

The image is a book cover for 'Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine Conquests - The Devastation of Baal' by Guy Haley. It features a central illustration of a Space Marine in full red and gold armor, holding a power sword and a power fist. The background is a fiery, apocalyptic landscape. The text is arranged in a hierarchy from top to bottom: the 'WARHAMMER 40,000' logo, the series title 'SPACE MARINE CONQUESTS', the main title 'THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL', and the author's name 'GUY HALEY'.

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE
CONQUESTS

THE DEVASTATION
OF BAAL

GUY HALEY

The image is a book cover for 'Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine Conquests: The Devastation of Baal' by Guy Haley. It features a central illustration of a Space Marine in full red and gold armor, holding a power sword aloft in his left hand and a power fist in his right. The background is a dramatic, fiery landscape with a bright orange and yellow glow, suggesting a battlefield or a volcanic environment. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, white, sans-serif font. At the top, 'WARHAMMER 40,000' is written in a stylized, metallic font. Below that, 'SPACE MARINE CONQUESTS' is written in a smaller font with wings on either side. The main title, 'THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL', is the largest and most prominent text. At the bottom, the author's name, 'GUY HALEY', is written in a smaller font, flanked by horizontal lines.

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE
CONQUESTS

THE DEVASTATION
OF BAAL

GUY HALEY

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About the Author

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THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL

GUY HALEY



BLACK LIBRARY



WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

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



CHAPTER ONE

THE RED MIST

Already the morning gongs were ringing when Uigui the water seller roused himself for another day of thankless toil.

Uigui rose fully clothed, and went to empty his bladder into the home-made purification unit in the corner. Every drop of water was precious on Baal Secundus, whatever the source.

His single-roomed home held three cots, a table, the recyc unit and precious little else. Old transit pallets heaped with threadbare blankets against the cold of desert night were their beds. On the way to the recyc unit, Uigui passed his great burden, his idiot son. The boy had gone away to the Chapter trials full of hope, and come back minus his wits.

‘Get up! Up! Up, you little fool!’ Uigui kicked at his son’s booted feet. The boy thrashed awake and threw up his hands in alarm. A frightened face peeped out between filthy fingers.

‘Get up!’ growled Uigui. ‘Dawn’s coming – can’t you hear the Angel’s gongs?’ He looked out of a window of low-grade alabaster set into the wall of unpainted adobe. Daybreak should have shone pink through the stone. Instead a red darkness lingered outside.

Most mornings were cold but beautiful, the sky flawlessly smooth and tinted a deep rose by the light of the Red Scar. Sometimes, the colours were enough to stop Uigui and make him forget how much he hated his life. ‘Not that you can tell,’ grunted Uigui. ‘Red mist. A thick one too.’

‘D-d-d-d-do we-e-e have to, Da?’ said the boy.

Uigui looked at the boy with clear hatred as he urinated into the recyc funnel. ‘Y-y-yes!’ he spat back, mocking the boy’s stutter. ‘Now, up! I need help to fill the flasks, age be cursed, or I’d turn you over to the Emperor’s mercy and be rid of you!’

Uigui adjusted his filthy clothes and stamped, bow backed and swaying, to the door of gappy wood that separated the single room of his home from the goods yard outside. He clutched at his lower back as he reached for the door handle and rubbed fruitlessly at the pain in his bones, his mood souring further.

‘Be kinder to the boy. He is my daughter’s son,’ croaked the aged voice of the room’s final occupant. The coverings on the third bed shifted, the lump beneath them growing thin arms and knotted hands as a woman even more wasted and hunched than Uigui emerged. ‘You owe him some love for her memory, if

you can't summon some for the boy himself.'

The old woman coughed hard. Phlegm rattled around her throat. Uigui looked at her in disgust. Her face was as deeply lined as the pit of a fruit, as if time had rotted away the pleasant outer flesh, leaving the bitter, craggy interior of her soul exposed for all to see.

'Where's your daughter now, you old witch?' he said. 'Dead. Dead and gone, leaving me with a fool and a crone for company.'

'You are cruel,' said the old woman. Clustered carcinomas blighted her face. She had only a few more months of life in her, but her eyes were bright and shrewd. Uigui hated her eyes most of all. 'The Emperor will punish you.'

Uigui snarled. 'We'll all starve long before the Emperor notices if you and your precious grandson don't rouse yourselves. We must be at the gates before they open for the day.'

The woman shrank back into her blankets. 'The Red Mist is here. You will have no customers.'

Uigui rested his hand on the piece of scrap he had fashioned into the door handle. It was worn almost featureless. He had unearthed the metal in his youth from one of the moon's ruined cities. An unidentifiable artefact of the system's lost paradisaical past, it could once have been a piece of art, it could have been a component from a wondrous machine. It could have been anything. Now it was old, ugly and broken, suitable only for the coarsest work. Just like Uigui.

'Then we will starve. Get up. We go to work.' He flipped the door open, letting it bang into the wall to show his anger.

The Red Mist was the worst he'd ever seen: a choking, thick vapour laden with sand particles. Only on a low gravity lunar body like Baal Secundus was such a phenomenon possible, though Uigui didn't know that. His worldview was necessarily limited. What he saw was a day's business ruined. Red Mist was iron sharp in smell and texture, a soupy brume that lacerated the nostrils. He coughed and pulled up his scarf to cover his mouth and nose. He had no clip to hold it in place, so he pressed it to the contours of his face with his left hand.

Though his home was modest, his stockyard contained a fortune. Four huge terracotta urns, taller than men and too wide for the embrace of two people to meet around, lined the wall. With such wealth to protect, the courtyard was better built than the house. The walls were of stone, not mud brick, and high, the tops studded with rusty spikes and broken glass. The gate was deliberately small, triple-barred, plated in scavenged metal, upon whose pocked surfaces the marks of the ancients were still visible, when the light was right.

There was no sun. The early day was tainted a bloody murk. The urns were looming shapes, the wall invisible. The yard was little over twenty feet side to side, but the Red Mist was so dense that day Uigui could not see across.

He paused. At the very least the fog would be full of toxins given off by Baal Secundus' poisoned seas. If the sands in the mist had been picked up over one of the old cities, the rad levels would be high. Uigui supposed he should fetch his rad-ticker from inside. Frankly, he could not motivate himself to retrieve it. He was old. A dose of radiation from the badlands could not shorten his life by much, and if it did, what of it? He was tired of life. It was hard and unforgiving.

Sometimes he thought of ending it all, the misery, the graft, the wearing company of his son and mother-in-law. He had no illusions death would bring a happy afterlife in the Emperor's care; all he wanted was peace. He could not bring himself to do it. The mindless will of genes forced him to continue living, which he did begrudgingly.

Blinking gritty moisture from his eyes, he headed for the lean-to where he kept his cart. A pair of tall wheels bracketed two cargo beds, one above the other. Three dozen clay flasks were on each level. He

fetches the first and took it to the tap attached to the nearest urn. To fill it he had to let his scarf drop. The dust in the mist tickled his nose and he swore. Rusty water ran into the bottle, making him want to piss again. His bladder was another thing that was failing him.

‘Boy! Boy! Get out here and help me!’

The door creaked. Out came the old woman instead, her face veiled in the ridiculous manner of her desert tribe. Uigui should never have married out of town.

‘Where’s that damn boy?’ growled Uigui.

‘Let him breakfast, you old miser, he’ll be out in a moment.’

‘He’s a waste of food and water,’ said Uigui. He shut off the tap, pressed the cap closed on the bottle and fetched another flask.

‘It’s not his fault,’ said the old woman.

‘I think we all know that it’s the Angel’s fault,’ said Uigui quietly.

‘Hsst!’ she said. ‘That is heresy. Would you leave him without a father as well as his mind?’

‘He went to their trials a strong youth, and was returned to me a fool. Who else should I blame?’

‘Fate,’ she said. ‘He was not meant to join them, and he is getting better.’

‘He is not,’ said Uigui sourly. He set the full flask into his cart, and fetched a third.

The crone shuffled across the courtyard to the cart, her long skirts disturbing the moist sand of the ground. There she stopped, but she did not help, only watched him, a judgemental phantom in the fog. Uigui gave her a filthy look.

In her gnarled hands a small auto-tarot deck made its tooth-grinding clicks. She pushed the button at the side. The tiles behind its scratched viewing pane clattered into place. She studied the little pictures on them a moment, then pressed the button again. Then again. Uigui fought the urge to strike her, to knock the tarot from her hand and cast her out. The tarot was the instrument of the Emperor. Even he balked at such blasphemy.

‘Help me, then,’ he said. He squinted at the sky. ‘The sun is rising.’ The fog remained as thick as ever, but the light behind it was getting stronger. ‘We are late.’

The old woman hooked her tarot deck to her rope belt, took a flask up and went to the second urn.

‘Today is a day of great portents,’ she said.

‘You say that every day,’ said Uigui.

The woman shrugged. ‘Today it is true.’

‘Nonsense,’ he said, but he was wary of what she said. She had a knack for reading the tarot. He half believed she was a witch. In truth, he was frightened of her. He slammed the latest filled flask into the cart hard, making the others rattle. ‘Where is that boy?’

The boy pushed the cart. At least he was good for that. Uigui and the old woman walked behind. The flasks knocked and clinked in their trays, warning others they were coming. It was a good advertisement, but under the cover of the fog the noise made Uigui nervous. For all that Angel’s Fall was under the direct administration of the Blood Angels, there was always the possibility of robbery on a day of mist.

They met no misfortune as they walked the street from Waterer’s Row towards the Sanguinian Way, the small city’s main street. There were precious few people about. Those figures that appeared suddenly out of the murk were swaddled head to foot, and just as quickly disappeared.

‘Quicker, boy,’ grumbled Uigui. ‘We want a good spot. I want to get there before they are all gone.’

They turned onto the Sanguinian Way. At its far end was the Place of Choosing, where the giant statue of the Great Angel spread his arms and wings to face the eastern sky. Immense though Sanguinius’ effigy was, the fog obscured it totally. With the majestic statue hidden, the cramped, low buildings that made up

Angel's Fall seemed ruder than ever. It did not look like a holy city. The fog forced attention onto its inadequacies. Even the Sanguinian Way was meanly proportioned, and crooked. Without Sanguinius, Angel's Fall could have been any town on any backward, arid world in the galaxy.

Gongs boomed from unseen towers, signifying the start of the Peaceday markets. Only a handful of stalls had been set up at the roadside, and foot traffic on the way was low. Uigui reckoned visitors to Angel's Fall would be fewer than usual, though there were always some. The Red Mist discouraged travel. Not only was it toxic, but Baal's violent wildlife hunted under its cover. He cursed his luck. Water was expensive to both the buyer and the seller. The price he'd get for his stock barely covered the cost, and he owed a lot of money to Anton the reguliser. Anton took prompt payment of debts very seriously. Uigui rubbed at the stump of his left little finger, a reminder of the last time he'd been late with a payment. Anton had been nothing but apologetic; he had said he had no choice.

Uigui thought they would have to stay out late, selling to people exiting the city to travel in the cool of the night. *Assuming the mist lifts today at all*, he fretted. Such a fog was rare. Baal Secundus' principal weathers were wind and dust storms, but there was not a breath of a breeze today.

'This weather is unnatural,' he said.

'A day of portents,' said his mother-in-law in satisfaction.

'Shut up,' he said. 'It's just a day. Boy. Here.' Uigui pointed out a patch of ground in the lee of the Temple of the Emperor. The temple occupied a whole block by itself, and another of Angel's Fall's major streets intersected the Sanguinian Way there.

'This will do.' The gongs continued to ring. 'Why all this racket?' Uigui said.

'Happenings. Baalfora has much in store for us today,' said the old woman, using the local name for Baal Secundus. She settled herself down. Her joints grumbled, and she grumbled back at them, forcing her old legs to cross. Upon skirts held taut between her knees she set her tarot deck and began repetitively clicking at the workings. Uigui bared his teeth at her. He took out his irritation on the boy.

'Come on, boy, set out the table! Where are the cups? By the Emperor, we'd all die if you were in charge here!'

'S-s-s-orry, father,' said the boy.

'Don't call me that,' he said. 'My son is dead. Stolen by angels. There is no one to inherit my business once I am gone. Do not presume your place.'

The boy bowed his head to hide his tears, showing the ugly scar running across the top of his head. Uigui hated the sight of that most of all. He was sure had his boy not fallen he would be up there on Baal as a warrior of the Emperor. He stared at it as the boy set up the little table that folded out from the side of the cart and put out a set of small bronze cups. Something like grief hurt him. He responded with anger.

'Quicker!' he snapped.

The gongs were still booming long after they should have stopped. He squinted into the dim morning. There was another sound, a distant rumbling, under the clamour of the gongs.

'What is that?' he whispered.

'V-v-void ships?' ventured the boy.

'Silence!' snapped Uigui. But even as his anger flew out of his mouth, he thought the boy might be right. Angel's Fall was no stranger to the ships of the Angels. There were offworlders too, who came to pay their respects to the place where Sanguinius, purest of the Emperor's progeny, was discovered. But rarely did they arrive in such numbers that the sound of their descent was so constant.

Uigui heard the crunch of heavy feet on sand coming down the way. He swore at himself. Angels. They would have no use for his water.

'Bow! Bow!' he hissed. He dropped his head, and forced his idiot son to kneel.

A huge armoured figure emerged from the murk. Armour black, his helm cast in the shape of a skull. A Space Marine priest, death incarnate. Uigui trembled. He dropped to his knees in fright, waiting for the figure to pass by.

He did not. The footsteps stopped by the little cart. Uigui felt the Angel's regard upon him. His bladder twinged yet again.

'Be at peace, blessed son of Baal Secundus,' said the warrior. His voice was inhumanly deep and thickly accented.

Uigui looked up. The grimacing skull glared down at him. Breathing hoses were clamped between its stylised teeth, and eye-lenses of glowing green set below the angry brow. The armour hissed and whined in response to microshifts in the Space Marine's posture, making Uigui more afraid.

The warrior looked down both streets of the crossroads.

'The great square. Where is it?'

Though made hollow and booming by its projection machinery, the warrior's voice was kindly. Still Uigui could not see past the terrible visage glowering at him. He stared dumbly back.

'Waterseller, I mean you no harm,' said the Angel. 'I come to pay my respects to my lord. Where is his statue?'

Uigui trembled and flung up his arm. He intended to say 'That way, my lord!' A strangled mewl came out of his mouth instead.

'My thanks, and my blessings,' said the Chaplain. 'The Emperor keep you.'

He glanced up at the great temple, then strode away.

'W-w-why does he not know?' said the boy stupidly.

'I do not know,' said Uigui. Still upon his knees he gazed fearfully at the departing giant.

'M-m-m-more!' said the boy, and shrank back behind the cart.

Uigui followed his son's wavering finger. More Space Marines, dozens of them. Uigui had never seen so many at one time and his body shook in terror. They walked past, armour dull in the foggy daylight. Uigui could see clearly enough to know they were not Blood Angels. Their armour was adorned in a similar manner to that of the masters of Baal. The heavy plates were beautifully formed, covered in scrollwork and delicate embellishments, and decked with bloodstone drips cased in gold, but the red of their armour was an unfamiliar hue, their helms and trim were white, and their markings were strange.

Uigui watched, amazed, as the column of warriors moved by in solemn silence, voiceless but for the growls and hum of their armour. It was not unusual to see other angels claiming descent from the Great Angel in Angel's Fall, but only in ones or twos. When a second group in yet different colours marched by, these armoured half in black and half in bloody red, Uigui's mouth fell open. The gongs boomed. Outside the wall, the roaring of braking jets grew louder.

'Th-th-there's hundreds of them!' stuttered the boy.

For a moment, Uigui forgot his anger, and put his arm around his broken son.

'W-w-w-why so many?' the boy said.

'They come to pay respect to their father. They come to pray,' said Uigui. 'It is a marvel.'

The old woman chuckled, a low growling sound like a felid about to bite. The tarot tiles rattled.

'What is it?' Uigui said.

The old woman's smile was evident in her voice. 'The burning tower, the bloody angel, the falling star, the foundered void ship – these are fell signs.'

Uigui looked sharply back at her. 'What do you mean?'

The old woman regarded him through the cloth of her veil. 'They are not coming here to worship, you foolish man,' she said. 'They have come here to die.'



CHAPTER TWO

THE COMING SHADOW

Across the central deeps of the Ultima Segmentum the Red Scar spread its sanguine pall. A stellar desert tinted bloody, hard and inimical to man. The suns imprisoned within its bounds were all red in colour, whether senescent supergiants or early sequence infants. Deadly radiation bathed this benighted subsector, rendering its worlds uninhabitable by any sane measure.

The Imperium had long passed the point of sanity.

Perhaps because of their situation, the planets of the Scar were rich in exotic resources, and so generations of humanity had lived out brief lives under baleful stars, toiling at the will of the High Lords of Terra. Sustained by elixirs manufactured on Satys, the inhabitants of the Cryptus, Vitria and other systems afflicted by the Scar's poison lived a life, of sorts, in service of the species.

Against all the odds, by human ingenuity and for human greed, there had been billions of humans in the Red Scar region. So it might have been for generations more, but nothing is permanent and mankind no longer held sway.

The tyrannids had come to the Scar, scouring every world they encountered down to the bedrock to feed an ancient and powerful hunger, extirpating humanity in the process.

The invader was Hive Fleet Leviathan, by Imperial designation, though the governing intelligence of the hive mind made no such distinctions between the component parts of its body. To its incomprehensibly vast intellect, Leviathan was a limb, a foot or an arm. If the hive mind regarded Leviathan as distinct from the other fleets devouring the galaxy in some way, it was by categories too alien for men to understand.

From across the cold gulfs of intergalactic space the hive fleets had come, moving from one feeding ground to the next. The hive mind did not know and did not care what its food called itself, but noted, in its alien way, the strangeness of this prey-cluster; an environment where the realities of the mind and form were intermingled. There was risk there, but good hunting in the dangerous shoals. The galaxy teemed with life, and the hive mind glutted itself on a staggering array of biological abundance.

From the human point of view, the tyrannic wars had raged for close to a half millennium. In that time, hundreds of Imperial worlds had been devoured. Several minor races had been consumed. Thousands of unknown planets outside the Imperium's notice had been turned from living orbs to rocky spheres that

would never bear life again. Had the High Lords of Terra known how devastating the tyranids truly were, they may have acted sooner.

Like the mythical plagues of locusts of Old Earth, the tyranids stripped everything they came across bare. With each feast the hive mind became stronger, absorbing the genetic profiles of everything it devoured and adding their strengths to its own. With every new creature eaten, its repertoire of genetic tricks grew. When it encountered a threat, it adapted. Its methods became more efficient, its fleets more numerous. Its creatures proliferated and multiplied, the essences of the galaxy's worlds converted into yet more elements of the never-ending swarms. So overwhelming was the threat it posed, the race had been declared *Periculo Summa Magna*, and was deemed by many departments within the Imperium's higher echelons as the most serious challenge to mankind's continued existence.

They were wrong about that, but only by a little. These were dangerous years, well blessed with horrors. Nevertheless, the hive mind did not advance unopposed. There were brave men and women, heroes all, who stood against it no matter that the odds were impossible, and death was their only reward.

Imperial losses were many. Victory was rare. At many junctures the Blood Angels Space Marines had defied Hive Fleet Leviathan, stealing away its food, and in some cases destroying its splinter fleets in their entirety. The hive mind responded to them as it did to other threats in the prey-cluster, creating new beasts to beat the defences of its prey, improving those it already possessed, and devising new strategies. All to no avail. Though pushed back, the red prey warriors fought on. At Cryptus the Blood Angels performed one last supreme effort, destroying a tendril of the greater whole, in truth a trivial victory at the cost of a rich system.

Nothing could halt Leviathan's encroachment on the Red Scar. After Cryptus there was Baal, home world of the Blood Angels, lying directly in the swarm's path.

This was not accidental.

The sages of the Imperium thought the hive mind a non-sentient intelligence. They believed the actions of the myriad creatures in its swarms were performed instinctively, and that the sheer numbers of interactions between them gave rise to complex behaviour. At the very highest level these behaviours were remarkable, but only had the semblance of thought. Ultimately instinct drove the hive fleets, they said, not free will. Similar false intelligences had been witnessed so very many times in social animals across space, after all, from the ants of ancient Earth to the thought-trees of Demarea. The hive mind's actions could be ascribed to sentient consideration, but the sages insisted they were nothing of the sort.

The biologists held the hive mind to be only a complicated animal, a supreme predator driven by a devastatingly powerful reactive mind, nevertheless devoid of soul. It was an automaton, they said. Unfeeling. It was as unaware of what it did as the wind is unaware of the cliff whose face it scours away, grain by grain. The hive mind was biological mechanics writ large. Mind from mindlessness.

The Imperial scholars were wrong. The hive mind knew. The hive mind thought, it felt, it hated and it desired. Its emotions were unutterably alien, cocktails of feeling not even the subtle aeldari might decipher. Its emotions were oceans to the puddles of a man's feelings. They were inconceivable to humanity, for they were too big to perceive.

The hive mind looked out of its innumerable eyes towards the dull red star of Baal. It apprehended that this was the hive of the warriors that had hurt it so grievously, who had burned its feeding grounds and scattered its fleets. It hated the red prey, and it coveted them. Tasting their exotic genomes it had seen potential for new and terrible war beasts.

And so it drew its plans, and it set in motion its trillion trillion bodies towards the consumption of the creatures in red metal, so that their secrets might be plundered, and reemployed in the sating of the hive mind's endless hunger. This was deliberate, considered, and done in malice.

The hive mind was aware, and it desired vengeance.

Commander Dante walked the Arx Murus, the great encircling wall of the Arx Angelicum, as the Blood Angels fortress monastery was known. The Dome of Angels was closed against the coming war. Its huge armourglass blister rose gently behind him – several square miles of triangular panes sparkling in Baal's midday sun capped the Arx Angelicum's ancient caldera in impenetrable diamond.

The Arx was a double spike of dark rock that stood alone in the sands of the Endless Desert. Of the primal form of the volcano it had been, little remained, for it had been carved into something more fitting for the dwelling of Angels long ago. The fires in its heart were extinguished. Where lava once flowed Space Marines held court. A trained geologist would have guessed at its natural shape. But though both peaks had been thoroughly remade by the hands of man, a hint of their origins remained; for all their adornment their base form was that of twin cones, one smaller than the other, their throats open to the sky.

In every other way, the Arx Angelicum was the work of mankind. The caldera rim had been remade into the high walls of the Arx Murus, the broad and mighty wall-walk broken by the many towers of the Blood Angels' sub-orders. The murus plunged forty sheer yards to the uppermost of a series of tiered firing galleries that, reinforced by towering redoubts, marched belligerently down to the sand. From towers shaped as gaping angels' faces or screaming eagles the muzzles of defence lasers and macrocannons aimed at the ever-present threat of the void.

Other, smaller outcrops around the Arx had been refashioned into towers and squat forts bearing guns big enough to down a void ship. The fury of the world's heart that had boiled within the volcanoes might have gone, but a different rage had taken its place.

To Dante's right the Heavenward Redoubt, the fortress monastery's keep, swelled out of the inner wall, the skull-faced Citadel Reclusiam atop it squatting athwart the wall-walk, beyond which the cursed Tower of Amareo speared the sky. The uppermost towers of the librarius fringed the walls on the far side of the Dome of Angels, while the Sanguis Corpusculum, the bulwark domain of Corbulo and his Sanguinary priests, thrust up from the lesser peak, its flat head joined to the main wall by a broad, armoured bridge.

The interior of the volcano was as heavily transformed. The throat had been widened to the same diameter as the giant lava chamber beneath it, so that the floor of the Arx was many storeys beneath the level of the desert. The inner walls had been smoothed and carved. Buttresses fashioned as giant angels ringed the interior, and the walls between were pierced with thousands of gleaming windows. All was done with exquisite care, and gloriously embellished with stone and metal. When the star Balor shone directly overhead, the throats of the Arx blazed with a rubicund refulgence, dazzling those lucky enough to witness it.

The Arx Angelicum was truly among the most beautiful fortresses in all the galaxy.

Towards the bottom of the shaft the tiered steps of the fortress exterior were repeated, but these sprouted with greenery, not guns – the Verdis Elysia, the marvellous farmlands where the Blood Angels grew their food, and parklands that preserved the fragmentary remains of Baal Primus' and Baal Secundus' once vibrant ecosystems.

Baal had forever been a desert planet, but not its moons. Their toxic wastes were of man's doing.

Baal's cloudless sky was busy with the crossed contrails of landing craft. Shoals of blunt-nosed Space Marine attack craft crowded the planet's anchorages. Dozens of battle-barges formed the nexus of fleets arrayed in cramped formation. The largest of the vessels were miles long, and clearly visible at the height of day as pale, dream-like shapes. Their attendant escorts were albedo phantoms, and the smallest were bright stars moving rapidly in dense clusters. Baal Secundus was rising in the west, Baal Primus setting in

the east – the two rarely shared the same sky. For shame, local legend had it.

Baal's moons were close to their mother planet, and large. The arcs of their spheres framed the activity in orbit, but like a picture overfull with detail, the gathered fleets of the Blood Angels successor Chapters spilled out from the gap between the moons and Baal's horizon, and the blocky shapes of their ships swarmed over the moons' surfaces also. Giant, man-made objects sailed over the mottled patchwork of desert and toxic seas of Baal Secundus, while the ugly scarring of Baalind's Necklace on Baal Primus caught flights of support craft in the rings of its craters.

Activity in the void was mirrored on the ground. Machinery rumbled all around the extinct volcano. The peace of Baal had fled into the deeper deserts. Dunes that had lapped at the feet of the Arx Angelicum were being bulldozed away, uncovering structures abandoned after the sundering of the Chapter in the mythical past. Once, the fortress monastery had been even more expansive.

It surprised Dante to see how much had been left to the sands by his forebears. Throughout his thousand-year reign as Chapter Master, relics of ancient eras had occasionally been uncovered by powerful storms, offering glimpses into the past. Despite his deep knowledge of the Chapter records, the outer fortress was largely unknown. To see uncovered landing fields thronged with warriors and machines was as if the days of the Great Crusade lived again.

Dante had led his warriors longer than any other man in the Imperium. Indeed, there were very few humans older than he. Among all mankind's trillions, had every person approaching Dante's age gathered together, they would hardly fill a strike cruiser.

He had known that Leviathan was coming for some time. His efforts at Cryptus were his last chance to delay. Only at Baal, only here, could the vast tendril that had ravaged the Red Scar perhaps be destroyed, and only by titanic effort. Dante had called upon all the Chapters of the Blood, all those Space Marines that shared Sanguinius' heritage, and their warriors had come by the thousand.

As soon as he sent out his plea for aid to the successor Chapters of the Blood Angels, Dante ordered a grand scheme of works begun, setting the Chapter's blood thralls and its cohorts of servitors the task of preparing for the gathering host. For miles around the Arx Angelicum they had dug into the ground, pushing back the desert, in some places excavating far down to where the sand had begun its slow transformation into stone. In the process the forgotten structures had been uncovered. Bunkers, towers, and a circling wall marked on none of the ancient maps were unearthed. Most of the structures outside the Arx Angelicum were useless ruins, foundations filled with rubble and rough lumps of metal melted in forgotten battles. But the rediscovered wall itself was viable, an unexpected bulwark against the coming threat.

Dante was too wise a man to see the wall as a sign. It was coincidence, and the extra protection gave him little cheer.

Teams of mortals rebuilt the wall as he watched. Within its circuit sheltered the arriving host. Aged rockcrete landing fields freed from the sand were once again in use. Hundreds of craft lay in neat ranks radiating out from newly erected command centres, their formations on the ground making interlocking circles of red, black, white and gold. There were thousands upon thousands of Space Marines on Baal. To accommodate them the deepest halls of the Arx Angelicum had been thrown open. Built for a Legion, the fortress monastery could have housed twenty Chapters, and now it was called upon to do so again. Even so, there was not enough space for all the newcomers, and barrack houses interspersed the command centres dotting the fields.

The number of brother Chapters was impressive, a portent of victory, the rash said. The assembling battle-brothers drew strength from the presence of so many others like themselves. Among the warriors present were thousands who had never been to sacred Baal, whose only contact with the father Chapter

were infrequent and resented visits from the Blood Angels High Chaplains. Their ways were strange to those of the Blood Angels, and many were markedly different in appearance and behaviour. Although none but the Blood Angels could lay claim to birth on the triple worlds of Sanguinius' finding, and were thus not of the sacred Tribes of the Blood, ultimately their gene-seed derived from Sanguinius'. All were of his lineage, and bonds more terrible and deeper than those between any other Chapters existed. Brotherhood spread its web across Baal more tightly than at any time since the Emperor walked among men.

Yet this did not bring Dante joy, either.

A long line of transports flew down from the fleets, stacked up so far that the hindmost were motile glints. Gunships and lifters, lighters and bulk landers, conveyed an endless line of materiel to the spiritual home of Sanguinius' sons. A score of Chapters emptied their ships' holds of weapons, tanks, ammunition, and more. The supplies were welcome. A third wall was being erected out beyond the unearthed second. This last was of the low, prefabricated segments all Space Marine Chapters were equipped with. More were being made as Dante watched. Auto-castelators scooped up huge buckets of sand and dumped them into hopper-moulds on their trailers. With great heat and pressure the sand was crushed into shape. Fresh, steaming segments of defence line were dropped onto the desert to be dragged into place by waiting haulers.

Formations of vehicles in varied shades of red were parked around the monastery. Down aisles formed of slab-armoured tanks, hundreds of Techmarines from across the galaxy walked, sharing their ideas and experience with eager listeners.

Dante kept his progress slow around the Arx, so that he might better see the host of Angels. Balor, Baal's large, ruby sun, made his golden armour red. Airborne sand whispered against the ceramite of his shell. The Arx Angelicum was so tall that the noise of the army marshalling in the desert and all the sounds of work as Baal fortified itself were reduced to faint suggestions of themselves. Engines were puttering disturbances. Myriad conversations were reduced to infrequent, thin shouts. The rumble of jets was as quiet as the hiss of sand on sand. Though his hearing was as sharp as any Space Marine's, this was all Dante heard. He left his vox-beads off, and his auto-senses dormant. Having spent sleepless weeks welcoming the stream of arrivals and formulating his strategies, he sought peace on the wall, seizing it where it did not come to him voluntarily. The host gathered at his feet in rich, desert quiet.

Every half mile a pair of winged Sanguinary Guard stood in vigil. They saluted their master as he passed. The warriors wore gear nearly identical to Dante's, but the masks of the Sanguinary Guard showed the features of their wearer. Of all men, only Dante wore Sanguinius' face. Only he had that burden.

Baal Secundus moved up the sky, obscuring the edge of the sun and bringing a transient dusk to the desert world. This little darkness would pass in an hour as Baal Secundus continued its orbit, and day would resume. Eclipses were an everyday occurrence on all three of the Baal triple. There was nothing so simple as day and night on any of them.

As the moon covered more of Balor, the dark grew, and the temperature dropped. A sudden, warm wind blew out of the desert, stirring the flags of the Blood Angels into motion, and making Dante's cloak snap.

Fittingly it was in that short spell of night that Mephiston came to him, emerging from one of the Arx Murus' many armoured doors. Jerron Leeter, the Master of Astropaths, walked in his black shadow. The Blood Angels Chief of Librarians was a figure almost as legendary as Dante. Among the most potent psykers in the Adeptus Astartes, Mephiston's power was known across the Imperium. But while Dante was celebrated and his leadership sought, Mephiston was shunned. He was secretive, and feared by all.

Mephiston did nothing to counter this opinion. His armour was cast to resemble the exposed musculature

of a flayed man, incongruously framed in gold. Every fibre of a human's exposed subdermal anatomy had been lovingly reproduced in ceramite, the horrible made no less disturbing by the artistry employed. His armour was a deeper red than the Blood Angels norm, a dark, arterial crimson lacquered to a high gloss, so that Mephiston's gory panoply glistened as if wet. He habitually went unhelmeted. A psychic hood of unusual design framed his face. Mephiston was inhumanly beautiful in a Chapter renowned for physical perfection, and the scholiasts of the Blood Angels insisted he looked much like Sanguinius himself. If Mephiston did take after their gene-father, it was Sanguinius dead, for Mephiston's perfection was that of a sarcophagus effigy. His troubled soul made beauty into ugliness, and the freezing, hard light in his eyes was enough to frighten the bravest man.

Leeter was another exceptional example of his type. He had survived the soul binding with his senses intact. Virtually every other astropath Dante had encountered in his long life had been blind, their eyes burned out by their communion with the Emperor, while some had no earthly senses remaining to them at all. This singular characteristic was the mark of Leeter's power and Leeter's will, as much as it was of the infinite grace of the Emperor. That such a prized operative as Leeter had been assigned to the Blood Angels was a token of how highly the Chapter was regarded by the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

Leeter's second sight was as extraordinary as his first. He could commune across space with the Librarians of the Chapter, bypassing his fellow astropaths. He could pierce the most terrible of veils, catch the most degraded teleprayer on the treacherous currents of the empyrean.

Leeter could see through all but the shadow in the warp. That remained opaque, even to him.

Seeing his Chief Librarian approach, Dante stopped and awaited his arrival. Mephiston greeted him. Leeter knelt, head bowed, until Dante told him to rise.

'My lord, how goes the muster?' said Mephiston. His voice was dry and whispery. During true night it was stronger. Something in the Chief Librarian loathed the day.

'It goes well,' said Dante. 'Our brothers move quickly, as they must. The hive fleet will soon be here. Time has been generous to us, but it runs out.' Dante could not stop looking up into the sky, past the fleet, the moons and the sun, to where swarms of xenos monstrosities swam the killing depths of space towards Baal.

'Twenty-seven Chapters have already arrived, my lord,' said Leeter. Though he had knelt out of respect, as a senior member of another adepta, Leeter had no qualms about speaking freely in front of the Chapter Master. 'More have promised their help. There are Chapters of the Blood here that are not on any roll the Chief Librarian's scholiasts can unearth for me. In my wildest hopes, I could not have dreamed of such a response.' Leeter's long, emerald robe moved violently in the eclipse wind. His remarkable eyes sparkled with fervour.

'The sons of the Great Angel are loyal,' said Mephiston.

'There are over fifteen thousand sons of Sanguinius in-system already,' said Dante. 'Estimates suggest we may eventually be blessed with as many as twenty-five thousand. Every warrior that comes here is another stone in our defences against Leviathan.'

Dante could feel Mephiston watching him closely. Dante had changed in the last months. The weariness he strived so hard to hide from others had fallen away, and his vigour had returned. But he had also become dour, his outlook grim. Dante's last equerry, Arafeo, had offered up his blood at the end of his service. Dante could not have refused had he wanted to. From death Dante's new-found energy came. Death would be his reward for it.

Dante was sure Mephiston could sense all this. So it should be. Dante made no effort to hide his shame from the Librarian.

'Is there news from Cadia?' Dante asked.

‘Not much, my lord,’ said Mephiston. ‘And what little there is is ill-favoured. The forces of Chaos gather in crushing strength at the Diamor system. Since Astorath sent word that he and Captain Sendini were en route to Diamor, we have heard nothing. Karlaen, Aphael and Phaeton should have arrived by now.’

‘We have had no notice of their safe translation,’ said Leeter quietly.

‘Could they have fallen?’ asked Dante.

Mephiston closed his eyes a moment. His face was as still as a funeral mask. In his armour it was impossible to tell if he breathed. Not for the first time Dante wondered if he did. ‘They still live,’ Mephiston said. ‘I would know if they did not.’

‘That is something, at least.’

‘We of the Librarium will travel to Baal Secundus and add our senses to those of the astropaths at the relay there. Perhaps we will hear something soon. In the meantime, there are better tidings.’ The Lord of Death motioned to Leeter. The astropath held out a scroll case of polished hematite decorated with bloodstone drops.

‘In this case,’ said Leeter, ‘are details of astropathic communiques from six of the battlefleets you have scouring the nearest worlds. They are disturbingly fragmentary. Already, the shadow in the warp creeps over our territory and disrupts our communication. The content is clear enough. Their work proceeds. The tyranids will find nothing to fuel their advance. Many Chapters march at your command. It is as if the Legion of old is reborn.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Dante. He was wary of Leeter’s implicit comparison of him with Sanguinius, and concerned for the future. His every effort thus far had proved insufficient to stop Leviathan. ‘I fear it will not be enough.’

‘Though it is a sight, is it not?’ said Mephiston. Tellingly he did not speak out against Dante’s fears. Neither of them had much faith in their ultimate triumph. Both of them had faced the Great Devourer several times, most recently at the pyrrhic victory at Cryptus. They had witnessed the hive mind’s power first hand. ‘I wonder if this is what our father saw when he marshalled his Legion here, those millennia ago. I feel close to him, seeing this. The dark we face is great, but it is a fine thing to come closer to the primarch.’

‘To see an echo of what he saw with our living eyes is an honour.’ Dante was forever conscious of the sacred ruby affixed to his brow. Inside the hollow vessel was the last unadulterated liquid drop of blood taken from Sanguinius’ veins, preserved for all time. ‘He is always with me, Librarian. He is always with all of us.’

‘In our blood and our souls,’ agreed Mephiston, a truth more literal than figurative; Sanguinius’ visions haunted their dreams, and hounded them to their deaths. A war deemed ancient by others was, to Blood Angels, the betrayal of yesterday. ‘By his blood were we made.’

Dante nodded. ‘By his blood he is within all of us. And we will need his strength now, more than ever.’



CHAPTER THREE

EATERS OF THE DEAD

The signature state of a Space Marine warship when not in battle was quiet bustle. Second Captain Erwin of the Angels Excelsis had a fine view of his serviles at work. The *Splendid Pinion's* throne platform was set upon a pier projected high over the work pits and instrument banks of the command bridge. Up there, he was as separate from the serviles as an angel in a primitive heaven is separate from the mortal sphere.

And so it should be, he thought. Sergeant Achemen was his only company on the platform, flicking through reports on a dozen screens to Erwin's left. Achemen's square face was fixed in concentration. It was possible he was not deep in thought, but just as bored as Erwin was.

The captain was in poor spirits. His thirst troubled him when he had little to occupy his talents. This slow road to Baal goaded the monster in his breast. He despised inactivity.

The *Splendid Pinion's* deck was four hundred feet across, with a domed roof as lavishly decorated as any cathedral's. Servo-skulls and tethered cyber-devices drifted below friezes depicting great triumphs of the Chapter. Around the rear of the circular room were galleries screened with metal fretwork to hide the servitors and lesser serviles labouring there. The screens were beautiful, but Erwin thought them a compromise of function and art. The front arc of the command deck was aesthetically finer. Columns of glittering white stone ribbed the walls. Fine lancet windows were set between them. At the forefront of the deck was the wide rose of the *Splendid Pinion's* grand oculus. The central pane was a single, flawless piece of transparisteel, but the edge was made up of tiny pieces of coloured glass held in place by adamantium camees. The art was far more beautiful than the view it bordered.

A bare ball of rock turned in the oculus, as dead as all the worlds Erwin had seen over the last month. Utterly unremarkable. Erwin lost himself in the circular frieze, as he had many times before. It depicted the first Angels Excelsis in battle. The picture ran into itself, so that there was no beginning or end, but an eternity of war. After fifty years in command of the Second Company and their strike cruiser, Erwin knew every red and white figure in the image by name. Every one of the original three hundred founders was remembered in that glass. The battlegear they wore when the Chapter was formed had been perfectly reproduced, right down to their name scrolls.

Most of them had died within a year. Their first mission had been an arduous one.

How Erwin wished for such a glorious struggle now.

A chime and a flashing lumen bulb on the command panel drew his attention to the hardline vox. He accepted the communication, praying for reports of something, anything, in the system to kill.

His hopes were dashed.

‘I have yet to register any signs of life in this system, my lord Erwin,’ reported the Servile of Response. The pitch of his voice was higher than a Space Marine, a sign of human weakness. That was why the Emperor had created the Space Marines, to protect frail men who could not protect themselves. Erwin reminded himself of his sacred duty, though truth be told he found it hard not to be irked by his charges’ fragility.

Erwin looked over to the vox station, a tiered stage set fifty feet below his throne.

‘More information,’ Erwin commanded.

The Servile of Response stood smartly and saluted, but he dared not look up at his superior, and spoke to the empty air.

‘The astrogatorium records give a population of five and a half million Adeptus Mechanicus adepts, with an unknown number of servitors, my lord. There are none left. All have been devoured, along with the native biome of Sciothopa.’

‘I can see that,’ said Erwin testily. He pointed through the window. ‘I have eyes. Maintain broad scanning parameters. I am not concerned with message content at this stage, only if there are any messages to be heard.’

‘Another dead system,’ said Sergeant Achemen. His voice was as miserable as his stolid, blocky face. ‘Would you consider, my captain, that we strike from this course and head straight for Baal and the muster? Lord Follordark would concur, I am sure.’

‘The Chapter Master was clear in his orders,’ said Erwin. ‘Scout each inhabited system in this sector before heading to Baal as Dante requested, and so we will check this system thoroughly as we have checked all the rest. Any intelligence we can present to Commander Dante will be welcome, I am sure.’ Erwin settled himself more deeply into the command throne. There was little he could do to make himself comfortable in its marble immensity, the cables plugged into the power ports of his armour prevented that, but he could at least flex his legs a little. They had become stiff with inactivity.

Erwin was well regarded as a ship captain, but he longed for the physicality of battle. Facing one’s foe upon the open battlefield with sword in hand was a more satisfying experience than the mathematical exercise of void warfare, although even that would be better than this tedium.

‘Be vigilant. The enemy may still be present.’

‘We will not be taken unawares, captain,’ promised Achemen.

Erwin smiled. ‘You misunderstand. I fear no ambush. I could use a good, honest fight.’

Achemen bowed his head. ‘As you command, my captain.’

Erwin gripped the stone lion heads adorning the throne’s arms and stared out into the void. The Red Scar draped scarlet shrouds across the cosmos, occluding the bright heart of the galaxy. Sciothopa was a minor nowhere on the way to bigger nowheres, but even these isolated systems had not been spared by the tyranids. Most of them housed only small human colonies, it being too expensive to provide large populations with protection from the Scar’s often deadly effects. Outside of the most valuable systems, Imperial presence was restricted to astropathic relay stations, Adeptus Mechanicus research bases, star castella and wayforts. Every single one had been cracked open and stripped.

Erwin looked down at the dull, dead ball of Sciothopa Prime. According to his Ordo Astra charts, it was a living world, with life adapted to the weird radiations of the Red Scar. The Adeptus Mechanicus were

present to exploit this resilience, thus far without result. Now they would never have the chance to unpick its secrets. There was no evidence of life left. The seas were dry, the atmosphere sucked away. High gain picts showed the broken remains of tyrannic feeding tubes on the surface. Standard tyrannid feeding patterns; after sucking up all useable resources, the tubes' most valuable chemicals were leached away by the departing fleet, weakening them. An act of planet-wide autophagy that left lacy remains to collapse under their own weight.

Lights from the *Splendid Pinion's* subsidiary craft played over the broken station orbiting Sciothopa. Glaring circles of bright light turned bent girders into shining filigree. Large parts of the station structure were missing, and the rest was close to disintegration. Erwin reckoned it would only be a few weeks before the remains were dragged from the sky by Sciothopa Prime and smashed to atoms on the surface.

'They take even the metal,' said Erwin.

The Servile of the Watch looked up from his podium over the augur pits, where baseline humans less fortunate than he laboured in unbreakable communion with the ship, their eyes and ears removed and sensory cortexes plugged directly into the auspectoria's cogitators.

'They take minerals of every kind, my lord,' said the servile. 'I have compared spectrographic analysis of this world with records of how it was. It shows massive depletion of all main range elements. The devourer remakes the worlds it consumes. Although I notice a small inconsistency with the oldest records of tyrannic-stripped worlds.'

'Small enough for me to ignore?' asked Erwin. The Servile of the Watch was an earnest fellow, genuinely fascinated with his work. He had been known to bore his masters with unnecessary detail.

The servile pulled a neutral expression, making his slave tattoos shift across his face, a sense of motion exaggerated by the low light of the command deck. The Servile of the Watch was unusually expressive for one of his breed. 'Whether it is relevant or not I shall leave to your deep percipience, my lord.'

Erwin grunted. 'Edify me then.'

'The older worlds show a larger loss of mass. The tyrannids spent longer on each, digesting parts of the planetary crust. They do not remain so long as they once did. Once the biological components of the world have been devoured, they target only sources of refined metals, such as the Mechanicus station here, in preference to the source minerals.'

'Then they are running scared, feeding, moving on before they can be interrupted,' said Erwin. 'Commander Dante has them afraid.'

'Or, my lord, they are presented with a surfeit of food. They have nothing to fear. They have too much choice. The Imperium is a banquet to them. They have become fussy eaters.'

Erwin shifted in his throne. For the first time he looked at the Servile of the Watch properly. He was a wholly unremarkable man to his Space Marine eyes, a tool of his Chapter, here now, soon dead. But there was something about him, an unusual courage. Most humans would never look a battle-brother in the eye. Erwin supposed the servile must have a name. He never bothered learning their names, they lived so short a time.

'You dare disagree with me?' said Erwin.

The servile stared out of the oculus, an expression that Erwin took a moment to place.

'Are you amused, servile?'

The Servile of the Watch dared look at him. 'Yes, my lord.'

'Why?'

'I find it amusing that I disagree with you and you have not killed me.'

Erwin slapped his armrest and let out a solitary bark of laughter.

'By the Blood, servile, you are a brave one.'

‘To reach a position such as I have, one must be bold,’ said the Servile of the Watch.

Erwin had no idea how the serviles were chosen for the roles they fulfilled, and he did not care. Logistics work was no fit use of a warrior’s time. That was the duty of the Master of the Household, an office given in Erwin’s Chapter to a captain no longer capable of fighting. So it had been since the 36th millennium, when their glorious order had been founded.

‘You may be right,’ Erwin conceded. ‘It is heartening to err on the side of optimism. I applaud you, servile, for prodding the uncomfortable truth.’

The Servile of the Watch bowed.

Erwin smiled, baring his long, sharp canines. ‘Now do not do it again, or I *will* kill you.’

‘Of course, my lord.’

‘Continue scanning the area,’ said Erwin. He stood and addressed the whole command deck. ‘We have a few hours before we must depart. We will make the translation directly to the warp from the nearest gravipause. There is no need to go to the Mandeville Point, this is a dead system. But if there are any tyrannid organisms remaining here, I will destroy them before we leave.’ Erwin thought he should not tarry for such pointless exercises, but he and his men needed action. Morale was as important a consideration in war as any other variable.

‘As you will it, my lord,’ responded the Servile Locum, the mortal who commanded the vessel when the Space Marines were absent. When Erwin was present, he did his duty by saving Erwin from the dull business of giving orders to the rest of the serviles.

Erwin settled himself back into his throne and kicked out one massive booted foot. ‘All forward, Servile of the Helm. Bring us around Sciothopa, full orbit. Make it fast, let us see if we can find anything to kill. And call in our craft, I have seen everything I need to see of the facility. Give me a maximum gain augur sweep when we break orbit. Absenting a target, we leave in three hours.’

Three hours passed. Erwin’s concentration drifted to past battles.

‘My lord! We have a contact. Something is moving in a debris field twelve thousand miles ahead.’

Erwin snapped out of his contemplation to full alertness.

There was nothing visible against the red void in the oculus.

‘Hololith,’ he ordered.

A projection sphere sprang into life over the forward strategium. In its false-light rendition the glow of the Red Scar was even more lurid. Erwin leaned forward. Away from the dead world a spread of wreckage was slowly dispersing. Datascreed sprang up around the pieces. Subsidiary view fields magnified the larger items to fuzzy, indistinct shapes.

‘Analysis,’ he ordered.

‘A mixture of Imperial and tyrannic debris. Augur readings give a preliminary estimate of seventy per cent metallic to thirty per cent organic.’

The Adeptus Mechanicus put up a weak fight, thought Erwin.

‘Lock on to the contact. Show it to me.’

‘Adjusting view now,’ said the Servile of the Watch. Servitors mumbled out rote responses to the servile’s commands. The hololithic view swung around. A black shape moved at the heart of a debris field, then the hololith view encompassed a second, and a third shape.

‘I have three targets,’ said the Servile of the Watch. There was an excitement in his voice that Erwin approved of.

‘Magnify,’ ordered Erwin.

Living ships moved among the wreckage. Coiled shells sprouted masses of tentacles from wide

apertures at the front. Their arms waved, plucking morsels from the shattered carcasses of bio-vessels, stuffing gobbets of flesh and frozen fluids into hidden maws.

‘A salvage operation,’ said Erwin.

Achemen looked up from his screens for a moment. ‘To what purpose? It does not seem a sensible use of resources.’

‘Who knows? I have heard reports that this tendril of Leviathan is preparing to splinter, putting out fresh shoots, as it pushes on towards Baal. This could be a seeding swarm,’ said Erwin. ‘Or it may not. I do not care. They are xenos, unworthy of life. All that matters is that they are in low numbers, and therefore vulnerable.’

‘It may be a trap,’ said Achemen.

Erwin tapped the arm of his throne. ‘You are probably right. Prepare for engagement. Do not bring us too close. Attack from maximum range. Bring torpedoes to readiness. We will stand off and destroy them.’

‘We should let it be,’ said Achemen. ‘This could be what they want.’

‘Leave it?’ said Erwin dismissively. ‘It is alive. It is an enemy. It should be dead. You are too timid, my sergeant.’

‘I am cautious, brother-captain. Letting the thirst guide our actions in this war would be a mistake.’

‘It is not the thirst that guides me,’ said Erwin. ‘You are not captain of the Second Company yet, Achemen, and will not be as long as I am alive. We will destroy them. That is my command.’ He looked at his second in command. ‘From a distance. Cautiously. I heed your counsel, brother.’

‘Firing solutions calculated, my lord. Forward torpedo batteries are aimed and ready for your command,’ announced the Servile Belligerent.

‘How many are required?’

‘Three torpedoes apiece should do it, my lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch. ‘I recommend multiple warheads, standard atomics.’

‘Recommend full spread of six for all targets,’ barked the Servile Belligerent.

‘Is that not a waste of munitions?’ said Erwin, testing his men.

‘Better to be sure, my lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch.

Erwin grinned. ‘Very good. Six apiece it is then. Time to impact, if we fire from here?’

‘Eighteen minutes, my lord.’

‘Too long,’ said Erwin. ‘Servile of the Helm, bring us closer. Accelerate to quarter speed. Loose torpedoes at five thousand miles. Prepare three spreads as per the Servile Belligerent’s recommendation. One spread per vessel.’

‘I say again, captain, it may be a trap,’ said Achemen.

‘We will release them all and break off,’ Erwin said to the sergeant. ‘Let the impetus of the ship speed our vengeance away.’

‘Revised time to impact after acceleration is seven minutes, my lord.’

‘Better,’ said Erwin.

A short-lived flurry of activity took hold of the serviles. A few moments later, the *Splendid Pinion* shuddered as its drive stacks pushed it towards the debris field. Erwin picked out the broken hulk of a small mechanicus arkship. He could see none of their warships among the wreckage – unsurprising for a research system.

‘I am detecting increased activity from the enemy, my lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch.

‘They have seen us,’ said Achemen.

‘If they have, what of it? They will not catch us,’ said Erwin. ‘Their ships are slow in-system. They have no power to give them speed. We will finish these ones easily enough.’

‘We are approaching optimum firing position in five seconds, my lord,’ said the Servile Belligerent. He counted down. ‘Four. Three. Two. One.’

Erwin raised his hand lazily. ‘Fire torpedoes.’

‘Volley one away!’ called the Servile Belligerent.

The ship jolted. Six torpedoes raced from the ship.

‘Second spread loaded,’ reported the Servile Belligerent. ‘Target locked.’

‘Fire!’ said Erwin. He leaned forward. This brief moment of action fired his sluggish blood. His mouth watered, and his sharp eye teeth slid a fraction further from his gums. He forced his attention away from the men under his command, their warm bodies and pulsing necks, and instead focused on the torpedoes. The hololith dimmed to cut the glare from their drive units. The first spread ran ahead of the ship where it divided into two subgroupings of three. The second spread followed the same pattern. The torpedo drives obscured the debris and their targets for a moment, but they were soon far out from the ship, reduced by the unimaginable vastness of the void to jewels of yellow on the wide red sash of the Scar.

‘Third spread loaded and ready,’ said the Servile Belligerent.

‘Swiftly accomplished. Commend the gunnery crews,’ said Erwin. ‘Extra rations and an additional five minutes’ sleep this rest cycle for such fine loading. Now fire.’

The last volley burst from the tubes in the ship’s bull-nosed prow far from the command spire.

‘Turn about,’ said Erwin. ‘Full reverse thrust. Turn us away from the enemy. Keep the hololith locked on our targets.’

Jets of fire stabbed out from the starboard prow shield, slewing the ship to portside. The *Splendid Pinion* groaned under the pressure of the manoeuvre. Erwin laughed as the ship shook.

‘Accelerate into the turn, Servile of the Helm,’ said Erwin. ‘Servile of Empyrial Transit, have the warp engine prepared.’

‘The Master of the Enginarium insists activating the core under this stress is unnecessary and risky,’ said the Servile of Empyrial Transit.

‘Noted. Do it anyway,’ said Erwin.

Achemen’s boots clunked as he activated his suit maglocks. Erwin grinned savagely to see his brother reach out to the dais rail to steady himself; Achemen was not so strong as he maintained. Inertia pulled the Space Marines sideways against the drag of the deck grav-plating. It was good to push his ship and his men so.

‘Spikes the blood, eh, Achemen?’

Achemen stared stonily ahead, disappointing Erwin. Achemen was a fine warrior, but precious little joy was to be had from his company.

The ship’s real space engines thundered, shaking the command spire with their sudden, massive increase in output. At their driving, the *Splendid Pinion* swung around in a wide arc, coasting along the gravity plane of Sciothopa and using it to accelerate out of the system. *Perfectly done*, thought Erwin. He was proud of his crew, mortal and Adeptus Astartes alike.

‘My lord, torpedoes about to make contact.’ The Servile Belligerent’s voice sounded out of the hardline vox by the throne, vastly amplified but barely loud enough to be heard over the roar of the ship. ‘The enemy have released torpedo spines and boarding pods in response.’

‘Then destroy them!’ said Erwin. The thirst rose in him, eager for the kill. ‘They will get no time for a second volley.’

Indeed they did not. One of the tentacled scavenger vessels disappeared in a sphere of brilliant fire. So *bright*, Erwin thought. Nuclear fission purged the sick redness from the void for a moment with pure, clean light. Seconds later, the next torpedo spread hit the second ship. Three bright globes of fire were

followed an instant after by three more, the six together swelling into a ball the size of a miniature star. Then the third ship was hit, and the small fleet was gone. The fires faded.

‘All hit,’ reported the Servile of the Watch. ‘Targets destroyed.’

‘We have debris coming in hard after enemy munitions. Activating point defence systems,’ said the Servile Belligerent.

Faintly, right at the edge of Erwin’s enhanced hearing, guns chattered. A cloud of approaching shapes picked out in red on the hololith thinned as bio-missiles were shot down. Large segments of the cloud blinked out of existence.

‘A fine job, serviles,’ said Erwin. His brief joy at battle was fading as quickly as the spheres of fire. ‘Are there any more?’

‘No, my lord,’ responded the Servile of the Watch.

‘Then set course for the next system.’ Erwin glanced over to Achemen. ‘Gather the company. I will address them in the Siege Joyous. We head to Baal after our next reconnaissance, at last.’

‘My captain,’ said Achemen.

Erwin depressed the head of the leftmost lion. It clicked gently. A flicker of status lights ran over his displays.

‘Captain departing,’ said a machine voice, broadcasting the news across the command deck.

Gas sighed as the cables detached themselves from the rear of Erwin’s armour. He stood with difficulty, the armour briefly dead on him with neither power pack nor ship to provide energy to its systems. His backpack descended from the ceiling above, the stabilisation nozzles delicately grasped by long-nosed grips. Like the ceramite of his arms and legs, it was a marbled white, setting off the deep crimson of his torso plate. His golden helm followed on a telescopic arm.

Arming serviles crept out from the dark places at the rear of the dais and wordlessly attached the backpack to Erwin’s armour. His growl of satisfaction at the strength flooding back into his battleplate systems was amplified as his helmet passed over his head and locked in place.

‘Servile Locum, you have command,’ Erwin said, glad to be free of the command throne. He looked out at the throbbing wound of the Red Scar. ‘Close the oculus. There is no need to look upon this painful smear any longer. I hear it drives men mad, and it troubles my heart.’

The shutters were ground down over the oculus. He strode along the pier and out through the doors at the rear, thence off the command deck.

Before he reached the hall of the Siege Joyous, a servile from the astropathicum came bearing urgent news. Upon reading the scrip presented him, Erwin’s day became immeasurably better.

With a savage shout, Erwin crumpled the parchment, returned to the command deck and ordered a course alteration to the Zozan system.

He would get a proper battle soon, after all.

To human eyes, a tyranid organism was a single thing, a beast like any other. This was not so.

Each monster in the limitless swarms was a carefully designed colony of symbiotic creatures. Once incorporated into the hive fleet’s genetic knowledge, the baseline genome of those organisms chosen for a primary host was pared back to the bare essentials, and gifted with the characteristics common to all tyranid creatures – thick, chitinous armour, a hexapedal anatomy, multiple redundant organs – characteristics that, above all else, made them incredibly difficult to kill. Only then were the true adaptations added.

Though the finished creature may have looked like a complete, single being, it was made up of a multiplicity of individual creatures, many of them semi-sentient in their own right. This was most obvious

to the casual observer in the weapons borne by the larger constructs, whose repurposed anatomies still retained recognisable biological shapes. There were other, less obvious examples of forced parasitism. Thinking blood. Organs that could live separately from the creature they served. Subsidiary brains that awaited the death of the main nerve stem or the presentation of some unusual circumstance that required specialist knowledge not present in the basic mentality of the creature; both events that might never come to pass. Organs could be installed, fully aware, and live for centuries, never realising their potential. The hive fleet was so huge it could afford to be profligate with flesh.

This modularity of being allowed the enhancement of creatures at short notice, or modification for particular roles. As the Angels Excelsis annihilated the small tyranid scavenging fleet, one such colony of beasts approached the *Splendid Pinion*.

Among the debris of the dead hive ships floated something that appeared to be another piece of biological wreckage, but was in fact a cunningly conceived single-occupant void pod.

The nature of the tyranids made it impossible to say which part of this gestalt biomechanism possessed the guiding mind. Was it the sensor beast, mounted upon the blunt nose, that perceived the Space Marine ship and originated the nerve pulses that dictated the pod's action? Or was the *Splendid Pinion* spied by the eyes of the pod itself, and was it then the pod's rudimentary brain, housed at the rear, that directed it? Or were these elements of the colony subsidiary to the mind of the infiltration beast carried within, that slumbered and yet looked out upon the void through the linked brains of its outer casing? They were all ultimately part of the greater whole of the hive, so which was the driving sentience? The classifications used by the Imperium to define levels of consciousness among the swarm's parts were crude. They lacked subtlety. Perhaps even at the height of its power, mankind could not have understood the tyranids.

The creature in the pod was autonomous in every way, except when it was not. It was natively cunning, an individual in its own right, but not a thing of will unless it was needed to be. Contradictions to the human mind, but not to the hive.

Moist sensor pits as sophisticated as any Imperial augur scried the *Splendid Pinion*. A calculating mind observed the ship in multiple spectra, and judged it a worthwhile target.

In truth it was all the subcreatures together – the pod, its subsystem beasts and the cargo it carried – that made the decision to vent a portion of the pod's meagre stocks of propellant. Gas puffed from orifices along the pod's flank, sending it spinning along a random-seeming trajectory resembling the tumble of harmless debris. Chromatic cells on the surface flickered to match the colour of the Red Scar void. Counter-augur creatures encysted in the pod's skin digested themselves, their electromagnetic screams sending out a cloud of obfuscating radiation on all frequencies. Silently, stealthily, the pod moved towards the *Splendid Pinion*, tracking the metal ship as it pulled away from the debris cloud and made its way to safe translation distance.

The pod's journey was a one-time chance, but it was one of millions. It was disposable, as all creatures in the hive fleets were. The mere act of fulfilling its purpose guaranteed its death. The component animals of the vessel did not care for themselves. Though several were capable of doing so, having been derived from sentient gene stock, their potential for self-preservation was suppressed psychically and chemically. They were mind-slaved, devoted to the Great Devourer in the same way a man's fingernail is devoted to his hand.

Gunfire strobed the void as anti-missile batteries locked onto pieces of shell and muscle spinning through the void, atomising them in bright bursts of radiant particles. The pod corrected its course, moving away from the thicker clusters of wreckage, taking care not to move at all like the smattering of tyranid torpedo spines streaking directly towards the prey ship. Invisible behind its baffles, the pod sailed unharmed through soundless explosions.

A separate, distended brain-creature housed in a cyst deep in the pod's bony armour calculated the precise speed needed to penetrate the ship's void shields. Too fast, and the pod would trigger the displacement response in the energy field, and be sent into the warp where it would be annihilated. Too slow, and the pod would be outpaced by its prey. More precious propellant gases were expended. The pod slowed. Its path became more certain, a parabola that brought it up and under the vessel towards the crags of the ship's keel towers.

A soapy ripple on the skin of space marked the pod's position as it punched through the void shield. This was the point of highest danger. The vigilant machine-spirits of the vessel might note the anomaly. Now the pod's camouflage was a liability. Not seeing what caused the disturbance in the field, the machines could alert the prey within their dead metal ship. Detection, if it occurred, could not be helped. Countless infiltration organisms had died performing the exact same manoeuvre, and countless more would. The hive fleet shed them like a human sheds skin cells. Successful infiltration was a matter of probability. It only took one to make it through.

The pod hurtled towards the *Splendid Pinion* unseen as the ship accelerated away from the growing debris field. A desperate venting had the pod match speed with its target. With a final eructation from the rear sphincters it came within grasping distance.

Bony plates blew from around the prow. Flailing tentacles burst from the cavities revealed, their broad, suckered ends slapping onto metal eroded by long exposure to the void.

Contact was made. The pod hauled itself onto the hull, its arrival so gentle there was not the slightest impact tremor. Once attached, the pod extruded a gummy foot and hauled itself along the plasteel in search of a crevice to hide within. It found one soon enough, slipping into a space between a turret base and the podium of an angelic statue made faceless by centuries of micro-meteor impacts. Once ensconced, it jettisoned tentacles blackened by exposure to hard vacuum, and withdrew its pseudopod into the safety of its shell. Sticky resins leaked from pores all along the pod's length, bonding its chitin fast to the ship.

By the time the *Splendid Pinion's* void shields dropped and were replaced by the eye-aching sheen of Geller fields, the pod was secure. The *Splendid Pinion's* warp engines tore open the universal veil separating the void from the empyrean, and plunged into the maddening psychic currents on the other side.

As the *Splendid Pinion* cleaved the warp towards Zozan the occupant stirred, perfectly safe in the pod. Hormones and stimulant chemicals gushed into its body, bringing it to a higher level of wakefulness.

The lictor prepared for its mission.



CHAPTER FOUR

A GREATER DARKNESS

Behind hex-warded gates lay the Diurnal Vault, the dread library of the Blood Angels where wonders languished in temporal prisons. Terrible science enslaved a star that powered this fortress within a fortress. Idalia, it was called, shackled by the will of the Emperor, and placed into the breast of a statue of Sanguinius that rivalled that at Angel's Fall.

The vault was but the first hall of the librarius. Deeper within were other places, more secret, more dread, the archives of ten thousand years of war. Warded cells. Repositories for all the cursed artefacts the Chapter had gathered to itself. Depictions of all the foes they had bested. Far, far inside lay the Sepulcrum Maleficus, a place of such secrecy its existence was known only to the very highest officers of the Chapter. This was Chief Librarian Mephiston's sanctuary.

It was the custom of the older Blood Angels to rest in the Hall of Sarcophagi where they were made, should time allow. Opportunity was limited in those dark days, but the rest was longed for.

In the Long Sleep infusions of sacred blood carried out all impurity from the body, and spiritual communion with Sanguinius was a tantalising possibility. Some held that the Long Sleep staved off the progression of the bloodline's curse. Others, fewer in number, decried the practice, seeing it as an exchange of duty for dreams of the past. Both parties were right, in their own way.

Mephiston slept as often as he could. When awake, he secreted himself in the Chemic Spheres, his self-imposed prison. When he slept, he slept among the dead. There were places in the librarius that defied all known laws, being neither of the universe nor the warp. The strictures of the material plane relaxed. The Sepulcrum Maleficus was one such location.

The Hall of Sarcophagi was a place of life, the Sepulcrum Maleficus was a place of death. It was fitting that Mephiston made his abode there.

In form the sepulcrum was a deep shaft, its bottom, if it had one, lost to the dark. Much of its volume was taken up by moving platforms. Coffins were mounted singly upon the platforms' decks, which moved in circular motions like a vast, stacked orrery. Articulated stairs linked them, their steps hissing as they whirled around and around, constantly changing shape to accommodate each other, in a giant, deadly puzzle of shifting gears. Somehow, the stairs passed through one another when they met, intersecting with

the sound of swords sharpening on whetstones.

In each ivory casket was preserved the body of a Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels. Regular infusions of blood kept their bodies fresh. Although they were long dead and their gene-seed removed, around many hovered shreds of consciousness, spirits that a being as psychically gifted as Mephiston might commune with and seek guidance from.

At the centre of all this was a greater platform, and upon that a singular incongruity: a room with no walls, being bounded like all the other platforms in the space by a sheer, unfathomable drop. It was furnished as a study, with a rich rug carpeting the metal. A table and chairs of artistry befitting the Chapter occupied the centre. A single bookcase crammed with rare treatises on war and the empyric arts stood off to one side.

Being at the centre of the sepulcrum, the room's orbit was smaller than the rest of the platforms', but it moved like they all did, always in dizzying progress, never stopping, a whirling, automatic motion that suggested life where there was none.

Other staircases led off from Mephiston's study to subsidiary platforms. Upon one of these Mephiston's personal artificer dwelt, rendered blind and condemned to live there until old age took him. On another was the Lord of Death's armoury. There his grisly armour hung upon an arming stand. Over it, hovering in judgement within a shaft of ruby light, was Vitarus, the Chief Librarian's ancient force sword.

The armoury platform rotated away to the grinding of metal on metal. A third presented itself, and it was there that Mephiston rested.

Mephiston's sarcophagus was indistinguishable from those of his predecessors. Like the others, the platform was made of iron chased with Theldrite moonsilver in designs that grew in complexity towards the central point, where the casket was set. The sarcophagus was made of a single, giant piece of ivory carved with cartouches and esoteric Blood Angels symbology. Nestled between stylised representations of a Space Marine's pauldrons was a blank-eyed sculpture of Mephiston's visage. In these details it was no different to its others. Though the precise style of the caskets varied according to the whims of differing eras, in form they were the same.

But where the coffins of the dead were inert, Mephiston's glowed with caged power, its etched lines gleaming with ruby light. About it a dozen brass rods topped with silver skulls were arrayed like guards around a prisoner. A nimbus played around the casket's rounded head and shoulders, and from this glow occasional bursts of power cracked loudly into the creaking of the sepulcrum, striking the brass rods and leaving them smoking.

Inside the sarcophagus, Mephiston dreamed, and that was most unusual.

The Lord of Death thrashed against the silk padding lining the interior, ripping free the lines purifying his blood. An unbidden vision had him under its spell, pulling his soul half from his body and thrusting him unmanned into the floods of time.

'At Diamor, it will begin,' said a voice.

A sense of foreboding – a tragedy overtaking his brothers fighting with Astorath – gripped him. He sensed despair, and loss, and bent his mind to see.

Grey and green smeared across the dark, a reflection in a pool whose surface was broken. This was no material reflection, but the mirror of the warp. Empyric ripples quieted, leaving Mephiston looking not upon the Diamor system but on a world he knew well: Cadia, the gateway to the Eye of Terror.

His brothers were there, fighting alongside millions of others. The muster was thousands of times the size of that taking place on Baal, but it was immediately apparent it would not be enough. From the wide cosmic road of the Cadian Gate came a procession of unending violence. Thousands upon thousands of ships emerged from the Eye of Terror. They bore old hatred out of the past, determined to overthrow the

present in a welter of blood. Billions of daemons accompanied hundreds of thousands of Heretic Astartes. The Black Legion, the Iron Warriors, the Emperor's Children... All nine of the Emperor's fallen Legions and their lords had come out from their strongholds to rekindle ancient war.

All this Mephiston apprehended in a kaleidoscopic flurry of images spread across a single instant. There was no time in the warp. Then the Lord of Death was speeding through vortices of thought, and the vision burst into an infinity of individual pieces. Through fragmentary possible futures, Mephiston witnessed countless acts of heroism, but the end was inevitable.

Faces he saw of import included a monstrous Mechanicus priest, an inquisitor out of time, a Space Marine in the armour of a Black Templars marshal. There was another, faceless presence. A snatch of laughter, and the flash of a silver mask accompanied the touch of an aeldari mind. The presence was gone before he could strike it.

War and death had come to Cadia on unprecedented scale, and still that was not the sum of the horror approaching the Imperium.

Time blinked. Mephiston walked moorland battlefields between the howling sons of Fenris. Daemons died under their blades and bolts, but the Space Wolves were weary, rank with the sweat of days of battle. Their armour was cracked, their weapons blunted. In the distance a fortress burned in an unnaturally coloured inferno. The sky was a livid bruise, neither warp nor void nor cloud, but a seething mess of energies that cast spears of lightning into the ground with explosive force.

Daemons saw his soul. They snarled at Mephiston as he shadow-walked across the broken moors. He held up his hand and pushed them away with his mind. Once past them, he faded from their minds like the ghost he was.

The scene rippled away into another. Cadians fought from behind barricades of their dead. Silver machines chased through the sky.

The Necrons, thought Mephiston. The first warriors in the endless war had returned to finish it. Three times over the last months the Necrons had aided the Imperium. He did not trust their motives at all. Metal minds and soulless intellects prevented his reading their intentions, but their arrogance betrayed the danger they posed.

There was something else, something closer in time and nearer to his blood. He searched for it, seizing upon possibility's cloak, but fate shook him free. Time skipped. Tall, alien pylons crashed down in flames onto the plains of Cadia. With each toppling structure the purpled sky twitched expectantly.

'Doom!' roared a voice that no mortal could hear.

More pylons fell, collapsing like tall trees burned up in forest fires.

'Doom!' The voice was made of many.

The death screams of a million human soldiers were drowned out by the triumphal howl of daemonkind. Blood scent thickened the air with copper and iron.

'Doom!' screamed the voice one final time.

Reality convulsed. Mephiston's soul reeled, struck a metaphysical blow that dented the inviolable energies of his spirit.

The sky peeled open. The madness that lurked beyond the veil of the universe was revealed. Mephiston looked into it unblinkingly. He understood what few did. This roiling, limitless ocean was true reality, not the sluggish skin of matter men walked across and fought over, but the endless hells of warp space.

He snarled in defiance, preparing to die far from home and out of time.

A cool hand touched his spirit lightly, steadying him. A musical, female voice spoke from behind a silvered mask.

'Hail, oh Lord of Death.'

The aeldari. This creature was not part of his vision, but impinging on it. He prepared for battle, for the ancient race were skilled walkers of the psychic veil, witches all, but no attack came.

‘We shall not fight, angel of death, for I bring tidings. ‘Ware, son of blood! The time comes when all will change, some for the better, some for the worse.’

‘Begone from my mind!’ Mephiston said. As he pushed back he gained a greater sense of the alien. It was one of their dancer caste, the Harlequins.

‘You see me!’ she laughed, and skipped away through the raging battle, trailing motley diamonds in her wake.

The combatants fought on, though the end was coming. The garish sky fell in. Fire and death washed over the landscapes of Cadia, blasting all to pieces.

A racing pyroclastic cloud engulfed Mephiston. Had he been there in the flesh, he would have died instantly, no matter his power. It burned his soul, hurling his spirit from one level of being to the next.

His vision was enwrapped in shadow, constricted like a corpse in winding sheets. He struggled against its cold press, lying on his back, unable to move. Darkness burst asunder, and he rose up over burning sands to hover in a fiery sky over a hellish land. Mountains of skulls soared to infinite heights. Rivers of blood and fire carved canyons through white deserts of ground bone, while the sky rained thick ash: fragments of souls still hot from the forges of the gods.

Horned daemons fought one another in every place, their battle older than time itself.

For all its seeming solidity, this was no place native to the realm of flesh. To be there was a grave peril to the soul for he was deep in the warp, in the lands of blood. Had another psyker ventured into Khorne’s domain even in vision form, they would have been consumed by rage and hatred, and their souls torn apart. The risk was especially great for the sons of Sanguinius.

These things did not happen to Mephiston. His soul was a pillar of ice in a world of fire. He had no fear. Instead, he thought.

How am I here?

+Because you must be,+ whispered the aeldari into his mind.

Mephiston passed unseen over a world of ceaseless war. Daemoniac creatures and the souls of damned men battled furiously against one another. Armies clashed. Lone warriors duelled. He witnessed a force in the throes of disintegration, comrades turning on each other before the pulses of their vanquished foes had stilled.

+Onward,+ said the eldar. +Fear not, you are guarded, for a time.+ Silky laughter, cruel as the void, caressed his being.

Mephiston’s spirit approached mountains made of skulls so big he could not conceive of any creature that might have produced them. The mountains were close to one another, and Mephiston flew between them through a narrow defile whose walls were riddled with eye-socket caves and nostril gullies wherein brutish, winged creatures fought over scraps of mortal souls.

+Onward,+ said the voice. +Do not tarry, son of blood. You must see before you are seen.+

The pass opened out onto a plain that stretched on forever. Upon it two huge daemoniac hosts fought, one of black and one of red. The foot soldiers of both hosts were arrayed in vast legions. Individual warriors lost all meaning, the two were opposing seas of different colours, crashing violently against one another. Arcane machines and bizarre armoured vehicles partly of flesh and partly of iron warred among the limitless multitudes, their guns sounding a constant thunder over the raucous cymbal clash of a billion blades. Most dreadful of all were the generals of the armies. Great bloodthirsters of Khorne flapped over their minions on leathery wings. Rage crystallised and given will, they fought wheeling battles in the sky against one another, crying hatred as loud as cannon fire.

Mephiston's heart responded. The curse he held subdued rose in him. Being there was pain. Being there was joy. Only the letting of blood would alleviate his suffering and intensify his pleasure. The thirst parched him, the rage tormented him, they fought for his mind, an internal struggle which mirrored that going on below, red versus black.

He came to the centre of the clash, where a vast spearhead of the red-skinned daemons had penetrated deeply into the black forces. Giant, brass-clad towers ground daemon flesh into pulp as they rolled forward, their baroque cannon belching gun smoke.

At the very tip of the formation the most monstrous bloodthirster of them all fought, one of the eight to the power of eight to the power of eight lieutenants of Khorne. So many were the multitudes of the bloodthirsters that no man could know every one of their number, but this creature clad in brazen armour, ape-faced and fiery-breathed, was known to all those of Sanguinius' line permitted to learn the truth of the warp.

'Ka'Bandha,' whispered Mephiston.

+Do not speak its name,+ urged the eldar. +You put us at risk.+

'Then why am I here?' said Mephiston.

As if in answer, Ka'Bandha threw back his head and howled with rage so potent the ground shook and the sky answered with peals of thunder. An avalanche of skulls rumbled off the mountain range, burying thousands of combatants alive. Mephiston's fury burned high in his breast. He wanted to descend to rend and tear with them all.

'I must leave here, or I am lost. Release me, xenos.'

+Not yet! Watch!+

Mephiston's attention was directed to the distance. A titanic axe of fire wounded the yellow sky. A slash opened the world from heavens to deeps. Through it shone the cold light of real space stars.

+The way opens. The Bane of Angels comes.+

Ka'Bandha roared again, and his rage infected everything within earshot. Mephiston struggled to control himself. He forced himself to observe as the rising tide of fury swallowed his mind.

Above the rift, an angel of scarlet fire ignited into being, his wings filling the sky. His outline shivered with heat distortion. His sword burned.

The mellifluous voice of the eldar spoke in Mephiston's ear, so close he could feel the thing's breath.

'Hold fast. Watch for the end. A lord of men returns. Do not fall, do not fall! Stand fast, two-souled Mephiston. Now is the time of ending, and of beginning.'

A sheeting flash ended his vision and Mephiston fell for an age.

The Lord of Death returned to life full of rage. He clawed mindlessly at the inside of his sarcophagus. Equipment broke to sparking wreckage. Velvet shredded. Soft ivory scored under his nails. The lid juddered on its mountings at his ferocious strength. Alarms peeped and whistled. The sepulcrum echoed to the tolling of a bell so large the sarcophagus vibrated as if struck by the clapper.

Mephiston was oblivious to the havoc he had unleashed. *Out out out!* he screamed in his mind, though only incoherent snarls left his mouth. The machinery that held the coffin lid closed squealed with oppositional effort. Though the locks were powerful, they could not resist his warp-born strength.

He lashed out with his mind, sending a scarlet tide of energy at the sarcophagus lid.

With a crack, the ivory lid split in two and bounced onto the platform floor. One half hung from wrecked pneumatic closures, the other skidded through a slick of blood and fell from the platform, banging from the sides of the sepulcrum as it crashed into the indeterminate deeps of the librarius.

Ripping at his own flesh, Mephiston fell forward, tangled in the feed lines and hibernation monitors still plugged into his black carapace's neural ports. Blood squirted from tubes as he tore them free.

Mephiston landed in the wreckage of the sarcophagus. Hot anger burned through him. He felt himself, whatever he was, slipping away. Mephiston, Calistarius – both were at risk. He was in danger of becoming something else again.

This is not your rage, said a cold, impersonal voice. His voice, Mephiston's voice, though it seemed to come from without. *This is not Sanguinius' sacred rage*, it said. *Cast it from you. It is impure.*

Rapid blinks shuttered over eyes rolled back into his skull. Mephiston convulsed and vomited a thin stream of bloody saliva. With a feral half groan, half shout, he pushed the anger out of his mind as if he were shouldering a physical object aside.

The rage passed.

Gasping from the depths of his soul, Mephiston got up onto his hands and knees. Blood pooled upon the platform around him. Nearby, Mephiston's personal artificer waited stoically for death upon his platform. Mephiston sensed his anticipation; the wretch wished to die.

'You live another day!' gasped the Lord of Death.

Agitated cyber-constructs shrieked down from their roosts and warily circled Mephiston. Precious vitae, spiced with chemical improvement, ran from the edge of his platform in a helical waterfall as the sepulcrum's mechanism continued on its ceaseless course.

The bell's tolling summoned the Librarians of the Adeptus Astartes soon enough. Whether to aid their master or to contain a monster they did not know, but they came down the stairs to Mephiston's platform in strength and armoured, the weapons of their minds and fists prepared for the worst.

Epistolary Gaius Rhacelus arrived first. He was personally closest to Mephiston in the librarius, but most ready to do what must be done despite their friendship. The guardians of the spheres came after him, their huge swords at the ready. Rhacelus hurried through Mephiston's strange study and onto the steps leading to the rest platform. When his feet were wetted by the pool of blood, Mephiston looked up at his equerry with burning eyes. He was naked, smeared in blood, his long hair sticky with it, savage in every aspect; he was nevertheless in control.

'Stand down. I am not yet damned, Rhacelus,' said Mephiston quietly.

The wychlight shining in Rhacelus' face faded, though it never died. His aged features were suffused always by power leaking from warp-damaged eyes. He held up his hand. The warriors behind him relaxed from their readiness for combat and began issuing orders, bringing mindless servitors in to repair the damage to the Sepulcrum Maleficus. Their labours would be slowly performed. Blood thralls under the direction of a Techmarine would have completed the work in hours, but only members of the librarius were allowed into this innermost sanctum. Few outside the Quorum Empyric, the librarius' ruling body, were aware of its existence.

'Mephiston! By the Blood, what has happened to you?' said Rhacelus. He reached for his master. Mephiston pushed his friend's hand away and sat back on his haunches.

'It is the future that should concern you.' Mephiston coughed.

'Fetch Aphek!' Rhacelus snapped over his shoulder. He looked over Mephiston again and his frown deepened further. 'And Sanguinary Priest Albinus. We will have them both look you over, my lord.'

The Lord of Death shook his head, sending his blood-thick hair swinging.

'Not now. There is no time. Help me,' Mephiston said. 'Help me into the Chemic Spheres. I must have answers. Quickly.'

Rhacelus stood. He nodded, concern writ large upon his grey-bearded face. Mephiston could communicate much with few words. 'Sheathe your swords.' Rhacelus motioned to the guardians of the spheres. 'Carry him.'

