

THREE HANGED MEN

Before the arrival of the Salamanders, the war on Heletine had been long and brutal. Those first days would be regarded by its few survivors as the worst. Imperials died in their thousands, citizens and soldiers alike. Men and women. It made no difference. Once a proud monument to the creed of the Emperor, Heletine was transformed into a grotesque ruin, enslaved to dark creatures that lurked beyond the veil.

Such turpitude, violence, murder and corruption on an incomprehensible scale did not go unnoticed. As the conflict worsened, the veil thinned and while a daemonic breach was ultimately prevented, some small essence of the warp leaked through. It infested certain districts with its casual taint, subtly altering nature itself. And like the radiation scars that an atomic leaves behind in the bedrock, in the very bodies it corrupts, such a wound lingers long after it is thought healed.

One such place was Paeangi, though it was given a different name after the first week of the war.

More than twenty thousand souls were put to death there. They didn't die in battle, nothing so salubrious. Sacrificed. It became known as 'Crucius', Executioner's Gate.

- Uncredited Imperial scholar, Promethium War

Warriors are dying, Drek'or.

These were the last words of Brother-Sergeant Zantho before he took his company east. Drek'or had warned him of the risks, unique to an

armoured column of battle tanks – ones he already knew all too well. But it was the risks he didn't know, *couldn't* have known, that made those last words ring so poignantly, so tragically, in light of everything that followed.

It began at Crucius, at the Executioner's Gate.

Three corpses hung from a curving archway of fire-blackened stone. All male, and all from the citizen soldiery of Heletine. Each one was distinctively mutilated. The first had been hung by the neck, arms limp by his sides, bifurcated at the waist. A second, also hung by the neck, was blind, his eyes roughly gouged out. The third dangled by his ankle, for there was no neck around which to tie a noose, decapitation the obvious cause of death.

'Three hanged men.' Zai'ban stated the obvious, standing in front of the rumbling hull of his Predator and looking on at the grisly vista.

'At Executioner's Gate,' Xavan murmured, rubbing his stubbled chin and standing in advance of his own battle tank.

Both turned to their commander, who had thus far said nothing, preferring to wait silently between them.

'Theatrics,' Zantho told them in his deep, melodious voice. He turned, heading back to his vehicle where Drek'or and Skarr'kan were waiting.

'Brother-sergeant?' Zai'ban craved further explanation.

Zantho gave him none. He was already climbing the ladder to his Predator's open turret hatch when he replied.

'We've wasted enough time, minutes our brothers don't have. Get back to your vehicles.'

Both warriors obeyed with crisp salutes, unused to Zantho being so curt and obviously disquieted.

Nine battle tanks waited in column behind the commander's Annihilator-class Predator, engines idling. Three more Annihilators, three Destructors and three Vindicator siege tanks. The war machines were scarred and veiled in a thick patina of dust from having just driven through a large section of the city, demolishing it. East, Zantho had ordered. He hadn't mentioned roads; his intention was to plough through anything in their path.

And until the three hanged men they had done just that.

Once back inside, Zantho took position in the open hatch. He had drawn his gladius. 'Bring us in slow and tight, Skarr'kan,' he said to his driver. 'We'll cut these poor souls down before we roll on.'

Akadin Zantho had seen fetishism of this kind before. It was ritual, cultish and most certainly Chaotic. He knew enough of Heletine's occupation during the early part of the war to recognise the relics left behind by the servants of Ruin.

His face grim, Zantho cut the first man down.

Taking the veteran sergeant's lead, Zai'ban and Xavan released the others. Three hanged men were left to moulder in the armoured column's wake.

The Salamanders drove on.

'Is it deep?' Zantho asked, calling down to Drek'or from the Predator's hatch.

Drek'or crouched next to a rocky bank, peering into a trench of turbid water. A mouldering scum lapped at its edges. As a weak breeze disturbed the surface, it exuded a noisome stench thankfully filtered by the Salamander's armour.

'It's rank,' Drek'or replied, scowling in spite of the rebreather covering his nose and chin. His eyes flashed crimson across the gloomy city streets as he turned to his commander. 'But I think we can cross. There's a ford of some kind. Perhaps the natives made it. Either way, we can use it.'

Zantho nodded, and signalled for Drek'or to return to the vehicle.

The waiting was beginning to gnaw at his resolve and even-temper. Something about this place, this 'Crucius', was putting him on edge. The others felt it too. Zantho could see it in the way they were reluctant to leave their shell of vehicular armour and in how their weapons panned slowly across every shadow. The anticipation of an expected attack could be debilitating. Many soldiers crumbled under it, but the Adeptus Astartes were not merely soldiers.

