. Battered-looking Space Marines filled it, but the boxcars were nowhere in sight.

'What the hell did you do?' screamed Leonid. 'I thought you came to rescue us?'

'No,' said Ardaric Vaanes. 'We were never here to save you. We came to stop the Iron Warriors getting more slaves for their weapon shops. Without slaves they cannot make weapons to fight us.'

'You killed them,' said Ellard, looking down the tracks for any sign of the boxcars.

'Trust me, if they truly understood what awaited them in Honsou's citadel, they would thank me or my mercy.' 'Mercy! You bastard, those were my men,' shouted Leonid. 'I fought shoulder to shoulder with them and you betrayed their courage.'

'They were not the men you fought beside any more. You know this. They were broken. But you have steel in you, I can see it plain as day. If you wish, you may come with us and strike back against the Iron Warriors. But decide now; we are through the gatehouse, and its guards will be upon us soon if we are not away.'

Vaanes climbed into the tender and held his hand above the coupling mechanism.

'Are you with us?' he asked.

'Go with you? We don't even know what you are,' said Leonid.

'We were once Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes and fought for the Emperor, but now our only allegiance is to each other,' said Vaanes. 'Our former battle-brothers would call us renegades,

but right now we are the nearest thing you have to friends.'

Leonid started to reply, but felt Ellard's hand on his shoulder.

'Sir, he may be right.'

'He killed our men, sergeant!'

'I know, and we will never forget that, but as Castellan Vauban used to say "the enemy of my enemy..."'

'...is my friend,' finished Leonid.