Mephiston was half dragged down moist, crumbling corridors to the Chemic Spheres. The room was full of the light of the captive star Idalia. A milky dome occupied the centre. All was pure and white, until Rhacelus employed his blood key, injecting the dome with a shot of vitae, sending crimson circuits of psychic power all over its surface and opening the seamless door to the interior. Pale gloom turned pink as he entered, the tracery of activated psychic circuits racing out from his feet. A claw-footed throne materialised from the sanguine glow, and Rhacelus motioned that the Chief Librarian be placed upon it.

Mephiston half fell into the throne, swallowing heavily. The guardians retreated, leaving Rhacelus alone with his master.

‘Tell me what happened,’ Rhacelus said.

‘I dreamed,’ said Mephiston wearily.

‘You do not dream. Not in the Long Sleep. You do not allow yourself.’

‘Dream I did,’ said Mephiston. ‘I had no choice. An eldar brought me the vision, I think. There are great forces at play.’ He took a deep breath, still weak. ‘Firstly, something is about to happen to the Diamor taskforce. I did not see, but I felt it.’ He struggled through his memories of his vision, but like all dreams they were fading. ‘I must focus! Help me, Rhacelus. The lives of a third of our Chapter depend upon it.’

The epistolary gestured. His eyes flared. A second throne manifested from nothing. He took his place in it and closed his eyes, lending his power to Mephiston’s.

Their souls entwined, and the two of them looked upon a fractured future. The dark stain of the shadow in the warp encroached upon the Baal system, blotting out the soul-light of stars in its wake and leaving nothing but hungering blackness that spread like ink through water. From the direction of Hivefleet Leviathan’s approach there was none of the psychic noise generated by the Imperium’s astrotelepathic network, no crackling pops as ships entered and left warp space, no susurrus generated by the multitudinous souls of inhabited worlds, no psychic screams of dying planets, no alien thoughts or psychic echoes from the past, only a blank and oppressive silence more forbidding than a storm front. When focused upon, the silence gave way to the chittering of the swarm. Random seeming at first, the horrible uniformity of innumerable minds working in synchronicity became apparent.

There was something else, a thrumming tension to reality’s fabric that made all shake and vibrate like the skin of a drum lightly struck, though the rhythm it played grew more violent with every heartbeat.

+There is a disturbance in the warp greater than that of the Great Devourer,+ thought Mephiston. +It is what I felt. I saw Cadia in flames.+

+This is the danger to the Diamor fleet?+

+Maybe. That was something else. Something earlier. We must see!+

+Let us see if we can join with our brothers,+ said Rhacelus. +Epistolary Asasmael is with them. Let us call to him.+

They flew through non-space to look upon the fringes of Diamor. Worlds moved in stately fashion around a blue giant. Unusually placid for a star of its kind, it bathed its planetary children with bright cyan light. Already the *Angelic Blade* and the *Flame of Baal*, the strike cruisers of the Fifth Company, were present with a small flotilla of escorts, their red livery black in the blue starshine. More Blood Angels were coming, Mephiston and Rhacelus could sense their approach, urged on to great speed through the warp as if some agency wished them to arrive with High Chaplain Astorath’s force.

+We will warn them,+ thought Mephiston.

A sense of imminence afflicted them, and they looked on in anguish as a malevolent mind reached through the veil of realities. Spectral jaws formed around the *Angelic Blade* and snapped shut. A blood-red psychic storm wreathed the ships. A terrible scream resounded through the warp, blasting Mephiston with the anguish of dozens of warriors lost to madness together. The *Angelic Blade* listed, falling off its

course. The *Flame of Baal* vented atmosphere from a dozen deep gashes in its flanks and steamed ahead, pulling away from its sister.

All this would have taken hours in real time. Mephiston and Rhacelus watched as it happened, but they were divorced from the mortal realm, and time moved differently for them.

Warp engines made bright tracks upon the psychic firmament as vessels forced their way into real space, arriving moments after the storm that assailed their brothers. The markings of the First, Second and Seventh Companies of the Blood Angels were displayed upon them. It should have been an uplifting sight, to see their brothers safe through the immaterium and heading to war, but other powers wished them stopped.

The arriving fleet stood off from the *Angelic Blade*. Uncertainty coloured the warp. Seeing something was amiss, the vessels Dante had sent from Cryptus sped towards their beleaguered brothers.

A sorrowing mind reached out to touch theirs, groping through the psychic backlash.

+I have Asasmael+, thought Rhacelus, his mind strained at the pain of making contact at such distances. He and Mephiston struggled to hear Asasmael's voice. His presence was snatched away before he could impart a sense of what had happened. The drumbeat rippling of empyrical disturbance intensified. Fell intelligences noticed Rhacelus and Mephiston's astral presences, and turned their attention upon them.

+Enough!+ said Mephiston.

Mephiston's eyes snapped open. Without pausing for breath he thrust himself from the throne, waved down a vox cherub and began issuing orders. 'Marcello! Send word to the relay on Baal Secundus. Have our astropaths focus their attentions upon the Diamor system. Let the librarius aid them. Find Karlaen and the rest.'

'My lord,' said Epistolary Marcello's voice from the silver lips of the cherub.

'Something terrible has happened to the taskforce,' he said to Rhacelus. 'We must speak with Asasmael. We shall go to the relay on Baal Secundus, and enlist Master Leeter's aid.'

'There is worse on the way,' said Rhacelus. He shut his glowing eyes, and rubbed behind his skull, scratching at the interface sockets of his psychic hood.

'Yes,' said Mephiston absently, his mind drifting back to the vision of Ka'Bandha. This element of his vision he would share only with the Chapter Master. 'Far worse. Commander Dante must be informed.'



CHAPTER FIVE

BLADE OF VENGEANCE

‘Is it not glorious?’ said Erwin. His teeth pricked at his lips in anticipation.

‘As you say, captain,’ said Achemen.

Erwin stood free of his throne, trusting to the Servile Locum to run the command systems for him. He and Achemen were fully armed for battle. Erwin wore a power sword belted to his side. A boxy storm bolter hung from a strap around his right shoulder, the gun being too big to mag-lock to his battleplate. Fifteen of his Tactical Marines stood at various points around the bridge, guns in their hands. They expected to be boarded. They wanted it.

The *Splendid Pinion* cut its way through space towards a world shrouded in a cloud of tyrannic spacecraft. From fifty thousand miles out the aliens looked like a swarm of nocturnal insects mobbing a lumen.

‘Numbers!’ demanded Erwin.

‘Forty-seven thousand destroyer class and larger bio-ships, my lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch drily. ‘Or thereabouts.’

‘Imperial numbers?’ said Erwin.

‘Two battle-barges: the *Blade of Vengeance*, Blood Angels, and the *Crimson Tear*, Angels Numinous.’

‘The *Blade of Vengeance* itself!’ said Erwin eagerly. Achemen gave him a morose look. He lacked the proper enthusiasm.

‘Six strike cruisers,’ the Servile of the Watch went on, ‘and thirty-five escort craft.’

‘Is that it?’ said Erwin incredulously.

‘Those are impossible odds,’ said Achemen. ‘We cannot win.’

‘Ah! Our brothers in the Blood are not seeking victory,’ said Erwin. ‘Look.’

Bursts of light marked out battle in the encircling shroud of the hive fleet. The ships of the Imperium were invisible at that distance, but the destruction they meted out was not. Spheres of dazzling light enveloped alien craft, blasting holes in the swarm. Twinkles of an unleashed broadside sparked in the shifting clouds of xenos ships.

‘Impossible odds,’ repeated Achemen.

‘The tyranids are not the target,’ said Erwin.

Shockwaves rippled through the atmosphere of Zozan Tertius. A circle of the sky turned black. Its expanding circumference crackled with violent electrical storms, and the centre glowed – the telltale sign of planet death by cyclo-nucleonic fire.

‘Exterminatus,’ said Achemen bleakly.

‘The Kryptmann solution,’ said Erwin. ‘Starve the horde. The situation must be desperate if a noble heart like Commander Dante would consider the death of worlds. Servile of Response, send them a message. Hololith transmission,’ commanded Erwin. ‘Commit primary projector to the purpose. Maximum boost.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said the Servile of Response.

The strategic display winked out over the main hololith pit, and its stylised representation of the void was picked up by lesser tacticaria. In its place a pale sphere glowed, gradually coalescing into the ghostly shape of a Blood Angels fleet officer.

‘Greetings, my brother,’ said Erwin. ‘I am Captain Erwin, Second Company of the Angels Excelsis and commander of the *Splendid Pinion*. We answer your call for aid.’

‘I am Brother Asante, fleet captain of the *Blade of Vengeance*.’ Noise spill from the *Blade of Vengeance*’s command deck crowded the audio channel. Interference from tyranid jamming beasts interrupted the visual, causing his face to momentarily freeze and jump apart into blurred image blocks. ‘Your presence is welcome,’ said Asante. His words smeared into one another. The sound of voices and ship’s guns swelled in the background. ‘We are preparing to fall back. Cover our... rrrrrr.’ Asante’s image flickered out.

‘Get him back!’ commanded Erwin.

‘My lord. There is heavy interference on all frequencies. Our communications are being targeted.’

‘I care not for reasons! Do as I command, bring the captain back!’

The Servile of Response worked as best he could with Erwin glaring at him. Servitors moaned and gave out their monotone reports. The hololith crackled and Asante burst back into existence.

‘...ese coordinates. Come to a halt, and prepare for further orders.’ Asante half moved out of the projection field, shouting orders that the crew of the *Splendid Pinion* could not hear.

Behind Asante’s wavering head, the battle had filled the oculus. Zozan Tertius’ blackening orb filled most of the great window, the fires of its death creeping round the far side. The ships of the hive fleet were revealed as void leviathans, things with curled shells and mouths of writhing tentacles, or bodies like slugs covered in asteroidal rock glued into place over their skin, like the aquatic larvae of predatory insects. The variety of craft in the swarm was astounding. The tyranids had weight classes to match every vessel the Imperium possessed, from individual fighters to capital ships, and more besides. The planet’s orbit was crammed with xenos life propelled by gas plumes. Darts of gristle and bone took the place of torpedoes, fast hunting beasts driven by bioplasma jets replaced interceptors; long, whale-like carrier beasts ejected spores and hunter-killers from their sides by the thousand. The tacticaria hololiths were a red blizzard of life signs.

Asante looked back into his hololith imager. ‘Asante out.’

‘Friendly,’ said Erwin.

‘He is preoccupied,’ said Achemen.

‘You know, when the Emperor’s gifts were implanted into your body, Achemen, I think they left out the organ responsible for a sense of humour. Where is your joy? We go into battle!’

‘There is only room for duty in my heart.’

‘You have two,’ Erwin reminded him.

‘The other is full of sorrow for the people of our Imperium,’ said Achemen.

Erwin made an exasperated noise. ‘Put the tactical display back on the main hololith. Do we have the captain’s coordinates?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch. The glowing sphere of the tactical hololith took place at the centre of the deck again. Upon it a blue signifier blinked amid the swirling mess of tyranid life signs. A dotted line described the *Splendid Pinion*’s track, as desired by Captain Asante.

Erwin leaned on the railing around the command throne’s dais. He stared at the suggested course intently for several minutes as the *Splendid Pinion* hurtled towards the devouring swarm. ‘Not there,’ said Erwin finally.

‘My lord?’ said the Servile Locum.

‘Asante gave us orders,’ said Achemen.

‘The last time I looked, you wore the winged axe of the Angels Excelsis upon your pauldron and not the blood drip of Baal,’ said Erwin.

‘He is not of our Chapter, I admit, but he has seniority,’ said Achemen.

‘You would obey him, then?’

‘They are our founder Chapter. Asante is renowned across the segmentum as a talented void commander. He commands a battle-barge. We go to the aid of the Blood Angels. Yes, I would obey him, for these and many other reasons, brother.’

‘Well, I will not,’ said Erwin. ‘Not until Lord Follordark tells me that I must abandon my judgement and blindly follow another’s. Asante’s withdrawal is flawed. They will be cut off by these two groupings here.’ Erwin worked a console with buttons sized for his armoured hands, his fingers clacking on the plastek. Additional indicators leapt onto the hololith. ‘Do you see? These movements look random, but they are not, there is a predation pattern concealed within it. If he breaks the way he says he will, his trailing vessels will be cut off and destroyed.’

Achemen scrutinised the graphics thrown up by his captain onto the display. ‘Why did Asante not see it?’

‘Maybe he is not as fine a commander as you say he is, though I shall be charitable and attribute the oversight to his preoccupation with the battle. Servile of the Helm, take us on this heading.’ Erwin, not linked to the ship’s systems directly while he was out of the throne, was once again obliged to use physical interfaces to display his desired path on the hololith. ‘Bring us down to quarter speed. Turn seventy-five degrees. Present our port flank to the swarm. Maintain an oblique heading towards the main body of the fleet. Servile Belligerent, have all our weapons brought online, loaded and standing by. Servile Scutus, activate void shields. Increase reactor output to maximum – I will need all our speed and all our power.’

His crew obeyed. The constant reactor vibration, that machine shake that stood in for a heartbeat, increased in frequency. Alarms and notification tocsins sounded and were duly silenced.

‘Now we will see if it is I or Asante who is the better voidsman,’ said Erwin with relish.

By now the blackness of planet death had spread its way across all of Zozan Tertius. Lavabombs cracked the crust, shockwaves did the rest. Smoke obscured the face of the world. The void dimmed as Zozan’s planet shine went out, swallowed by a global pall of smoke.

The *Blade of Vengeance* and the *Crimson Tear* broke and ran. Space Marine craft moved surprisingly quickly for ships of such mass. They turned about and reordered their formation, strike cruisers making a hollow box around the two battle-barges. They moved off even as they manoeuvred, all weapons blazing at the tyranid swarms now the planet was in its death throes. Lance batteries made a deadly lattice of laser beams around the battle group. Pinpoint torpedo strikes destroyed high priority threats.

The hive fleet sent wave after wave of grapple-armed nautiloids at the battle-barges, but the Space

Marines aboard maintained a punishing rate of fire. Planet killing bombardment cannons gutted hundreds of bio-ships. The tyranids had no protective energy fields, relying on sheer numbers to overwhelm their foe. Within moments the clouds of broken flesh and frozen fluids already around the Space Marine fleet had thickened considerably. The Space Marines powered away from the planet, a sphere of tyranids around them. The swarm distorted as the Space Marines moved off and thousands of bio-ships followed them, dragging the teeming life forms around the world into a teardrop.

‘The enemy is confounding our allies,’ said Erwin. ‘They are blinding them. Observe, the groups I indicated make their play, as predicted. There is a weakness at the rear of the enemy interception. They seek to tempt our brothers to make a swift run from their attackers. Of course, Asante will see that as a trap, but will be forced to exploit it anyway.’

‘And so they will be driven right into the arms of the approaching subswarm,’ said Achemen with dawning realisation.

Erwin nodded. ‘Did I not suggest this would happen?’

‘We should warn them.’

‘We should,’ said Erwin. ‘I doubt it will be possible.’

Achemen frowned. ‘We should at least try.’

‘Servile of Response! What say you?’

The Servile of Response went around his small kingdom of desks and cyborg slaves with nervous efficiency. ‘We cannot, my lord. The enemy employ total band inhibitor broadcasts.’

‘So you see. You are not a foolish warrior, Achemen, but you over rely on those who command you. You make assumptions about situations, about what those above you know. You can think beyond these restrictions, yours is a fine mind. If you are ever to become captain, you must transcend these limitations. You have too little confidence in your own abilities.’

The *Splendid Pinion* rushed across space. The hive mind finally deigned to pay attention to this new, negligible threat. Brass risk counter dials clicked upward. Servitors pedantically mumbled out unfavourable odds. On the hololith, two blots comprising hundreds of ships broke away from the world and made directly for the *Splendid Pinion*.

‘Enemy moving to intercept,’ said the Servile of the Watch.

‘Hold course and hold fire,’ ordered Erwin.

‘You are taking us directly into the tail of the pursuit swarm,’ said Achemen.

‘As is my intention, senior sergeant,’ said Erwin. ‘Now the swarm. See how the assembled ships of the Blood Angels and the Angels Numinous attempt to break through the weakness in the encirclement sphere? See how the enemy is ready to respond?’

Through the oculus, the feigned weak spot in the encirclement sphere cracked with the light of macrocannon bombardment. A wall of tyranid constructs blew apart, and from the interior sailed the Space Marines fleet.

‘Now watch how their hindmost vessel...’ Erwin looked questioningly at the Servile of the Watch.

‘The *Staff of Light*, my lord.’

‘Watch how the *Staff of Light* is sure to be caught. It is damaged,’ said Erwin. He brought up a magnified view and circled plasma venting from its drive stack with a quick movement of his finger over a gelscreen interface. ‘Your vaunted Captain Asante has not seen this. See how desperately they run to keep up. They are doomed.’

The sun welled around the black edge of Zozan Tertius, haloed through the densely packed tyranids. Realising their prey world had been rendered inedible, the governing mind of the swarm disengaged the rest of the splinter fleet from the planet and set a pursuit course for the Imperial ships. The xenos had no

chance of gaining on the human vessels, and so those set to trap them were redirected to close surely around the *Staff of Light*. The numbers attacking the battle-barges and other ships dwindled. Asante's taskforce pulled free, though they remained under heavy fire. Void shields blinked and flickered. Auspex banks warbled aboard the command deck of the *Splendid Pinion* at their collapse. An escort cruiser peeled away from the formation, fire streaming from it as its atmosphere burned up, and broke apart.

'Asante is making a run for safe translation distance,' said Achemen. 'If we follow his orders—'

'His suggestion, Achemen,' interrupted Erwin.

'His suggestion then, we shall also be safe, and we can cover their retreat. That was his intention.'

Erwin watched Asante's fleet pull away, leaving the lagging *Staff of Light* further behind. Hundreds of hive ships were turning from the pursuit, and falling like pelagic predators on bleeding prey.

'Do we wish to lose however many of our bloodline brothers are aboard that ship?' said Erwin.

'No, my lord,' said Achemen.

'No, indeed. So, watch me save them. Full speed ahead. Servile Belligerent, prepare to open fire, all weapons!'

Two battle-barges punching their way out of total encirclement was a spectacle to be remembered. Broadships rippling, they annihilated thousands of the tyranid ships mobbing them. Void shields burned with purple fire. Tyranid torpedoes and boarding spines flashed into nothing, shunted into the warp by ancient technologies, or their atoms sundered and the energies caged inside set loose in blinding flashes of annihilated matter.

Strike cruisers and escort craft operated around the paired leviathans, protecting the battle-barge's more vulnerable approaches, but it was the battle-barges that did the majority of the work, efficiently sectioning the three-dimensional battlefield between them and filling it with a punishing barrage. Macrocannons lobbed timed-fuse munitions into the midst of tyranid attack squadrons. Fusion beamers burned across space, slicing apart ship after ship before shutting off, then firing again.

'Look at that,' said Erwin. 'Asante is running his fusion beams to the overheating threshold. His gun crews must be exemplary.' He raised his voice. 'See, serviles! That is how a real ship is run. Take note.'

Plasma projectors sent out shorter-lived rays of energy, solar bright and damaging to the eyes of those who looked at them.

'Yes,' said Erwin. 'Asante deserves his reputation, but no man is perfect.' Erwin pointed an armoured finger at the *Staff of Light*. It was increasingly isolated at the edge of the fleet. Tyranid response squadrons turned back from the assault on the main battle group and bore down on it. 'Servile of the Helm, take us on a direct intercept course for the *Staff of Light*. Open fire now as we close – make me a hole in the xenos so that we might come alongside and help them.'

The Angels Numinous strike cruiser was of the same class as the *Splendid Pinion*, albeit of a differing pattern. The variation of its armament and shape was superficial. It had the same blocky rear hull containing the engines, main weapons and fighter bays. A short neck housed bombardment cannon batteries, embarkation deck and drop ports. Its flat prow was protected by a pair of blast shields giving it a hammer-headed appearance. The *Staff of Light* was a pale grey with vermilion shields. The *Splendid Pinion* was bright white with red accents. They were sisters, and the *Splendid Pinion* rushed to help its beleaguered sibling.

'Send a message to Captain Asante. Inform him we are moving to aid the *Staff of Life*.'

'There is extensive interference still, my lord. I cannot raise them,' said the Servile of Response.

'Keep trying.'

'Yes, my lord.'

‘My lord,’ said the Servile of the Watch. ‘The *Staff of Light* has lost its shields. The enemy are boarding in strength.’

‘We should leave them. Asante will have had his reasons,’ said Achemen.

They watched as hundreds of tyranid assault spores rushed at the ship, but it was not done yet, and most were burst apart by point defence weaponry.

‘They are still firing,’ said Erwin. ‘The Blood Angels may condone this sacrifice, but I will not. Serviles, how lies the field for pulsed laser communication?’

‘Possible, but difficult, my lord,’ said the Servile of Response. ‘There is a great deal of debris between us that will corrupt databursts or disperse them completely.’

‘Then they will be surprised to see us. Achemen, summon your squad and Orsini’s, have them report to the drop deck. Servile Belligerent, target preference for boarding spines. Take us in closer. The shorter distance our boarding torpedoes must go, the better it will be. Shelter the *Staff of Light* as much as possible with our void shields. Keep attempting communication with both Captain Asante and the *Staff of Light*. See if you can form a data bridge so we might coordinate our fire.’

The sparse human crew gave a chorus of ‘yes, my lord’ as each order was passed down the chain of command.

The *Staff of Light* rolled in the oculus as the *Splendid Pinion* sailed over it. The grey skin of the hull was pocked with acid burns all along its length, particularly towards the rear port side. Whipping tendrils disappeared into maggot holes twenty yards across as boarding spines wriggled their way through the ship’s armour and into the interior in search of meat.

With the two ships firing in tandem, the immediate space around the two vessels was cleared, although some of the small tyranid craft running ahead of the main fleet got through, while the wall of wriggling tentacles and calloused flesh blotting out the dying world of Zozan was gaining on them.

‘Achemen, we have to go now. Servile Locum, you have command.’

‘My lord.’ The Servile Locum activated his command station; the crew of the bridge reoriented their attention to him.

‘Come, Achemen,’ said Erwin. ‘Let us show the Angels Numinous how the Angels Excelsis fight. Serviles, maintain bombardment. We do not depart until every one of the Angels Numinous is aboard the *Splendid Pinion* or their ship is free of the swarm.’

Three boarding torpedoes burned through the spinal way of the *Staff of Life*. Melta arrays whooshed. The air shimmered with heat and molten metal ran down the walls. The torpedoes shuddered as their track units shut off and the melta arrays cut out. For a second, quiet returned. Guns boomed in the distance, shaking the ship. Molten plasteel glowed from white to orange to red in the unlit corridor. Metal *pinked* as it cooled.

Explosive bolts blew on the torpedoes’ prows, smashing their access ramps down with enough force to push away any final obstruction. Erwin and his men deployed rapidly, and were immediately confronted by a tumbling spill of attack organisms. Hissing things the size of human children sped at them from both ends of the way, long scythe-limbs raised and ready to kill. Bolters opened fire before the metal slag created by the Angels Excelsis’ landing had hardened. Bolt propulsion flares strobed the dim spinal corridor. The battlefield was dark, full of acrid fumes, but the Space Marines could barely miss. Their bolts ploughed into a crowd of aliens, blasting internal organs to pulp and sending shattered chitin cracking off the walls. Creatures behind their fallen broodmates slipped on spilled entrails. The tyranids came on regardless, heedlessly trampling the fallen.

Despite the toll the Space Marines took on the beasts, they continued to advance quickly from both stern

and prow of the ship, leaping over one another in their mindless haste to close. The Angels Excelsis adopted a standard spread order as they fired, forming into two loose skirmish lines back to back. They stood with two yard gaps between each Space Marine, so that their lines covered about half the width of the spinal way. The lines bent back at each end, and the brothers anchoring the ends stood with their backpacks almost touching. With the Space Marines position adjusted, xenos fell like crops before the harvester. Registering their losses, the swarm abruptly changed tactics. Large numbers of them switched direction simultaneously, heading for the open edges of the corridor to box the Space Marines in while yet more poured forward directly at their preys' guns to tie them up.

Not one of the creatures got within striking distance.

For a full minute, the Space Marines fired, each battle-brother keeping to his own pace, reloading when necessary, covering his squad mates when it was needed. Despite the number of beasts attacking them, the Space Marines sighted every burst carefully, their adapted brains making microsecond adjustments so that all their rounds hit their mark.

'Cease fire!' shouted Erwin.

The last bolt round banged out of a gun and rushed down the hall, detonating with a flash some way away. Then all was still. Piles of xenos bodies confronted them. No more came. Fyceline smoke merged with the greasy metal vapours occasioned by their entry.

Erwin lowered his storm bolter and pushed a dog-like alien over with his boot. Two of its four arms were missing. Yellow ichor dribbled from the wounds.

'Gaunt strain,' he said. He looked down the way towards the main section. Very much like the spinal corridor on his own ship, it was forty yards across and almost as high. Tracks for ship trains ran down the middle, and the ceiling was crammed with hundreds of pipes and conduits as dense as a rhizome mat. There was a screeching coming from a corridor off the way. The ship shook to the discharge of its guns and the impact of tyranid spores. 'Where are the Angels Numinous?' he said. He switched his vox to unciphered broadcast. 'This is Captain Erwin of the Angels Excelsis. If our brothers of the Angels Numinous are present, declare yourselves. We have come to retrieve you from the ship.' He got only static back in reply. 'Auspex,' Erwin said. 'Give me a life form scan.'

Sergeant Orsini unclamped a handheld auspex from his leg and keyed it into activation. Its gentle pinging robbed some of the fury from the muffled noise of war.

The sergeant sent the results directly to the captain's sensorium.

'There are concentrations of life ahead, my lord, I would say the enemy,' said Orsini. 'Nothing else. Minor returns on fixed organisms to either side of us. Gun deck servitors, I would guess.'

Erwin made a thoughtful noise. 'We shall head to the command deck and secure it. Someone is still aboard this vessel, directing its operations. Forward!'

They ran down the spinal corridor, covering the mile and a half to the main hull quickly. The life signs were concentrated around the juncture of the ship's neck and its stern command section.

Erwin ordered his men to slow as the glowing red indicator of enemy life signs drew close on his cartolith.

Sure enough, they saw the foe with their own eyes soon enough. A bulkhead hid the first of them, but on passing they were confronted with a tyranid boarding spine dying in the wall. It was a large ship-animal, the heavy armour to its fore generously provided with tubules for the venting of acid. Its foreparts looked like a spearhead, designed to penetrate its target, with the ridged, layered armour plates covering it acting as barbs to prevent it being drawn out. Now it was aboard, it had lost its predatory sleekness. Its head had been flung open into four quarters after penetrating the vessel, an action that appeared to have been fatal to the beast itself. The armour had opened along seams that were cracked and splintered in a way

that meant they could never rejoin, and the skin and muscles underneath were torn. Tentacles hanging from the interior flopped weakly against each other, not even attempting to grasp the Space Marines. Mucous dripped from its torn gullet. The thing had no guts of its own; the fleshy cavity where its internal organs should have been was occupied instead by transit bladders hanging from gristly fibres. What it had transported was impossible to judge. Acid leaked from ducts, melting a wide hole in the floor and sending up a choking smog from the dissolving metal that stirred in the ventilation systems. The auspex indicated there were more of the spines hanging from the wall further along.

Erwin slowed his men. 'Something is moving in this mess. Be prepared.'

Guns clacked as the Angels Excelsis pulled their bolters into sighting position. Erwin moved forward slowly. His helmlight display blinked up cautionary amber screed as acidic fog condensed on his armour. There was enough corrosiveness left in the fumes to damage his battleplate's soft seals, if he remained in it too long.

'There!' shouted Achemen. Bolt shots followed his word.

The fog came alive with screeching shapes. Multi-limbed xenos nightmares poured forward. Their horrific appearance was made all the worse by a superficial resemblance to humanity.

Brother Golus of squad Achemen filled the corridor with promethium. There was no time for restraint – he emptied the entire flask of his flamer. Genestealers fell back covered in fire, arms flailing, and their screeches were horribly human. The genestealers were the worst of the enemy's weapons, infiltration biomorphs who perverted the breeding cycles of the creatures they came across. Most of those Erwin had fought had shown the mark of human genetics, from their noses, perpetually wrinkled in hate, to their grasping hands. They ran in a hunched parody of men. Erwin's gorge rose at this perversion of the sacred Terran form.

'Hate the alien,' he pronounced, shooting down a purple-faced monster as it came at him, clawed limbs outstretched.

Genestealers were harder to kill than 'gaunts. Their bodies were toughened inside and out to withstand combat. Their armour was thicker, their organs more deeply buried. The lower pair of arms carried huge, human-like hands, capable of ripping away a Space Marine's helmet in one strike. But what made the creatures most dangerous were their upper claws, a trio of conical spikes with monomolecular edges. No other tyranid biomorph was more suited to tearing through ceramite. Even the thick plates of Terminator armour offered little protection against a well-placed blow.

To standard power armour they were deadly.

A genestealer sprang off its powerful back legs, upper claws outstretched to disembowel the captain. Erwin slashed with his power sword, cleaving three of the four arms from the monster's body. Still it lived, crashing into him, severed arms weeping thick blood. Its taloned feet scraped at his armour, scoring the paint and scratching the metal beneath. The remaining upper claw swept around in an attempt to punch through Erwin's eye-lenses. Erwin opened fire, and the beast lifted back at the last moment, spine breaking apart from within and showering viscera all over its broodmates.

Erwin shook the corpse free from the end of his gun, and held aloft his sword.

'Slay them all! Once they are dead, the way is clear! Purge the alien! The stars belong to mankind!'

The genestealers would not die easily. They were wickedly fast, dodging blows that should have hit, and responded with devastating speed. Brother Agnaras clove into the chitinous exoskeleton of one with his chainsword, only to be eviscerated by another as the toothed blade bucked and roared, stuck fast in the corpse of his victim. A genestealer fell from the ceiling, landing on Brother Chrysto of Achemen's squad. Chrysto staggered backwards, firing behind him as the genestealer embraced him in all four arms, then wrenched off his head, an insolent sneer on its hybrid features. Blood spouted high from Chrysto's neck.

The scent made Erwin's spittle run down his chin. His desire to get at the blood and lap it up sharpened his reflexes even while it clouded his mind with rage.

'Slay! Slay! Slay! By the Blood! By the Great Angel!' He shouted the Chapter war cry, his storm bolter bucking ferociously in his hand as it let out a stream of mass reactives, blasting genestealers away from his warriors, and laying low those loping through the chemical fog towards the fight.

'Death! Death to xenos! Honour the Emperor through your slaughter!' bellowed Erwin. He ran at a genestealer about to decapitate one of his embattled brothers, and cut it clean in half with a single blow.

He was so focused on his brothers that one of the foe almost took him unawares with a charge from the side. It was already wounded, a bolt crater in its stomach bleeding freely, but it was not weakened, and it barged Erwin off his feet. The captain twisted, landing on his back, sword across his front. The genestealer pounced on him as he struggled to get upright. One huge, humanoid fist closed around his right hand; long fingers scrabbled for his sword hilt. He could have sworn the thing smiled at him as it flicked the power stud of his blade, killing the disruption field. It kept Erwin's hand tightly gripped in its own, preventing him from reactivating his weapon. The thing bared black teeth, its hollow tongue emerging from its maw and smearing saliva across his helmet. Erwin wrestled with it, bracing its lower hands with his dead power sword, but it was far stronger than its wiry body suggested, and the combined effort of his muscles and armour could not shift it. It drew back its upper claws, ready to strike.

The thing shook to a triplet of bolt impacts. Still hissing, it fell sideways from his chest. Achemen came to his side. Firing his bolter one-handed into the jerking body of the genestealer, the sergeant extended his other hand to Erwin. The captain let his storm bolter hang by its strap and grasped his second's wrist; his stabilisation jets blasted heated vapour to help him stand.

'Careful, captain,' said Achemen, then he was away again, bolter barking death.

Erwin howled with outrage. The thirst tightened its hold over him, goading him into closer quarters with his enemy. His sword crackled with renewed power, and he swung it in wide arcs as he charged into the foe, its shining edge blurring into an electric crescent with the speed. Several more of the creatures fell to his wrath before the combat calmed, and the enemy backed away from his rage. They hissed and snapped at him, but they would not come near. Stealthily, they withdrew into the chemical fog.

Achemen's bolter banged behind him. The shattered remains of a genestealer fell from the ceiling, splashing black blood over the party.

'My lord, the tyranids are retreating!' shouted the foremost Space Marine.

Shouts of astonishment and rapid boltgun fire followed the genestealers' unexpected withdrawal.

A brief burst of gunfire, another, then silence. The Space Marines broke forward to fall in line with their foremost brother, guns up, repairing a formation disrupted by combat.

'They are wiser than the rest of their kin,' said Achemen.

'Cunning is not wisdom,' growled Erwin. He was struggling now to contain the thirst. He forced it back. He had to concentrate. If he gave in, he would doom his warriors to a glorious but pointless death. He steadied himself with the appropriate catechisms.

'Nor is rage,' said Achemen. 'What are your orders?'

Six mortis runes pulsed on Erwin's helmlate. White and red armoured bodies lay among the numerous alien dead.

'Withdraw the dead from this fog, or their gene-seed may be lost. We will retrieve the bodies on our return. Erect a teleport homer, in case we do not come back this way.' In all likelihood the bodies would be lost should they attempt to teleport them back, but a slender chance was better than forfeiting the gene-seed for sure.

His men moved into action, not needing to be told who would perform which task; they smoothly broke

into two groups, one covering, the others dragging their dead brothers from the mist. One Space Marine took a pack and tube from his waist. In seconds he had removed a homer's components from its packaging and erected the machine. A red light blinked on top of the pole, and a sense of disquiet emanated in pulses from its humming body.

'Complete, my lord.'

'We press on to the command deck,' he said, pointing through the fog. 'Keep your guard up.'

The ship shook to a massive impact. Achemen glanced back towards the prow. 'That was no explosion.'

'We must hurry,' said Erwin. 'Scan for survivors. Once we have reached the command deck, we return to the *Splendid Pinion*. I will not lose my own ship.'

They ran past the bodies of the other tyranid boarding spines. Erwin found the technology aberrant, if it could be termed technology. Whatever creatures had been devoured to make the spines had been enslaved in the most profound and total way. There was no denying their efficacy, however. The spines had hit the void ship precisely enough to avoid the gun decks lining the neck, then chewed and melted their way through yards of armour to reach the corridor before dying in a frenzy of disgorgement. Past the last creature the acid fog cleared, and they came to the heavily protected approach to the command tower. Heavy bolter emplacements tracked them as they walked by. Imperial signum codes broadcast by their armour were all that protected them from the mechanisms. Fragments of flesh hung from every surface. Chitin cracked under their feet. In that space the tyranids had been so thoroughly obliterated it was impossible to say what manner of beast the remains had come from.

Ahead lay the adamantium doors leading into the command deck. A large siege beast slumped dead against the acid scarred metal, its cranium cored out by lascannon beams.

'Form a cordon. Sergeant Orsini, get that door open.'

'Yes, captain,' said the sergeant. He hurried to the door, mag-locked his weapon to his thigh and took out his auspex. He held its head towards the door centre. 'The machine-spirits are in communion, my lord.'

The ship shook violently again. The Space Marines staggered as it was pushed off course.

'We should leave now!' said Achemen.

'Being my second gives you no right to question me,' said Erwin. 'Open the door!'

The auspex chimed. Giant pistons in the walls hissed and the doors opened following their complicated sequence, each layer peeling back and revealing another that opened at a different angle. The first slid sideways, the second diagonally, the third vertically. Before they had retracted fully the Space Marines ducked through, ready for whatever they might discover.

Silence greeted them. Servitors worked mutely. Machines made their quiet noises. The oculus was closed. The only sign of battle was the deck trembling to the firing of guns.

Erwin and Achemen advanced ahead of their troops. Orsini ordered the rest of their party to spread out.

'There is no one here. We have risked our lives for a decoy!' said Achemen in disbelief. He marched his way to the enginarium station. The mindless servitors ignored him. 'Their warp engine is damaged along with the main motive drive. Brother Erwin, they left this ship behind on purpose.'

'Of course there is no one here. This is an obvious diversion.'

The Angels Excelsis raised their guns, training them unerringly on the source of the voice.

A warrior in armour the colour of drying blood stepped out from among ranked cogitator banks. His power sword was inactive, but ready. With him were five heavily armed Chapter serfs, their faces covered with full mask helmets, and a spindly navigator almost as tall as the Space Marine. His limbs were so thin a strong draught would break them. The reinforcement braces at his joints were probably the only things keeping him upright. His hands were overly large and the fingers webbed, his forehead covered with a black bandana.

‘Declare yourself!’ said Erwin.

‘Sergeant Hennan, of the Angels Numinous.’

‘What are you doing hiding here?’

‘Waiting to die,’ said the warrior. ‘Someone had to oversee the servitors so they kept up a good rate of fire. My plan was to surprise the enemy when they boarded. Instead I have surprised an impetuous rescuer who does not know how to listen to orders.’

‘Captain Asante is not my commander,’ said Erwin.

‘Then you should have paid attention to good sense, captain,’ said Hennan. ‘Respect should have made you hearken. Now you have put your ship in danger when only this one would have been lost. Our main drive malfunctioned, damaging the warp engine in the process. There was no choice but to abandon it. Had the others delayed to shelter this ship, they would have been lost, as you will soon discover. Everyone else left. You are too late, Captain Erwin.’

‘What about the serfs?’ said Erwin. ‘And him.’ He pointed his gun at the navigator. ‘Why is he still here?’

‘These men were of the same mind as I,’ said the Angel Numinous. ‘Best to die in honour than flee in shame. My navigator here—’

‘I may speak for myself, sergeant.’ The mutant had a high, sexless voice. There was a hint of pain to it. As a psychic being, such close contact with the hive mind would be causing him great discomfort. ‘I am pledge-bonded to this vessel. I cannot leave, by the laws of my house.’

‘That is a waste,’ said Achemen.

‘So is throwing away your ship and company attempting to rescue an obvious decoy vessel,’ said Hennan.

‘Your ship has served its purpose. Come with us, we can at least save you.’

‘I vowed to end my days here. I will not break my oath.’

Erwin had little to say in reply. He was shamed by his impulsiveness. There was only one way he could see to regain his honour. He and Hennan stared at each other.

‘You need not lose your ship,’ he said.

‘Asante did not see it that way,’ said Hennan.

‘The situation has changed.’

‘We can die together?’ said the sergeant.

‘We can live together,’ said Erwin. ‘Are your other systems still operational?’

‘More or less.’

‘Then we can make a break for the warp,’ said Erwin. ‘We can open the rift with our engines, you can follow us in. You have your navigator still. Once inside the immaterium, you will be able to follow us and re-emerge when we do.’

‘What he says is possible, though difficult, sergeant,’ said the navigator. ‘It is a chance. We should take it.’

‘I appreciate that you have an overwhelming desire to live if you can, Navigator Meus,’ said Hennan. ‘But we will never make it to a safe distance from Zozan. We will be overtaken.’

‘Who said anything about a safe distance?’ said Erwin. ‘We can translate here.’

‘You are impetuous, captain. The mass interference of all these tyranids will rip our ships to pieces.’

‘It might.’

‘It almost certainly will.’

‘It is better than dying,’ said Erwin.

‘So you would trade the certainty of saving one ship for the possibility of saving two. Consider there is

also the possibility of saving none.'

'If my ship runs now, we will probably lose it anyway,' said Erwin.

'The probability of your survival alone is higher than our survival together,' said Hennan.

'Where is your fighting spirit, sergeant?'

'Under control,' said Hennan. 'Are you, captain?'

The ship lurched again. The movement was big enough to register against the grav-plating of the ship.

'You are running out of time!' said Erwin. 'Decide. I can save you.'

Hennan stared back, his helmet masking his expression.

'Very well. We shall try, and, when we die, we shall at least drag millions of these xenos spawn into the warp.'

'Do you still have shuttlecraft?'

'A few,' said Hennan.

'Then if your hangars are clear, I request that we might borrow them, and return to our vessel.'

Five more Angels Excelsis fell on their way to the *Staff of Life's* hangar bays, cut down by genestealers and other, worse things. But Erwin was conveyed to safety and, forty minutes after he departed the *Staff's* bridge, he strode back on to the command deck of the *Splendid Pinion*.

The void outside the ship was crowded with tyranid attack craft, living and dead. The *Splendid Pinion* was free of assault beasts. The same could not be said of the *Staff of Light*. A shelled bio-ship had the front of the ship firmly in its tentacles, and was biting at the prow shields with a giant beak. The size of the thing was difficult to comprehend. Few creatures grew to such a size by any natural process, or could withstand the rigours of the void.

'Send a data-squirt to Captain Asante,' said Erwin. 'Inform him we have the *Staff of Light* under our protection and will attempt a tandem emergency translation.'

'You are insane,' said Achemen.

'Only those who are insane have strength enough to prosper.'

'Only those who prosper truly judge what is sane,' responded Achemon.

'Then you know the Prestican thinkers.'

'I never said that I agree with them,' said Achemen. 'If this works, captain, I swear I shall pay great attention to your every word. If it fails, I would like to say in advance I told you so.'

Erwin looked at his second in command. 'So you do know how to jest.'

Achemen removed his helmet, revealing a face sheened with combat sweat. His expression was entirely humourless. 'I do not jest.'

Erwin shrugged. 'All power to the main drive,' he ordered. 'Prepare immaterial drive for emergency translation. Intensify forward fire. Servile Belligerent, remove that creature from the prow of the *Staff of Life*.'

'Yes, my lord! Gunnery stations, prepare fusion beamers and plasma casters for maximum discharge,' ordered the Servile Belligerent.

Erwin's commands sent his human crew into action. They were tense, but worked efficiently, their fear at imminent death kept in check by their training.

'Servile of the Helm, take us forward.'

'Course, my lord?'

Erwin grinned inside his helmet. 'Into the heart of the swarm.'

The *Splendid Pinion's* engines burst into life, their backwash incinerating a score of tyranid vessels attempting a stern approach. Erwin's vessel slid forward smoothly relative to the *Staff of Life*. The

creature wrapped around the prow spewed streams of gas from vents along the curve of its shell, shoving the *Staff of Life* sideways. The stress of this movement could snap a ship in two, and the vessel had little choice but to roll with the beast while attempting to move forward.

‘Spinal gunnery stations, standby!’ shouted the Servile Belligerent.

The tyranid beast was huge in the oculus, moving out of view as the *Splendid Pinion* passed it by. Erwin watched its grainy image captured on the hololith and taticaria.

‘Fire! Full strike!’ said the Servile Belligerent.

The shells and void-pocked flesh of tyranids all around the *Splendid Pinion* lit up harshly as a dozen energy cannons let fire. Beams of plasma slammed into the shell of the grappling kraken, charring it through to the core. Fusion beams flash cooked the soft tissue within, then rendered it into ash, but the creature did not die. It convulsed, gripping the ship harder than ever, before a second volley hollowed out the shell. It floated away, keratinous armour smouldering, detached tentacles drifting off, given brief freedom before they too expired. The *Staff of Life* lumbered around, correcting its course and following the *Splendid Pinion*.

‘Match speed to the *Staff of Light*,’ said Erwin. ‘Do not outpace it.’

Guns flared along the flanks of the two ships. The void shields of the *Splendid Pinion* sparkled as it absorbed thousands of small impacts. The strike cruisers were alone, the rest of the fleet having outpaced the pursuing tyranids. The *Staff of Life* could only limp along. Bio-ships swarmed the two vessels. By dint of sheer firepower, they kept their side approaches clear of aliens, but the real peril came at them from the front, where the two squadrons sent out to intercept the Imperial fleet had reversed course and were now bearing down directly on the strike cruisers.

‘My lord?’ asked the Servile of the Helm. He looked up from his station and the choir of servitors he directed.

‘Straight at them! Prepare for warp translation on my mark. Activate Geller fields.’

‘We shall have to drop the void shields,’ warned the Servile Scutus.

‘Do it!’ commanded Erwin.

The tyranids drew closer. The void shields dropped, exposing the ship to the impact of living torpedoes and balls of bioplasma. The anti-munitions cannons of the vessel worked ceaselessly. The point defence turrets and interception galleries reeked of overheated machinery, and were ankle deep in hot shell casings.

‘We are not going to make it,’ said Achemen. He pointed ahead. A shoal of many-armed assault beasts was speeding at the vessel.

‘Stand firm!’ ordered Erwin. ‘Launch torpedoes. Full spreads. Reload, fire again. Do not stop.’

Moments later, the prow ejected six heavy torpedoes at the creatures.

The timbre of the ship’s voice changed. Complex harmonics overlaid the rumble of the engines.

‘Translation in fifty seconds,’ intoned a dull machine voice.

The soapy sheen of a Geller field appeared around the vessel. There was no communication between the Angels Excelsis and the Angels Numinous ships, but the *Staff of Light*’s actions matched that of their would-be rescuer, and their own warp protection popped into being a moment later, flexing the void around it.

‘Translation in thirty seconds.’

‘We will be torn apart by gravitic shear,’ said Achemen. ‘I advise you to change course, captain, and make speed for a different translation point.’

‘The chances of survival are only moderately better,’ said Erwin. ‘The certainty of death to the xenos is only increased by our departure from their midst. Make for the centre of the interception shoal!’

‘Translation in twenty seconds.’

Thousands of spores, seeds, pods and living munitions peppered the oculus, mouths sucking and scraping at the armourglass as they slid off. The first round of torpedoes met their target, blasting apart a kraken ship. The second volley arrived more quickly, the distance between the closing splinter squadron and the escaping cruisers now considerably shortened, but these detonated prematurely, their drives fouled by suicidal creatures and their servitor brains deceived by false information projected by living chaff.

‘We are not going to make it. Damn it, Erwin, you have killed us all.’ Achemen placed his helmet back on and loosened his weapons. ‘All squads, prepare for boarding parties.’

Erwin ignored him. He leaned on the dais rail, hands gripping it so hard the metal bent. There was a chance. Where there was life, there was always a chance.

The chance was rapidly diminishing. Already grasping tentacles were unfurling, diamond-tipped appendages flexed, the teeth on their suckers twitching, ready to snare their prey.

‘Translation in ten seconds,’ said the voice.

‘That is it. They have us,’ said Achemen.

But as the first tentacle brushed the ship, it recoiled. The kraken slowed and broke formation clumsily, turning away from the vessel. One sailed dangerously close to the command tower, a vast, moist eye peered hungrily into the ship, and then it was gone.

‘Apparently not,’ said Erwin.

‘Translation ready,’ said the voice.

‘Close the shutters!’ bellowed Erwin. ‘Brace for translation! Engage warp engines!’

The shutters of the oculus descended, smearing the remains of dead tyranid void organisms across armourglass. Command deck lumens dipped and turned red.

‘Brace. Brace. Brace,’ sang a skull-faced servitor with a beautiful voice.

The ship’s immaterial drive howled at being activated in proximity to so much mass. Reality warping bent perceptions out of true, stretching space-time like spun sugar. The sickening threat of Geller field failure teetered on the cusp of realisation. The crews of both craft experienced a moment of disassociation, a feeling of being adrift in a sea of monsters far worse than the tyranids.

Outside, the black cloth of space balled in on itself. In place of the normally smooth creation of a warp rift, the void ruffled into a cluster of holes, and the veil of reality opened like melting plastek sheeting. Multiple smaller rifts sagged open, interspersed by hard knots of compressed reality. The ships sailed on directly towards the central tear of this cancerous fissure. They shuddered as gravity waves rucked up the void. A hard particle sleet of neutrons and gamma bursts slew servitors and burned out electronic systems, but still they plunged on towards the blazing unlight beyond the uneven rift.

The effect on the tyranids was catastrophic. Their ships were scattered like playthings flicked off a blanket. Those closest to the opening tear imploded messily on themselves, compressed into neutronic diamond, or were smeared bloodily across space.

With a final wrenching noise that echoed in the souls of all living things present, the empyrean was revealed. The ships passed out of reality with a violent flare, leaving the interception shoal in shreds. For thousands of miles around their translation point the tyranid fleet was decimated.

On board the command deck of the *Splendid Pinion* Erwin released the dais rail.

‘Well done, my servants,’ he said.

Sparks rained down from on high. The smell of cooked human flesh rose from wrecked servitors. Fires burned unchecked on three galleries at the back. But they had survived.

‘Captain,’ said the Servile of Response. ‘I have vox contact from the *Staff of Light*. They are firmly in our warp envelope and following.’

Erwin looked over to Achemen.

‘First sergeant, you spoke too hastily.’

‘I did not,’ said Achemen, staring ahead. ‘The enterprise was reckless.’

‘Yet you admit we are alive, and we have saved a valuable vessel in the process.’

‘Luck,’ said Achemen.

‘Maybe.’ Erwin stood taller. His pauldrons shifted back. ‘You will report to me later for punishment

duty.’ He swept his gaze over his command deck. ‘Never gainsay me like that again.’



CHAPTER SIX

THE ARCHANGELIAN

While the muster gathered, Commander Dante spent much of his waking hours in the throne room at the pinnacle of the Archangelian, a soaring, needle-thin tower upon the Arx Murus. A processional staircase guarded by statues wound its way up the tower's hollow centre, decorated with a continuous mural a thousand yards in length painted only in shades of red, black and bone. A rich runner, hand knotted by the Blood Angels themselves, carpeted the stair in a single, unbroken length. The rods that held it in place were of pink Baalite granite, the stops of platinum. A hundred thousand bloodstones glinted in the balustrade of the stair. Organ music blasted from the depths with such force it created a swirling draught in the shaft of the stairwell, buffeting the angelic cyber-constructs and the servo-skulls of loyal blood thralls centuries dead that thronged it.

Hundreds of Space Marines ascended the stair in slow unison, their steps timed with ritual precision. Dozens of Chapter heraldries were evident. Most of the supplicants were Chapter lords and captains, Chaplains, forge masters, Sanguinary priests and similarly high ranks. Though members of brotherhoods other than the Blood Angels, they were moved by the beautiful singing of the blood thralls as much as their hosts were, and hearkened to the teachings of the Blood Angels Chaplains stationed on the stair's wide landings with as much respect.

Mephiston bypassed the ritual line in an unseemly hurry. Rhacelus followed. The appearance of the Lord of Death was greeted with a mixture of emotion by the gathered scions of Sanguinius. Many Librarians acknowledged him. The reaction of their brothers was less favourable.

Mephiston's uncanny presence provoked fear in all men, even in the hardened hearts and minds of the Adeptus Astartes, and though it was but a shifting unease the Space Marines felt, it was still fear. Of all the sons of Sanguinius, only High Chaplain Astorath the Grim, Redeemer of the Lost, provoked more loathing.

Rhacelus felt the wash of emotion as his master surely must. Mephiston showed not a sign of caring. His will was hard as millennial ice, black as night and strong as iron. Opprobrium or approbation were equally unimportant to him.

Droning chants provided a simple baseline to the complexities of soaring plainsong. Proclamations of

Sanguinius' purity and responses of loyalty from the Space Marine lords added a rhythm. All were entwined with the rumbling organ music. Unity of purpose and of blood bound music and men together.

If this were only a common happening, thought Rhacelus, *then nought would stand against us. The galaxy would know peace again.* Rhacelus was old, and he had seen many gatherings of the Blood, but he was humbled by this unprecedented display of power and piety coiling its way around the Archangelian.

Mephiston caught Rhacelus' thoughts.

'It is impressive,' he said aloud.

'The Blood is strong with us,' said Rhacelus.

'You have spent too long these last weeks cloistered in the Diurnal Vaults, Rhacelus. Venture onto the Arx Murus and you will see the majesty of the force Dante has summoned.'

They arrived at the top of the stair. Blood Angels in the golden plate of the Sanguinary Guard barred a giant set of carved stone doors leading into the throne hall. Two skull-headed angels were depicted in the stone either side of a giant 'IX' picked out in gold, their skeletal hands held up to frame the numeral.

At the head of the line waited Castellan Zargo, the Chapter Master of the Angels Encarmine, flanked by his honour guard. Mephiston ignored him.

'Let us pass,' said Mephiston to the Sanguinary Guard.

The guardian angel's vox emitter rendered his voice emotionless, at odds with the howling mouth of his death mask.

'Lord Commander Dante forbids entry while he is receiving our allies.'

'He must see us immediately,' said Rhacelus. 'We have news regarding the Diamor taskforce.'

'I shall contact him when he is done with the lords of the Angels Penitent.'

'Damn protocol,' said Rhacelus. 'This cannot wait.'

The Lord of Death stared into the eye-lenses of the sentry. Power haloed the Lord of Death's face, the blue wychlight bringing cold accents to the warm gold of the guard's armour. 'You will speak with him now.'

'Very well.' The Sanguinary Guard fell silent a moment as he communicated on a private channel. 'You may enter, oh Lord of Death,' he said.

The Sanguinary Guard parted their spears. Mephiston gazed at them with undisguised annoyance as they swung open the soundless doors.

The throne hall occupied the whole of the tower's pinnacle. Decorated buttresses leaned in from heavily carved walls supporting the dome of stained glass. Floor to ceiling windows, sixty feet high, gave views out over the fortress monastery and the host barracked in the desert. Cowled blood thralls stood motionless in recesses between the windows holding bronze effigies of artists' tools and small representations of their masters' weapons. The stone floor was black as the void, its surface flawless and polished to so reflective a shine it was as if a second, inverted dome lurked just beneath its surface.

Ten stylised statues of Space Marines made an inner circle within the room, five to represent the Angelic Graces of honour, humility, mercy, restraint and forgiveness. Set in opposition were the Warrior's Virtues of strength, savagery, abandon, rage and detachment. Where an eleventh statue might have stood was the commander's throne. Nine steps of blood-red porphyry led up to a seat far too large for a human being, even a Space Marine, sheltered under a giant bronze ciborium. Sanguinius spread golden wings and arms behind the throne in an effigy so lifelike he looked as if he might take flight.

Another image of Sanguinius sat on the throne, and this one did live. Commander Dante wore the death mask of Sanguinius and, in doing so, became an echo of him.

Commander Dante should have looked small and unimportant in a seat sized for a primarch, but somehow the mask magnified his presence, making a giant of his golden armoured form. He was a vessel

for Sanguinius' grace, and the light of the Emperor's noblest son shone out of him.

On Dante's left stood Corbulo, the Sanguinary high priest. On his right was the Paternis Sanguis Ordamael, deputising for the ever-absent High Chaplain Astorath. Either side of them were crescent formations of the Chapter's highest officials, like blood-red wings. All were bareheaded but Ordamael, whose chaplaincy vows forbade him from removing his helmet in company, and Dante, who habitually hid his face behind that of Sanguinius.

Fourteen Space Marines knelt at the foot of the stairs. Eight were Chaplains, their humanity hidden by cast skulls and symbols of death. The rest wore armour that bore too close a resemblance to that of the Death Company for Rhacelus' liking. Dark red thorns snaked over the black of their plate.

Rhacelus felt a deep self-loathing radiating from them and, by extension, for the rest of their geneline. Still, they had come to defend Baal.

'Rise,' commanded Dante. To the purr of armour and the dull noises of metal on stone, the Space Marines stood. 'I accept the fealty of the Lords of the Thorns,' said Dante. 'In the name of our shared blood, and the Great Angel, who is father to us all, I welcome you to Baal. I thank you for your presence. As head of the Red Council, and of this Chapter, I greet you as brothers.'

Corbulo added his words. 'On behalf of the Council of Bone and Blood, I also thank and welcome you.'

The Angels Penitent reclusiarch, rather than any of the captains, responded.

'This is the home of our father, who made us, and in whose eyes we are all found wanting for our lack of perfection,' he said. 'In this place we shall stand beside you, Lord Dante, and seek forgiveness for our shortcomings. May the eyes of Sanguinius be on us all, and may he judge us fairly for our faults.'

Dante nodded a little, neither agreeing with the sentiment nor denouncing it.

'Go now, Reclusiarch Relian, and prepare for war.'

The Space Marines gave thanks and turned from Dante with their heads bowed. Their reclusiarch paused as they passed the Librarians, and he looked up and levelled an accusing finger at Mephiston.

'The Emperor condemns,' he said. 'You should not be.'

'And yet I am,' said Mephiston calmly.

Relian's disgust at Mephiston soured the air. There was a split second where fate held its breath. Rhacelus felt Relian come close to attacking the Lord of Death. He clenched his fist. 'May you find the Great Angel's mercy through an honourable death,' he said, and he walked away.

The doors opened, and the Space Marines left.

'Their creed is perverse,' said Ordamael, when the doors were safely shut.

Dante sighed and tapped his fist lightly upon the plain stone of his throne. He looked at his hand as he moved it. The blank-eyed stare of Sanguinius regarded the limb as if it were a thing alien to him. 'They are welcome, nonetheless.'

The commander summoned his armoury thralls and ordered them to remove the golden mask of Sanguinius. His servants wrapped the helmet in red silk and took it away behind the throne. The officers of the Chapter waited in silence. Many watched Mephiston closely. Not all of them did so with friendly eyes.

Dante's lined face took the place of Sanguinius' perfect features. Dante often said to those closest to him that in wearing Sanguinius' deathmask he became the primarch, in as far as he was perceived by those outside the Chapter. When he wore the armour common humanity and Adeptus Astartes alike saw Sanguinius, not Dante. Maybe there was a deeper truth there than even Dante realised. Without the mask he appeared too small for the throne. The radiance that shone from him dimmed.

'Now, my Lord of Death, what brings you from the librarius into the midst of our diplomacy?' Though Dante was less weary than he had been during the Cryptus campaign he still rarely showed his face, with

good reason. His aged appearance was shocking to those unaccustomed to it. His skin was losing the leatheriness that ancient Space Marines developed, and becoming thin. His cheeks were loose on his skull. Wattles hung beneath his chin and his golden hair had become fine and white.

‘We have made contact with the Diamor fleet, my lord,’ said Rhacelus. He unclipped a scroll case from the belt of his blue armour and walked up the first of the dais steps. He offered the scroll to the Chapter Master with a short bow. ‘Master Leeter’s message.’

‘I take it from the dire looks on your faces that the news you have is bad,’ said Dante. He reached for the scroll. Mephiston gripped Rhacelus’ wrist and moved his hand away.

‘Wait,’ said Mephiston. ‘You must know, the circumstances whereby this message came to us are unusual.’

‘How so?’ asked Dante. He withdrew his hand.

‘We were opposed by some force, my lord,’ said Rhacelus. ‘Events gather to a head around the Cadian Gate.’

‘Rhacelus, let me tell this story from the beginning,’ said Mephiston. ‘There is something of great import at play.’

‘Do so quickly,’ said Dante. ‘Many warriors wait to meet with me, and more are on their way. Time is short, but I will honour them in the correct way. They deserve courtesy at least in return for their lives.’

Mephiston narrowed his eyes. ‘Then I will be brief. I was struck by a vision. It came to me while I slept in my sanctum. This is unheard of.’

Dante looked intently at his Chief Librarian. Corbulo became attentive.

‘The vision was sent to me by a member of the aeldari race,’ continued Mephiston. ‘I was afflicted by foreboding, attached, I was sure, to Diamor, but when I attempted to scry that system in my dream I was instead shown Cadia attacked by a Black Crusade of unsurpassed size. Billions of foes both daemonic and mortal issued forth from the Eye.’

‘As Astorath’s message informed us,’ said Brother Incarael, the Master of the Blade. His armour was massively enlarged by a Techmarine’s equipment. ‘These are known factors.’

‘There was more to this than Astorath conveyed,’ said Mephiston. ‘I saw Cadia fall, and while I watched a sense of a tragedy unfolding now touched my soul. When I awoke, Epistolary Rhacelus and I attempted to find our Diamor taskforce once again, for it was from there that my first sense of foreboding came. We saw our brothers arrive. The First, Second and elements of the Seventh you sent from Cryptus, my lord, broke warp shortly after Astorath and the Fifth Company. It is good that they did not arrive simultaneously.’ Mephiston spoke the next words very clearly, so that none might mistake them. ‘The Fifth Company was psychically attacked, and has fallen to the Black Rage.’

Shocked silence greeted Mephiston’s news. Dante’s head dropped a fraction of an inch, no more than that, but Mephiston saw.

‘How many are lost to the rage?’ he said quietly.

‘After our vision,’ said Rhacelus, ‘we went to Baal Secundus’ relay, and focused all the effort of our astropathicum upon Diamor. Shortly after, Master Leeter made contact with Codicier Asasmael.’

‘Asasmael lives?’ said Brother Adanicio, Warden of the Gates. He was head of the logistician, responsible for every detail of the Chapter’s logistics. He made a note upon the data-slate attached by cords to his ornate armour. ‘What of our astropaths?’

‘The astropaths are dead or driven mad by passage through the warp. The empyrean is in uproar around the Eye of Terror,’ explained Rhacelus. ‘The situation is far worse than we feared.’

‘How many have fallen to the rage?’ demanded Dante.

‘Asasmael reports nearly all. The Librarians, Astorath, Captain Sendini and others with either protection

or great will have survived...’ Rhacelus’ wrist was released by Mephiston. He offered up the scroll again.

‘How many were there on the *Angelic Blade* and *the Flame of Baal*?’ said Dante again.

‘My lord,’ said Brother Bellerophon, Keeper of the Heavengate, lord commander of the Blood Angel’s fleet. ‘It was the entire Fifth Company. I...’

‘Give me numbers!’ shouted Dante with sudden fury. The Archangelian fell silent. Half-human things roosting in the buttressing beneath the dome took flight with a clatter of metal wings and squawked prayers. Dante rarely expressed himself so forcefully. Mephiston sensed the rising of the thirst. Its pernicious psychic influence sparked sympathetic reactions of anger and hunger in all those around the commander.

‘There were ninety-four of them, my lord,’ said Adanicio hesitantly. ‘The Daemonbanes were our only battle company approaching full strength.’

Dante’s gauntlet clenched, rasping on the stone of his throne.

‘Ninety-four,’ said Dante.

‘Not all are lost to the rage, my lord,’ said Rhacelus.

‘Nearly all,’ said Dante. The mechanisms of his armour whined as he pulled himself up in his seat. ‘This Chapter dwindles, Brother Adanicio. What are our numbers of battle-ready brothers?’

Adanicio cleared his throat and brought up his ever-present archeo-ledger to full luminescence. ‘In the wake of the Cryptus campaign, and now this news, my best calculation is that there are six hundred and forty-seven battle-brothers at full readiness for war. Including our Sanguinary priests, the librarian, Chaplaincy, Dreadnought Ancients, forge Techmarines and neophytes, there are eight hundred and thirty-seven in total remaining. From which total two hundred and nine members of the First, Second, Fifth and Seventh are at Diamor.’

‘Less than fifty per cent of our Chapter remains here to face the Great Devourer,’ said Dante. ‘We call out for aid to others while we send our warriors elsewhere.’ He became pensive. Rhacelus had never seen him question his own judgement publicly like this, and he felt doubt emanating from the commander. ‘How many other worlds will fall so that ours has a chance of surviving?’

No one answered the question.

‘Well then, tell me, will Cadia fall?’ asked Dante.

‘I do not know, my lord,’ said Mephiston. ‘The issuing of the great horde has yet to occur. I cannot trust these visions. Where the future is concerned, it is hard to see the truth. One might see a future that will not come to pass, and of late there have been deliberate attempts to cloud our foresight. Such visions are deceptive under the best of circumstances. The involvement of the alien witch makes me doubt them all the more. It could be a ploy on the part of our enemies to weaken our resolve.’

Corbulo stepped forward. Though no true psyker, an element of Sanguinius’ foresight touched him too, and his nights were plagued with dark dreams. ‘The sky shall fall, and a voice in malice call out “Doom! Doom! Doom!”.’

‘You quote from the Scrolls of Sanguinius,’ said Dante.

Corbulo looked at Mephiston and Dante with haunted eyes. ‘I do. But I have seen it. I have been seeing it for years. I have heard the voice, issuing from the sky.’

‘It is possible that melancholy rather than second sight is the cause of your foreboding,’ said Brother Bellerophon.

‘I am a Sanguinary priest, Bellerophon. I know the difference. I long hoped that the visions that devil me were the product of imbalance in my humours – a result, perhaps, of minor malfunction in the hormonal systems of my angel’s gifts. But I am not troubled in this way. I have tested myself extensively. My sight

comes from our lord, the Great Angel. I share his curse.'

'You are not alone, Corbulo. I have had the same vision,' said Dante quietly. 'Before we received Astorath's message at Diamor. The voice, proclaiming doom.'

'Then the probability increases that these events will come to pass,' said Mephiston simply.

'If they do,' said Rhacelus, 'there is worse to come.'

'How so?' said Dante.

'I do not know,' said Mephiston. 'The sky fell. The Eye of Terror swelled hugely.'

'Abaddon intends to fly for Terra, after all this time,' said Bellerophon.

'I fear it is more than that,' said Mephiston. 'This is the Great Enemy's boldest gambit in ten millennia. They are planning something more terrible than an attack on the throneworld. Something to do with the Eye.'

'But what?' said Ordamael.

Mephiston shook his head. 'I know not.'

'Well then!' said Incarael dismissively. His servo arms twitched.

'I regret to say that there is more,' said Mephiston, directing a cold look at the forgemaster. 'Much more.'

'Then speak!' said Adanicio.

'The last is for Dante's ears alone.'

'If there is a further factor of risk, all the Chapter lords should be informed,' said Adanicio.

'Let the Lord of Death keep his silence, Adanicio,' said Dante. 'Attend me later, Mephiston. I will judge who should know what, if it can wait.'

'It can, my lord,' said Mephiston. 'I wish to seek confirmation first.'

'Very well. In the meantime, give me Master Leeter's message, Rhacelus.'

Mephiston's equerry held out the message tube. 'It is a simple message. After he delivered his black tidings, Asasmael spoke of increasing anomalous psychic activity at the Adeptus Mechanicus excavation site on Amethal. In the wake of the taskforce's losses, he requests reinforcements.'

Rhacelus offered up the tube again, but Dante held up his hand.

'Tell them there are no reinforcements. We cannot spare another warrior.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Rhacelus, withdrawing the tube.

Dante looked around at his warriors, meeting the eyes of them all. 'None of you are to speak of this with any of the other Chapters here present. Do I make myself clear?'

The warriors affirmed that he did.

'If they reveal visions of their own, do not mention yours. We need every warrior we have to defend our home system.'

'My lord,' said Captain Zedrenael of the Eighth. 'If Cadia falls...' he let the implication hang in the air.

'I will not abandon Baal,' said Dante. 'If Baal falls, the whole of the northern Ultima Segmentum will be open to predation from Hive Fleet Leviathan. If the news of Cadia's peril becomes widespread, half our brothers will wish to leave, seeing defence of the Imperium as their prime concern. Half will wish to stay because, like I, they fear what will happen to the galactic north east should Leviathan break through our stand. We cannot fight both wars and win. We may lose both if we split our forces.'

'If you could command them to stay, it would be easier.'

'That cannot be, Brother Bellerophon,' said Dante firmly. 'I have no authority over them other than that granted by their own consent, and that is by no means yet assured. Authority must be won.' Dante's ancient snow-white brow creased further in thought. When he spoke again, it was with greater certainty. 'We have a chance to destroy one of the great evils of this age, here upon Baal. Should we depart from this course,

should half our brother Chapters depart and half stay, we will gain nothing, and lose everything. That is my judgement, as Sanguinius is my father. By the Blood, I will see my orders obeyed. Any who reveal this information to our brothers will face my judgement.'

'Yes, my lord,' said the Space Marines.

'Now, my Librarians, go about your duties. Mephiston, come to me before the war council tomorrow and deliver whatever tale you must,' said Dante grimly. 'The lords of the Angels Encarmine have been patient. Their homage to our Chapter must no longer be delayed.'

The doors swung open at Dante's command, flooding the room with song. The words spoke of triumph none present thought would come.

Dante crooked his hand, and Castellan Zargo of the Angels Encarmine entered.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GATHERING HOST

After a short five days in the empyrean, the *Splendid Pinion* and the *Staff of Life* re-emerged into the material realm, breaking warp at the Baal Mandeville. Balor, Baal's sun, was a medium red star, a common enough type on the fringes of the Red Scar. From Baal the Scar was a crimson band that stretched from one side of the stellar horizon to the other, its stars smouldering like the eyes of wolves in a dark forest.

At full speed the *Splendid Pinion* could have made Baal in a matter of half a day, but as a courtesy Erwin had his ship match speed with the *Staff of Life*. Both ships had taken damage in their violent escape from Zozan, and the *Staff of Life's* unstable drive system was coming close to failure. A loan of transmechanics from Erwin's vessel stabilised matters. As the repairs were undertaken, periodic alarms signalled the arrival of other vessels of the Blood translating in to Baal. The *Splendid Pinion's* detection matrices pronounced the names and classes of friendly vessels it identified in the system, and it did not stop. There were ident beacons ringing out from successor Chapters Erwin had never heard of. By the time the *Staff of Life* was ready to move at a greater speed again, they sailed a crowded void.

Upon entering the inner system and contacting the Arx Angelicum's orbital control centre, a harassed sounding servile ordered the *Splendid Pinion* and the *Staff of Life* into close convoy with a dozen other ships. The vessels were given an approach corridor and placed in single line with barely twenty miles between each. So it was that the *Splendid Pinion's* view of Baal was obscured by the engine flare of the ship ahead of them. When the tug of Baal's gravity began to work upon the ships, the convoy broke apart and made for their separate anchorages, allowing Erwin, Achemen and their brothers assembled upon the command deck to see the triple worlds ahead.

'Baal,' said Achemen reverently, 'the home of Sanguinius.'

Erwin and his first sergeant stood with their faces bathed in the reflected light of the sun. Baal's moons were so big they barely warranted the name. Baal Primus was paler than its sister, mottled with mountain ranges and smudged with the flat colours of dust seas. Across the pregnant swell of its equator were a series of massive black scars. Four that must have been a hundred miles across each dominated this grouping of planetary wounds, which together numbered hundreds, odd mountains pimpling their centres.

Baal Secundus, slightly smaller, slightly redder, was in respects similar to Baal Primus, though it had the added green and yellow of small, toxic seas, and the dazzling shine of salt flats that commemorated its vanished oceans. Webs of dead rivers stark as the veins of an old man criss-crossed its surface.

There were no orbitals around the three worlds. A blessing under the current circumstances, as every anchorage was crowded with ships. The space around Baal played host to flotillas from over a score of Chapters. They were strictly ordered, moving in contra-rotating bands so that the three worlds appeared wrapped in wire.

Some of the space-faring brotherhoods had magnificent fleets, with dozens of vessels, and it was clear that several Chapters were there at full strength. So many scions of Sanguinius had answered the call that good anchorages were contested, and the ships jockeyed for space with barely contained irritation.

The orbits around Baal Secundus especially were full. Chapters of the Blood vied to be closest to the place where the foundling Sanguinius had first spread his wings. It was upon the second moon that, ten thousand years ago, Sanguinius had inherited a ruined world and saved the benighted populace. Over Baal and Baal Primus there was scarcely more space. Databursts from a dozen nearby ships flooded the *Splendid Pinion's* cogitators, warning them off collision course.

'I have never seen so many Space Marine attack craft,' said Achemen.

'Nor have I, though I do not like to admit my ignorance of such spectacle!' said Erwin.

'There must be thousands of Space Marines here,' said Achemen.

'Tens of thousands,' said Erwin.

For them both, the thought of being near so many others like themselves was strange, and not altogether pleasant.

Then there was Baal itself: huge, red, brooding. Deserts blanketed it from pole to pole, where tiny icecaps sat in deference to its modesty. They could serve no other purpose but to spare Baal's embarrassment at its lack of water. They were too small to spawn glaciers, too cold to birth rivers, too isolated to be utilised easily by men. Legend said that Baal was never fully populated, for its moons had been paradises, and it had always been a desert. Unlike the scarred beauty of its satellites, Baal's natural splendour was mostly untouched, save for here and there in the red sands, where the skeletal remains of lost colony cities showed like lace.

One place upon Baal exhibited signs of life, and though small from orbit it stood out in the sterile expanse of desert. Surrounded by lights, heralded by broadcasts on all frequencies of the spectrum, the black, spreading mountain that housed the Arx Angelicum was large in every Space Marine's perception.

From orbit the Arx Angelicum was the merest blemish on the equator, but magnified pict views revealed something of its splendour. Black rock had been carved into imposing art. None of the Arx Angelicum's impressive verticality could be appreciated from that altitude. Everything on a world appears flat as a game board from the void, but the barrels of defence lasers pointing skyward all over the main cone and its secondary companion were a sufficient statement of threat. The fortress monastery was a place of great power – no space-faring visitor could overlook that.

To the Space Marines flocking to the world, the fortifications were the least of the Arx Angelicum's qualities. Baal was a spiritual home to every transhuman in the fleet. No matter how far they had strayed from the grace of their forefather, and some had strayed far indeed, the Arx Angelicum was a reminder of Sanguinius' actuality: that the Great Angel was no myth, that he had once been, that he had walked and fought and died for the dream of the Imperium. Sanguinius himself had built that fortress and he had dwelt there. At the sight of it those Chapters who had forgotten something of their heritage felt their love for Sanguinius shine anew, while those who still held their lord in their hearts were smitten with near-religious awe.

Relations between Sanguinius' sons remained close. Their curse was their bond. Hundreds of those present had been to Baal on pilgrimage or missions of amity. However, thousands of the warriors had not, and on many ships of many colours, hardened warriors wept to see the world of their gene-father for the first time.

Magnified further, rows and rows of Space Marine tanks were visible on the uncovered landing fields, as was the industry disturbing the desert for miles around the Arx.

'I have seen the tyranid swarm with my own eyes,' said Achemen. 'Until this moment, I thought we had no hope of beating them. But we might, we just might.'

Erwin and Achemen watched for an age, unwilling to tear themselves away from the spectacle.

A harsh burst of static interrupted their silence. A voice, its words indistinct but its tone angry, blurted out from a vox station in the communications section.

'My lord, we are being hailed by the *Blade of Vengeance*,' called the Servile of Response.

Erwin frowned. 'Captain Asante?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Let us have him then.' He gestured. 'Main hololith.'

Asante swam hugely into life over the main hololith pit. His armour was bedecked in honours and bloodstone. His face was stern.

'Captain Asante, to what do I owe this honour?' said Erwin, though he could guess. Asante maintained a neutral expression.

'Captain Erwin, I demand you present yourself upon the *Blade of Vengeance*.'

'For what purpose?' said Erwin, though he guessed that too.

'I would like you to explain to me why you disregarded my orders, and went to the aid of the *Staff of Light* rather than falling into formation with the rest of my task force.'

Erwin smiled fixedly. 'I shall be glad to attend you. I accept your invitation, Captain Asante. But you have no right to summon me.'

Erwin nodded at the Servile of Response, and Asante was cut off as he was opening his mouth to speak again.

'Prepare my Thunderhawk,' ordered Erwin.

Achemen pointed at Erwin's armour. His colours were scuffed and scratched. Alien blood caked the deeper recesses. 'Are you not going to clean your wargear before you meet him?'

'That would undermine the point I am going to make,' said Erwin.

'Good luck,' said Achemen.

'It is he who will require luck,' said Erwin. 'The Angels Excelsis take orders from none but themselves. In any case, you can watch, because you are coming with me. Orsini, keep things in order while we are gone. Servile!' he called to his armoury servant. 'Bring us our weapons. We shall speak to this captain armed.'

Erwin's Thunderhawk wove its way through crowded space. Smaller craft sped between the vessels of the gathering host, taking emissaries between Chapters to reaffirm old alliances and strike new ones. From the largest ships went streams of landing craft, ferrying men and materiel to the surface. Everywhere there was activity, and the vox was overwhelmed with the chatter of two dozen separate military organisations attempting to establish some sort of order between themselves.

It looks like a Legion, thought Erwin, of the sort from the old histories, but it is not. If only it were. There is no unity here.

There was no central command structure, no order of deference to be observed, no hierarchy. Each

Chapter was semi-autonomous within the Imperium, beholden to the commands of its master and no one else. Very few individuals or organisations could order the Space Marines to do anything. Although all of them respected Commander Dante as the eldest living Space Marine commander, and his position as lord of the founding Chapter granted him authority, technically all the Chapter Masters were of the same rank as he. The situation was even more complicated at captain level. A Space Marine captain was expected to make decisions with little guidance. For much of the time they operated alone upon their own initiative. There were hundreds of them at Baal, and they had no command structure to coordinate their actions.

That was why Erwin must go to Asante and stand his ground.

The *Blade of Vengeance* dominated the space around it. Orbital control at the Arx Angelicum did its best to group ships by Chapter. The *Blade* was attended by three of the Blood Angels strike cruisers and a number of escorts. Its blood-red livery was striking, its shade of red more violent, more sanguinary than all the other reds around it. Erwin shook his head. His mind was playing tricks. How was the red of the Blood Angels any more vibrant than that of the Blood Swords? How was it more arresting than the deep red and black of the Flesh Tearers? That kind of thinking was why Asante thought he could order Erwin about. The idea of Blood Angels as pre-eminent had to be challenged.

Even so, Erwin could not shake a sense of awe as his Thunderhawk flew along the metal cliffs of the *Blade of Vengeance's* flanks. It was a magnificent ship, and ancient, dating back to the Heresy. One of the first of its class, and among the most powerful, its gundecks and towers were festooned in glorious sculpture, chased with gold and precious metals. Large panels were painted with stupendous battle scenes. It was a scarred beauty. The freshest wounds were inflicted by acid, bioplasma and claw, but these marks of the Cryptus campaign were overlaid upon older damage, some of it so deep the art of the Blood Angels could not conceal it. The damage did not detract from the ship's grace, instead it accentuated its magnificence and its deadliness, like duelling scars on the face of a beautiful female warrior. The *Blade of Vengeance* had taken everything the galaxy had to throw at it for ten thousand years, and it had survived in glory.

The flight deck entrances were located in the stubby wings projecting from the side of the main section. In this and other regards, battle-barges were similar to strike cruisers, with the same overall body design of main hull, and a projecting neck housing gun batteries and turrets that ended in a flat-headed prow. But they were so much bigger. Extra flank shielding sheltered the flight decks and the reactor core. Erwin's craft flew behind the shields, out of the light and into a dark saturated with bloody tones by the Red Scar, Baal and the ship's arterial livery.

Atmospheric shielding flickered over his ship, and he came into the brightness once more. His Thunderhawk put down on a landing square in the hangar.

'Welcome to the *Blade of Vengeance*, Captain Erwin,' said a human voice. 'You may disembark.'

Erwin ordered the ramp lowered and strode out, Achemen and himself flanked by a pair of Excelsior Guardians clad all in white. He noted straight away that the grav-plating was set higher than the Angel Excelsis ships, mimicking Baal's great mass.

A human servile waited for Erwin at the foot of the ramp. Armed shipmen stood in a perfect square behind him, their heavy lasguns held to attention.

'My lord.' The human dipped his head. 'I am Corvael, third deck captain and blood thrall to the Blood Angels Chapter. My lord Asante regrets that none of the brothers were available to greet you, but it is, unfortunately, unavoidable. Our Chapter is presently understrength, many of my lords are deployed elsewhere. As you can see we have a great many tasks to accomplish.'

Our Chapter? thought Erwin. One of his own serviles would never have dared refer to the Angels Excelsis that way, and a *captain*? There was no meek deference in this Corvael. He was confident, daring

to look at Erwin as if he were almost an equal.

Erwin hid his astonishment. His irritation was harder. 'My thanks, third deck captain.'

Corvael bowed deeply. It was a small balm to Erwin's outrage.

Servitors came to the Thunderhawk, clamping track units around its landing claws that raised the ship up off the deck. The tracks squealed, and the Thunderhawk lurched off in the direction of a holding bay.

Corvael followed Erwin's eyes. 'Your ship will be ready to leave when you are, my lord.'

Impertinent, thought Erwin. 'Take me to your master,' he said.

'As you wish.'

Corvael turned smartly about. The Angels Excelsis followed, and the human shipsmen formed up around them.

Corvael was not lying about the number of Space Marines present. They marched down deserted corridors. Ammunition transports rumbled past on their way to and from the ship's vast magazines, but the only people they saw were servitor half-men, and their barely more human Adeptus Mechanicus creators. Space Marine craft had small crews for their size, most of them being servitors watched over by human serfs and commanded by Space Marines. It was unbelievable to Erwin to have the likes of Corvael with so much authority. He should have seen at least a few fellow Space Marines. They went deeper into the ship towards the command spires. Only when they reached a bank of giant lifters situated at a nexus in the spinal corridor did he see a solitary Blood Angel standing watch.

Ornate doors of red marble slid back. They were beautifully carved, as was the interior they revealed.