In spite of his immunity to most human frailty, Zantho acknowledged the desperation he felt to reach their brothers. With every delay, dread blossomed like a cancer in his breast. 'Ill winds portend ill deeds', or so Zen'de was quoted as saying. Zantho believed in the dead warrior's philosophies. The stink on the breeze moving viperously through Canticus was foul indeed.

Doubly frustrating was the fact that the trench was the first impasse the tanks could not simply batter through.

Alone up in the turret hatch, Zantho eyed the still waters with suspicion.

It was quiet over Crucius. Beyond its borders, and the grisly totems that had been hanging at its gate, it seemed silent. A long concourse had led them to this point, a narrowing of the district's surrounding ruins that dipped into a shallow basin where some sewer or waste aqueduct had overflowed and filled the trench with stagnant foulness.

'Skarr'kan,' Zantho called down to his driver, eyes front and on the water. 'Take us over.'

After a second's delay the Predator's engines went from a low ululating growl to a loud snarl, as if the *Draken's* machine-spirit had been stirred from slumber.

'Keep it steady, brother,' said Zantho, as the tracks ground the urban debris beneath them.

Twenty metres across, almost a third of the way to the other side, Zantho called down to Drek'or. 'Signal all other engines to follow on, but maintain alert status.'

Drek'or replied in the affirmative.

'Slowly now,' uttered Zantho, directing his driver so the other vehicles in column could catch up.

Skarr'kan reduced them to a crawl as the front glacis scraped the rancid water. Effluence rode up the sides of the tracks, foul and cloying, as the *Draken* drove through it. They sank incrementally, but the ford held and supported the tank's armoured mass.

Tall structures loomed ahead, buildings with crooked backs and gaping holes in their walls like wounds from the cruel attentions of the war. Despite a sense of foreboding he couldn't shake, Zantho could detect no snipers or lurking ambush in the shadows before them.

As they passed these desolate ruins, the shattered templums and cored out municipal structures, Zantho noticed something that caused him to remark aloud.

'Are you seeing this?' he asked, reaching for the scopes he kept close to hand.

Marks in black daubed the walls on either side. The appointment of each one appeared as if at random but as they progressed along the trench, Zantho began to discern a crude pattern. It only became visible at a certain angle and height, as if the viewer needed to occupy a specific position to see it.

'Brother-sergeant.' Drek'or's echoing summons from below sounded urgent.

Zantho descended from the hatch.

Drek'or was waiting for him in the close confines of the hold. Grainy light washed the hull-encased chamber in viridian monochrome, serving only to deepen the hue of the Salamanders' armour.

Skarr'kan was up front, harnessed into the driver's position. Drek'or was behind him, acting as both gunner and comms-operator, and crouched aside to let Zantho in. He gestured to the right flank vision slit.

Stooping to avoid the hold's low ceiling, Zantho edged forward to peer through the slit.

It wasn't obvious at first. Whoever had built the ford had finished it with a thin layer of rocky scree, but as the *Draken* traversed the upper strata it began to fragment. Every slow rotation of tank tracks loosened and spread the scree layer, ultimately revealing what was trapped beneath.

'Blood of the primarch...' said Zantho, with slow and disgusted realisation.

Bodies. Hundreds of them lined the ford in a putrefying corpse road.

Whether it was coincidence or divine fate, Zantho looked up from the drowned dead just as the *Draken* reached the halfway point across the trench. Through the vision slit, the black marks on the walls conjoined for a few brief seconds, just long enough for Zantho to perceive their tidings.

It was a sigil of Ruin, a runic prescription that hurt the veteran sergeant's eyes to look upon.

'Make haste!' Zantho snapped to Skarr'kan, realising the folly of trying to cross the trench.

But it was already too late.

A submerged detonation from somewhere deep beneath them rocked the *Draken*, forcing it to stall.

'Damage?' Zantho demanded.

It took Skarr'kan a few seconds to check.

'A glancing hit,' he said. 'All systems functional.'

Zantho frowned.

'Something's not right...' he began.

Drek'or supplied the cruel sting that Zantho had expected when he had heard the explosion.

'The bodies...' He was staring through the other vision slit, eyes on the gruesome bridge beneath their tanks.

Now Zantho saw it too.

Like jaded lovers, the bloated corpses in the trench began to part, unravelling from communal embrace.

Zantho turned to his driver, a grim cast to his face. 'Skarr'kan, take us back. Now.'

The sudden lurch of slipping treads, churning impotently on decaying remains, rewarded Skarr'kan's swift response.

'No grip, sergeant.' Skarr'kan wrestled the controls. The engine howled as he increased pressure to the accelerator pedal. Wet, mired tracks continued to turn.

The *Draken* was sinking, the foul slurry rising around it.

The rest of the tanks in the column were similarly affected.

Zantho seized the vox. 'All engines to vacate the trench immediately.' He only hoped the cascade effect of the slowly parting bodies had yet to reach the others. He reached over to grip Skarr'kan's shoulder, impressing upon him the urgency of the next command.

'Advance, brother. Take us out of this fetid mire with all speed.'

Skarr'kan threw the drive lever forward. After a few seconds of stasis, the *Draken* overcame inertia and began to move.

The relief of the Predator's crew was short-lived. The tank lurched once and stopped.

'Are we snared on something?' asked Zantho, heading for the turret hatch for a better vantage.

Drek'or had remained at the vision slit and saw the danger well enough. 'The dead,' he breathed, revulsion warring with horror. 'They cling to us.' Zantho threw back the hatch, emerging from the turret to witness a dark miracle.

The limbs of the dead, those poor souls confined to drowned torment, had become ensnared on the *Draken's* tracks. It should not have impeded them, the Predator was more than powerful enough to crush a rancid pile of flesh and bone. And yet...

Zantho could not be certain but it appeared as if the pallid fingers in the water were grasping, actually grabbing at the tracks.

'Drek'or,' he murmured, scowling as bile rose in his gorge. 'To arms.'

Grabbing a pair of boltguns from the weapons rack, Drek'or followed Zantho as the tank commander climbed out of the hatch and took up position on the hull.

Looking out over the column, Zantho could see that Zai'ban and Xavan had done the same. Four of the tanks in the column had returned to the bank where they had started. Five others, including the *Draken*, were foundering midway across the trench.

'Brother-sergeant.'

Zantho took Drek'or's proffered bolter and went to the left flank of the Predator. Drek'or took the right.

'In Vulkan's name,' said Zantho.

The Salamanders mounting the hulls of their vehicles across the width of the trench began to fire.

Dead flesh burst apart in rancid plumes of gore and effluence. The mass-reactive shells of their bolters were overkill, shredding limbs and showering the trench with bloody matter, but leaving the tanks unscathed.

It was over in seconds, Zantho with his clenched fist aloft to signal a cessation to the shooting.

Bloated torsos and denatured body parts bobbed and floated in the sudden wake.

Eyes wide in disgust and disbelief, Drek'or pointed to the grisly flotsam.

'Brother-sergeant...'

The limbs, the fingers still attached to hands...

'They are drifting towards us!' Zantho could scarcely believe what he was saying, let alone seeing. He roared down through the hatch, seizing hold of a guide rail on the hull and silently bidding Drek'or to do the same.

'Skarr'kan, get us out of here. Go!'

Skarr'kan gunned the engines. The tracks slipped once, prompting a violent jerk that nearly threw Drek'or off the tank, but after a lurch the

Draken heaved forwards and quickly picked up momentum.

The tank powered over the other side, engines screaming, rear end slewing hard right before skidding to a frantic but effective halt.

Zantho looked back at once, letting go of the rail so he could stand atop the hull.

Xavan and Zai'ban were right behind them, their war engines scurrying as the *Draken* had. A fourth Predator came in too hard, too fast, and rammed the rear armour of Zai'ban's war machine. Smoke trails began to pour from the over-eager battle tank's glacis.

Zantho's gaze remained locked on the fifth.

Strength of Xavier.

Off to a slower start, having to wait for the others to clear the way, *Strength of Xavier* was in trouble. Its hull was sunk over halfway in the murky water, those pallid limbs rising around in a forbidding tide.

Zantho raced to the edge of the *Draken's* hull, a sick feeling already filling his gut with ice.

'Leave it, brothers!' he cried to the beleaguered *Strength of Xavier*.

Xavan, Zai'ban and the others who had mounted the roofs of their vehicles stopped as they too saw the danger.

Strength of Xavier had no tank commander, only a driver and a gunner. Zantho knew the names of every battle-brother in his charge. He had trained them all personally.

'Hesparo, Or'dak,' he called to the *Xavier's* crew. 'Get out of that tank now. That is an order!'

The water rose higher as the battle tank slipped deeper, corpses and parts of corpses appearing to converge and overlap.