'This way, my lord,' said Corvael, gesturing to the empty lifter.

They ascended many floors to the uppermost decks, passing the command centre. The lift stopped near the top of its run, and Erwin's party was led into a lofty hall whose walls, floor and ceiling were covered in polished stone of black, red and cream. Inside he found a dozen Blood Angels – a single squad and a couple of Sanguinary Guard whose armour and gear mirrored Erwin's Excelsior Guardians in all but colour.

There was a high throne in the hall upon a platform held off the paving by a cunningly balanced stair. The thought of Asante lecturing him from that vantage made Erwin angry, but it appeared the captain would not, for it was covered in a red banner bearing the Chapter badge.

The Blood Angels parted, revealing Asante.

'You,' said Asante without introduction. 'I ordered you to follow my lead. Why did you not?'

Erwin removed his helmet before answering, letting the hiss of pressure equalisation fill the space of words. He looked upon a man who was similar in appearance to himself. Sanguinius' gene-seed reworked its bearers strongly. There was a genuine family resemblance in the Chapters.

'Because you have no right to order me,' said Erwin. 'I am not of your Chapter. Even if I were, I am a company captain. You have no company. I will not submit to another captain's authority without direct orders from my own Chapter Master.'

'So you disobeyed—' began Asante.

'Disregarded is how you put it before,' interrupted Erwin. 'That is more accurate.'

'You disregarded my orders to make a point?' said Asante.

'I disregarded them because you did not give me the complete picture. I saw a ship in danger. We could not communicate. How was I to know the *Staff of Life* was a decoy?'

'It was an obvious tactic,' said Asante.

'One I disagree with. To be frank, had I known I would have acted the way I did anyway. In the end, I extricated the ship and myself. You could have done the same.'

‘If I had, I would have risked my entire task force. You put two ships in danger, and your company. The destruction of Zozan Tertius was under my command.’

‘I came to a call for aid,’ said Erwin. ‘I aided you as I saw fit.’

Asante frowned, and took a data-slate from an attendant blood thrall. ‘Upon this slate are triple-verified prognostications for casualty reports if my plan had been followed. Within it also you will see the chances of success for your self-appointed mission. You will note they are low.’

Erwin ignored the slate.

‘I acted on my own judgement, as is my right. You cannot complain about my exercising my Emperor-given authority as a captain of the Adeptus Astartes.’

‘I would not, had you not put my entire operation at risk.’

Erwin laughed. ‘Nonsense. I put my company at risk, not you or your ships.’

‘Our chances of escape would have been higher had you obeyed.’

‘You escaped anyway!’ said Erwin. ‘Thanks to me, Hennan of the Angels Numinous lives to retell the story of your victory. Had it not been for my so-called disobedience, he would have been dead, and a valuable ship lost.’

‘Now I see more to disagree with you about. You call this a victory?’ said Asante.

‘Your mission was to deprive the hive fleets of biomass, I assume. You enacted exterminatus?’ Erwin shrugged. ‘Then your mission was a success.’

‘Five hundred million Imperial citizens are dead by our hand,’ said Asante. His face flushed. He stepped in close to the Angel Excelsis. He was bigger and heavier than Erwin, but Erwin would not be intimidated. ‘Five hundred million lives we were sworn to protect. Their world, a valuable, viable world, is no more. They called for help, before the shadow fell on them. They would have seen us arrive as the hive fleet invested their planet, thinking their prayers answered and their lives saved. But die they did, and the last sight they had was of a Blood Angels warship opening fire upon them,’ said Asante. ‘We did not have time to evacuate them, or to even explain our actions fully. There are no successes in this fight, only degrees of failure. Impetuous warriors like you increase the severity of those failures.’

‘You are attempting to distract yourself from your guilt by railing at me. I expected more from the Blood Angels.’

‘And I expect more respect from a brother in arms. I suggested a course of action that was logical and had the higher parameter of success.’

‘What can I say?’ said Erwin. ‘I enjoy bad odds.’

Asante stared at him.

‘Please do not become angry, brother,’ said Erwin. ‘I agree, we need a command structure. If commanded to do so by my own lord I will follow you without question. But you have no right to assume I will follow you because you are of the father Chapter. A hierarchy based on so flimsy a premise will not withstand the rigours of war. You presume too much because you wear the colours of Sanguinius, my brother.’

Asante scowled. ‘Your efforts to save the *Staff of Light* are appreciated, but folly. Saving it is to be commended. Missing two ships would have been the poorer result, and it was far more likely. Do not risk yourself in that manner again.’

‘I have said that you cannot command me!’ said Erwin.

‘Then you will die alone. We must work in concert if we are to prevail. Commander Dante will show you the way.’

‘No agreement has been made yet,’ said Erwin.

‘Someone has to take command,’ said Asante. ‘We could be wrangling over this for months. If we do not

make our own agreements when needed, we will die. If this situation ever occurs again, I advise you to do as I say, or die as you will. All that matters to me is that Baal is saved. I hope you will choose the better option so you might help in the defence, rather than throwing your life away.'

Erwin frowned. 'Why are you being this way? Why do you challenge my authority in front of my second?'

'I have commanded fleets against the tyrannids eleven times,' said Asante. 'I fought at Cryptus where the swarm was bigger than any we have seen before. What is your experience, brother?'

'Sufficient,' said Erwin. 'I do not have to listen to this rebuke. It is unworthy of both of us.' He replaced his helmet and motioned to his men to leave. It was good no one tried to stop him. In the mood he was in, Erwin would have fought.

'Captain!' called Asante.

Erwin paused.

'I hear they paused in their assault during your escape. Why?' said Asante.

'Only Hennan could have told you that. Ungrateful wretch, reporting on me to you.'

'Did it happen, or not?'

'We drove them off, it is simple,' said Erwin.

'They never retreat, never. Do you know that, Captain Erwin?'

'That is not my experience, captain.'

'Really? I advise you to check your ship for signs of infiltration,' said Asante. 'You may be carrying genestealers, or worse.'

'There are no infiltration organisms on my ship. None at all,' said Erwin. He made to go again, then stopped and turned back. 'The people you mourn. They would have died anyway,' said Erwin. 'They died quickly. Their bodies remain upon a world sanctified by their death. They will not provide reinforcements to our foe. The very stuff that makes them did not have to endure the most wicked form of slavery I have ever encountered. Forgive me, Blood Angel, but in my Chapter the destruction of Zozan Tertius would be regarded as a success.'

'Get out,' said Asante.

Erwin saluted, making the aquila over his heart. 'I will see you on the field again, I am sure.'

The Angels Excelsis boarded the elevator again under the unfriendly stare of the Blood Angels.

'You say that I have no faith in my abilities,' said Achemen. 'Your problem, my brother, is that you have too much confidence in your own.'

Erwin hissed theatrically. Achemen looked sidelong at him.

'One day,' said the sergeant, 'you are going to get us all killed, captain.'

The pod's inhabitant extruded its sticky foot from its shell. A set of razor claws composed of a synthesised mineral punched through its skin. The claws were intended to be used once, and had no exit from their sheaths but through the flesh of the pseudopod, destroying it in the process. The claws snapped out in a welter of fluid that froze in the voidal cold. A frenzied twisting of dying muscles sent them slicing into the resins sealing the pod to the hull of the *Splendid Pinion*. The pod convulsed and shook. Limbs trapped inside calciferous cavities beat hopelessly at their prisons, shaking the pod loose of the weakened resins, and it drifted free.

Sensing beasts came alive. A rich flood of prey sign swamped the pod's secondary brain. In seconds it had processed multiple streams of data, identifying the target fixed in its memory by the greater hive mind, and calculated the best trajectory to land unseen.

The last propellant gases were expended, moving the pod away from the prey vessel, and leaving it at

the mercy of fate.

Sophisticated baffles screened the pod's descent through the crowded sky. Void craft gravity wakes perturbed its flight, threatening to cast it uncontrolled into the well of Baal Primus. With emotionless calm, the pod shifted fluid between internal bladders, correcting its fall. It would have died with equal phlegmatism.

Into the upper reaches of Baal's atmosphere it fell, going from the killing chill of the void into the cold night sky of the Southern Dune Ocean. Atmospheric friction scorched the hard, wrinkled exterior of the craft, cooking alive the lesser subcreatures clinging to the shell. They died in silent agony, robbing the pod's brains of sight, hearing, smell and every other sense one by one. The pod's grasp on the prey's position slipped away as it fell into sightless dark. The meaningless electromagnetic pulses booming from the metal-shelled craft of the prey were the last to go silent, and then the pod was isolated from everything but the burning heat of the air.

Terminal impact smashed the pod's primary brain to mush, and wrenched the secondary from its cellular bindings. Floating free in draining fluids, it twitched its vestigial limbs for the first and final time.

Stimulant hormones flooded both the pod and its occupant. This last act accomplished, the secondary brain died, not caring about its own demise or that its mission had been accomplished.

Sand blew over the steaming shell. The pod was an insignificant speck in a plain of undulating sand, black in Baal Secundus' moonshine.

Minutes passed with no sign of activity. The pod was already beginning to disappear under the drifting sand.

A wet crack heralded a false birth. Seams, ropy with thick mucous, burst open along the quarter lines of the hull, spasmed, then splayed wide. From within, a tall, gangling creature staggered out, unsteady as a newborn animal at first, but within a few steps it was striding confidently into the night. It unfolded multiple limbs, its great killing talons lifting high and opening upward. It cast back its head and tasted the air. Glowing eyes looked skyward. Tentacles moved beneath an alien skull in place of a mouth.

The lictor scanned the area with multiple senses. Hitting upon what it sought, it turned sharply on its hooves and galloped off. Its outline flickered, and it vanished into the dark.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE OCTOCALVARIAE

There were places in the Carceri Arcanum that actively denied the working of technology. Mephiston paused at the border of one, took up a torch of rare, resinous Baalian wood from a rack, lit it with a small fusion torch hanging by a chain from the crumbling brickwork, and went deeper within. Firelight supplemented the weak glow of the biolumen globes riveted to the vaulted ceiling. Water dripped from somewhere ahead. Baal was as dry as bone dust; the liquid came from some other place and time.

No one knew who had built the Carceri Arcanum. They were some of the oldest parts of the fortress monastery, if not *the* oldest. It had been suggested they predated the volcano they burrowed under, but they were of brick, and seemed to have been made by human hand, whereas the volcano was estimated to be over seven million years old. The tunnels had many peculiar qualities. If mapped against Baal's physical terrain, they should have gone miles outside the Arx Murus, but there was no sign of them. Once, a curious Librarian had ordered a pit dug into the desert sands where the tunnels should surely be. He found the ruins of a defence complex abandoned after the sundering of the Legion, and no tunnels.

Many mysteries were attached to the Carceri Arcanum, but only one certainty, and that was that they were anomalous in every respect. They resonated with the warp, amplifying the power of the librarius. Because of this affinity, Mephiston held court in the Circle of Consonance at their centre, where his Quorum Empyric met to discuss matters of sorcery and the soul.

The Carceri Arcanum served a further useful purpose. Deep underground, only partially contained within mundane reality and with a fierce source of empyrical energy to tap, they were a fine place to house the Chapter's most dangerous relics. The tunnel that Mephiston took led away from the centre of the labyrinth down one of its lengthy spurs. Short corridors curved off the passageway, their shadows resistant to his torch. In those corridors adamantium doors barred cells where ancient weapons languished. A sword which slew any foe, but that kindled the Black Rage swiftly in its wielder. The full armour of the blood-mad Chapter Master Araclaes, whose reign ended in such disaster for the Chapter it had been struck from every record. The skull of the haemonculus of Baal, a creature whose falsehoods almost brought the Blood Angels low.

There were devices salvaged from dead worlds, dangerous technology that had survived the fall of Old

Night, idols to alien gods, cracked force wands whose splinters allowed a direct view into other realities, cursed blades, the shattered bodies of Necron lords held prisoner in stasis, bolters that fired true every time but which required the blood of the innocent to function, the crowns of insane emperors and the banners of fallen squads whose histories were blacker than the void. These and worse things were interred there.

As Mephiston went past the galleries of cells, the sense of strangeness clinging to the place grew. The grinding thump of heavy machinery rumbled the brick, though there was no machinery there. Ghost lights flickered across distant passages, daring chase. Shadowy shapes blinked glowing eyes from inconstant corridors. At one junction the thunder of a waterfall was carried on a cold draft that smelled enticingly of water, but if the sound were followed, both smell and sound petered out, and the explorer was confronted by a collapsed section of tunnel full of bones and black sand.

Mephiston strode by all these wonders and horrors. None held any danger for the likes of him. The end of the corridor was where the librarius ended, and whatever lay beyond it began.

The sandy floor of the Carceri Arcanum stopped at an iron door rough and purple with oxidisation, but the warding symbols on it were clear to see for those with the right kind of sight. To Mephiston's eyes they glowed. He rapped three times on the door with the head of his torch, causing it to sputter and shower sparks over the ground.

With an unearthly moan, the door opened inward. Mephiston stepped through. His torch guttered out in a breeze rich with incense. It was so black that his sensitive eyes were blind. His warp sight was dulled by the counter runes painted on the walls. He saw only these, and then as a feeble glow.

A machine coughed. There was the sound of a reactor powering up, and the smell of exhaust. The machine noise became a grunting rumble. Pistons hissed. A vision slit glowed green in the dark, gradually lighting the room enough so that Mephiston might see the extent of the small antechamber. A second iron door was situated opposite the first, iron loops set in the frame criss-crossed with hexagrammatically warding chains.

By the door the square shape of a Librarian-Dreadnought stood sentry.

'Greetings, Mephiston, Lord of Death,' a machine-moderated voice boomed out. 'It is a long time since you visited my vault.'

The Dreadnought occupied more than half the room. Its engines growled unevenly, rough with long inactivity. In one mechanical fist the machine held an oversized poweraxe. The crystalline matrix was dormant. But the occupant of the Dreadnought could bring it to life in a moment, and though ancient employ it with devastating skill.

'My Lord Marest,' said Mephiston. 'I have been fortunate that I have not needed to venture here for some time.'

'What brings you to this most damned of places?' said the Dreadnought. Marest was older even than Commander Dante. Once he had been the Chief Librarian, as Mephiston was now. Before he had been interred in the war tomb, he had commanded that a new vault be constructed, where all the worst things in the Chapter's care be kept, including the thing that had killed him. With his dying breath Marest had pledged to watch over it for all time, and so he had. The room he now guarded was too small for his Dreadnought to enter. When the Vault of Marest had finally been finished, Marest's sarcophagus had been dragged in on a wooden sled, and his new body assembled around it. His dedication to the Chapter was held up to the neophytes of each new generation. Every Blood Angel knew the story of Marest.

'Have you come to view the scroll? Has the time come to seek new knowledge from our lord's prophecies?'

'I am afraid not,' said Mephiston. He dropped his extinguished torch and placed his hand on the hilt of

Vitarus. 'I must go deeper.'

'Is that so?' rumbled the Dreadnought. 'What occurs in the world beyond?'

'Dark things, Lord Librarian. The Great Devourer approaches Baal, and another, older enemy.'

'You require knowledge, then,' said Marest. 'You will visit the octocalvariae?'

'I shall. I am sorry to disturb it.'

'Why? Do you apologise because it was he who slew me, or because you fear my judgement on your actions?'

Mephiston did not reply.

'It matters not. Your position is a key that will unlock any door. You must do what you deem right,' rumbled Marest. 'You are permitted to go where others are prevented. Nevertheless, I will provide the ritual warning. Be careful what dark things you look upon within this vault. Take none of their evil unknowingly out with you.'

'Your words are worth heeding, my lord Marest.'

'They are, Lord of Death. Go with my blessing,' said Marest. His blocky upper body pivoted on the ball mount of the waist. He raised his force axe. Wychlight shone around the blade, and the chains fell from the doorway with a clatter. 'And may the Emperor watch over your soul.'

'My thanks, Lord Marest.'

Before he left the room, Mephiston drew his sword.

A chamber of marked contrast to Marest's atrium greeted him. A smooth cylinder of rockcrete dropped away down to a machine comprising an upright disc spinning round at ferocious speed, shooting out noisy blue sparks. Embossed steel skulls around the shaft's circumference stared up at him with bloodstone eyes. The cylinder was saturated with red light, the short bursts of electric blue mixing painfully into it. The limbless torsos of servitors were embedded in alcoves in the cylinder wall level with the top of the disc. Lidless eyes held the disc in eternal vigilance.

This unit accepted energy remotely broadcast from Idalia to power the vault's mechanisms, for unlike in the greater undercroft, there were machines in the Vault of Marest, special devices shielded from the odd effects of the Carceri Arcanum. Using the power of Idalia, they formed the random energies coursing along the brick corridors and made of them strong psychic walls that none could penetrate. The Vault of Marest was a prison above all else. Every part of its physical and metaphysical fabric was dedicated to the purpose of confinement.

Dozens of fell things were kept inside. In the wider Carceri Arcanum were articles touched by Chaos, but those inside the vault were wholly of it. They were things that could not be destroyed for fear of unleashing the evil they contained, or simply because they were not destructible in any understandable way.

A catwalk ran around the circumference of the room. A single, silver-plated door led out again, covered in warding signs.

Mephiston went through this other door into the only pure chamber in the vault, and one of the largest: the Ecclesia Obscura. His footsteps echoed from distant walls. Stained-glass windows depicting scenes from Sanguinius' life filtered light from an unknown source. No dust danced in the slanting beams, for the air was extensively scrubbed on its way in and out of the vaults by psychically active atmospheric filters. Whispers from the pallid scholiasts who inhabited the place murmured from the stones.

This was the home of the Scrolls of Sanguinius. In the vault they were safe from all harm, psychic or physical. Fifteen scroll casings as big as men hung in stasis fields, their tops closed with wire crimped shut with lead seals. Mephiston paused by the casings, closing his eyes and allowing the sanctity of his long-dead lord bathe his soul. Something in him recoiled at the touch of Sanguinius' power, but he held

his mind full in the fire, shuddering as it purified him.

Nothing else of goodness was kept in the Vault of Marest. The purity of the scrolls acted as a barrier to the evils that were housed in the deeper chambers.

Scholiasts paused in their duties. Their minds touched Mephiston's own with feathered pressure. These men had been acolytum to the librarius before their failure, but though rejected they possessed some mental strength, and so they lived out their service in darkness, ministering to the relic of a hero whose glories they could never aspire to.

Mephiston ignored the attention of these cast-offs and walked to the end of the hall. As he approached, an iron gate clanked into the ceiling. Stale air tainted with the sharp scent of wickedness blew at him. Gripping Vitarus more tightly, Mephiston proceeded into the inner vaults.

Beyond the Ecclesia Obscura the vaults took on the character of the Carceri Arcanum, becoming a warren of tunnels again, though these were of rockcrete and silver rather than brick, and ribbed cables ran along the walls, carrying power to the locking mechanisms of the cells.

The psychosphere was of a different sort to that of the Carceri Arcanum. It was trammelled by strange machines, and darker in flavour. Though securely held, the things gaoled there leaked their malign influences into the fabric of the walls, making a dangerous cocktail for the soul. Mephiston felt its impurity saturate his being. He was unperturbed. There were darker things trapped inside his body.

Doors hummed with caged warp power. Grey rockcrete gave way to warded adamantium and back again. Each room was specifically tailored to the evil of whatever it contained, bespoke creations that melded warp sorcery and science. Whole tunnels had been adapted as cells for the larger obscenities. Giant pits had been dug into the unearthly soil, lined with sanctified silver and roofed with bars of purest iron. Sanguinius' symbol was everywhere. Glass-fronted boxes projected hololithic symbols anathema to the working of the warp. Combat servitors prowled the complex, their brain cases stamped with counterspells, the first line of defence should anything escape. Maintenance constructs trundled by, constantly monitoring for malfunction, ready to summon aid from the forge to fix what they could not repair themselves.

Not everything there was an artefact. Some things had life, or a semblance of life, and were capable of action on their own.

It was to one of these beings that Mephiston went.

The vault was not particularly extensive. It took the Lord of Death only minutes to make his way to his destination, though time in the vault was difficult to accurately measure.

He turned off the main corridor and came to a crude-looking cell door of black wood, with a steel grille rusted orange at eye level. Its appearance was deceptive. Inside the tree the wood was harvested from, veins of psychically conductive crystal had been force grown, and they vibrated with the power of the empyrean.

Mephiston looked in. A dark shape sat at the centre of the room, four arms stretched out from an emaciated body and held in place by manacles and chains engraved with complex circuitries. The floor thrummed with the actions of hidden machinery.

There was no key; no normal lock would hold the prisoner. Mephiston pushed upon the wood. His skin tingled through his armour. Without his ceramite, the power running through it would have burned his flesh. The door creaked open.

With a gesture, Mephiston ignited four rod lumens stapled to the walls. Three shone with a cold, greenish light. The fourth hitched and buzzed with a flicker that would not settle.

The creature in the cell was not human. Two stumpy legs made up its number of limbs to six. Its skin was

slack on fatless flesh, many ribs clearly visible beneath.

The octocalvariae had been in the cell for three thousand years without any nourishment. It should have died long, long ago. But it would not.

The thing lifted its head. Whether its body was its true form was not known. There had been none of its race left to compare it with. But its face was not its original. Chaos had had its way with the thing's features, perverting them in a manner that was unmistakable. Upon its alien head, eight tiny, grotesque faces had grown. They were all identical, perhaps miniature replicas of the xenos' original. There were six simple eyes on each. The noses were three gill-like vertical slits. The mouths were slender probosces curled neatly between poisonous palpa. The creature did not use speech like men did. It was probable its species had been psychic; if so, it was their downfall.

Traces of larger features were visible as puckers in the smooth flesh. Chaos had wiped the xenos' face clean, giving it eight in miniature in cruel recompense.

Mephiston felt its intellect prodding at his. With a thought, he pushed aside the empyric veils caging its mind, making an aperture big enough for it to speak through.

+Who are you?+ it said. Its thoughts were alien. There was no linguistic structure that a human would recognise, but Mephiston understood, psyker to psyker.

'I am Mephiston. Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels, the Lord of Death,' said Mephiston aloud.

+A fitting name for one such as you.+ Its multiple eyes blinked together. +You are the successor to the one who killed my followers and caged me.+

'I am. Many generations removed. You have been here a long time.'

The thing let its head droop. +For preaching the truth of reality to your people, you kill and enslave,+ it said. +You call me monster, you who hunger for the blood of your own kind.+

'You are the enslaver,' said Mephiston. 'By warpcraft you subjugated three Imperial systems, and seduced their inhabitants away from the light of the Emperor, and damned them for all eternity. Your confinement here is just. We would kill you, if we could.'

The alien's smooth flesh convulsed. The eight tiny faces pulsed, their eyes closing and opening in rhythmic waves. A show of mirth. Its laughter echoed in Mephiston's mind.

+You cannot. The dark lords make me strong. Have you come here to gloat? If you have, enjoy it. I shall one day be free of this place. I will be merciful to those who show me respect.+

'I have no need to gloat,' said Mephiston, 'and you shall never escape. I have come instead to seek your wisdom, evil as it is.'

The thing laughed again. Its suspended body quivered. +That is amusing.+

'A great darkness approaches Baal.'

+I see it. A blankness in the sea of souls. An unending hunger comes. It desires to consume you. Your hungers are similar. Do you not see it as a kindred spirit?+ asked the being.

Mephiston ignored the alien's insinuation. 'There is something else. Another event is soon to occur, not of the material realm but of the warp. I have seen it in a vision, but will have confirmation before I act.'

The thing dragged its deformed head upright. +And you want me to help you?+ It laughed again, its amusement buffeting Mephiston's stony soul.

'You will help me.'

+Then release me,+ it said, +and perhaps I may accommodate your desires before I kill you.+

'I never said I needed your active participation.'

Mephiston drove Vitarus into the ground before the alien psyker and reached out his hands towards it. Red fire flickered around his fingers.

He bent the creature's mind to his will, but it fought him all the way, and for a moment Mephiston feared

he had attempted a task he could not accomplish, and that the being would overwhelm him. With a psychic shout, he pushed hard, battering the octocalvariae into submission.

The creature was a worshipper of Chaos in its formless glory and was many thousands of years old. Who knew what worlds it had ruined or how many species it had corrupted? At the height of its power it had been a prophet of incredible accuracy. Its link to the empyrean was still strong, and Mephiston rode this as a warrior from a backward world might attempt to master an unbroken steed. The xenos' mind bucked and thrashed in his psychic grip, but he did not relent, and through the creature's many unholy eyes he looked out into the Realm of Chaos, and the myriad possibilities forming there.

A billion horrible images burned into his second sight. He sifted through them quickly. Ka'Bandha's lust for the souls of the Blood Angels shone redly bright. Mephiston homed in on the greater daemon's essence with little difficulty.

For a brief moment he saw the daemoniac battle still raging. The red angel burned with furious fires. Ka'Bandha was within a spear's cast of the Gate. He was coming to the material realm.

The bloodthirster paused in its carnage, turned and looked Mephiston directly in the eye.

Ka'Bandha's bellow sent the Lord of Death flying backwards. Trailing flames he slammed into the wall of the octocalvariae's cell.

The octocalvariae convulsed in its chains, setting them rattling violently. When the spasm stopped, it hung from its bonds, laughing more loudly than ever.

+That is what you wanted to know? Had you told me, I would have shown you willingly. There is no finer thing than presenting a being with truth of its own death. The Neverborn you call Ka'Bandha will come for you, so-called Lord of Death. He will take your mortal skull for his drinking cup, and your soul shall join his armies, and throw down this Imperium you pretend to love.+

Mephiston recovered himself, and took up Vitarus.

'Those are lies,' he said calmly.

+Are they? You will see!+ said the octocalvariae. +There is a darkness in you that eclipses my own, Lord of Death. Let me free, so I may see you fall!+

'You will remain here,' said Mephiston, his voice cold as the depths of space. 'Be assured, if it were possible, I would slay you.'

+One day, you will be my ally,+ said the octocalvariae.

'Never,' said Mephiston. He severed the psychic link, leaving the octocalvariae scratching at the walls of his mental fortress.

For an instant, Mephiston considered running the xenos sorcerer through, simply for the pleasure of hurting it.

He sheathed Vitarus and departed.



CHAPTER NINE

DANTE'S DILEMMA

The Red Council was one of the Blood Angels two ruling bodies, the other being the Council of Blood and Bone. The latter was made up of the senior chaplaincy and Sanguinary priesthood, responsible for the spiritual and physical work to constrain the flaw. Chief among their duties was the selection of a new Chapter Master when the office was vacant.

The Red Council's purview was the waging of war, and as that was the purpose of all Adeptus Astartes Chapters, it was the senior of the two groups. Such was the importance of the Red Council that the room where it met in the Arx Angelicum was replicated in every detail upon both battle-barges of the Chapter: the *Blade of Vengeance*, and the *Bloodcaller*.

At least, so it had been. When responses from the successor Chapters began flooding in to the fortress monastery, Dante had decreed that the council room be expanded so that all the Chapter Masters and their captains might sit there as brothers.

'This is our darkest hour, and they have answered,' he had told his assembled officers. 'I will accord them the honour as if they were of our own Chapter,' he said. 'Let no warrior come to Baal at our call for assistance and feel himself less than equal.'

The ancient room was obliterated. Six thousand years of history was made dust in the effort of a week. Many other halls were carved away to make space for Dante's vision. The number of seats on the Red Council was twenty-five. The rebuilt Chamber of the Red Council was twenty times as large. Five hundred seats were arrayed around a massive circular table with a hollow centre. The Chapter Master's chair had been slightly larger than the others, to emphasise his status as first among equals. Dante insisted his chair in the new chamber be replaced in the room exactly the same as it had been before, and that the chairs for the other Chapter Masters be the same size as his.

The new table was of pure white marble. The names and ranks of those invited to attend were displayed on adaptive golden plaques set into the table surface. The plaques were the same in dimension and decoration. No warrior would think another more highly regarded than any other.

The Chamber of the Great Red Council was as artful and fine as everything the Blood Angels made. Its decoration was flawless, a display of taste and craftsmanship of the highest sort. Black rock was polished

until it gleamed. Reliefs of every single successor Chapter the Blood Angels had begotten decorated the walls, their heraldry picked out in bright minerals and precious metals. Those who were damned were included, though their panels covered over with black cloth. Those who were lost to war were marked with glowering collections of skulls carved from the same ivory as the Blood Angels' sarcophagi. All the Chapters that sprang from Sanguinius' glory were there, alive and dead, good and bad alike. The worst of them had been heroes once, and the shame of their falling was a lesson the others should not neglect.

Scrolls carved in the stone bore the names of every Chapter Master of these orders, at least so far as they were known. The names of prominent heroes were embroidered upon flags hanging over the shrines, and parchments fixed with coloured waxes recorded the most famous battle honours of each brotherhood. The founding lords of the second-generation Chapters were commemorated in stone. To make them, the bones of the extinct volcano had been shaped into living marvels, statues so realistic they looked as if they might step down from their plinths.

Even those races who considered themselves more refined than gross humanity would have marvelled at the chamber's beauty. There was a weight of history, of honour and of justified pride, and so the room felt as old as the Chapter, though it had been finished only a few days before. It waited for those who would fill it, ready to judge the deeds of the living against those of the dead commemorated on the walls.

It was in this Great Chamber of the Red Council that Mephiston met with Dante. The Lord of Death arrived to find his lord sitting in his throne. His helm was set on the table, Dante gazing intently at the outraged face of Sanguinius as if it would speak with the primarch's wisdom.

Mephiston's footsteps echoed lightly as he crossed the floor. The Lord of Death moved stealthily always, like the predator he was. Firebowls and candles lit the space, casting its crannies into red darkness. Dante was a being of liquid flame in his gold. The candlelight moved on his armour, inviting the Chapter Master to join it in dances of destruction.

The movement was false. Dante remained still, lost in thought until Mephiston stopped before him.

'I have come,' said Mephiston.

Dante looked up, his ancient face hollowed with worry. 'You will tell me now what you could not before.'

Mephiston nodded once, a slight incline of his head. It was as if a statue had moved, a slight motion caught out of the corner of the eye, so mundane a gesture yet terrifying when performed by the Lord of Death.

'There was another part to my initial vision, my lord. I went into a hellish kingdom of fire, bone and blood. There I saw Ka'Bandha.'

The fires in the room guttered and flared, dancing a little harder at the mention of that name.

Dante narrowed his eyes sharply. 'You are sure it was the Angels' Bane?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'And what was he doing?'

'He was fighting his way through a legion of black-skinned daemons.'

'Is it not the way of the Blood God's minions to always make war on one another?'

'It is,' said Mephiston. 'If the dark lore is to be believed.'

'Then what of it?'

'He was fighting his way *out*. A vision of a red angel burned in the sky. There was a gap in the world, a rift, beneath the angel that opened upon our universe.'

'You think he means to come here,' said Dante.

'I do.'

'But you are not sure of the vision's veracity.'

‘No, my lord. I was not,’ said Mephiston. ‘That is why I delayed.’

‘I have seen nothing of the Angels’ Bane in any of my own visions,’ said Dante. He lapsed into thought for a moment. ‘You say you were not certain. I take it you are now.’

‘Yes,’ said Mephiston. ‘It was he. He is coming. I have... confirmed it.’

Dante peered more closely at his Chief Librarian, noting, perhaps, the greyness to his alabaster skin brought on by the strain of his visit to the octocalvariae that made him more like a corpse than ever. ‘Do I wish to know how this was done?’ asked Dante.

‘I think not, my lord,’ said Mephiston. And, in truth, he had little appetite for recounting his journey into the Vaults of Marest. ‘It was hard, and it cost me, but it was a worthwhile endeavour. I am sure. The Angels’ Bane means to attack us, while all the Chapters of the Blood are gathered. This is a truth.’

‘Can he return?’ asked Dante. ‘He was not long banished from the material realm.’

‘There are rules even for the servants of Chaos,’ said Mephiston. ‘The vision of my Librarians is occluded, and we grow blinder every day. But I can say that beyond the shadow in the warp all is changing. There is an unprecedented flux. I cannot see past the darkness the hive mind casts, but all reality holds its breath. The empyrean is pregnant with portents. If Abaddon’s Black Crusade affects the Eye of Terror as my vision suggested, Ka’Bandha may make his way through.’

Dante smiled humourlessly. ‘He attacks when we are at our strongest, and yet when we are gathered together, we are also at our weakest.’

‘This gathering of all the sons of Sanguinius for the first time in generations is too tempting for him. We know that the Blood God covets us. Our rage draws the servants of the Skull Throne to us as surely as flies to corpses. If Ka’Bandha comes, it could be disastrous. He is the lure to the thirst, the catalyst to madness. If he manifests while we are engaged in the defence of Baal, we shall be at our most wrathful, our most unrestrained. We will fall.’

‘It says in your archives, does it not, that the servants of the Blood God have tried and they have failed many times to sway us. Need these monsters be reminded that there are many kinds of rage, and there is nobility in overcoming them?’ said Dante.

‘We must resist every single time. He needs to succeed only once,’ said Mephiston. ‘The Neverborn have eternity. We do not, and not every Chapter of the Blood has as much restraint as ours.’

Dante was troubled. ‘Do not bring your enmity with Seth into this,’ he said.

‘I have no enmity against him. I have no enmity against anyone. His enmity is for me – I feel nothing for him. I speak the truth, my lord, and you know it.’

Dante shifted in his chair. His armour scraped on stone, its motive units whining.

‘Can the Angels’ Bane be stopped?’

‘I honestly do not know,’ said Mephiston. ‘I can try. There are certain rituals that may be attempted.’

‘They are dark in nature?’ said Dante.

‘Of course,’ said Mephiston.

Dante’s expression clouded. Another decision for the Chapter Master to wrestle with – always a choice between two evils. If Mephiston had been closer to humanity, he would have felt sympathy for his lord. For one thousand five hundred years Dante had watched their bloodline descend further into savagery, and the Imperium draw nearer to its end. To all others he was a golden angel, the avatar of the Emperor’s most noble primarch. His legend was known the length and breadth of the galaxy. His advice was sought by all, and his warriors clamoured for on every battlefield. Nobody knew of the despair behind the mask. So though Mephiston could not feel pity or sorrow for Commander Dante, he remembered despair, and he understood the dilemmas that faced his leader.

‘What is your counsel, chief of the librarius?’ asked Dante eventually.

‘I would attempt to stop him,’ said Mephiston. ‘I will do so only if you decree it shall be so.’

‘Then I order you to stop him,’ said Dante.

‘No matter the cost?’

Dante’s lips thinned. ‘No matter the cost.’

Mephiston bowed in a rustle of silks and purring armour joints. ‘Then it shall be done, my lord.’

Dante stood. ‘Mephiston, tell no one of this that does not need to know. Bind your Librarians by oath not to reveal what you will attempt. If you recruit from the other Chapters, make them swear the same.’ Dante stared angrily into the face of Sanguinius. ‘This war breeds secrets too readily.’



CHAPTER TEN

THE GREAT RED COUNCIL

The Chapters of the Blood waited for Dante on their feet, as respect demanded. Five hundred exalted heroes of the Imperium filled the Chamber of the Great Red Council. The oils and exhausts of their power armour blended with the incense pouring from the firebowls, adding to it a sacred machine scent.

So the host was gathered. The sons of Sanguinius, the most noble of all the Adeptus Astartes, and the most troubled. Garbed in battleplate of black and red, white and gold, a diversity of livery that could not hide their unity of blood. Fire's warm illumination brought their appearances closer. It muted the gold, enlivened the black, tinted the white, so their armour did not appear so different.

Blood Swords stood by Angels Numinous, Charnel Guard and Red Wings waited with Exsanguinators. The savages of the Carmine Blades rubbed elbows with warrior-scholars of the Golden Sons. Those who had embraced the flaw met with counterparts who defied it to the point of destructive denial.

If divided by custom, they were united by blood. Time had wrought its changes on their temperament and traditions, but underneath the varied colours of their skin and their tattoos, beneath their esoteric rites, they were the same.

The scions of Sanguinius had come home.

The blood thralls of their hosts waited on them, serving spiced wines adulterated with vitae. Other refreshments were available, from plates of exquisitely prepared food to ritual bleedings, and the blessings of Chaplains were given out to troubled souls wishing for some of the grace of the primarch.

They spoke to one another in hushed tones. A Space Marine must strive heroically to become intoxicated, but if it was in the character of some of those present to try, none did so, though Brother Adancio had thrown open the doors of the Chapter's wine cellars, and there was enough drink to make raucous feast. Restraint reigned. For all the pageantry of the gathering it was funereal. A family gathering precipitated by tragedy. Warriors from Chapters who were virtually unknown to one another conversed, amazed at their differences, united by their similarities, but talk turned inexorably in every meeting to the impending arrival of the Leviathan and the impossible task ahead.

A trumpet sang with heavenly notes so refined all paused to hear it. Not a single voice continued, not from the most cynical nor from the most aggressive. Fire crackled in the sudden quiet. A choir of angelic

voices swelled over the main entrance from the mouths of the statues standing guard there, and silence was banished again.

An ancient blood thrall, high ranked in the logisticiam, came into the hollow centre of the great white table upon a mechanised platform. His natural limbs were withered, so for support he was strapped upright into the legged carriage. Seven metal legs tapped and scraped on the stone, carrying him when his own legs could not. A flock of miniature cyber-angels passed and swooped overhead, adding their tiny voices to the chorus emanating from the statues by the door.

The thrall held up a corpse-like hand. Telescopic eyes extended and whirred as they performed a semblance of blinking. The man's body was wrecked with age, but his voice was clear and pure, preserved by his masters for its beauty.

'Take your places, lords of the Blood!' He spoke without music, and yet his voice was so fine it sounded like singing. 'Lord Dante comes! Commander of Baal, Master of the Blood Angels, Keeper of the Blood, Lord of the Angelic Host!'

'Dante, Lord of Angels! Dante, Lord of Baal! Dante, Lord of the first-born sons!' sang the chorus of cybernetic angels. 'Dante! Dante! Dante!'

Melodies perfect in their complexity accompanied the exultation of the commander's titles, while a dulcet chant of his many victories played counterpoint.

The doors flew open. In strode a procession of the highest and the best the Blood Angels had to offer.

The Exalted Herald of Sanguinius, leader of the Sanguinary Guard, Brother Sepharan, led the way. 'Dante is here! All stand for Commander Dante!' he shouted, though all in the room were standing already. Behind Sepharan marched the fifteen Sanguinary Guard presently on Baal. In their footsteps followed the company captains. Six were present, for four were at Diamor in battle against the black fleets of Abaddon. Machiavi of the Third, Castigon of the Fourth, Raxietal of the Sixth, Zedrenael of the Eighth, Sendroth of the Ninth, and finally Borgio of the Tenth, the master of recruits. The fleet captains were next, led by Asante, captain of the battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, walking side by side with Asimuth of the *Bloodcaller*. Then came the Chapter Ancient Behelmor carrying the colours of the Blood Angels proudly before him, a sacred relic depicting Sanguinius. The cloth of the banner had not faded since its weaving thousands of years in the past.

Only after Behelmor and this honour guard of noble heroes did Commander Dante himself arrive. To his right was Brother Corbulo, bearing the Red Grail itself, the very vessel that had caught the dying Sanguinius' blood. On his left was Chaplain Ordamael, Paternis Sanguis, second only to Astorath the Grim in the order of the Reclusiam, carrying Amit's Reliquary out of the Basilica Sanguinarum, wherein the last feather of the primarch was kept in permanent stasis. Behind him walked Mephiston, Lord of Death, Chief of Librarians, and Incarael, Master of the Blade, huge in his Martian priest's battlegear, then Brother Bellerophon, Keeper of the Heavengate, the Blood Angels fleet commander, and at his side Brother Adancio, master of the logisticiam. In Adancio's train were the leaders of the Chapter's human servants from every division, scholiasts of the librarius, equerries to the Chapter councils, logisticiam adepts, the captain-ordinary of the blood thrall warriors, Master Leeter of the astropaths, and those navigators who could bear the gravity of Baal.

Finally there were champions of each of the companies at that date on Baal, all clad in armour of the most ancient sort. These suits had seen service in the Horus Heresy and were lovingly decorated. The name of the warrior who had worn the armour those many thousands of years ago was emblazoned upon their chestplates and helms. The armour waited for days like this, guarded against decay by arcane sciences. Today it was worn again in remembrance of who the Blood Angels once were, and the weapons of legendary heroes were clasped in the hands of the champions also. After them servitors shepherded

velvet padded grav-sleds bearing other relics: the sword Valour's Edge, the plasma pistol Fury of Baal, Gallian's Staff, the Angel's Wing, the Crown Angelic, sitting easy upon a polished skull, and then the Veritas Vitae, the machine blessed enough to record the words of Sanguinius himself, then repeat them upon the field of battle.

A column of armed blood thralls twenty strong, their small human forms lost in ornate half-powered carapace suits, followed their masters in their storied battleplate and the relics in their train. Behind them walked a mighty Librarian-Dreadnought, decked with honours, and four more of his kind. Lastly were robed blood thralls bearing golden censers spilling the most wonderfully fragrant smoke, and five thralls in black bearing representations of the Five Virtues, and five in white bearing similar gold objects depicting the Five Graces. All about the procession was heavenly singing, and glory, and they walked into the Chamber of the Great Red Council in a blaze of golden light.

At the table the procession peeled apart, one stream heading to the right, the other to the left. Those Blood Angels granted seats at the table stood behind their appointed places, while the rest went to stations around the hall. The champions and Sanguinary Guard went to recesses in the walls to watch over the gathering, while the warrior thralls turned and stamped their feet, forming an avenue for their baseline human brothers to negotiate before they too went to their duties about the hall, whether to serve, advise, or to burn their holy smokes by the effigies of celebrated heroes.

The Chapter Lords of the Blood watched in respectful quiet as the mightiest of their number went to stand at his place at the table. The artefacts his comrades carried – the blood, the feather, the standard, the ancient armours – were of the most sacred kind to all the Chapters of the Blood, but it was Dante's gleaming, golden presence that held all their attention.

Over Dante's face was the death mask of Sanguinius, the righteous anger of their lord father frozen in gold, and his blood preserved in the bloodstone upon Dante's forehead. These were more than symbols the Blood Angels brought, they were tangible links to the past and the Chapters' shared origins.

Corbulo handed off the grail to a thrall of the Sanguis Corpusculum. Ordamael gave Amit's Reliquary to a black-robed, tongueless servant of the Reclusiam Citadel. As these human serfs stood behind their masters, so did Brother Behelmor stand behind Dante's chair. The flag's silk rippled liquidly. The music ceased. True silence fell again. The brothers of a score of Chapters remained standing as Dante surveyed his allies with Sanguinius' unblinking, shining eyes.

'My brothers!' said Dante, his pronouncement startling in the sepulchral quiet. 'These artefacts that my warriors and their servants bear date back to the time of Horus' great betrayal of our beloved Emperor. These relics here, these suits of armour, these weapons my brothers carry, date from the most terrible war in our history. And these,' he pointed to the Red Grail and to Amit's Reliquary. 'They bore witness to our lord's death, for both are vessels for his mortal remains. No greater shock have the Chapters of the Blood experienced than when our lord fell to the blades of his hateful brother, not when our forebears were sundered from one another's company, not in those times when our Chapters have faced annihilation, as my own has three times within the span of my life. Sanguinius' loss echoes to this day in all of us. It is a pain that is immortal.

'Yet those times passed, no matter how dark they appeared. Through the sacrifice of our lord, the Emperor was triumphant, and order was restored. From this I draw hope.' He paused. No one spoke. 'I have lived a long time. I have seen things I thought never to see. Every century I survive presents a new horror to test our Imperium. I have seen the Necrons awaken. I have witnessed the Tau emerge. I was there when the hive fleets first came out of the intergalactic void to prey upon the worlds of our species. I have fought Ghazgkhull, the great beast of the Orks, upon the thrice-damned world of Armageddon. I have seen Chapters fall. I have seen worlds die. I have seen the flower of the Imperium's martial might laid

low by the perfidy of traitors. I have seen the ambition of vain men deliver the innocent into the obscene hungers of the endless dark.'

The glowing eyes of Sanguinius' mask swept over the crowd of warriors. 'I have seen all this. I have faced every manner of enemy, and I have slain them all!' he said, his voice rising. 'The Imperium stands! We are the Angels of Death, the Emperor's appointed champions. We are the lords of battle, the bringers of vengeance. We are the sons of Sanguinius, the red line of blood which none shall pass.' He placed his hands on the table, and leaned forward. 'What is to come will test you. You will look to the sky in search of the stars and you will not see them. The tyranid swarms will block out their light. You will marvel at the number of creatures they shall land upon these worlds, and you will doubt it shall ever end. You shall speak with your psykers and your Librarians, and they will tell you of the shadow that blinds and pains all those who look into the warp. You shall see all this, and you shall believe that we cannot prevail. But I tell you this – prevail we shall!' he shouted. 'By blade, bolt, plasma and las-beam we shall cut them down. By the strength of our blood will we throw them back. We shall make a virtue of our curse, and release the unbounded savagery of Sanguinius upon these trespassers. We will do this because it must be done. We will do this because there are no others to do it. Hive Fleet Leviathan comes against us with a great portion of its strength. If these worlds of Baal fall, the whole of Ultima Segmentum will be open to its swarms. The hive fleets will pour north, devouring everything in their path, and the Imperium will be dealt a grievous blow.'

He slammed his fist down onto the perfect new marble of the table, cracking its surface. 'This shall not be so! This will be a victory where there have been only defeats. Here, on Baal, the Leviathan shall die!'

His shout resounded around the chamber. He drew in a deep, ragged breath. His fury affected all those near to him, and, as their thirst awoke, it provoked that in others further still, and so the red rage of Sanguinius radiated out from Commander Dante like slow ripples in a pool of blood, until all felt its touch, and the urge to do battle grew keen in the twin hearts of the warriors in the hall.

'The Imperium will endure,' growled Dante. 'By the blood of Sanguinius that I bear upon my brow and that I carry in my veins, I swear it shall be so.'

He sat heavily. Silence held for a moment, and broke suddenly.

'Dante!' screamed someone. His cry was taken up. 'Dante! Dante! Dante!' the Space Marines shouted, raw and raging, so very different to the pure angelic singing that had ushered the commander in. 'Dante! Dante! Dante!' they roared. They each beat one fist upon their chestplates, filling the chamber with the raucous clash of metal. 'Dante! Dante! Dante!' There were warriors in the hall who felt their rage burn hot and crimson, and struggled to contain themselves, so great was the outpouring of emotion in that place.

Dante held up a hand. Behelmor slammed down the staff of the Chapter banner. The sharp crack of metal on stone broke through the applause like a stone through ice.

'I pray for your indulgence a little while longer,' said Dante. Quiet returned. 'And I bid you sit.'

A strange chorus sang, the whine and scrape of five hundred suits of power armour lowered into five hundred stone chairs.

'Firstly, I thank you all for responding to our call for aid in this darkest hour,' Dante said. 'Loyalty to Sanguinius' home is admirable but not demanded of our bloodline. I am gratified and humbled by the numbers you and yours have brought to the defence of this system. Never since the breaking of the Legions have so many of our kind been present in one place at one time.' He looked around the room gravely. 'However, the scale of this Angelic Host brings its own problems. Every one of us in this room is a lord among angels. We are the masters of the Chapters of the Blood. Each one of us bears great responsibilities, be it for a hundred men, a fleet, or a system of worlds. We are equals, you Lords of Blood and I, and so there is a matter that must be settled, a question that must be asked.' He paused. The

words were important. They must be put well.

‘The question I would ask of you is one of command,’ said Dante. ‘You may think that I would take the lead without your explicit approval. I would never presume to do so. I ask instead that you permit me to lead the defence of Baal and in any military action that might be required to break the hive fleet thereafter, that you submit your warriors and yourselves to my command alone, and that you shall swear to do my bidding no matter the cost or how much you may disagree with my course of action.’

Quiet again.

A warrior in black and gold stood from his chair. A swift-moving servo-skull went to hover over his head, bathing him in a soft lumen glow.

‘Captain Cantar of the Golden Sons,’ it said. ‘Keeper of the Wheel, Slayer of Danrane of the Fifteenth Path, Bloodlord of Kathoi, Exterminator of the Skaal.’

Cantar let the herald skull say its piece. In the light the skin of his bare head was a deep, nut brown of lustrous hue, and his hair was tightly plaited and gathered into a short braid at the back. Golden tattoos glimmered in the light. ‘I am but second captain, no master am I,’ he said. ‘I was sent here with my own warriors and two half companies of my brother-captains at the command of my Chapter Master Erden Cleeve. He gave me express orders to follow your will to the letter. You need not ask if we shall follow you, Commander Dante.’ He banged his fist upon his chest, then made the sign of the aquila. ‘I hear at Armageddon the generals of the Imperium appointed you as lord commander, but they debated first. There is no need for that here, you are among your kin. You are our lord.’ He bowed his head, and sat. A cheer went up around the room.

‘My thanks for your words, brother,’ said Dante. ‘But there will be warriors here who perhaps think they should have ultimate say in the deployment of their Chapters, as is only right. I believe that only in unity shall we prevail. I cannot proceed until I am assured that my orders will be obeyed by all. Our lives, our victory, depend upon it.’

Another warrior stood, this one helmed and in particoloured armour of black and red. The herald skull’s light lit gorgeously worked trim. Upon his shoulder a winged skull glared out imperiously.

‘Castellan Zargo, Chapter Master of the Angels Encarmine, Fleetlord, Far-Wanderer, Master of the Gloried Reach.

‘We of the Angels Encarmine commit ourselves wholly to your cause.’ Through his helm emitter his voice was hard and rasping. ‘I am sure there are many more here who would agree. I feel I can vouch for the sentiments of Chapter Master Seth. Though we have had our differences I am sure we are of mind on this matter. Chapter Master Glorian, and Chapter Master Voitek, among others also. Is there need for this, Dante? You are the great hero of the Imperium. Your name and exploits are known to all of us, even those who have never been within a thousand light years of Baal before.’

‘Aye! Aye!’ men shouted. ‘It is true!’

‘Let us be about this war, without this charade. You bear the blood of Sanguinius on your forehead,’ said a warrior in sombre grey.

‘Paracelius, First Captain, Charnel Guard, Giver of the Bones, nineteenth of the title,’ said the skull.

‘You wear Sanguinius’ mask on your face. We shall all follow you,’ Paracelius said.

‘Yet I am not Sanguinius,’ said Dante. ‘You all must understand this. I have achieved much, but my legend is different to my story. I am only a warrior, like you. Know this. Know also that this war may be the doom of your Chapters. I will command only by consent, and not by some supposed right. For who but the Emperor could confer that on me? Therefore in His absence, I must ask my peers for their approval.’

‘So we will die!’ shouted a captain of the Blood Swords, surging to his feet too quickly for the herald to reach him and call out his name. ‘What of it? For what other reason did the Emperor create us than to die

in battle performing service to Him? If our deaths will aid victory, then so be it! Life is fleeting, the blood is eternal. We fight not for ourselves, but for our geneline and the Imperium.'

'Hear, hear!' shouted several warriors. Gauntlets banged thunderously on the table.

'Dante shall lead us!' cried someone.

'Dante! Dante!'

Dante stilled the noise with a raised hand. 'If you are so eager for me to command you, then heed this first order,' said Dante. 'Vote.'

'Aye! Very well, we shall vote!' shouted a helmetless Chapter Master in rich white and red armour.

'Lord Follordark, Chapter Master of the Angels Excelsis, the Void Sword, Master of Utrech,' said the skull herald.

'And I shall swear to be bound by your command should my brothers in arms here vote yes!' Follordark shouted. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. Spittle flew from his lips. He held up his hands and turned around so that all could see him. 'But,' he said, his voice dropping, 'should the vote prove against you, Lord of the Hosts, then I shall command my own men in the manner of my choosing. And that will be to follow you!'

Dante inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'All I ask is that you vote. The vote will be done simply and quickly. When my Master of Ceremony asks that you cast your lots, stand if you favour my command of this defence and subsequent actions necessary to break Leviathan. Remain seated if you wish to operate independently. I remind you that all of you in here are bound to honour the outcome, no matter your preference.'

The warriors spoke with each other then, either for or against. The motion of impassioned gestures made draughts in the room that stirred the fires lighting the gathering.

Dante nodded to his Master of Ceremony. The old man piloted his conveyance into the centre of the table, the thick metal cables running down his back linking his brain with its motive systems gleaming orange gold.

'My lords!' he said in his incongruously beautiful voice. 'We ask you to be silent! We shall now vote on the matter, the first to be put to the Great Red Council of the Angelic Host.'

Conversation dropped away reluctantly. Warriors who had stood sat again so as not to pre-empt the result.

'Vote!' called the Master of Ceremony.

The hall reverberated to the sound of hundreds of armoured giants getting to their feet. The growl and whine of armour joints working in unison filled the space, so that it sounded like a mechanical dragon stirring in its lair.

Servo-skulls swept over the silent crowd. From the ceiling a robotic angel descended, lowered by an armature. It spread useless metal wings. Red light burned fiercely in its soulless metal face. Fine laser spread scanned up and down the voting Space Marines as the angel turned in a slow circle.

There were a handful of warriors who remained defiantly seated, and of them only two were Chapter Masters. Commander Dante's reputation was such that very few of them would not follow him. The majority in the room were variously surprised and annoyed that he asked at all. Most of the captains that remained seated did so on principle to honour the Codex Astartes commandment that no lord, no matter how great, should command more than a thousand Space Marines. Only a couple were arrogant enough to believe they could do better than the Master of the Blood Angels.

The angel finished its count. Its metal eyes shut with a click, and its wings folded.

The Master of Ceremony closed his eyes, communing via data pulse with the machineries of the Arx Angelicum.

‘In favour of Commander Dante commanding the defence of Baal, four hundred and seventy-six. Against, twenty-four.’

Deafening cheers and applause ripped through the chamber.

Dante stood, and shouted into the tumult. ‘Then it is decided. I shall command you as if you were my own until this conflict is done and Baal is saved! Until that time, I will treat you with the honour and respect I accord my own warriors, and mete out the same punishments to those who defy my will. Any who do not agree may leave. This is your last chance. Go without rancour, and be counted among our brothers still.’

The applause petered out. Dante’s glowing eyes lit upon the last seated warriors. Not one of them moved.

‘Very well,’ said Dante with a curt nod. ‘To war.’

‘So it shall be!’ cried out a captain of the Blood Drinkers.

‘Dante! Dante! Dante!’ the shout began again. Once more the ancient heart of the Arx Angelicum rocked to the shouted name of its Master.

‘Enough!’ commanded Dante, and all fell silent. ‘We shall turn now to the matter at hand – the destruction of Hive Fleet Leviathan.’

A hololith activated, adding its gentle thrum to the room’s noises. Ribbon projectors concealed in carved angels upon the ceiling painted a glowing star map whose sides brushed the edges of the table’s interior. A section of the Ultima Segmentum floated in space, perfect in every detail. Across its centre was the broad, bloody brushstroke of the Red Scar. Balor glowed off centre. The twin-starred Cryptus system burned to the galactic south west. There were many stars in the Scar, and all were red, whether they were lone wanderers in the Red Wilderness, or tightly packed in the stellar nurseries that cramped the southern Obscura Veil. The cartolith showed space around the Scar too, and away from the lurid glow the norms of space reasserted themselves. The Scar was relatively sparsely inhabited, but outside the Scar were millions of systems, hundreds of them Imperial, all at risk.

Once established, the illusion of space was total. For a few seconds the Chapters of the Blood were warrior gods peering down from their celestial palace at the mortal realm. A flicker and an influx of data banished the effect. Signifiers and datascreed sprang up all over the map. First came the system names, unrolling themselves in multitudes over the points of ersatz starlight. Most were no more than a string of Ordo Astra astrogation numbers, reminding them all of how thinly spread the Imperium was. Star systems occupied by humanity gained datascreed that scrolled down automatically, detailing their worlds closely: populations, exports, tithe grades and all the other macro-grade information the Imperium’s slow bureaucracy needed in order to function. The statistics in the screeds were from the top of a pyramid of data; even so, all except the most general would be out of date.

System orbital marks, stellar progression tracks, zone delimits, borders, highlighted phenomena and important outposts cluttered the map further. It became busy. Still, for another second, the Space Marines looked upon a pristine map of humanity’s empire in that sector, annotated with a bureaucrat’s diligence.

Order and purity were as much an illusion as the hololith of the void. A further flicker brought the watching warriors closer to the truth. Cogitators overlaid the progress of Hive Fleet Leviathan over all the busy data of the cartolith. A shadow was engulfing the stars, multiple tendrils extending along attack vectors from beneath the galactic plane. They moved in unison, closing like a slow-motion vid replay of some monstrous, aquatic beast snaring its prey. Though at first regard the tendrils appeared separate, splinters in the parlance of the age, all led back to the unknowable totality of the hive mind. As the monster moved, the galaxy died. Beneath the slowly questing tentacles star signifiers, Imperial and non-Imperial both, flashed an angry red and greyed out.

‘Behold Hive Fleet Leviathan,’ said Commander Dante, his out-flung arm encompassing the writhing tentacles. ‘It has been on this heading for decades, consuming all in its path. This simulation is sped up by a factor of several thousand. As you watch you will see it consume world after world, although in reality these planet deaths were months or years apart. Its progress is slow by our standards. By some mechanism the tyranids are able to violate natural law and exceed the speed of light somewhat, but as far as we know the fleets cannot traverse the warp. Over the last few decades this has offered us a small strategic advantage, as we have been able to respond more quickly than it has. Nevertheless, I cannot claim any sort of victory. We have done our part in attempting to stop the hive fleet, but in doing so have discovered that it could not be stopped. It is too vast, and growing bigger. Every world devoured has strengthened it in number and variety. Forgive me if I provide knowledge you already possess. There are several Chapters here who have warred valiantly against the Great Devourer, but not all of you have.’ Dante paused. ‘We have fought Leviathan many times now, and we have come to new, disturbing conclusions.’

A smaller scale map sprang into being, separated from the greater in a glowing wireframe rectangle. It displayed two alternate courses for the hive fleet, one lighter than the other.

‘From the data we have gathered from the Ordo Astra and which has been provided to us by the Inquisition and other adepta, we believe this darker course to have been Leviathan’s original trajectory,’ said Dante. ‘See how it looked to be avoiding the Red Scar until this sharp turning to the galactic north, twelve years ago. The Red Scar is a poisonous area of space. The hive fleets, as a rule, seem to be drawn to rich worlds, those populous or with intact natural systems. They favour sectors with high densities of such planets, and avoid perilous areas of space. But in this case the hive fleet appears to be forgoing richer sectors in favour of a strategic goal. We believe that it is actively seeking the destruction of the Blood Angels Chapter.’

A hubbub arose at these words. ‘That is impossible, Commander Dante.’

‘Lord Malphas, Chapter Master of the Exsanguinators,’ blurted the herald skull.

‘We have fought against these creatures before. They appear cunning, but they have as much self-determination as a colony of steelmites. They are animals, they do not bear grudges.’

‘Techial, Chapter Master of the Disciples of Blood,’ said the servo-skull.

‘Then why, twelve years ago, did Leviathan alter its course, and begin to head directly for Baal?’ said another.

The skull’s announcement went unheard as voices clamoured at Dante. Space Marines argued with each other.

‘My brothers!’ shouted Dante. ‘Scaraban, the Chief Librarian of the Flesh Eaters has invested a great deal of time into investigating this independently of our Chapter. Listen to him, then judge.’

Scaraban left his seat and went through a gap in the table into the hololith at the centre of the room. As he talked, he strode through the stars like a celestial being. His force staff glimmered with unearthly power, as if he could not quite separate himself from the warp.

‘We in the Imperium see the tyranids as a collection of creatures linked together through psychic interface,’ he said. ‘It is an understandable misconception. We compare the things we fight to other foes. In this case, comparison begets false truths. There is nothing like this race of beasts in this galaxy, and therefore nothing to accurately compare them with. We face heaving masses of creatures, and see armies of individuals. We observe the higher forms appearing to make decisions and directing the lesser, and see officers or slave masters. The tyranids appear as a race like any other, one that has incorporated many species into its genetic memory, and that employs radical gene-engineering and psychic slavery. This is the logical interpretation. It is also wrong. The tyranids are winning their war because the Imperium has

been blind to their, or I should more correctly say, *its* true nature.'

'You know the truth of its being?'

'Chapter Master Geron of the Angels Numinous,' said the skull. Its gravity motor growled with effort as it flew back and forth across the room.

'I did not discover it,' said Scaraban. 'This hypothesis is but one of several theories advanced, but it has the merit of being true. I have seen it.'

Doubtful talk struck up.

'No psyker can look into the shadow without going insane, Adeptus Astartes or not!'

'Seutona, fifth captain, Angels of Light.'

'I have,' said Scaraban.

'I hear rumours that you consort with decadent aeldari to further your knowledge!' said Seutona hotly.

'If I have, it is to the benefit of all,' said Scaraban.

'Aeldari destroyed the Third Company of my Chapter not four years ago, they cannot be trusted!'

'Silence!' warned Dante. So commanding was his voice the brewing argument was quashed instantly.

'There will be no dissent. No airing of grievances. Do not do the enemy's work for him.'

'I have seen it too. Scaraban speaks the truth.' Mephiston rose from his chair. His eyes glowed blue, and on wings of scarlet energy he flew over the heads of his peers and landed in the centre of the map, his deathly pale skin lit by the dancing light of disturbed hololithic star systems.

Dark mutters greeted the Lord of Death's intervention.

'I have looked into the shadow in the warp and seen the thing that casts it,' said Mephiston. 'What assails our galaxy is not an army of individuals, or even a colony of social animals working as one, but a single creature, a monstrous foe of inconceivable dimensions. Scaraban is correct. We have our perception of this predator back to front. It is not as it appears, a host of creatures linked psychically, it can instead be seen as a single, massive psychic presence: a single mind. These monsters that attack us generate it, they make it as a man makes his soul, but whereas ours are individual, theirs is singular, a single predator, not many.'

'And when they attack each other?' said Malphas.

'Perhaps the hive fleets are different beings, one mind for each. Perhaps they are all ultimately one. We cannot say for sure. The tyranids are utterly alien. But we know the hive mind is real. This intelligence is emergent, coming from the billions of creatures in the swarms, but it is not an empty intellect, it is aware. It has a soul.'

'You say then this being is a warp entity, born of the immaterium?' asked a Librarian. 'In our librarius we have theorised it is but another thing of Chaos wearing xenos skin.'

'Codicier Laertamos, Brothers of the Red,' the herald skull announced.

Scaraban shook his head. 'I am sure its origins are in this realm of being. We are not alone in holding this opinion of its nature. The reports of Inquisitor Kryptmann, others in the Inquisition and the Magos Biologis suggest so, at least those that support this interpretation. Perhaps what we are seeing is a creature part-way to spiritual transcendence, a gestalt made of the minds of billions of brute animals trapped half in and half out of the warp by unending hunger?'

'You suggest we fight a god?' scoffed a Space Marine of cadaverous appearance. His eyes were sunken in skin that looked dry as dust.

'Carnifus, third captain, Blood Drinkers.'

'Is there a better word for such a thing?' said Mephiston.

'Blasphemy,' muttered Carnifus.

'Then should we not take the fight to it psychically? Destroy the mind and the bodies will follow.'

‘Dammanes, seventh captain, Brothers of the Red,’ said the herald skull.

‘We cannot fight it in the warp, my brothers. Its presence there is so overwhelming that the Emperor himself would not prevail,’ said Dante. ‘When these things are separated from their mind, as has happened in my wars against them, be it by psychic or physical means, they remain alive, and savage, with a will and intelligence of their own to fall back on until they are enslaved again. The Leviathan must be killed in the flesh, then the mind will die, for the mind is generated by the creatures it guides. It is a thing of this world that is half in the next. That is its weakness. Its creatures seem endless, but kill enough of them, and the hive mind is weakened. Kill all of them, and it is over.’

‘But then it will not die until every last one of its vile spawn is destroyed!’

‘Ares, ninth captain, Red Wings.’

Dante waited for the echoes of the servo-skull’s announcement to end. ‘Then it shall be made to recoil, as the monsters of the night once fled before fire in mankind’s primitive past. Either it will flee, or it will die. As long as Baal survives, I care not. My brothers,’ he said. ‘The Red Scar is lifeless. With the Satys system lost and all stocks of its elixirs exhausted, the red worlds are being abandoned. Without the Satryx elixir, most are uninhabitable. Where this is yet to happen, I have taken action. Those worlds that the tyranids have not stripped already are dead by my hand. They will find the Red Scar empty of all but ashes.’ Dante’s voice quietened. He regarded himself as the defender of humanity. Ordering exterminatus on forty inhabited worlds sat ill with him.

Words of affirmation came from those captains and masters who had been on these missions.

‘The tyranids will find nothing to sustain them,’ said Dante. ‘If we stop them here, we can turn them back from the populous worlds to the north and east. If we drive them from the ramparts of the Arx Angelicum, we shall trap the Leviathan in the Red Scar, watch it starve, and destroy it at our leisure.’

Deafening cheers erupted. Hands hammered on the table until it shook.

When the applause subsided, Dante set out his plans.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEALED IN BLOOD

Gabriel Seth made his way along the lower walls of the Arx. Even among so many of Sanguinius' bloodline, there was no mistaking the Chapter Master of the Flesh Tearers. He was an immense man, taller than most Space Marines by a head, his blocky face so set with anger it appeared to be a study in fury carved from granite. To a mortal he was a giant clad in brutal black and clotted red. To his blood kin he was a liability, a furious monster more likely to kill his allies than aid them. The reputation was not entirely deserved. Gabriel Seth was cursed with dark celebrity.

Seth crossed the Bone Walk below the Sanguis Corpusculum in shadow, the sun being on the far side of the great tower. Polished skulls stared up at him from beneath a protective coating of transparisteel. He had the walk to himself. Few scions of Sanguinius had business on the walls, for all were busy with preparations for the coming war, as Seth himself would have been had Dante not summoned him. When they did venture to the heights, the upper levels of the Arx Murus were preferred by his cousins. The view from the lower terraces of the Angelic Host was poorer. Seth looked out at the host dismissively. Where some might see unbridled Imperial might, he saw weakness. All the warriors suffered from the flaw like his own Chapter did, yet in the main they denied what they were. They were not worthy to carry the blood of Sanguinius in their veins.

A mournful cry from the Tower of Amareo seemed in agreement with his opinion.

The empty sockets of the skulls watched him without sight. The eyes of passing servitors were just as blind in their own way, and the cyborgs went by without acknowledgement. Their reworked minds were too focused to fear him. Seth welcomed the opportunity to think, unbothered by the reactions of others to his presence. His own reputation had grown, but his Chapter was still mistrusted by the other Chapters of the Blood. Too many of them thought themselves above his brethren, and those that knew they were not were mired in their own misery. Only a handful of the Sanguinary Brotherhood were regarded with more caution than the Flesh Tearers. Seth was untroubled. Their suspicion was justified, at least in part, for his Chapter was savage. Service was its own comfort. He rebuffed sympathy as strongly as he did challenges to his authority. There was no salvation for his kind, there was only war, and wrath was a useful tool in its prosecution.

Seth rounded the flank of the Sanguis Corpusculum into weakening sunlight. The ivory sides of the Sanguinary Tower shone pink as newly exposed bone. Another day was ending. Half of Balor was lost behind the horizon. The silhouette of Baal Primus had taken a large bite of the part that remained. The last warriors of Seth's Chapter were on the moon. He was annoyed at being called away from them at this delicate time of preparation. His place was at their side. After the betrayal on Nekkarris, and the attempt on his life from within the Flesh Tearers' own ranks, some of his warriors still needed watching.

Dante had requested his presence at the second landing column of the Sanguis Corpusculum. The site came into view, haloed by the sun, but the column and its landing pad were out of sight, retracted to the lowest position a hundred feet below.

When the pad was at its medium elevation it was possible to walk from the Bone Walk onto the platform. When at the bottom of its range there was a sheer, unguarded drop. Where the Bone Walk bent around the pad, turning into a concavity in the side of the tower, stood a sole Sanguinary Guard. Seth approached him. The warrior watched. They were so poised, the first born of Sanguinius. His own honour guard would have leapt forward like chained dogs in challenge.

Seth weighed the prowess of the guard; there was much he could tell in how a warrior stood. He could have killed him, of course. The vision of himself doing just that flickered through his mind. A blow to the chest to disrupt power flow to the guard's jump pack, a follow up to the throat. It would not be enough, but it would be the start of a worthy challenge. His muscles tensed in anticipation of violence. Upon his stony face there was no change.

'Greetings, Master Seth,' said the Sanguinary Guard. 'Our lord Dante speaks with Sanguinary Priest Albinus. He sends his apologies, and bids you wait here with me.' The guard's hand shifted on the hilt of his encarmine sword. Seth's lip curled dismissively. He wondered if the guard was one of those Blood Angels that hated his Chapter. Dante tried to hide it from him, but the hatred many of his warriors held for the Flesh Tearers was obvious and insulting.

'Dante called for me,' said Seth. 'Be civil.' His words were measured, imbued with a calm that he had spent a century perfecting. It was a crust upon seething lava. Always he was ready to unleash his fury. He took in all detail around him, noted every threat. At the far end of the walk was a second Sanguinary Guard. Another watched on from an aperture in the tower's side above. Something important was happening there.

'I mean no offence, my lord,' said the guard, and Seth thought perhaps he did not. 'My brothers and I have been asked to detain you only until the commander is finished.'

'Then I will wait,' said Seth. He spoke neutrally. He kept his pronouncements to the point in case they turned to unintended threat.

The golden-armoured guard inclined his head. 'I thank you on behalf of Lord Dante for your understanding. Once again, I apologise for the delay.'

Seth glared a moment at the guard. The guard returned his stare and Seth half smiled in acknowledgement of his bravery.

Grunting dismissively, the Flesh Tearer went to the edge of the Bone Walk to look down at the lowered pad. Light spilled from the open hangar of the Sanguinary Tower, the main part of the Sanguis Corpusculum, cross-hatching the long shadows teased out by the setting sun. Soft yellow light lay over pink. From his position he could not see inside the complex.

Ten scouts formed a cordon around a Thunderhawk gunship. The neophytes of the Blood Angels were force grown to maturity in the space of a single year, and the young warriors had their full size and suite of gifts. Their black carapaces should not have been implanted, as it was the Blood Angels' custom to gift the carapace only at the close of training. In this single regard they conformed with other Chapters. Seth's

enhanced sight saw scabbing on the scouts' fatigues, the marks of recent wounds which corresponded to the positions of neural interface ports, and rising from them he scented surgical gels and blood heavy with Larraman cells.

He watched them like a lion waits outside the cave of primitive men. They were toys at his feet. He calculated the best way to jump down, the most efficient way of killing them. Sanguinius' wrath stirred in his breast, urging him to do it. As it tormented him, he taunted it in reply by his inaction.

A trio of Sanguinary priests and white-robed thralls stood to the side of the Thunderhawk's open prow ramp, a demi-squad of battle-brothers at their backs. Commander Dante was speaking with them, although Seth could not hear what they said.

A line of tracked servitors trundled up to the base of the Thunderhawk's rear ramp, as well ordered as ants. They lowered grey pallets to the ground at the foot of the ramp, turned one hundred and eighty degrees and went away. Containers covered in methalon frost were removed from the pallets by blood thralls wearing insulated suits. From there they carried the cargo on small grav-sleds into the Thunderhawk's hold. The men went in and came out again, the servitors arrived and deposited their loads, two loops meeting but never touching. He saw the relationship between his Chapter and the Blood Angels described in their toil. Entities worlds apart yet derived from the same source, their endless labours to a common end.

He snorted in harsh laughter at himself. Dante was getting to him.

A Techmarine dodged his way past the loaders and into the craft. Soon afterwards the Thunderhawk's jet covers petalled open and began preflight testing, cycling up and down with whining roars. Heat haze shimmered around the exhaust.

The servitors brought out the last of the containers. They drove away into the hangar and did not return. The last pallet was unloaded. Most of the thralls left and returned inside also.

Dante reached out a hand and placed it on the lead priest's pauldron. Seth assumed this was Albinus.

Seth could not see what Dante said to Albinus, but the Sanguinary priest fell to his knees, clasped Dante's golden-clad hand and pressed it to his lips with his head bowed. His men saluted and boarded the craft. Albinus got up, embraced his lord, took his helmet from a thrall and followed his warriors into the hold of the Thunderhawk.

A klaxon honked, drowning out the ambient noise of the host's preparations for war in the desert. Giant engines engaged under the landing pad. Ground crew unhooked fuel lines and ran into the hangar. Dante was left alone. He glanced upward and nodded at Seth.

Like a giant piston, the landing pad rose. The klaxon blared all the way. When it drew level with the Bone Walk, Dante stepped off and came to stand by the Master of the Flesh Tearers. The pad continued to grind upwards, rising over them until it was as high over Seth as it had been below him.

Seth broke their mutual silence.

'You send away your gene-seed.'

'Yes,' said Dante.

'You do not think you can win,' said Seth bluntly.

Dante looked at him. Or rather, Sanguinius did, his golden face frozen forever in an outraged shout.

'I have seen Leviathan descend,' said Seth. 'That was no victory. You said so yourself. We nearly lost our lives at Cryptus. We will lose everything here.'

Dante looked away, back to the landing pad. 'There is hope. The Sanguinor himself told me. I was like you, Seth. I despaired.'

'Beyond wrath, there is only despair,' said Seth. 'Better to be wrathful.'

'I choose to be hopeful. The Sanguinor has never spoken. Not once in ten thousand years. At Cryptus he

did.'

'Sending your gene-seed away is not the act of a hopeful man.'

'I am a pragmatist, Gabriel. Albinus is a loyal warrior. He will keep our future safe, even if our home is lost.'

'The scouts were newly implanted with the carapace.'

'Prematurely elevated, in case of need. They must prove themselves still, but when the time comes they will be ready for their armour,' said Dante.

'For what? We cannot win,' said Seth, 'and ten scouts cannot rebuild the Blood Angels.'

'Perhaps not,' conceded Dante. 'But this Chapter has been reduced to a handful of warriors more than once. If we fail here, the Blood Angels will rise again on some other world.'

The Thunderhawk's engines built to a blast furnace roar. Spikes of white hot flame stabbed out over the lip of the raised landing pad.

'What of it then?' said Seth, suddenly angry. His jaw clenched so hard he spoke through his teeth. 'I bleed willingly for you, Dante, for one reason. Of all the puling men who claim descent from the Great Angel, you are the only honourable one. You understand what it is to feel the pull of the Black Rage. The others pretend. None but the Flesh Tearers know the depths of fury. Wrath is what we are, it is what we all are. You have lived long enough to face it yourself. So.' He shrugged. His fists closed involuntarily. 'If you choose to send your gene-seed away, it is no business of mine.'

'You would not do the same?'

'I never claimed to be able to save my Chapter. It dwindles before my eyes, until a bare few hundred remain. All I ever wished was for a glorious end in honour of the Emperor and the memory of Sanguinius. If we must be damned, then we will fall in the service of the Imperium, by blood and fury, so it shall be. Best to end it here, if it must end.'

'You would not unleash your legacy on this galaxy without your guidance? You would rather your Chapter died?'

'If that is what you think, Dante, then believe it. What do you want, commander?' growled Seth. 'The last time I was on Baal, I was brought as a prisoner to your Forum Judicium. I recall you saw no need to ask my permission. I am insulted that you ask the approval of these weaklings to command them.'

'Seth, you seek outrage for the sake of it,' said Dante. Some of his poise deserted him. He sounded tired. 'You know it is different this time. You have proved yourself a thousand times the loyal servant of the Imperium. You know it had to be done.'

Seth made a humourless noise. 'Tell that to the innocents fallen before our wrath. Tell that to my men who dared to oppose me.'

'Your savagery is your strength as much as your curse.'

'Savage? Here I am, obedient.'

'If it rankles, why?' said Dante.

Seth looked up at the darkening sky and the moving constellations of ship lights. 'Because I owe you a debt of honour that cannot be repaid. I have placed my men under your command many times. I have watched them die in pursuit of your goals. Remember this, Commander Dante,' said Seth, and the furious expression on his face grew deeper. 'I am not your thrall. Do not take my obedience for granted. You sent me to the moon of Baal Primus, and you called me back. I am here. What more do you want?'

Dante sighed disappointedly. 'Seth, Seth, Seth,' he shook his head. 'Gabriel, I mean you no dishonour. Quite the opposite in fact,' said Dante. 'I did not call you here to witness the removal of our gene-seed. Do you think I am making some sort of point to you?'

Seth shrugged. He honestly didn't care.

The Thunderhawk lifted off. Landing gear clunked away, and it appeared over the pad edge, turning in the sky, nosing heavenward. Engines roaring, it pushed upward slowly, so blocky and huge it looked as if it could never break free of Baal's gravity, but as it rose it accelerated, and tore away from the Arx Angelicum leaving black contrails in its wake.

'There. It has gone. One small mercy,' said Dante.

'You save your Chapter and sacrifice mine,' said Seth.

'Do you think I would do that to you, Gabriel?' said Dante.

The boom of the gunship breaking the sound barrier rumbled over the desert. The muted industry of the host took its place.

The sun was sinking away. Bright lights snapped on in the sands. The work proceeded around the clock.

Deliberations in the council had lasted most of the previous night. Dante had spoken at length, assigning duties to the Chapters of the Blood. There was little dissent, but there were many generals almost as gifted as Dante, and some had expertise even the ancient Chapter Master lacked. His plans were refined by his peers. Out in the desert Techmarines from all across the Imperium laboured side by side to raise new fortifications, armies of servitors at their beck and call.

Dante sighed and reached up for his helmet. Sorrow troubled Seth's boundless, caged fury. He disliked Dante hiding behind the face of their primarch, but once his helmet was free, he liked what he saw even less.

Dante was old. That was what nobody ever expected to see behind that ageless, golden face. They thought him in the prime of his power, such was Dante's reputation. But men were not meant to live so long, and Dante, though exceptional, was no primarch.

Shadows pooled in his sunken eyes, a morbid foretaste of his appearance in death.

'I did not bring you here to insult you. I have something for you, Gabriel,' said Dante. 'Please, come with me.'

Dante set out. Seth hesitated before following.

They walked around the Bone Walk to where it joined a larger terrace lined with light artillery. All were covered over with tarpaulins, the stations empty of men or half-men. They followed the gallery to the main peak of the Arx, and there went into a small sally port unobserved. A dimly lit tunnel greeted them, so narrow Seth had to stoop. The shoulder pads of his brutal armour scraped on the stone. He growled. His pulse sang in his ears. He wanted to fight, not creep around in the dark.

'We are nearly there,' said Dante, sensing his rising ire.

A second small door opened into a room lit by a shaft of dark orange light shining through a single hole high up in the wall. As the sun sank it crawled up the stone, and would soon be extinguished. A solitary Blood Angel, his helm a veteran's gold, stood guard by a simple plinth. The plinth and the tall object on it were covered in black silken cloth, with a weave so close it was smooth as water. A tight grin pulled at Seth's mouth. This was made by an Adept Astartes. Where did the Blood Angels find the time to make such things?

'Leave us,' said Dante.

The veteran departed with a wary glance at the Flesh Tearer.

As soon as the door was shut, Dante pulled the cloth away. It whispered off a long, beautifully crafted cylinder a yard in length made of gold that glowed softly in the darkening room.

'Do you know what this is, Gabriel?'

'The Reliquary of Amit,' Seth said. 'Inside there is the last of Sanguinius' feathers. Any of the Blood would recognise it.' Even Seth's dour heart was stirred by the sight.

'Aye, and his blood,' said Dante. He lifted his terminatus honour from around his neck and pressed it into

a concealed cavity in the cylinder. The reliquary hinged in half. Inside, a feather as long as Seth's arm hung suspended within the soft glow of a stasis field.

Seth's breath caught in his throat. The feather was pure white. In the glow of the field he could see every barbule. Around the base the barbs were soft down of unimaginable delicacy, below them the shaft graduated from white to a delicate grey at the blunt tip. Its purity was marred around the top by crimson splatters – blood that gleamed, eternally wet.

'This feather has never touched the ground. It was caught as it fell from our lord's wing on the wall of the Imperial Palace as he fought there, and placed in this stasis field. Shortly after, he met his death at the hands of Horus. In all that time, the field has never been deactivated. Within the field, the time of Sanguinius' death has yet to occur.'

'Beauty birthed our wrath,' said Seth quietly. He could not reconcile the two.

'Beauty makes its home in you, Gabriel Seth. If you could wipe it free of blood you would see the glory in you. Sanguinius writes of your founder Amit's savagery, but also that he was a great craftsman.' Dante pointed at the casket. 'He made this container in penance for Sanguinius' death. True art speaks to the soul, but the greatest speaks *from* the soul. So much art is subjective, dependent on the observer and not the artist. The greatest art transcends this. It takes on a universal meaning. Its intent cannot be mistaken or interpreted. This is one of those rare pieces. One looks at Amit's Reliquary, and we can feel his sorrow at the death of our lord. It is an exquisite piece of work.'

Dante removed his terminatus honour from the socket. The reliquary slid shut. Dante took it up.

The shaft of sunlight had gone. The chamber had faded to a pinkish grey. Dante's bloodstone glowed in the gloom.

Dante held the relic out to Seth.

'It belongs to you.'

Seth looked at the treasure in incredulity.

'The feather...' he said. 'I will not take this.'

Dante held out the reliquary further.

'It belongs to your Chapter. The spirit of your founder is rooted in its metal. That, more than the reliquary, has protected it. It is time it went home. Take it.'

Seth looked from golden cylinder to Dante's deadly serious face.

'Then you think like me. You do not expect to win,' said Seth.

'We must win. There are uncountable foes arrayed against us, but with the Chapters of the Blood gathered here, we have a chance at victory. Even so, this fortress monastery could fall. The hive mind will attempt to destroy the Arx Angelicum. There are areas of our home that can bear such attentions without destruction, perhaps, but I have ordered that our most precious artefacts be removed and sent from this place. The Scrolls of Sanguinius, our gene-seed, and the other relics of our lord. It seemed most fitting that you should take this reliquary and its contents in memory and honour of your founder.' Dante stopped, considering his next words carefully. 'You may refuse, of course, but I ask you to accept this burden in honour of our friendship.'

'Friendship?' Seth frowned. 'There is only fury, and service. Brotherhood in the bond of blood, but not friends, never friends.'

'Do you really believe that, Gabriel?' said Dante. 'I faced dissent from the Red Council for reaching out to your Chapter. I maintain it was absolutely the correct action. You are among the most worthy men I have ever known. You struggle with the thirst and the rage, but you rise above it. You have no special gift, as does Mephiston. You are not damned like Lemartes.'

'I am not as wise as you,' said Seth.

‘Do you think that I am immune?’ said Dante, deeply troubled. ‘I tell you I am not. You suffer more than I do, but you resist. I do not know if I could do the same. I admire you.’

He took Seth’s hand and placed it upon the reliquary. ‘These relics do not belong to me, I cannot give them away, but it is in my power to see they are safeguarded in whatever way I see fit. I give this into your trust as a necessity. The feather inside bears the last unadulterated drops of blood other than that contained in this bloodstone.’ Dante pressed two fingers against the blood drop on the brow of his helmet. ‘I give it to you as an honour, for all you have done for my Chapter. I give it to you in recognition of your skill and intellect. I know that should every last one of us die, you will somehow see this relic safe. But, most of all, Gabriel Seth, I give you this feather and its casket as a friend.’

Seth hesitated.

‘You have changed,’ said Seth. He sniffed the air. ‘I smell it on you.’

Dante’s head lowered. ‘I took blood, for the first time in a long time.’

‘Ah,’ said Seth. ‘You are not pure after all.’ He intended to express bitter pleasure, but sadness overtook him. He realised then he needed Dante to be better than all of them.

Seth took the reliquary. ‘I will take it. I swear it shall be safe, by the Blood, and by the Great Angel, and by the Emperor.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dante in relief. ‘Tonight we feast. Tomorrow, you will leave for Baal Primus. This may be the last opportunity you and I have to speak in private, Gabriel. I wish you good fortune.’

Seth hefted the reliquary thoughtfully. Before he could wish Dante good fortune in return, the door had opened and the commander had gone.

The lictor looked like a creature unto itself. It moved as a solitary organism. It had operated on its own for years, far away from the hive fleet. But it was not apart from the hive mind. That was the mistake the prey always made. Even at this corpuscular level, it was a mistake to see the lictor as a lictor, one of millions; there were not many, there was one. The lictor was *the* lictor. Every iteration was a copy, better than perfect for aeons of improvement, party to the actions, mistakes and successes of every other lictor that had come before. Welded to the very genes of its being were untold millions of years of experience. And it was on Baal just as it was simultaneously on a thousand other worlds throughout the galaxy.

It put ancient lessons into action. Sight was the easiest sense to fool. The lictor moved at night, when it was harder to see. Chromatic microscales lent it near perfect chameleonic ability even in the full light of day. Deformable organ clusters embedded in its skin allowed it to change its shape somewhat, enabling it to take on the rough texture of stone, or mimic fronds of vegetation. Smell was a more primal sense, harder to deceive because of it. The lictor managed that too. It had virtually no scent. Only when it flooded the air with pheromone trails to guide its kin beasts did its emissions become noticeable. By then it was too late. Most prey could hear, so it made no sound when it moved. Special arrangements of hairs baffled the whisper of its limbs moving over one another.

More esoteric senses were equally well accounted for. Its electromagnetic profile was minimal. Its brain case was shielded by internal bone structures against energy leakage. The nerves in its body were similarly cloaked. Its hooves were shaped to make the minimum of vibration, and although it could not entirely stop the perturbation of the air made by its movements, its chitinous plates were fluted in precise molecular, fractal patterns to minimise its wake. It gave off no heat. It shed no cells unless damaged. Its psychic link with the hive mind was like spider silk, gossamer thin, strong, and almost impossible to detect.

More adaptations heaped on top of more. Unlike a natural organism, which loses certain gifts in favour of others as evolution pushes it down a particular path, the lictor’s advantages were retained, new gifts

stacked atop the others. Its genetic structure was incredibly complex. Within every cell was billions of years' worth of adaptation, culled from every lictor, coiled up one over the other. Anything useful to its role, no matter how inconsequential seeming, it retained forever.

Every machine and psychic ability the Imperium had geared towards detection, the lictor could evade. The hive mind had consumed far more advanced races than mankind. Infiltrating Baal was child's play. There was no need for it to employ a fraction of its considerable talents.

At night it sprinted tirelessly across the desert, sustained by bladders of super-nutritious fluid contained within its body. The roar of the hive mind was growing stronger by the day, but the lictor was not aware of the mind. It had no sentience. Instead, the mind became aware of the lictor, much in the way a man becomes aware of his limbs only when he thinks of using them.

On it pounded through the nights as the prey creatures' clumsily engineered warrior caste gathered around the world. As Mephiston dreamed, it loped across the Waste of Enod. As Dante drew up his plans, it crossed the Bloodwise Mounts, bounding tirelessly from crag to crag, its hooves punching sharp holes in the pristine snows of the summits. Where it could, it fed upon Baal's sparse life to supplement its nutrient fluids, but it did not tire. It stopped to avoid detection, never for rest.

By the time Commander Dante called his Great Red Council to order, the lictor was skittering through the solidified lava fields of the Demitian Badlands. The prey was cunning. If other creatures like itself had made it to Baal, they had been found and destroyed, and it was a long time before it felt the sympathetic life pulses of other tyrannic organisms.

One was all it took, for one was all, and all was one. Wherever there was a sole representative of the species, there was the hive mind.

The final night of Leviathan's approach drew closer. The lictor burrowed into the crest of a towering dune as Balor burst over the horizon and flooded the desert with ruby light. Its eyes peered through siftings of sand.

Red day struck off a distant fortress, the black of its carved stone stark against the desert. Metal-shell prey conveyances flew from the fortress into the great star sea, and all around it were thousands of the prey warriors.

A feeble number against the onrushing trillions. If the lictor could have, it would have felt contempt. But it did not. It could not. It saw a target like a scope sees a target. It knew without thinking, without being, what it must do. Sophisticated senses appraised the fortress for weakness.

It saw nothing it could use, not yet. It needed more information.

Burrowing deeper into the sand, the lictor settled in to wait.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FEAST OF THE DAMNED

For one night, the Chapters of the Blood did not speak of the tyranids.

The Well of Angels was crammed with long tables arranged in a series of nested hexagons. The very centre was occupied by a temporary dais, upon which sat Dante and his fellow Chapter Masters. Outside that sat the captains, scores of them, and the executive officers of the Chapters. Then the Sanguinary priests, who occupied a facet of a hexagon facing the Chaplains. On the same table, occupying another side of the hexagon, were a hundred Librarians. Beyond them sat hundreds of Techmarines and squad sergeants. Only past that did the many tiers of tables accommodating the battle-brothers begin. Finally, bounding them all in a thin line, was a single tier of tables set aside for the Chapters' most important mortal servants. Astropaths, navigators, human shipmasters and officers, warrior serfs, logistician illuminati, historitors, scholiasts, craftsmen, and the hundred more professions required to keep a Chapter running. The tables so thoroughly filled the Well of Angels that the mortal table was set upon the first level of the Verdis Elysia, and so the human contingent looked down upon their transhuman masters. Viewed from on high in the volcano's shaft, the tables resembled an ancient angelic hierarchy of which Dante, clad as always in his gleaming golden battleplate, was the highest archangel of all. He sat upon a throne above the others. Now that the voting was done, Erwin supposed he wished to show his authority.

In one place the tables' circuit was broken. A circular hollow was set into the floor there. Ordinarily it held a small lake, but it had been drained, revealing a deep fighting pit floored with washed sand. There would be duelling to follow the feasting.

The difficulties in provisioning the feast stretched the capabilities of the Blood Angels' logistician. Brother Adancio's serfs, used to feeding a few thousand mouths, were suddenly presented with ten times more. The blood thralls worked tirelessly. Servants of every rank volunteered to fill lowly serving roles as the success of the feast and the reputation of their masters' Chapter meant a great deal to them. Men used to governing cities passed between the rows of tables bearing heavy platters and trays weighty with wine for the honour of it.

Vat creatures and cybernetic slaves flew overhead; plumes of heavy blue incense smoke poured from censers carried by some, while others played heavenly music that shifted and changed according to the

mood of the crowd.

‘This is an exceptional vintage,’ said Erwin, sipping his wine. A medley of flavours teased his palette, enriched with a few drops of fresh, expertly spiced blood. ‘And just enough vitae to sate the thirst without provoking it further.’

His dinner mate was a captain of the Angels Sanguine named Bolthus. He drained his cup.

‘You speak the truth, brother. We have nothing like this. The soils of our world are too bitter to bear such fine fruits.’

Erwin nodded. ‘Most are. We are a void Chapter. Our opportunities for agriculture are narrow. Still, we can thank the efforts of the Blood Angels for such excellent food. They are paragons in all things.’

‘Is that irony, brother-captain?’ said the warrior to his right, a captain of the Sable Brotherhood. He was a lugubrious character who reminded Erwin more than a little of Achemen. His name was Gos.

Gos pushed his goblet forward with outstretched fingers. The eyes of a servo-skull floating nearby flickered. A moment later, a serf appeared to replenish the drink.

‘They say Dante emptied his cellars,’ said Bolthus appreciatively.

‘Is that so?’ said Erwin.

‘I would too were I in his position. I heard a rumour he sent away his gene-seed,’ said Gos. He sat up straighter.

‘And what of it?’ said Bolthus.

‘We might not win,’ Gos said.

‘Ill fortune to speak so,’ said Bolthus.

‘Victory is never assured,’ said Erwin. ‘It must be fought for with cunning and great strength. Leave “thoughts of defeat are heresy” to the Astra Militarum. We are above that. We have to be. If we cannot countenance defeat, how can we find our way to victory?’

Erwin looked around, his curiosity piqued by the diversity of men who staffed his brother Chapters. As a last symbol of peace (although Erwin thought it more to save space) Dante had ordered that they attend in their day robes. These were almost as varied as their wearers. Among the scions of Sanguinius there were all manner of skin tones, variations in height and eye colour, but all of them unmistakably bore the marks of their gene-sire. Even those brothers whose basic physiology was markedly different had been changed by their gene-seed, their faces resculpted to echo the thousands of images of Sanguinius that filled the Arx Angelicum. They resembled each other in a fundamental way that simply sharing kinship could not explain. He looked upon myriad variations of Sanguinius’ face. Some Chapters were more heavily touched than others, so that all their battle-brothers looked as if they had been stamped out of a mould.

The only real differences were evident in expressions of the flaw. Some Chapters appeared to suffer more than others. Those most heavily cursed were either dour at their predicament or straining with rage they could only just contain. There were a few Chapters in this latter category who hid it better than others, the Flesh Tearers being one, but they betrayed their tension in their body language and manners. Some bore the first signs of genuine deviancy. There were warriors with bulging, bloodshot eyes, or unnaturally dry skin like the Blood Drinkers, the glowering mien of the Red Knights, the bright white hair of the Red Wings, and the pronounced eye teeth of the Charnel Guard.

Gos had skin so white his veins were a map of blue rivers. Bolthus was unusually ruddy, his angelic features coarse.

Lord Follordark was on the dais with Dante. Unlike their men, the Chapter Masters wore their power armour, all of it burnished to a gleaming shine.

‘How can they celebrate on the eve of battle?’ said Gos.

‘What would your Chapter do, Brother Gos?’ said Erwin.

‘Stand vigil,’ said Gos. ‘In silence.’

‘Well, I prefer to drink,’ said Bolthus, and raised his goblet.

The evening passed in similar exchanges. Erwin spoke with these two and the captains a few seats down from him on either side. The officers had been mixed to sit with those of other Chapters, and Erwin’s nearest Chapter brother was ten seats away. Erwin had an open mind. He welcomed the opportunity to meet others. He had the feeling that Gos did not feel the same way.

Once, he caught Asante staring at him. He was sitting so that he was just visible to Erwin, where the table bent around and the captains further on were hidden by the Chapter Masters’ dais. Erwin nodded at him. The fleet captain looked away.

Dante kept a good table. Nine courses were served in honour of the old Legion’s number. The wine kept flowing, so much of it that Erwin began to feel its effect as the night wore on. Finally, the last plates were cleared away, and the Chapters each nominated one of their number to recite a poem of their deeds, or to sing of glorious days. Among the Chapters who shared the Blood Angels’ fondness for art there were many fine lyricists. Some of the Chapters of the Blood looked disdainfully on, for their control stemmed from self-denial and the scourging of the flesh. Gos in particular appeared dismayed at such frivolity. Others yet had darker ways of managing the thirst. Throughout, Dante sat quietly. He did not remove his helmet or partake of any drink or meat. When the final lay had been recited and all the trumpets and lyres set aside, Dante stood.

‘Now we shall end our evening, my brothers, in displays of martial skill,’ said the commander. ‘Who will duel first in the Ring of Heaven?’

There set up an enormous clamour to claim the honour. Hundreds stood from their tables and shouted out their names.

Erwin saw Asante make his way up to the dais, and attract his lord’s attention. Dante held up his hand. The room fell silent. The commander’s rich voice filled the Well of Angels.

‘I beg your indulgence, brothers of the Blood. My brother Asante, captain of our battle-barge the *Blade of Vengeance*, requests that he be permitted to issue the first challenge. Do any here object?’

A resounding cheer answered the question.

‘Very well,’ said Dante. ‘Whom do you challenge, Captain Asante?’

Asante walked around the base of the dais until he stood face to face with Erwin. He stared, stony faced.

‘I challenge Captain Erwin, of the Angels Excelsis.’

Erwin stood.

‘Do you accept, Captain Erwin?’ asked Dante.

Erwin smiled widely. ‘Of course,’ he said, and drained his wine.

By mutual agreement and effort, the tables around the Ring of Heaven were removed. When space had been cleared to hold a crowd, some Space Marines headed up into the lushness of the Verdis Elysia, whose multiple levels and uneven slopes offered better vantage points to watch the coming duel.

Asante walked through a metal gate held open by a human serf and down steps coiled around the arena wall to the sandy floor. Erwin followed. Space Marines crowded the edge of the arena as they descended. Asante paced, shucking off his robe to stand in soft trousers and heavy boots. His pale chest was massive with muscle. A big scar ran diagonally from top left to bottom right, a light grey track over the darkness of the black carapace under his skin. His body servant scooped up the robe and took it away.

Erwin took off his own outer robe with more care. Underneath he wore a light vest. He was surprised how angry Asante appeared. The Blood Angels were supposed to be among the calmer of Sanguinius’ progeny, but compared to Erwin’s own Chapter, Asante was short tempered.

A gate opened. Servitors entered carrying racks of melee weapons. Under the direction of red-robed blood thralls, they set them up at the side of the arena. Fine craftsmanship was the hallmark of each. All were edged, but none were powered.

‘I offer the challenge. What weapon will you select?’ said Asante.

Erwin shrugged. ‘Your challenge, your choice, captain.’

‘Longswords,’ said Asante. He spoke through bared teeth. His jaw hardly moved as he spoke.

‘Longswords it is, then,’ said Erwin. He beckoned a serf who fetched a straight sword four feet long. An identical weapon was brought from a second rack. The mortals who carried them were obliged to use all their strength, but Asante and Erwin took the hilts in a single hand. Erwin gave his weapon a few experimental sweeps. It hissed through the air.

‘Baalite steel,’ Erwin said, impressed. He ran his finger down the blade. ‘Sharp.’

Asante glowered at him.

A tall pulpit was wheeled to the edge of the pit. The platform was faced on all sides by the visage of stern angels whose foreheads bore massive bloodstones. Dante mounted the steps and the pulpit was pushed out further as he ascended, until it was over the edge of the pit. From there, he could address combatants and audience both.

‘For what reason is this challenge issued?’ said Commander Dante. ‘In amity or in enmity?’

‘Enmity. This is a matter of honour. Captain Erwin jeopardised my mission at Zozan with his disregard for my orders,’ said Asante scornfully.

‘What is your response, Captain Erwin?’ asked Dante.

‘I have given my response already,’ said Erwin, altogether more mildly. ‘I was under no obligation to obey him. I came to his aid, whereupon he immediately assumed he was my superior. I declined to agree. By following my own course, as is my right, I saved a ship of the Angels Numinous he had set as a decoy from destruction.’

Dante’s impassive masked face stared down.

‘There is no grudge here,’ said Dante. ‘You may step aside from the challenge if you wish, Captain Erwin.’

‘Oh no,’ said Erwin with a sly smile. ‘I do not want that at all. I will fight Asante for the pleasure of it, if there is no matter of honour to answer.’

‘With no malice?’ said Dante. ‘From either side?’

Asante shook his head. ‘Honour, not malice.’

‘None whatsoever, my lord,’ said Erwin.

‘Then take your places,’ said Dante. ‘This bout shall go no further than the point of yielding. Blood may be spilt, but if I deem there is a serious risk to either combatant, I shall call a halt myself. Is this understood?’

‘Aye, my lord,’ said Asante.

‘Yes,’ said Erwin.

Erwin and Asante went to opposite sides of the duelling ring, fifty feet apart.

‘Then stand ready!’ commanded Dante.

They raised their blades in mirror image, two hands on the long hilts, tips pointed directly upward.

“Begin!” said Dante.

Silence fell on the gathering. Asante and Erwin circled each other, one foot over another in measured sidesteps. They spiralled inward, until they were within striking distance, eyes locked, each waiting for the other to move.

Captain Asante broke first, his blade flicking out towards Erwin’s head as he stepped in. Erwin parried

easily, and deflected the attack that followed. The blades sang off each other, and then they were back in their guard positions, swords humming with the impact.

Asante attempted two more such attacks, seeking to draw responses from Erwin so that he might decipher his fighting style and construct a strategy to beat him. Erwin kept his responses to a minimum, giving nothing away. Asante was stronger than Erwin, and more aggressive. Erwin reckoned himself the better swordsman. Asante's attacks lacked finesse. In case it were bluff and he was hiding his skill, he reserved forming an opinion.

Eventually, Erwin decided it was his time to strike, his sword flashing out and taking Asante by surprise. Three attempts around Asante's guard were foiled. Their blades spoke for them in quick, metallic sentences.

They parted a moment, drawing a few paces further back from one another. Their circling slowed, and then the fight began in earnest.

Erwin attacked without warning, his sword directed low for Asante's legs. The Blood Angel saw the move and responded. Erwin switched line before Asante's counter could land. Asante leapt back too slowly, and Erwin's blade drew a line of crimson across Asante's ribs.

'Do you yield?' said Erwin.

Asante showed his teeth. His eyes were shining, his canines long. The thirst had him.

Erwin's own thirst rose in response. It surprised Erwin that Asante's anger affected him. They were not of the same brotherhood.

Asante's wound was shallow and closed quickly. They attacked together, swords weaving blurs of steel around their heads, blades sparking when they hit. Asante sought to shake Erwin's grip with his superior strength, but Erwin was too practised.

Asante backed away. Erwin, his blood up, came forward, but Asante's retreat had been a false one, and he powered off his back leg, sword swinging around for a powerful blow.

Captain Erwin's blade rang heavily from Captain Asante's. Asante barged into him, and they both staggered back. Erwin was too slow in bringing his blade back into position, and Asante slammed the cross guard of his sword into Erwin's face. Erwin turned his head a fraction of a second before the quillion could take his eye. Asante's fist met his mouth instead. Lips burst on his teeth, filling his mouth briefly with blood, before his enhanced physiology sealed the wound.

Asante dropped back and swung the blade around at head height. Again in the nick of time Erwin parried, but he was off balance and it was a clumsy interception. Asante came in again, weapon blurring. He ducked a desperate blow from Erwin by dropping into a crouch, swinging his legs around to take Erwin's out from underneath him.

Before Erwin could stand, Asante was over him, sword at his neck.

'Yield,' said Asante.

'I will yield,' said Erwin, and spat a thick clot of blood from his mouth.

Asante cast aside his sword and reached out his hand. Erwin took it.

'Let all enmity be banished,' said Dante, 'worked out in this argument of swords. Is your enmity banished, Captain Erwin?'

'I had none to begin with, my lord,' said Erwin.

'And you, Brother Asante?' said Dante.

'Will you obey me in future?' said Asante. He held out his hand again.

Erwin looked at it, then up at Asante's face. 'I told you, if my Chapter Master decreed I should follow you, then I would. He has, so I shall.'

He reached out his hand and he and Asante clasped wrists.

‘Your beating me has nothing to do with it,’ said Erwin.

‘Maybe not,’ said Asante, lightly panting. ‘But I still beat you.’

Erwin laughed.

They were walking from the ring when the next call for challenges went out. This, however, was interrupted by the loud trumpet of a herald servitor.

‘My lords, pray welcome Captain Fen of the Angels Vermillion.’

Dante froze. Erwin thought that a strange reaction, and he stopped at the edge of the pit to watch. Asante halted by him. He stared in open hostility at the newcomers, and this too Erwin found curious.

Over a hundred warriors came into the Well of Angels through a gateway tunnel bored through the Verdis Elysia and out of the northern cliff. They were arrayed for battle, and their armour was scarred with signs of recent combat. Several of them were wounded. Acid had burned away their paint, leaving bare, discoloured metal in place of their livery. Enough of them carried colours so that their Chapter could be identified. The gathered blood of Sanguinius parted to let them through.

Their feet crashed on stone as they marched in close formation to stand before Dante unchallenged. Their leaders came forward in a loose group; a captain, a Chaplain, and three Sanguinary priests.

Their leader held up his hand, and the party knelt and dropped their heads, the wounded among them performing the same action though it clearly pained them to do so. When they were all on their knees, the captain joined them. Only then did he speak.

‘I am Captain Fen,’ said their leader. ‘I come to treat with Commander Dante, Lord of the Host. We have travelled far to offer fealty to the Lord of Baal, and to aid in the coming battle.’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ said Dante, fury thickening his voice.

Captain Fen kept his head bowed.

‘We offer ourselves for the defence, in the name of Sanguinius and of the Blood, as is our right as scions of the Great Angel. Although we were not called upon, we are here.’

A Chaplain pushed his way to the front of the crowd. ‘I am Chaplain Ordamael, and I say you are not welcome here!’ he said.

‘Brother, what is happening?’ said Erwin to Asante.

Asante glanced at Erwin in puzzlement. Perhaps he expected Erwin to bear a grudge against him. Erwin widened his eyes to prompt a response.

‘Dante issued a ban on the Angels Vermillion some five hundred years ago,’ said Asante reluctantly. ‘He will not say why. Only the High Chaplain knows.’

‘The Paternis Sanguis speaks the truth. You are not welcome here,’ said Dante.

‘Aid is not welcome? I bring more than a hundred warriors,’ said Fen.

‘We do not need your help,’ said Dante.

Fen looked up. ‘Nevertheless, we are here. Do not turn us away.’

Sanguinius’ metal face glowered down from the pulpit.

Fen got to his feet and removed his helmet. He was young for a captain, and afflicted with journey’s weariness, but he would have his say. ‘My lord, I am aware of your dislike for our Chapter,’ he said. ‘We have braved many dangers in our voyage from the Bloodspike to Baal. The warp is in turmoil. Tyranids infest every system we attempted to put in to. As you can see, we have fought our way here, losing two thirds of our number on our pilgrimage.’

‘Chapter Master Chauld cannot buy his forgiveness by your sacrifice,’ said Dante.

‘Forgive me, my lord, but Chapter Master Chauld is dead, slain by the Necrons forty years ago. Moar is Master of our brotherhood now. He does not know we are here, and indeed we have come in direct

contravention of his orders. We humbly ask for your absolution for the sins of our Chapter. Not for ourselves, but so that we might protect the home of our gene-sire by your side.'

Murmurs ran around the crowd. It appeared few warriors knew of Dante's distaste for the Angels Vermillion.

'You will renounce your practices?' said Dante. 'The letting of innocent blood?'

'Which Chapter can claim their hands are clean of innocent blood?' said Fen. 'All of us know brothers who have fallen. Your tower of Arameo holds its own secrets. How are they who are held within fed?'

Dante evaded the question. 'Your kind institutionalised butchery,' he said. 'Rationally. Coldly.'

'Only to prevent worse atrocity,' said Fen. 'Our Chapter is not the only one to sate its appetites this way. For the loss of a few, the many are protected.'

Outraged shouts greeted this last pronouncement.

'You are in no position to allege misdeeds on the parts of others, when yours are known,' said Dante.

Fen was disappointed. 'For our honesty we are punished. Lesser men would become your enemies, not beg to be your friends. We here do not agree with our Chapter practices. They have grown more extreme under Moar. We wish only to serve as best we may. We will place ourselves at the vanguard of the fighting. Let our deaths redeem us.'

Dante regarded the captain for a moment.

'You are sincere in your desire for rapprochement?'

'Absolutely.'

'Tell me what occurred on your voyage here.'

'There were nigh three companies of us,' said Fen. 'We five score and twelve are all that remain. We were to rendezvous with brothers of the Fifth Company at Danvin. Their captain is close to me, a friend, and shares my opinions of Moar. There was no sign of them, instead we were welcomed by the foe. We were attacked there by a tyranid swarm and forced to fight ourselves free and back into the warp. Away from the shadow, we attempted to send an in-warp message to our brothers, trusting that they too had fought past the tyranids. We made brief contact, but lost two of our three astropaths to the shadow madness for our efforts, and so we broke warp at Aldine to attempt communication again. We were ambushed as soon as we emerged. The tyranids were waiting for us, as if they knew we would arrive. We lost two cruisers, Captain Malthaen, and the majority of our Third Company. Their gene-seed has gone. Once more we were forced to withdraw. Within the immaterium we found ourselves half blind. A darkness is falling over the Astronomican. The shadow of the warp laps at the shores of this system. I fear we are the last to answer the call of the gathering host. The tyranids are coming.'

A murmur went around the room.

'It could be so, Aldine is close to Baal,' said Bellerophon rapidly. Dante silenced him.

'We thought it would be safe,' said Fen. 'We were wrong.'

'We are sorry for your losses,' said Dante.

Fen took the condolences well. 'We are sorry we could bring no more of our brothers to aid you, my lord. If your judgement goes against us, we could fight, my brothers and the host here. We will not. If you desire to kill us, we will not resist. We come to Baal in its time of need. Will you put aside your hatred of our Chapter for the moment, and accept?'

Dante paused. He gripped the sides of his pulpit and bowed his head. Erwin was surprised yet again. Dante was a legend. Legends did not hesitate.

Abruptly, Dante raised his head. Light flashed from Sanguinius' angry face.

'Rise, my brothers!' said Dante.

The Angels Vermillion stood.

‘I accept the terms of your service. You are welcome to fight with us, in memory of our progenitor. Sit now. Feast. You deserve your rest before the real struggle begins.’

‘My lord!’ protested Ordamael.

‘My decision is made, Chaplain. If Moar himself came here, my reaction would have been different. These warriors are penitents.’

Thralls came to the Angels Vermillion and led them to seats. Food was brought out for them. Human medicae and Sanguinary priests from several Chapters went to the aid of the wounded. Techmarines tended their machines. Relief passed over Fen’s exhausted face.

‘My thanks, my lord.’

‘Now!’ called Dante. ‘We shall continue. Who will bring the next challenge?’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TAKING OF THE INNOCENTS

Bronze doors clanked open, and Commander Dante stepped out onto the marble pediment of the statue of Sanguinius. The Sanguinary Guard and blood thralls lining the balustrade saluted. The tense hush of a silent crowd greeted him, their breath a gentle breeze on the still air.

There were several thousand Baalites crammed into the square. Tens of thousands more waited outside the city walls of Angel's Fall. Dante surveyed them, and they turned their faces away in fear when the blank stare of Sanguinius' death mask met their eyes.

Fifteen hundred years ago he had stood in that same square with the crowds, looking up at the statue and the living angels at its feet. Was there any of that boy left inside him? he wondered. Millennia had dulled his memories of the days before. Sanguinius' gene-seed had wiped away the face he had once had. Time had eroded the new one that replaced it. Only his eyes, tawny amber and possessed of a confliction of warmth and cold, remained the same. Everything else had changed. Everything.

'People of Baal!' he said, and all over Baal Secundus his words were repeated, translated where necessary into tribal pidgin. A host of imperfect angels, effigies of hololithic light four hundred feet tall, came to life all over the twin moons. The nearest wavered ghostlike outside the city, projection ribbons shimmering where they encountered pockets of static-laden dust in the air, the loop patterning barely strong enough to be seen through the sun. At Kemrender and Sell Town, at Angel's Leap and in the Ghost Lands, at the Gathering of Clans in the Great Salt Waste, and at every other place on the moon where the sparse population gathered in any number, Dante spoke. He had considered carefully how to deliver his edict. It had to be done simultaneously on both worlds. He had to do it in person, but he could only be in one place at a time.

He was not biased in choosing his one-time home, he told himself. Baal Secundus was the more populous. It had Angel's Fall. It had the more viable ecosystem. The tyranids would hit Secundus harder than Primus.

Still, he felt a pang of guilt to favour one moon over the other, even so slightly.

'Under my rule,' he continued, 'these worlds have seen many dangers and faced many threats. We have repelled them, whether ork or traitor. You have prospered while my angels have protected you. Your

young have bolstered our ranks, taking up the onerous service of the Great Angel for the glory of the Imperium of Man. Baal and its moons have contributed more than many other worlds to the survival of our species, and for that I am thankful – the Emperor is thankful!’

A worshipful moan passed over the crowd. Dante’s words echoed down every street of the shanty capital of Baal Secundus. Where the titanic hololiths could not be seen, servo-skulls and herald-cherubs drifted over deserted sands, shouting out the message to the wind and the fire scorpions.

‘In these dark times we face our greatest challenge yet. A horde of alien monsters bears down upon our system. Already they have devoured much of the life of the Red Scar suns. Our worlds are next.

‘I will not allow the birthworld of the Great Angel to fall! Nor shall Baal Primus, or Baal itself. You see in the skies the gathered might of all Sanguinius’ sons. I called them, and they heeded. They are here to stop this terror, on these sands, where once our blessed father trod.’

The fearful silence was broken by the rumble of engines. A pair of giant cargo landers grumbled overhead. The crowd started at them, as if they were the vanguard of invasion.

‘I must ask more of you than I have ever asked before.’ And here was the final message, which would condemn so many. Dante hid his sorrow to deliver their fate in the same bombastic fashion. ‘Those of you capable of carrying weapons will be deployed under the command of the angels to aid in the defence of Baal. These ships you see carry guns and ammunition. Every man and woman of sound body over the age of ten standard Terran years will be armed. Children below the age of ten and their mothers will be excused this duty, and evacuated from the system today.’

Weeks of rumours had sent the population into a state of dread anticipation. Their worst fears confirmed, their dread turned into panic. Dante raised his voice.

‘Any refusing this duty shall be executed. All must fight, or all will perish. This is my decree, as commander of the Blood Angels, Chapter Master, Lord of Baal, Baal Primus, Baal Secundus, and of the Angelic Host!’

The crowd surged forward. Those at the front, until moments ago full of quiet adoration, were crushed up against the marble. Outside the walls, rockets thundered as the cargo lifters touched down. Loading ramps dropped, and transit containers rolled out from their holds, each one full of lasguns.

‘May the Emperor watch over you and protect you. May we all find mercy in his light.’

Blood thralls were moving into the crowd, heavily armed and armoured. They shoved at the people, corralling sections of the populace and herding them away for processing under the watchful eyes of Space Marines. Feeble fists thumped off their carapace armour. The Baalites were screaming, shouting, weeping and wailing. Questions issued from a thousand mouths, merging into a harsh babble that could never be answered.

‘Stay back!’ roared the Sanguinary Guard. ‘Away from the statue of Sanguinius. Away!’

Dante turned and marched back within the pediment. Inside was a small complex, completely unknown to the men and women living above it. A fast monotrack waited to take him to the Fortress of the Blood at the edge of the city, where a Thunderhawk stood by.

The first shots rang out before the bronze doors sealed themselves with a doomy thump, cutting out the screams of the panicking multitude.

The Blood Angels were not gentle in this recruitment. Resistance was brutally quashed, and the square was soon sticky with spilled blood. Similar scenes were repeated all over both moons.

Dante hated himself for what he was doing, but it was necessary. The guns were needed in Baal’s defence, but more was at stake. The more human biomass he could remove from each of the moons, the more likely the moons were to survive. He must drive the tyranids to attack the Arx Angelicum directly. He was counting on it.

Seeing the necessity and stomaching the manner of its execution were two different matters. To ensure the survival of his Chapter he had exterminated worlds and now he brutalised his own people. To billions, Commander Dante was a hero, for centuries he had striven to be worthy of their love. He felt far from heroic at that moment. He betrayed himself by fulfilling his duty.

He hardened his heart. Worse was to come.

Far above the complex where Dante walked, over the square where the protectors turned on the protected, the serene face of Sanguinius' giant statue stared heavenward, away from the violence perpetrated in his name.

Dante held court upon the *Blade of Vengeance*. Chapter Masters came from both worlds in flocks of transports to the gathering. It was a pre-mission edification like no other. There had been precious few gatherings of so many Space Marine lords in all the history of the Imperium, fewer still of all one bloodline, and only a handful of similar size at Baal itself.

They arrived shorn of pomp, for the time of display was done. Space Marines were warriors first and foremost, and although ceremony had its place in all they did, when battle came they were sober and focused. The decision to follow Dante was made. There were no sly words in deserted corridors, no jockeying for power one would find in another Imperial force. Space Marines were weapons clothed in men's flesh.

They willingly put themselves at Dante's disposal.

Seventeen Chapter Masters, their aides and a dozen other officers who led Chapter contingents where the Master was not present, sat within the Red Council Chamber on the flagship. Six more stood behind the chairs as luminous hololith ghosts.

Dante was humbled by their loyalty to Sanguinius; he was under no illusion, he knew full well that when they looked to him for leadership it was not Dante they saw, but Sanguinius' eternal golden visage.

Time turns about a spiral, he thought in silent prayer. *We live in a pale reflection of ancient times. Here we are but a shadow of you and your Legion, Great Angel. Give me the strength through your blood to honour you.*

'My lords,' said Dante. 'The time has come.'

He held up a hand; a vox recording crackled out of concealed speakers.

'...*ear of Destiny*, report thirty-two, mission ma... three-zero-nine... other-Sergeant Callisto reporting.' The recording was a mess, cut up by sequenced interference pulses, but the enemy had not completely succeeded in blotting it out.

'Position Dernos Five.' The recording became stronger. 'Hivefleet Leviathan is here. Tell the commander that there are millions of them... e... to... cannot achieve an accurate count.' Shouting came from the background, calls for signal boost and shield activation. The recording cut out, becoming a buzzsaw drone. Signal beeps punched through the racket. When Callisto's voice returned it was blurred and came with the rumble of weapons fire. '...are engaged. We are surrounded, I repeat, we cannot retreat, we...'

A cry and an explosion cut short the recording.

'Chapter Master Techial,' said Dante.

The lord of the Disciples of Blood stood from his chair. He had no helmet on. The mass of scar tissue he had for a face twisted his mouth into a permanent snarl.

'This message was received by the *Red Blade*, also of my Chapter. The *Spear of Destiny* was on the far side of the Adernos system when the tyranids emerged from the system fringe. They were lost. The *Red Blade* made warp and returned. Their augur soundings speak of a swarm of unprecedented size.'

‘Captain Fen encountered them at Aldine,’ said Dante. A cartolith quivered into focus over the hollow circular table. Baal was at the centre, other Red Scar systems around it. A star blinked. ‘From Aldine it is three point four light years to Adernos. The tyranids are making great speed towards us.’

‘We can be thankful they do not travel the warp,’ growled Malphas of the Exsanguinators.

‘If they did, then we would be dead. Even so they make a mockery of natural law in moving so quickly,’ said Zargo of the Angels Encarmine. ‘Their ships are slow in-system, but in the interstellar void we have nothing that can match them. We need more time!’

‘We have a few similar eye-witness accounts from other systems,’ said Dante, ‘and our scourging fleets have encountered scouting swarms at six others. Astropathic plea prayers were received from nine more.’ A crescent of minor stars blinked, then twelve once-populous star systems within the same vector. All of them were lifeless now, made so by tyranid consumption or at Dante’s order. ‘They approach on a broad front,’ said Dante. ‘So far as we can tell, all from the galactic south. This gives us an advantage. Thus far, we have denied them the opportunity to replenish their fleet biomass from the Red Scar systems. Therefore, the combined might of the fleets will not be much over what our intelligence suggests. Our defences are ready. The concentration of our forces and of the drafted populations around the Arx Angelicum should ensure that the full force of the tyranid attack falls there, where we are strongest, and not on the moons.’ Dante pressed his hands flat on the table. ‘These are only small consolations. Let it be known that we face the greatest concentration of tyranids since Hive Fleet Behemoth penetrated Ultramar.’ He paused. ‘The shadow is falling. Our astropathic prayers no longer resist the roar of the hive mind. The warp is becalmed all around the system, its currents are stilling as water upon which oil is poured. There will be no more reinforcements. My requests to my brothers at Diamor go unanswered. There will be no more messages. The Great Devourer approaches.’ Sanguinius’ face looked at each of the Chapter Masters in turn. ‘They are coming.’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BROKEN NECKLACE

The junker-tribesman Chrimsae led Gabriel Seth over rusty plains. He scurried. He scuttled. He did not walk like a true man. Seth's steady, heavy footsteps crunched upon the crusted surface of ancient war glass while Chrimsae's pattered, rodent-like and furtive. The junker was young, though reckoned old for his tribe, sparely muscled, his growth stunted by malnutrition, teeth already rotting in his head.

Seth fought down his contempt for the youth. He had been useful during the fortification of Baal Primus. He had shown Seth the ancient redoubts on the shoulders of the moon's wrecked orbitals that his men now laboured to rebuild. Chrimsae's knowledge of the deep caverns of the Necklace was invaluable, and he had a certain wiliness. But he was not sufficiently gifted to be a candidate for apotheosis, or he would not be languishing on the moon. Chrimsae was evasive when questioned about the Blood Angels trials. Seth thought he must have tried. Anyone living in a hellhole like Baal Primus would try.

Now there was this, a report of another force of Space Marines putting down on the far side of the Necklace that had been corroborated by no other source and that Chrimsae would show to no one but Seth. Perhaps the youth meant to lead him into a trap. He was a greater fool than he looked if that were so.

Oxide dust puffed up with every footstep. The area around the Necklace was thick with metal rusted to powder over the glass. The glass was a product of firestorms from reactor failure when the orbitals came down. Seth suspected the Necklace had been bombed after their fall also; the ancients must have possessed terrible weapons, for there were areas still hot with exotic isotopes twelve thousand years after the supposed date of the war. Imperial atomics would render an area dangerously radioactive for weeks, not years, never mind millennia. Whoever had attacked Baal Primus had been engaged in a calculated attempt at sterilisation. Such hate between the two worlds; humanity's capacity for hatred was bottomless. If indeed the legends were true, and the wreck of the paradise moons had not been occasioned by xenos assault.

The ancient attempt at exterminatus had failed. Humanity was a persistent, vermin species that thrived in wreckage. Mankind had survived on Baal Primus to produce such debased specimens as Chrimsae.

The boy turned back to him, yellowed eyes peering over hunched shoulders. His head was covered over by the filthy pelt of a creature native to the deeps of the Necklace, possibly descended from Terran rats.

‘We must go up, angel, to the top.’ Chrimsae pointed to the square wall of the unnatural mountains. ‘Other ones on the far side.’

‘My warriors saw nothing,’ said Seth. ‘This system is full of other Chapters. They saw nothing. I do not believe you.’

Chrimsae shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Chrimsae not lying. He not knowing. But Chrimsae sees. You see too, if you follow me.’

‘If you are lying, I will kill you,’ said Seth.

Seth’s vox-bead pinged. Chaplain Appollus’ voice followed.

‘*Seth, these wretches are pitiful! They will not work hard enough.*’ Appollus’ perpetually angry voice barked in Seth’s ear. ‘*The eastern fortress will not be ready by the estimated time of planetfall.*’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ growled Seth. ‘Work them harder.’

‘*You should be here to tell them yourself!*’ spat the Chaplain. ‘*I invoke the rights of my rank to reprimand you. You neglect your duties.*’

Seth thought this hypocritical coming from Appollus, whose own penchant for violence often had him rushing ahead of his brothers into adventures of his own with little thought for the consequences.

‘You will hold your tongue, master of the lost. You will oversee the construction while I am gone, and you are not to provide your usual brand of incentive. We need the mortals.’

‘*Then how am I to make them work?*’

‘Use your imagination.’

‘*You have grown soft, Seth.*’

‘Insult me again, Appollus, I dare you,’ said Seth. ‘Perform your duty, finish the fortress. I will be back soon.’ He cut the vox.

Chrimsae stared expectantly at his giant charge, chewing on ragged nails as he waited.

Seth nodded at him.

Chrimsae grinned and scurried off, but no matter how fast his legs rose and fell, he could not outpace Seth’s slow, deliberate stride.

Time had worn down the wounds of the Long Ago War. Edges of minor impact craters overlaid on one another had been abraded down to soft circles, so that the earth was pocked, like the skin of a survivor of disease. Wiry vegetation covered over irregular highlands. The orbitals had come down in a long line and at first glance they appeared a natural mountain range. Shock ridges wrinkled the plains for dozens of miles around them, the stone blending with the metal of the fallen orbitals in a facsimile of foothills. Erosion had smoothed off snapped spars, and caused decks to collapse, sealing the hollow interiors away from sight. Only after a time examining them did the mountains’ true nature reveal itself. It was there to see in the boxy strata of compressed decks, the strangely straight courses of mountain streams, in the square mouths of room-caves, until they crested the last ridge and there came a point where the broken orbital plate rose suddenly from the ravaged crust around it in an unnatural cliff. There the beginning of man’s artifice was sharply delineated.

Seth rested his hand on ancient metal and looked upward.

‘Now we climb, yes? Yes!’ shouted Chrimsae eagerly. He beckoned to the Space Marine lord, that he follow into a ragged cave mouth.

Seth looked back. Craggs of stone pushed up by ancient impact blocked his view of the way back to the fortification site. His presence would not finish the forts any quicker, no matter what Appollus said.

Shaking off his misgivings, he ducked into the cave, and passed through the flaking hull of the ancient orbital of Baal.

They avoided the deep caverns, skirting through the outer passages to make their way to the summits. The

route had been improved by generations of Chrimsae's people, though in the most rudimentary way. Bridges of sheet metal crossed holes in the floor, rents in buckled walls and decks had been widened into doors. Rope railings had been strung alongside the most dangerous drops. The work was crude, like the war rigs the junkers rode around on the plains beyond the false mountains. There were chasms that could have been crossed by slightly more advanced engineering, but that appeared to be beyond the junkers. Any culture that could maintain combustion engines should be able to make a proper bridge, but the junkers could not. The desperate nature of their existence had pruned away any knowledge that was not absolutely essential to their survival.

The outer passages opened in many places to the outside world. Seth's enhanced mind, so much more powerful than Chrimsae's, kept track of their path easily, confounding Chrimsae's attempts to conceal the route. They passed a small rust-red waterfall gurgling from on high, disappearing down a chute into metallic deeps. Ferric deposits furred the walls, narrowing the passageway. They crossed a bridge, little more than a plank of metal, that shook dangerously under Seth's weight. On the far side, half-hidden by the accretions of rust, there was a doorway.

'That way is quicker,' said Seth.

Chrimsae did not ask how Seth could possibly know such a thing. Seth was an angel. He knew things nobody else did.

'No, no, my lord. Dangerous. Phantoms and ghosts and worse are there. We go upward.' The boy's fear of the deeps was greater than that he had of Seth, and he hurried on ahead before Seth could command otherwise.

Seth looked down the dark hallway. His Space Marine eyes saw a space still recognisable as a maintenance corridor. Drifts of detritus cluttered the corners, and its bulkheads were bent out of true, but this part of the ancient space station had come down belly first, and it was more or less level. A dank wind blew from somewhere far inside. Seth grunted, and followed the boy.

They stayed within the orbital for a short time. Soon after the waterfall, the path emerged through a bent-toothed docking gate, and they continued their ascent through a wood of stunted trees whose limbs bore witness to genetic corruption.

That part of the station had sustained heavy damage. Its hull was crumpled, giving chance for thin soils to accumulate. In places it was possible to forget the origin of the mountains, until a square and deadly shaft yawned suddenly underfoot, or the armoured glass of an ancient viewing port glinted from behind curtains of orange mosses.

On they went, following ancestral trails of Chrimsae's people. The junkers had no vehicles that could traverse this terrain, all was tailored to hiking. Where the trail grew steep there were ropes and ladders, or badly welded steps to speed them on. These additions were few, for the orientation of the downed orbital and its broken nature made for easy climbing. In a few hours they had walked several miles from the Flesh Tearers' fortifications and ascended seventeen hundred feet. Smashed turrets and spires made the peaks of the artificial range. Their dull grey metals were cloaked in ice, for though the altitude was modest Baal Primus was a cold world. Dirty snow, the product of Baal Primus' dysfunctional hydrological cycle, crunched underfoot. By now, Seth could hear the newcomers. The sky rumbled softly to the coming and going of landing craft.

Chrimsae led him over the shoulder of a massive habitation section. Dark holes of glassless viewports were glazed with rippled yellow ice. Chrimsae's clothing was hardly adequate for the lowlands, and up on the mountaintop he was blue with cold. His teeth chattered and he jammed his hands into his armpits periodically to warm them, and yet he did not appear to notice the gravity of his suffering. Seth supposed the boy had never been truly warm.

‘Down there.’ Chrimsae pointed to a shelf at the top of a cliff. ‘The others.’

Seth trudged down to the cliff edge. His armoured boots broke ancient ice and he half skidded, coming to a swaying stop at the brink of the cliff.

The far side of the orbital was a shattered mess. A scrubby forest clung to the exposed internal structure, cloaking it in vegetation. Over time, deep fields had formed in hollows, and taller trees grew from them. This relative verdancy gave out once more at the beginning of the plains. Baal Primus’ erratic rains fell only on the higher ground; beyond was a cold badland of crevasses and razored ridges, made in that moment twelve thousand years ago when the orbital had plunged from the sky, and turned paradise into hell. It had changed little since.

Some miles out the shock ridges spread, allowing for wide depressions between. In one of them a small army mustered, their transports roaring up into space and back again. Seth’s face pulled tight. Centuries of mishaps had led him to isolate his warriors from his allies. When the Flesh Tearers were in battle they were at the mercy of the Red Thirst. Sanguinius’ dubious legacy gave them the strength to overcome enemies of far greater numbers, but if the thirst were not appeased, their allies or civilians paid the price. His predecessors had been less scrupulous than Seth, or perhaps more cursed. Near excommunication had been the result, and with it the discovery of the flaw in Sanguinius’ gene-seed that would have endangered all the Chapters of the Blood. He did not like to fight alongside others. He had deliberately positioned his force away from the three other Chapters sent by Dante to protect Baal Primus.

And now here was a fifth Chapter, who dared to establish themselves on his doorstep.

He called upon the talents of his armour to discover who the interlopers were. A glint in the sky grew instantly in his vision, magnified by his helm lenses until it became a Thunderhawk gunship with a battered livery of dark red and silver.

Only one Chapter bore those colours, a Chapter that had a reputation for frenzied savagery that exceeded that of his own brotherhood.

‘The Knights of Blood,’ he said. The newcomers were still arriving by Thunderhawk and unarmoured lighter. The ships touched down without shutting off their engines, returning to orbit to shuttle down more.

Twenty Thunderhawk flights was all it had taken to bring the Flesh Tearers down to Baal Primus from the battle-barge *Victus*. There were so few of them left. Even that had taken too long, for Seth’s armoury was almost as empty as his barracks. The spirits of his war machines were bloodthirsty like their masters and the vehicles were apt to make rash, aggressive moves that too often resulted in their loss.

The Knights of Blood had the edge in numbers of men and machines. If what he heard was true of them, they would not likely withdraw. He toed the snow, watched it crunch and fritter to pieces that tumbled from the edge. *Dante did this on purpose*, he thought.

He fought back his anger and called up to Chrimsae, huddled out of the wind in the lee of a communications spine poking up from the snow. ‘How long to their landing site?’

‘A half day, my lord.’

Half a day. For all his complaints, Appollus would have things under control at the fortresses. He trusted Codicier Belthiel to keep him in line. This could not wait.

‘Take me there. Now,’ said Seth.

As Seth approached the landing zone of the Knights of Blood he saw that they did not intend to stay there. No castella or other temporary defences had been established. Instead transports waited in column to take them away. He could see no warriors, assuming them to be within their Land Raiders and Rhinos. The Knights of Blood were close to moving out. It was a foolish hope to expect them to go further away. He knew in the pit of his stomach they intended to make for his own position.

Baal passed in front of the sun, bringing on the first of Baal Primus' two long nights. Nothing was simple in the Baal system, not even night and day. The Blood Angels were the same, with their art and their denial. He embraced his savagery. Simplicity was the key to holding the thirst at bay. He had no time for games.

The equipment of the Knights of Blood was as battered and spattered with old blood as that of his own Chapter. The vehicle insignia followed Codex Astartes norms, and from that he saw that this was an ad hoc formation, made of units drawn from across the Chapter.

Several years ago, the Knights of Blood had declared a crusade against all the enemies of the Imperium, but so savage was their campaigning, and so broad their definition of an enemy, that they had been declared renegades by the High Lords of Terra themselves. Before then they had been like the Flesh Tearers, looked upon warily by their allies. Now they were friendless, and persecuted, though they protested that they were still loyal to the Imperium.

Another force close to extinction. Though they had gone further down the road of damnation than Seth and his warriors, it was only chance their positions were not reversed. Stepping into their landing zone brought him closer to their fate, and he did so warily.

The Knights of Blood brought no supplies with them, only fighting vehicles. Empty ammunition crates littered the sand, left where they had been thrown open. The dust was churned up. Sheets of it floated slowly on the breeze, final flags to wave off the departed Thunderhawks. All about was a sense of disarray, though the materiel scattered around was modest. Few Space Marine Chapters would be this careless in deployment.

The tanks, however, evinced order. They stood silently in the desert. Wind moaned through their fittings. 'Remain here,' said Seth to Chrimsae a hundred yards out from the line of tanks. The scrawny youth shook his head emphatically. He unslung his makeshift firearm, and slipped into Seth's shadow.

'Stop!' A metallic voice rang out from the Land Raider heading the column. Its engine burst riotously into life. Lights snapped on. Grinding tracks spun on the spot. With servos purring the Land Raider brought all of its considerable weaponry to bear on the Chapter Master.

'State your name,' demanded the metallic voice. 'State your business.'

'You know who I am,' snarled Seth. 'I am Gabriel Seth, Master of the Flesh Tearers. You state your business to me. This is my area to defend.'

The Land Raider's engines roared. The sighting lasers of machine-spirits dotted his armour. Seth's hand went to the handle of the eviscerator mag-locked to his backpack. He tensed to charge, knowing he could not make the tank before its lascannons blew him apart. Chrimsae whimpered.

Electric motor whine harshened the wind. A band of ruby light slit itself across the tank's front, widening as the assault ramp came down. A Space Marine almost as big as Seth strode out into the ecliptic night. His armour was finely wrought, and had many honours painted and engraved into its plates, but all were battered. The gold was knocked from the laurel wreath about his head, the skulls on his elbow guards and knuckles roughened by abrasion. Seth scented the rot of old gore hidden in the crevices of the battleplate as he approached.

The warrior halted before Seth. They sized each other up, violence a twitch away.

'I brought him, like you ask!' said Chrimsae.

Seth gave the tribesman a hard look. Seth's face was hidden by his helm, but Chrimsae shrank back from his anger. The knight had scarce little more time for him.

'Silence, wretch. I would not brag of your cunning, lest Seth here think it treachery. He is not known for his forgiving nature.' The Knight of Blood turned his attention to Seth. 'Hail and well met, Flesh Tearer, Master of the most feared warriors in the Imperium.'

The Knight of Blood extended his hand. Seth looked at it. The knight carried himself with exaggerated care. It did not conceal the red heat of thirst-born fury radiating from him.

‘Almost the most feared,’ said Seth. ‘Leave, or your men may take back your body. Give me your name so I can add it to my battle honours.’

A hard laugh grated out from the other’s voxmitters. ‘I am Sentor Jool, Firstblade of the Knights of Blood. There, your question is answered, but I will not leave.’

‘I will make you.’

‘You cannot fight us all, Seth,’ said Jool.

‘Every life is a game of one death. Do you care to bet yours?’

Jool laughed again. ‘Why did you come on foot? Do you have no aerial craft?’

‘Why did you land so far from my position?’ countered Seth.

‘The reputation of the Flesh Tearers precedes you. I wished to have my warriors ready, in case of a less than warm welcome.’

‘Our reputation?’ said Seth. ‘What of yours?’

‘We are kin in many ways. That is why Dante asked us to fight alongside you.’

‘Dante sent you.’ Anger curdled Seth’s stomach, and he realised there was a weak part of him that hoped Dante was not involved. He was disappointed. This was not betrayal, exactly, but Dante should have told him. Seth would have objected, but that was beside the point.

‘You fight with no one,’ said Seth. ‘You did not attend the feast. Why should I believe you?’

Sentor Jool looked up at Baal. The planet’s nightside was dark, the false firmament of ship lights bright upon it. The Arx Angelicum was bathed in sunlight on the far side, invisible to them. ‘We do fight with others. We did not attend the feast. We are unworthy of fellowship. The lure of the Black Rage is too powerful for us. But we will fight alongside you.’

‘Is that an insult, or a crass attempt at flattery? I fight alongside only those I choose, and I did not choose you.’

‘You will. There are very few of you left, I understand. These last decades have been hard on your numbers even as your reputation crawled back out of the pit of gore your predecessor cast it into. We are the same.’

‘We are not the same,’ said Seth.

‘We have few warriors. We have that in common. If we combine our forces, our savagery will become the stuff of legend. The enemy will be here soon. We are coming to your side whether you wish it or not. It has been preordained.’

‘You have seen this.’

Jool nodded. ‘It cannot be denied. We are the chosen of Sanguinius. We are blessed with his foresight.’

It was Seth’s turn to laugh. Jool stared at him.

‘The chosen of Sanguinius? Arrogance.’

‘We believe it to be true,’ said Jool evenly. ‘They are coming soon. We waited outside the system bounds, beyond augur range, and slipped in when the shadow grew. We have seen them. You will see too, they will be here in a few days at the most. We feel them, we feel their hunger.’

‘You can feel them,’ said Seth levelly.

‘I told you, Seth, we are closer to Sanguinius than any other. We have his gifts, as well as his curse.’

Seth looked at the Knights of Blood. They had a good number of tanks. If they were combined with his own...

‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘The Flesh Tearers fight alone.’

‘You fortify,’ said Jool. ‘This is not your way of battle.’

‘I have fought the swarms before. I will harbour our savagery so that it will be best used. You throw yourself into their maws if you wish.’

Jool laughed again. His mirth irked Seth. ‘Tell me of these forts.’

‘There are bastions on the wrecks that have survived the ages. I have ordered two rebuilt. You know this. You will have spied on me from orbit.’

Jool said nothing.

‘We do not have the space to garrison your warriors,’ said Seth. ‘Fight elsewhere.’

‘Rust and dust has this world in its grip. Has the metal not rotted through?’ asked Jool.

‘Not all,’ said Seth. ‘There are defensible positions in these mountains, but not many. The local tribes live in and around them. Against the hive fleets, their nature will work against their defence. There are too many tunnels for the enemy to exploit.’

‘Then why stay here?’ asked Jool.

‘That is my concern,’ said Seth. ‘Move on, go to Stardam and the Blood Wings. They may welcome you.’

‘You know they will not.’

The Chapter Masters stared at each other for a long moment. Abruptly, Jool broke eye contact and called to Chrimsae. ‘Boy, come here.’

The tribesman stepped, blinking and afraid, out from Seth’s protection.

‘Do you know the origins of these mountains?’ Jool asked him.

‘They are pretty jewels, stars ripped out of Baalind’s Necklace,’ said Chrimsae. ‘Given to Baalind by Baal, and broken by their nasty, jealous sister.’

Jool gestured at the crumpled masses. ‘Do you believe this?’

‘It is story we learn from babehood,’ said Chrimsae warily. ‘We tell others. Like stories of angels, all is truth.’

‘It is not true,’ said Jool. ‘Would you like to know the actual truth?’

The boy nodded hesitantly. On the eve of an invasion that would destroy his world, he was still calculating if a good story might buy him a couple of hours by a fire. Seth’s scorn increased.

‘There is a hall I would most dearly love to visit,’ said the Knight of Blood. ‘Perhaps you can tell me if it still exists?’

The junker fell to his knees. ‘Yes, angel. If you says so.’

‘It is the exterior of an old enginarium, though you will not understand that term. A large place, not distorted by the fall of the stars. There is writing there. Show it to me, and I shall tell you the true story of the Necklace.’

The boy was confused. ‘I don’t understand, lord angel.’

‘A place deep under the ground. You call it the Fellholme. To you it is a place of daemons and horror, but your ancestors lived there, once. Do you know it?’

Chrimsae shook fearfully.

‘You are wasting your time. The junker tribes are afraid of the orbital interiors,’ said Seth. ‘You are wasting *my* time.’

‘I am not. You shall see.’ Jool bent forward so that his breathing grille was level with Chrimsae’s face. The stink of blood coming off him was overpowering. Old and rotten though it was, Seth’s mouth watered.

‘You know the place I speak of,’ Jool said in a menacing whisper. ‘You will take us there, or I will kill you.’ He did not ask Seth if he wished to attend.

Seth growled a warning at this assumption. The knight’s presence tugged at his thirst. His fury, never far buried, rose in sympathy to the rage radiated by his distant cousin.

‘You do not wish to see the history of men on this place, most holy to our shared lord?’ said the knight.

‘What other tasks detain you?’

‘The fortifications.’

‘Your men and slaves can do that. When did the mighty Gabriel Seth stoop to dirty his hands with peasant’s toil?’

Seth stared at the knight. Chrimsae looked between them nervously.

‘I will come,’ said Seth. ‘I do not care for history, but I will not have you lurking under my feet unseen.’

They went back to the mountainous derelicts. This time they went directly inside, following tunnels to the heart of darkness beneath. Once they were past the tangled mess of the northern faces the ways went straight, bent only slightly by impact and war damage. No natural tunnel could have brought them so far so quickly.

In other respects, the buried corridors and chambers were like natural caverns. Water trickled down the walls into pools where blind things swam. Flying creatures burst from rooms filled with their reeking dung, and flew chittering away. Minerals leached from high above formed organic-looking rills. Seth stopped by one impressive formation, brilliant white streaked with blue oxides in the circle of his suit light. There was plenty of stone used in the construction of the orbital, but he thought the calcium in the rock came from human bones.

A hall they passed through twenty minutes later bore out his theory; it was crammed from floor to ceiling with a tangle of remains. Thousands of grey skulls looked out in silent shock.

There were other living things down there, humanoid creatures that stared with coldly luminous eyes from the dark, then ran away from the Space Marines. Chrimsae was terrified of them, but his fear of Jool and Seth was greater, and he led them on into the depths of the wrecked orbital.

Decay, ruination, death. They seeped into Seth’s bones. The Necklace was a kingdom of the dead. The remains of ancient times presaged the end come again. Seth felt that in his hearts.

There were few obstacles. Chrimsae evidently knew the route. He took them down random side passages that turned out to bypass crushed arterial ways, or corridors filled in by debris falls or still, black lakes.

Finally, they emerged into a vast space, so high Seth’s luminator beam faded before it reached the ceiling.

Jool made a satisfied noise. ‘We are here.’

A storm of insects rushed from a wall when Seth’s light touched them. Chrimsae cowered.

‘There are writings here, do you know that?’ said Sentor Jool. He stepped into the room, hunting for something. ‘A record of the fall of Old Night, and the end of humanity’s first stellar empire.’

‘I have heard nothing of this,’ said Seth.

‘The Blood Angels regard themselves as superior to every other Chapter of the Blood,’ said Jool bitterly. ‘Their librarius holds secrets they would never dream of sharing.’

‘Then how do you know?’

‘Our founder, Ousten Galael, was a native of this moon. We envy you primogenitors for your closeness to the source of our bloodline, but we were lucky enough to be established by captains from the Blood Angels themselves. Galael had his own records.’

The Space Marines wandered apart, each heading by unintentional degree for different parts of the reactor hall. The floor was soft with guano. No one had come to the cave in a long time. There were signs of ancient occupation. Platforms stepping up one side made the basis of a tall ossuary, and the wall was hidden by neatly stacked bones. Seth approached it. The bones were brittle with great age, but the marks of butchery were clear on them. These people had been cannibalised.

Jool meanwhile had drifted towards the back of the cave. His light fell on jury-rigged catwalks and collapsed shelters made of metal sheeting. The slumped shape of a reactor housing loomed large as the rising Baalite moons in front of him. He saw something, and made for it in a straight line.

‘Here! Lord Seth, come.’ He beckoned.

Seth grumbled in his throat. Jool waited before a high wall adorned with broken shrines. Something had been written upon the surface. It had long ago corroded away.

‘Galael was a considered man, like yourself, Lord Seth,’ said Jool, searching the surface of the wall. ‘He was a great scholar in his own right, and although he had no psychic ability of his own, the librarius was always his passion. We have a reputation for savagery, and it is well earned. I speak to you now in calm, but once in combat we find it impossible to control our passions. The Blood Angels have their graces and virtues. Once we had a similar system to hold our fury in check. It no longer works. Our wrath at the enemies of mankind grows unchecked, but our librarius remains important to us, as do histories. There is knowledge of the old times there, gathered from this hall by Galael. Galael’s chronicle is at the heart of our collection. In it he wrote extensively of what he learned from his people, before time and circumstance separated us from Baal forever.’

Jool pointed at the corroded wall.

‘The chronicles say that in this place the records of the people were held, engraved into the metal of the fallen stars after the war. They are gone now, but I have longed to look upon the place where they were once displayed, for I know the story they told by heart.’

Seth looked over the pitted metal. Fragments of text were visible, curves of letters wrapped around pockmarks, or extending from scales of oxidisation. Streaks of fossilised faecal matter covered much of the rest. Whatever the words had said was lost to time.

Chrimsae looked blankly up at the wall. He was illiterate and lacked the imagination to see anything in the marks, but Jool’s words held him spellbound.

‘All the worlds in the Red Scar are subject to its humours,’ said Jool. ‘To dwell here at all, men must take their elixirs or live burrowed into the ground. That is true of all the planets within a hundred light years of this place, all save Baal. The configuration of the three bodies here deflects the Scar’s more terrible radiations. When men came here in the first great ships they were as nomads struggling over the desert, and this system was an oasis to them. Baal Primus was gentle enough, but Baal Secundus was a rarer prize yet, an analogue of Old Earth, and rich in biological diversity.’

‘And Baal?’ asked Seth.

‘Baal was as Baal is,’ said Jool. ‘Baal is eternal. The moons were settled, Baal was not, not at first. For many millennia, the records said, the worlds were isolated. The Scar kept them alone. No xenos civilisation or human world was within the range of their ships. Together they developed a culture whose richness was hinted at in these records, before they were lost.’

‘Galael’s chronicle suggests eventually the people of Baal were reunited with the rest of humanity, and a golden age beckoned. All this is written in the most perfunctory manner, barely sufficient for context. It is strange, I believe, how people take for granted the norms of their time, never thinking that they will change, and so they leave unrecorded the things that would facilitate understanding of their lives, if only they were written down.’ Jool’s helm moved, his eye-lenses glowing in the dark, as if he could read what had once been written on the wall. ‘What is recorded in great detail is the manner of the fall. As war consumed the galaxy, the two moons were isolated again, but though their history was long, their memories were short, and the worlds could not recapture their earlier self-sufficiency. Famine ensued and Baal Secundus demanded that they, as the more populous world, be granted the protection of the orbital facilities of Baal Primus, and that Baal Primus be evacuated. Baal Primus refused, citing their greater

military strength and resources as reasons for their own moon to be protected. The original record was unclear how the war began, but the orbitals were among the first targets. Maybe they were deliberately destroyed. I prefer the theory that an attempt to steal them led to their scuttling, and they fell from the sky, devastating Baal Primus. It is probably not true, but there is a certain amount of poetic hubris there.

‘Ironically, Baalind and Baalfora were safe from the turmoil of the wider galaxy. The Red Scar protected them, as it protected their degenerate descendants until the coming of the Great Angel. In the end they destroyed each other.’

‘This is only legend,’ said Seth. ‘And it is irrelevant.’

‘Do you really think so?’ said Jool. ‘In Galael’s time, the writing was still readable. I tell you why it is relevant: the terrors of that time came as much from within as without, and this is something all we of Sanguinius’ line can understand. We struggle against the monsters of our minds. You, Gabriel Seth, have triumphed. Warriors like you...’ Jool placed one hand on Seth’s shoulder, the other on the back of the neck of Chrimsae. ‘You are a lesson to us all in hope.’

‘We are all damned,’ said Seth.

‘The Red Scar brings madness and death to all its worlds, but our fury is holy.’ He looked down at the junker. ‘It is Sanguinius’, and all the more powerful.’ Jool removed his hand from Seth’s pauldron, and held Chrimsae firmly. The youth moved uncomfortably, but did not dare break free. ‘Not all of us have such fortitude as you, Gabriel Seth. In some of us, the curse is much stronger.’

Seth’s patience was running thin. ‘A waste of time. We are not saved. Our end comes. There. Is that what you wanted to hear? Let me tell you, I will not follow your road.’

Jool laughed, a single grunt, and closed his fist, crushing the vertebrae in Chrimsae’s neck. Incredibly the boy still lived. Jool hoisted him into the air, vitae running out between his silver fingers. Chrimsae’s feet jerked in the air. His tongue, purple with trapped blood, poked stiffly from his mouth. His eyes rolled helplessly. Jool turned his attention upon the youth, watching him die with detached curiosity.

‘These legends hold a lesson for you, Seth. Allies die when they refuse to stand together. Bloodshed is the inevitable outcome. We will fight by your side. We dare not fight alongside any other force, but you Flesh Tearers are the same as us, pure and strong and wrathful. We will fight with you whether you want it or not.’

Seth could have killed him then, in the dark. But the Knights of Blood would have attacked the Flesh Tearers, and two Chapters would be lost to the defence in fratricidal squabbles. He growled in frustration.

‘Will you drink with me, to seal our pact in blood?’ Jool held out Chrimsae’s corpse to him.

‘I will not,’ said Seth, even though saliva pooled in his mouth at the rich blood scent rising over the stench of guano.

‘Why not? They are cattle. We are the canids of the herder. Is it not right that we should feed from the herd?’

‘He was a wretch, but he did not have to die,’ said Seth. ‘You should not have killed him.’

‘How many similar innocents have your warriors butchered?’

‘Not in cold blood,’ said Seth. ‘This is why you are damned and I am not.’

‘Is it?’ said Jool. ‘What was his life? He would have died anyway. His end serves the Emperor better this way.’ With a tearing wrench, he ripped Chrimsae’s head free. Blood ran over his battered gauntlets. Seth’s mouth watered all the more. ‘Now, will you sup with me?’

‘No,’ said Seth. He clenched his jaw. His angel’s teeth extended and pricked at the soft meat of his inner lip. ‘I will not sup with you. I will not fight with you. Keep to your own positions. We shall stay on ours. There will be bloodshed if you disagree. Yours will be the first head I take.’

Jool made a disparaging noise. 'If you insist. Very well. We will venture no closer than three miles to your position.'

'Too close,' said Seth.

'Shall we fight?' said Jool.

When Seth did not reply, Jool continued. 'Then we keep to our common enemy. I will see you on the field of battle, Seth, as an ally. I have seen it.'

He dropped Chrimsae's mangled corpse and reached for his helm seals.

'Now, please depart. I need to feed, and I prefer to be unobserved.'

Seth was only too happy to oblige.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANGELIC SACRIFICE

Blazing light flooded the throne room. A figure in burnished armour, his features obscured by the glare, stood before the Golden Throne. Awful machines pounded away in every quarter. Thousands of coffins wired into the mechanisms hid untold tales of suffering. The wrongness of the devices gnawed at Dante's soul. In the central throne was a wizened figure for whose benefit this atrocity was committed, yet he was oblivious to it as he was to all else on the mortal plane. He sat unmoving as the golden warrior prepared for battle, yet another human life to be sacrificed for the Emperor.

Something twisted towards the throne. The golden figure raised his sword.

Darkness.

Dante's eyes slid open slowly. Disoriented, it took him a second to realise he was in his bedchamber in the Heavenward Redoubt of the Arx Angelicum, and not on Terra.

He sat up. The sheets of his huge bed whispered off his skin.

An extravagant clock ticked softly at the other side of his bedchamber. Dante had been asleep for three hours. Once, Dante was capable of fighting for days without rest. Now he took sleep when he could and woke weary from it. If he could, he would have enjoyed the Long Sleep.

Corbulo warned him from the sarcophagi. There were risks for Dante hidden in the holy machines.

Age. All down to his damned age.

He rested his face in his hands. The texture of his wrinkled skin disturbed him, for a dreaming man never sees himself old. He remained that way for several minutes, breathing slowly, until the air passing in and out of his lungs absorbed his attention and calmed him.

With a quick, decisive breath, he threw back the covers and rose from his bed. His muscles ached, an old man's pains afflicting an immortal. Rotations of his shoulders worked out some of the stiffness, but by no means all.

He thought to call for his equerry. Arafeo's name died on his lips. The man was gone, aged from youth to senescence in what seemed to be minutes to Dante. He had put off appointing a new equerry from the blood thralls. There had not seemed to be much point.

He dressed in a robe stiff with embroidered angels and fetched himself a cup of wine laced with blood,

as was the custom of the Blood Angels. Unremarkable, save that Dante had eschewed the drinking of blood for long centuries until these last months.

Dante swirled the wine around the goblet beneath his nose, allowing the scent of spices and vitae to stir his sluggish hearts. He shut his eyes to savour it.

The smell of blood. The smell of life.

He had had the dream of the golden warrior many times. Whether it was a genuine vision, he could not tell.

Dante kept the dream to himself, knowing that its recurrence would be seen as egocentricity on his part. This need for the figure to be him, for him to have one truly worthy deed to do before his life was done... It was a weakness, and he did not care to share that. He was amused by how much he tried to convince himself he was the warrior. He had never seen the face, though from the form of the armour the figure was a Space Marine, and not a mortal or a member of the Adeptus Custodes. Did he see wings? He discounted them. If it were Dante, where was his axe? Well, Dante theorised, he might have lost it. Besides, visions were figurative, not literal. Unfortunately, they shared that characteristic with dreams.

He smiled at his conceit that he would save the Emperor.

While this desire he had was undoubtedly indulgent, he needed it. He needed a reason to continue, to fight the daily woe and exhaustion his position burdened him with. If there was harm in that, it was no great one.

Today was different. He mulled it over as he sipped his wine, puzzled. One detail of the vision had changed. Each time when he had seen the golden warrior, the Emperor's sword was upon his unmoving knee as it had reputedly been for ten millennia. That last time, it was missing.

He feared that to be a bad omen.

Almost in confirmation of his misgivings, a bell tolled in the distance.

His head came up suddenly. The sound drifted from hearing and back, inaudible in that deeply buried room to all but a Space Marine's ears. He strode from his bedchamber, bursting through double ebony doors into his private dining room. His feet padded over mosaics of carnelian, all the detail given in differing shades of red. The tolling bell grew louder as he marched to the glass doors leading onto his balcony and went out into the Well of Angels.

The deep throat of the volcano plunged away. Graceful patterns of lumen light illuminated the plaza thousands of feet below. The moist scents of the Verdis Elysia drifted up from broad terraces.

The well was a place of peace, until the bell of war rang. It resounded loudly round the shaft. From high above a wild howling competed with the stately tolling.

Dante raised his eyes to the oval of lilac morning sky trapped by the Arx Murus. Towers pointed upward like teeth. One in particular drew his gaze.

The inmates of Amareo were awake, all of them baying and shrieking for blood, their monstrous cries sounding throughout the fortress monastery.

Their howls were a sure sign war was upon them.

Dante hurried back inside to a hardlined vox panel set into the far wall. A knock stopped him before he reached it.

'Enter!' he called.

Sanguinary Guard opened carved doors of anthracite. Beyond lay his state rooms, banqueting hall, armoury, private chapel and other chambers of his palace.

Captain Borgio stood in the doorway, armoured for battle.

'Borgio, the damned scream for blood. It has begun, has it not?'

Borgio nodded. 'My lord, I have urgent communication from the picket fleets. Our long range augur

buoys have been tripped across multiple coreward sectors.’

Borgio looked almost apologetic as he delivered the news.

‘The tyrannids are here.’

Fully armed and armoured, Dante marched towards the Basilica Sanguinarum, the full strength of his Sanguinary Guard flanking him. Music did its best to conceal the snarling and anguished shouts of those in the grip of the thirst rising from the cathedral, but it could not. Nothing could, not the mass, chanted repetition of the Moripatris as the scions of Sanguinius knelt in prayer to stave off madness, or the clangorous peals shaking the fortress. The bell in the Citadel Reclusiam had been joined by others. They would not cease ringing until the invasion began.

The Arx Angelicum was frantic with activity. There were not sufficient holy spaces for all the Space Marines in the basilica, so the brothers of the Blood knelt in groups wherever they could find space. Under the solemn guidance of their Chaplains, they prayed for mastery over the Black Rage. The stirrings of the thirst had come upon them unexpectedly with the arrival of the hive fleet. Blood thralls ran about everywhere, preparing for imminent attack. Only the servitors seemed unhurried, but the sheer numbers of them clumping about betrayed the gravity of the situation.

‘Make way! Make way!’ shouted Sepharan. ‘Make way!’

None had difficulty obeying the order. The corridors were cleared instantly, allowing Dante’s party to tramp by.

At the gates of the Basilica Sanguinarum various dignitaries awaited the commander. They too parted. All but one.

Chapter Master Geron of the Angels Numinous stood alone before the giant gates. He held his helmet clamped under one arm. His face was pale and contorted with fury.

‘Stand aside, Master Geron,’ said Sepharan. ‘The commander will pass.’

‘No,’ said Geron, stiffly shaking his head.

‘Stand aside!’ commanded Sepharan. The Sanguinary Guard raised their angelus boltguns.

‘You threaten me?’ said Geron in astonishment. ‘When you allow this abomination?’ He pointed behind him to the gates. From inside came the roaring and pitiful shouting of Space Marines in the grip of the Black Rage. ‘You treat them to this honour? The fallen should be incarcerated in the Tabernacle of Repentance. They must undergo the shriving before they are expended. They shame us all with their weakness.’ His features quivered with emotion. ‘An angel should be pure and noble. These mindless brutes are an embarrassment.’

‘Stand aside!’ demanded Sepharan. ‘You will not be asked again.’

Dante stepped forward and rested a calming hand on Sepharan’s arm.

‘Geron,’ he said. ‘While your warriors fight for me, all will be accorded the same respect as the brothers in my Chapter.’

Ordamael spoke up from his position by the gates. ‘They are blessed in this moment with Sanguinius’ vision.’

‘They are cursed, and unclean,’ said Geron, rounding on the Chaplain. ‘I will not have this.’

‘You granted me command,’ said Dante. ‘Make any attempt to remove your warriors from the basilica, and I will kill you myself. Do you really wish to plunge our brotherhood into war as the Great Devourer bears down on us? Show pity to your men. They are your brothers yet.’

Geron snarled. Dante’s Sanguinary Guard interposed themselves between the two Chapter Masters. Geron made to move forward, but his own Sanguinary high priest stepped to his side and firmly took his elbow.

‘It goes against our beliefs, my brother,’ he said, low and urgently, ‘but now is not the time.’

Geron gave Dante a look of pure fury. ‘I should have expected no less from you, Dante, who openly consorts with the Knights of Blood and invites the savage Gabriel Seth into his confidence. You stand shoulder to shoulder with those who would embrace the rage.’ He spat on the floor. The marble sizzled with the acid in his spittle.

‘You will obey me,’ said Dante. ‘Stand aside.’

‘For honour’s sake, I will obey, as I voted to obey,’ said Geron. He pointed at Dante. ‘But I will not forget this slight.’

Geron’s priest moved him to the side.

‘Pray open the gates!’ boomed Sepharan.

The Basilica Sanguinarum’s high portal creaked open, letting out the full volume of the howling of the damned.

Space Marines of many Chapters were still being brought into the cathedral as Dante entered. Some arrived in a state of calm, glazed confusion, or were brought in unconscious. Others needed to be wrestled into place.

‘This is all of them?’ asked Dante of Ordamael.

‘The Moripatris continues, my lord, but new incidences of rage are tailing away. This will be the majority.’

Major conflict was always presaged by the awakening of the prisoners of the Tower of Amareo. That such debased beasts should be so close to Sanguinius frankly horrified Dante, but by dint of their hyperactive gene-seed their sixth sense was sharper even than that of the Librarians, and their rage the first to kindle. When war spread its red wings, the prisoners of Amareo heralded it.

If the Amareans awoke and bayed for living flesh, the Blood Angels knew to expect their own visions. They prepared themselves as best they could, steeled for the ritual of the Moripatris, for the memories of Sanguinius intruded strongly when the Amareans sang. In those times it was certain that several of their number would succumb to the Black Rage and be lost.

Only this time it was not several who had fallen. It was not dozens, as the worst crises could precipitate. It was hundreds, far too many to be contained in the chapels used for the purpose of blessing the damned.

The cathedral was full of afflicted brothers from every Chapter. From differing brotherhoods in life, in their living death they found a common hell. Their armour was black and crossed with red saltires, with little but their badges to show from which Chapter they hailed. It was a sorrowful spectacle of unity that brought the magnitude of the curse home to all who saw it.

The damned behaved according to their character. Some struggled too violently to be armoured, and knelt naked on the stone. Others were sunk deep into trances or prayer. The tranquil yet authoritative words of two dozen Chaplains calmed others. The states of many were not constant, but shifted from one mode of behaviour to another as their self-control waxed and waned, and so more than half were restrained by heavy chains about the wrists, ankles and necks.

Dante took his position at the head of the basilica, beneath the statue of Sanguinius. Ordamael began his shouted oratory as soon as he was in position. There was little ceremony to the ritual. The nature of the congregation demanded it be concluded swiftly.

‘May Sanguinius watch over you, as you enter the last trial of your life,’ began Ordamael. ‘May the Emperor use you while your arms remain strong. May your fury fire you as you fight your last.’

Ordamael intoned the prayer loudly. Calming choral music softened the atmosphere, leaching away thoughts of blood and replacing them with contemplative sorrow. Gradually the swollen Death Company became quiet as deeply embedded hypno indoctrination was called into activation by the words. It was

potent but it would not last. Serfs from various Chapters came out from hiding in the cathedral aisle and moved swiftly among the damned, affixing death ribbons to newly repainted armour.

‘In the name of humanity do you tread the dark road to redemption,’ continued Ordamael. ‘And as your enemies flee from your righteous wrath, shall you find peace in death.’

The most violent battle-brothers were quiescent now, and could be approached with minimum risk. Well-practised hands undid chains, quickly completing arming rituals while the Death Company were lulled by the Litany of Doom.

‘By your deeds shall ye be known. By your rage shall you forge your deeds.’