As the *Xavier's* turret hatch was thrown open, Zantho leapt off the back of the *Draken* and raced to the bank as if proximity to his stricken brothers could increase their urgency.

An armoured gauntlet gripped the hatch's edge. By now, the *Xavier* was listing badly, the rear of the vehicle almost submerged, so climbing out was far from straight forward.

'That's it, Salamander!' willed Zantho, not knowing if he was urging Hesparo or Or'dak.

He would never find out.

Capriciously, almost sentiently, the water lapped up over the roof of the hull and fed down into the open hatch, taking with it rot and a tide of cadavers.

The last sight Zantho had of his brothers was a half-glimpsed faceplate trying to rise up as the water dragged it down and a host of cold, dead fingers smothered it.

Without sound, with barely a ripple, *Strength of Xavier* sank into the trench and disappeared.

Zai'ban was at the edge of the water, calling back to his crew for winch lines and about to wade in.

'Stop!'

Zantho's commanding voice halted him. The sergeant slowly shook his head to convey futility but also honour the tenacity of what Zai'ban had been about to do.

'They're gone, brother,' he said, knowing deep in his marrow that although the trench was too shallow to hide a tank, no amount of dredging or searching would ever uncover *Strength of Xavier* or those aboard.

All who had witnessed the tank's demise knew it; denial just took a little longer to wear off in the less experienced. No one mentioned what they had seen, or thought they had seen. They had all fought the servants of Ruin before and had witnessed the unnatural and the depraved. The trench appeared to be both. Lingered on such things, trying to analyse them... no good ever came of it.

Xavan took a more pragmatic approach. He was standing by his Predator, *Immortal Anvil*, and had just handed the vox back to one of his own crew.

'Sergeant Zantho,' he said, 'we are cut in half. There's no way the engines on the far side can reach us now. That's all the Vindicators.'

'And Axius's Predator,' said Zai'ban, retreating from the bank.

Zantho looked from Zai'ban to Xavan and nodded.

'Understood. They'll have to find a way around.' He faced east. Beyond the trench, Crucius opened out in a long, broad plaza. Smoke coiled into the sky from the distance, too thick to be from the countless diminishing fires they had seen thus far. Situated in a natural basin, with a steep rise leading to the edge of the drop, that area of the plaza and whatever was burning in it was obscured from immediate view.

Zantho's face hardened as he regarded the smoke, trying not to imagine what it might portend. The loss of *Strength of Xavier* was grievous but it would be nothing compared to the loss of Drakgaard and the army moving through Canticus.

'Back aboard your vehicles,' he said. 'We drive on.'

At the summit of the steep rise, Zantho halted the company again and looked down into a vast trough. After a long and shallow decline, the flat plaza reasserted itself. Cracked mosaic was visible, marred by the war and rendered with more black daubings.

'Another sigil,' he muttered, examining the mark through the scopes. At a distance, he couldn't feel its physical effects.

Further on, Zantho saw what was creating the smoke that now blighted the horizon.

Setting down the scopes, knowing the sigil would fragment and be lost as soon as they started to descend, he called down to Skarr'kan.

'Take us in.'

Rows upon rows of towering, smoke-exuding pyres lined the plaza like some grim processional. More corpses, ended with fire this time rather than water, burned on each and every smouldering stack.

'Should they still be burning like that?' remarked Drek'or, having not left his vigil at the vision slit since the trench.

'*Should they?*' Zantho replied. He rode in the cupola, one hand resting on the *Draken's* pintle-mounted stormbolter, but could hear Drek'or well enough. 'I am beginning to understand that nothing about this place *should* be. A trench *should* not swallow a battle tank, the dead *should* not reach for the living... Yet we saw both of these things.'

But Drek'or was right – the corpses *were* burning, but not down to ash and bone. They simply burned, filling the hot air with the reek of sizzling fat and scorched hair. Every face amongst the pyre burned in perpetuity, with no end to the fire or their torment.

These pyres, Zantho realised, were not intended for the disposal of the dead, but had been erected for a different purpose.

Zai'ban's voice crackled over the vox. '*Should we not douse them?*'

'With what, brother?' Zantho asked grimly. 'And they are in their hundreds. The pyres are monuments to torture and suffering, put here for the amusement of our enemies. They cannot *be* doused, not by any means we possess anyway.'

'*I can practically taste the taint of the warp,*' snarled Xavan, listening in on the column-wide communication and confirming what the others suspected.

Crucius was ripe with dark sorcery, some kind of malignant anima that had insidiously wormed into its rock and very foundation. It was said that death could cling to a place, lingering on in the form of a revenant spirit or presence. Here, over twenty thousand souls had howled in sacrificial torment – and they were still howling, only silently.

Stretched out as before, the tanks were travelling steadily in a line of four but close enough that if one got into trouble the others could provide swift reinforcement. Zantho led the line in the *Draken*, followed by Zai'ban in *Firemantle*, then Xavan riding aboard *Immortal Anvil*. The rear-guard and the back of the column were maintained by *Spear of Themis*.

'*They are screaming,*' Zai'ban hissed across the vox.

Zantho's face hardened. He kept his eyes front, hoping to see an end to the burning pyres, but they went on into the shadows.

'Do not look, brother,' he told Zai'ban, wondering privately if Hespero and Or'dak had glanced at the floating dead of the trench and been fatally

slowed by something they had seen in the fetid depths.

The tanks had driven far into the pyres now, a long funerary road swathed in curling flames and billowing, columnar smoke. Every face in those burning stacks was trapped beneath another or impaled on the vicious cruciform spikes that acted as frames for the dry tinder, wood and cloth. Though dead, they twisted as if still alive, their expressions contorted in silent agony. It was slow, almost perversely sensual, as if the pyre victims writhed in ambivalent pleasure-pain.

'I can see Hespero amongst the dead,' Drek'or uttered flatly.

Zantho did not respond. He had seen their fallen brother too. And Or'dak.

'Hold to your courage, brothers.'

Zantho's words were like steel, tempered on the anvil of his own self-belief and dauntless will. This was not a worthy war, though few were. Here, the strength of iron he possessed with the tanks of his company had been reduced to little more than an armoured conveyance. It was armour that provided scant protection at that moment. Crucius had unstitched it as keenly as any chainfist or melta beam.

How can we fight smoke and the spectres of our dead?

The answer was simple.

With their Emperor-given courage and indefatigable spirit. A shield was more than a piece of bonded metal or wood. It was will, and the strength to wield it with purpose. It was every intangible trait a true warrior possessed without ever having the need to brandish any weapon or don armour.

'Recognise yourselves,' Zantho said, opening up the vox to every Salamander in his command. 'Recognise your brothers. See yourselves in their eyes. Defiance is in your Nocturnean blood... *Our* blood! Remember who you are, and we shall deliver ourselves from this perfidy. We are fire-born!'

The cry that echoed Zantho was unanimous and heartfelt.

He leant down to address Skarr'kan, enough self-belief coursing through him in that moment to defeat to a greater daemon.

'Increase our speed. We linger here no longer, brother.'

When he looked up again the smoke had thickened, as if reacting to Zantho's impassioned rhetoric.

Miasmatic drifts of light-eating darkness plumed from the pyres. Their shape and direction defied the wind, defied all laws of physics. Smoking tendrils bled across the road, colliding like waves before collapsing in on one another. Their clawed extremities seemed to reach for Zantho but he resisted the urge to grasp or fight them.

'Be resolute, unyielding!' he roared, but the dark fog that had risen around them deadened his rallying words.

Skarr'kan ignited the lights with metallic *thunk* as he threw the lever,

and Zantho watched as the automated search lamp mounted on the hull tried to pierce the gloom. It was like a lance striking rock.

'Nothing breaches it,' announced Zantho, returning below before the choking black clouds could infiltrate the hull. He sealed the hatch above him, and instructed Drek'or to do the same with the vision slits.

Skarr'kan had to trust in the *Draken's* auspex now and the purity of its machine-spirit to overcome whatever plagued them and see through it.

Drek'or tightened his grip on the bolter he still held.

'That won't avail you here,' Zantho told him, darkly.

Drek'or eased back on the weapon, but shook his head wearily.

'How do we fight this, sergeant?'

'Trust in this.' Zantho tapped the flaming sigil on his chest.

'Barring the auspex, we are almost blind. It's as if our—'

'Eyes had been put out?' It wasn't a question, not one Zantho needed an answer to anyway. 'We were warned,' he said.

Drek'or looked nonplussed, whilst Skarr'kan was oblivious as he focussed on the contoured geometric display of the Predator's auspex.

'Warned?' asked Drek'or.

Zantho smiled ruefully.

'The three hanged men above the gate.'

Drek'or nodded slowly as he recalled the mutilated soldiers.

'The first was cut in half...'

'And so were we,' Zantho replied. 'The trench cleaved us as cleanly and surely as any executioner's blade.'