Other prayers were whispered by other Chaplains. Ordamael was not the most senior Chaplain in the host; there were over a dozen Reclusiarchs at Baal alone, but the others deferred to his authority, as highest-ranking Blood Angels Chaplain. He was the Paternis Sanguis, master of the Tower of Amareo. The title carried great weight.

The serfs and thralls withdrew as quickly as they had emerged from their hiding places. The Chaplains began to rouse their charges, unlocking their chains from the floor and bidding them get to their feet.

‘In blood, there is life,’ said Ordamael, reaching the last stanza. ‘In life, there is thirst for blood. In death, the thirst dies. Sanguinius be with us, as he is with you.’

The prayer varied between Chapters. The sentiments were the same.

Specially adapted servitors came to the aid of the Chaplains, strong enough to restrain the damned should they go berserk, expendable enough that it did not matter if they failed.

Ordamael beckoned to his peers. At the rear of the cathedral, the three Rage Gates opened onto large lifter cages, ready to convey the damned to the chambers in the Dungeons of Amareo where they would be housed until needed.

Dante bowed his head in respect as they filed out. The damned were soothed by their Chaplains, though they were already growing restive again. Dante wondered for a moment what Lemartes might do with such a force, but Lemartes was at Diamor, light years away.

The last of the damned was shepherded into the lifters and his chains secured in place on the wall. The more aggressive were beginning to shout again, uttering heartbreaking words first spoken ten millennia ago, and repeated many times since.

‘Why?’ one demanded to know. ‘Why did you betray us, Horus?’

The gates slammed shut, cutting off his question.

There was no answer to give.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VOID WAR

Situated beneath the Citadel Reclusiam at the top of the Heavenward Redoubt was the Prime Strategium of the Blood Angels.

Pale red sunlight filtered through armourglass windows twenty feet thick. Wide horizontal slits, cut through the rock on the other side of the glass, gave sweeping views out of both sides, into the desert, and the plunging Well of Angels.

Several hundred people were present, and a tense hush was upon them. Servitors, mortals and Space Marines were engaged in duties that could decide the fate not only of Baal and the Blood Angels, but of the segmentum beyond. Each piece of the war machine was as vital as the next, whether human thrall, cogitator sub-array or decorated captain of the Adeptus Astartes. Commander Dante understood that better than most. Under his purview they operated excellently.

A dozen separate command stations, individually tasked with overseeing an aspect of Baal's defence, were situated around the central hololithic tacterium. About its eerie projection sphere were gathered a band of heroes of rare renown. Many were regarded as the epitome of Imperial virtue in their own right, but even these great warriors waited upon Commander Dante's word.

Dante stood upon a raised platform, his eyes trained on the projection along with everyone else's. The sphere depicted the Baal system. The red star Balor and its worlds; the triplets of the Baalite subsystem, the solitary gas giant Set, the clumped asteroid field that separated outer and inner system, and the cold, distant world of Amair alone on its six-hundred-year journey around the star. Balor was not a fruitful sun. It had few children.

'Expand the field of observation,' said Dante. 'Show me the outer bounds.'

A quiet whirr of lenses pulled back the view. Balor shrank to the size of a pomegranate. Baal and its moons were bright dots circling each other. The other worlds glinted. Only gaseous Set was big enough to see as more than a point of light.

Far out at the edge of the projection field, where the image began to lose integrity and focus, was Balor's cometary belt depicted on the hololith as a swarm of tiny dots moving with the agitation of bacilli in a drop of water.

Just inside this ultimate shell of the system was the Space Marine fleet. The assembled navies of nigh three score Chapters divided into four battle groups. They waited at a distance from one another. The direction of the tyrannid fleet's approach was known, where exactly it would breach the cometary wall was not.

On a human scale, the ships of the Imperium were colossi, miles-long chunks of metal as large as cities, home to tens of thousands of cyborgs, thralls and Space Marines. In the vastness of space they were specks. Shifting shoals of data tags displayed their position.

By Dante's left shoulder stood the Master of Interpretations, the blood thrall liaison with the astropaths of the Chapter. Vox signals would take hours to reach the fleet. By the power of ancient science, hololithic communication was instantaneous across in-system distances, but fragile in the face of the shadow in the warp. The astropaths would be the last line of communication with the fleets. But all means, electronic or immaterial, were vulnerable to the tyrannids.

An earthquake rumbled through Baal, upsetting the projection. The Arx Angelicum's stone moaned.

'They are close,' said Captain Essus of the Blood Swords. 'They trouble Baal. This is the sign of their coming, the gravitic pulse.'

'What of the warp?' asked Dante quietly.

'The shadow is stronger, but our astropaths are still in contact with the fleet, my lord,' said the Master of Interpretations.

'When will they come?' asked Geron. His tension spoke for them all.

No one replied. All of them remained focused on the hololith. Dante had set his pieces on the board. Twenty-one battle-barges, ninety-four strike cruisers and several hundred smaller craft would intercept the hive fleet under the command of Bellerophon aboard the *Blade of Vengeance*. They would strike, cripple as many large vessels as they could, then fall back to Baal. Six thousand Space Marines were aboard those fleets. Twelve thousand were on Baal, six thousand on Baal Secundus and five thousand on Baal Primus. They were the largest gathering of the Blood since the Horus Heresy. Time would tell if it would be enough.

They stood for hours staring at the hololith. It was almost a relief when the first blinking red dot of enemy contact sprang into life at the edge of the system.

'They have come,' said Dante.

A choir of thralls began the 'Psalm protective against planetary investment'. The lights changed. Threat indicators ratcheted up from null to beta-severe.

The first red dot was alone for but a moment. Hundreds more began to blink across a wide segment of Baal's system edge. Many were feeder-scouts, the solitary eyes of the hive fleet. Several proved to be the tips of attack tendrils. Behind them came long, sinuous ribbons of other dots, questing for prey. They were forming up across a band of space little over a single astronomical unit wide. Already the Space Marine fleets were manoeuvring to counter.

Giant machines within the Arx Murus growled, pushing up huge blocks of stone into the window slots. The room shook with the effort of moving so many thousand tons of rock. The red light of Balor became a sliver fine as a diffuse las-beam. Emergency lumens crackled on. Machine lights were stars in the gloom.

'We are at war,' said Dante.

Erwin sat on the edge of his command throne, unblinkingly staring out of the oculus of the *Splendid Pinion*. Other ships of his Chapter waited with him, their bristling weapons casting black shadows on their sides in the starshine of distant Balor. The glow from the Red Scar was almost as bright as the sun that far out. Erwin hated looking into it, it was like gazing at a suppurating wound, but still he could not

tear himself away.

‘Any sign yet?’

‘None, as there was none three minutes ago when you asked, captain,’ said Achemen. The serviles were glad he answered. None of them liked to speak with the captain before battle. Not even the five battle-brothers of Achemen’s squad stationed as guards on the deck.

Erwin snarled. ‘All this damned waiting! Where are they?’

His thirst teased him, fuelling his frustration so that his skin crawled under his bodyglove. His fist tensed so hard his armoured fingertips pushed in the metal ribbing covering his palm.

‘Damn them!’ he said. ‘Damn them!’ He was panting quickly and shallowly. He could sense the thirst of the others on the ship and vessels around him. Battle-hunger was the worst form of starvation.

‘They will be here soon enough, brother,’ said Achemen.

‘Do not patronise me, first sergeant!’ snapped Erwin. ‘You feel the same wrath as I.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Achemen. ‘But I control it better.’

Erwin’s head whipped round at this impudence. He bared angel’s teeth already at full extension.

‘My lords!’ The Servile of the Watch spoke up. ‘I have hundreds of incoming contacts.’

Tocsins sounded. On the tactical displays of the command deck a swarm of red lights made itself known.

‘Revision. There are thousands,’ said the Servile of the Watch. ‘Tens of thousands.’

Erwin leaned forward. Nothing was visible in the oculus, only the vileness of the Scar and the occasional glint of a comet turning about its axis.

‘How fast?’ asked Erwin.

‘Super-light speed, my lord,’ said the servile. ‘My augurs show massive gravitic disturbances at several distinct points.’

‘Adjust orientation towards the nearest,’ said Erwin.

‘Adjusting,’ said the Servile of the Helm.

As the servile spoke these words, Erwin witnessed a rippling of the view forward, the bending of light due to manipulation of gravity. Something was hiding behind the distortion.

‘There they are,’ said Erwin. ‘There they are!’

‘*All vessels of the Angels Excelsis. Prepare for battle.*’

Erwin snorted. Follordark had never been one to make grandiose speeches.

The rippling cut out. For a moment the oculus was full of streaks. These compressed themselves into the solid shapes of tyrannid bio-ships that shone wetly with deep space ice. Small, teardrop-shaped vessels bristling with sensor spines were breaking from the fore, heading back towards the shelter of the vessels coming behind.

Erwin laughed savagely and hammered his hand onto the lion’s head of his throne arm. Untold thousands of ships were ahead of him. Green glows lit up behind them as they engaged bioplasma drives, and advanced towards Baal.

The vox came alive with orders flying between dozens of ships.

‘*Attack!*’ commanded Follordark.

The *Splendid Pinion* lurched as its engine stacks burned full ahead.

‘At last,’ grinned Erwin. ‘A worthy foe.’

Aboard the *Blade of Vengeance*, Bellerophon oversaw the unfolding void war through the ship’s vast main hololith.

‘Angels Vermillion interdiction force!’ commanded Bellerophon. ‘Come about and bring weapons to bear on advancing tendrils twelve-alpha.’

The tactical displays of the *Blade of Vengeance* were a maddening blur of vessels. Bellerophon squinted at them in turn. The four battle groups had performed to their plan, coming together as a square, their squadrons of ships forming the towers of a vertical castle. Smaller groups split off from the main, darting out into the onrushing swarm to destroy prime targets and sow disruption among the invaders through boarding actions and rapid torpedo strikes. This tactic still had its value, though it was no longer as efficacious as it had been; the tyranids had identified the ploy some years ago and adapted their command net, spreading back-up synaptic nodes to lesser ships. Discovering which housed them was a mixture of careful observation and Emperor-guided guesswork.

The *Blade of Vengeance* flew in tandem with its sister, the *Bloodcaller*. Together they put out a tremendous amount of fire. Within half an hour of them encountering the lead elements of Leviathan, space was full of broken shell fragments and giant chunks of flesh. Frozen body fluids drifted in clouds between the corpses of bio-ships. But for every ship destroyed, there were two dozen more to take its place. The greatest of the living vessels were truly titanic, dwarfing even the battle-barges. Vast and slug-like, the Norn ships were encrusted in ancient ice and stolen asteroids glued together with excreted resins that was as good as any armour. The hive ships had no energy fields, but protected inside their jackets of stone and frost they sailed through the full fire of Imperial vessels with little ill effect. One lay ahead; the *Blade of Vengeance* ploughed through dozens of smaller vessels in an attempt to intercept it before it broke through the fleet of the Golden Sons.

Tocsins and alarms chimed, rang, beeped and shouted. Though the tyranids' weaponry was less potent than that of the Imperium, they had a lot more of it. The void shields flexed and thrummed to the impact of torpedo spines and living missiles. Fast hunter beasts streaked past on the green fires of bioplasmic jets, spitting barbed quills from dripping orifices. Convulsing tubes ranged down the sides of the largest ships cast out giant, gnarled teeth by peristaltic motion that burst on hulls to unleash hordes of metal-hungry creatures. But in the main, the tyranids neglected ranged combat. Giant nautiloids vented glittering clouds of gas, moving with deceptive slowness towards the Imperial battle line, their five-hundred-yard-long tentacles extended to entrap ships. They seemed so cumbersome, but when close, sinews snapped out with such force the tentacles buried themselves in plasteel, and the Space Marine ships were reeled in, their void shields useless. Bellerophon watched as one of the *Blade of Vengeance's* escorts was caught. It bucked in the fleshly snare, engines blazing, but it was doomed, engulfed by dozens more tentacles and broken in two.

The variety of vessels beggared belief. Some were like slugs, others looked like void whales. There were examples that bore a passing resemblance to sea creatures, scaled up a million times. There were ships with massive blades at the front, or armoured beaks. Ships with tentacles predominated, but others had horned rams for prows, or carried super-sized versions of biocannons wielded by the carnifexes or tervigons fixed in giant, never-closing maws. There were ships with flippers, ships with tails, ships with atrophied arms and legs. Many had monstrously long tails. Some were armoured with the segmented chitinous plate common to most tyranid organisms, albeit on a massive scale, others seemed to have no protection other than a leathery hide. Every possible permutation of life was there, but all melded, changed, bent to the hive mind's will. In their diversity was an awful uniformity.

'Brother,' said Asante from the command throne. 'We will have to move position. There are multiple attack craft on an intercept course.'

Bellerophon spared a glance for a side screen where Asante cast the relevant data.

'One more moment, Asante. One more.'

'The hive ship?'

'The hive ship.' Bellerophon nodded absently, only a fragment of his mind on the conversation. His face

flickered with the light of a dozen tactical displays. His enhanced Space Marine mind took hundreds of different pieces of information and translated them into a battle plan. 'It is our primary target at this time. We take that out, this entire sub-tendrill will collapse.'

Power feedback from stressed void shields shook the ship stem to stern.

'Very well,' said Asante. 'But I am pulling up and out of this maelstrom as soon as it is dead.'

Bellerophon signalled the Blood Angels battle group. 'Prepare for attack run.'

The *Blade of Vengeance* groaned as engines forced it down. The hive ship loomed ahead. It was a true leviathan of the void, twenty miles long and three across. Impacts flared all over its shell. Four strike cruisers harried it, all aiming for the front. Bellerophon could not bring himself to call it a prow. At the base of two vast mandibles spread wide like shears was a cluster of red-brown eyes and a tiny, tentacled mouth.

'Charge lances,' ordered Asante. 'Load cyclonic torpedoes. Main guns, keep our flanks clear.'

Bellerophon spent an intense half minute rearranging the *Blade of Vengeance's* support ships. Flights of interceptors flew around the group, doing their best to clear away the teeming swarms of tyrannid fighter beasts. Swift destroyers identified and disabled approaching kraken ships with volleys of torpedoes.

The four cruisers zeroed in on their target, hammering away at the creature's face. The angles were awkward, and many shots were simply snatched from the void by the thing's lightning fast feeder tentacles.

'Let us lance this thing in its vile xenos face, then break off,' said Bellerophon.

'As you command, Lord of the Heavengate,' said Asante.

'Cruisers, stand clear,' ordered Bellerophon.

'Targets locked,' reported Asante's gunnery master.

'Fire,' said Asante.

The *Blade of Vengeance* spat out a full spread of torpedoes, turning slightly once they were away to glide cleanly abeam the hive ship. As it passed the living battleship, four pillars of blinding light slammed out from the *Blade of Vengeance's* dorsal turrets, blasting the hive ship's head to pieces. The weapons snapped off, leaving the hive ship dying. Thick blood spewed from the front. The torpedoes smashed home as the *Blade of Vengeance* and its escorts moved upward over the hive ship. Atomic fire annihilated the first three miles of its forequarters. The symbiotic weapons creatures were still firing, but the core of the hive ship was dead. Random eruptions of gas spasmed from its thruster spiracles, and it lumbered out of formation, smashing aside dozens of its fellows.

Beyond the dead hive ship, the void was packed with uncountable enemy vessels.

'One down, fifty thousand to go,' said Asante drily.

'*Hold formation.*' Follordark's simple command cut through the alarms clanging repetitively all around Erwin. He would need luck to restore order to the Angels Excelsis fleet, whose battle order was being split apart by repeated, suicidal attacks towards their centre. The responses of Erwin's fellow captains were garbled nonsense in his vox-beads.

The Angels Excelsis were under massive attack. Granted the honour of sallying out from the mobile fortresses of the main battlegroup, they dipped in and out of the onrushing swarms like a rapier. But repeated thrusts had blunted their point. The quick attack and withdrawal that bought them many good ship kills earlier in the battle was confounded by the density of bio-ships streaming past them towards Baal. The Space Marines had been pushed further and further back across the system. Three days of fighting saw them lose hundreds of millions of miles of ground. Large tendrils of the hive had twisted away towards Set and Amair and were greedily devouring the resources of the worlds. If there was one comfort

to be taken from this difficult battle, it was this: the tyranids had been so starved in the Red Scar that they were consuming worlds with little to no complex organics, worlds they bypassed when the hunting was good.

The swarms flowed over and around the Space Marines like a mountain river around boulders. There were not enough Imperial ships to stop the flow. Little islands of violence were all they could manage.

Ships came at the Angels Excelsis from every direction. Sprays of penetrative spines burst into flares of light against the *Splendid Pinion's* void shields.

'They are coming in for another pass,' shouted the Servile of the Watch.

'Intensify forward fire!' Erwin commanded.

'Yes, my lord,' responded the Servile Belligerent.

The oculus flickered like a primitive imaging device. Thousands of autocannon rounds from point defence turrets slammed into the waves of spine-torpedoes hurtling towards them. Leech-like boarding craft twisting their way through the bombardment disintegrated under intense fusion fire. Spores were obliterated by the thousand.

'I have seen thinner blizzards,' growled Erwin.

Half the Angels Excelsis ships were lost. The panicked cries of serviles screamed out of the vox as the *Angelic* died. Its sides were riddled with the maggot holes of tyranid boarding worms. Its guns were silent. The questing arms of a vast kraken ship wrapped themselves about the *Angelic's* mid-section, pulling it inexorably towards the grinding bone plates of the bio-ship's maw.

Erwin threw up his hand to shield his eyes against a reactor death that didn't come. The *Angelic* was sawn in half and pulled inwards. The sight of its prow and stern rubbing against each other was obscene somehow. Even the gas vented from its emptied compartments was inhaled by the gigantic creature. It consumed the entire thing, meat, metal, men and monster. Not a scrap escaped.

Follordark was on the vox, hollering orders. On a short-range hololithic tactical projection the full enormity of the situation was plain. The *Essence Eternal*, the Chapter flagship, was in trouble. Three lesser kraken ships had their boneless arms entwined about the Chapter battle-barge's superstructure. One kraken came away, its shell burning ferociously, eviscerated by a broadside. It would not be enough to save the *Essence Eternal*. Many-limbed spores were clamped like tumours all over its angular lines. Boarding worms were chewing their way inside. Guns fired wildly all over the battle-barge.

'We are losing, Follordark,' said Erwin. His own ship shuddered as it unleashed yet another payload at the predators stalking it.

'*They shall pay! We shall destroy them all!*' replied Follordark.

'We should withdraw.'

'*Negative,*' said Follordark. '*I command you to hold your—*'

One of the krakens crept sinisterly over the *Essence Eternal*, arm over arm. It wrapped its tentacles around the main vox tower. Follordark's voice cut out as it wrenched the entire assembly free.

'He is lost,' said Achemen.

'The Chapter is lost,' muttered Erwin. 'Servile of Response, open vox channels to all surviving ships.'

'Aye, my lord.'

Erwin stood from his throne. The cables plugged into the back of his armour at least permitted him to do that.

'All vessels of the Angels Excelsis...' As he spoke those words, another of his Chapter's ancient craft was chewed up and eaten. Then another. 'I, Erwin, assume command. I order all ships to turn about and rendezvous with—'

'Erwin! To port!' shouted Achemen in alarm.

Erwin had time to look up and see the blunt, exposed bone of a ram ship snout emerge from the swarm of vessels, swift and unexpected as an eel darting from its hole. The void shields burned away layers of the ram and sent purple lightning arcing all over the ship. It made not one iota of difference. The ram ship impacted the *Splendid Pinion's* command tower several decks below the command deck. The violence of the impact threw Erwin off his feet. He slammed into the railing of his dais and flipped over it. The cables attaching him to the ship's power and command systems parted in a welter of sparks and smoke.

He slammed into the lower deck, killing the servile he landed upon.

For a moment, he lay dazed. The hiss of air from a breach in the hull roused him, the deadly sound standing out amid the cacophony of alarms, screams and creaking metal.

He stood with difficulty. His armour had no power supply. It was a dead weight on him, onerous to move without the assistance of its supplementary musculature.

'Serviles!' he barked. He coughed. His ribs were bruised by his fall. The air was foggy with smoke and fire suppressant gas. 'Serviles! Report!'

There was no reply. Someone was weeping, another groaning. At the last, unaltered humanity betrayed its weakness.

'Achemen! Achemen! Where are you? Damn you, answer me!'

He staggered around the wreck of his command dais. The smell of Adeptus Astartes blood drew him to Achemen's final resting place. The sergeant lay sprawled under a girder, eyes bulging out of his broken skull.

'Serviles!' he roared. 'Report!'

There was still no reply. Thrashing electric cables spat arcing crackles. The glass of the oculus was queered by a massive crack running from the top to the bottom of the central pane. Much of the view was obscured by the sucking mouths of tyranid beasts. Diamond teeth rasped on the glass, scratching it deeply. The command tower had buckled, and the oculus now pointed downwards towards the main hull. Through the diminishing gaps between the flocking beasts chewing on the glass, the dead bulk of the ram ship was visible, its head thrust deep into the *Splendid Pinion's* innards.

Among the orchestra of alarms a fresh one began. Erwin's eye was drawn to a broken console.

On a cracked pict screen the rune for boarders blinked urgently.

Something began hammering on the command bridge door. Something big.

Erwin reached for his storm bolter, but it had been torn away from its strap.

He struggled forward towards the doors, drawing his combat knife. The command deck reverberated. Ten feet of plasteel was denting inward.

Erwin took cover before the doors. The few Adeptus Astartes on the deck were all dead. The rest of his company was trapped in the decks below.

'Come on!' he screamed. 'I will slay you!'

By the time the carnifex hammered its way through the door, Erwin was fully in the Red Thirst's grip. He charged at the tyranid in mindless frenzy.

His mangled body hit the deck plates moments afterwards.

Brilliant light from yet another reactor death seared the vision of the *Blade of Vengeance's* deck crew. A sphere of nuclear energy tore out a hole a dozen miles across from the approaching tyranid hive fleet. As suddenly as it was opened, it was filled again by the hurtling bodies of ten thousand tyranid organisms, their tentacles already extending as if they could grab Baal from half a million miles away.

'That was Erwin's ship,' said Asante. 'He died better than he lived.' He consulted a tac-display. 'The entire Angels Excelsis Chapter is gone. We are losing ships too quickly. The force of the swarm is double

what we expected.'

Bellerophon studied the tactical display. He could only agree.

'What do you propose, brother, that we turn and run?' said Bellerophon.

'No, my lord,' said Asante. 'We should begin phase two of the strategy—'

'Not yet!' barked Bellerophon. 'We cannot split yet. We must slaughter as many of these xenos filth as we can while we have the numbers. Our lives do not matter. I will spend them all if I thought it would help.' He lowered his voice. 'Only through sacrifice shall Baal stand.'

The Space Marine fleet was bent back upon itself. Four battle groups had become one, a crescent line venting fire forward and to the sides. They could do little more than kill what they could. The tyranids were too numerous to stop.

Kill counters rattled up in a blur. Cogitation estimates had the number of tyranid dead well into the millions. Three hundred and seven hive ships had died to the Imperial guns. Bellerophon doubted they would ever get a good idea of how many lesser vessels had been blasted apart. Surely it would make sense for the enemy to stop, to turn about and retreat? No amount of feeding in the Baal system could possibly make up for the losses the tyranids were enduring, and would surely endure, when they landed upon Baal. Bellerophon was a gifted fleet commander, but he could not credit the hive mind with the strategic ability to force a passage north through Baal. It was idiocy. Why not avoid the Red Scar altogether? He also did not believe it intelligent enough to want the Blood Angels eliminated, or intelligent at all, in point of fact. And Mephiston's theory that the hive mind thirsted for vengeance, that was laughable.

But what he could understand was that the tyranids were numberless, and they were at Baal.

Bellerophon understood defeat when he saw it.

He chided himself. There was hope. The Sanguinor himself had said so. They could not hold the tyranids, but they could slow them. Every dead beast was one that would not set foot on Baal. Every hive ship destroyed saw the hive mind's coherency weakened. They could do it. They must.

Hope proved itself fleeting.

'My lord!'

The tone of the thrall's voice had Bellerophon reacting instantly.

'What?'

'The augurs, my lord.' Blood thralls were brave, loyal, not quite the best of the best, but head and shoulders above the common herd of man. The thralls who manned the command desk had been aspirants to the Chapter who had failed by the narrowest of margins. But this one was scared. 'Look!' He raised a quaking finger.

Bellerophon turned his head to a minor hololith. The main display was occupied by the immediate environs of the battle, an area of a hundred thousand miles or so. The lesser hololith the thrall shakingly pointed to supported a graphical view of the entire system.

'By the blood of the Great Angel,' said Bellerophon.

From the far side of Balor, a second hive fleet was approaching, bypassing the defences, and heading straight for Baal. There were tens of thousands more vessels. Far too many to overcome, but he did not pause in making the order that would end his life.

Bellerophon slammed his hand down on a button, opening every vox horn within hearing distance of his voice. 'All battle groups, pay heed!' he shouted, his orders competing with the hideous white noise of tyranid denial broadcasts. 'A second hive fleet approaches Baal.' He keyed in a number of rapid orders into a nearby cogitator. 'Battle group alpha, fall in line with the flagship. We cannot leave Baal undefended. The rest of you, cover our withdrawal until we are away, then break apart and make distance.

I release you from my command. Pursue objectives of harassment and division as best you can. Keep as many of these xenos fiends away from the primarch's birthplace as you can, for as long you can. By the Blood were we made, my brothers. May the Emperor guide you and preserve you.'

Dante did not see Bellerophon die. He did not see Asante die. He did not see the ancient *Blade of Vengeance* overwhelmed by tyrannid razorfiends as it rushed into Baal's orbit. He did not see the *Victus* and the *Bloodcaller* forced to abort their attack and withdraw, heavily damaged. He did not see the miles-long flagship draw a blazing river of fire across Baal's upper atmosphere. He did not see it crash land. Not until later would he see the column of black smoke that issued from the downed vessel. He did experience the violent tremor of the impact, though it originated hundreds of miles away. But as the steady green arrow of the *Blade of Vengeance* turned grey upon the hololith and fell from the representation of the sky, he felt the same, burdensome regret he had felt every time a man had died under his command for over a millennium. He remembered Asante as a neophyte. He remembered Bellerophon's misery as his natural affinity for void war saw him permanently seconded to the Heavengate Fleet, and been gladdened by his joy as he had grown into his role.

He could not remember meeting either of them for the first time. There was a lot he did not recall. His memory was a vast hinterland, full of obscure countries shrouded in Lethean mists. Forgetting saddened him. It was a second death for those who had died, a further lessening of what they had been, and who they were.

'Bellerophon and Asante were heroes of this Chapter,' said Dante. 'They will be honoured.' Silence greeted his words. There were many other heroes who had fallen in the past five days. The thunder of shocked air replied, loud enough to be heard through the redoubt's thick walls: the sound of thousands of tyrannocytes, mycetic spores and landing beasts falling into the atmosphere faster than the speed of sound.

For the last half day, the defence lasers and larger cannons had been firing, their infrequent reports an irregular heartbeat. Now thousands of smaller guns joined them. The *Arx Angelicum* trembled with rage.

'Order the men to the walls,' commanded Dante with an air of icy calm. 'The enemy are at our gates. We shall repulse them.'

The invasion of Baal had begun.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MOAT OF TEARS

The thick black streak of smoke on the horizon was a poor grave marker for so mighty a ship as the *Blade of Vengeance*. The sight of it stirred the wrath of Chaplain Ordamael to towering heights.

Ordamael was stationed on the third line, overseeing some of the hordes of mortals drafted from the Baalian moons. The prefabricated sections of defence line they manned surrounded the curtain wall of the Arx like the teeth of a gargantuan mantrap, and it was a trap. There was a smooth area of sand a hundred feet in front of the line. The sand appeared to be a part of the desert, but was only a couple of inches thick, concealing a rockcrete channel, fifty feet across, that ran all the way around the Arx and its two walls.

Inside the channel was thirstwater.

Ordamael had learned to fear thirstwater when he was a boy. Nobody really knew what it was. Incarael said it was a vicious weapon from the Long Ago War, although there were the possibilities that it was native to Baal Secundus, or a thing of xenos origin.

Thirstwater looked like water, but it was alive, possessed a rudimentary intelligence, and it hunted, lying in wait to lure the thirsty towards it. No refreshment was held in its liquid, only death, for it desiccated whatever it came into contact with, adding their moisture to itself. Its properties prevented proper study. However, the Blood Angels knew enough about it to find it, catch it, and to contain it. As much as could be found had been gathered on Baal Secundus.

It would have escaped if it could, draining itself away into the sand, dividing into hundreds of separate organisms and flowing off to lurk.

Dante had contaminated Baal with the system's deadliest substance. The Chapter world would never be free of it.

Desperate times led to unthinkable strategy.

Even hidden under the sand, the thirstwater affected the environment around it. It dried the air so much it crackled. Ordamael's sensorium sensed something amiss and flagged up this unusual dryness. He was not completely safe in his battleplate. To approach the moat would have been death for the mortals fighting alongside the Space Marines, and so they were terrified. Ordamael strode among them as they lay cowering behind the defence lines, exhorting them to greater efforts, scaring them into taking up their guns

and firing at the enemy. They could hardly hear him, though he bellowed with his voxmitter at full amplification. Many were startled as his massive armoured black hand descended upon them unnoticed to pluck up discarded guns – child-size in his grip – and gesturing for them to shoot.

‘In the name of the Great Angel, for the greater glory of the Emperor, for the preservation of Baal, keep firing!’ he roared. He brandished his crozius arcanum over his head. Tyranid microorganisms flashed to nothing in its disruption field. ‘Keep them back! Keep them back from the moat!’

Baal had thrown off its desert silence and gave voice to Sanguinius’ rage. All along the third and second lines guns barked, while the Arx Angelicum hurled an endless barrage into the heavens, obliterating hive ships and their effusions of landing craft. But there were always more, no matter how many were rent to pieces by shrapnel or energy blast.

A wall of furious noise thundered behind Ordamael. From the reconstructed curtain wall thousands of heavy weapons banged and howled, sending out such a quantity of plasma and las-fire the environment around the Arx Angelicum stirred with unnatural heat. The mortal men on the defence line shone with sweat. Missiles rushed overhead. Sand erupted in drifting fountains in a display to shame a potentate’s gardens. Autocannons blasted long lines of puffed sand. Heavy shells blew up geysered plumes. The audio dampers of Ordamael’s vox-beads strained against the thundering of the Arx Angelicum’s main guns. Defence lasers spat out columns of blinding light that tortured the air into storm fronts. Macrocannons intended to sweep the void free of enemy ships were turned to face the earth, and the wounds they inflicted were huge. The tremors from their impacts shook Ordamael in his armour. The very air shouted. Such was the atmospheric disturbance caused by the Arx Angelicum’s outpouring of fire that the sky was charged with energy. Lightning storms blasted all around the fortress monastery and static - crackled over Ordamael’s battleplate.

Burning debris drew black lines from the sky. Metal and meat showered down for five hundred miles around the Arx from the continuing void war. The remnants of the fleets performed lightning raids and surgical thrusts into the swarm where they could, their weapons sheeting out the sky with white actinic flashes. Cosmic thunders rolled around the horizon. An avalanche of biomunitions hurtled at the fortress from space. All were annihilated. The very skin of reality quivered as missiles and creatures were destroyed by the void shield, shunted by its arcane technology into the warp.

And yet, the sound of guns was not the loudest noise. The swarm’s voice suppressed it all. A sinister susurrus of hissing and the click of chitinous plate on plate, punctuated by the pained shrieks of discharging bioweapons. The sound was weirdly reminiscent of strong wind in trees, were those trees full of predatory desire, and the wind a horrific scream.

The tyranids were an adaptive race, but their invasion pattern never changed, having been honed by millions of planetary attacks to unimprovable perfection.

First came the release of billions of airborne microbes that went to war with a world’s unseen biome of bacteria, viruses and microscopic creatures. Some of this organic soup was designed to foul weapons or destroy mechanisms, most of it initiated the consumption of the world even as it fought to survive. Macro-scaled, explosive spores followed by the million, throwing out more microspores along with their scything bursts of shrapnel when they detonated, making flight perilous for the defenders and disrupting ground formations. Then came the aerial swarms, winged horrors of all sizes, some deployed directly from orbit, others leaping from burning drop cysts as they plunged thoughtlessly to their destruction.

Only when the skies were full to bursting with their own kind did the tyranids begin their ground assault, dropping hundreds of thousands of assault spores around primary military targets. The lesser types fell at killing speed, splashing open like rotting fruit, sending out a seed of swift monsters who gathered together in great hordes and attacked anything they could find. The smaller constructs came down first. Always.

‘Keep them back from the moat!’ yelled Ordamael.

As yet the tyranids were disorganised. Their larger leader beasts had not come down in any number, and as soon as they were spotted they were targeted and destroyed by fire on the walls. Thousands of ’gaunts attacked in ragged waves, pounding towards the defence line in mass, uncoordinated assaults. It was distraction behaviour, meant to tie down defenders with uncountable numbers while the greater strains landed. Back from the front, a thick rain of tyrannocytes landed hordes of these bigger bioconstructs. Chitinous airbrakes deployed at the last moment slowed their descent enough to protect their cargo. The pods themselves burst on impact, throwing out sprays of thick mucous. Creatures poured from the dying innards, dripping with shock-absorbing liquids, to join the waves advancing on the defence line that formed the outer perimeter of the Arx Angelicum.

The Space Marines had seen it a thousand times. They swept the creatures away with small arms fire while their big guns remained firmly targeted upon the falling spores. The larger the spores were, the more fire they attracted.

There was an added complication to the battle. It was imperative the probing attacks not be allowed to come into contact with the moat.

Dante kept most of the Space Marines behind the curtain wall. The unarmoured mortals baited the trap, watched over by a handful of veterans and Chaplains. Ordamael pitied the Chapter Master. It was not in his nature to be so cavalier with the lives of common humanity. This war cost him part of his soul.

‘Keep firing! The Emperor is watching you!’ roared Ordamael. ‘He judges you, he condemns anyone who will not fight!’

The men and women of the moons struggled under Baal’s heavier gravity. Their movements were sluggish. But though impeded they gave good account of themselves. The moons were violent worlds. Most of them could fight.

‘Destroy them! Destroy them! Permit not the alien to live!’ he shouted.

Chaplains of a score of Chapters prowled the deadly ground before the curtain wall. Their armour was all black and bone. They could have been of the same brotherhood; they were, in the most important respects. The bonds of the bone and the blood united Sanguinary priests and Chaplains across the Chapters of the Blood, regardless of all other considerations.

To the mortals they were the personification of death itself, giants in grimacing helmets whose words could fell the most deadly of foes. Ordamael urged the humans to fight in the name of a god he did not see as divine, shouting prayers meant only for the ears of battle-brothers, all while judging the situation, and reacting to the chatter of orders sounding in his ears. It was crucial the ’gaunt hordes were kept back until they were ready to launch a major attack. If the Space Marines lost the element of surprise, they would lose the vital kill count the thirstwater could deliver.

‘By the purity of the chosen tribes have you survived to this day!’ shouted Ordamael. ‘You are of the Blood! Give your thanks in righteous violence! Destroy those that would consume you!’

A cartolith interposed itself between his eyes and the outside world. The tyranids were represented as a thick red stain around the Arx Angelicum. Patterns were emerging where before had been confusion. More of the larger beasts were coming down, exerting the conscious control of the hive mind over the ’gaunts’ limited instincts. Exploratory fingers groped for weak points, whereupon they would be gathered together into a fist. Soon the tyranids would attack, and all at once. They had the numbers. They did not care for individual death. Rushing the prey from all sides prevented it from concentrating its fire. There was a horrible perfection to the foe, but perfection was limited in expression. The tyranids’ success had made them predictable.

‘Chaplains, prepare.’ Dante’s calm, pure voice rang in Ordamael’s vox-beads. ‘Critical mass in ’gaunt

hordes predicted in four hundred seconds.'

A counter imposed from outside ticked down over Ordamael's left eye.

Rippled ruby las-fire snapped out from the defence line. 'Gaunts screeched and tumbled to a dead stop, limbs tangled up.

'The Great Angel's home is at risk. You are at risk! And the Great Angel said "let not the hunger of the alien be sated upon human flesh!" Do not demean his words! Destroy! Destroy! Destroy!'

Ordamael spotted a straggling group of 'gaunts racing close to the lip of the moat.

'Sector nine-five-gamma,' he said quickly into his vox. 'Possible breakthrough. Neutralise.' He sent the location to central command. The 'gaunts were within yards of the moat when a storm of heavy las-fire crashed down from the Arx Angelicum and cut them to pieces. Shrapnel pattered down over the defence line. The mortals there threw themselves flat. A few looked fearfully behind them, turned and fled.

'Stand your ground!' Ordamael shouted, striding among them. He swatted a man with his crozius, destroying his ribcage. Blood sprayed across the sand. Another fell to a single shot of his bolt pistol. 'Return to the fray!' If Ordamael must act as a common commissar then he would. The duty was unpleasant, but not dishonourable. A few of his brothers in the black were more enthusiastic in their efforts.

The smell of blood stirred something inhuman in him. He shepherded the weeping fugitives back to the wall, and returned his eyes to the enemy.

'Stand by all defence line sectors.' Adanicio spoke this time. '*Incoming heavy bombardment on my mark. Be ready. We provoke an attack. Targeting hive node creatures.*'

Out beyond the moat, arriving leader beasts exerted their influence and the hordes of 'gaunts were becoming more organised. They formed into solid ranks that were moving as one towards the perimeter, ignoring the massive casualties they sustained. Thousands fell to the Imperial guns. Their bodies were piling into a berm of shattered chitin and pulped flesh that the weight of the horde bulldozed forward towards the perimeter.

All the while mycetic spores screamed down from orbit to disgorge yet more tyrannids. In the distance the dripping shapes of larger and larger beasts were rising from their broken transports, the greatest command beasts, heavy assault constructs and brood mothers emerging behind the first expendable wave. Soon living artillery would set down, and the battle would commence in earnest.

So many worlds were overwhelmed by this initial horde. Not Baal.

'*Bombardment commencing. Three, two, one. Mark.*'

The guns cut out for a brief moment. A second later a rippling wall of coordinated explosions arose from the sand. Tyrannid bodies flew upward, shattered into fragments, riding sheets of dust and fire into the air. The leaders were targeted. Giant hive tyrants were cut down where they stood. Massive flying crones were downed by anti-aircraft fire. Warrior broods were obliterated in roiling storms of plasma that burned the faces of the mortals exposed to them.

'Witness the fury of the Blood Angels!' roared Ordamael, staring full into the inferno. 'Witness your salvation!'

A second massive bombardment blasted the xenos, this one a few hundred yards back from the first. Two concentric rings were briefly cut into the horde. The bombardment ceased, and the guns resumed firing at targets of opportunity.

The 'gaunts roared and hissed as loudly as a tempestuous sea. Their leader beasts felled at the moment of attack, their behaviour changed again. What had been a flock-like movement once more became individualistic, chaotic. Fights broke out between the creatures in places. They rocked forward suddenly as the gaps in their lines were filled in by onrushing beasts, knocking those at the fore towards the moat. It

was important that the horde's own impetus could not be halted. Timing was everything. They must be goaded.

'Stand ready,' voxed Adanicio. All down the line Chaplains turned to face the horde.

Ordamael continued his commands to fire. The 'gaunts halted a few yards from the edge of the moat. Their blood was seeping towards the thirstwater. As soon as moisture touched it, it would be revealed. The 'gaunts' native instincts would demand they halt to await further direction.

'My lords,' he voxed. 'It must be now.'

'Withdraw,' said Adanicio.

'Warriors of the Imperium!' roared Ordamael. 'Back to the wall!'

Similar commands issued from a hundred skull-masked faces.

Malnourished faces looked up at Ordamael in a moment of bewilderment.

'But they're stopping,' said one. 'We're winning.'

Ordamael strode towards the wretch, picked him up by his clothes and tossed him towards the curtain wall as easily as if he were a rag. 'Back!' he shouted. 'Back!'

The men and women of Baal needed no more encouragement. They turned and fled, many throwing down their weapons. They staggered under the heavier gravity, fleeing like dreamers in a nightmare unable to outpace their pursuers.

The shouts as they ran were lost to the thunder of war.

The 'gaunts did not follow. They ceased their milling. A ripple of movement passed down the front rank as they turned to face the wall. Order returned to their ranks.

'Strategium, something is wrong,' voxed Ordamael. 'They do not pursue.'

The first 'gaunts had reached within feet of the moat. Their ranks were so tightly packed it was hard to tell individual creatures apart. In the distance hulking monsters screeched and roared, raging without proper direction. That would not last. More leader strains were inbound. They did not have much time.

'They are not taking the bait,' said Ordamael. He pushed his way through the humans struggling away from the defence line, and stepped over the metal.

'Xenos!' he shouted. 'I am Ordamael, Paternis Sanguis of the Blood Angels, second only to beloved Astorath the Grim. Fight me! By the Blood, come to my crozius and accept my blessing!'

The monsters were barely three hundred feet away. They stood motionless, unblinking, their hooves ploughing up the sand as the weight of the tyranid swarm at their back pressed them forward. The bright slick of xenos blood was rolling towards the concealed moat. A solitary 'gaunt watched the slow spread of this sticky river suspiciously, and then it looked up at Ordamael.

Ordamael had stared into the dead black eyes of countless 'gaunts. This one was different. There were subtle variations to its cranium, a difference in the way its heat vents were arranged. Small, but crucial. Something rode this creature, something so ancient and powerful that at a hundred yards away, looking out from one of a thousand near identical beasts, its presence pressed at the Chaplain and made him reel.

Ordamael stared into the face of the hive mind. How it looked out from this simple beast he did not know. All he knew was that it must be killed.

It could not cow him. He was a Space Marine. A Blood Angel.

Ordamael knew no fear.

He raised his gun.

A single shot obliterated the mutant skull of the 'gaunt. The horde froze a second, then broke forward. The death of the 'gaunt was the pebble taken from the dam. The 'gaunts fell forward in screeching thousands, pushed on by their need to kill and the weight of thousands more behind them. It was uncanny to see the change from total organisation. Simple instincts intended to make them effective should the hive

mind be disrupted worked against them.

The blood slick trickled into the moat and sank through the sand. A soft crackling sounded as it came into contact with the thirstwater. It was a warning any son of Baal Secundus knew well.

It did not halt the tyranids.

Ordamael threw up his arms and turned his skull helm to face Baal Secundus looming beyond the whirling aerial swarms.

‘By his blood did he make me!’ shouted Ordamael. ‘I am an angel of Sanguinius!’

The first gaunts plunged through the scrim of sand obscuring the thirstwater, their screeches lost instantly as hundreds of their fellows plunged down on top of them. They piled on into the thirstwater without stopping. All around the Arx Angelicum, driven on by the unrestrained desire to kill, they tumbled into the rockcrete channel where they thrashed and screamed and died. The bleached bones and exoskeletal plates of the creatures emerged as bright reefs from the surface, only to slip back under as every vestige of moisture was sucked from them and they were reduced to powder. The death toll was incalculable, how many hundreds of thousands Ordamael could not tell, but they kept on coming, and coming. As the remains clogged the moat it allowed the aliens to come closer, but still half the width remained unfilled, and the ‘gaunts continued to fall mindlessly into it, screeching hatefully as they died.

All of a sudden, it stopped. The swarm halted dead in its tracks. Hundreds more were murdered by impetus, and then the slaughter was done.

The rest fell back from the brink. The thirstwater slopped and churned in its narrow prison, eager for more. Larger beasts moved forward to impose the hive mind’s will. The ‘gaunts steadied, only to scatter again as the greater beasts were shot down by weapons on the curtain wall. More leader beasts came to die, then more. Back and forth the ‘gaunt horde went, never quite making it to the edge of the moat, their numbers thinned all the while by a constant rain of giant shells and raking fire from the defences. The slaughter went on for half an hour. The air grew hot with weapons discharge. The smell of fyceline and scalding metal overpowered the stink of spilt alien blood.

No more larger beasts came. The ‘gaunts drew back one final time, turned tail, and scurried from the moat.

Unbelievably, the tyranids were withdrawing.

Cheers and song erupted all along the curtain wall, followed by a redoubment of firing into the backs of the fleeing creatures.

Ordamael let the head of his crozius thump to the floor, and knelt in thankfulness. ‘By the Blood, are we made victorious,’ he said.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DARKEST HOUR

The tremors of battle penetrated every part of the fortress monastery, shaking even the hidden halls of the librarius, whose walls were not all of cretes and stone, and whose ways did not necessarily lead to places on Baal.

Rhacelus sat impatiently within the Chemic Spheres, watching an entranced Mephiston for signs of life. Mephiston had not moved for days. His face was grey, his skin contrasting queasily with his mane of white hair. He looked like a corpse.

Rhacelus wished he were performing the vigil alone. Unfortunately, Mephiston had insisted Lucius Antros attend with him.

‘He has been gone a long time,’ said Antros.

Antros’ voice was a croak. Antros was inhumanly beautiful, a paragon of Sanguinius’ form to Rhacelus’ pugilist’s body. But his beauty was marred. His sculpturally sharp features were drawn. Dark shadows pouched his eyes. The Librarians of Baal suffered the ill effects of proximity to the hive mind. Lesser beings than they would have been driven insane. Rhacelus could not help but think that the strain had peeled back Antros’ beauty to reveal something of his true nature.

‘He should have returned to us by now,’ said Antros plaintively.

Rhacelus ran his gauntlet over his close-cropped silver hair. He was very old, but it was rare for him to feel his age like he did then. A billion voices hissed at the edge of his hearing. The mental pressure did nothing good for his humour. His limbs were like lead, heavy in their metal casings; they had been armoured since the invasion began. He had taken no solid sustenance nor liquid while in the Chemic Spheres, relying on his battleplate’s nutrient fluids, and his mouth was gummy from underuse. His skin was intolerably grimy under his bodyglove. Every microscopic grain of salt from his dried sweat was a rough pebble grating on his flesh, each as irritating to him as Antros was.

‘It will take as long as it will take, Lexicanium,’ said Rhacelus, pronouncing each word with acid calm. He closed his ever-glowing eyes. It was tempting never to open them again.

Antros was fretful, behaving in a way unbecoming for an angel of the Blood. His hands twisted in his lap, ceramite grating on ceramite. ‘It is wrong to be in here. We should be out there with the others. They

need our strength. Our gifts will be missed in the fight.'

Rhacelus almost shouted at Mephiston's protégé, but bit back his anger at the last. 'One cannot dictate to the Lord of Death,' he said through gritted teeth. 'You can only do what he asks, and hope it works in your favour in the end. If we do not act to head off this other peril, we will have two enemies to face, and then three as we turn upon ourselves. We are needed here. We stay here.'

Admitting it aloud would have killed Rhacelus, but Antros had a point. More than half of the Blood Angels Librarians present on Baal, and a score from other Chapters, waited for word from the Chief Librarian. That was a lot of destructive potential sitting on its hands. Isolated in the Chemic Spheres, Rhacelus had little idea how the battle fared, but the guns had not rested once, and kept up a steady rhythm, firing enough times to shatter a warfleet. He could tell when the tyranids landed. The shake of every discharge was now followed moments later by a fainter impact tremor, a sign of guns firing at targets on the ground. 'He will come back to us when it is time.'

Rhacelus doubted the words as he said them. Mephiston had been in a trance for too long. The longer Mephiston was under, the more concerned Rhacelus became. Mephiston walked the warp at the worst possible time.

'By the angel's wings, Mephiston, where are you?' he said.

The Lord of Death said nothing.

Hours crawled by. Another day passed. The endless pounding of the guns merged with the thump of Rhacelus' headache. Once, he tried to enter a trance himself, to see if he could locate Mephiston's astral form, but he was stymied. Mephiston was a master at spiritual projection, a skill few Space Marine Librarians had to any degree, and that was yet another thing that set Mephiston apart from his fellows. Rhacelus lacked his master's ability, and the crushing malice of the tyranids' composite soul shut all doors to the epistolary.

His attempts exhausted him. His warp-blasted eyes slid shut. He meant to meditate, instead he slept. He awoke to a gentle shaking of his shoulder guard.

'Rouse yourself, now is the time Rhacelus!'

Mephiston stood over him, his skin still drawn and grey. He was a revenant, haunting Rhacelus in the night.

Rhacelus blinked and swallowed in an unsuccessful attempt to moisten his dry mouth. 'Mephiston? My lord?'

'I have returned. We must go. Now.'

Antros was already standing. Their thrones had vanished. Rhacelus got groggily to his feet, and his own seat dissolved into a mist of blood-red corpusant.

Mephiston made a series of gestures, and the flesh-like dome wall of the Chemic Spheres parted.

Their isolation was over. Rhacelus' vox-beads came alive with the steely calm battle chatter of Space Marines at war.

'Prepare our Thunderhawks.' Mephiston's sepulchral voice cut into the vox like a knife. 'We leave now.'

Two gunships packed with Librarians and a small bodyguard of veteran Space Marines flew out from the Arx Angelicum. The gunships were yet more assets that should have been utilised against the xenos. Rhacelus patched his helmet display into the augur eyes of the craft, and watched as the ships ascended at a steep angle and flew quickly over the excavated landing fields around the fortress monastery. Vast networks of spidered cracks were eroded into the ancient rockcrete. If he had not known them for what they were, it would have been easy to think the fields a natural formation on the ground, but from the air their artificial origin was obvious, and the footings of long-vanished buildings were clear as day in the

sand between the numerous landing aprons that had known no thruster's kiss since the beginning of history. The extent of the extramural facilities were a tragic indication of how large the Blood Angels had once been. Not even all the sons of Sanguinius gathered together in this one place again matched the full size of their parent Legion. Another reminder, if Rhacelus needed one, that they lived in diminished times.

The Thunderhawks followed the curve of the void shield down. Rhacelus swayed in his mag-locked boots as his mass shifted. They passed over formations of Space Marines moving to reinforce various points of the wall. Tank formations and whole phalanxes of jump pack equipped Assault Marines waited behind the wall to deal with breakthroughs. A sense of unfettered rage took him as they flew over a newly built hangar of plasteel. The psychic mark of the Death Company was unmistakable to Rhacelus, and awesome in its might.

They flew between stabbing beams of energy, jinking to avoid the track of shells. The craft wobbled in munition-shocked air as they sped over the curtain wall and on past the killing zone between the wall and the third line. In the open space, funeral pyres of neatly stacked mortal corpses sent up thick black smoke. The numbers of mortals manning the defence barriers seemed thin. Long-ranged weapons fired from the two lines. The defenders' small arms were silent. The tyranids had ceased pressing their assault; the reasons became clearer once the gunships decelerated to pass through the void shield.

Hundreds of thousands of tyranid corpses lay around the outermost defences, the piles of them growing in height and density until they were heaped as tall as a Dreadnought around the moat. The layer of camouflaging sand and oil had been disturbed, and the moat was now revealed for most of its circuit. The bleached, desiccated remains of tyranids half filled it.

'A respite, nothing more,' said Mephiston, as always seemingly privy to Rhacelus' inner thoughts. 'The hive mind will be formulating a new strategy.'

Sporadic fire rained down on the luckless mortals. Their position was outside the void shield, and therefore exposed to both the enemy's artillery and its airborne contingent. But the Arx Angelicum's mightiest void ship killing weapons suppressed most of the tyranids' heavy gun beasts, and the few winged aliens daring to stoop upon the mortals were mostly shot down before they could finish their attack runs.

Rhacelus tensed. Outside the shield, the gunships were at risk.

'Where are the aerial swarms?' he said.

'They will be on us when we are out of range of the wall's anti-aircraft emplacements,' said Mephiston.

The Lord of Death was rarely wrong. They headed away from the fortress monastery, flying hard for the south. The ring of churned-up desert and dead xenos gave way to a sea of creatures of every size, from those no bigger than vermin to examples as large as battletanks. There was not a scrap of sand visible through their multitudes, and though shells screamed down into them, blasting hundreds to pieces with every hit, the holes filled rapidly.

'It is no more use than throwing stones into the ocean,' growled Rhacelus.

'We have other problems,' said Antros, his eyes closed in a light trance. 'They are coming for us.'

The pilot's voice bore out Antros' predictions. 'Be warned, my lords, the aerial swarms approach. Initiating evasive manoeuvres.'

The Thunderhawk's engines screamed up to maximum power, jolting Rhacelus in his armour. He switched views between the external lenses of the ship, until he caught sight of flocks of black shapes swirling like sentient smoke towards them from the east. They were a replication of the cosmic swarms reaching for individual worlds. The tyranids were fractal in organisation, their hierarchy and their movements repeated at every scale.

The view grew uncertain. Residue accumulated on the augur lenses. The engines coughed as tyranid

microorganisms clogged the intakes.

The aerial swarms switched and moved as one. In their precise choreography it was easy to see them as one creature, not many.

The ship outpaced the eastern swarm with ease, but others appeared to the south, spreading like an opening hand to catch them. The horizon grew black over the mountains where the Thunderhawks were heading, until the sky was a thick swirling mass of winged bodies.

The Thunderhawks' weapons opened fire. Their armament was pitifully inadequate to take on so many beasts.

'My lord,' voxed the pilot. 'We will have to turn back. We cannot pass this swarm, it is a wall in the sky.'

'Hold your course,' stated Mephiston. 'And open the rear ramp.'

Alarms clanged through the passenger cabin as the rear-facing assault ramp dropped down, forming a slope that ended as a black line against the faded red of the desert.

'I shall return in a few moments, brothers,' said Mephiston.

There were warriors from other Chapters within the Thunderhawk who had never seen Mephiston in action. Rhacelus grinned at their reaction as Mephiston unlocked his boots from the floor and strode towards oblivion.

Empyric energy coursed through the transport hold, Mephiston its focus. With a crackling snap, wings of ruby energy unfurled from his back and Mephiston leapt into the air without breaking his stride, drawing the sword Vitarus as he took flight.

'He really will return in a few moments,' said Rhacelus.

He focused his attention once more on the feed from the Thunderhawk's external sensors. Propelled by the limitless power of the warp, Mephiston streaked past the gunships. A storm of red energy built in front of him, trailing streamers of gases chilled out of the atmosphere. The Lord of Death held out Vitarus before him, his ethereal wings beating with firm, steady strokes out of time with the great speed he was travelling. A wordless, psychic shout roared from Mephiston's powerful mind, and the storm around him expanded to a broad globe, shaking the Thunderhawks. Writhing energies passed through their airframes and sparked from the psykers' armour within. The Lord of Death's power concerned Rhacelus. He spent his quiet hours wondering if the being he called a master and friend truly was on the side of the angels.

The storm stabilised, making a barrier around the Thunderhawks. It flickered with eruptions of pink and red lightning that grew fiercer as the aerial swarm approached. The tyranids would attempt to slow or stop them, if they could not destroy the Thunderhawks outright, until the pursuing swarms caught them up, and their heavier, slower, flying beasts could be brought into play. Then, the Librarians would be finished.

Such a tactic had probably worked a million times on a million devoured worlds, but there was only one Mephiston, and the hive mind had yet to experience the full potency of his wrath.

Rhacelus let his empyric senses brush Mephiston's mind briefly, for to push deeper invited death at the Chief Librarian's own hand. The chill, cold fury of Mephiston's rage outmatched the hunger of the hive mind. Rhacelus thought it could dull the light of the Astronomican itself. The warp heaved around them. The hive mind's vastness had calmed it to doldrums. Mephiston stirred it into a psychic hurricane.

The tyranids shrieked as they neared their prey. Weapons symbiotes extended from aerodynamic housings. Claws flexed in anticipation of the kill. Maws glowed with building bioplasmic generation.

Into the swarm the globe of energy went. The skies flashed for a hundred miles around with unnatural auroras. The tyranids disappeared as Mephiston's wrath consumed them. Most of those present knew this ability as the Blood Lance, but none of them could wield it as Mephiston did. A tremendous, electric roar shook the craft as the storm bored a hole right through the tyranid swarm. Greasy ash thumped against the

ships. The Librarians moaned as they fought to keep hold of their souls while immersed in the ambit of Mephiston's overwhelming power.

The Thunderhawk bucked, and they were through. On the ship's view, Rhacelus saw clear sky ahead. The storm winked out. Mephiston turned back towards the ship. His wings were fading and shrinking in on themselves. All pyskers had limits. Mephiston, strong though he was, had reached his.

The ship shook with engine exertion, blurring Rhacelus' vision. He unlocked his boots, leaned forward against the acceleration and headed for the ramp.

'Somebody, help me!' he called against the howling engine noise. Antros came down first, then a Codicier of the Red Knights, and a Lexicanium of the Blood Legion.

'He will return in a moment,' Rhacelus shouted, relying on vox and augmitter amplification to convey his words. 'Do not let him fall!'

The swarm was receding behind them, its constituent parts wheeling around in the sky to pursue the escaping Space Marines.

Rhacelus locked his boots to the ramp only at the very edge. He scanned the empty skies.

'Where is he?' shouted Antros.

A bang on the ramp answered his question. An armoured hand appeared. Mephiston clawed his way up. Vitarus rang on the metal. Rhacelus trapped the blade with his foot to prevent it falling from the gunship.

Mephiston could rise no further. His eyes glowed red in his pallid face. His teeth were bared, his canines fully extended.

Rhacelus knelt and grabbed Mephiston's arm. 'Someone take the sword, and help me drag him in!' he called.

The others pulled at the Chief Librarian. He was unable to move, and a deadweight in his armour that taxed their strength, but they hauled him aboard.

'Shut the ramp!' commanded Rhacelus.

Pistons drew the exit shut. The roaring of the engines and rush of air was sealed away from their ears.

A second mind made itself known to Rhacelus, as ravening as the Red Thirst, yet coldly calculating. In the fraction of the second of contact, the similarities with Mephiston's soul were striking – a creature of immense power, possessed of a hunger that could never be sated.

A flare of power shoved away the alien presence. Mephiston lifted his head. Blood ran from his eyes. 'Fly faster!' he snarled at Rhacelus.

Hearing their lord, the pilots pushed the engines to their limits, and the Thunderhawks sped onward to the Cruor Mountains, leaving the aerial swarm labouring far behind.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

LORD OF BLOOD

A spray of bolts finished the 'gaunt mid-leap. The quarry cliffs echoed to their detonations long after the thing's broken shell crunched upon the rock.

The Thunderhawks were already away, racing fast from the gaining aerial swarms. Out from the Arx Angelicum the tyranid presence was minimal; there was not much on Baal other than the Space Marines, but small groups had evidently been dispatched to deal with places like the bloodstone quarry. Servitors lay dead where they had fallen, their loads of stone and tools spilled. These had no combat protocols, and they had been slaughtered while they were working. Rhacelus trudged up a low fan of angular, machined rock, grimacing when he spied a small tyranid organism nosing through the innards of a dead cyborg. He killed the creature with a casual twitch of his mind, and toed the remains of the servitor with his boot. The remains lay in a sticky pool of mixed blood and oil. Its metal torso casing had been melted through by acid spray, the organics inside part consumed. The dead cyborg looked up at Rhacelus with open, dull eyes. They never seemed more human than in death. Such pity stirred in the epistolary that he bent to close the thing's eyelids with his hand.

Another series of bolt shots rang out. Rhacelus looked down to the wide open space in front of the mine gates. Space Marine Librarians swept the area clear. They relied on their weapons in the main, conserving their psychic might for the coming ritual. At that moment they were the galaxy's most over-powered combat patrol, he thought.

The mine's machinery was untouched. The tyranids had no interest in it, and saw no threat from it, so the conveyors, rock crushers, earth shifters and more stood ready for service. Only the servitors were dead, and they had been comprehensively exterminated. The mine was completely autonomous, and had gone into lockdown as soon as the xenos attacked. Its armoured gates were closed fast against the alien hordes. The outer part had been an open cast facility. With its load of bloodstone worked out millennia ago, the servitors had followed the veins of crystal into the mountain. The Cruor Mountains were the sole source anywhere for bloodstones, with which the Blood Angels and certain favoured successors adorned their armour. They were of immense importance to the Chapter, for the stones held ritual and spiritual meaning that few outsiders were allowed to know of.

Square-cut machine cliffs surrounded the central pit. To the south a road for automated haulers led up to the surface. The Cruor Mountains rose, flat peaks to the south east, south and west. The quarry was enormous, a pit, but it was a mean atrium to the vast mine workings hidden under the ground.

Rhacelus sniffed the air. Powdered rock, spilt oil and thin cyborg blood, the aseptic scent of tyrannid vitae, wholly unpalatable, and the moistureless expanse of Baal's global desert.

'As good a place for a last stand as any,' he muttered bleakly.

'It is this way.' Mephiston was leaning on Antros, pointing to a path that led up from the quarry through interleaved piles of tailings away from the main mine entrance.

The Lord of Death's voice was a whisper in Rhacelus' vox-bead. He wondered how many times the Lord of Death could stretch himself like this and survive. Each major expenditure of effort in this crisis wore him down a little more. His strength had yet to return from his battle in the sky, and he leaned heavily on Lucius Antros. Rhacelus was disturbed at the sight. He did not trust the younger Librarian entirely. Antros was too eager for power. There was something unseemly in the way he fussed over the Chief Librarian. He had known people like that in Kemrender, back before his apotheosis. The ambitious were always drawn to the strong.

Mephiston was a distant, strange, isolated figure. He remembered Calistarius, the man Mephiston had been. Sometimes he thought he could see bits of his old brother in the Lord of Death, but he could not speak out to Mephiston in honesty like he could have done with Calistarius. No one could. The words could be said, but Mephiston was so immured in his own, strange state they were not heard. Rhacelus had asked the priest Albinus to speak with him; he was arguably his only other friend, but Mephiston had shut Albinus out at the mere suggestion that Antros' power was growing too quickly.

Rhacelus rebuked himself. These thoughts would not do. Antros was of the librarius. Mephiston judged him worthy, so should he. He was getting intolerant in his old age. Antros was the same as any psyker. They were all strange, it was in their nature. He forgot, sometimes, that he was no different to his brothers.

'My eyes glow all the damned time, and I am charmlessly misanthropic,' he scolded himself.

He went to join the others.

The path led them through heaps of crushed spoil to the side of the mountain. A small portal of thick plasteel barred the way within. Mephiston withdrew a signum-key from his belt and bid the lock's machine-spirit open.

'Obeying,' sighed the door, with a voice as worn and empty as the desert. The door clunked into its housing. Mephiston went in first. Rhacelus beckoned the rest after, his gaze ever on the skies.

They went into a wide corridor carved from the bones of Baal. Rhacelus felt something down there. He had read widely, and spoken with psykers of many kinds. He recalled the idea of the 'world spirit', a confusing eldar concept that seemed to apply both to their artificial pseudo-organic informational networks and to the native animus of a world. Everything the eldar believed was offensive to the human mind, possessed of diametrically opposed duality that made a nonsense of their philosophies. Sometimes, though, Rhacelus thought there might be something to what they said. Their understanding of the warp was dangerously flawed, but even so, there was a feel to places. Rhacelus had been witness to many strange things that the teachings of the librarius poorly explained.

Baal's spirit then, if that was what he felt; it was huge and immobile, an ossified thing with little life but great presence, like a towering mesa of dry stone.

In the dim past, unusual tunnels had been uncovered by the giant grinding machines of the Imperium at the ends of these workings. The passage ended abruptly. Concentric marks of a machine drill's teeth forever

marked the spot where the Blood Angels servants had broken through into the labyrinth.

The machines the Blood Angels employed plundered the stone with little regard for the mountains, making tunnels that were straight and broad and obliterated everything in the process. The passages beyond were surgical, a confusion of intersecting galleries as delicate as a circulatory system, precisely following a single seam of bloodstone. There was a suggestion that these older workings were contemporaneous with the Carceri Arcanum. Perhaps they were not made by human hand. They were certainly oddly proportioned, being wide and low.

Mysterious as they were, the tunnels were unimportant. Where they led was. The tunnels went far into Baal, abruptly terminating at one spectacular cave that not even the Imperium had the heart to pillage. This sacred place, the Ruberica, or the Heart of Baal, was the Librarians' destination.

A bloodstone blood drip was a mark of honour of a Space Marine's kinship with Sanguinius. Several variations were awarded for notable deeds on and off the battlefield, including mastery of the Five Virtues and the Five Graces.

The jewels were not only symbolic, each one was also mildly psychically resonant. Individually, the stones were too small to have any effect on the bearer, but where there was a large amount of the crystal they amplified psychic power. The warp itch in Rhacelus' eyes intensified. The light they emitted burned brighter. His limbs felt stronger, his mind sharper. The auras of his companions became bright enough to see in the mortal realm, and struck glimmers of reflected empyrical power from the walls of the caves. Gradually, the pressure of the shadow in the warp slipped away, taking Rhacelus' headache with it. He breathed easily for the first time in days.

Mephiston also drew strength from the site, effecting a remarkable recovery. Early on he shook off Antros' helping arm, and soon he was walking steadily with great purpose. Physically the tunnels were also a balm. They had a never-changing pleasant cool. In the deeper chambers there was a hint of invigorating humidity.

By the time they neared the wide mouth of the Ruberica, the party glowed with warp-born might. Rhacelus felt invincible. He reminded himself that he was not, for nobody was. A false sense of power could undo their efforts of the next few hours, possibly damn them all.

Rhacelus ordered their veteran bodyguard to remain outside, and the party made their way within.

The cave mouth was worked partway. Whoever had made the ancient tunnels had stopped their excavations when the glory of the Ruberica had become apparent to them, much as the Space Marines had ceased their excavations when they had encountered the labyrinth. Chisel marks of unfathomable antiquity still scored the wall. Rhacelus traced them with his fingers until they suddenly stopped, and the Space Marines were in a tube of convoluted, natural stone untouched by any tool. It was volcanic in origin, there never having been enough water on Baal to create caves by hydrological process, but how exactly it had been formed was another mystery.

The tunnel opened out into a wide, dark space. Mephiston was first into the Ruberica. Once he had passed into the room it did not remain dark for long. Tendrils of psychic power wisped out from his head. Where they touched the cavern's sides, light kindled in the hearts of the giant crystalline formations encrusting every surface. Tall, hexagonal pillars of pure bloodstone pointed towards the centre of the chamber, as if the cave were a giant geode.

On the floor the crystals made an uneven but passable pavement that stepped up and down in pretty geometric blocks of translucent stone. As the other pyskers came within the chamber the light grew, glowing from every surface, so that shortly the Librarians moved through a world saturated in bloody light. Those Space Marines still wearing their helms removed them. Their skin was stained all the same

shade, the whites of their eyes and enamel of their teeth delicate pink in their ruddy faces.

There were many strange things about the cavern. Among these was that the crystals healed themselves, like a living, siliceous organism. The finest example of this was a servitor from an earlier millennium encased up to its waist in the floor. Crystals sprouted all over the rest of it, hiding its human form in immovable armour of ruby shards. Accidental nicks and cracks inflicted by the weight of Space Marine battleplate were always repaired the next time the cave was utilised by the librarius for its rituals, but elsewhere the crystals did not grow, and remained marked when damaged. Far from encouraging harvesting of the Ruberica, this strange phenomenon only increased the librarius' veneration of the site.

The floor rose up to a natural podium. Mephiston made for this place and stood upon it. He waited for the rest of the party to file in and take up their stations at lesser raised points of the floor, until all the Librarians were arrayed at differing heights in a loose circle around him. Then did the Lord of Death speak.

'I have told you all what we must accomplish here, in this most sacred of places, and that it is dangerous and heretical,' said Mephiston. 'Know that we have no choice. The daemon known as Ka'Bandha has long coveted our souls. He is moving against us while we are at our most vulnerable.' Mephiston's voice had an unusual vigour, as of one who has recently fed upon warm blood, but the crystals absorbed the sound, preventing echoes, and so his speech was curiously flat. 'If he is not stopped, the consequences for our bloodline will be catastrophic,' he continued. 'All of us here wish that we could stand beside our brothers against the xenos. What we do in this cave today is as important, if not more so. The tyrannids represent the gravest threat to the corpus of the Imperium, but Chaos, the ancient foe, is the greater danger. It imperils the soul. If we are not successful here, our brothers will lose both life and spirit. But we will be successful. We shall bind the daemon Ka'Bandha, and abjure him, so preventing his ingress to this realm. Then we shall rejoin our Chapters, and scour the alien from this world with the power of the warp.'

Mephiston nodded to Epistolary Marcello, designated the caller of the word for the ceremony. Rhacelus took a deep breath. This whole enterprise had been dug out of an ancient book in Mephiston's personal collection. It stank of sorcery. The line between magic and the pure, Emperor-sanctioned utilisation of the warp was silk thin and wavering, but this was no misjudgement; they were about to leap over the line with both feet.

'Begin!' called Marcello. 'Share the blood.'

In major ceremonies at the Arx, blood thralls aided them. Chaplains stood by to guard the Librarians against spiritual corruption. Sanguinary priests attended to protect the purity of the Blood. There would be singing to calm the spirit, and incense to cleanse the psychosphere. None of that was utilised. The Librarians stood alone on the brink of damnation.

Grimly, Rhacelus twisted the release seal on his left gauntlet and pulled off the armoured glove. He flexed his hand in the red light. His eyes met with the Lexicanium to his left. He did not know him beyond a psychic impression and a name on a scrollplate. Understanding passed between them.

Rhacelus offered up his wrist.

The other bent his head to Rhacelus' bared flesh and fastened his mouth around it. Rhacelus gasped as the needle-sharp angel's teeth of the other pierced his skin. The Librarian drank with increasing urgency.

'Enough,' said Rhacelus.

The other did not relent.

'Enough!' he said firmly, and pulled his hand free. Three drops of blood dripped from his wrist before his Space Marine physiology closed the wounds. The Lexicanium blinked and stepped woozily back, blood drunk.

The warrior on the right offered up his wrist to Rhacelus. The Codicier drank sparingly, ashamed and excited by the rising of the Red Thirst.

The sharing done, the Space Marines replaced their gauntlets. Rhacelus' wounds already itched with the formation of scar tissue. The deep ache of the wound in his flesh faded.

The blood they had taken from one another did anything but fade. It warmed their stomachs, and shortly thereafter sang in their veins. In each of the scions of Sanguinius was a tiny portion of the Great Angel's vitae, and to taste it afresh awakened their souls. Brotherhood bound them together more tightly than ever. With men he barely knew Rhacelus now had an intimate bond.

At the centre of it all stood Mephiston. He took no blood, but drank in the potency of the sharing nonetheless. He seemed to swell in size, becoming dark in countenance, shadows gathering around his back like flexing wings.

'Brothers,' he said, and his voice was in their ears and in their minds, thick with stolen life. 'Lend me your arts.'

The ruby light flared, becoming not brighter but more intense, taking on a consistency beyond that which light should possess. Mephiston's form wavered and grew. He was speaking words no servant of the Emperor should ever utter.

A wound appeared before him, a slice in reality that dripped blood and tore like rent flesh. It split wide, and its edge bled fire and vitae.

Through it Rhacelus saw terrible things. Two armies of daemons, one black, one red, battled upon a plain of bone. A gate of scarlet light in the shape of an angel opened from the daemons' world into his own. There were stars on his side, and the curve of a red world with two moons encircled by warring fleets. Baal – he was looking at Baal.

A titanic monstrosity was only yards from the gate, ape-faced and wide-horned. Blood-red skin strained with every swing of its axe as it fought its way through the last few beings barring its way. Hideous foes, almost as mighty as the creature, fell before its blade. From the daemon emanated a terrible, all-encompassing fury that resounded from Rhacelus' soul like the striking of a bell calling him to an eternity of war.

Mephiston had opened a way into the realm of the Blood God. Heresy of the first order. Worse by far, it spoke of a dark power in the Chief Librarian that exceeded that of all those who had come before him.

Mephiston drew hard on the other Librarians; Rhacelus winced at the pain. The vital brotherhood between the psykers strained like a bulging net. Instinctively, Rhacelus knew the bond joining them was all that prevented them from falling head first into the no-places of the warp.

The view changed, swooping down over the battle. Mephiston sprouted wings, blood red and huge, trceries of fine veins visible through the stretched skin. His body was black as night, and eyes aglow. The view through the rip in space and time halted in the maw of the gate as the daemon slew its last opponent.

Ka'Bandha roared at the sky, and his followers screamed out their praises of him, and fell in a frenzy on the last of the black-skinned daemons, putting them to the sword and finally breaking them. Triumphant, the Angels' Bane stepped towards the gate, ready to fall upon Baal.

The Lord of Fury stopped, his triumph turned to puzzlement. He reached a hand to the gate to find his way barred. Snorting mists of blood from his nostrils, he peered downward, and there spied Mephiston. He grunted a laugh, his angry face twisting with mirth. Heavy dreadlocks bound in brass rattled upon his breastplate. Yellow eyes shone with fiery delight.

'What is this? Little angels stop the gate. I have won the right to pass this way by blood and might. Begone! We shall see each other soon enough. I shall call for you and you will join me.'

‘Back!’ spoke Mephiston. The space between he and the daemon shimmered with heat. ‘You cannot pass. The sons of the Great Angel do not permit it.’

Ka’Bandha snorted again. ‘**You have no business here, Calistarius,**’ he said mockingly.

‘Then how am I here?’ shouted Mephiston back. ‘We abjure you. Depart from this gate, by the will of the Great Angel.’

By way of answer the daemon threw back his head and howled with rage so the ground shook and the sky rumbled with answering thunder.

‘**Your broken-winged lord has no power over me,**’ the daemon snarled. ‘**I am coming for your head, little Calistarius,**’ he said, pointing his coiled whip at Mephiston. ‘**Baal shall fall, the angels will see their true nature, and Khorne shall rejoice! Your legion is gathered, after all this time. Such a fine harvest of warriors for the Blood God!**’ He looked through the rift, and spied the others in the cave. ‘**All of you will fall to your knees and gladly follow me before the eighth day of my manifestation is out.**’

Ka’Bandha’s yellow eye passed over Rhacelus. His soul shivered. The daemon’s gaze provoked the rage in him. His mouth thirsted for blood, his soul for battle, and in his mind’s eye unwelcome flashes of wars fought millennia before rose up to trouble him.

His comrades were not so aged as he. Rhacelus was steeped in the warp; centuries of experience gave him a wisdom and resilience the others could not claim. The web binding the coven shuddered under Ka’Bandha’s regard. Several of the company screamed with rage, but none fell. All stood firm.

‘My kind have resisted your temptations since the dawn of the Imperium,’ said Mephiston. ‘You will not best us. Begone from here. This is not your time.’

‘**I will pass.**’

‘Turn back!’

Ka’Bandha laughed in a savage, brutal mirth. ‘**Then let the harvest be of blood rather than warriors! You may die rather than serve easily enough. Blood is its own reward. Khorne cares not whence it flows, only that it flows.**’

The beast swung his axe at Mephiston. Psychic energy blasted out where blade met man. Skulls, dislodged by the shockwave from the ground of Khorne’s realm, flew in every direction and rang hollow musical notes as they rained down upon the sand and bone of the false earth.

Within the cavern the impact shivered out from Mephiston. Bonds until now invisible flared brightly, joining the breast of each Librarian to his fellows with crackling arcs of power. Immaterial energies and the force of the blow together dissipated into the crystals, making the rock formations sing. The mountain shook. The air shimmered with volcanic heat and flaming cinders burst from the psychic web. But Mephiston did not fall.

Ka’Bandha roared in outrage, and cast his beady eye over the assembled Librarians.

‘**He who renounces his loyalty to the dead Emperor shall be rewarded with immortal life, so swear I, most beloved of Khorne,**’ said Ka’Bandha.

No one replied, but Rhacelus felt, through the heat and the rage, a faint wavering.

‘**Do you see, little Calistarius, they are tempted!**’ The last word became a grunt, and he hewed with his axe again at Mephiston. Warp-made iron clashed with the dark radiance of Mephiston’s soul. Power blasted into the material universe through the rift. A Librarian of the Golden Sons died, his eyes bursting as flame consumed him from within. Rhacelus was driven to his knees, and he cried out in agony. Again that flicker of uncertainty. He looked out across the crystal cave, seeking out the weakness in the web.

‘Twice you have struck, twice I remained unbowed,’ said Mephiston. ‘Now it is my turn.’

Mephiston drew Vitarus. The silver steel of the blade blazed with heat. Ka’Bandha swung again, and this time Mephiston met the blow with his own weapon.

Reality moaned at the shock. Crystals sang and shattered. Fires burned in the very stone. The mountain shook upon its root, and the walls of the Ruberica cracked.

Ka'Bandha was driven back, howling with anger. He recovered, and ran at the rift, seeking to bypass Mephiston and force his way through to Baal.

The weakness in the psychic web grew. Strands of power shrivelled away, and Rhacelus' gaze fell upon Antros.

The Librarian stood transfixed, and Rhacelus knew in his heart that he was enchanted; his face was slack, and one hand was rising slowly to welcome the beast in.

'Antros! Concentrate! Let not the promises of the daemon sway you!' shouted Rhacelus, quoting the Lexicanium's Rule.

Antros' perfect mouth moved, forming the words of a prayer.

'For into evil a man shall fall, though evil he seek to avoid, if he once hearkens to the black tongue of the Neverborn,' he said along with Rhacelus.

Rhacelus drew on strength he thought long exhausted, shoring up the weak point in the psychic web and lending his power to Mephiston.

Ka'Bandha forced the gate. Mephiston swung with Vitarus, and the blade passed out of the rift into the Realm of Khorne. Where it touched the leg of the angel of red fire, the flames went out, the daemons shrieked, and the portal slammed shut.

But Ka'Bandha was not defeated. His head and one arm emerged into the crystal cave, swiping at the Lord of Death. He roared and bellowed, his shouts breaking crystals and bursting the eardrums of the Space Marines present. The Librarians howled in agony, all of them; more died, but the stronger fought through the pain, and into Ka'Bandha's fiery breath they cast their spears of light and lances of blood, wounding the beast. Mephiston raised his sword again, sweeping it down. It was too late.

The flaw sown by Antros' wavering ruptured, and the Librarians reeled as their fellowship broke.

With a mighty heave, Ka'Bandha hauled himself through, breaking open the rift and gate both. He stood a moment in triumph, his roar shaking the mountain, until the wrath of Sanguinius given form blasted at him from every Librarian, and he fell out of sight into a space between the worlds.

The rift slammed shut. The mountain gave out a final tortured grinding, and there came into the chamber the rumble of falling stone as it shook. The Librarians were staggered from their feet. Wild psychic energies lashed around the Ruberica. Crystals the size of landspeeders crashed from their beds, crushing men under their weight, and the ruby light dimmed to blackness.

Slowly, the shaking subsided. The mountain returned to equilibrium. The clatter of falling boulders outside the cavern came to a stop. Air moved and huffed around the cave as the bones of the earth ceased their pained grinding and settled into new configurations.

Rhacelus got to his feet slowly. His body was unharmed, but there was a deep, horrendous ache in his soul.

'Mephiston!' he cried.

Other voices spoke, calling to their brothers. Groans answered some, and others, silence.

Fallen crystal crunched under Rhacelus' feet as he made his way to the podium. Light returned, fitfully at first. More of his brothers had fallen than he had expected. They lay lifeless, blood leaking from their ears and nostrils. Two were in a deadly embrace, hands locked about each other's throats. Others had clawed their own faces off in fits of rage, breaking open the skulls beneath. Blood was everywhere. The survivors were collecting themselves. All were shaken, no matter their might. Half were dead, the rest would never be the same again.

Mephiston lived. He crouched upon the podium. Vitarus was driven point down into the stone. He

gripped its quillions as if they were the only things in the galaxy that could support him. His head was bowed, and his cloak pooled around him like broken wings.

‘My lord?’ said Rhacelus. ‘Mephiston?’

The look the Lord of Death gave Rhacelus would haunt him until the end of his days.

‘We failed. We were not strong enough. Ka’Bandha has come through into the world of men.’

Rhacelus nodded. It was as much as he had feared. ‘Is he on Baal?’

Mephiston groaned and hauled himself up. ‘No. I do not think so, but he will emerge close by. We should leave this place, warn Commander Dante. And perhaps we might make amends for our failure here through the slaughter of xenos.’

Rhacelus looked behind him. The entrance to the cave was blocked by giant slabs of rock and crushed crystal. ‘We have other concerns to address first, my lord. We must dig our way out, and that will take a long time.’ He returned his eyes to Mephiston. ‘I fear the battle for Baal is finished for us.’



CHAPTER TWENTY

AT THE THIRD LINE

‘D-d-d-d-da,’ stammered the boy.

Uigui stirred out of a half sleep haunted by screaming monsters. When he remembered where he was, he was eager to get back to his nightmare.