'And this,' added Drek'or. 'The smoke and fog?'

'Blinds us, like the poor soul with his eyes gouged out. Have we too not lost one of our keenest senses?'

Drek'or shook his head at the depravity of it all.

'But how?'

'I think we were goaded here. Crucius is the most expedient route through the city, but this game began long before we reached the district's borders.'

'At the Cairns,' Drek'or realised.

Zantho nodded. One of the fallen stone monoliths had forced them along this path, pushing them out wide until Zantho had needed to throw off caution and make haste to reach Captain Drakgaard.

'We cannot turn back, though,' said Drek'or.

'No, we are in this now. Our only hope is to push through it.'

'But all of this...?' Drek'or asked, confused, 'is to what end?'

'The last of the three hanged men was decapitated. Perhaps our tormentors wish for us to lose our heads.'

Drek'or responded firmly, 'Then they have underestimated us as prey.'

Zantho clapped him on the shoulder.

'Indeed they have, brother.' He turned to Skarr'kan. 'More speed.' As the engines rose to a bellowing clamour, Zantho opened up the vox. 'All Predators, track the *Draken's* signal-ident and follow.'

Two tanks replied with affirmatives.

Zantho frowned.

'*Firemantle*, respond with runic confirmation if your vox is down.'

Still nothing.

Zantho fought down the ill feeling growing in his gut as he tried again.

'Zai'ban, respond.'

Cold static echoed back across the feed.

Drek'or's voice was edged with foreboding. '*Firemantle* was right behind us.'

'Zai'ban...'

Still no response.

'Xavan, I have lost contact with the *Firemantle*. Do you have visual?'

After a few drawn out, anxious seconds, Xavan replied.

'*Negative, sergeant. Nothing on scanners and this filth is still too thick to penetrate.*'

Zantho clenched his fists. He wanted to hit something but mastered his fury. Calm humours were needed now, not rash ones. He smiled, but that did not mean he could not act on instinct.

'The pyres,' he said to Drek'or, holding on as the tremors resonated through the hull from the *Draken's* sudden shift in speed. 'What do you remember about them? Not the bodies, for I suspect the nature of them was for our benefit, but the *actual* pyres themselves.'

'Cruciform. Some of the bodies were impaled on spikes.'

'How many cruciforms?' Zantho asked.

Drek'or nodded, understanding. 'Two,' he said. 'Four points apiece.'

'Another sigil of Ruin, but not only that... They are also lodestones, psychic conduits not unlike ritual circles. I have seen Xarko create something similar prior to entering the fire tides.'

'We must break the link.'

Zantho was already on the vox.

'Brothers, go *through* the pyres. Scatter them.'

Skarr'kan had been listening to their conversation and threw the *Draken* into a pyre. The tank drove through it, smashing the cruciforms apart and crushing the corpses under tread and track.

The others in the column followed the *Draken's* example, breaking formation to destroy more pyres while maintaining forward momentum and with Zantho ever in the lead.

After the eighth pyre was sundered, the smoke began to lessen.

'Sergeant,' reported Skarr'kan, vengeful. 'There is light.'

'Our fire burns through it,' Zantho replied, turning to Drek'or. 'I was wrong, brother. We will need our guns after all.'

Zantho rode up in the cupola hatch and took a firm grip of the mounted stormbolter. Drek'or was below, but the heavy bolters in the Draken's side sponsons were grinding up into position.

'Slow us down enough for secondary weapons,' he shouted down to Skarr'kan. As soon as they had decreased to combat velocity he turned to Drek'or.

'Let them have it.'

Muzzle flare ripped apart the darkness and with every blow that the shells struck against a pyre, the fog thinned until it was nothing more than faint wisps of dying ash-grey.

As they rode from the plaza, Zantho turned in the cupola hatch hoping to see Zai'ban and the *Firemantle* but only he and two others remained. Blackened corpses were scattered across the road too, skeletal and almost rendered to ash, captured souls freed from their dark bondage.

It was small comfort as Zantho looked head, *Immortal Anvil* and *Spear of Themis* rolling in behind him and returning to column formation again.

A bridge extended across a narrow, dry gorge. Beyond it was the border of Crucius and the way out.

'Looks like a river once flowed through here,' said Xavan as they crossed the bridge's threshold, 'but like much of the city it has fallen to ruination.'

Zantho had slowed the company to a crawl. They had to cross but he would do so with caution. The meaning of the decapitated soldier still eluded him, though it was the last of the hanged men so it was likely they were approaching some kind of conclusion.