‘What?’ he said. They were out beyond the wall, stuck behind the feeble defence line in the face of the tyranids and the frigid desert night. The moons shone blandly in a sky crowded with alien horrors. The guns had never stopped, not once, and the shields of the angels’ home guttered unnatural flame in response to the living bombardment. Horrible shrieks sounded in the desert, the sound of tortured artillery screaming as it fired. On the far side of the moat blood-chilling screeches and cries haunted the night.

But no assault came.

He felt intolerably heavy, and wearied beyond comprehension.

‘W-w-w-why are we waiting here? I-i-i-it’s cold. I’m scared. W-w-why did they make us come back?’

The boy was all a-twitch, shoulders rising and rotating with a will of their own. It was always that way when he was scared. His son, lost to him now, would never have asked such stupid questions, but would have astounded Uigui with his insights. Nor would he have writhed so piteously. Uigui missed his son, and had no time for the boy’s whimpering.

‘We’re the meat in the trap,’ he said viciously. ‘We are here, in front of their vile xenos noses, right where they can smell us. They want to eat us, don’t you see? We’re softer meat than the angels in their armour.’

‘Stop it, Da, stop it! You’re scaring me!’ The boy clamped his fists over his ears and began to rock on his haunches.

Uigui gave him a look of disgust and spat. His mouth tasted of battle smoke and xenos fluids. He wiped his arm across his mouth.

A ghostly white face loomed out of the darkness. Uigui’s stomach spasmed at the sight.

An angel in black with a skull for a helmet stared down at them. He towered over the defence line’s crenellations, but seemed to have no fear of the enemy picking him off.

‘What is this noise?’ the angel said, with a voice as deep as the night.

For a moment Uigui thought it was the warrior-priest he had encountered in Angel's Fall, before all this began, when they were ignorant of the coming threat. Then he realised his armour was styled differently, and his voice was sterner. He tried to tell himself there was a man inside the power armour, but his mind would not accept it. Uigui cursed the attention the warrior-priests were paying him of late.

Uigui threw himself down, tugging the boy after him to grovel at the angel's feet.

'I am sorry, my lord! Forgive us.'

Uigui's face pressed into the sand. It was strangely scented. Baal was so alien to him.

'Our creed teaches us that only we can forgive ourselves. Hold your silence, or you will hurry your death. Do you wish that?'

'I am sorry, my lord, the boy is frightened.'

The angel's breathing rasped from his augmitter. Uigui risked a glance upward. The angel was a mountain of black armour lit by fire and void shield light, topped with a skull like a forbidding shrine, in whose sockets fires glowed.

'Back to your post,' said the warrior. 'It is normal for your kind to know fear. Trust in the Great Angel, aim truly, and all will be well.'

Uigui dragged himself back up. The angel watched him curiously.

'I cannot move my arms and legs as I would,' said Uigui, explaining his sluggish reaction. 'This weapon weighs as much as an anvil. We cannot run. This accursed weight. Baal is a place for angels. We sin by being here.'

'You are not cursed. It is only the world – the mass of this planet is higher than of the moons. It is gravity that afflicts you, not a curse,' said the angel.

The boy, for all his idiocy, was quicker than Uigui, and was already back at the firing slit.

'M-m-m-my lord,' said the boy.

'Silence!' hissed Uigui.

'Let him speak!' growled the angel. 'What is it?'

'Th-th-th-there is something out there,' he said.

The boy pointed out into the dark. Uigui squinted, but could see nothing amid the shattered corpses of the enemy on the far shore. The thirstwater glinted with the light of reflected fire.

The angel swung his head around and looked out. 'Where?' he said.

The boy pointed.

As the boy raised his finger, a beast plummeted shrieking from the sky, splashing into the thirstwater with wings folded.

Another followed, then another.

'Movement on the far bank!' said the Space Marine.

Uigui did not have the advantage of Space Marine eyes, and saw nothing beyond the pale, streaking shapes of creatures raining out of the sky.

The angel said something to his brothers via his armour's devices. A ripple of guns sounded from the home of the angels, and the sky was filled with slowly falling stars that flooded the desert with harsh light.

Then Uigui saw. A living carpet of 'gaunts crept towards the moat on their bellies, smaller beasts the size of rats moving stealthily among them.

'They are attempting to cross. Open fire!' shouted Ordamael.

Guns spoke all down the line, the cracking reports of thousands of lasguns intermingled with the isolated flat bangs of bolters.

The flares prompted a reaction. All at once thousands of winged creatures began to throw themselves

from the sky into the moat, screeching as they fell and were consumed, and on the far side the slinking aliens rose up and rushed forward as one.

The guns on the curtain wall opened up on the horde. War's pandemonium was unleashed once more.

Ordamael received a flurry of data-squirts from various places: the strategium, the Citadel Reclusiam, the company commanders overseeing the section of the curtain wall behind him. The tyranids were attacking at five distinct points. The aerial swarm was hurling itself into the moat across spaces no more than fifty feet wide. The terrestrial creatures approached the same segments.

'They mean to fill the moat with their dead,' he told the mortals. 'Teach them the error of their ways!'

'*All sections prepare for immediate armoured support,*' voxed a voice he did not know. A datatag signified it as coming from the strategium. '*Stand by for heavy artillery bombardment.*'

The tyranids were wily. Broods of lesser 'gaunts raced up and down the bank, drawing much of the fire of the human conscripts.

'Concentrate fire on the crossing point!' Ordamael bellowed over the whistle of shells and explosions that obliterated thousands of creatures on the far side. An incandescent stream of plasma turned night into day, charring the falling aerial creatures into carbon at the edges of its track, evaporating them completely at the heart. The humans cried out as their unprotected eyes were damaged. Ordamael's sensorium pinged out warning notes. His eye-lenses darkened to compensate. When the stream cut out and his lenses cleared, he was blinking away after-images.

Still the creatures came. The aerial swarm was so thick that it fell in an almost solid torrent, obscuring the creatures charging into the water from the far side. As during the day, thousands of tyranids died. Heavy weapons cut the dropping creatures to pieces. Titan-killers punched massive holes in the swarm. It was to no avail. Slowly but surely, the moat was filling with corpses. The bones of tyranid dead rose to the surface as more and more creatures poured themselves into the moat. Even as the bone causeway broke the surface of the hungry water, they continued to die; a splash from the moat was a death sentence. Convulsing 'gaunts spilled from the sides of the causeway, widening it. It rose higher from the water, until its snout was proud of the killing liquid. The 'gaunts poured on, those strains armed with ranged weapons not even bothering to discharge them as they threw themselves to their death.

The rain of aerial creatures continued. A huge splash exploded upward as a larger flying beast crashed into the water right on the edge of the extending rampart. It took its time in dying, thrashing about and spraying deadly liquid all over the creatures rushing to use it as a bridge. Hundreds more fell to the concentrated fire of the Space Marines. Their deaths were of no account, only their mass was. Whether its minions fell whole or in pieces into the moat was irrelevant to the hive mind, so long as they fell.

'Keep firing!' shouted Ordamael. 'We stand in the eye of the storm! The Emperor is immobile upon his Golden Throne, he relies on you for victory! Your strength, your will! Do not disappoint him.'

His words were drowned out by the terrible racket of the swarm. Being close to so many of them affected the mind. His thoughts were filled with nameless dread.

Ordamael was not one to be frightened. He pushed aside the artificial fear contemptuously, held up his gun and strode forward beyond the defence line, sending bolts winging their way into the horde. Seeing the angel of death stand unharmed before the fury of the enemy heartened the mortal troops, and their fire rate increased. They could not miss. Every las-beam felled an alien. It did not matter.

The lead edge of the causeway approached the Imperial side with increasing speed, the aliens building upon the now firm foundations of their own dead. Screeching hormagaunts sprang forward from the advancing lip. Several floundered in the water close to the edge, long claws stabbing into the bank to haul themselves out as they were devoured alive.

The next group would make the jump.

‘Concentrate upon the lead elements!’ Ordamael shouted. Support fire from the curtain wall switched targets, homing in on the causeways themselves. The bone bridges were hit several times, but every crater was rapidly filled, and the causeways grew wider, pushing out the thirstwater. Free of its rockcrete channel and sated with the moisture of a million alien dead, it seeped away into the sand.

Xenos hooves and claws clicked on dry bone. Gunfire scythed the tyranids down. They came on still.

The first over were a hundred leaping hormagaunts. They bounded high over the last dozen feet of the thirstwater, and landed on the nearside of the moat.

Ordamael blasted three to nothing as they galloped the short distance to the defence line. Las-beams cracked through the air, but the creatures were too fast for the mortals to easily hit. They were almost too quick for Ordamael. Three rapidly aimed shots took down two more, and then they were on him.

‘By the Blood am I strong, by the Blood do I serve.’ He swung his crozius, obliterating a ’gaunt. Disruption lightning chased itself up his arms and earthed itself in the ground.

He blew the head off another ’gaunt. A third he kicked as it leapt at him, pulverising its ribcage with his boot and destroying its organs. But there were too many, far too many.

Tank engines roared. Armoured vehicles cut up the hundred yard gap between the defence line and curtain wall. The void shield rippled as they passed through and opened fire. Their heavy weapons mowed down hundreds of the beasts in a moment, slowing the tyranids’ screaming assault over the bone causeway.

They were too late to save the mortals. The humans were dying, engaged at close range by creatures designed only to kill. The ’gaunts’ faces were wrinkled as if in hate.

Do they hate us? wondered Ordamael. *Do they know emotion at all?* He paused, torn between running to the front to fight with the tanks and saving the humans who had fought under his command these last days.

It is a Blood Angel’s duty to protect, he said to himself. *They have served their purpose. We used them callously. I shall not abandon them now their role is played.*

Ordamael ran back towards the defence line, bolter firing. He gunned down two of the creatures. Bolt shrapnel from the ’gaunts’ deaths slew one of the mortals. Unavoidable. The others lived for his efforts. He vaulted the wall, gun still firing. The mortals were in disarray. Many were lying on the floor in terror, though some fought as well as they could. He banished his awareness of the blood upon the sand from his mind, though his treacherous body responded eagerly to the smell.

His bolt pistol emptied. He ejected his magazine and loaded a fresh one as he scanned the ground between the third and second lines. There were few tyranids in the killing field. The lines of tanks were holding back the xenos. This was as good a chance as the mortals were going to get.

‘This line is lost. You have done your part here. Retreat. The Emperor watch over you. Take your weapons. Fall back to the wall.’

For the final time, the mortals turned from the defence line and ran.

Ordamael watched them go. They struggled to run in Baal’s iron grip, but enough passed through the void shield, leaving man-sized ripples. What few tyranids moved to intercept them were shot by Space Marines on the curtain wall. There were only a fraction of the mortals left, but these ones, at least, would live.

A demolisher cannon boomed close to the moat, the vindicator it was mounted upon rocked back on its suspension by the discharge. Ordamael moved forward, intending to pick off the few creatures that got close enough to the armour to pose a threat, but, as he ran, the vindicator exploded violently, throwing Ordamael from his feet. A mighty roaring followed its demise.

He lifted his head up, groggy from the explosion. Dozens of heavy assault beasts were crossing the bridge. A quick glance at his cartolith showed him the situation was the same at four of the five other crossings the tyranids had attempted. The tanks reversed, those with turrets tracking round to better target the approaching beasts. Two huge things that scuttled like arachnids unleashed living rounds from their massive symbiotic cannons. Bloated pods ruptured on the hulls of the tanks, covering them in oily fluids. Hurling seeds followed from the cannon's second barrels, reacting with the oils on the metal. The hollow thumps of implosion turned two tanks inside out.

Then from the walls came a bloodthirsty howling, and Ordamael knew from that sound how grave the situation had become.

Uigui and the boy were staggering through a vision of hell. Their leaden bodies refused to obey. They ran with horrifying slowness through the advancing Space Marine tanks. Flat-sided vehicles in various reds and blacks rumbled past them. They had their attention on the enemy, and any mortal who inadvertently got in the way was crushed flat under their grinding treads.

The enemy intensified their screaming bombardment. Gobbets of liquid became explosive conflagrations when they hit the ground, saturating wide areas of the killing zone outside the void shield with chemical fires. The tanks shrugged off these deadly falls, but any human caught by them was immolated immediately. An acid gas wafted over the battlefield, choking those who breathed it in, growing thicker by the second.

The boy was gibbering with fright, but he went on, dragging at his father's unwilling arm. Uigui panted with the effort of running under such weight. The boy shoved him back as a fleshy ball hung with tentacles on its underside fell from the sky and exploded near a tank, splattering it with corrosive liquid. The nature of the swarm's noise behind them changed, becoming deeper, issuing from a few throats rather than many. Uigui risked a terrified look back, and saw the swaying spore chimneys of monsters coming through the smoke, gas and flames. He moaned in fear. His muscles turned to water and he stumbled, but the boy dragged him on.

The curtain wall of the second line rose ahead, its features rendered indistinct by the wavering shield. Fiery liquids slapped into the energy field and vanished in painful light. Explosive spore munitions detonated violently, leaving only ripples on the air.

The boy wept, but pulled Uigui on, some part of his damaged mind remembering the brave youth he had been.

A wall of violet rose up, curved and seemingly as delicate as a soap bubble, and yet it was proof against all violence. Uigui gritted his teeth. He did not enjoy passing through the void shield.

Uigui and the boy plunged through. As its protective energies shielded his body great pain ripped through his soul, as if he gave up a part of what he was in exchange for survival. Something in a place beyond the blackest night howled for his immortal spirit.

Then they were through, and the din of battle was blunted. Other mortals burst through the skin of energy in a straggling line. The curtain wall was before them – ancient, time-pitted rockcrete contrasted with the darker greys of freshly constructed parapets. Plasteel cupolas housing heavy bolters and lascannons protruded from the wall, while in the crenellations' embrasures the hulking forms of heavily armed Space Marines crouched, their missile launchers and plasma cannons sending out a torrent of fire at the enemy.

A small gate beckoned. Uigui staggered on, the boy dragging him when his own legs would not obey him. Safety was near, yet the night was not yet done with its terrors.

Terrifying howls split the darkness, this time coming from ahead. A deafening scream of multiple jet engines blotted out all other noise.

Space Marines in black came leaping over the parapets, jump packs flaring bright in the dark. They shouted incoherently as they fell towards the ground. Their movements were frenzied, seemingly out of their control.

They dropped all around the boy and Uigui. Seeing the mortals there, one raised an axe crackling with angelic power.

‘Death to the traitors! Death to Horus!’ he shouted.

There came a mighty clash of metal on metal, the boom of angels’ weapons meeting. A priest of the angels stayed the axe with the winged head of his own staff, the two weapons sparking angrily at the contact.

‘To the front, the enemy are not here. These are blameless civilians, caught in the perfidy of the traitors. Let them pass, let them pass!’

And then the black-clad Space Marines were running on, shouting and roaring, and the Chaplain was with them at the fore, leaving Uigui and the boy alone.

They staggered on towards the gate, other Baalites with them, scattering when a boxy transport painted black with red crosses burst through, engine roaring as furiously as the warriors whose livery it shared. Uigui fell down in terror. The tracks missed him by inches, spraying up sand into his face as it sped by, another following, then another.

He lay weeping on the holy sand of Baal, as ashamed at his cowardice as he was terrified.

A hand tugged at his limp arm.

‘D-d-d-da, it’s safe now. They, they’ve all gone.’

Uigui raised his head slowly from the dirt. Space Marines in red were coming out from the gate, helping up the few mortals who had made it back to the wall. One ran at him, and Uigui expected the end, but a ceramite gauntlet grabbed his arm, encircling his bicep with room to spare, and hauled him painfully to his feet.

A voxmitter clicked. ‘You are safe, Baalite,’ he said. ‘You have survived.’

The survivors were rounded up and herded within the wall, Space Marines making a watchful perimeter around them. The gate slammed shut behind.

It was as if Uigui had stepped through into another world. Battle became a rumour of distant gunfire and beastly shrieks. Transports cut across the wide landing fields between the fortress and the wall in neat formation. Space Marines ran in well-ordered squads from one area to another.

The mortals dropped, exhausted, near the gate, ignored by the warriors they had nearly died for.

The void shield sparkled hundreds of feet overhead. Fire raged in the night skies. Baal Primus was a watery circle on the other side of the shield’s shifting energies, its face twinkling with the fires of war.

Within the wall it was much calmer, but Uigui could never feel safe.

The boy took his hand and leaned into Uigui’s shoulder. Uigui was too exhausted to object.

The Death Company came like furies into the fight, leaping over the line of tanks holding back the tyrannids with savage abandon. Their plasma pistols spat bright suns of deadly energy into the foe. A squad hurtled past Ordamael, raging, shouting at traitors that were not present. At the urging of their Chaplain, they singled out a tyrannofex that had destroyed four tanks, and they fell on it wildly. One boosted himself directly at its face, thunderhammer swinging round as he flew. The blow destroyed half the creature’s skull, but it did not fall until another Death Company Space Marine ran howling at its side, punched his power fist through its chest and wrenched out a lumpen organ. Screaming out his hatred of the traitor Legions, the Space Marine closed his fist, annihilating the alien heart in his hand.

The tyrannofex fell forward, dead, but there were many more enormous assault beasts behind it, and they

shouldered their broodmate aside into the moat and pressed on, symbiotic guns convulsing and spraying potent acids and bullet grubs over everything.

The Death Company were legion, hundreds strong. Ordamael was equally uplifted and saddened to see so many. Giving them their blessing had been an honour. This was the curse of their blood unleashed in full. So many Death Company Space Marines fought around Ordamael that it was as if there were a Chapter of them. In their warring he saw a glimpse of the bloodline's future.

Ordamael followed in their wake. Upon the causeway of dead tyranids the enemy were being pushed back by the combination of heavy tank fire and the Death Company's relentless assault. Ordamael thought to direct them, but there was no need; now they were among the tyranids they fought like demons, tearing apart the alien beasts. The 'gaunt hordes of earlier had given way to great crowds of the warrior strain. Given their numbers, it was no surprise how well coordinated the alien assault was. Waves of heavier creatures marched forward, sheltering the warrior broods with their bulk and thick armour. Shells, energy bolts and flaming chemicals showered down on the battlefield from all sides. Truly, this was a vision of the mythical inferno.

Into the maelstrom strode Ordamael. He ignored the larger beasts, saving his efforts for those creatures that could be harmed by his weapons. He dropped tyranid warriors with single shots to the eye and smashed limbs with his crozius. The Death Company penetrated deeply into the masses of tyranids. They fought on with the most horrendous injuries. Ordamael saw one still on his feet with the front of his helmet and all the flesh beneath melted down to the bone, but they were not immortal. One by one they fell to the talons, claws and pincers of the monsters attacking the home of the Blood Angels. Ordamael sorrowed to see so many of his blood kin die. It was impossible to tell who hailed from which Chapter. In the end they stood together, one blood in death. It was how it should be, he thought.

A lone warrior strain came at him from the night, boneswords swinging for his head. Ordamael met them with his crozius, parrying them with minimal movements. The warrior held a bag-like weapon symbiote in its lower limbs tipped with a bony funnel. A deathspitter. Ordamael filled it with a burst of three bolts, rupturing the ammunition sack and sending writhing grubs in a cascade to the ground. The warrior screamed as if it had been hurt itself and pressed its attack with its twinned swords. Yellow, slit-pupilled eyes rolled in the hilts of each weapon. The blades were white and pink, like fresh bone. In every way, the creature was repugnant. Ordamael put it down with a blow to the head that cracked its tall crest in twain.

A wide-band vox message echoed in his helmet. *'All warriors retreat to the curtain wall. The third line has fallen. Prepare for wall assault. Hold the second line.'*

Reluctantly, Ordamael withdrew, leaving the bloated, multi-Chapter Death Company to sell their blood, lives and gene-seed in one last glorious act of violence.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DEATH OF THE FUTURE

The lictor lay still as its kin beasts plummeted down from orbit. It did not move as they swept over its hiding space. It watched as the hive was repulsed from the third line, and was watching still when it fell. It bore silent witness to the slaughter at the moat. As shells rained around it, it betrayed no movement.

Until, finally, opportunity presented itself.

The lictor dug itself out of its hiding space silently. It kept low, hugging the slipfaces of the dunes around the Arx, never once exposing itself. As the pandemonium of war raged around it the chances of detection were infinitesimal, but the hive mind took no chances.

The lictor scuttled through fields of wrecked tanks. It hid as Space Marine sky craft screamed overhead. At any chance of detection it froze, reducing its biological activity to the absolute minimum until the danger passed.

The route it took was erratic, its destination concealed by wide detours and backtracking. It looked as if it were hunting for something. In reality, it knew exactly where it was going.

Behind the wall of tyranids moving up to attack the second line it was strangely quiet. Away from the fortress eater beasts were landing and the tools of digestion being deployed, but Baal was minimally gifted with life, and the density of the digestion swarm was low. The battle swarm's noise shushed and roared, its hissing, clacking voice punctuated by the repetitive banging of the prey's weaponry. Some of their devices were impressively destructive, much more so than the weapon-creatures employed by the swarm. But the efficacy of individual guns was irrelevant; the hive mind had a billion for every one employed by the prey. Its weapons were not dependent on chains of supply or minerals mined on faraway worlds. They required no specialist worker caste to create. Everything the hive mind needed, it grew within itself, and the prey always ran out of bullets before the hive mind ran out of bodies.

Still, certain prey required care, hence the lictor's mission. The hive mind's cell-bodies were numerous but not infinite. There was an optimal ratio of destroyed beasts to biomass harvested. Exceed it, and the consumption of a world would result in a net loss. Warrior creatures were dispensable, but the larger ships and complicated beasts cost time and organic matter to replace. If there was a way to shorten a war the hive mind would find it.

The lictor reached its destination. Sophisticated organic senses equal to any machine the Imperium could employ probed the ground, ensuring this was the correct spot.

For days the lictor had been gathering intelligence on the surroundings of the Arx Angelicum. Its specialised brain acted as a node, gathering together sensory data from a million other creatures. They had no awareness of what they were seeing. They had no need for the data they unwittingly collected. That was the lictor's role.

Under the sands was an anomaly. Once, a tunnel had led out of the Arx Angelicum to a fuel tank. The tank had been removed millennia ago. The tunnel had been collapsed and forgotten. The hive mind, working through the lictor, knew none of this, and would not have comprehended the information if it had. It saw a weakness; it needed to know no more.

The lictor's hyper-enlarged brain pulsed magnetic waves through the sand, picking out chunks of crushed rockcrete and the outline of the tunnel's route towards the Arx Angelicum's walls. The fortress was so close. Its multiple eyes could enlarge the structure so much at this close range it could see every finial and carving. If it turned its attention to the seething, bone and purple sea of the war swarm, they appeared close enough to touch. Naturally, these were more human concepts that were alien to the hive mind. The lictor did not regard itself apart from its brethren. It did not regard itself at all.

A blurred map of the underground shimmered in its magnetic sight. It plunged its head into the ground, the tentacles that made up its mouth writhing through the sand, and it tasted trace amounts of complex hydrocarbons and minerals that were not native to this prey-world. Longer range sonar soundings displayed the path of the tunnel nearly all the way to the wall. The sand was reefed with broken artificial stone. The point in the mountain where the tunnel had penetrated was smooth, capped with more false rock and refined metallic minerals.

It was strong, but not as strong as the natural, glassy stone of the dead volcano.

The lictor rose suddenly. It emitted a short burst of aromatic chemicals and a weak psychic pulse. Both were beneath the prey's notice, but its fellow creatures heard. Like white blood cells are attracted to sites of infection, soon creatures joined the lictor. They needed no direction. A pair of suitable beasts swam through the sand and began excavating a new tunnel alongside the path of the old. They were known to the Imperium as trygons, something else the hive mind did not care to know. It had no names for its constituent parts. The wolf cares nothing for the thoughts of sheep. They worked quickly, shoving the sand aside with their claws and compacting it. There would be no spoil heaps to give them away. Resinous secretions from their long bodies sealed the sand into a form of organic concrete. Soon others came. The swarm selected the best organisms for the task. Infiltration creatures with high combat capability were automatically deployed. Dozens of genestealers came in ones or twos, moving stealthily so that the gathering group would not be noticed. Another safeguard. They would not be seen anyway, the eyes of the Space Marines were upon the sea of monsters attacking the second wall.

Twenty minutes went by, a meaningless measurement of a meaningless span to the eternal hive mind. Sand suddenly hissed away into a rapidly widening hole, and the lictor plunged in. The genestealers followed. They ran along a pitch-black tunnel, needing no light to see. They passed under the moat, the fallen third line, and the curtain wall without detection, their movements masked by gunfire. At the far end the two trygons attacked the plug seal with acidic spittle and teeth with monomolecular edges. The ground rumbled around them to the steady heartbeat tremors of artillery fire. No sand fell from the resin-bonded roof.

Acid ate through metal easily. When that had dribbled away to noxious fluid the prey creatures' false rock dissolved just as fast, revealing a thick rustless plasteel pipe piercing the foot of the Arx Murus. The wall was of diamond-hard volcanic glassrock. Eating through that would have taken days. Time equalled

detection. The simple plug in the pipe's jacket took only hours.

A hole opened. The trygons rapidly gnawed at the edges to widen it. Toxic vapours steamed from the material as it dissolved, shortening the creatures' lives by years. Another consideration meaningless to the hive mind.

Silently, the trygons pushed aside the rotting material. It scattered into damp, steaming sands. The pipe within the fortress remained. The lictor paused, multiple senses reaching out into the depths of the fortress monastery. The air was stale. The machines there dead. Nothing had moved down there for generations.

As one, the infiltration splinter poured into the Arx Angelicum. They ran soundlessly down the pipe, reaching a junction. A further seal barred the way. Bio-acid reduced it to metal-rich liquid in moments.

Acid vapours dispersed on feeble currents. The lictor tasted the air. Its olfactory sense was sensitive to chemical components at one or two parts per million. The amount of data it processed would have confounded an advanced cogitation unit. Thousands of compounds, borne on multiple air vortices from locations it had never seen, were processed in fractions of a second.

It found what it was looking for.

There were two targets. It tasted them both quickly: a diversion, and the objective.

The diversion would drive the prey into a rage, and conceal the second.

Prey always fought hardest to protect its young.

Dante fought on the wall.

The killzone was a field of burning wrecks. Dozens of priceless war machines lay broken in the desert. Dante had a chilling flash of prescience, seeing their unrusting hulks beneath an airless sky, the Arx Angelicum in ruins behind them.

Not yet. The Chapters of the Blood still lived. The consumption phase was hearteningly late in beginning. The wall still held. The void shields stood. Between the vehicle wrecks the sand was carpeted in shattered white and purple chitin. Desert that had not felt the kiss of moisture for a billion years was soaked in alien fluids.

Assault after assault was thrown back from the restored curtain wall. Guns roared and boomed all day and night. The sky was a constant pyrotechnical display of flak and las light. If they stood alone, Dante would have been more careful with his ammunition, but the Blood Angels successors had brought millions of tonnes of ammunition with them, and so he allowed the cannons of his fortress to fire and fire. In the dark their muzzles glowed with heat. The desert shook with explosive impacts and the constant, quiet tremble of the Arx Angelicum's reactors working at maximum capacity to supply energy to las emplacements, plasma turrets and shielding.

Any other army would have withdrawn from the siege. The Arx Angelicum would have been impregnable to any other foe, its ten thousand defenders too great to overcome. The tyranids cared nothing for death. They threw their living bombs at the fortress monastery, not caring or not understanding that they would never hit their target. The void shields groaned and snapped. The flicker of displacement was a noisy aurora around the Space Marines position. Floating spore mines were slow enough to pass through, but as they were drawn to the noise of war, they were targeted and blasted apart by Icarus lascannons and quad autocannon anti-air defences. A near constant rain of acid fell from these clouds of living bombs, too diffuse to do anything but scorch the colours from the battleplate of the Space Marines. The aerial swarm too might fly through at the correct speed, but their beasts had withdrawn in the face of heavy casualties, leaving the sky to the racket of exploding flak rounds and the crash of phosphorescent chemicals splashing to nothing against the aegis.

Along the curtain wall emplaced heavy bolters chugged, panning back and forth monotonously, sweeping

away genestealers, 'gaunts and warriors. The wet crack of splintering chitin and alien death screams were a hellish symphony that played without pause. There were enough Space Marines to man the parapets shoulder to shoulder. Boltguns fired from every embrasure, destroying the lesser bioforms by the thousand. It was a tactic of the hive mind to pile up its dead to render any defensive line unusable, as it had at the moat, but the tyranids could not get close enough to the wall. An embankment of heaped corpses provided a little shelter to the advancing swarm; there yet remained a clear killing field between it and Dante's wall. It crept forwards a few feet every day, as corpses rolled from the top. In strict rotation, sections of the wall were cleared by concentrated melta fire, plasma incineration and promethium bombs, to stop the heap of dead becoming a ramp. In doing so, the Space Marines created a thick, black smokescreen in front of the sections under clearance, obscuring the view and encouraging attack. So these minor advantages were traded back and forth between the two sides. None gained a decisive edge. The fortress was inviolable, the tyranids practically infinite.

A biotitan shrieked as it was blasted to pieces by a defence laser. There were fewer of the large constructs coming. Dante's army was killing them faster than they could be bred. Slowly, the swarm was being worn down.

Stalemate was not a victory, but it was better than the alternative. Every day the Arx Angelicum held, the chances of triumph increased. Garbled reports burst through the tyranids' vox jamming every so often, reporting successful hit and run raids on the hive fleet. These could sometimes be seen in daytime through the watery shimmer of the void shield and the flowering of flak. At night, these battles lit up the heavens.

Defence lasers aided in thinning the orbital swarm. Most of these powerful weapons could only be fired a few times a day, but when they did they invariably claimed a kill apiece; each meteor shower of burning alien meat streaking across Baal's sky brought another cheer from the wall's defenders.

Back and forth. For every ten tyranid ships destroyed, another strike cruiser was lost. Reactor deaths made brilliant suns. Messages from Baal Primus and Baal Secundus were just as likely to tell of defeat or Chapters decimated as they were to report positions held.

Everything depended on the void shield. Hold that, and the swarm would be blunted, broken, and finally turned aside.

Until then the hive mind would throw its endless armies at the curtain wall, employing variant strategies each time.

The enemy's latest gambit approached. Hundreds of hulking carnifexes bulled their way through the hordes, trampling their smaller kin. They were giant assault beasts, their short limbs thick with muscle, domed backs protected by inches of chitinous armour, powerful weapon symbiotes bonded to their flesh. There were bigger tyranid constructs, but none were as numerous nor so versatile as the carnifexes.

Heavy weapons fire burned the air over the curtain wall from the fortress, striking at the hulking monsters and laying them low by the dozen. There were too many to stop. Several broods were protected by floating psychic abominations which projected fields of warp energy, proof against all but the heaviest guns. Others marched under the cover of toxic fogs whose swirling spores foiled target locks as easily as they choked human lungs.

Dante watched from a low drum tower that shook with the recoil of its turreted macrocannon. Five of his Sanguinary Guard led by Brother Dontoriel, hero of Cryptus, were arrayed around him in a protective circle.

The carnifexes were getting close to the berm of the dead, disrupting attempts to hit them. Fountains of limbs and xenos flesh pattered down where shells tore into the bank.

'In a few more moments they will come under the shadow of the walls,' said Dante. 'Then we will see how well the foe will test us.'

The encircling carnifexes ploughed through the embankment of the dead, causing it to tumble forward closer to the walls. Some of them were doing so deliberately, shoving corpses ahead of them, banking them up at the foot of the wall. Closer examination showed they had adaptations specifically for this role, with massive flattened claws that locked together like dozer blades.

Dante checked visual feed from augur eyes and the helmets of his fellow Chapter Masters. The same was occurring in several places.

‘Prioritise carnifex forms pushing forward the dead,’ he ordered, switching to battleforce-wide vox. The Arx Angelicum amplified his signal through its powerful communications centre, but even so the return feed was full of the chilling voice of the hive mind.

The last of the weapons fire from the fortress monastery cut out. The carnifexes were too close to the curtain wall. The Arx’s guns redirected their punishing bombardment to a second wave coming behind the first, leaving the leading carnifexes to the heavy weapons mounted on the second line, so the attack was under fire from the curtain wall alone. Dante scanned quickly through thumbnail views from around the wall. He halted at one. Six carnifexes were absorbing an obscene amount of fire, heaping the dead at the foot of the wall as stolidly as serfs digging in the rain. ‘Chapter Master Orix, you have a breakthrough imminent in your sector. Please deal with it,’ he said.

In another place the enemy had sent a spearhead of giant serpentine forms to race at the wall and scabble up it with vestigial claws. One nearly made it before a plasma cannon shot took off its head and set it alight.

‘Captain Therus, attend to those trygons,’ Dante commanded, his voice as always clear and steely. Minor breakthroughs could be contained. It was crucial there were no major breaches of the wall.

Still the rain of spores fell. Still the hissing sea of lesser forms leapt and snapped, those few who made the wall’s base scrambling part way up the smooth rockcrete before slipping back. Others waited with mindless patience for the ramps to be finished, relatively unmolested by gunfire while the defenders concentrated on the siege beasts. Should the carnifexes build their macabre ramps, there would be thousands of tyranids within the second perimeter in moments. Dante’s hand tightened on the Axe Mortalis. There was not much he could do but trust in the skill and devotion of the Chapters of the Blood.

A desperate vox call cut into the inter-Chapter traffic. ‘*The wall! The wall! Carnifex brood coming over the wall!*’

Dante’s attention snapped to a place half a mile from his bastion. Four monsters there eschewed the heaping of corpses, and were attempting an escalade. They made their own ladders as they climbed, smashing out holds in the rockcrete with their giant claws. Fleshhooks whipped out from chest cavities and scabbled for extra traction, hauling them further up the wall towards the warriors at the top.

Dante was close, and first to respond. He leapt from the bastion and jetted high, his guard following instantly.

His jump pack fuel indicator fell quickly. Baal’s gravity was strong. Sustained flight could therefore only be brief, and so he leaned forward, willing himself to reach the crisis point before it was too late.

He roared over hundreds of Space Marines firing from the wall. Blades of light stabbed out, a weft of las-beams that died and replenished itself over and over again. A carnifex imploded below, peppered with so many krak bombs it collapsed into itself in a shower of gore. The small explosions of bolt shells were so numerous that it seemed the war was conducted to the layered playing of a million insane drummers. Washes of flame so intense Dante felt the heat through his armour drove back hordes of ‘gaunts from a nearly completed corpse ramp. Dozens shrivelled in the heat. Thick promethium gels adhered to the larger monsters, coating them head to foot with flame, but the carnifexes continued working, immune to pain, even as their eyes cooked in their sockets.

A flight of gargoyles screamed at Dante and his guard, only to be blasted apart by quad cannon fire before they got within a hundred yards.

His fuel indicators dipped towards amber, hurrying for the red of exhaustion, and then he was there.

Dante cut out his jets at the apex of his leap, allowing himself to fall fast towards the monsters clambering over the wall. He selected one and corrected his drop with a microsecond jet burst. Carnifexes were the brute squads of the hive, built to take large amounts of punishment then retaliate in kind. A power axe such as Dante bore would harm one, but not enough to ensure the survival of the attacker. Dante had fifteen hundred years' experience in warfare. There was little new he could learn of any martial artistry. He had fought hundreds of things as big as carnifexes before, and slain dozens of carnifexes besides. He fell like a meteor onto the creature's swollen head. With the weight of transhuman and battle armour multiplied generously by gravity, Commander Dante used the impetus of his fall to split the thing's cranium with the *Axe Mortalis*. Purple brain matter splattered his armour as he dropped past. Dante followed his blow, falling away over the carnifex's shoulders and spore chimneys towards the seething tide of attack beasts hammering at the foot of the wall. He adjusted his weight a touch, somersaulting through the creature's broodmates, dodging a swiping talon, moving over whip-like tentacles that flickered out at him. The lesser creatures fired upwards. Their weapons grubs splattered upon his armour, their acidic innards steaming as they dissolved on his golden plate. Close to the packed mass, he ignited his jump pack's jets again, incinerating hormagaunts leaping up to spear him with their scythe-like talons, then flew back to the parapet.

His honour guard thumped down around him, one after the other. The Blood Swords were stationed on that part of the defences, their armour darker red than the Blood Angels. They fought all the harder for seeing the Lord of Baal among them.

Another of the climbing carnifexes bore multiple smoking powerblade wounds all over its body. Dante's guard had targeted its joints, and one claw dangled from a red skein of sinew. As Dante looked past it, he swore loudly. The carnifex he had decapitated was still climbing, coming up behind the one wounded by his guard. With the primary brainstem destroyed, its weapon symbiote took on the task of directing the creature's massive body. Puppeted by its gun, the carnifex clambered on upwards jerkily. Its ruined head pumped yellow alien blood down the wall. The tongue, still attached by the root to the shattered skull, flapped about like a wet flag. None of this discomfited it.

'By the Blood! Is it not possible to kill these things?' swore Dontoriel.

'Well you know that, brother,' said Dante.

Dontoriel jerked his head at his gold-clad comrades. They rose again and dived at the one-clawed carnifex. They flitted about it in whooshing jet bursts, every manoeuvre timed for maximum fuel efficiency and ending in a strike. Jump packs were inelegant devices, not intended for true flight. Bulky, noisy, hungry; compared to the finer constructs of some races they were clangorous toys, but in the hands of Blood Angels, Imperial jump packs transcended their limitations. It was possible to forget what they were, and see in the skill of the Space Marines the graceful flight of true angels. A fatal blow slashed out, cutting away the carnifex's second claw completely. For a moment it held its place, then overbalanced and fell roaring into the milling sea of 'gaunts at the bottom of the wall.

Dante remained where he was, eyes fixed on his own target. The headless carnifex's huge claws continued to punch holds into the rockcrete to a steady rhythm, hauling itself up another few feet with every wall-shaking impact. It crawled directly over a heavy bolter emplacement. The space between its belly and the gun lit up with a hundred explosions as the bolter fired at point-blank range, but the carnifex pulled past it, leaking fluid from fresh wounds, and dragging the bolter and its machine-spirit free of the mounting as it climbed. Dante aimed the perdition pistol and waited for the carnifex to lift its claw again.

For a moment in each second, the weapon symbiote was exposed. Bred in the shape of a long, fluted cannon, the thing looked like an artefact, but it was independently alive, and intelligent. Half-formed limbs curled around the base of its barrel-snout. The last vestiges of an alimentary tract could be picked out towards the rear. Most tellingly of all a large yellow eye stared out malignantly from the stock where the carnifex's lower limb melded with the gun's mechanisms, if they could be called such.

Dante adjusted his aim.

The claw slammed into the rockcrete again, obscuring the secondary beast. The other claw smashed into the wall, and the headless monster rose upwards three feet.

'It is nearly at the top!' yelled a Blood Swords sergeant.

The claw raised, exposing the weapon for a fraction of a second again. Dante's aim was good. The air shimmered as he fired. Where the fusion beam connected with the gun's flesh there was a terrific roar as all moisture in the sub-beast was instantly evaporated. The resulting explosion blasted it to pieces. The carnifex continued to climb for one more clawstroke before flailing limply and falling from the wall.

The beast had come within feet of the edge, and two more screeching monsters were still climbing.

A devastator squad in Blood Drinkers livery deployed and opened fire with their lascannons, a second devastator unit from the Blood Swords close behind. Four ruby beams of light blew holes in the lead carnifex's armour, expertly targeting the beast's primary organs. Trailing fire, it fell into the horde, crushing dozens of lesser beasts. The third of the brood paused, opened its mouth wide and started to scream. Stark white light shone in its throat.

'Bioplasma!' shouted the Blood Swords sergeant. Dozens of boltguns banged, smashing into the monster. They exploded harmlessly on its chitinous armour, only a few tearing chunks out of the more vulnerable intercostal spaces. Fist-sized craters appeared all over it. One eye burst. Several rounds flew down its throat, but were there consumed by the beast's gathering incandescent fire.

A further lascannon volley denied the beast the chance to spit. The light died. The carnifex slumped, dead, hanging from the wall by its claws.

Dante took stock. All along the wall similar tales were being told. Carnifexes tumbled from the fortifications, riddled with smoking holes. Newly built corpse ramps burned under sustained plasma and melta fire. He called up his strategic overview. The wall remained a solid green line. Three breaches glinted red, but quick vox reports and glimpses through the eye-lenses of others informed him that these were places where carnifexes had clambered over. The wall itself remained whole.

'Such a fruitless expenditure of assets,' said Dante. 'If they continue to pursue their objectives so thoughtlessly, we will crush them.'

'Aye, my lord,' said Dontoriel, looking out over the surging horde. 'But they have plenty to spare. The second wave approaches.'

'We must make sure they do not pile the corpses up, Dontoriel. A few carnifexes in the perimeter will be simple to deal with, but if we have to engage a host of 'gaunts we will lose control of the situation and be forced to fall back. I am going to send you to—' Dante was cut short by an eerie wailing from the Arx Angelicum. An angel's cry that cut Dante's soul. There was only one location that would generate such an alarm.

Captain Raxietal's voice crackled over the vox. '*My lord, we have xenos inside the fortress. There are genestealers within the Hall of Sarcophagi.*'

Dante activated his widecast vox. 'Chapter Master Ercon of the Blood Swords has command of the second line until further notice.' And he activated his jets again, blasting over the ground between the second line and the Arx Angelicum. His Sanguinary Guard followed.

'How did they get in?' he demanded over the vox. 'If there is an unguarded breach, there could be

thousands of them inside.'

'Unknown, my lord. I have an augur team scanning the lower levels to see if they can lock it down. We have traced the general area to section nine-Phi. I have sent several squads and our blood thralls into the Cantabrian Mesozone to head off any further attack.' Captain Raxietal was running fast enough to make a Space Marine pant. The impact of his boots boomed off stone. *'I am heading to the Hall of Sarcophagi now myself.'*

'Double the guard on the void generatorum and reactor halls,' said Dante.

'Sergeant Frense is already there. I have three more squads en route. No reports of hostiles elsewhere as yet.'

'Good,' said Dante. 'Beware. This could be a diversion. Keep me informed of everything.'

'My lord.' Captain Raxietal's voice cut out.

Dante swore – ancient, powerful Secundan oaths. The breach would not be large, otherwise the Arx Angelicum would be under full scale assault. That was the one reassuring fact of this debacle. If it were a diversion, targeting the Hall of Sarcophagi was a stroke of tactical genius. Within its blood-filled caskets, neophytes underwent the year-long ritual of the Insanguination. Such a brazen assault on the Chapter's future would send his men into a fury, and that would dull their thinking. He hoped the alien mind of the swarm was merely being vindictive, or was hell-bent on wiping out the Chapter. But those were the low plans of animals, and Dante thought the hive mind to be of a far higher degree than that. He looked upwards as he flew. As yet, the void shield still rippled over the fortress monastery. He was thankful for Captain Raxietal's level-headedness.

The black majesty of the Arx Murus towered ahead, flashing with the reports of giant weapons. He was closest to the Maxilliary Gate, where the walls projected out over a gatehouse like a closing mouth.

Alarms bleeped urgently in Dante's ears. His gaze flicked to the top corner of his faceplate display. His fuel indicator was running rapidly to zero. His suit's machine-spirit informed him when his fuel reached a dangerous level, allowing him time to land safely. He ignored it, burning the last seconds of his supply to send himself forward and upward. 'Get me a transport. Something fast. My jets thirst, and can carry me no more.'

Stuttering fire, the jets blew out. Momentum carried Dante forward a hundred yards, but Baal's robust gravity caught up with him, and he was dragged down on a steep curve.

He hit the sand hard. He couldn't roll because of the bulk of his jump pack, and came down in a staggering run that ended in a fall. His teeth jarred in his head as his foot hit the rockcrete. Internal shock absorbers took death out of the impact, but something gave in his leg and every forward step brought a sharp pain in his knee until his armour's pharmacopoeia detected the hurt and dulled it, though the bone ground as he ran. He opened the adrenal valves on his helm, elevating his heart rate to dangerous levels. There was only so much a Space Marine's enhanced physiology could take, but he could not afford to be cautious.

Dante's jump pack was of ancient and powerful make. He had outpaced his bodyguard. They caught up with him as he ran, landing around him in perfect formation.

'Get back up!' he commanded. 'Get inside! Head for the void generatorum.'

'My lord.' Dontoriel led his fellows off, stepping up into the air as if it were solid ground.

The Maxilliary Gate opened. Five combat bikes sped out onto the landing fields. Plumes of sand sprayed from their rear wheels. Now the work of war had begun the clearing was neglected, and the desert was swallowing the fields again.

The bikes roared up and skidded to a halt. The biker sergeant leapt off his steed and knelt at his lord's feet.

‘Take my machine, my lord, go quickly,’ he said.

Dante leapt onto the bike without a word, the encumbrance of the jump pack nothing to so graceful a warrior. Wheels spinning, he wrestled the heavy machine around in a circle and headed back towards the Arx Angelicum at speed.

The gates were left open for him. He did not dismount, but sped on, thundering through his fortress. The labyrinthine ways and halls of the Arx Angelicum whipped by as he headed down. The bike left tyre marks on pristine stairs, and shattered the quiet of sacred halls with bellicose engine noise.

The Hall of Sarcophagi was deep beneath the surface, far from the light. Dante slewed his borrowed combat bike around tight corners, bursting through the hall’s modest gates into the long, low expanse of the chamber.

Rectangular in shape and lined down both long edges by caskets of ivory and plasteel, the Hall of Sarcophagi was a place of peace. There, within its sacred precincts, diseased, malnourished boys were remade into angels for the greater glory of the Imperium, and weary warriors might rest awhile from the toil of battle. Ordinarily the silence was interrupted only by the quiet hum of machines and the whisper of robes across the polished floor.

Its peace was in ruins.

Space Marines fought desperate close-quarter battles with genestealers. There was precious little cover in the hall for the aliens to utilise, but the genestealers were everywhere, and the Space Marines hesitated to use the full destructive potential of their weapons for fear of hitting the next generation of neophytes dreaming their way through apotheosis. They relied on single shots, aiming carefully so as not to kill their own kin, and that allowed the genestealers to use their superior speed. They scuttled at the Blood Angels, leaping at them with their claws outstretched, tearing them apart in a flurry of raking strikes.

With the warriors of the Eighth Company at his side, Dante roared into the hall, the boltguns mounted on the fairing of his combat bike barking, the Axe Mortalis crackling with wrathful power. He had not ridden one of the machines for centuries, but his skill was as accomplished as when he had been a young Assault Marine. He jinked past a snarling, purple-faced abomination, smiting it as he sped by. The force of his charge and the energy field of his axe reduced the alien to a shower of stringy meat and broken carapace. A second reared in front of him. Dante ran it down. Its rangy body cracked loudly under the wheels. A third jumped onto the bike, grabbing at the handlebars. A fourth made a giant leap, folding its arms about Dante’s jump pack from behind. The bike wobbled as he fended off their claws. He grabbed the thing on the fairing and heaved it off in front of his bike, where it was smashed to pieces by the weight of the machine. Broken alien chitin ground in the space between wheel and bodywork. The fourth’s jaws snapped at the side of his mask, super-hard teeth squealing on the ceramite. The back wheel of Dante’s mount slid out from under him as he wrestled with the beast. He managed to trap the claws scraping curls of metal from his plastron eagle under one arm, and drove back with the head of the Axe Mortalis. Its disruption field snapped and crackled. The axe’s edge scored a mark in his pauldron as he bludgeoned the genestealer’s face with the axe’s flat top. Atoms fizzled, broken energy bonds arcing out as stabbing lightning. The genestealer’s head exploded and it fell away, but too late. Dante’s bike tipped over, ploughing up shards of broken stone from the floor. His armour fountained sparks as the bike slid out of control across the hall. It slammed into the wall, crushing a genestealer’s legs and pinning it in place, and yet still it snapped and hissed at him. Dante snatched out the perdition pistol and blasted two more aliens running at him. Several of the infiltrators sensed his vulnerability and were turning from the other Space Marines. One of the other bikes was down, but four remained, and they passed through the crowd of genestealers in close formation, boltguns blazing, buying Dante a few precious moments.

Shouting wrathfully, Dante flipped the bike upright, freeing himself and crushing the trapped

genestealer's chest. Finally, it died, its last breath a hateful rattle, yellowish blood oozing between silicate teeth.

Howling, Dante spun around to face the creatures moving on him. Red stained his soul and his vision. Sanguinius' curse rose in him. Dozens of the sarcophagi were ruined, the neophytes inside torn to pieces in their sleep. Dante experienced a father's insane fury at the sight. Anger threatened to overwhelm him.

Be not rage, lest rage become all you are. The words of the Bloody Catechism rang in his mind. *Let the fourth virtue guide and save you, until all is lost and restraint be abandoned. This is what they want,* he told himself. *This is why they are here.*

Snarling like a beast, he fought back the urge to slay these monsters at the cost of everything else. If he lost himself, he would lose the battle.

Still, they must die. It was not a question of how they died, or how he killed them, for they would die. It was a question of where his mind was when he was done.

He swung his axe in crackling arcs. A genestealer's exoskeletal armour was tough, but no match for a powered blade. Their arms came free at the passing of the edge. Their heads separated from necks deferentially, as if they inconvenienced the axe's machine-spirit and would make amends. Blood and flesh sprayed in gory rain. Dante's armour was painted black and yellow by vile xenos fluids. It was fortunate the tyrannid ichor was repellent, or he would have struggled to contain the Red Thirst.

Space Marines were falling all around the far end of the hall, their ceramite ripped open by alien claws. Dante despaired to see so many red-armoured bodies lying on the ground, and still his warriors were dying. A bike roared past him, engine afire, and exploded against the far side of the chamber, smashing three sarcophagi to pieces.

Dante found himself surrounded by a dozen purple and white horrors; the noise of bolter fire was giving out. His men were being slaughtered.

So it comes to this, thought Dante. He set the terror field projector built into the death mask's halo to maximum. The arcane psychic technologies whined hard, and a pressure grew in his head. He bellowed out his anger, and the projector amplified it. A human foe would have fallen helpless with fear. But Dante was screaming his defiance at a mind far greater than his, and the genestealers did no more than flinch. It was a slender advantage that Dante used. He threw himself forward. The mass of his armour and jump pack knocked two of the enemy flying, and he laid into the rest before they recovered.

If you are to die, die well, he said to himself.

More and more were coming for him. He had lost count of how many he had killed. They pressed in. He cut them down with his axe, he turned them to steam with the perdition pistol, but there were too many, and they crushed his arms against his side.

'My lord Dante,' boomed a powerful voice, amplified to ear-splitting levels. 'Get down.'

With a last effort, Dante lunged forward, dragging genestealers to the floor with him. He fell into a flailing mass of arms and claws. The deafening racket of an assault cannon cleared a space above him. Monstrous aliens flew backwards, riddled with holes or burst apart completely. Dante wrestled with the creature beneath him. He let his axe and pistol fall, and choked the life from it with his golden hands. He did not let go until he felt the creature's spine give under its chitinous exoskeleton.

The whining of an autocannon barrel powering down fell to sudden silence. Dante stood.

The Hall of Sarcophagi was destroyed. Fires burned in broken machines. There were but a few sarcophagi left intact; most had been ripped open, the rest were shattered by weapons fire. Dante felt a deep, sickening rage.

Space Marines lay dead all through the hall. Most were of Raxietal's reserve company. Among the dead lay Raxietal himself, his left arm and head torn from his body, the pieces of his corpse surrounded by

xenos dead.

Three Dreadnoughts stood in the doorway of the hall, weapons glowing with heat. Their giant shoulder plates also bore the double yellow blood drip of the Sixth.

‘We... we could not come quickly enough to save our brothers,’ their leader said. His machine-moderated voice was thick with emotion. ‘I...’

‘I too was late, Brother Daman,’ said Dante.

‘They should have waited.’

Dante counted thirty Space Marine corpses. ‘The enemy is cunning. It wished to provoke us by attacking our youth. It has succeeded.’ He reactivated his helm’s strategic displays. For the time being the second line was holding. ‘Dontoriel,’ he voxed. ‘Report.’

‘The genatorium is free of enemy. You were right, my lord, the void shield was their target. We engaged them near the first gateway. The enemy were annihilated. We are chasing down the survivors.’

Relief coursed through Dante, easing the hammering of his hearts. He switched vox channels, hunting out Corbulo’s private channel. ‘Captain Raxietal has fallen. Brother, attend to the extraction of his gene-seed personally. He was a warrior of rare skill.’

‘How many dead?’ replied Corbulo. The sound of fighting raged in the background. Corbulo’s ident signum placed him on the northern curtain wall.

‘Thirty fallen. Some are wounded.’ Dante attempted to move, but was halted by the drag of his injured leg. Wound signifiers screamed for attention. Furthermore, his armour’s lower assembly was impaired. ‘I need your help. I am wounded. I require Techmarines also, my armour is damaged.’

‘I will find one and bring him with me for you, my lord,’ responded Corbulo.

‘My thanks.’ Dante cut the vox, and limped towards a wounded Space Marine, intending to comfort him until help arrived.

A muffled explosion sounded. The Arx Angelicum shook violently. The lumens went out.

‘Status!’ Dante voxed his entire command cadre.

Incarael replied, his passionless machine voice as close to panic as Dante had ever heard. ‘My lord, the void shield is down.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE HEART, SHATTERED

The lictor watched the prey's warrior strain attack its broodmates. Prey in red fired their refined mineral spines at the trygons. They misidentified synapse creatures and falsely assumed the death of the largest would precipitate the confusion of the genestealers. Their tactic worked against them. The trygons were too strong to be easily stopped by their weaponry, leaving the genestealers crucial moments to attack. This prey was easy. Slow to understand. Slow to adapt, while the hive mind evolved a thousand times faster. The lictor had no opinions. It made no moral judgement. It felt no emotion. The little clash it watched through its many eyes was added to the sum total of the hive mind's knowledge. Little was to be gleaned. Observation was not its task any more. With complete disinterest, the lictor retreated into the shadows.

Many ways revealed themselves to the creature's bewildering suite of senses. Stealthy sonar pulses sounded out secret paths. Psychic resonance and scent revealed the location of prey concentrations that must be avoided. It slunk through cracks barely wider than its head, compressing its body to an astounding degree. The energy skin of the prey hive was generated by devices buried in this segment, all protected by rock and mineral adaptations. They thought it safe. They were mistaken.

The lictor crawled along dusty conduits. Whenever it sensed a maintenance drone or servitor it froze, shrinking into the dark, until the thing had passed. It pressed on, deeper into the machinery of the prey hive, following the unique vibration patterns of the shield genatorium. The tremors of the battle outside were easy to discount. It had no trouble finding its way to the target.

Deep inside a conduit, it stopped. A hole a foot across crammed with pipes led downward into the guts of the prey's device. It crouched low, tentacled mouth feeling around the hole. Thrills of electrical energy tingled in its brain. Beneath it was the prey creatures' energy nexus. This was the way.

Its hands were incredibly dextrous. With them it wrenched out the pipes and cables, cutting them where necessary with razor claws and teeth, hacking and tearing until the hole was clear. The last cable broke and slipped away down the shaft.

Some half-biological thing came rushing to investigate. The lictor slashed out with its scythe-like upper claws before it could raise the alarm.

The lictor leaned over the hole again. Probing tentacles provided a perfect measurement of the hole's

size. Even now the cabling was gone, the hole was still too small to admit the lictor.

Without hesitation it tore its upper scythe-limbs off. When the hive mind had reshaped its ancestors it had left the neural architecture for pain intact, but though the lictor felt the agony, it did not trouble it.

Now it would fit. Its body convulsed, controlled muscle spasms moving its exoskeletal plates and endoskeletal structure apart. Its skull flattened, the sutures between sections cracking wide. Its remaining limbs popped out of their sockets. The lictor drooped its way towards the hole, and with a shivering rush slipped inside and down, lubricated by its own blood.

Fleshhooks flicked out from its ribs, dragging it downward towards the electric hum of the field generator. The lictor could feel the machine in its mind. The energy skins of the prey were but one of their technologies that utilised the energies of the immaterial universe that lay over that of matter. Crude. Ineffective. Most prey species were like this one, changing the world to suit them rather than changing themselves. All had fallen to the superiority of the hive.

A flickering light registered on the lictor's eyes. It was close. The light grew brighter, then became painful. The lictor cared nothing as its eyes were blinded. It pressed doggedly on.

The conduit ended. Had it still been able to see, the lictor would have witnessed a crackling sphere of cold energy. But it did sense the magnetic field holding the force in place. It could smell the tang of psychically stressed iron.

It slithered from the conduit, towards the scent of iron, seeing its way by sonar and magnetic senses.

Tapping hands found the thing it sought. To the Imperium it was a field-generating spike, to the lictor's magnetic senses it was a glowing pillar of cool light surrounded by radiating bands of force.

The lictor embraced it like a monster sneaking into bed to devour the sleeper.

This pivotal act was performed unnoticed. Not even the hive mind was truly aware of what the lictor did, for its constituent parts performed every action automatically. A man does not feel his blood cells about their work.

An internal convulsion squeezed thin-walled cysts seeded throughout its body, an adaptation it had grown specifically for this mission while waiting in the desert. Cellular walls broke, mixing chemicals that were inert alone, but when catalysed formed a potent bio-acid.

The pain this caused could not be ignored. Agony racked its body. It suffered, but the instinctive responses to pain its ancestors possessed had been taken long ago. The lictor did not let go. It could not. It held on tightly to the spike as its body dissolved. Liquid seeped, then flooded, all over the spike. With slow certainty the acid ate its way through the metal.

Energy shorts burst from the corroded surface. The spike collapsed into itself and fell away from the side of the reaction chamber. The cold power it held in check wobbled on its axis, then failed.

The explosion that followed heralded the beginning of the end for the prey. The lictor lived until the last moment, certain vascular adaptations enabling its brain to outlive the death of its body and communicate its success. It felt no satisfaction at achieving its mission. No exhilaration. No release at its death. It felt nothing at all before it died, and nothing after either.

Dante went at a limping run up from the Hall of Sarcophagi. His damaged armour ground and caught, its machine-spirit singing a plaintive song of alarm and dismay that begged him to stop. His knee throbbed dangerously. The three Dreadnoughts of the Sixth Company stumped after him, beseeching him to wait.

He could not.

The Arx Angelicum shook. Another explosion rocked deep at the heart of the mountain. Statuary toppled from plinths, smashing on the floor. Stone groaned and creaked. Cracks ran up walls designed to withstand major tectonic upheaval. The mountain flexed, shaking off millennia of human artifice. Dante

ran for the Stair of Apotheosis only to find its long steps shaken loose of their sockets and piled like broken gaming chits at the base of the shaft.

‘Dontoriel! Report!’ snapped Dante. Dust and smoke spilled downward.

There was no reply.

‘My lord,’ voxed Incarael. *‘A massive reactor failure has destroyed the void shield genatorum. We will be exposed in seconds. I have major issues across all our power generation nexuses. The collapse of the shield is in danger of sparking a chain reaction right across the fortress monastery.’*

‘Fix it before it goes critical!’ commanded Dante.

‘My lord, it cannot be done. Not without taking sixty per cent of our power generation off line.’

More explosions rocked the ancient fortress. Alarms wailed from every quarter. Dante’s vox-beads were a typhoon roar of shouting voices, all asking for information.

‘Then shut it down!’ shouted Dante. ‘Shut the fortress down!’

‘My lord,’ said Incarael. ‘I...’

‘Do it!’

Tragedy was unfolding. The Arx Angelicum was falling. Dante hobbled on, making for the bottom of the Well of Angels. He burst into a circular shaft of galleried walkways. High above was the plaza and the Nine Circles of the Verdis Elysia, but he could not see that, only a circle of pinkish blue sky sectioned by the triangular panes of the Dome of Angels.

The watery shimmer of the void shield had gone.

The fortress rumbled again. The aftershocks were decreasing. Black rubble fell past in an unseemly rush. The galleries above were failing.

An uneasy quiet fell. The fortress ceased its grumbling. The sky remained free of tyranids.

Dante stared upwards. It would not last.

Black curtains drew over the dome, swirling masses of flying beasts that rushed at the fort. Guns opened up all over the fortress, firing skyward, and a rain of broken bodies fell thumping onto the armourglass. There were so many of them. Their corpses tumbled down like leaves into the gutters of wetter worlds. Many arrived unharmed. Living things of gargantuan size landed on skidding talons and attacked the dome directly.

Vox requests beeped in his helmet, all of them marked as being of the utmost urgency. He selected Captain Borgio’s vox almost at random.

‘My lord, we have tyranids all over the fortress. The aerial swarm is attacking unimpeded.’

Gunfire boomed and roared all around the Arx, shaking its mighty walls.

From above came a series of titanic bangs. The aerial swarms parted, making themselves into a living tornado up whose funnel Dante looked. Through the maelstrom, thousands of heavy landing pods were falling.

They could not lose the Arx. If the fortress fell, they were as good as dead. He could not fight a war on two fronts.

Dante closed his eyes. With heavy hearts he opened a battle group wide vox channel. ‘All warriors, fall back to the Arx Angelicum. Abandon the second line.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BLOOD AND FLESH

Gabriel Seth was at peace. In his hands was a chainblade as tall as a full-grown mortal man that shook and snarled for blood. Over his head guns fired unremittingly. Before him were uncountable foes. In his heart was a savage need to kill.

And yet, he was at peace.

He played Blood Reaver with consummate skill, sustaining its impetus so that it never stilled. A combination of weight, Seth's strength and the blade's razored teeth had it cutting through chitin, flesh, endo and exoskeletal structures, strange alien organs and weapon symbiotes with ease. The weapon sent out fine sprays of bone meal and blood mist with every swing. Never did a tyranid come closer than six feet. The length of Blood Reaver defined a hard limit around Seth that none could cross.

The Flesh Tearers fought with savagery at last unfettered. Here was a foe whose total destruction was desired. There were no civilians to fear for on this battlefield.

Freedom came in violence. It was a release. For nigh on two centuries Seth had exhorted his warriors to restrain themselves, curbing their worst excesses, directing what bloodlust he could not stop to the appropriate ends. For his troubles he had been censured, tried by his peers, betrayed by his warriors, hunted by the Inquisition.

None of that mattered now. None of it at all. He slew and he slew again, and as the enemy died, and Seth roared and raged at them for having the temerity to exist, a slow, cold smile crept over his face. Not even at Cryptus had he been able to enjoy such abandon. Here was vindication at last. On Baal Primus the Flesh Tearers had a battlefield where they could do no wrong.

A tyranid warrior reared up in front of Seth. Blood Reaver was already on its way to the beast's neck as it raised its deathspitter. The chainblade cut through vertebrae, sending the head, jaws still snapping, wheeling through the air. The creature remained upright, jerking spasmodically, its bladed upper limbs scything. The gills of its symbiote weapon pulsed, dribbling clear mucous, yellow, slit-pupilled eye squinting at him. The headless warrior tottered forward.

'Stay down, xenos!' shouted Seth. He barged the tyranid back with his shoulder, and brought Blood Reaver around in a reverse cut that gutted the deathspitter. Acid slopped from its riven abdomen, hissing

on the floor and pitting his ceramite where it splashed him.

It was dead, but there were more. There were always more. High Chaplain Astorath himself, the Redeemer of the Lost, and arbiter of the fate of all afflicted by the curse, had declared Seth a weapon. It was a role gladly fulfilled. He pumped Blood Reaver's activation bar, revving its compact engine. The chain track spun around, flicking out gore that might clog its workings, and he set to his appointed task again.

Time passed. Seth's sense of self receded. His world became the pumping of his twin hearts, the play of his muscles, the growing ache in his flesh as he fought.

Seth could see no further than forty yards in any direction. Requests for orders from the warriors stationed in the forts went unanswered. His men were individual dervishes, their squad cohesion abandoned.

A sudden lull came in the fighting. Seth was short on foes. He had slaughtered every tyranid warrior within a hundred yards. Nothing but 'gaunts remained nearby, scurrying around the corpses of their larger cousins.

Seth strode forward down the slope towards a knot of his warriors fighting out away from the mountain, Blood Reaver ready to begin its rhythmic slaughter again, but the tyranids parted like water before him. A pathetic spattering of ammunition grubs cracked on his armour. Seeing Seth unharmed and unwilling to face his rage, the horde of 'gaunts turned tail, eerily moving in complete synchronicity, and scuttled away. Warrior broods embedded in the tyranid second line hissed and roared and never turned their faces from him, but they too fell back.

The urge was there to throw himself into the fray, to abandon sense. The Black Rage pulsed hot in his breast and head, seducing him with the promise of blood and death.

Seth shut his eyes and quickly whispered, 'By the Blood am I made. By the Blood am I armoured.' He could not see the battle raging on, but he could hear it, the bark of weapons and roars of his brothers, and the eerie screeching cries of the tyranids. He must hear it and master his wrath. If he shut off his displays and auditory equipment and let himself sink into silence, he knew he would lose himself as soon as he reactivated them. Calm must be regained in the face of fury, he told himself. 'By the Blood, I will endure.'

He let out a long breath, feeling the touch of the blood madness retreat from his mind. Time to take stock.

He had attained a position up on a ridge some way from the wall of the Necklace. To his front, a sea of tyranids seethed around knots of Space Marines, some in the black and maroon of his own Chapter, some in the silver and red of the Knights of Blood, too many in the black of the Death Company.

Behind him the counterfeit mountains of the Necklace rose skyward. He had chosen to make his stand where the metal range bowed back in a U-shape, making a formation not unlike a corrie. His forts occupied the summits of the ridges embracing the space, now misted with blue fyceline smoke and columns of black from burning tyranid monstrosities. A makeshift defence line stoppered the mouth. His few armoured fighting vehicles studded this line, filling the role of bunkers. Their tracks were chained to prevent their belligerent machine-spirits taking control and driving at the enemy. So far, the crews had resisted the temptation to free them.

They were making progress. The Chapter as a whole was becoming better at holding down its temper and directing its berserk fury in the right direction. Such a pity it was all going to end there.

'Furious Sentinel, report,' he voxed, signalling the first of the forts. His words were bitten off, half-snarled.

'My lord, you have taken a fine toll on the foe.' Captain Kamien's voice was phlegmy, almost strangled. It was hard for those warriors Seth had commanded to man the guns and watch over their brothers. He would not be able to keep asking them to do so. Defence was not his preferred form of war,

but tyrannids required walls to break themselves on. To give in completely to the thirst would result in a single charge – glorious, but short-lived. Hence this hateful skulking behind fortifications.

All his Chapter thirsted for the raw, unadulterated slaughter of close-quarter fighting. A third of his remaining men, already pitifully few, had succumbed to the curse and now wore the black and red of the Death Company. Appollus led them with consummate skill, wielding them as a weapon, somehow managing to coax them back and redeploy them after each attack, conserving their numbers beyond expectation, though every evening there were fewer, slain in glory during the day. More succumbed to their own bloodlust in the nights.

It was nearly over. Bolts ran out. Lives ran out. Time ran out. This battle was a charade, a grand performance to keep the Space Marines occupied while the tyrannids went about their real business. On the horizon tentacled feed ships were nosing down from the void, held aloft by giant, venous gas bladders whose rapid inflation made a rubbery booming over the plains. Feeder tubes were already creeping upward from the ground to meet the ships' pulsing mouths, and giant chimneys, as grand as any Imperial industrial structure, were belching out shifting clouds of spores and microorganisms to aid in the digestion.

Seth spent minimal time reading tracts on the mores of an enemy. He saw no point. He was first and foremost a warrior. His requirement was to know where the enemy were, and how they could be killed. But he recognised the digestion phase of a tyrannid attack.

His breath rushed in his helm like the snorting of a bull. The disgusting stink of tyrannid blood polluted his air supply despite his helm's best efforts to filter it out. The trap was obvious. The tyrannids had read him well, luring him away from his forts. If his force advanced any further he would pass through the curtain of the artillery bombardment, and be isolated and destroyed.

The next words he spoke were among the hardest he had ever uttered.

'All companies, regroup. Fall back to Furious Sentinel and Wrathful Vigilance. The enemy have had enough for today.'

Night fell of a double blackness as Baal Primus turned its back to the sun and to Baal. The stars were blotted out by smoke and spore clouds and the endless ships of the swarm in orbit. Light came from the ground instead of the heavens. Low fires played over the horizon where Stardam, Baal Primus' only sizeable settlement, burned. The noise of human weapons firing there had ceased earlier that evening.

Unlike on Baal, the war on the first moon was diffuse. Chapters were scattered across the world's surface. Dante had deployed them that way deliberately, just enough warriors to divert the tyrannids away from Baal and the Arx Angelicum, not enough to weaken the defence of the fortress monastery, spreading them out to divide the enemy's attention. The Space Marines upon Baal Primus were a token force. Most of the population had been moved, much of the rest had died in the fighting. The dark was alive with the screeches of tyrannid beasts and the thunderclaps of Space Marine guns. The ancient metal of the fallen orbitals thrummed in sympathy, remembering ancient wars in their dreams.

'What are we waiting for, Gabriel?' snarled Appollus. He appeared from the gloom of the makeshift rampart, his grimacing skull helm alive with the flicker of gunfire from the artillery platform below. 'Why did you order us back? This is weakness, pathetic!'

'We will die,' said Seth. His fingers curled into fists as he imagined smashing Appollus in the face. Too many times the Chaplain had questioned his judgement.

'We are going to die whatever you do,' said Appollus. 'This is an unwinnable war. You knew that, when we came here.'

'You knew yourself, or you would not have followed me.'

Appollus laughed harshly. 'You who were going to save the Chapter, killing us all for a Blood Angel's whim! The irony chokes me.'

Seth rounded on Appollus. 'Do not speak to me this way, Chaplain.'

'I perform the duties of my office.'

'You speak from your black hearts.'

Appollus stepped threateningly close. 'If you do not like what I say, then confer with High Chaplain Canarvon instead.'

Appollus jested bleakly. Canarvon had finally succumbed to his centuries-long sorrow the day before, and the same day perished in the black of the Death Company.

'You are not an authority over me,' growled Seth. 'I am Chapter Master. My decision stands. We fight here. We sally out when needed. We kill at the right time. I have not returned this Chapter from the brink of destruction to throw it away.'

'We will die,' said Appollus, 'and for the benefit of one who would have executed you, had High Chaplain Astorath not exerted his will.' Appollus slammed his hand down hard on the rampart. 'What is this? The old Seth would never have grovelled before Dante. You put the Angels of Baal before your own brothers. You left our scouts to die to help Dante at Cryptus. Dozens of us fell at that shield world so that the rest of us might die here. There are less than two hundred of us left, Seth. Amit's legacy has long been guttering. You will be the one to snuff it out.'

'Only cowards speak so. Cowards have no right to audience,' said Seth. He stepped away. Appollus' hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

'I am all you have left.' Anger simmered under his words. Seth respected the strength of will the Chaplain possessed to keep himself in check. 'The rest of the Reclusiam are dead. I am the last of the Flesh Tearers Chaplains, and I speak to you rightly.'

Seth's breath whistled through clenched teeth. He forced the tension from his muscles. Appollus released his arm.

'We should not die like cornered vermin.' A plea, fuelled by anger and pride. 'I am an Angel of the Emperor. We should die with Sanguinius' name on our lips and our weapons in our hands, not skulking behind these walls. The paltry defences set in place on this moon are nothing.' Appollus flung out his other hand to encompass the horizon. It shook with anger. 'The other Chapters are destroyed. The real battle is on Baal. Dante did you a great dishonour, and he did not ask you as an equal. He ordered, you obeyed.'

'There is no dishonour in what we do,' said Seth. He wanted to agree with the Chaplain. His soul ached to plunge into the fire and never emerge. But he could not. He was Chapter Master, Guardian of Wrath, and he would use it, not it him. 'Dante has tasked me with safeguarding the last feather of our primarch. There is no greater honour than that. We can go out as you say, full of righteous fury, and slaughter the enemy until we fall. But we will fall quickly. By remaining here, we buy the Blood Angels time. We divert the attention of the hive mind and we ensure, Chaplain, that at least a portion of this bloodline you say you care for so much survives.'

'We will perish needlessly. The Flesh Tearers will be no more.'

'This is no longer about our survival or damnation. This is about the survival of the heritage of Sanguinius!' Seth shouted right into Appollus' helmeted face. The skull remained impassive.

Seth turned away, teeth grinding. He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, letting the chill of ceramite on skin cool some of his rage.

Appollus made a noise of utter contempt. 'Dante has changed you for the worse, Seth. Dante sees you as a savage. He uses you as a tool. And you are. I look to Sentor Jool and see the old Seth. He does not hold

back. He will die gloriously. We will die like dogs for the benefit of Commander Dante, no one else.'

Appollus stormed away, his ink black armour swallowed up by the night.

Seth spat out over the rampart and looked over the plain to where the Knights of Blood fought. Jool had ignored Seth's wishes and established his operations close by the Flesh Tearers' position. By all rights they should have been wiped out three times over. Jool had done exactly what Seth would not, plunging his forces directly into the heart of the enemy. Flashes of boltgun fire and vox-amplified howling were the sole indications they survived amid the churning mass of aliens.

He respected and loathed the Knights of Blood. They fought with the strength of ten men each, and reaped a terrible toll on the enemy. They did not fear the rage and the thirst as too many of his cousin Chapters did. But tyrannid blood was not their sole tally on Baal Primus. The numbers of mortals had dwindled fastest near the position of the Knights of Blood. Very few of them had been killed by the enemy.

Seth was glad it would all be over soon. In the Knights of Blood he saw his Chapter's future, as rage-fuelled animals who fought without restraint. That future had shortened considerably, but damnation still had time to claim them. While he drew breath, the Flesh Tearers would attempt to be of some service.

Baal was coming up, bathing the hordes of tyrannids in the badlands in pink planetshine. The mother world rose quickly. Seth watched it until the equator rolled over the horizon and the Arx Angelicum became visible.

He looked to the location of the fortress monastery through void war discharge and swarms of tyrannid ships. Occasional flashes of light on the surface, far away, indicated that the Blood Angels still held out.

Transfixed by the lights, Seth punched at the rampart with his left fist, landing blows in time with the guns that got heavier the more he thought.

Appollus was right, but Seth knew he was also right. There must be a middle way.

Alarms blared, breaking his concentration. Searchlights snapped on, bringing a wide section of the badlands into brilliant illumination. Hundreds of massive assault beasts were moving forward. Gunfire from the two forts was immediately redirected upon them, but though the ground shook and buckled under the bombardment, the creatures' armour was thick, and precious few of them fell.

Seth heard their support broods before he saw them, a chittering, chirring screeching, a darker blackness on the night, and a torrent of bodies with beating wings flashed in the searchlight beams.

Seth grinned with feral glee. It appeared his choice of death was to be dictated for him. The tyrannids were making another assault.

Appollus got his wish, though not for the reasons he had put forward.

Seth led half of his warriors in a charge into the tyrannids in an attempt to reach Sentor Jool, pre-empting the attack upon his forts. His men joyously abandoned their guns and took up chainswords and bolt pistols, rushing after their master into the fray.

Darkness made no difference to Seth. He killed in the light and he killed in the dark with equal efficiency. The night was the same as the day had been, save only that now upon his back, secured in a magnetic tube locked to his armour, was the reliquary of Amit and its precious cargo.

He let the Red Thirst slip free of all bonds. His teeth extended, digging into his lower gums. He salivated for blood, even for the vile ichors of the tyrannids. He would kill them all and then he would sate the lesser of Sanguinius' curses. That was his pledge to himself.

'By the Blood am I made strong!' he roared, gutting a genestealer. Its fellows ran at him, deadly claws extended. If a single one got within striking distance he was as good as dead. Seth laughed. None of them got close. He cleaved them in two. Bolt rounds from his honour guard punched them from their feet. His warriors ran beside him in a shallow spear tip, howling and roaring as they smote the foe. The last of his

Death Company gave out strangled cries as they bludgeoned their opponents to death. His battle-brothers barely had any more restraint. Harahel, First Company champion, was a snarling dervish. Belthiel the Librarian wielded his anger as a psychic bludgeon, smashing aside the enemy in wide swathes. Flesh Tearers Dreadnoughts stamped through the mass of tyranids, waist deep in lesser beings. Lightning claws spinning, they engaged the monstrous beasts of the enemy, coring deep, bloody holes in their chitinous armour. Stuttering light cast by the disruption fields of power weapons strobed the battlefield. Searing plasma blasts brought short noons to the dead of night.

‘We are wrath! We are fury!’ the Flesh Tearers chanted. ‘We are the blade of the angel, we are the death of the alien!’

Screaming, killing, the Flesh Tearers ripped through the phalanx of heavy assault creatures moving towards the forts. A few guns still fired up there. They were inconsequential. Fury carried them forward. Krak grenades jammed into bony hollows and breathing vents brought carnifexes low. Volleyed plasma pistol shots immolated trygons. To Seth’s left his men closed on a tervigon, riddling its birthing sac with bolt shells. Termagaunts flopped out, half alive, from the ruin of the alien womb, slain before they assumed full awareness. A dozen chainswords dipped in and out of the tervigon’s exposed guts, bringing the mighty creature to death.

The tyranids had adapted themselves for the Blood Angels’ propensity for violence. They had learned at an exponential rate all the weaknesses of their enemy, but their knowledge was generalised. They were not prepared for this charge. They were not prepared for the Flesh Tearers. The tyranids lumbered about, becoming entangled, attempting to make space for their weaponry, but the closely packed nature of the horde prevented them. They fired anyway, sending frenzied grubs, hypertrophic seed pods and acid sprays at Seth’s men, hitting their own kind instead. The organisms that made the tyranids’ munitions were programmed not to harm recognised phenotypes, but acids and pyrochemical mixtures knew nothing, and burned tyranids as easily as men.

Flaring chemical fire bathed the battleground in weird colours. Bone-dry soil turned into slurry with the spilling of so much xenos vitae.

Blood pounded in Seth’s skull to the rhythm of two hearts. ‘By his Blood are we made! By his Blood are we armoured! By his Blood shall we triumph! Forward, forward! To the Knights of Blood!’

Another monster died, and another. The noise of boltguns and more chanting came from a shock ridge ahead.

‘Sentor Jool!’ roared Seth. ‘Sentor Jool! I have come for you!’ With a surge of near ecstatic exhilaration, Seth ran at a massive carnifex, lopping off the snout barrel of its bonded cannon. The thing was powerful but slow, almost pecking at Seth with its crustacean’s claws. Seth was too fast. Two well-placed blows with his sword blinded the monster, and he ran up its shoulder, rode its frenzied bucking until he stood athwart its spine. Reversing Blood Reaver, he rammed it downward, struggling as the weapon skidded on the beast’s living shell. He fought with the eviscerator until it snagged on an edge of chitin and pulled forward, burrowing itself down into the beast’s back. The carnifex crashed forward, dead, and Seth leapt free.

Figures in silver and red appeared, intermingled with the aliens. Some moved to attack him. He parried the blows of one, shoving him back so that he disappeared into the press of the melee. He was forced to kill another. On he went, slaughtering everything in his path, until a ragged banner came into view, and a giant figure stood upon the ridge’s edge.

‘Sentor Jool!’ Seth called. He barged past a Knight of Blood, knocking the weapon from another’s hand. Jool roared and jumped down the slope, feet slamming into the ground before Seth. He swung his chainsword. Seth caught its edge upon Blood Reaver. The motors of their weapons whined as teeth tracks

jammed against one another.

‘Sentor Jool!’ said Seth. He threw back the other Chapter Master. ‘Dampen your fury!’

The Knight of Blood recovered and raised his weapon to strike again. Seth shouted back.

Jool halted, and lowered his sword. From head to foot he dripped with alien fluids. Rents in his armour fizzed with sealant foams. A sundered power cable sparked.

‘You deign to share the field with us, after all,’ said Jool. His voice strained with the effort of not leaping forward to attack Seth.

The fighting was abating around them. Knights of Blood formed a circle around the two Chapter Masters. Flesh Tearers matched their counterparts, all of them constantly in motion.

Seth reached up and tore his helm free. He had not realised in his fury that it was raining a salty, acidic - drizzle. He blinked the stinging liquid away from his eyes.

‘The tyranids are feasting. This world is lost,’ said Gabriel Seth. He too felt the urge to fight, to attack and kill the Knight of Blood, to cast aside all reason and end his life with one final, heroic duel. He kept his passions in check. He had something else in mind. ‘You can fight me, or we can fight them together.’

Jool growled. ‘I should kill you.’ He took a step forward. ‘The time for alliance is done. There is only blood.’ Jool’s men formed up around him. Seth’s Flesh Tearers responded in kind. Boltguns raised. The rage rose in them all. Fratricide was a heartbeat away.

Seth gunned Blood Reaver’s engine, and held it, ready for violence.

‘I was correct,’ said Jool thickly. ‘You and I are just the same. Such glorious slaughter we could have made, if only you had listened. Now it is too late.’

‘It is not!’ Seth roared. With a great effort of will, he threw down Blood Reaver, and tugged the tube from his back, knocking the top off and allowing Amit’s Reliquary to slide out into his hands.

‘I will not let the rage take me here,’ said Seth, holding out the reliquary. ‘I will not pointlessly die as a beast.’ At the sight of the reliquary, the anger of the others faltered. ‘I will not fight at the rage’s behest. I fight for Sanguinius. My death will count for something.’

Jool stared at the reliquary. His head bowed, his weapon wavered and lowered. ‘For the Great Angel,’ he said, his voice quiet. ‘We fight for the Imperium.’

‘Not for fury’s sake,’ said Seth. He held the reliquary high. As he did so, a clear light shone from within through the fretwork of the metal. At its touch, their anger bled away, and Flesh Tearers and Knights of Blood fell to their knees in wonder, leaving Jool and Seth standing alone. ‘I made a promise to the Master of the Blood Angels to safeguard this artefact. I intend to keep it,’ said Seth.

‘What do you suggest?’ said Jool.

‘Baal Primus is finished. I have called in my fleet to evacuate us. I will return this relic to its home in the Basilica Sanguinarum. I will allow you to join us, as you requested. Set aside your ban on fighting alongside others. Return with us to Baal, where we will die with purpose.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

PARADISE LOST

Piles of broken wings were heaped high like bizarre leaves from stone trees. The Walk of Angels had become a walk of death, and all its lofty heroes cast down from their plinths.

Gunfire riddled the podiums of the fallen statues, blasting apart stone brought from faraway worlds to grace the Arx Angelicum. Beauty had made her home there since the dawn of the Imperium, but she was driven out.

The Arx Angelicum burned. On every level of the towering fortress war raged. The tyranid aerial swarm, free to act once the void shield was down, beat back the defenders from the stepped outer galleries of the Arx Murus. Section by section, guns fell silent, and tyranid ground organisms were brought to bear. Carnifexes battered at the fortress' gates. Lithe-limbed genestealers climbed mirror-sheened walls. Haruspexes vomited cargoes of smaller beasts onto parapets manned only by corpses in power armour.

Shortly after the void shield fell, the Dome of Angels shattered. Weakened by acidic drool and weapons effusions, the transparisteel gave out under a bombardment spat out by convulsing weapons-tracts of the ships in orbit. There were too few Space Marines vessels left to prevent this. The war in space mirrored that upon the ground; the united front of the sons of Sanguinius was broken into myriad small actions. Seeing the weakness in cohesion between the Chapters, the hive mind had driven them apart, and was eliminating them one by one.

What reports made it to the strategium through the tyranid denial broadcasts spoke of Chapters shattered and battle-barges destroyed. The *Invictrix*, flagship of the Charnel Guard, was downed over Baal Secundus, the scattered remains of its hull burned in the Great Salt Wastes of Dante's birth. The Flesh Tearers *Victus* had broken flight and had not emerged from the far side of Baal Primus. All told a dozen battle-barges were verified destroyed, ten more were missing, presumed lost. Hundreds of other craft were gone. The entirety of the Golden Sons warfleet, whose auric vessels had patrolled the northern reaches of the galaxy since the 38th millennium, were shattered into gold-rich fragments orbiting Baal's outer worlds. Their fabled librarius was lost to the void. Their serfs were consumed by the hive mind, their battle-brothers reduced to a handful of scattered survivors. The Angels Excelsis had died in flames.

The Scions of Sanguinius were down to a sole battle cruiser limping away from the conflict. So it went on. Mortis mark after mortis mark came in, not the single runes that denoted the loss of a battle-brother, but rare and terrible symbols that spoke of the deaths of companies and of Chapters. The Angels Glorious, the Burning Blood, the Brothers of Jarad, wiped out without a sole survivor. The situation on Baal was little better. And as Dante's soul shook with each instance of dreadful news, so the Arx Angelicum rocked to the pounding of bio-artillery and ram-beasts hurled to their deaths from high orbit.

The time for tight cooperation between the Chapters was over, ended far more quickly than Dante had feared possible. The dwindling warriors defending the Arx against the swarms fell back on what they knew; fighting by Chapter, company and squad, until massive casualties rendered even these modest groupings irrelevant, and too often warriors found themselves alone to face the foe and the thirst before the end. Like hive world gangs, bands of survivors carved out territories to defend within the fortress monastery. In the Heavenward Redoubt a semblance of order remained, but outside the keep of the Arx the sons of the Great Angel were forced back corridor by corridor. No matter how many of the enemy they slew, there were always more, and so they were worn down, isolated and ultimately destroyed.

Although he was among the greatest military minds of his age, Dante could formulate no strategy against such attritional murder. Had the void shield not fallen the Chapters of the Blood might have persisted and eventually triumphed. It had been done before, on Macragge, but the Behemoth had been a modest shoaling compared to the Leviathan, and the void shield was gone.

Dante fought where he could not command. He vented his frustration personally, axe to flesh, against the beasts that would shatter his legacy. Hubris had damned him. He had fallen for the lies of his own legend. Behemoth had been driven back. Surely he, Dante, could do the same with Leviathan?

The tyranids were closing on the redoubt's gates. If the keep were to fall, the fight would be over. Strike teams fought on multiple levels, attempting to seal the ways up to the nerve centre of the Arx. He had awarded himself the most onerous sector as penance.

The Walk of Angels was the broadest, least defensible of the approaches to the redoubt's middle section. The far end was accessed from the plaza via the impressive Tribunalis Victorum, an architectural wonder become tactical liability. The left of the walk's curving length was open to the Well of Angels. Stained armourglass that had filled elegant traceries skidded treacherously underfoot. Flying tyranid beasts flew repeatedly at the gaps in the ruined windows. Most were shot down before they could fly through by heavy bolter turrets set into the buttresses outside. They faithfully chugged away, their ammunition feeds protected by feet of rockcrete and plasteel. Even so, several were gone, the turrets ripped free by suicidal attacks. The rest fired on, never tiring, their indefatigable machine-spirits smashing monsters from the air. The few flying creatures that crashed into the Walk of Angels alive were injured and easy prey for the defenders.

The Axe Mortalis buzzed, motes of dust bursting into nothing as Dante swept it through debris-choked air. A gargoyle, pathetic on the ground, died with a shriek and a burst of shattered atoms. He ran on, killing more maimed winged tyranids as he pounded towards the Arcus Elim. A tall, beautiful arch fashioned in the early days of the Chapter, it had admitted processions of the Blood Angels from the Tribunalis after every victory for eight millennia.

Dante glanced out into the Well of Angels. Teeth of glass rimmed the caldera where the remains of the Dome of Angels clung to the rock. The serene heart of the monastery was awhirl with flapping, screeching attack organisms. Weapons ensconced all around the volcano's throat fired endlessly into the swarm. The plaza was yards thick with tyranid dead, but there were not enough guns or enough bullets to kill the numberless millions of xenos still raining down on Baal.

A mixed group of Blood Angels, Angels Numinous and Blood Drinkers ran with Dante. Drafted mortals

and warrior blood thralls provided covering fire, their las-beams cracking down the way, felling gargoyles as they burst through into the walk. Another gargoyle skidded across the floor before Dante, its wing burned off. It screamed at him defiantly. He stamped its head flat as he ran.

Dante threw himself into the cover of the Arcus Elim's massive triple-lobed pillars. Angels bearing victory wreaths of green stone looked down with blank eyes, hands held out in blessing towards the long sweep of the Tribunalis Victorum. A hundred yards down the stairs warriors and four Dreadnoughts of the Red Wings held a barricade of smashed stonework against a seething mass of tyranids. No bolt missed a mark. Creatures were blown apart by the score, whole ranks of them blasted into gobbets of flesh and shards of bio-armour. Still they came on. So it had gone on for three days, since the tyranids had broken their way onto the landing below. The stairs were fully enclosed. The Red Wings were free from aerial attack. It was an excellent choke point under any other circumstances but they could not hold the line forever. They simply could not kill all the beasts sent against them.

A chime pinged in Dante's ear as another heavy bolter turret on the exterior of the walk fell silent. The walk would not stay defensible for long. The tyranids would break through, and the Red Wings would be cut off.

'Captain Dentinus, prepare to fall back,' voxed Dante.

The Red Wings sang as they fired. Their guns steamed from constant discharge. Dante could feel their rage, their desire to spring from cover and attack with axe and blade. The scions of Sanguinius were not made for this kind of war. Frustration worsened their rage.

'*We are holding them in place, my lord,*' insisted Dentinus. '*We can keep the stair free.*'

'You will fall back to the Portis Castellum,' said Dante. 'The walk is compromised. Its guns die. It must be sealed at this end, and the perimeter re-established at the entry to the redoubt. Prepare to fall back on my order.'

'*As you command, my lord,*' said Dentinus reluctantly.

A Blood Drinkers Techmarine worked quickly at the far support of the arch. He and his servitors had already prepared the column for demolition. A ring of melta flasks adhered to the stone with explosive putty, wires sprouting from their opened cases. It was an ugly executioner for such a work of beauty.

Dante moved aside to allow another Techmarine to get at the second pillar. He could not tell which Chapter he was from. His armour was covered in dust stuck to oil, his badge obscured. He could have been one of Dante's own.

The rest of the warriors with Dante arrayed themselves in a firing line at the top of the Tribunalis.

'Demolition is prepared, my lord,' voxed the Techmarine.

Dante walked to the centre of the line. 'Company! Stand ready to give fire. Dentinus, fall back. Now.'

The Red Wings loosed a few more shots, some tarrying at their stations, loath to leave the enemy alive. Those with presence of mind locked their bolters to their armour and hauled ammunition crates from dead resupply servitors and retreated under the cover of their fellows. The four Dreadnoughts were the last to leave, walking backwards up the stairs, their guns sweeping back and forth as they retreated.

'Open fire,' ordered Dante.

His mixed group shot over the heads of the Red Wings, holding the tyranids back with a storm of fire. The stairs were broad but steep. The Space Marines were able to keep up a constant fusillade until the Red Wings were close. They ceased for a moment as the seventy or so warriors ran between them, then opened up again.

'Dentinus, fall back to the Portis Castellum. Gather up the mortals from along the way. You may begin preparations at the Portis Castellum immediately. You will hold the line there.'

'My lord.'

The Red Wings streamed back towards the citadel, letting off opportunistic shots into the aerial swarm in the Well of Angels as they ran. Only when they had crossed the last step did the Dreadnoughts swivel their legs around, their torsos following, then break into a stone-shaking run.

‘Company,’ said Dante. ‘Fall back on my command, group by group. Covering fire protocol.’

The tyranids surged up the stairs. Hundreds died, but free of the punishing heavy weapons fire of the Red Wings Dreadnoughts they were able to draw closer to their enemy.

‘Group one, fall back!’ shouted Dante.

Half the Space Marines turned and ran after the Red Wings. With the volume of fire halved again, the tyranids came closer. Their breath steamed in the air. Their shrieks were deafening.

The first group of Space Marines reformed a hundred yards up the walk, ready to cover the others.

‘Group two, fall back!’ shouted Dante.

The remainder left. All gunfire in the walk ceased. The tyranids roared and poured up the stairs.

The second group continued running through the first, towards where the Red Wings were establishing a fresh barricade in front of the huge black metal gates of the Heavenward Redoubt. Weapons turrets over the gates came online, ready for the foe.

Hissing cries echoed up the Tribunalis. The first tyranids ran through the arch, into the guns of the waiting Space Marines.

‘My lord?’ said a Techmarine. He held up an detonator.

For eight thousand years the Arcus Elim had stood witness to the victories of the Blood Angels. How painfully fitting the last thing it should see was defeat.

‘Bring it down,’ said Dante.

The Techmarine’s thumb depressed the button.

The charges blew in horizontal columns of rock powder so symmetrical they could have been painted. The arch cracked, slumping towards its middle. Huge chunks of masonry jammed against each other, preventing its total collapse.

The first tyranids galloped under the arch, sharp hooves slipping on the polished floor beneath its cloak of debris.

‘Keep firing!’ someone shouted.

‘Heavy weapons, target the arch apex,’ ordered Dante.

Lascannons and missile launchers finished the demolition as the horde poured through.

With a wrenching creak, stone ground on stone and the Arcus Elim cracked down and apart. Chunks of masonry smashed into the tyranids, their carvings shattering on the gallery floor. A rush of tumbling rock debris pounded down from above and sealed the way to the Tribunalis.

The few tyranids who made it through were gunned down.

The company let out a ragged cheer. The way to the redoubt was blocked.

Dante remained silent. He stared at the billowing dust. There was no victory in that moment. It was Arnupul, Hollonan, Rogets Gift and Cryptus all over again. A pathetic gesture, a pebble placed in the path of the flood, and worse for being lesser than all those that had gone before. Dante let his men cheer, but they might as well save their breath and cheer at the last tyranid they downed before their heads were torn free of their necks. It would mean as much.

Silently, the Chapter Master turned on his heel and strode back to the Portis Castellum.

Dante waited impatiently while forge thralls worked on his armour. Blue sparks fizzed from arc welders. Plasma torches warmed the ceramite to temperatures deadly to mortals. The pristine gold was dented and covered in lubricant, sealant foam, sacred healing oils, alien blood and rock dust. These running repairs

were all that kept it going.

Captain Adanicio addressed a gathering of battle-worn captains from numerous Chapters.

The strategium shook. Dust sifted from the ceiling, interfering with the tactical hololith. The Arx Angelicum took centre stage in the light map, its black rock described in blue angular lines. A wash of red lapped around its feet. More red dotted its ramparts and its galleries. It was a giant corpse infested by maggots. Every blob represented a brood of tyranids. Each brood could be dozens strong. The blobs ran into each other, a blanket smothering the life out of the fortress monastery. Individual components in the red were indistinct unless zoomed in to the finest level.

Then I should go out into the thick of them, boltgun in hand, and count them myself, thought Dante furiously.

‘The lower halls are still contested,’ Adanicio was saying. ‘The Angels Numinous hold the Gallery of Arts, but they are losing numbers all the while. We have major problems here, in the Well of Angels. The Verdis Elysia is overrun on all but the ninth circle. We retake the plaza only to lose it to the enemy daily. I suggest we abandon it. Until now, all enemy reinforcements have been coming down the Well of Angels, where our guns might take a toll on them, and via the Portis Gehenna. The enemy are making more inroads. Three hours ago, tyranid burrowing organisms penetrated the Arx Murus here and here.’ Bright white tunnels pushed their way through the thickness of the volcanoes’ walls. ‘They outflanked us at the Elohim Gate and Gates of Dondris. Soon, they will have them open.’

‘How did this happen?’ said Dante angrily. ‘Where is Zargo? Where are the Angels Encarmine? They were tasked with holding the fourth sector.’

Adanicio glanced at Captain Sendroth of the Blood Angels Ninth.

‘Answer me!’ said Dante angrily.

‘Zargo died an hour ago, my lord, along with two thirds of his Chapter,’ said Sendroth. ‘The Angels Encarmine are devastated. Half of them could not restrain themselves at the loss and let the thirst take them. They killed many before they fell. There are barely a company’s worth of them left.’

‘Were you not informed, my lord?’ said Adanicio. ‘I sent out runners.’

Dante shook his head. ‘They never reached me.’

‘Without a wider vox network, we are doomed,’ said Captain Illius of the Sanguine Host.

‘We are attempting to boost our vox gain to break through the tyranid jamming field, but their methods have become more sophisticated since we last fought them,’ said Incarael. ‘They seem to know which frequencies to shut down as soon as we open them up. Only brute force will overcome it, but when we push, they push back harder. Our capacity to overcome their denial broadcast is lessening. They make a priority of our vox and augur arrays.’

‘Our hardlines are being targeted, along with our energy network. We have power outages in every area except the upper levels of the redoubt and the librarius,’ said Quaeston, forge master of the Blood Drinkers. ‘They are deliberately crippling our communications.’

‘So soon we shall be deaf and blind,’ said Dante angrily.

The representation of the Arx glowed solidly, challenging Dante to find a solution. He could see none. All but the upper levels of the Arx Murus and the redoubt itself was contested or overrun. The galleries on the mountain side were lost. A handful of bastions held out. They were isolated islands in an ocean of xenofoms, though their guns kept firing for now. Dante had not looked outside the fortress monastery to see what awaited them in the desert.

‘The redoubt is our last refuge,’ said Dante. At his words, Adanicio highlighted the Heavenward Redoubt. The castle keep of the Arx was a tall drum built into the murus, topped by the Citadel Reclusiam. ‘There have been no incursions within the walls here, unless there are more bad tidings I am

unaware of.'

'The redoubt remains inviolate,' said Adanicio. 'For now.'

'Then we must withdraw again,' said Sendroth. 'Bring all our warriors into the keep. Our forces are being isolated and cut off. We will be shattered, and eliminated piecemeal. Concentrated within the citadel, we may hold out for months if need be.'

'Until help arrives,' said Sendroth.

'If help arrives,' said Captain Borgio leadenly. The master of recruits had seen most of the Blood Angels scouts die over the last week.

'What is the situation beyond the walls?' asked Dante.

'Skyfall has been lost,' said Adanicio. 'Captain Zedrenael is dead, of that we are certain. We have lost contact completely with Baal Primus. Intermittent contact from Baal Secundus suggests Angel's Fall still stands, as does the astropathic relay under the Carmine Blades. Elements of the fleet continue to harry the swarm in the void, but their combat effectiveness has now hit the steeper slope of decline, and will soon dwindle to nothing. Mephiston has not been heard from. We fear he is also dead.'

'All is not lost. With the relay intact, we can yet summon help,' said Malphas. The Chapter Master of the Exsanguinators was barely holding the thirst in check. The whites of his eyes were as red as his armour.

'If there is any help to come,' said Captain Essus of the Blood Swords.

'We cannot rely on help. We must look to our own,' said Dante. 'There is precious little on our worlds for the tyranids to harvest. They will run out of monsters to throw at us eventually. All we must do is persist. We have the citadel. There remain several thousand of us. We have already slaughtered millions of them. By the Blood, we shall endure.'

'By the Blood, we shall endure,' repeated the others.

'Give the order to fall back to the citadel now,' Dante commanded. 'All warriors are to salvage whatever they can and bring it back with them. We have lost too many of our supplies already. Whatever occurs, this will be a long siege.'

The servitors and thralls finished with Dante's armour and withdrew.

'Now, Adanicio, today's casualties.'

Adanicio began the solemn listing of the dead, as he had every day since the invasion began. As he spoke, Ordamael and his Chaplain brethren chanted prayers for the souls of the lost.

The list was lengthy. Dante struggled to listen. Light-headedness robbed him of concentration. He swayed on his feet. Adanicio's voice faltered and stopped. Pressure built behind Dante's eyes. An unnatural silence fell on the strategium. He felt as if he could not breathe, that the weight in his head was sinking into his throat and compressing his lungs. For a moment he thought he alone was afflicted, but it was not so.

'What new evil of the tyranids is this?' gasped Malphas.

'This is not the tyranids,' said Essus.

All at once, the strategium servitors began to moan and jabber in myriad tongues. Something evil swept through the gathering, causing men to fall into convulsions and Space Marines to drop to their knees with grunts of unaccustomed pain. The few psykers present in the strategium, mortal and Adeptus Astartes alike, screamed in agony. Thunderclaps sounded outside the monastery, and the Arx shook. Sparks fell from the ceiling. Machines gave out with bursts of fire. The world vibrated. A dreadful shriek penetrated from outside, going on and on.

Dante staggered across a heaving floor, though if it moved or if it were a product of his mind he could not say.

'Open the shutters!' he commanded. He grabbed at chairs, statues, railings, anything to keep himself

upright as the world convulsed under him. He staggered through the wide strategium to the far wall where, in more peaceful times, huge windows looked out over the dunes of Baal.

‘My lord, the tyranids—’ began Adanicio.

Dante rounded on him, his fury potent enough to match the outrage depicted on Sanguinius’ golden face. ‘Do it. Now!’

The Arx swayed impossibly; nothing short of exterminatus by cyclonic torpedo had the force to rock a mountain like that, and yet they were still alive. This was not a physical phenomenon.

The jabbering of the servitors grew louder. The awful shriek competed with it in volume.

Adanicio pulled away cowering serfs from the desk that operated the shutters and overrode the servitors responsible for their operation.

A bass rumbling cut into the infernal howling. Massive slabs of rock fifty yards thick slipped away from the windows, allowing daylight into the strategium.

Dante wove unsteadily to the glass. For the first time in centuries, he felt nauseous, sickened to the depths of his soul by whatever was unfolding outside. He slammed into the armourglass, armoured fingers scraping on it as he struggled to remain upright.

The rock shutters withdrew, leaving Dante staring out of a deep slot onto the outside world.

The sky was on fire.

Lightning stabbed down in a frenzy from churning clouds. Tyranid feeding tubes broke and fell. A violent wind swept across the land.

Unclean energies spread through the sky, engulfing ships in writhing wreaths of hellish light. They burst and fell, burning with green flame. Reality quivered like a struck gong. All across the deserts of Baal, the tyranids stopped, and turned as one to face the heavens, their mouths open as wide as they would go.

The awful shriek came from a billion alien throats.

The hive mind was screaming.

Baal endured a cataclysm unfolding across the entire galaxy.

Darkness came to Baal as a shock of purple fire. The three worlds were engulfed in a haze of boiling energy that first swallowed the stars then obscured each of the trio from the other. On Baal Secundus, the astropaths of the Blood Angels, sheltered behind the ceramite wall of Carmine Blades, cried out and perished, leaving only a handful alive to experience the full horror of the warp unleashed. Deep in the Ruberica, Mephiston’s coven of psykers reeled. Navigators aboard the embattled ships were blinded by soulfire. Librarians fighting in the Arx dropped convulsing to the ground, their teeth shattering under the force of their spasms.

Every mind felt the touch of the warp, whether great or small. Being blessed with a portion of their father’s psychic might, the scions of Sanguinius were all troubled. Guns dropped from numb hands as visions of wars lost long ago filled their minds, and the rage stirred in the breasts of every one. The Tower of Amareo resounded to frenzied calls for blood and flesh.

But the sons of the Great Angel were less afflicted than their foe.

Screaming warp fire crashed against the gestalt soul of the tyranids, catching it unawares. The delicate synaptic web that bound its numberless minds into one being shrivelled like thread in a fire. Never before had the hive mind been so grievously wounded. Its control over its trillions of bodies was violently disrupted. Hive fleet was cleaved from hive fleet, brood from brood so catastrophically that for a moment the hive mind ceased to be. It recovered quickly, diminished but alive, but that moment seemed to the hive mind an eternity of darkness. Trillions of its creatures permanently lost touch with the hive mind, and were reduced to unthinking animals.

For the first time in its existence, the hive mind tasted death.

In the Baal system hundreds of thousands of tyrannids died, their brain stems reduced to smoking mulch by psychic feedback. Aggressive void predators became drifting hulks in the space of an instant. In the strategium Dante collapsed, unconscious. Thousands of Space Marines of the Blood followed him. Many awoke with no memory of who they were, their scarred minds full of visions of Sanguinius' death. The end of their own lives in madness and blood beckoned.

The Cicatrix Maledictum had opened.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A MESSAGE

Master Jerron Leeter glanced behind him before placing his hand upon the activation pad for the astropathicum portal. He feared the sight of his protectors. Not for their savagery, but because they would try to stop him.

‘I have been down here plenty of times since the rift,’ he said nervously to himself. ‘I have every right to be here. The Carmine Blades will not remark on me going to my station.’

The door opened silently. Chilled air blew outward. On the other side of the threshold was a deep quiet; astropaths worked better without distraction.

Jerron Leeter glanced around a room he had shared with his fellows for a century, but which they had never seen. The numbers of astropaths who retained the faculty of vision was so microscopically small nobody bothered to record it, so far as he knew. He regarded it as a gift from the Emperor. Being able to see did not seem like much of a blessing right then.

His colleagues remained in the sending cradles where they had died. The Carmine Blades were good protectors, but unsentimental. It was debatable which was worst; the smell of refrigerated meat going bad in the frigid room, or the twisted looks of horror on their sunken faces. Astropath Minoris Daneel in particular looked horrifying. He had screamed so loud his jaw had dislocated.

Leeter felt guilty. It was he that had insisted that the astropaths be on duty permanently, despite the pain inflicted on them by the tyranids’ presence, in case a message got through. He had hooked them up to stimm-laced nutrient feeds so they could work without rest to pierce the shadow in the warp. For this task they had worked in unity, minds blended. Leeter’s little choir was therefore as vulnerable as it could possibly be when the rift opened and reality screamed. He had been with them. He had felt their souls ripped from their bodies. He had sensed their total extinction.

Guilt was a weakness. At least, so the priests said. They would say that the astropaths died doing their duty as was expected. It felt like his crime anyway. No matter how he turned the problem about in his head, he could see no way to prevent what had happened. It didn’t help.

He moved carefully, so as not to disturb Horden Gennot, the only other living soul in the astropathicum. It was impossible of course; Gennot’s ears were as sharp as a blood eagle’s, but he had to try.

‘Master?’ Gennot spoke in a whisper. Of the seven astropaths in the relay, Leeter, Gennot and Anama Tuk had survived the opening of the Great Rift. Anama Tuk was driven insane, and Leeter had strangled her three days after the skies began to bleed, fearful that her untethered mind might pave the way for daemonic intrusion.

Gennot had fared better. He at least lived, and was sane, though the shock of the warp storm had wounded some fundamental part of his body, and he was too weak to be removed from his cradle. Leeter alone had come through unscathed.

Relatively. His mind’s eye harboured painful after-images that nibbled at his sanity. Bits of his soul were sore, others were fragile, some felt like they were no longer his, but had come from somewhere else. If he were truthful, he did not think he could trust himself completely any more.

He ignored Gennot, going to his sending cradle to prepare it for his work. He set up sensor pads he would press against his shaven head, he cleaned the neural shunts and feeding tubes that plugged into the sockets in his arms.

‘Master? What are you doing?’ said Gennot.

‘I have come to tidy a little,’ Leeter lied. ‘My strength has returned. My cradle is a mess, and it is time to remove these bodies. I thought this small work was a good place to start. It will calm my spirit.’

Gennot cocked his head. The spare light of the astropathicum caught on the metal orbs filling his eye sockets – richly worked gifts of gold from the Blood Angels. ‘Then why are you alone? Where are your attendants?’

Leeter continued working. ‘Sleeping,’ he lied.

‘Your tone betrays you, Astropath Prime,’ said Gennot. His injuries made him bold. Before the rift, he would never have spoken to Leeter that way. Leeter supposed he had nothing to lose now. ‘You are going to attempt to penetrate the veil.’

Leeter sucked air through his teeth. He paused in his preparations. As soon as he flicked the toggles to bring the psy-amplifiers online, the game would be up. He realised then he was lying for his own benefit, putting off the truth of what he was to attempt, not to spare Gennot, but because he was terrified.

‘You are as perceptive as ever,’ he said, bowing his head. ‘I am going to. I have to try. Can you feel it? The shadow in the warp has lifted for a while. This is our chance to call for help.’

‘I heard the enemy scream,’ said Gennot with a shudder. ‘I never want to hear anything like that again.’

‘Well,’ said Leeter. He sighed, and was aghast at the tremble of fear that shook him. ‘The hive mind is wounded, but I feel it coalescing in the immaterium. If we are going to call for aid, it must be done now.’

‘The risks of a sending during a warp storm are astronomical,’ said Gennot wearily. ‘There has not been a storm of this magnitude ever, as far as I know. You will die. You may kill us all in the process.’

‘I am aware of the risks.’ Leeter laughed a little hysterically. ‘What was merely impossible before has become incredibly dangerous instead.’ He punched up the psy-amplifiers. The dull voice of the machine’s spirit reported its readiness. The whine of machines built, passing beyond hearing into a realm only psykers like Leeter and Gennot could sense. Servants usually did all this. His fellow astropaths would find it impossible. Being able to observe their servants at work gave Leeter a much broader understanding of how the astropathicum functioned than most astropaths possessed.

He checked over the machinery. It was working at optimal capacity. Thank the Emperor the relay’s geothermal plant was still online.

Before he climbed into his own couch, he activated the psy-dampers on Gennot’s station. There was no need to subject Gennot to what Leeter would experience.

‘Master Leeter, don’t do that. I should help you.’ Gennot managed to struggle up onto his elbow.

‘You are improving,’ said Leeter. He plugged the various shunts and spikes into his interface ports with

unhurried efficiency. 'I am glad.' His limbs tingled with the urge to rush, to get it over and done with. He made himself take his time. 'But you are still weak.'

'I can help. Deactivate the damper. Let me boost your sending.'

'No,' said Leeter. He pushed the last spike home into the socket at the base of his skull. All this extra machinery was necessary to overcome the baleful influence of the Red Scar. It had always been onerous to use; now he hoped the relay's booster array would increase his chances of getting a message out.

To get a message out. Not to survive. He did not expect to live through the next ten minutes.

'The Blood Angels will need at least one living astropath,' he said, as calmly as he could. 'Goodbye, Gennot.'

He flicked on the null sound field, shutting out Gennot's voice, and eased himself into the sending trance.

Leeter was skilled. Unreality opened gladly to him.

Hell awaited him. The warp had gone from unnatural calm under the influence of the shadow to a raging tempest. The hive mind skulked, wounded, at the edge of his perception, the shadow it cast in the warp blasted into raggedness by a boiling seethe of soul-killing energy. Whirling eddies dragged at his soul. Things prodded at the skin of purity the Emperor's protection afforded him. It was rare to see the truth of the warp so clearly, the things that lived in it, the horror it held – so rare most astropaths below Leeter's grade could safely be kept in ignorance of the warp's true nature. But he knew.

Looking at the state of the immaterium, he doubted that the nature of the warp would remain secret for long. It would be impossible to conceal any longer.

It hurt to be in there. Agony that he could not describe in human terms pulled at him, teasing apart the fibres of his being. A roaring red pillar of rage battered at him, spatially close, he thought, though the geography of the immaterium made location and distance in the material realm impossible to judge accurately. There was no coherency to anything, all was in flux, and, most troubling of all, the brilliant, soul-searing light of the Astronomican was nowhere to be seen.

Has Terra fallen? he wondered, his fear growing. *Is the Emperor dead?*

The message he had carefully formulated would not take shape in his mind. He could not send it forth. Every attempt to make solid the metaphors he held in his imagination failed. His visualisations melted before they were born, or went bad, becoming abominations that mocked him before dissolving into the sea of souls.

If he could not send, then he must receive. His heart sank. This was it. Exposing his mind to receive messages would kill him.

Master Leeter had never neglected his duty.

With a brief prayer to the Emperor, Jerron Leeter opened his mind to the immaterium. He only hoped there was something to hear.

Evil voices screamed out their hunger for human souls. Death screams of worlds rippled the fabric of reality. The cries of the damned haunted breathless winds. Things caught sight of the candle of his soul, and swam towards him.

The fragments of a million frantic sendings skated over his perception, blasted into incomprehensible pieces by the warp storm and the wild temporal disruption it engendered, so that only the fear that propelled them was apparent.

Something was coming for him. He felt it follow the trail of his being in the warp, sniffing at his essence. He did not have long. He concentrated harder.

There was a purer presence moving out there, a holy presence, perhaps a focused major choir of his own kind.

The thing was nearing. He should pull out, but he had to see.

There was a light, lesser than the Astronomican, but of the same purity, singing the same message over and over again.

With growing wonder, Jerron processed the message, decoding in-warp as he received it. Relief flooded him, and joy.

He sent a simple reply, blasted from his being with all the force of his soul, a simple composition, two word signs and the badge of the Chapter, infused with great urgency.

+Save Baal.+

And then the thing had him.

Hajjin had been fifth sergeant of the Second Company of the Carmine Blades for a long time. Among his peers he was a warrior of renown. He had skinned his first man long before the Death Games. He had fought on Haldroth at his father's side against men and beasts both before the coming of the Angels and his ascension to their heaven. Once his body had been changed and his loyalties switched from tribe to Emperor, he had proved himself a dozen times over. When finally his carapace had been awarded in the Flaying Rite, he had not cried out at the priest's knife, and thereafter he had demonstrated his worthiness to wear the warsuit within days.

He had lived four hundred years. He had known the Carmine Blades by the name of the Swords of Haldroth. He had been there the day the Redeemer of the Lost had come and changed their Chapter forevermore, and that earned him as much awe as mistrust. Hajjin's skill with a blade was second to none; his brothers looked up to him, his commanders respected him, his enemies feared him. Yet he had never expected to become Chapter Master.

Now he was.

It was an office with a short tenure.

There were one hundred and fifty-seven Carmine Blades left alive upon Baal Secundus. Eight hundred of them had come to answer the call of Commander Dante. There had been much debating in the House of Long Bones as to whether to answer at all. Hajjin had said no, stating their loyalties to the Blood Angels were too new, but his was a belligerent Chapter. Young blood outnumbered old blood, and the young blood did not remember the time before. Votes had been cast in favour of intervention. Firstblood Kaan, their Master, had been bound by the will of his brothers.

Nearly all of the Carmine Blades had come to Baal.

And now Hajjin was Firstblood, first among equals, but lord nonetheless. His was a small kingdom that grew smaller every day.

'I apologise, bringer of dreams,' he said, giving the old name, the one they had used before they had known it was Sanguinius who brought them their visions, and not the wild gods of Haldroth, 'that I do not feel the honour in my office that I should.' He finished his prayer, and returned to his vigil over the blasted land.

The astropathic relay of the Blood Angels hid itself at the top of the world. Baal Secundus had no axial tilt, its seasons instead driven by the complicated series of eclipses imposed upon it by its brother and sister. At the pole, where the relay was located, neither day nor night ruled. A perpetual gloaming had the region under its spell. This was the kingdom of shadows.

The mountains the relay occupied were small in height and extent, a geological afterthought of cracked brown rock. Arid boulder fields spread around the mountain's feet. Dirty ice streaked with sand skulked in the lee of large outcrops so the wind could not strip it away. It was a rough land grown recently rougher, for new, angular shapes had joined the eroded stones: the corpses of hundreds of thousands of tyrannids.

Forty-nine times the tyranids had thrown themselves at the astropathic relay. Forty-nine times the Carmine Blades had repelled them. The base of its walls were choked with the dead. The rough camp of refugee mortals who had come begging for shelter was a pounded area of fabric tatters and metal scrap to the east. Spent ammunition casings were heaped high around the relay's autocannon turrets.

Each assault had cost the Carmine Blades more of their brothers. Their ammunition dwindled, their officers were felled, their heroes slaughtered. The Carmine Blades did not falter in their duty. They understood the sky-talkers must live.

Forty-nine times. Until the void had opened up, exposing its guts, and the creatures had stopped coming. Hajjin watched. There was no movement on the ground. There had been none for many days.

'Firstblood.' Sergeant Konoko saluted his leader, right fist clanging on his left shoulder. 'All is quiet in the south. The chimneys no longer belch their smoke. I see no ships in the void.'

'You see no void,' corrected Hajjin. He jerked his helm's muzzle up at the flat mauve sky, where ribbons of gold moved in painful whorls.

'Is it over then, Firstblood?'

'No,' said Hajjin. 'It is not over. Something has changed.'

'Heja,' said Konoko. 'You speak truthfully. When they attacked, they did so without sense. Have the Blood Angels won, do you think? Is this flatness in the sky their doing?'

'They are strange but they are not sorcerers. Anyway, how could they have won? Could they truly accomplish that?' said Hajjin. 'No. The sky is not the sky. It is a window onto the spirit lands. The change in the sky broke the mind of the Devourer. Warpcraft. A sorcerer's work.' Hajjin would have asked his Librarians, they might have known, or the Techmarines, they had knowledge no others did, learned on the planet of the machine priests, but they were all dead. 'That is not the end of something. It is a beginning. A bad one.'

'For now we live, by the Angel's will,' said Konoko.

They made fists, and bashed their wrists together.

'By the Angel's will.'

'Then your orders, Firstblood.' Konoko bowed. They were lodge-brothers, followers of the same totem. Konoko and he had jested with each other a great deal, until yesterday. There was no friendly mockery in his bow. Konoko had only respect for him. Hajjin felt a pang of regret that it should be so.

'Have the men rest and repair their wargear as best they can. Go to the vox station and see if you can raise anyone.'

'We have heard nothing from the other Chapters on this world,' said Konoko. 'I try every third hour.'

'It does not follow they are all dead,' said Hajjin. 'Find out. And bring me the sky-talker, it is time they attempted their prayers again.'

'I need not.' Konoko pointed down the rampart. 'He is coming to you.'

Hajjin turned round. Master Leeter was indeed walking towards them. He was ailing. He staggered, his left shoulder hunched high.

'Something is wrong,' said Hajjin. He pushed past Konoko. His boots crunched on chunks of the tyranid dead.

'Ngggn,' said Leeter. He held out a clawed hand towards Hajjin. 'He... He is...'

His eyes were alight with unnatural fire, and his arms squirmed bonelessly.

'Tyranid evil,' said Konoko. He raised his bolter. Hajjin put out a hand to stop him firing.

'He is witch-touched.' He glanced at the sky. 'Did you make a prayer, astropath?'

Leeter nodded. He fell forward. Hajjin caught him. The astropath's face was crawling, reshaping itself.

'He is a fool,' said Konoko. 'Something is trying to get out though his flesh. We should kill him now.'

‘Wait!’ commanded Hajjin. ‘Was there an answer?’

Leeter nodded again. ‘He is...’ He swallowed hard. His jaws clicked. His eyes were swimming, changing colour. ‘He is coming!’ he said.

‘Who is coming, old man?’ said Hajjin, though he was at least three centuries older than the creature he held in his arms. Veins pulsed hard in the man’s neck. Hajjin struggled to concentrate on his words.

The human frothed at his mouth, white foam spilled from between his lips.

‘G-G-G-G—’ he said. His back arched, his teeth clamped together. A monstrous growl issued from his throat. His flesh writhed under his robes.

‘Firstblood!’ said Konoko. He backed up, gun raised.

‘Emperor save you,’ Hajjin said. He slipped his knife from its scabbard into Leeter’s throat. Blood poured from his neck. Hajjin’s mouth watered.

‘Do not!’ warned Konoko. ‘It is unclean.’

‘I was not going to.’ Hajjin lowered Leeter’s corpse to the ground. ‘From respect.’ He looked at Leeter thoughtfully. ‘There is no more danger here.’

‘Who is coming?’ asked Konoko. He moved forward, gun still up, and prodded Leeter’s body with his foot.

Hajjin looked to the sky. ‘Who indeed?’



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE PENITENT'S DUE

Ka'Bandha fell through the hidden spaces between worlds. The occulted gears of creation rushed by him. In the machineries of being were the inner secrets of the universe displayed to him. The daemonkin of Tzeentch would have damned a dozen eternities for a glimpse of what he saw, but Ka'Bandha did not care for knowledge. The things on display were valueless to him, and the wonders of infinity whirled by unappreciated.

Ka'Bandha fell forever and for no time at all, until a wave of change rippled out through the multi-dimensional space he infected, upsetting the delicate workings of infinite, interleaved universes.

Ka'Bandha howled in triumph. The promised storm had been unleashed.

Far from Baal, at Cadia, Abaddon the Despoiler achieved goals he had pursued since the Horus Heresy. Reality split as faultlines closed millions of years ago were rent wide. Isolated warpstorms and anomalies spread their arms, reaching for the burning might of the warp. The Eye of Terror vomited its diabolical energies across the firmament. The raging storm it unleashed devoured tens of thousands of star systems. Millions of worlds were consumed. Races that had never known the wrath of man or the taint of Chaos were expunged in an instant. Imperial worlds fell by the score. Many thousands not destroyed outright were plagued by hordes of daemons, their psykers' minds ripped open to allow the fell beings of the empyrean to walk among mortal populations. A warp storm of a size not seen since the Emperor took to the Golden Throne raged across the breadth of the galaxy. A billowing wave of madness engulfed space, travelling far faster than time and distance should have allowed. In the empyrean the Astronomican flickered and died. Rains of blood fell on terrified people on worlds thousands of light years from the Cadian Gate.

All creation rocked. In the no-spaces between realities, the rift was felt. In places far distant to the reality of man, strange beings dreamed of fire and blood.

Old Night, a source of hazy myth and fear to the peoples of the 41st millennium, was reborn.

Ka'Bandha roared joyously at its return.

The daemon recovered from his endless fall, beat his wings, and flew for a weakness in the fabric of all things. A single swipe of his axe split space-time, exploiting a faultline opened by the Cicatrix

Maledictum. Ka'Bandha emerged into the material universe high over Baal Primus as the rift split the sky and the roiling energies of Chaos spread like a slick of burning promethium over the imperturbable depths of space.

The red world of Baal was before him. His promised prize was so close, and yet he could not reach it.

The storm was yet to engulf Baal. Without its vitalising power to sustain Ka'Bandha the void enforced its iron laws of cause and effect upon his body. His unreal being thrilled with electric agonies as the laws of physics sought to deny his existence. Mephiston could not prevent his entry to the world of dust and flesh, but he had damaged Ka'Bandha's form in the attempt. The energies that made his corpus had not knitted correctly. He had a limited amount of time to exist in mundane reality.

Gripped by hate for the Chief Librarian, he reached a clawed hand for Baal, howling soundlessly, for it lay frustratingly beyond his grasp and no exertion of will would bring it nearer. The storm was maddeningly close. Bathed in its energy, he might force a path to Baal. It was not to be. As the wavefront of the Cicatrix Maledictum rushed to engulf the Red Scar, Ka'Bandha was already falling.

The void could not kill him, but nor did it care to bend its rules to suit his whim. Giant wings thrashing helplessly at airless space, Ka'Bandha fell with increasing speed down the gravity well of Baal Primus.

The space between the three worlds was a glorious battleground. Ka'Bandha greatly approved of the slaughter he witnessed. Shattered tyranid ships filled the vacuum with spilled fluids. Space Marine craft burned in their own venting atmospheres. Here were blood and skulls aplenty for Lord Khorne.

As Ka'Bandha fell closer to Baal Primus' chilly surface, the Great Rift boiled in-system. An invisible psychic shockwave ran before it, disrupting the battle as it slammed into the monumental soul of the hive mind. Ka'Bandha laughed to hear the bio-ships screaming as their psychic web was shattered. He eyed them covetously. Such giant skulls the ships possessed, all worthy offerings for the Lord of Blood.

They were, as yet, out of reach. As the baleful light of the warp rubbed out the stars, reality became more amenable to Ka'Bandha's being, but still he could not fly. He was sucked down through a raging maelstrom of combat that turned still as the rift opened. Space Marine ships firing on living craft were suddenly silenced. Huge, slug-like hive ships convulsed, pulping their internal structures. Kraken ships driven mad tore out their own eyes with thrashing tentacles. Bioplasmic drives winked out. Hunter-killers turned on each other in a frenzy of bloodletting. The agony of the hive mind was an exquisite pleasure to the daemon; battling it would have been finer. Both war and pain were denied him as the monumental intellect driving the hive fleet shattered and went dark.

Ka'Bandha fell unnoticed, his huge form a speck amid the giant ships of the warring fleets. He raged at both sides as he plummeted, furious he could attack neither. Tyranid craft wallowed helplessly as he rushed by, ignorant of him while the hive mind underwent its small death.

Baal was denied to him. The war in the void was not his to fight. Raging, he turned his attention upon the onrushing moon. Fury turned to amusement as he spied the battle upon the surface.

Trailing the fires of atmospheric re-entry, Ka'Bandha rushed towards the ground, a furious comet heralding the opening of the Great Rift and the beginning of the Noctis Aeterna.

'Thunderhawks are en route to your position and will extract you within twenty minutes, Chapter Master.'

Seth fought with redoubled fury. His men and the Knights of Blood warred side by side. Arranging the evacuation had taken too long. Fighting free of the swarm around Baal and sailing for Baal Secundus had taken the *Victus* several hours. Precious time bled away with the blood of his men.

He and Jool held out in the fortress of Wrathful Vigilance. On the metallic mountain spur opposite, Furious Sentinel burned.

The tyranids scaled the Necklace, numerous as the extinct ants of ancient Earth. They poured into the cavities of the downed orbitals. The ground already vibrated to the drumming of a million alien hooves pounding through the passages.

Nothing was left. Only tyranids and Seth remained. The giant filaments of feeding tubes rose up to the sky all around their position. The swarms attacking them were reinforced by others diverted from battles won. There was such order to their armies. They marched in perfect patterns. Like a vortex described by grains of sand, they circled around the last fortress of Baal Primus, queues of xenos waiting patiently to die stretched from the horizon to the fort.

The big guns were silent. Their armour was all lost. A handful of Dreadnoughts fought alongside a few hundred Space Marines. Makeshift walls of salvaged ancient scrap collapsed under the weight of the alien dead. 'Gaunts, genestealers and warriors poured through multiple breaches. The hive mind held back its larger creatures in a show of biological parsimony. Seth would have seen contempt in the move were it any other species, but behind it was merely simple, brute economics. The larger strains cost more in resources and time to grow. The smaller beasts would do the job just as well.

If the hive mind thought the Flesh Tearers were finished, Gabriel Seth would show it otherwise.

'Fall back to the tower,' he voxed. He dodged a swooping shrike, gunning it down as it flapped its leathery wings and rose up and away. He wielded his eviscerator one-handed, spinning the heavy weapon around with practised expertise. With every pass the limbs of tyranids fell bleeding. He did not linger to finish those he maimed, but pressed onward to the centre point of the fortress from where his remaining warriors would be evacuated.

The forts were constructed around ancient bastions of the fallen orbital. His Techmarines had found the two virtually intact under layers of accreted soil and debris. Patched up, surrounded by a perimeter wall, they had performed well as strongpoints until now.

Seth barrelled through a knot of 'gaunts, slashing and shooting a dozen to death as he tore up the inclined ramp leading to the fort.

'Follow me! By the Blood, follow me! To Baal! To Baal! All here is lost!' he roared.

As he went, his men abandoned their positions to fall in behind him, firing as they ran. He left the last mortals to their fate on the walls. Some fled. Some remained and bravely manned the guns, others ran, screaming. Nobody would remember either their bravery or their cowardice.

Major breaches peppered the walls behind Seth, more being forced as they ran. The ten yards between wall and bastion was filling with alien warbeasts. Guns ran dry, hundreds of creatures were blasted to pieces. There were so many of them, Seth could have dropped a lance strike on the site and watched the crater fill in seconds with alien monsters to replace the dead.

Some of his men did not follow in his wake. The thirst was on them all, driving them insane. Only those around Seth and the sacred reliquary kept their minds. Too many of them plunged headlong into the Black Rage. They remained where they were, abandoning their weapons to batter creatures to death with their fists.

A Flesh Tearer's Black Rage was terrible to behold, more savage and devastating than that of their brother Chapters, quicker to rise, harder to fight off. Seth left his warriors to their fate. They would die as they had lived, in service to the Emperor of Mankind. That was enough.

Biomunitions screamed through the air, in some cases literally so, their vestigial mouths shrieking out inconceivable pain. Something the size of a man's head exploded on the bastion's wall close by Seth's running band. Thrashing vines speared out from the impact site, ripping two Flesh Tearers and a Knight of Blood off their feet and shredding them, armour and all, upon wickedly sharp thorns.

The central tower was in sight.

‘Open the gate!’ Seth voxed.

The bastion’s armoured airlocks were long gone. In their place were rough but sturdy gates made from scavenged plates of plasteel. They swung back on reinforced hinges, primitive as a feudal world’s castle portal.

A second group of Flesh Tearers came running up the walkway from the other side of the gate house. Merging with Seth’s band, they hurled themselves up the ramp towards the gate.

Heavy weapons opened fire from makeshift battlements, sweeping the gate ramp clear of pursuing beasts. Seth and his warriors rushed through. He turned to look back as the others pounded within the bastion. A handful of his men and Knights of Blood were still coming. Tyranids raced after them, engulfing them as surely as a racing avalanche swallows a building.

‘Close the gates,’ he ordered.

‘There are still warriors outside, my lord.’

‘Then they are lost,’ said Seth. ‘Close the gates.’

‘Extraction craft inbound. Prepare to depart. Estimated time of arrival ten minutes.’

Seth looked upward, searching without result for the bright shape of the *Victus* moving across the morning sky. The atmosphere was clearing of aerial organisms, but their swirling flocks still obscured the horizon. The bastion’s anti-aircraft weapons chugged out shots in short bursts. Seth had ordered them to conserve their ammunition. It appeared they would not need it.

A strong wind blew directly towards the capillary towers. The air was thinning. The final stages of consumption were under way. Through his battle fury Seth struggled to think, but he could see it was only a matter of hours before the air became too thin to support atmospheric flight.

From the top of the bastion he had a fine view of the end of the world. Away from his small island of defiance, consumption vessels jostled for space. The bright jewels of digestion pools winked at the base of huge bone towers. His enhanced eyes allowed him to see bloated eater beasts dragging themselves into them to be dissolved and their essences sucked up the tubes to the waiting fleet. For several miles around the last fortress, the tyranid horde seethed. Beyond it, the landscape had become almost tidy, scraped clean of all useful biological and mineral resources by the swarm. It appalled him how quickly it was accomplished. Baal Primus was being eaten alive.

A priority vox request impinged on his thinking. Seth accepted it.

‘Belthiel,’ he said.

‘*My lord, there is something happening,*’ said the Librarian. He was having difficulty speaking. ‘*There are ripples in the warp, a...*’ Belthiel’s words became a pained grunt.

‘Belthiel? Belthiel!’ said Seth.

‘The sky!’ someone shouted.

Seth looked heavenward.

A burning meteor plummeted through the thinning aerial swarm. Seth mistook it for a weapon of some kind, for it did not follow the curve of the world as debris should, but fell in a straight line as if fired. It slammed into the ground with a dull crump, sending up a mushroom cloud of dust. He would have thought nothing more of it, had the sky not changed.

‘The sky! The sky!’ More Space Marines were shouting, pointing upwards. A tremor ran through the tyranid horde. Its well-ordered patterns shifted, breaking apart for a second, reforming, then breaking down again. Pressure built behind Seth’s eyes; a metallic taste filled his mouth.

Sentor Jool came onto the battlement, his armour filthy with alien viscera.

‘What is happening?’ he said. He grunted his words, forcing them out through a jaw clamped tight with

the thirst.

‘Warpcraft,’ Seth said. ‘I can feel it.’

It was more than the work of a witch.

Where the meteor had pierced the swarm a red stain appeared, spreading rapidly, until the dome of the sky was a deep and ugly red. A bloody night fell as the rim of the horizon went from pale pink to deep red.

The tyranids were in disarray. Those attacking the walls stopped dead, or fell down, their limbs curled inward. Others ran back and forth aimlessly or attacked their broodmates. Out on the plains the ordered pattern of the assault broke into pieces.

Then they began to scream.

Seth and Jool looked on in disbelief as consumption ships fell from their tethers, bringing down soaring capillary towers. Explosions bloomed along the flanks of bio-ships full of volatile gases.

Lightning crackled around the hole in the sky. It warped the view of space around it, distorting all things as if viewed through twisted lenses.

A deafening roar blasted across the landscape. A giant figure hauled itself out of the pit made by the meteor’s landing.

‘Daemon!’ said Seth.

Jool growled, something in him responding to the Neverborn’s arrival. ‘How long until your craft arrive?’

Seth checked his chronometer. ‘Six minutes. If they make it.’

The daemon smote the earth with its axe. The ground trembled and split. From the wound in the ground a thrusting column of skulls burst, turning as it grew. Reality writhed around the column. Skulls from all over the battlefield were drawn to it, bursting from the dead, bouncing wet and dripping across the dust plains. At the base of the growing column they rolled impossibly upward, adding themselves to the girth of the tower.

Rotating like a screw, the tower rose higher and higher, until the pinnacle touched the hole in the sky. The tip disappeared within the unnatural void, but the pillar did not stop; it continued to twist, heading out of the real world into some other place.

A deafening peal of thunder blasted across the plains. Seth and Jool were battered backwards by an invisible force. Warriors from both Chapters screamed as the Black Rage answered Khorne’s call.

Seth blacked out, for how long he could not tell. When he rose again, his thoughts were black and barely under his control. Only by dint of his formidable will did he retain his sense of self, while Space Marines around him cast off sanity and leapt howling from the bastion into the mass of screaming aliens. Flickering visions of the distant past threatened to overwhelm him. The scent of blood tormented him. Something made him grip Amit’s Reliquary to his chest so hard he feared he might break it and spill its precious contents upon the bloodied ground. Its presence calmed him, allowing him to think. He looked at the cylinder.

‘To me! To me!’ he roared. Bloody spit flew from his mouth. ‘To the relic! It will save us!’

His men reeled towards him, fighting against their curse, but when they drew closer to their lord, they calmed.

Swarms of daemons were descending the column, crawling downwards head first towards the dying world of Baal Primus. They ran with supernatural speed from the base of their hellish stair, fanning out in every direction. The lead elements charged into the tyranids. Locked in position, the aliens were easy prey for the daemons, and a great slaughter began.

A red tide swept upward towards the fortress. Suddenly, the screaming of the tyranids stopped. They

awoke from their trance. No semblance of order returned to the swarm. Whether they fought against the daemons, fled or did nothing seemed to be the product of chance. They roared and screamed all the louder. Now they did so as beasts, not the vessels of the hive mind.

‘How can this be?’ said Seth. His head throbbed with fury. Waves of bloodlust battered his psyche. He wanted to kill.

Through it all, somehow, the Thunderhawks came. Engines roared loudly. Six of them arrived. There was space for only one atop the fortress. It landed heavily, the other five peeling off and strafing the tyranids and daemons surrounding the fortress. The assault ramp slammed down.

‘*My lord, we must depart,*’ voxed the pilot, the strain of the daemon’s call in his voice.

‘We go now,’ said Seth to his men. ‘Or we shall be damned.’ He clutched at his head, fingers scratching his shaven scalp. His skull pounded to irresistible war drums.

Jool growled and twitched, still kneeling after the psychic blow of the daemons’ arrival. Slowly, he shook his head, and rose up before Seth.

Seth’s hands closed protectively around the casque, prepared to kill Jool to save it. But, perhaps because of Sanguinius’ feather, Jool had control of himself still. With deliberate, stiff movements, he reached up and unclasped his helm.

‘We cannot go back,’ said the lord of the Knights of Blood.

‘I see,’ said Seth. And he did.

Jool’s face was contorted beyond any generous definition of humanity. His muscles strained under skin turned a terrible shade of red. His eyes were yellow. Sharp, elongated teeth crowded his mouth, forcing his lips back so they were painfully stretched.

‘The rage has us. It punishes us. My Chapter is finished.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Years ago. It began like it is with you, a rise in the thirst, a growing number of our brothers falling into the Black Rage. In our desperation we let ourselves give in to the thirst. For a while it helped, by the blood of the innocent we controlled ourselves. It did not last. Soon, these changes set in. We thought blood would save us. It damned us. Look upon me, Seth. There are creatures like me imprisoned in the Tower of Amareo on Baal. If our true nature were known, we would be exterminated. Only blood keeps the Black Rage in check now. Only blood. This is why we fight alone. I would fight with you because you, of all our brother Chapters, would understand.’

Jool looked out over the battle. Most of his warriors had broken from the fort, and fought outside its walls.

‘The wrath of the beast provokes the thirst. The daemons of Khorne covet our kind. They see our rage as the same as theirs. They are wrong. Ours remains a holy fury. No doubt this new beast wishes to subvert our might to its own end and deliver us as slaves to its bloody god. It shall not be so!’

He threw his helmet down, and drew his sword.

‘Go now, Gabriel Seth. Take what remains of your warriors. Remember us. Strive so that what happened to our Chapter does not happen to yours. We sacrifice ourselves in penitence. It is our due. We shall show the Neverborn that though we may rage as they do, we shall never fall into their ways. For we are noble, we are pure, we are the sons of...’

The daemon screamed again. A fresh wave of anger and the desire to slay threatened to undo Seth’s resolve. Jool roared.

‘Leave!’ said Jool, his voice losing its humanity, becoming harsh and animalistic. ‘Take the relic back to Baal. Aid... Aid Dante. We will cover your retreat.’

‘*My lord...*’ voxed the pilot.

Seth shook his head clear of red fog. The day was so bizarre it had taken on the semblance of a dream. If he did not control himself he would end in a nightmare of blood.

‘We leave,’ he voxed. He held up the reliquary. ‘Look upon the purity of the Great Angel and be saved!’

Those of his warriors still in possession of their minds obeyed, running aboard the first Thunderhawk. When it was full, it lifted off, and the second descended. Belthiel followed, dragged by his brothers, raging and ranting, and Harahel. Seth saw them all aboard the ships.

Jool strode away without another word. The few of his warriors remaining in the bastion followed. One remained, a nameless warrior, his eye lenses locked with Seth’s.

Then he too was gone.

A third Thunderhawk lumbered down from the sky. More of Seth’s warriors were losing themselves. Their psyches ravaged by the hellish anger of Khorne’s daemons, they turned from salvation and ran back into the fray. The vanguard of Ka’Bandha’s force had reached the false corrie the forts looked over. With smoking black swords they laid the aliens low. Bio-acids washed over them without effect. Bullet grubs passed through their unearthly flesh as they flickered in and out of existence.

Seth swallowed hard. He had seen this before. The daemon’s manifestation was weak, despite the storm curdling the heavens. Their invasion would not last long.

The fourth gunship descended. Dreadnoughts and warriors ran on board. The wounded were carried, limp and unresponsive, into the craft. Other battle-brothers raged and shouted as they got onto the ship, on the verge of losing all self-control.

Seth locked Blood Reaver to his back, setting aside violence. His hands free of the tools of war, he cradled the holy relic, and bowed his head in silent prayer.

Minutes passed. A hand grasped him. Seth looked up into the face of Appollus. In one hand was his gore-caked crozius, in the other Seth’s helm. The Chaplain breathed hard, and for a moment Seth thought Appollus would slay him, but he held out Seth’s helmet, and waited while the Chapter Master replaced it on his head.

Outside the wall the sounds of fighting had intensified, a three-way racket of screams issuing from human, daemon, and tyranid throats.

The Chaplain nodded once. Together, they clambered aboard the final ship and it lifted off, climbing fast and hard for the sky.

Sentor Jool led his last warriors into a savage’s vision of hell. The tyranids continued to devour the world while they were being slaughtered. Huge, fleshy structures pumped away the resources of a world even as they burned. Caught in the throes of their consumption cycle, the tyranid ships were unprepared for the advent of the warp storm. They fell flaming from the sky. Feeder tubes toppled and draped themselves across the landscape with deafening wet slaps. Intestinal towers burst as they collapsed, sending out floods of biological slop in corrosive tsunamis across the dead land.

The ground was breaking apart under the influence of the daemoninc incursion. Fissures gaped wide, aglow with magma. Seething blood welled up through the ground and boiled alien bioconstructs alive. Mountains of skulls grew from holes in the stone. Around the stairway of bone, reality warped the most, the land turning to screaming flesh. The plains were already overrun with daemons, but still the legions of Khorne marched down and around the spiral stair in infinite procession, into the battle for Baal Primus.

Thousands of lesser daemonkin fought tyranid beasts. Uncanny blades met hyper-evolved symbiotic weapons. The screams and shrieks of monsters rent the air. The tyranids were acting erratically; divorced from their controlling intelligence, they reverted to instinctive behaviour patterns, and these were open to the corruption of the Blood God. They were easy prey, many of them having lost whatever passed for a

mind. They acted without thought. Many writhed upon the ground.

Into this raging battle the last of the Knights of Blood plunged. They tore off their helmets, revealing faces as monstrous as those of the daemons they fought. They sang out their death songs into the thinning air. They made no distinction between xenos and Neverborn, slaying all that came within reach of their weapons.

Sentor Jool was swamped with the rage of Khorne. Gone was the niggling psychic pressure of the alien mind, replaced by a ferocious urging to kill. He looked to his own men and wanted to hack them down, but he resisted; he drew on the purer wrath within him, forcing aside the daemoniac influence scratching at his soul.

‘I will not succumb! I feel the wrath of Sanguinius! I feel the holy force of his anger!’ he roared. He smashed down a small tyranid beast, crushing it as surely as an insect with the spiked guard of his chainsword. A bloodletter rose to meet him, long black tongue whipping through the air as it swung a massive brass sword at the Chapter Master’s head. Jool’s sword met its blade mid-sweep. He held it there while he raised his gun and blasted a dozen holes into the daemonspawn, until its unnatural flesh succumbed and it died with an angry scream.

Hot gales raced through the depleted air. Sentor Jool howled, expelling the invasive anger of the warp from his spirit by the force of his voice.

The Knights of Blood fought for fighting’s sake. The battle could not be won. His warriors were never the most cohesive force. Upon that battlefield they finally abandoned any semblance of squad tactics. They killed and died alone.

Only Jool had a goal he intended to meet. He battled his way through the shrieking hordes of tyranids and their daemoniac tormentors, onward, to where the great red daemon Ka’Bandha slaughtered the largest alien weapons beasts, carving away their heads with absurd care. His trophies toppled not downward from gouging necks, but fell away upward into the vortex turning about the pillar of skulls.

‘Ka’Bandha!’ Jool shouted. ‘Ka’Bandha! Fight me!’

The Angels’ Bane did not hear him, so Jool forced further passage through the three-sided melee, weaving past a blood-crazed Dreadnought fighting a monstrosity composed entirely of screaming mouths. He felled a bloodletter grappling with one of his warriors, shot down a hound with a frill of skin around its neck that leapt at him. The tyranids he ignored unless they directly confronted him. Though the daemons were legion, their hold on reality was tenuous. Every one killed saw three thrown into the warp, and many were but pale outlines, monsters sketched in hate on the canvas of reality.

‘Ka’Bandha! Face me, in the name of the Great Angel! Fight me!’

At that the greater daemon did turn its apish face upon Jool. Yellow teeth in red skin grinned horribly at him. Yellow teeth like Jool’s own, red skin like his own, and eyes that stared with the same intensity.

A single crack of leathery wings sent Ka’Bandha high over the fray. He landed bowed before Jool in a billow of dust, his fist planted firmly in the ground.

Growling, Ka’Bandha rose up, and spread his wings and weapons wide. He looked down upon the Chapter Master with ferocious mockery.

‘Here I am, Sentor Jool. I will fight you, though you are no primarch.’

The daemon took up a combat pose, axe ready to strike, whip snaking back and forth hypnotically.

Air shimmered with heat around Ka’Bandha. Steam rose from the beast’s unnatural muscles, carrying the stench of rotting blood and old murder. Most dangerous were the waves of pure aggression beating off the thing. There was no seduction in the daemon’s lure, no promise of pleasure or knowledge or the cessation of suffering as the other dark gods offered, but a raw, open invitation to violence and bloody abandon. It hammered against Sentor Jool’s mind, threatening to crack it open and send him screaming into madness.

In the black promise of Ka'Bandha, Jool saw his worst excesses.

'See how much you are alike to me,' Ka'Bandha said, taking in Jool's hideous visage, the muscles straining in his neck and the blood pounding fit to burst his veins. **'Truly you are Khorne's creatures. Join me, and war by my side in an eternity of glorious slaughter. For you who thirst for blood, I offer oceans to slake your need.'**

Jool fell to his knees with a groan. His hearts ran so fast something gave inside him. He spat a mouthful of his own blood onto the ground where it hissed and bubbled.

'Pathetic,' said Ka'Bandha. **'You are nothing compared to your gene-sire.'**

'By his fury,' said Jool. He forced himself onto one knee.

'See how he struggles,' mocked Ka'Bandha.

'By his fury shall I stand!' said Jool quickly, fearing the knowledge of words would slip away from his mind and leave him dumb.

'Ah, fury,' said Ka'Bandha. He cracked his whip. **'Fury is the power Khorne gives. Only by his gift do you stand, capable of facing me, when any other of your unworthy breed would have ripped his own skin off at the sight. Now, turn around, and take your rightful place at my side. All your line will be mine, eventually. Seek my favour, become the first.'**

Sentor Jool looked up into the daemon's face and shook his head.

'Very well. You cannot beat me.'

Jool laughed, the blood pooling in his throat making it a gurgle. 'We delay you, monster. Your power is not so great. Already your host unravels. Your time here is limited.'

'You will still die!' shouted Ka'Bandha with sudden rage.

'I do not care.' Jool raised his sword. 'Sanguinius banished you. I cannot. I come to give you my testament, daemon,' he said, his voice strangled. 'They call us monsters, rightfully so, but let it be known to you and your master that it is Sanguinius' fury that gives me strength, not bastard Khorne's.'

Sentor Jool roared his last and charged at the Angels' Bane.

Seth's vision was a nauseating spiral of red and black. He clenched Amit's Reliquary to his chest. If he let go, he would attack his men. Through slitted eyes he watched them go through the same internal struggle. Waves of red hot hatred washed up from the planet below. The Thunderhawk bucked, engines screaming with effort. More than gravity assailed it. Its machine-spirit too was gripped with wrathful impulses.

'By his Blood am I made, by his Blood am I made, by his Blood am I made,' muttered Seth over and over again.

Appollus took up the chant. The others joined him, spitting the words through clenched teeth, moaning them between pleas for blood. There were so few Flesh Tearers left. Five Thunderhawks. So few.

The Thunderhawk burst from the gravity well of Baal Primus. For a second all was well; their weight slipped from them, the pushback of acceleration diminished. If this were a normal extraction, they would be aboard the *Victus* in a matter of minutes.

The illusion of normality was ripped away as the Thunderhawk encountered the storm. Most storms in the warp affected only the immaterium, but this was such a powerful tempest, it intruded into reality, rucking up the flat plane of space into titanic waves. The ship bounced along the surface of a tortured universe. Within, the Flesh Tearers felt their souls half ripped from their bodies. Flashes of the past intruded into Seth's mind. He saw his primarch. He saw the Great Enemy. Worse things came at him, landscapes of bone, rivers of blood, hell-spawned warriors fighting desperately, eternally, for the amusement of a violent god.

Metal squealed. The ship was bent and stretched like dough. Terrible pain speared Seth through and

through, every cell in his body individually and sadistically impaled. His helmet display fizzed. The chronograph ran forward at incredible speed. Diabolical faces leered at him through electronic static. Wicked voices hissed in his ears. The Space Marines were screaming, caught on the double-edged blade of pain and bloodlust. At the edge of his consciousness, Seth apprehended the wail of failing engines, alarms, and the battle shouts of the insane.

And yet through it all, the reliquary sat in his arms, a rock of calm in a sea of rage, and Seth drew strength from it, and from him the calm passed to his men.

It seemed to last forever, as all acute suffering does. When suffering is done it is as if it never was. The human mind cannot remember pain, only the fear of it.

A Space Marine knows no fear.

The sickening motion of the craft ceased. It spun out of control, tumbling end over end. The lumens in the transit bay were out. Blackness surrounded him.

Seth's breath thundered in his ears.

Emergency lumens pinked on. Seth's helmet cracked and burst back into colourful life. The main lights reactivated a moment later, followed by the cough of misfiring engines. A second of grinding, and they sang true.

The Thunderhawk levelled out.

Seth looked upon an awful scene. Several of his men had succumbed to the rage and slain each other. Three of them still ranted at the brothers restraining them. Globules of blood floated about in the microgravity of the transit cabin. At the sight of them, his hands gripped at the reliquary involuntarily.

'My lord, I have... I have...' The pilot spoke via vox. He sounded confused.

'Tell me the status of the enemy,' said Seth. 'Give me a pict feed so that I might see. My armour will not form a databridge.'

'That is it, my lord. They are... They are gone. The enemy are gone.'

'What?'

'I do not believe it,' continued the pilot. 'I cannot believe it.' Rarely had a wrath-filled Flesh Tearer sounded so confused.

'The storm?'

'Also gone.'

The co-pilot cut in. 'There is more, my lord.'

'What?' said Seth, a sense of cold wonder creeping into his hearts.

'You will not believe me.'

Seth turned down the mag-lock of his boots so he might walk.

'Then I am coming to see myself.'

He made his way up the access stairs to the cockpit, still carrying the reliquary. Through the canopy he saw that the storm had vanished from the sky, taking with it the tyranid swarm. Baal writhed with unnatural energies yet, but the stars shone again on the velvet black of space.

Making its way to Baal with engine stacks burning was the biggest Imperial Fleet Gabriel Seth had ever seen.

'My lord,' said the Techmarine pilot. 'We are being hailed.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FALL OF ANGELS

In the Exis Chapel, Commander Dante paid his respects to Sanguinius one final time.

In the six days since the Cicatrix Maledictum opened, the Angelic Host had slaughtered the tyranids. For a time, the hive mind appeared to be absent, and the disorganised aliens were easy prey for the Space Marines' wrath. A series of carefully staged sorties drove the aliens back from the gates of the redoubt, buying the scions of Sanguinius valuable time to regroup within. The Blood Angels held the redoubt still. The rest of the Arx was in the hands of the enemy.

Now their respite was over. The hive mind stirred once again.

Ordamael rested his hand gently on Dante's battered armour. There was not a plate of it untouched. Its lustre was gone, gold worn down to bare ceramite in the few places it was visible beneath scabs of sealant foam and dried alien blood.

'Ordamael,' said Dante. 'They are ready?'

'They await your command, my lord,' said Ordamael. 'The preparations are made. The Amarean Guard stand ready to open the gates to the tower. I am bound to remind you that once this order is given, it cannot be undone. The blood-cursed will not stop until they are dead. They cannot be contained once released.'

'I will have it done,' said Dante.

'Then it is time, my lord,' said Ordamael.

Dante rose slowly, keeping his head bowed to the modest statue of Sanguinius in the chapel's reliquary niche. The statue was white alabaster, imported to Baal centuries ago. Light the colour of arterial blood flooding through the windows of the chapel stained the statue a deep, ominous red. The Baalian sky's subtle shades of pink had been replaced by a bloody effulgence that never changed. The sun was gone. The moons were gone. There was blood in the sky and rage in Dante's heart.

'Now is indeed the time,' said Dante. He saluted the statue of his gene-father, and bowed as deeply as his armour would allow. The Exis Chapel was his by right as Chapter Master, his private place for prayer and contemplation. He did not expect to set foot within it again.

The stairs from the Exis Chapel to the Basilica Sanguinarum resonated to the sounds of Space Marines singing the Moripatris, the death hymn of the Blood, as the last defenders of Baal knelt with heads bowed

over their weapons, offering up their lives a final time in the service of their primarch and their Emperor.

Dante emerged from the stair's screened door and walked down the central aisle of the basilica. All the warriors were in black now. There was no paint, so the Space Marines had stained their armour as best they could, rubbing blood and soot into the plates to blacken them. The individual colours of Chapters were shrouded in mourning for a bloodline soon to be extinct.

The cathedral was half ruined. Ornate windows were blown into piles of glass and stone. The roof had partially collapsed. Acid marks pitted the floor where xenos beasts had gained brief ingress before being cut down. The smell of burning was strong everywhere.

Dante took his place in the pulpit at the head of the basilica for the final time. Chaplains and Sanguinary priests of all the Chapters lined up at the front and turned to face the assembled host, a handful only, fewer than the Blood Angels alone had possessed before the coming of Leviathan. Corbulo lived, as did Ordamael. Many of their comrades had died. They together represented a quarter of the Council of Blood and Bone.

Dante joined his voice to the singing of the death hymn. The numbers were deceptively high, two thousand, twice as many as a full Chapter, but a fraction of the Angelic Host.

This defeat was a deadly blow to the scions of Sanguinius, one that they would never recover from, thought Dante.

Tears coursed down his cheeks. His reign would see the legacy of a primarch destroyed.

Dante banished his woe as the Moripatris reached its sorrowful end. The roosts of the cyber-constructs who tended the cathedral were empty. No autochoristers remained to leaven the Space Marines' basso profundo voices with higher registers. Hearing the song that way, from so many transhuman throats and without embellishment lifted Dante's soul a little. There was a purity there. If the mixed songs of cyborg, Adeptus Astartes and thrall had represented Sanguinius' blood mixed with that of mortal men, now it was distilled back to its true potency.

When the last reverberations died away from the cathedral stone and Dante spoke, his voice was strong and clear, free of doubt and despair. All who heard it felt their blood stir.

'There is always beauty, even in the depths of ugliness, even in the depths of defeat,' said Dante. 'Your song raises us all above this realm of earthly flesh, for we are angels and warriors in equal part. Our devotion to our Emperor and our gene-father is a paragon to which the citizens of the Imperium have long aspired. Now we stand upon the brink of death, this will not change. I say let us not go into the long silences of history, but stride forward into legend.'

'If the tyranids remained without guidance, we might survive here, behind the walls of the Heavenward Redoubt. But they reorganise. The hive mind is disrupted no longer. Our Librarians report the shadow falls once more. It is weak, but it grows stronger with every passing minute, coalescing around one potent nexus. If this is allowed to continue the tyranids will become of one mind again, and they shall attack without mercy, and we will perish here, within these walls. We have no notice of the fleet. The void is awash with the energies of the warp. If we strike down their leader, we may deal the swarm one fatal deathblow, and save the worlds beyond Baal...' His voice caught. He recovered quickly. 'In this way, we will win a victory of sorts. We will most likely die in the attempt. Millions of them remain, scant thousands of us. If we stay behind these walls, they will overwhelm the last of our defences in a few days. This is the only way. The shadow in the warp is a many-headed monster, more ferocious than the hydra of ancient tales, for it has a billion times a billion heads, and all must be severed before it will die. We have the blades! We have the will! Let us carve the skulls of this creature. Are we not the sons of the Great Angel? Are we not the most blessed of all Adeptus Astartes?'

He let the question hang on the air unanswered.

‘Our primarch was among the first to die, but he lives eternal in all our beings. The meat and blood of our bodies are his host. For ten thousand years we have protected his legacy within the fortresses of our bodies.’

He bowed his head.

‘That time is at an end. We are all Death Company now. The sarcophagi lie shattered, their occupants devoured, and our future upon Baal has died with them. The Chapter is finished here, but it is not yet dead. Our bloodline may survive, in the gene-seed of our brothers elsewhere in the galaxy, it may not. This question of survival is no longer ours to contemplate. Divert your gaze from the future, and think of the present, of now, of what we might accomplish in these next, glorious hours. For if we must go into the darkness of extinction, let us do so with our swords in our hands and the wrath of Sanguinius in our grasp. When tidings of this battle reach other worlds, let them lift up their guns and say “We shall not fall! We shall not die meekly. Through battle we remember and honour the sons of Baal!”’

His voice raised. ‘Who will say “aye”, who will raise his sword with mine? Who will bring burnished steel and wrathful soul to the slaughter, and let red ruin flow? Who will die in remembering our lord? Our flesh may be devoured, but they cannot touch our souls! We are the most blessed of the Emperor’s warriors. The soul of our lord lives in the minds and the hearts of every one of us, we the red clad, the blood hungry. We the wrathful and the pure. We, the sons of Sanguinius, most noble and glorious of all the primarchs, we hold more than his memory in our hearts and minds. The Great Angel would not lurk here waiting for his end. He would strike out, seeking to destroy the leader of his enemies as he did when he confronted his brother Horus.’ His voice lowered. ‘Such a choice is now ours, as it was our father’s. If we do this, we shall all surely perish, but Baal may yet escape, and play host to Space Marines still. You and I will not be among them, but the name of the Blood Angels and the score of other Chapters who fought with us here will yet be known across the galaxy.’

Dante paused, and reached up behind his head. Seals hissed as he uncoupled the death mask of Sanguinius, exposing his aged face proudly to his brethren.

‘For a millennium I have worn this mask, so long that mortal humans on a thousand worlds equate Dante with Sanguinius. One has become the other. I have no need of a mask any longer, I need not wear our lord’s face. He is in here, in my hearts.’ He banged his fist against his chest. ‘I reveal my face to you, long hidden for shame of the weakness age reveals. I shall wear this mask when I fight, in honour of our lord, but I go into the final battle not as a poor facsimile of our father, but as Commander Luis Dante, son of Baal, son of the Great Angel, whose living body is the host of the primarch!’

He paused. Two thousand black helmets looked back expectantly.

‘What say you, warriors of Baal?’ he said in a ferocious whisper that rose in volume and power. ‘That we let slip the Red Thirst one final time, and fly upon wings of wrath with our lord unto battle? I commend you all, oh ye mighty, to the protection of the Great Angel. For the Emperor, for Sanguinius! There is no more beauty to be had from life, so let us then seek a beautiful death!’

‘A beautiful death! For the Emperor! For Sanguinius!’ the doomed angels shouted. Their voices shook the ruins of the Basilica Sanguinarum.

Dante nodded, satisfied. ‘Then we march. All of us who bear the Blood. Chaplain Ordamael, summon the Amarean Guard. Open the gates of the Tower of Amareo. Let the damned march with the damned.’

The Tower of Amareo had withstood the invasion with its windowless walls intact. Even while the aliens battered at its walls, the battle servitors, Dreadnoughts, Space Marines and blood thralls of the Amarean Guard had not once left their posts, keeping watch on the raging creatures within.

The gates of red iron opened rarely, and never to let anything out.

They shuddered. The Amarean Guard's fifty strong cohort withdrew from the gatehouse to the covered battlements overlooking the way to the tower. With a booming creak, the gates opened wide. As they did so the bell at the pinnacle of the tower was unswaddled. Red and black silk was cast from shutters that had never been opened before, and fell spiralling to the ground.

The bell began to toll.

The Custodian of the Damned emerged first, a Space Marine champion oathbound to remain within the tower until the end of days. Now those times had come, and he marched out with his sword flaring with energy, black armour glinting like oil. From behind him came the rattling of chains and the grinding of rusted doors forced wide by labouring machines, and howling and screaming of inhuman nature. All the words the thick, animal voices uttered were broken beyond comprehension, save one.

'Blood! Blood! Blood!'

The damned occupants of the Tower of Amareo burst from the darkness. They were abominations, twisted far from their human origins by rampantly malfunctioning gene-seed. They were twice the size of mortal men, bulging with muscles. Yellowed fangs took the place of human teeth. Their skin was blood red and waxy, their eyes amber. They bounded along on knuckled fists like apes, screaming at the sky. Five dozen immortal monsters whose suffering hung over the Chapter like a poison, free at last to kill.

They would take no direction. The Custodian of the Damned stood aside and went within an armoured cylinder to let them pass. They sped by raging, beating at their flesh, long black nails ripping at their own skin.

A way had been cleared from the tower's gate on the Arx Murus down to the bottom of the redoubt into the Well of Angels. Directed by barred doors and high barricades, the damned hurtled onward. Their roars filled the corridors of the keep, until they came to the grand inner ward, an internal killing field behind the Bloodgate. As the damned approached, portcullis, gates and energy field were all opened. Dead tyranids tumbled down from the corpse piles mounded up against the gates, to join the strata of stinking alien flesh filling the Well of Angels.

The damned scrambled out over the bodies, scenting things to kill.

Once they were gone, inner gates at the back of the ward opened, and the Space Marines ran out. By the time they were assembled and ready for their final sally a few minutes later, the screeches of embattled tyranids were already echoing in the hall.

Dante raised the Axe Mortalis.

'Sons of Baal, forward!' he shouted.

'For Sanguinius! For the Emperor! A beautiful death!' they replied, and together they ran though the Heavenward Redoubt's Bloodgate, and into the occupied Well of Angels.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ADVENT OF THE TYRANT

The Blood Angels stormed through the Well of Angels, smashing aside the tyrannids remaining inside as they made for the Elohim Gate. In the tunnel through the mountain wall they found no opposition. The inmates of Amareo's tower had preceded them, and slaughtered everything in their path.

The end of the tunnel beckoned, bright and red as a bullet wound.

As they ran Dante shouted, 'From his Blood are we born! From his essence are we made! From his passion comes our art! From his nobility comes beauty. From his might stems justice. From his thirst is born righteous rage!'

For the first time in twelve centuries, Dante let his control slip away, allowing the all-encompassing fury of Sanguinius to push aside his humanity. His worst fear was realised; to let go was pleasurable.

Dante embraced the Red Thirst. Blood roared in his head bringing pain, but with it came relief. No longer must he hold himself in check. He exulted in his freedom as his muscles swelled and distended. His hearts hammered in his chest like an automatic weapon fired to the point of malfunction. His angel's teeth extruded themselves from his gums.

'Rage!' he shouted. 'Rage, rage, rage against the dying of the light!'

They burst from the tunnel of the Elohim Gate like the wrath of the Emperor given form.

The tyrannids were sluggish in their response. Their whip-quick reactions had yet to return, though a rippling in the hordes outside the walls suggested a growing coordination.

The Blood Angels and their successors slammed into the broods of tyrannids filling the landing fields, bowling over the smaller types and crushing them underfoot. They followed a wide road of shattered bodies left by the damned, a weakness in the horde the Space Marines were swift to exploit. Jump packs ignited, sending the few warriors who possessed them arcing over their fellows. Dante went at their head, jets thundering. The last of the Sanguinary Guard flew by his side, led by Dontoriel and Sepharan – no matter which Chapter they hailed from, a glorious winged regiment whose like had not been seen since Sanguinius himself flew the skies of Baal. Ordamael flew with Dante, chanting complex poems to Sanguinius that caught and tripped on his thickening tongue, until they became meaningless snarls.