Presaged by static, the vox crackled in his ear and for a moment he hoped to hear Zai'ban's voice.

'Sergeant Zantho. Thank Vulkan you are still alive!'

'Brother Axius,' Zantho replied with the slightest edge of regret in his voice, answering the last of the Destructor-class and the only Predator at large with the Vindicators.

'I have been trying to establish vox contact but to no avail until this moment, sir.'

'We were lost for a time, brother,' was all Zantho could say. 'Give me your report. Have you successfully navigated Crucius?'

'Affirmative. We have an indent-loc on your position and are coming in from the west via a back road.'

'Any casualties?' Zantho asked, calling his immediate company to a halt.

'Mercifully none, but the detour has delayed us.'

'Consider yourselves fortunate.'

Axius was wise enough to know when not to press.

Zantho continued. 'Maintain heading. With Vulkan's providence and the Emperor's grace, we will meet you at the outskirts of Crucius.'

'In Vulkan's name, sir.'

'Aye, for the primarch. As always.' Zantho ended the feed, then opened up a channel to the others currently waiting on the bridge.

'I am the head,' he uttered simply. 'I am the last of the hanged men.'

His gaze tracked over the bridge, alighting briefly on the ruins of two monolithic statues that had once formed an immense arch across it. Although neither the size nor stature of the arches across Salvation Bridge, the statues that formed it must still have been impressive once. One elevated plinth remained, little more than a huge slab of elliptical stone. War and entropy had taken their toll. Only a pair of massive stone feet was left, sundered at the ankles.

Zantho had no doubt the rest of the statue would be somewhere down in the gorge, partly washed away when the banks of the river had broken, partly lodged in the silt and scum left behind.

When he began to climb from the cupola hatch and onto the hull, Drek'or was the first to raise objection.

'Brother-sergeant, you should remain with the *Draken*.'

'No, brother,' Zantho replied, stepping out onto the hull. 'I should not.'

Xavan spoke up. '*Zantho, return to your vehicle. If you are the head then—*'

'Our tormentor wishes to cut me down to size,' Zantho answered, scaling the hull ladder and leaping to the ground. 'Tell me something, Xavan – which way is west?'

Xavan, having emerged from the *Immortal Anvil's* turret hatch gestured numbly, knowing that Zantho knew the answer to his own question.

'Ah,' said Zantho, seeing the blasted plinth. 'At the foot of martyrs and saints.'

It seemed a fitting place to die.

'Akadin!' Xavan had begun climbing from the *Immortal Anvil's* turret hatch. 'I cannot allow this.'

Zantho faced him, but was resigned rather than belligerent at Xavan's insubordination.

'Allow it? I command this company, Xavan. You've trusted me all these years. Give me that trust one last time. Pull everyone back to the bridge's threshold.'

'Akadin, don't do this.'

'I have to, brother. I'm not dancing to this mad dirge any longer.'

Zantho headed for the plinth. He reckoned it was roughly four hundred metres distant. He also estimated that when he reached the far edge, he would no longer be visible to Xavan and the others.

On the plinth, he would stand alone.

By passing under the arch of the three hanged men, Zantho's company had inadvertently begun a cycle of violence and death that would end with their wholesale destruction.

Only now, when they were so perilously close to that fate, did Zantho see it for what it was.

'A trap,' he murmured to himself, seeing the charges buried in the broken slabs of the bridge. On foot, even in his power armour, his weight would not set them off. The four tanks left in the company combined...

'...would have brought this bridge down and into the final snare.'

To reach the plinth, Zantho had to scale the side of the bridge across broken stone balustrades. When he looked down, he saw the spikes of tank traps, broad and sharp enough to pierce the thickest armoured hull.

'You could have had your pick,' he said aloud to no one in particular, as he reached the base of the plinth and climbed.

At the summit, standing between two immense sculpted feet, Zantho beheld the face of his would-be slayer.

A warrior in tar-black Terminator armour regarded him with an amused expression.

'You saw through my game,' he said simply.

Cultured, handsome to the point of obscene beauty, Zantho knew a servant of Slaanesh when he faced one. This wretch wore the mark of the Warmaster and not that of the Emperor's Children. What price had he paid for such separation, Zantho wondered? Loyalty was a word and concept of convenience to these renegades.

'I am the head, am I not?'

The Terminator nodded. Only the length of the plinth separated them, and though the traitor appeared to be the epitome of geniality, Zantho could tell he was itching to finish him. For now, he slightly bowed his head.

'Socred,' he uttered, introducing himself, 'the Pulchritudinous.'

Zantho drew his gladius. 'As verbose as you are vain,' he said. 'I cannot say I'm surprised.'

Socred smiled but his eyes remained ice-cold. 'You're going to fight me with that thing?'

'No,' Zantho replied, as the two warriors started to advance on one another. 'I'm going to kill you with it.'

Socred's taunting laughter echoed across the bridge as he revved his chainblade and came at the Salamander.

Far from being daunted by the traitor's bulk, Zantho charged.

He barely parried the first blow. It was so hard, so fast, that it nearly put Zantho onto his knee. His only hope was speed. A second blow came in, faster than the first, grazing his side. Zantho made to counter with a jab but Socred backhanded him with an armoured fist and sent the Salamander sprawling.

Zantho almost fell off the edge of the plinth but threw out a hand and found a grip in the dirt and ruins. Hauling himself up, he saw Socred a few metres away. The traitor was beckoning him.

'Tenacity,' he said, goading, 'a trait I've *always* admired in you Salamanders.' He smirked. 'I never tire of killing warriors like you, ones who just don't know when they're beaten. Most other warriors would submit and bare their neck for the blade, but not—'

Zantho roared, and flew at the Terminator. His attack was so ferocious, it took Socred by surprise. There was a flash of metal, a stifled cry of pain and a thin arc of traitor's blood as the Salamander made his mark.

'Not so pretty now,' said Zantho, gesturing to the wound he'd just scored down the Terminator's cheek.

Socred dabbed at it with his fist. His armoured fingers came back bloody.

'That's going to scar,' he said, and rushed Zantho.

Before he could think, let alone mount a viable defence, Zantho was off his feet, his gladius sent skittering from his grasp. A burning sensation ripped across his shoulder where Socred's chainblade had gored him. He landed momentarily but was put onto his knees by a heavy punch to the abdomen.

Zantho felt bones breaking and knew his body had been badly damaged too – ruptured organs, internal bleeding. He tried to rise, but the strength in his legs gave out. He was losing blood. A lot of it. Larraman cells were rapidly clotting all his wounds but not quite quickly enough.

Socred loomed over him, standing at the apex of the plinth, chainblade purring in his armoured fist.

'I'll have your head now,' he said. 'Down in that gorge, your body broken amongst the rest of your men or up here alone and on your knees, it matters not.'

Zantho looked up. His hands were by his sides, but the fingers of his right gently brushed against the pommel of his fallen gladius.

He laughed, loudly and heartily, as he was often known to do.

Socred shook his head and smiled quizzically.

'Have I broken your mind as well as your spirit, Salamander?'

'Neither,' Zantho replied.

'Then what is so amusing? I would like to know before I kill you.'

'Look to the west, and you'll see.'

As Socred began to move, a flash of light impaled him, coring straight through the formidable aegis of his Terminator armour. He slumped, arms falling limp, his jaw slack as he looked down dumbly at the gaping crater in his chest. The lascannon beam was so hot, so ferocious, it had already cauterised his flesh. It had also liquefied most of his internal organs.

Now Zantho rose, finding new strength.

'I told you I would kill you with this,' he said, brandishing his gladius before ramming it deep through Socred's horror-stricken eye.

When it was over, Zantho hailed his brothers across the vox-feed.

First, he spoke to Axius.

'Brother-sergeant! You yet live.'

'I have your accuracy to thank for that, Axius.'

Zantho turned and waved towards the distant form of a Predator leading three Vindicators on a disused westward road. The plinth could be seen prominently from Axius's position. Zantho had gambled on the fact that the other tank commander would have been maintaining a watchful eye around the Crucius border for his comrades.

'What of the traitor? We saw you duelling him from a distance.'

Zantho briefly looked over his shoulder at Socred's corpse. He had aged dramatically, his beauty crumbling like a porcelain mask as the Dark Gods withdrew their boon.

'He took the bait and died for his arrogance,' Zantho replied. 'Rest assured, I'm safe. Make all haste for the border. We'll await you there.'

Cutting the link to Axius, Zantho relayed instructions to Xavan to lead the others across the bridge.

'One at a time, brother,' he warned, revealing what he had seen of the charges embedded in the slabbed road.

Skarr'kan would be along for him soon so he sat down upon a sculpted toe, using it as seat. To the east, Zantho saw smoke and flame rising, and a great pall of displaced dust.

'Hurry, brothers,' he said to himself. 'Our fight is not over.'