They descended with a fury born of sorrow.

Dante's feet hammered into the skull of a tyrannid warrior, smashing it flat. Its lash whip curled up and snared his feet. Dante severed it with a blow of his axe and thumped down onto the bloodied sand, then was off at a sprint. He moved like the desert wind, never still, never faltering, despite residual pain from his many wounds. He ran through the wreckage of Space Marine aircraft and tanks, slaughtering every tyrannid he found. A single item pulsed on his helm display: the hive mind nexus detected by his last few pyskers. All other data he had removed. In his furious state he would not have understood them anyway.

Cannons, manned by the last mortals in the Arx, boomed from the Citadel Reclusiam. The more esoteric weapons were beyond the mortals' comprehension, but they worked the fortress projectile casters well enough. Cones of sand and body parts sprayed wildly upwards, their mad dash for the sky arrested by gravity only when they had reached hundreds of feet in altitude.

On Dante's helm plate the marker beat slowly, temptingly, luring the commander into the press of alien monsters. He pressed on through the curtain of explosions. There were few blood thralls left. The ragged conscripts of Baal's moons lacked training, yet by a miracle Dante was not blown to atoms by his own side.

Dante fought his way forward. Ordamael raged at his side, his crozius banging with every impact. The songs of the Angels of Death became debased howling. Any semblance of squad cohesion or tactics went from the battleline as they surrendered themselves to the thirst. They fought and died alone, a wave of howling berserkers who hacked and bludgeoned, who soon forgot the ranged weapons they bore, who broke the chainswords they carried, who grappled with alien monstrosities with weaponless hands.

The world was a shifting mass of xenos, peeling detonations and the terrible colours of the sky that hid the universe from sight. The tyrannids were responding, recovering from their shock, if such creatures could be shocked. As Dante drew nearer to the hive node marker, the tyrannids' movements fell into further synchronisation. They had yet to attain the perfect simultaneity of the hive mind at peak efficiency, but their attacks evidenced greater thought and coordination. They feinted and withdrew. Differing creatures presented themselves to battle particular foes where before they had come thoughtlessly at the Space Marines. Phosphor bio munitions flew overhead on slow parabolas. They slapped into the landing fields, sending out gobbets of burning liquid in every direction, immolating tyrannid and Space Marine equally. Artillery beasts fired and fired, their cannon symbiotes screaming, a heart-rending noise that grew louder as the Space Marines penetrated deeper into the horde.

Dante slew with abandon. The honour guard fought alongside him with the consummate skill of murderers five hundred years in the making.

For all their unstoppable fury, the signs of defeat were unmissable. One by one, the Sanguinary Guard were dragged down, plucked from the air by shrieks or clawed apart by carnifexes. Sepharan was torn in half by a hive trygon. Dontoriel, hero of Cryptus, was the last to die, falling in a tumble of tattered wings not far from the commander, his golden armour hidden by a thrashing mass of alien limbs as he was ripped to pieces.

Dozens of wrecks from the withdrawal were strewn among the landing field's battered temporary buildings. Suits of power armour lay in quantity, their colours stripped by acid. The tyrannids had yet to remove the corpses, for the feeding of the swarm had not begun there. Dante laughed in wild despair. Gathered together, all the sons of Sanguinius could accomplish was to slow the consumption of a single world.

Thoughts of that clarity became rare. Dante let the raging monster in his soul out to smash down the foe. His perceptions lost their edge. Hallucination stole upon him, supplanting reality. The first sign of his failing mind was a golden flash overhead that had him shout in joy.

'The Sanguinor!' he called. 'He comes at last!'

Sanguinius' herald had come to the aid of the Blood Angels wherever they were most sorely pressed for ten millennia, appearing from nowhere, and disappearing as suddenly. He had haunted Dante in particular, his only recorded words spoken to him. Dante had felt abandoned by the holy warrior. He could not know the Sanguinor's absence from Baal was occasioned by his presence at the Cadian Gate.

When he looked again, the herald of Sanguinius was nowhere to be seen. The tortured skies were empty. These lying sights came more often, and soon the battle flickered and changed around him. He took a step forward, and was sent backwards in time, finding himself fighting alongside Blood Angels with unfamiliar markings in ancient suits of armour. The sky in that ancient battle was black, lit sporadically by the sheeting glare of energy weapons. He wept for the Emperor's dream as he fought alongside his brothers, but his fury did not abate with his sorrow. It was watered by it, becoming larger than he, a demigod's anger that did not originate in him but possessed him and overfilled him.

The battlefield flickered back to the present. A Space Marine, burning head to foot in corrosive chemical fire, howled madly, bludgeoning a tyranid beast with his broken sword as he died. All around the Angels of Death were falling. Ordamael charged into a hulking, multi-weaponed assault beast, stunning it with a blow from his crozius arcanum, only to be ripped in two by giant, crustacean's claws.

Dante salivated at the sprays of blood that flowed out. He would have torn his helm free and lapped at the sticky sand then, had a trumpet's sweet notes not halted him.

Light shone over a part of the battlefield. The Sanguinor hovered, five hundred feet away, sword held upright, finger pointing downward. Warriors in black battleplate appeared from the shimmering air, their armour covered in skulls and bones. Fire streamed from their eyes and mouths, and when their bolters fired, they shot strange ammunition of blue flame.

The Legion of the Damned had come to aid the sons of Sanguinius in their hour of need.

Dante blinked, but this vision did not disappear. His warriors shouted and howled, regaining some of their humanity, and pressing on after the revenants deeper into the hordes of tyranids.

The tyranids fell back before their unearthly assailants. The trumpet sounded again, and the Sanguinor pointed again with his blade at a spot on the field.

When Dante looked where the herald indicated, the reticle in his helm beat madly and flashed green. He blinked. In his fury he had forgotten his mission. His vision blurred, and the Sanguinor became an angel of flesh and blood, huge and mighty, clad in blood-red robes.

'Sanguinius?' Dante said. He pushed on, shoving his way through combatants whether alien, revenant, or Space Marine.

A carnifex reared up before him, barring his way. Dante prepared to tackle it, hefted the sparking Axe Mortalis, but a helmless warrior barged past him, face locked in a savage rictus, teeth exposed, and engaged the creature in a hopeless, one-sided battle. Captain Fen, a quiet part of Dante remarked. The Angel Vermillion had been good to his word. Dante ran past, his last embers of intellect telling him he needed to reach the Sanguinor before he lost himself for good.

He fought on, sometimes alone, but as he pushed on, he was surrounded by the ghostly shapes of the Legion of the Damned, whose ceaseless, uncanny fire felled aliens all around the Chapter Master, and so he drew nearer to the Sanguinor.

He passed the first of the beasts of Amareo. The red-skinned giant lay curled up, childlike, surrounded by the rent bodies of tyranids, its face at peace as if sleeping after long efforts. The second came soon after, then the third. All were dead, their immortal bodies pierced in a hundred places each.

The Sanguinor maintained its position, pointing downwards. Warriors from all over the field were converging on the point, not for tactics or for glory, or even for survival. They did it for fury. They did it for blood. They did it for their primarch.

Sanguinius reached out to his sons through his herald, and commanded they strike one final blow in his name. They obeyed.

A wall of poisonous vapours obscured the target. Spindly things floated by. Feeble limbs dangled beneath oversized spore chimneys that pumped out yellow and green granular gases. A trillion spores gave the fog its texture, each one a tyrannid organism smaller than a terrestrial mite. As Dante ran into this smoke his armour let out a shrill warning. The tiny sporelings attacked his battleplate, eating into the banded metal of the joints and the soft seals beneath. Where his skin was exposed by broken plate it blistered under the effects of toxin and acid. He did not feel it.

The fog muted all sound. He could see no further than a few yards. Dark shapes grappled in its depths, edges of chitin or ceramite illuminated by weapons fire. The flaming, silent warriors of the damned Legion fought on unaffected, but they drew away from him, lighthouses in the fog, leaving Dante to his fate. He knew in his soul he must fight this battle alone.

A blind tyrant guard emerged from the coiling false smoke. It was huge, and hunched, bent over its short, heavy claws. Dante engaged his jump pack instinctively, roaring out of the way of its attack, and up over its eyeless head. The Axe Mortalis sparkled with the death of a hundred thousand tyrannid spores as it cleaved down, caving the thing's head in. A shot from the perdition pistol burned out its internal organs and sent it crashing down.

A golden glow led Dante on. The snarls and howls of his warriors were barely more human than the hissing chitters and roars of the tyrannids. His flesh burned, his superhuman physiology unable to keep pace with the damage inflicted by the miniscule creatures eating into his body. The sensation barely registered. Pain that would have incapacitated a normal man, even a Space Marine, was a dim, meaningless throb to him.

More of the blind giants emerged from the fog, moving with increasing surety of purpose as the sluggish hive mind reacted to the threat. Space Marines came in from every direction, screaming for blood and death, crashing into the guardians of the swarm's leader.

Dante shot another of the tyrant guard, wounding it, and slipped by. As it staggered about to follow him, three sons of Sanguinius in blackened armour charged at it. One was scissored in half by the beast. A fire-wreathed warrior with pallid skin moved in to engage the creature with his powerfist. Dante did not witness the end of the fight, he headed further into the killing smoke, seeking out the leader beast.

The reticle in his borrowed helmet strobed rapidly. He was close.

Sounds of battle receded. He ascended a mound of intermingled tyrannid and Imperial dead. The hive mind would consume them together. Autophagy was a part of its evolutionary strategy; its weapons were disposable, like the bolts in a Space Marine's gun. The biomass of its warrior beasts would find new uses elsewhere.

The smoke thinned as Dante climbed. He could not recall seeing such a tall pile of dead from the Arx. When he looked at his feet the tyrannids had gone. Instead he walked over the tangled corpses of myriad species, all soaked in bright gore. Not a few among them were men or Space Marines, and he numbly recognised some as faces from long ago.

Dante walked on the collected remains of his victims. Whether this was a psychic attack by the hive mind, or a symptom of his imminent mental collapse was immaterial. There was one more body that must be added to this pile, then he might rest. He forced himself up the phantom mound by strength of will alone.

Up he went for hours. At times he was accompanied by ghosts from his past. A boy with a black smile. A Blood Angel he had executed. A teacher he had almost forgotten. A Space Marine's memory was eidetic,

but Dante was so old that his memories had corrupted over time. That which he had not entirely forgotten of those distant days, he struggled to access. Now all his past was there to torment him.

The corpse pile grew steeper. Dante was forced to lock his axe to his back and holster his pistol so that he might drag himself upward. The stiff limbs of the dead were his handholds. Rotten cavities provided him places to put his feet.

He attained the summit without realising how he got there. He was suddenly, inexplicably standing upon a plain. The corpses were gone, replaced by a pavement of closely packed skulls marked with vile runes.

Ahead lay his final struggle. Horus the deceiver stood as vast as a titan over the battlefield. The face of his brother was a mockery of what had been. His charismatic smile had become a cruel leer. Arrogance displaced confidence. Where wisdom had shone in noble eyes, there burned the fell power of ancient, evil gods. He...

Dante screwed his eyes shut. 'I am not Sanguinius,' he said through gritted teeth. 'I am Dante. Dante. I will die as Dante. This is my final battle oath. I shall be myself.'

Horus shivered, and became more real. The scene rippled. A corrupted spacecraft wall wavered into being behind him. Dante continued to walk forward, his heavy feet beyond his control. Armoured boots clanged on deck plating. He was fated to die here on the *Vengeful Spirit*. He had to. For the Emperor's sake, he would allow his death at the hands of his brother. His wings twitched, longing for one final flight.

No, that was not right. Not right.

'I am not Sanguinius!' he shouted. 'I will die as Dante!'

He blinked. Horus was gone. The skulls were gone. Poison smoke was being harried to shreds by the gathering desert wind. He saw a light in the sky, a star? The redness of the warp storm seemed to be thinning. He stared dumbly upwards, wondering if the storm was over, until a screaming roar brought his attention back to earth.

Fifty yards away was the largest hive tyrant Dante had ever seen. Upon backward-hinged legs it stood taller than a Dreadnought. Red spore clouds pumped from the chimneys on its high back. Bonded to its fists were four matched boneswords, with heavy ends as square and brutal as cleavers. He had heard of this thing, the galaxy's bane, the hive mind personified.

Commander Dante faced the Swarm Lord.

His perception coalesced around the monster. Reality reasserted itself, his visions driven off by the sheer physicality of the hive mind. The past gave way to the present. The sounds of battle returned, albeit muted. The horde was broken into pieces. The howling of his blood-mad warriors was scattered, so isolated there could only have been a few of them left.

In the monster's eyes glimmered an ancient and powerful intellect. As old as he was, Dante felt like a newborn babe compared to the intelligence staring at him through that unblinking gaze. He sensed that there were two beings looking at him. The monster, and the being that controlled it. They were separate, yet one. A sense of crushing psychic might emanated from it, so great its grasp encompassed galaxies. There was sophistication there, and terrifying intelligence, but all were outweighed by its bottomless, eternal hunger.

For the moment that the man and the monster stared into one another's souls, Dante pitied it. The hunger of the hive mind made the Red Thirst trivial by comparison.

A rumble sounded in the monster's throat. Muscle fibres exposed by gaps in its chitinous armour contracted; that was all the warning Dante received. There was no threat display, no roar to intimidate, it simply hurled itself into the attack. The hive mind was nothing if not efficient.

Despite its size, the Swarm Lord moved with staggering speed. Its alien anatomy made its attacks difficult to predict, and Dante found himself fending off a blur of jagged bone. Crystal veins glittered in

the blades, generating a shimmering energy field like none Dante was familiar with.

The Swarm Lord's weapons met the Axe Mortalis with a thunderous boom. Dante reeled back from the blow, letting out a brief blast from his jump pack to steady himself, dodging narrowly to the right to avoid a return strike from the Swarm Lord's two left-hand swords. He ignited his jump pack fully, making a short leap backwards as the swords from the right smashed into the desert where he had been standing. The energy field encasing the blade exploded the sand.

As the beast slammed down its weapons he snapped off a quick shot with the perdition pistol. His aim was honed by centuries of practice. The meltbeam cut a roiling line through the air, connecting with the Swarm Lord's lower left elbow joint. An explosion of steam carried the smell of broiled meat out towards Dante, and the thing's arm went limp.

It made no cry of pain. As it moved forward, its useless arm snagged on the ground. With an total lack of human emotion, it severed the crippled limb with a sword blow and moved in to re-engage. Dante leapt again, jets on full burn. He swooped low, darting in to strike and withdraw. His fuel indicators plummeted, but Dante remained aloft, soaring away from bonesword strikes with expertly timed exhaust bursts. His blows left a dozen smoking scars in the Swarm Lord's carapace. It responded with a buffeting storm of psychically generated terror that had no effect on the Space Marine lord, so deep in the thirst was he. The thirst grew in Dante until he stood on the brink of the Black Rage, a pit he could never climb from. He resisted the urge to finally throw himself in. The strength this last surrender would grant him would be formidable, but his mind would be gone for good, and so he would perish. Not until this thing was slain would he abandon his last shreds of self-control. He had to know that it was dead.

He focused on his hate, on his desire to kill, on his need to rip this interloper's head from its shoulders and cast it to the sand.

The Swarm Lord's armour was thickest on its shoulders, head and back. They duelled for long minutes, Dante landing so many blows that the edge of his fabled axe dulled, and its power unit vented black smoke. All his skill could draw but a little blood. The Swarm Lord snapped and swung at him with undiminished might.

Dante needed a decisive blow soon. The Swarm Lord's endurance would outlast his own, and one lucky strike from the beast's weapons could end the fight long before exhaustion set in. So Dante dived in again, axe held low in the manner of a cavalryman stooping in the saddle to strike with his sabre. Jinking through swinging boneswords and into the spore cloud issuing from the Swarm Lord's chimneys, he raked the blade of his weapon across the leader beast's face, catching it across one eye. He was momentarily blinded by the swirl of red microorganisms belching from its back, and forced to touch down.

The two combatants wheeled to face each other. The chitin around the Swarm Lord's right eye was cut down to a gleam of bone. Ichor and humours from its ravaged eye wet its cheek.

Dante smiled coldly. 'I shall take your other eye, and then I shall kill you.'

In return the leader beast shrieked, a psychic assault that channelled the polyphonous voice of the hive mind into a concentrated mental blow. Dante reeled under the combined sonic-psionic blast. Something gave inside him. He tasted blood at the back of his throat. His mind suffered more than his body, and he staggered back, dazed, his axe dragging through the sand.

The Swarm Lord seized the opportunity and ran at the commander again. Dante blasted backwards, but even as it charged the Swarm Lord assailed Dante with fresh psychic attacks, sending out a lance of psionic energy that cut through his armour into his leg and knocked Dante wheeling from the air. He slammed into the ground with bone-jarring force. His face slammed into his helm, breaking his nose. The terror field halo around Sanguinius' golden mask buckled and gave out in a skittering crawl of psychic energy. His iron halo's energy field failed with a bang.

The thing screamed again. Dante's being was deadened from the soul outward. His vision swam. The energy his thirst gave him was stolen away. The Swarm Lord thundered at him, head down, three swords back, ready to strike. Dante regained enough of his wits just in time, activating his jump pack while he was still on his back. The jets sent him scraping across the ancient rockcrete and sand of the landing fields at high speed, drawing a shower of sparks from his armour. Alarms wailed from every system of his battleplate.

A second, brain-rattling impact shook him as he connected with the wreck of a Land Raider. The systems diagnostics for his jump pack wailed at high alert, red danger runes blinking all over his helmet. With a thought, he jettisoned his jump pack, rolling free of the stuttering jump unit as the Swarm Lord barrelled into the tank wreck with such force it lifted from the ground. The Swarm Lord turned on him quickly, grinding Dante's jump pack into a pool of fire and sundered metal under its broad hooves. The Land Raider slammed back down.

More alarms rang in Dante's helm. On standard battleplate, a jump pack took the place of a Space Marine's reactor pack, replicating most of its functions as well as providing limited flight capability. Without it, Dante was left in a suit of armour with only residual power.

He had seconds left of combat effectiveness at the most. Emergency battery icons clamoured for his attention, bars sliding quickly down to red emptiness.

The Swarm Lord screamed. Psychically induced horror buffeted Dante's mind, tormenting him with dread. Dante roared back, unafraid.

'I am of the Lord of the Blood,' he said, as he broke into a run, the alarms of his dying armour wailing in his ears. 'What I do, I do for he who made me. No personal ambition is mine. No glory do I seek. No salvation for my soul or comfort for my body. No fear do I feel.' The Swarm Lord swung at Dante hard. Dante retaliated with a counter blow, shattering the bone sabre. Thick alien fluids pumped from the broken blade. The eye set into its hilt rolled madly, and it began to shrill. 'By his Blood was I saved from the selfishness of flesh.'

The Swarm Lord was unmoved by the death of its symbiotic blade. The stroke continued downward, the remains of the sword catching Dante below his breastplate and penetrating his plastron. A combination of Dante's impetus and the Swarm Lord's immense strength punched the bone fragment deep into his body, penetrating his secondary heart, scraping on his spine, and exiting the other side of his torso.

The creature snarled in what would have been triumph in any other species. Dante's formidable progress was arrested. Hissing deeply, the Swarm Lord lifted Commander Dante off the ground, armour and all.

Warm blood ran down inside Dante's bodyglove. Toxins leaked from the Swarm Lord's weapon, sending spiders of agony crawling along his nerves.

'By his Blood was I elevated.' It was over. He began the Mors Votum.

The Swarm Lord lifted him high, screaming in victory, and swung its arm down to flick Dante from the blade's shard so it might finish him on the sand.

Reactive foams bubbled from Dante's armour, bonding him firmly to the remnants of the Swarm Lord's blade.

'By his Blood do I serve.'

The beast hesitated, only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. As it was raising its remaining two blades to cut Dante in two, the commander raised the perdition pistol. His armour died on him, its systems starved of power, growing heavier with every second as his life ran from his body. His aim did not waver.

'My life I give to the Emperor, to Sanguinius, and to mankind,' he intoned. The Swarm Lord's face was reflected in the dulled metal of Dante's mask.

Sanguinius' face shouted silently at the hive mind.

Dante disengaged the weapon's failsafes with a flick of his thumb.

'My service is done. I give thanks. My life is finished. I give thanks. Blood returns to blood. Another will take up my burden in my stead. I give thanks.'

He fired the perdition pistol at point-blank range into the Swarm Lord's face. Its flesh liquefied and boiled off as superheated steam. Its first bonesword bounced from Dante's armour, ripping long scratches into its decoration. Bloodstones fell from their mounts. Still Dante held his aim true. The pistol's power pack grew so hot with thermal feedback it blistered his skin through his ceramite. Still he did not relent. The fusion beam bored through the creature's organic armour. Thermic biogels bled from cavities in the chitin, but they could not stay the perdition pistol's beam. The weapon glowed with white heat. The Swarm Lord reared backwards. Its cries became gurgles as its tongue cooked in its head. Desperate to be free of Dante, it severed its own wrist with a clumsy strike. Dante blacked out for a moment from the pain of the bone shard jarring his organs as he hit the floor. When he came to he was lying on the ground.

The Swarm Lord slumped to its knees alongside him. Its movements were feeble. Keening quietly, it fell forward, chest heaving. Air whistled through its breathing spiracles, then ceased. Dante rolled his head to one side. One of the boneswords lay close to his face. The eye set into its hilt stared hatred at him before dimming. The pupil dilated. The sword, too, was dead.

Dante took a painful breath. Fluid bubbled in his lungs. His body ached all over from the tyrannid's poison.

He was dying.

Dante's rage bled away with his vitae, leaving him with his pain and clear thoughts.

The sky was clearing. The red and golden involutions of the warp storm dissipated like smoke, revealing a cold night full of stars. Baal Primus and Baal Secundus pursued their relentless cosmic chase, one falling behind the horizon as the other rose. He noted with satisfaction that the sky was empty of war. There were no ships visible behind the retreating fronds of the storm, only stars, and the bright, glowering slash of the Red Scar. Peace reigned.

His breathing hitched. His hearts were slowing, his body was cold. The sword splinter of the Swarm Lord ground against his ribs with each breath. Blood ran from him in a trickle too persistent for his Larraman cells to staunch. As his body failed, his battleplate gave out finally, the helmlate display winking out. His dying armour was a cooling tomb, but he was calm, calmer than he had been for centuries.

This was how fifteen hundred years of service ended. He had given a score of lifetimes to the Imperium, and he begrudged it not one day. He smiled. He had done his best. By his efforts had the tide of evil been kept from mankind's door a few extra years. That had been his ambition, and he had fulfilled it a hundred thousand times.

Darkness crept into the corner of his eye. He remembered similar times in his life when he had faced death, the first as he lay dying of thirst in the Great Salt Wastes of his youth on his way to the trials. There had been many other occasions since then, but this was the last. He was sure this was the last, and he was glad.

He knew for certain that he was not the golden warrior prophesied in the Scrolls of Sanguinius. He wondered, in an idle, unconcerned way, who the primarch had meant.

For the last hundred years, he had kept himself going with the idea that it was he Sanguinius spoke of, and that he had one final important duty to fulfil. Now it turned out not to be true. How deluded he had been.

His blood soaked into the sands of Baal. Dante laughed.

Darkness rushed at him.

He welcomed it with open arms.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE GREAT ANGEL

Dante lost consciousness. The way he jerked awake, breath sharp in his lungs, suggested that his hearts had stopped beating for a time.

That was the most likely explanation for the lambency which replaced the dark. He was cocooned in the false warmth of death. The pain had gone from his chest.

A glorious armoured warrior stood over him. His helm was fashioned in Sanguinius' image, the same face Dante himself had worn these long years. Five months earlier after Cryptus, Dante had looked into that mask and felt shame. He felt that shame no longer.

The Sanguinor had come to him at the end of his service.

'You came,' he said. His throat was dry, his lips numb. The beautiful voice that had inspired millions was a harsh whisper. 'You came after all.'

The Sanguinor kept its silence, but stood back and flung an arm wide to indicate a greater presence behind it.

Dante's breath caught in his chest. Once again, he saw the face of Sanguinius, but this was no metal representation. The face was of flesh, the wings that spread either side of his body were white feathers, not cold sculpture. His body was as real as his sorrow. He shone like a desert sun in the full glory of noon, a bringer of light dangerous in its incandescent power.

'My son,' Sanguinius said. 'My greatest son.'

The primarch reached out to him. Dante was on his back, but at the same time it was as if he floated in an immense void, and Sanguinius hovered in front of him. And yet, when the primarch cried, his tears fell forward onto Dante's face. All reality's order was disturbed, but this felt like no dream or vision. When Sanguinius' glowing fingers traced the line of Dante's cheek, they were solid and warm, and they brought into him a sense of peace and holy joy.

'You have suffered greatly for mankind's sake,' said Sanguinius. His voice was beautiful. 'You have won your rest a thousand times. Rarely has one man given so much, Luis of Baal Secundus. You have been a light in dark times. I would give you any reward. I would take you to my side. I would free you from strife. I would release you from pain.'

‘Yes!’ said Dante. ‘Please. I have served so long. Grant me the freedom of death.’

Sanguinius gave Dante a look of profound sorrow.

‘I cannot. I regret that I can do none of those things. I need you, Dante. Your suffering is not done.’

Sanguinius gripped Dante’s face in both hands. Strength flowed from the primarch, driving out death’s comfort and replacing it with pain. The scene rippled. He heard the shouts of Space Marines, felt the ghostly touch of living hands upon his armour. Sanguinius faded.

‘Please, no!’ Dante cried out. ‘My lord, I have done enough. Please! Let me rest!’

The light was dying; Sanguinius’ smile carried with it the sorrows of ten thousand years. Darkness was returning. The Great Angel disappeared into it, but his glorious voice lingered a moment.

‘I am sorry, my son, that you cannot rest. Not yet. Live, my son. Live.’

Dante returned to life screaming for the mercy of death.

Hands were all over Dante, holding him down. Sharp pains intruded via his neural shunts.

‘No, no, no! No more! Take me with you! I beg you!’ Dante shouted.

He lashed out with his fist. Metal hit metal.

‘Hold him! Hold him down! He is coming round!’

Dante’s vision focused with stubborn slowness, resisting his attempts to see. A Sanguinary priest leaned over him, framed against a predawn sky. It was not the pristine heavens of his vision, but nor was it the domain of war. The bio-vessels of the hive fleet were gone. In their place were thousands of lights, picking out the shapes of hundreds of Imperial ships at low anchor. He had no time to process this sight. His mind buzzed with pain and stimulants. The priest had his right hand pressed hard against Dante’s chest. Clear lines ran from his narthecium into the hole in Dante’s battleplate, conveying blood and drugs directly into his primary heart. The blade had gone from his body, but the wound was wide open; he could feel the wetness of his exposed organs chilling in the cold of Baal’s night.

‘For the love of the Great Angel! Hold him down!’ shouted the priest.

A face loomed over his. ‘Dante! Commander! It is I, Captain Karlaen. Calm yourself, please, my lord. You are gravely wounded – let Albinus do his work.’

Dante steeled himself against the agony enough to stop thrashing. ‘K-Karlaen?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said the captain. He wore power armour instead of his customary Terminator plate, and his usual dourness was replaced by happiness. Tears ran freely down his bare face. ‘We found you. We have found you!’

‘Good, good!’ said Albinus to someone at Dante’s side. ‘That is right! Hold them there. I have repaired the damage to his secondary heart and almost have the wound closed. I have it stapled, but it is too deep for it to shut itself quickly. It requires a little help.’ A plasma spike jetted from Albinus’ narthecium. ‘My apologies, Lord Dante. Your battleplate pharmacopoeia is inactive, so this may sting.’

In the manner of doctors throughout history, Albinus played down the hurt. Dante roared with pain as Albinus cauterised Dante’s wound.

‘Steady, steady!’ Albinus said. His brow knitted with concentration, he played the plasma torch along Dante’s chest, liquefying the skin, making it run together. ‘Nearly there!’

Dante bucked involuntarily. His secondary heart restarted to pound alongside his first. His gifts flooded his system with synthetic chemicals but they could not staunch the pain without the help of his pharmacopoeia.

The jet shut off. Albinus sprayed a cooling, healing mist over his wound. The pain receded, leaving a hot throbbing.

‘That hurt,’ gasped Dante.

‘Will he live?’ asked Karlaen.

‘He will live,’ said Albinus. He got up. His white and red armour was covered in blood, much of it Dante’s.

‘Can he stand?’ asked Karlaen.

‘Yes,’ said Dante.

‘No,’ said Albinus at the same time.

Dante ignored him, gritted his teeth against the pain and forced himself upright to discover the world had new surprises for him.

Firstly, the body of the giant hive tyrant was being enthusiastically sawn up by a clade of Magos Biologans. Secondly, strange Space Marines stood guard over them.

They wore red and gold, and all the colours and trappings of the Blood Angels themselves. Save in one regard their livery was identical – a pale grey chevron cut through the Chapter emblem upon their left pauldron. They were unusually large, being taller and broader than normal Adeptus Astartes, and their armour and weaponry, though of Imperial make, were of unfamiliar patterns.

‘My lord, you should rest. Wait for a bier. We will take you to the command centre,’ said Albinus. ‘Lie down. Rest.’

Dante shook his head. ‘Karlaen, how do you come to be here? Who are these warriors?’ He peered closely at his First Captain. ‘And you? You have aged! What is going on? What is the news from Cadia?’

Albinus thrust a canteen of water at Dante. The commander accepted it and drained it. His thirst was great.

‘The answers to these questions are not easy to give. It is best you see, my lord. As for these others, they are like us, yet not like us,’ said Karlaen. He smiled broadly, the look of a man privy to a profound, joyous, metaphysical truth. ‘They are a new breed. The saviours of the Imperium.’

‘These in our colours are not the only ones,’ said Albinus. ‘There are others, of differing gene lines.’

‘Differing gene lines? What do you mean?’

One of the strange warriors came forward. He wore codex standard sergeant’s insignia. In every superficial way he was a Blood Angel. He removed his helmet, and Dante found himself looking upon the familiar countenance of a man reworked by Sanguinius’ gene-seed. ‘We are the Unnumbered Sons of Sanguinius, my lord Dante,’ said one. ‘We are Primaris Space Marines, and we have come to your aid.’

‘Primaris Space Marines? Where have you come from?’ Dante’s bewilderment overcame his injuries. ‘Whose is that fleet?’

The sergeant looked to Karlaen. ‘Captain, might I? I could perhaps explain.’

‘Wait, Anthus,’ said Karlaen. ‘I said it is best you see, lord commander. It is a wonder words cannot express. We will take you there, to see him. Can you walk?’

Dante gave Albinus a defiant look. ‘Yes.’

Albinus gave a resigned look. ‘Very well. Someone bring him a backpack. Let his armour aid him, as best it can.’

Karlaen helped Dante to his feet. An intact reactor unit was retrieved from a corpse and fastened to Dante’s armour. Power surged back into it, and the alarms began to toll again. He silenced them.

‘This way, my lord Dante,’ said Sergeant Anthus. ‘Our lord awaits you.’

They led Dante gently by the arm. He limped, his broken armour grinding upon itself. Blood leaked from his wounds, but he would not allow any to help him, and they went slowly because of it. The sky continued to clear, so little of the warp storm’s writhings remained. Morning was coming in the pink and blue of Baal’s natural hues. Imperial fighters roared through the dawn. Guns pounded far away, Imperial artillery, not the shrieking horrors of the hive fleet, yet it was all dreamy sounding, quiet as harvesting

machinery in the summer distances of an agriworld. The incessant chittering and screeching of the tyrannids had gone, as had the immense, mind-flaying pressure of its psychic presence. Instead of a sea of monsters, Dante saw Legions of the tall, unfamiliar Space Marines, many in the colours of his own Chapter. The Sons of Sanguinius, Karlaen called them. Dante's thinking was confused, the thirst still nipped at his heels and his brain was starved by lack of blood. When he looked to his side to see the person helping him he saw Albinus sometimes, but at other times he saw the Sanguinor, and once his own, long-forgotten father, his amber eyes perfect in a rad-ravaged face. Dante had those eyes himself, the sole reminder that he was another man's son besides the Great Angel's.

'Come on, Luis,' said his father. 'Not far now.'

'Da?' said Dante. 'Da, is that you? Look at me, look! I became an angel, Da.'

'My lord?'

His father's face shivered away like a mirage over a desert. Albinus' concerned face replaced it. 'My lord, we should stop. You are gravely wounded. Please allow us to help you. Let us carry you.'

'Give him aid,' said Karlaen impatiently.

'No!' commanded Dante. 'I will walk. No help. Not yet. I must walk.'

That he did so for penance he did not say.

They took him to a landing zone where fortifications were springing from the sand. Ships screamed down from the sky, depositing wall sections near heavy haulers. Bunkers dropped from orbit came to a stop on screaming jets over their sites, positioning themselves carefully before shutting off their rockets and slamming into place.

Thousands of the new Space Marines were there. This was not a Chapter or multiple Chapters, these were the Legions of old, reborn in new ceramite.

Dante staggered against Albinus. Hands grabbed at him.

'You need to rest, my lord,' said Albinus again.

'I will not,' slurred Dante. 'Not until I have seen this miracle for myself.'

Wide roads were marked out by barrack blocks. There were thousands upon thousands of men of every kind in the camp. The camp was organised superlatively well, not a prefabricated building out of place, and it was growing rapidly.

The centre remained the centre, no matter how wide the perimeter grew. There was a campaign castellum undergoing the final stages of assembly. From its four corners fluttered large flags of cobalt blue, the ultima of Ultramar emblazoned on them in silver thread, its arms embracing the aquila of the Imperium, and crowned with a laurel wreath. A familiar insignia with a new twist.

Wonder built upon wonder; standing guard at the top of the stairs leading to the gates were the gold-armoured warriors of the Adeptus Custodes, whom long-lived Dante himself had seen only within the precincts of the Imperial Palace upon Terra. They saluted the approaching party of Blood Angels.

The gates whisked open with sharp pneumatic sighs, revealing more honour guard, these Ultramarines veterans.

A warrior in the battleplate of a captain stepped forward.

'I welcome you to the castellum, Lord Commander Dante,' he said. 'Our lord is waiting for you.'

'Sicarius?' said Dante. 'Is that you?'

'It is, my lord. It is good to see you alive,' the Ultramarine said. 'Are you hurt?'

'Of course he's damned well hurt, Sicarius,' snapped Albinus. 'Take us to him, before the commander collapses!'

Sicarius held out his hand apologetically, indicating the way Dante should go.

Ultramarines of the old type gave way to tall examples of the new kind. They stamped their feet and

stood to attention as Dante wearily limped towards the central command node's armoured gates. These opened at his approach. Dante shook off Albinus' arm at the threshold and stepped through as proudly as he could.

Upon a throne of pure adamantium, surrounded by hundreds of pristine standards, sat a living miracle, a giant warrior clad in blue and gold, his expression fair yet stern, a massive gauntlet upon one hand, a huge, scabbarded sword resting upon his knee.

Now he understood the significance of the sword missing from his vision. The sword of the Emperor was there before him, upon the person of a living primarch.

Roboute Guilliman had come to Baal. There was no mistaking it. Dante had seen the primarch before, shut away in a stasis field in the Fortress of Hera on Macragge, where he had sat a second from death for most of the Imperium's history. But here he was, alive and breathing.

The primarch's physical presence hit Dante hard. Guilliman was nobility writ large, a monument in flesh. He was overwhelming. Ignoring the hurts of his healing wounds, Dante fell to his knees with a clatter and dropped his head.

'Can it really be true? Is it really you? Do you live?'

The primarch stood and set his sword aside, and came down the steps.

'Get up, Dante,' said Guilliman gently. 'I will not accept displays of humility from a man like you. You are one of the few in this era who have earned the right to speak with me on equal terms. Rise. Now.'

Dante grunted with pain as he attempted to get to his feet. Guilliman grasped Dante's pauldrons and bodily hauled the Chapter Master up.

'Forgive the indignity,' Guilliman said. 'I see you are hurt.'

Dante nodded numbly.

'Never kneel before me again. I will have you stand with me as a mark of respect. I will order you not to if I must. I would rather our relationship not function on those terms. I have no time for deference, there is too much to do. Though, if your pains are great, you may of course sit,' he said with the ghost of a smile.

'Is this a dream or a vision?'

'Neither. I live. I have returned to save the Imperium,' said Guilliman.

'Forgive me, my lord.' Dante had to step back to look him in the eye. 'I failed. I called together all the Chapters of the Blood, and lost them all to save Baal. The Arx Angelicum is in ruins. Thousands of Space Marines are dead, and Baal is devastated.'

'Forgive?' said Guilliman. 'There is nothing to forgive, Dante. You stopped them. When we arrived, the hive fleet was greatly depleted, and easily destroyed. As we speak, the Indomitus Crusade is scouring this system of the last remnants of the tyranids. You have achieved what few others have, and destroyed a major hive fleet tendril. I would congratulate you, but there is nothing I can say that encompasses the scale of what you have achieved.' Guilliman put a hand on Dante's shoulder. 'You have saved Baal from the hive mind, Commander Dante, and with it the greater part of this segmentum.'

At that, Dante wept freely.

'I am sorry, I am sorry,' he said. 'I almost lost. I almost lost everything. Please forgive me.'

'There is nothing to forgive.'

Dante did not hear. Overwhelmed by his hurts and the luminous presence of a living primarch, he collapsed to the ground.



CHAPTER THIRTY

NEW BLOOD

Uigui shivered. It was a hot day, even in the shelter of the ruined Arx, but he was freezing cold.

‘Colder than a desert night in here,’ he said, his teeth chattering.

‘D-d-d-da?’ said the boy, his simple face childlike with worry.

Even so close to death, Uigui was affronted by the boy’s stammer.

‘Stop your fussing. I will be fine.’

What he wanted to do was reassure his boy, to tell him that they had stood on the very heights of the Arx Murus and watched the Space Marines run to their death, that they had fired the great cannons to cover the Angels of Baal as they fought their final fight. That they had witnessed a living primarch, to share their awe at these events as father and son. But resentment and disappointment, and not a little fear, got in the way.

A flying thing had shot him. Were it not for the boy pushing him out of the way, he would be dead. He wanted to thank his son for that as well, but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. Every positive thought was a sole warrior arrayed against an army of bitter memories.

‘Da?’

‘I will be well,’ he said crossly, and turned his face from the boy.

They waited for hours in the wrecked gallery along with hundreds of other mortal men. Uigui had no time before to think about the fortress monastery, terror had got in the way. Now peace had returned he saw how fine the fitments of the place were, even in that simple corridor, war-battered as it was. Such luxury. It did not seem fair that the protectors should live so well when the protected wallowed in poverty.

The approach of an angel in white distracted him before his thoughts could turn truly heretical.

The angel’s armour gleamed as if no war had been fought there. His insignia was pristine. He moved among the battered conscripts with exaggerated care, as if he feared to step on them. Baseline human attendants in equally spotless uniforms assisted him.

‘Hey! Hey!’ called Uigui.

The angel ignored him.

‘Wait your turn,’ one of the human assistants said.

‘Yeah, shut up,’ said the man sitting slumped next to him.

Uigui’s teeth clenched at a sudden agony from his wound. ‘I am hurt!’ he snapped.

‘Many are hurt,’ said the angel without looking up.

Uigui sank back against the wall, shivering with a poison fever. He dozed a little, for when he looked up again the angel was towering over him.

‘Now it is your turn,’ said the angel. He knelt beside Uigui. Ridiculously, he reminded the water seller of his father.

As the angel inspected his wound, so efficiently Uigui suspected him of being perfunctory, Uigui saw the younger conscripts being led away.

‘What are you doing with the boys?’ Uigui yelped when the angel prodded his wound.

The angel stopped. ‘We honour them,’ he said. ‘I have orders to assess them all.’ He looked over at the boy. ‘Is he your son?’

Uigui gritted his teeth. It was hard to admit he was the boy’s father, even now. ‘Yes. Yes, he is my son.’

‘Is he hurt?’

‘No! I am the one who is hurt!’ said Uigui. The pain was getting to him. Something was moving in the meat of his chest, he was sure of it. He was scared.

The angel glanced at the boy, who stared back in awe. The angel looked closer. ‘This scarring on his head... How did he come by it?’

‘An old wound,’ said Uigui.

The angel reached out his left arm. A device bulked out the armour. A vicious-looking drill head poked out from a cowl on the underside. On the upper side of his forearm was set a small screen and a number of buttons. They meant nothing to Uigui. The angel depressed a button on his arm and waved his hand over the boy’s head. His fingertips lit up with violet light. The boy blinked fearfully at it.

‘My son was selected at the last trial to go to the Place of Challenge two summers ago,’ explained Uigui. ‘He was a brave boy, clever and strong when he went, then you broke him and sent me back this fool.’

The device hummed. The boy tried to be brave, but his lip quivered, on the edge of tears.

‘A fool, really?’ said the angel. ‘He must have fought bravely if he lived through the devastation.’

Uigui’s lips pressed thin. He almost mentioned how his son had saved his life twice. *Almost.*

‘How did it happen?’ asked the angel. ‘This wound that disqualified him?’

‘An accident, so I was told. He slipped on a climb and banged his head.’

‘Then he was lucky. There are a hundred ways to die at the Place of Challenge.’

‘His survival was a curse.’ A hacking cough afflicted Uigui. When it subsided, his mouth was full of a foul tasting, meaty grit.

The angel’s instrument made a sweet note, and he dropped his wrist.

‘I see,’ the angel said, his voice beautiful and cold. ‘He has minor brain damage. I am not surprised he was rejected. We take so few, any flaw is enough to eliminate them from the process.’

‘Would you have taken him had he not fallen?’

‘Possibly. His genetics are a match, and free of the more egregious Baalite deviations.’ He paused. ‘He is a positive match for gene-seed integration.’

‘So you would have taken him?’ said Uigui bitterly.

‘We would, had he proven himself. I would say he has. Let me see.’ The angel paused, looking into an inner space. ‘He has, he had, a fine brain, before his mishap.’ He paused again. ‘The damage is reparable,’ he said. He muttered something that Uigui could not hear, and waited for a response, then turned to the boy. ‘You are accepted. You are to be an angel.’

The boy’s face lit up.

‘What?’ said Uigui. ‘Are you joking?’

‘It is unusual, I admit,’ said the angel. ‘But the Chapters of the Blood are shattered. Many are destroyed, most are seriously undermanned. Commander Dante has decreed that all Baalite youths of the right age and genecode are to be immediately inducted as neophytes into one of the Chapters of the Blood. We can repair his mind, and he will serve the Emperor.’

‘The youths you are taking away, you are recruiting them?’ said Uigui incredulously.

‘If they are compatible, like your son here. If they are not, they will be offered the choice of all aspirants who fail the gene test. They may return home, or they may serve the Chapter as blood thralls. In recognition of their courage in the face of the tyrannids, you understand. We pay you a great honour. The Lord Guilliman comes with machines and knowledge to make a better kind of Space Marine. A new era dawns.’

‘This hasn’t happened before, has it?’ asked Uigui uncertainly.

‘It is unprecedented, citizen.’

‘What about me?’ said Uigui. The shivers came on again. There was burning pain in his wound.

The angel leaned back over him. He seemed even more massive when he did that. The angel reached up a cold, metal hand and touched Uigui’s face.

‘I am sorry. You will die. You have been contaminated by a xenos gene-forge bio-organism. It will either kill you, or turn you against us, and then you will die.’

Uigui’s mouth hung open. ‘I am to die and you tell me like that?’ He was finding it hard to control his temper today.

‘All things die,’ said the angel. ‘Nothing lasts forever. All men know this. How else am I supposed to inform you?’

‘Look into your damned machine,’ Uigui said. ‘You are wrong. I will be well.’

The angel sounded genuinely regretful. ‘I do not need to. The signs are clear. I am sorry.’ He looked away a second, then reached swiftly round and gripped the top of Uigui’s head.

Uigui stared into the glass eye-lenses of the angel. They looked back at him, neither judging nor condemning.

Uigui looked to his son. ‘An angel, eh?’ He smiled.

‘A-a-a-are you proud of me, Da?’ said the boy.

Uigui nodded. He could think of no words to say to make up for the way he had treated his son. A look of idiot innocence made the boy’s features doughy, but Uigui could see the boy he had been, and the man he might have become. All that grief, all that hate, turned against the one he had loved. Now he had reached the end, he was numb to it all, and so very tired. Most of all, he was dumbfounded it was all over. Death was life’s great expected surprise.

His boy might still become the man he always hoped for. He might still.

‘What is your son’s name?’ asked the angel.

Uigui screwed up his eyes. ‘I am sorry.’

‘What is his name?’

‘Teus,’ said Uigui. ‘His name is Teus.’

A dam of sorrow broke in him. Tears welled at the corner of his eyes.

‘And what is your name, father of Teus?’

‘It is Uigui. I am Uigui, the water seller.’

‘Then, Uigui the water seller, do you accept the Emperor’s mercy?’ the angel asked in tones of infinite kindness.

Uigui closed his eyes. The grip of the angel’s hand on his head was cold and firm without being painful.

‘Yes,’ he whispered. ‘I accept. Teus, I am sorry. I am so sorry. I—’

‘Da!’

The angel twisted. The crunch of bone was sudden and final. Uigui’s head lolled on a broken neck.

The angel stood and spoke to men the boy could not see. ‘Cleansing team to the Galilean Walk. I have a contaminated body.’

‘You killed my da!’ said the boy.

The angel looked down at the boy. ‘This was mercy, not murder. He would have died in pain, and would have wished for a swifter end before the poison killed him. He was brave and wise, at the end, at least. He took kindness when it was offered over agony.’

The angel reached out his hand.

‘It is misfortune you witnessed his death, but there are many things we never think to see,’ said the angel.

‘What was sundered can again be made whole. Be thankful. We live in an age of wonders. Come with me, be healed, and become my brother.’

Hesitantly, the boy stood. With a backward glance at his father’s corpse, he allowed the angel’s thralls to lead him away.

Gabriel Seth returned Amit’s Reliquary in the same manner in which it had been given, in secret and in darkness.

He waited for Dante in the catacombs far under the Arx Angelicum. Lit by a single red candle, the dusty sarcophagi of forgotten warriors lined shelves carved into the rock. There were thousands of them, in niches that went higher up the wall than he could see, curving away into the absolute darkness of Baal’s underworld. So much artistry was there – every niche carved, every sarcophagus a perfect representation of the unique warrior they contained, all of it hidden forever.

Pointless, thought Seth, though as he did so he hefted the tube containing the reliquary and doubted his own opinion. There was a permanence in art not found in life.

The tyranids had not found their way in so deep. The dead slept undisturbed. Perhaps they would have remained there until the sun burned itself out had the xenos won, a relic to be uncovered by the next species arrogant enough to proclaim itself master of the galaxy.

Such stillness was there, such peace. It only accentuated Seth’s simmering rage. His double pulse roared in his ears in the marmoreal silence. His muscles creaked with tension. He stopped his fists clenching on the reliquary’s container only by a direct act of will.

Poised between the silence of the dead and explosive, uncontrollable fury, Seth waited with the patience of a well-balanced sword in its sheath: still, but deadly nonetheless.

In the darkness the nearly silent purr of Dante’s master-crafted armour growled as loudly as an enraged wolf.

Seth’s luminator snapped on, striking scintillating reflections from Dante’s golden plate that moved over the faces of the sarcophagi. Such was the effect of Sanguinius’ death mask bathed in light that Seth almost knelt reflexively. He remembered Appollus’ chiding, and grunted in anger, forcing himself to remain standing.

‘Gabriel,’ said Dante. ‘It is good to see you living.’ His pure voice echoed off in the distance, revealing the vastness of the catacombs.

‘Commander,’ said the Master of the Flesh Tearers. He held out the tube. ‘I am returning this to you.’

Dante looked at the relic. ‘I gave it freely,’ he said.

‘It was not yours to give,’ said Seth gruffly. ‘Besides, a thing of this worth and beauty has no place with us. Better it stays here with you. I have seen the fate of my Chapter in the face of Sentor Jool. If

Sanguinius' feather remains with us, it will be lost.'

'Very well.' Dante grasped the tube. 'If you insist.' Seth released it to his care. 'My brother. You survived. Your Chapter faced rage incarnate, and it did not fall. The Knights of Blood could not tear themselves from the fight. They were in thrall to the flaw. You are not they, you have proved that. Your fate is not theirs.'

'No,' Seth shook his head; his frown grew deeper. 'No. It was not like that. The Knights of Blood thought themselves too monstrous to return to Baal. They sacrificed themselves. They chose where to die, they fought the embodiment of rage, and they did not fall. It was a clean end for a corrupted bloodline. There will be no such blessing for my warriors. Without the relic, it may have been different. I pray to whoever is listening that we can find similar peace.'

'It will not happen to you,' said Dante in surprise. 'Guilliman brings enough new warriors to rebuild all the Chapters of the Blood.'

'Not the Knights of Blood.'

'Not they,' admitted Dante. 'That name is too cursed to resurrect. Let them be remembered for their final heroic act. But the Flesh Tearers will be reborn. Guilliman is a living primarch. He will save the Imperium. He brings more than reinforcement. The new warriors will save our bloodline. Where we are flawed, they are not. There is little, if any, sign of the flaw among the Primaris Space Marines. Corbulo tells me that where he failed, Belisarius Cawl has succeeded, eliminating the instability at source. Not one of them in the long, hard years of the Indomitus Crusade has fallen to the Black Rage. When queried on the thirst, the majority are perplexed. They simply do not know of it. Corbulo is amazed.'

'That is salvation, is it?' said Seth. 'I say otherwise. I say it is a deliberate action against our lord's heritage, and the work of the Emperor himself.'

'How can you say that?' said Dante, appalled.

'You are too noble to understand.' Seth rounded on Dante. 'That is not salvation, that is *replacement*. These new warriors will bear the colours of Flesh Tearers, but without Sanguinius' fury they will be Flesh Tearers in name only. All my time as Chapter Master I have waged war on our rage, to wrestle it into submission and use its strength to slay our foes. We are fury! From the time of Amit, the savage lord, to this day, we have carried the white heat of Sanguinius' anger in us. That was our gift and our burden. The flaw is what makes us what we are.' He clenched his fist in front of Dante's face. His voice dropped. 'We are nothing without the struggle against it. He would make us all Ultramarines in red armour.' He turned away, his gaze straying down the dead legions of Blood Angels. 'There are few of my warriors left, few true Flesh Tearers. Once we are dead, the Flesh Tearers will be no more, no matter that these abominations carry our name. It is a betrayal, not a boon. Guilliman will want us gone quickly, and his own warriors in our stead.'

'Gabriel!'

Seth waved his hand. 'Open your eyes, Dante. These Unnumbered Sons, they are Legions in all but name. I have spoken with the newcomers. They are only too glad to tell me of the Avenging Son's plans. Wherever Guilliman goes, he leaves his men in place. Through the codex, he gave the Adeptus Astartes their independence. He is more than willing to remove it from us. Soon, the Chapters will be free in name only. And these new Space Marines, he has the gall to interfere with the work of the Emperor. If he is willing to do that...' Seth fell silent suddenly.

'What are you suggesting?' said Dante quietly.

Seth mulled his words over, even as his anger tried to force them out of his mouth. He would not speak at rage's behest, but decided to say them in calmness. They needed to be said. 'If he is regent, why not Emperor?'

‘What you suggest is treasonous!’

‘My words, or his actions?’ snarled Seth. He drew himself up to the fullness of his considerable height.

‘Be careful of him, Lord of Baal. Be very careful.’

Without waiting for a reply, Seth walked away into the darkness.

Once again, Dante stood upon the Arx Murus. With him were the remaining officers of his Chapter. Captains Borgio, Karlaen, Aphael, Phaeton, Machivai and Sendini, Sanguinary High Priest Corbulo and Brother Adanicio. Astorath had returned with the primarch, and Mephiston had dug himself out of the Cruor Mountains, returning from death once more with a larger part of the librarius. That was something, at least, thought Dante. Most of his other specialist officers were gone.

‘This is all of us, then,’ said Dante. He took in the battered remnants of his high command. They looked back at him grim-faced. Their armour had been repaired and repainted, but war had marked their flesh, and several of them had lived a lifetime more than Dante thanks to the temporal flux induced by the storm.

‘The Chapter will be rebuilt, my lord,’ said Adanicio. ‘The primarch assures me.’

‘It will not be the same,’ said Karlaen sadly.

‘Today is a historic moment,’ said Mephiston. ‘The next time the lords of our Chapter gather so, our numbers will be swollen with new blood. We are the last conclave of Blood Angels Space Marines ever to be. From henceforth, the Primaris will begin to replace us until we are no more.’

‘Everything is changing,’ said Dante. He welcomed it. Let Seth rage.

The view they looked upon was unimaginably different to what had been before. The dunes were flattened by the passage of millions of hooves and claws. Where it was not smooth, the desert was marred by thousands of craters. Although these were already filling in with wind-blown sand, the outlines of the largest would be visible for centuries to come.

So much xenos blood had been spilled it crusted the desert over, preventing the sand from moving as it would. There was no rain to wash it away. Curls of sand hissed over these hard pans of baked vitae, unable to find purchase. Dunes would be long in rising there. When they did, the ichor of tyranids would leave a permanent mark in the geology of Baal beneath them.

Much of the Arx Angelicum was in ruins. The outer tiers were the most battered, having taken the brunt of the tyranid attack. The underlying stone of the Arx was durable, and once the ravages of bio-acid were polished over, it would gleam again, but the turrets and bastions were wrecked, their weapons cast down, and all would need rebuilding. Many of the statues that had adorned the exterior had fallen and were smashed beyond repair. Even upon the redoubt the tyranids had left their mark. The Basilica Sanguinarum was heavily damaged. The Citadel Reclusiam was a windowless shell; only the attached Tower of Amareo was untouched, and that was silent for the first time in thousands of years. A shattered stump was all that remained of the slender spire of the Archangelian. The Sanguis Corpusculum, as the repository of the Blood Angels stocks of vitae, slave vats and other biotech, had been ransacked.

Corbulo regarded the soot-stained remains of his domain, and pronounced himself glad. ‘We survived,’ he said. ‘We won. We will rebuild, better than before.’

‘Not all change is for ill,’ said Astorath.

Plasteel walkways bridged the breaches in the wall-walk of the upper Arx Murus. Most of the parapet had been swept away. Though it had been made safe, the remains of the Dome of Angels were yet to be cleared, and its jagged shards still clustered at the volcano’s rim. The void shield genatorium was a hollow in Baal’s crust. The Hall of Sarcophagi was irredeemably profaned. Inside the Well of Angels the situation was similarly dire. Bolt craters pocked every surface. The Verdis Elysia was a stripped wasteland. Thousands of windows set into the throat wall were broken. No corner of the Arx was

untouched. Not one statue was unmarked. Millennia of art and history had been destroyed in three weeks of violence, what was left dirtied forever by xenos contact.

A single Sanguinary Guard stood watch over the gathering of his masters. Caraeus, he was called. He was the last of his kind, and therefore would soon be made Exalted Herald of Sanguinius. New guard would be selected. Dante had a plethora of heroes to choose from now, but for the moment, Caraeus completed his duty alone. So it was throughout the Chapter.

‘Already steps are being taken to set things to rights,’ said Adanicio. ‘The primarch has brought with him vast resources for peace as well as war.’ He gestured down at the scaffolding covering the lower levels, which was creeping closer to the twin summits by the minute. Adanicio was more enthusiastic than his peers. In Guilliman, the diligent master of the logisticiam had found a kindred spirit.

‘The Arx Angelicum will be a very different place,’ said Dante. ‘It has never endured such a devastating attack. It will never be the same again.’

‘Our bonds with our primarch are frayed a little further by the loss of so much history,’ said Karlaen.

‘Aye,’ said Sendini, ‘but his brother walks among us. That is a fair trade.’

‘He is not the Great Angel,’ said Corbulo.

‘He is with us, nevertheless,’ said Karlaen.

Dante listened to the quiet talk of his brothers. So many had died. Castigon, Raxietal, Zedrenael, and Sendroth had all fallen in the defence. Behelmor and Asante slain as the *Blade of Vengeance* came down. As yet firm casualty numbers were unavailable, but Dante did not expect the total survivors of the Blood Angels to exceed three hundred.

Others of the Blood had fared far worse. Eight Chapters had been entirely wiped out, half a dozen nearly so, to the point where they would never recover. Most of the others could boast no more than a company or two of warriors, and none remained at above half strength. Hundreds of war machines, dozens of ships, thousands of warriors, all gone.

‘If the hive mind had truly intended to wipe out Sanguinius’ line, it failed by the narrowest of margins,’ said Dante.

‘But we have won,’ repeated Corbulo. He of all of them was the most optimistic for the future.

The fortress monastery played host to the new breed of Space Marine. There were thousands of them wearing Sanguinius’ colours alone. Formations of them moved in the desert, replacing the warriors Dante had lost in his defence of Baal. Their strange ships soared through the skies, their tanks growled over the sands on anti-grav fields. As novel as they were, these machines would remain unfamiliar for only a short time.

‘Perhaps this scouring clean of the Arx Angelicum is for the best,’ said Borgio. ‘A new fortress monastery for a new Chapter. The old days are over, the days of the Space Marines are done. The Primaris hold the key to man’s survival in this terrible age. A new era is dawning, one our primarch father would not recognise.’

‘The galaxy is in great peril,’ said Dante. He looked heavenward. During the day the Cicatrix Maledictum painted a writhing band across the sky. At night it dominated everything. The warp storms were over, but the northern half of the galaxy was denied the light of the Astronomican. ‘Half of the Imperium is at risk of destruction, and on the other side of the rift is in little better shape.’

‘Imperium Nihilus,’ said Astorath. ‘What horrors await us out there? The Indomitus Crusade has fought all manner of foes. Many of our worlds have fallen.’

Karlaen and the rest had done their best to bring Dante up to date on all that had happened in the wider Imperium. Since Cryptus fell less than six months had passed from Dante’s subjective point of view. Beyond Baal, seventy years had gone by. Time had been bent out of shape by the opening of the Great Rift.

Dante folded his arms. The artisans had done a good job restoring his armour. Burnished gold gleamed again. The damage to Sanguinius' mask was repaired. More than ever he felt like a fraud, a pretender to the primarch's glory. Now he had met one...

Now he had met one. The thought was still wondrous.

He was a relic, like Seth. A golden statue from a doomed age. Maybe the Imperium was finished, primarch or not. If it survived it would have to change. Everything was in flux. For one thousand five hundred years Dante had seen the Imperium locked in a stasis of its own making. In a handful of days the certainty of millennia had been swept aside. Guilliman promised reform.

Old as he was, weary as he was, Dante was glad he had lived to see this day. He would serve. Sanguinius himself had commanded it, and so it would be done.

Dante vowed never to share that vision with anyone, not even Roboute Guilliman. Whether it were real in any objective sense was not important; in every sense it was true.

The certainty of service calmed his troubled thoughts, but one thing nagged at him. Sanguinius' prophecy had not been disproved after all. The golden warrior would still be needed to stand at the Emperor's side in the final days. Perhaps he had a vital part yet to play.

Peace had come to Baal for a time. War racked the heavens. He hoped the prophesied days would not come to pass. He prayed that Sanguinius was wrong.

If that time when he stood at the Emperor's side were to come, it was not yet. Clatters of industry sounded across the desert again. The fleets of the Imperium crowded Baal's orbits. Hundreds of thousands of warriors walked its sands. His place was there, for the foreseeable future.

A heavy yet measured tread had Dante turn away from the view. Roboute Guilliman approached the group unarmoured, an apologetic look on his face, a data-slate in his hand. Dante had seen the tools of administration in the primarch's hand more often than he had weapons. The officers of the Blood Angels ceased their conversation instantly and knelt respectfully.

'My lord Commander Dante, Blood Angels, may I join you?'

'Of course, my lord. We are your servants to command,' said Dante. He did not kneel, as the primarch had commanded him not to, but he wanted to.

'My lords,' Guilliman said to the others. 'If you might give me a few moments alone with your Chapter Master, I have a few matters I would like to discuss with him.' Guilliman impressed Dante with his knack for command. His orders sounded more like invitations.

The others left Dante with the primarch. Last to go was Mephiston. Of all the surviving lords of the Blood Angels, he had changed the least, perhaps because he had already drifted furthest from them. He shared an inscrutable look with Dante, and departed, his cloak sweeping the air behind him.

The primarch did not speak immediately, but leaned on the parapet and looked out at the troops in the desert. The parapet's height relative to Guilliman's own meant he had to hunch to rest upon it. Huge muscles bunched under his clothes.

All his life Dante had been told tales of the primarchs. The stories did no justice to the being that stood next to him, not in terms of his power or stature, for Dante was wise enough to know the stories had exaggerated these attributes of the primarchs beyond belief. The real surprise was that the stories did no justice to the primarch's humanity. He was completely human, concentratedly so, as if the essence of mankind had been distilled a hundred times and poured into a giant's body. Beyond human, but more human for being so. He was a perfect exemplar of sacred mankind in every way, excepting the thick rope of a scar that ran lopsided across his throat.

The primarch swept his gaze across the desert, nodding approvingly to himself. When his eyes met Dante's again, Dante felt a common bond instead of the imperious gaze of a demigod. In Guilliman's eyes

were sorrow and ambition, impatience and humour, loss and resolve. They were sentiments Dante knew only too well, although despite this openness of feeling, Guilliman could not help but be commanding.

‘Are you sure I am not disturbing your conference with your warriors?’

‘We had nothing of import to discuss,’ said Dante. ‘We merely took a moment’s rest from our labours to observe the work here, and reflect on our salvation.’

‘You deserve rest. You have fought hard for a long time.’ Guilliman tapped the data-slate. ‘My historitors have struggled to create a concise history of your life, so numerous are your deeds.’

‘There is no rest, not while one enemy of the Imperium lives,’ said Dante.

‘True. Neither primarch nor Legiones Astartes were made to be idle,’ Guilliman said. He drew in a deep breath as a precursor to changing the subject. ‘My work here is almost done. The remnants of the tyranids are all but extirpated from Baal and Baal Secundus. They are a terrible enemy. They would be difficult to defeat without our other foes to distract us. This time has a plenitude of horrors to show me. You have done well.’

‘Whatever victory I won, and that is debatable, Lord Regent, it is not enough,’ said Dante.

‘It is as well as can be expected,’ said Guilliman. ‘This hive fleet, the Leviathan, it has been dealt a powerful blow. This tendril has been wiped out. You have saved billions of lives through your sacrifice. I would say that is enough. I leave this sector in capable hands.’

‘You are leaving then, my lord?’

Guilliman nodded. ‘Soon enough. I am glad to have arrived here in time to save you. It will make my task a little less impossible.’ He smiled. They shared the joke. The task was impossible. ‘I will see your worlds secure before moving on.’ He looked out again; finding what he saw satisfactory, he turned his back on the desert and lavished his full attention on Dante. It took all the commander’s will to hold his gaze.

‘The genesis machines are operating correctly. You will be able to begin creating Primaris Space Marines of your own within the week, and put all these new neophytes you have created to use. I trust my warriors are settling in to their new quarters?’

‘They are, my lord,’ said Dante. It was he that needed to adjust, not they. The Arx no longer felt like his home. The older generation Space Marines were in a decided minority.

‘Good. There are enough of them to bring all the Sanguinian bloodline Chapters back to full strength. I appreciate the adjustment for you will be difficult, but they are experienced warriors, and mighty. I am in the process of establishing a number of new Chapters, also of your gene-father’s bloodline.’

‘We will extend to them the same friendship we do to all of the Blood, my lord,’ said Dante.

‘I know you will, and it is good that it is so, for before I go I shall formalise the obvious influence you have over your brother Chapters.’ He became distant a moment. ‘Now is the time for great leaders.’

‘My lord?’

Guilliman’s eyes refocused. ‘To that end, my Mechanicus have begun the work to recover the wreck of the *Blade of Vengeance*. It can be salvaged, and it will be rebuilt.’

‘The effort to take it into the void alone will be monumental, my lord,’ said Dante.

‘I have the resources, Dante. I will expend them as I see fit.’

‘I thank you. It is a fine gesture.’

‘It is no gesture. You will need it.’

Guilliman placed a hand upon Commander Dante’s shoulder and smiled sadly.

‘Listen, son of my brother. You have witnessed much, I sense in you your weariness. The Emperor never told me how long the Space Marines were supposed to live, but I suspect he never envisaged any living quite so long as you.’

‘I am weary, my lord, it is true, but I shall not stint in my service.’

‘I do not think you will. As I understand it from these records, you have carried the mantle of Imperial hero for a very long time. I am here now, my son. Be no longer afraid. Put aside your weariness. You need not masquerade as my brother any longer, for a real primarch walks among men again.’

‘I meant no deception or pridefulness, my lord.’

Guilliman smiled and squeezed Dante’s pauldron. The metal creaked at the pressure his bare hand exerted. ‘I know plenty about men being worshipped when they would rather not be. The error is a common one, and it is not yours. You have nothing to feel shame for. I offer you relief, not condemnation. Remove your helmet.’

Dante took off Sanguinius’ mask, exposing his aged features to Guilliman’s scrutiny. The primarch had seen him without armour while Dante recovered, but he felt naked before Guilliman’s gaze in a way he had not before.

‘I must soon leave Imperium Nihilus,’ said Guilliman. ‘My final mission here was to reinforce you and your Chapter’s successors, to shore up the defence of the Imperium in this segmentum. To...’ He let his words die in his mouth, and began again. ‘Dante, I am afraid I am going to add to your burdens. The Blood Angels and their successors are needed more than ever. You need no longer allow men to see you as my brother, but I cannot let you retreat from the role of hero. I am going to name you Warden of Imperium Nihilus, commander of all Imperial forces north of the Great Rift. I must return over the Cicatrix Maledictum soon. Now I have found someone who will strive in my stead, I may. The situation here, though dire, is not as bad as I feared, while that in the Imperium remains parlous.’

‘I understand. I will do my best.’

‘Your best is more than I could wish for.’ Guilliman looked overhead. Baal Primus and Baal Secundus continued their slow waltz around Baal as they always had, only Baal Primus was now dead, and upon the southern hemisphere the daemoniac rune of Ka’Bandha’s name leered in bright white bone. The skulls of millions of tyranids, from void ships to vermin gatherers, had been stacked to create the sigil.

‘Look at that,’ said Guilliman. ‘The arrogance of the Neverborn remains as great as it ever was. But it is we who remain, and it is we who shall prevail. Dante, there is a lesser task I will set you.’ He lifted his hand up to encompass three worlds. ‘These planets were hells. For generations we have recruited the strong over the weak, in the belief it makes our warriors better. I do not think this is so. Cruel men make cruel warriors make cruel lords. We need to be better. We need to rise over the need for violence and recognise other human qualities in our recruits. Your Chapter has ever understood this. If we do not, then we will fall prey to our worst excesses, the kind of thing that that represents.’ He pointed at Ka’Bandha’s name. ‘It has long been in your capability to transform these worlds. Baal Primus is dead, but you need not let your remaining people suffer unnecessarily. Will they fight any better for dwelling on a world that kills them? By sacrificing their children to the Emperor’s service, they have earned a better life. Once you have torn that blasphemy down, raise up the population of Baal Secundus. Teach them what we are fighting for. A line must be drawn between what is good and what is evil, for if the Great Enemy comes with offers of power to a wretch, what reason does he have to refuse hell if he dwells in it already?’ Guilliman was tense. Dante had not expected that in the Lord of Ultramar. Guilliman was impatient to change things. He was angered by what he had found upon his rebirth, and he was not hiding it.

‘You must find the strength to continue, Commander Dante,’ said Guilliman. ‘There are very few warriors like you in the galaxy any more. I need every exemplar of heroism I can find. Please do not disappoint me.’

‘I will not, my lord regent.’

Guilliman smiled at him again, and reached out to Dante. Dante extended his hand. The primarch’s

fingers engulfed his hand, gauntlet and all.

‘I know you will not. I am counting on you to prove me right.’

Fourteen weeks later, the Indomitus Crusade pulled away from the Baal system. Behind it left the skeleton of new orbitals and shipyards over the prime world, and multiple ships of Mechanicus fleets attending to their construction. Dante waited for every engine stack to burn bright on the ships before sending the order to his own fleet to open fire on Baal Primus. *Bloodcaller* symbolically loosed its torpedoes first.

The day was clear. Baal Primus was large in the sky. Dante could track each flaring cyclonic torpedo as it fell towards the dead moon. The assembled fleets of the Blood were a shadow of their former selves, but mighty enough to kill a world nevertheless.

Roboute Guilliman went to a fiery salute. Rings of flame burst on Baal Primus’ airless plains, gone as soon as they were made, but potent enough to render Ka’Bandha’s monument to bone dust. Macrocannons joined the demolition, and lances, until all the force of the Space Marines warfleet was employed in erasing the daemon’s name.

Guilliman’s ships rapidly receded into twinkling lights, leaving Dante an insurmountable task. Dante looked down from the top of the Sanguis Corpusculum. Chapters in liveries old and new looked back.

‘My lord warden,’ said Adanicio, kneeling and offering up the Axe Mortalis to Dante. ‘The Chapters of the Blood await your command.’

Dante took the haft of his weapon in silence. Slowly he raised it over his head.

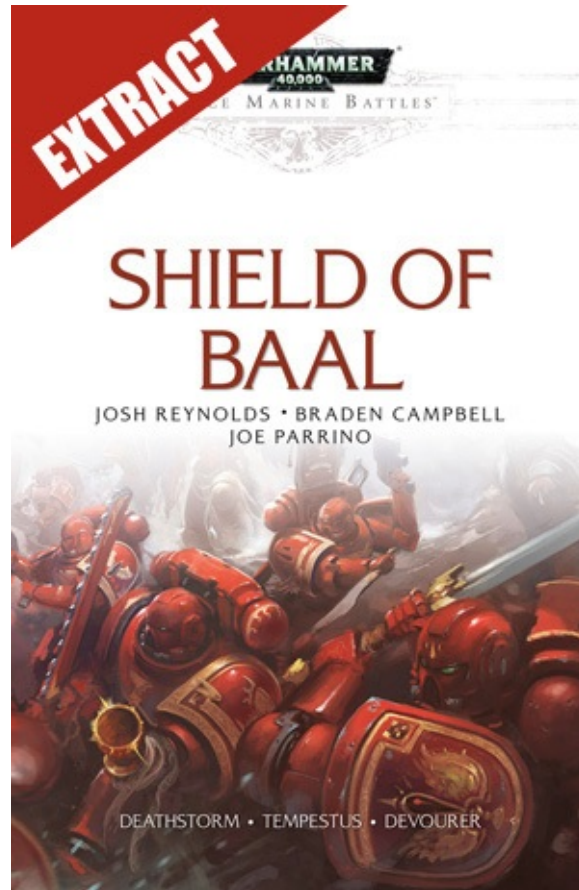
‘For Sanguinius and the Emperor!’ he roared.

‘For Sanguinius! For the Emperor!’ tens of thousands of Primaris Space Marines roared back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Shield of Baal*.



The black flesh of the void was torn asunder by a sudden eruption of red as *Blade of Vengeance*, flagship of the Blood Angels fleet, thundered into real space, weapons batteries roaring out a brutal announcement of arrival. More ships followed, plunging out of the warp like coursing hounds. The massed batteries of the fleet joined those of the flagship in a dull, pulsing war-hymn. The burning remains of the Cryptus System's defence monitors were swept aside by the song, the detritus of their final heroic stand against the enemy washed away by volley after volley of high-powered energy beams.

The audience for whom this sudden performance was intended was not appreciative. The vast shapes of the outlying bio-ships of the tyranid hive fleet, their bloated, shimmering forms faintly reflecting the deadly red light of Cryptus's twin suns, reeled and shuddered like wounded animals as the fusillade cracked their shells and ruptured the soft contents.

The Blood Angels fleet swept forwards with slow deliberation, bombardment cannons sweeping aside the swarms of escort drones which leapt from the flanks of the massive bio-ships and spiralled into death with unseemly eagerness.

Such was the considered opinion of Captain Karlaen, as he watched the performance unfold through the massive vista-port of the flagship. Ships moved across his vision, pummelling one another in a grand dance of life and death, duty and instinct, honour and abomination. The arched, cathedral-like space of the vessel's tacticum-vaults echoed with the relentless song of war. Karlaen could feel the roar of every cannonade through the deck-plates beneath his feet and in the flicker of every hololith display as enemy volleys spattered across the battle-barge's void shields.

This battle was merely a microcosm of a greater engagement which now spread across the Cryptus System and the Red Scar Sector. The monstrous shadow of Hive Fleet Leviathan, as the Ordo Xenos had classified this particular xenos incursion, stretched across countless worlds, being enveloping Segmentums Ultima, Tempestus and Solar. Worlds were being scoured clean by the Great Devourer, and even the most sacred sites of the Imperium were under threat, including Baal, home world of the Blood Angels.

When the bow-wave of Hive Fleet Leviathan washed across the Cryptus System, the Imperium had met it with all of the strength that the Astra Militarum, Adepta Sororitas and the household troops of the ruling Flaxian Dynasty could muster. But orbital defences and massed gun-lines had proven unequal to the task. Within a cycle, tyrannic spores were darkening the skies of every major world within the Cryptus System. And now, at last, the Blood Angels and Flesh Tearers Space Marine Chapters had arrived to deprive the monster of its feast. Though the system was lost, they could at least diminish the biomass that the hive fleet might recycle and use against Baal.

All of this passed across Karlaen's mind as he watched the Blood Angels fleet engage the enemy. Battle was a thing of vivid colour and riotous fury, even in the cold, airless void of space, and he felt something in him stir as he considered it – like a persistent, red hum deep below the surface of his thoughts. It had

been with him since the day of his Sanguination, but familiarity did not breed affection. His reflection stared back at him from within the slightly shimmering surface of the vista-port. A battered face, blunt and square and lacking all but a trace of its former good looks – acid scars pitted his cheeks and jaw; his hair was a grizzled golden stubble that clung stubbornly to his scalp and his nose had been shattered and rebuilt more than once. A bionic eye occupied one ruined socket, and the magna-lens of the prosthetic orb whirred to life as he examined his reflection, seeking out some niggling imperfection that he could not name.

He was clad, as was his right and honour as commander of the First Company, in the blessed plate of Terminator armour. It was the toughest and most powerful form of personal armour ever developed by the Imperium of Man: a heavy blood-red shell of ceramite-bonded plates, chased with gilding and brass, reinforced by sections of plasteel and adamantium and all of it powered by thick bundles of electrical fibres and internal suspensor-plates.

It had taken twenty red-robed Chapter serfs and dull, cog-brained servitors to encase him within it, hours earlier, when the prospect of a boarding action first reared its head – they had worked feverishly, connecting fibre bundles to nodes using spidery, mechanical limbs which possessed the inhuman dexterity required for such a precise task. Others had cleared air and build-up from the pistons and pneumatic servo-muscles that enabled him to move, while the senior serfs, their gilded masks betraying no emotion, polished the ceramite with sweet smelling unguents and blessed oils, awakening the primitive soul of the ancient relic, stirring it to wrathful waking. The armour was heavy and powerful, and, in those moments when he succumbed to the lure of poetry, Karlaen thought that it might be the closest thing going to the Word of the God-Emperor made harsh reality.

Karlaen raised a hand, his fingers tracing the outline of the Crux Terminatus on his left shoulder plate. It was said that the symbol contained a shard of the Emperor's own Terminator armour, which had been shattered in that final, catastrophic duel with the Arch-Traitor in ages past. At the thought, Karlaen's breath hitched in his throat, and his vision blurred, as the red hum grew louder, now pounding where it had pulsed, as if a thousand hammers were beating on the walls of his skull, fighting to be free. For a moment, his vision blurred, and he saw a different face, not his own familiar battered features, but *a handsome and radiant face which he recognised but could not name, twisted in loss and pain the likes of which no mortal could bear, and he heard the snap of great wings, and felt the rush of heat and pain* and his fingers touched the surface of the void-hardened glass.

He closed his eyes. Swallowed thickly. Opened his eyes. He looked up at the stained glass which marked the circumference of the vista-port. It showed scenes from Imperial history – the discovery of Sanguinius on Baal Secundus by the Emperor; Sanguinius, angel-winged and radiant, taking command of the Ninth Legion; other scenes, dozens, hundreds, all depicting the glorious history of the Blood Angels, a history which had shaped Karlaen, and made him who he was today. *I am Karlaen, he thought. I am Captain of the First, the Shield of Baal, and I am true to myself. I am not flesh, to be swept up in the blood-dimmed tide, but stone. And stone does not move or yield to those red waters, no matter how they crash.* The hum faded, hammer blows becoming taps, and the pressure retreated as it always had. Irritated with himself, he concentrated on the world beyond the curtain of void war.

Asphodex – it was an inelegant word for an inelegant world. Beyond the shifting, shimmering distortion of the battle-barge's void shield, behind the bloated shapes of the bio-ships which clustered about its atmosphere like feeding ticks, Asphodex roiled in its death throes. The magna-lens of Karlaen's bionic eye whirred to its next setting, bringing the world into stark relief. The heavy grey clouds which shrouded the atmosphere were shot through with infected-looking strands of purple, each one squirming with billions of tiny shapes. The lens clicked again, focusing on the bio-ships clustered about the world's

poles. As they moved across the atmosphere, he could see corresponding disturbances in the clouds. Someone joined him at the vista-port. 'They are feeding,' Karlaen said, out loud.

'Yes,' Sanguinary High Priest Corbulo said softly. Clad in crimson power armour edged with white, he was the spitting image of the face which haunted the black dreams and red memories of Karlaen and every Space Marine of the Blood Angels Chapter. His voice, too, throbbed at the roots of Karlaen's mind, stirring to life ancient thoughts which were not his own. Corbulo was a ghost, though whether of the Chapter's past or its future, none could say. 'That is what they do, captain.'

'They will strip the planet of all life soon,' Karlaen continued. He had seen planets caught in the grip of the Great Devourer before, and had calculated Asphodex's chances of survival on an idle whim. The planet was doomed. He looked at Corbulo. 'Why am I here, Master Corbulo? I should be making ready to—'

'To what, Captain Karlaen?' Corbulo asked. His voice was gentle, but resonant, like the crash of waves against a distant shore. He looked at Karlaen, and his eyes caught and held Karlaen's own. They were deep and pale and powerful, and Karlaen felt the red hum in his head grow in strength. He looked away. 'You are exactly where you should be, captain.' Corbulo spoke with such surety that Karlaen could not help but feel an atavistic thrill course through him.

'As you say, master,' Karlaen said. He kept his face stiff and still.

Corbulo smiled, as if he could sense Karlaen's reluctance. 'I cannot help but feel as if you doubt me, brother,' he said.

'Detecting doubt – or worry, anger, or any other emotion for that matter – on Karlaen's face is a skill akin to the detection of geological shifts on Baal, Corbulo. One must know where to look for cracks in the stone. Isn't that right, brother?'

Both Karlaen and Corbulo turned as Commander Dante, Chapter Master of the Blood Angels, strode towards them, his golden artificer armour gleaming in the reflected light of the hololiths that studded the tacticum-vaults. His features were hidden, as ever, behind the golden mask which was said to have been modelled on the features of Sanguinius himself.

Karlaen inclined his head. 'As you say, commander.'

Dante looked at Corbulo. He gestured to Karlaen. 'You see? Stone,' he said. 'Karlaen is the rock upon which the First Company stands.' He looked at Karlaen, his gaze taking in everything and missing nothing. Karlaen, for his part, could only hold his superior's stare for a few moments before it became unbearable. Dante was the oldest living Space Marine in the Imperium who could still function outside of the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, and he carried with him the weight of history wherever he went. Like Corbulo, his very presence stirred the red hum in Karlaen's head to fretful agitation.

Karlaen made to sink to one knee, but Dante gestured irritably. 'No,' he said. 'No, I am in no mood for such gestures today, captain.'

Stung, Karlaen straightened, the joints of his armour wheezing and hissing in protest. Dante crossed his arms and gazed up at the vista-port. The flagship shivered slightly around them, and the void shield writhed as it was struck. Dante said, 'Report, captain.'

On firmer ground now, Karlaen cleared his throat. 'The first wave of the assault is preparing for their descent to Phodia,' he said, referring to the principal city of Asphodex. He did not think it tactful to mention that, as Captain of the First Company, he should have been overseeing those preparations.

'You are wondering why you are here, rather than there,' Dante said. It was not a question. Karlaen looked at Corbulo.

'You see, he is too disciplined to ask, though I have no doubt that curiosity is eating at him.'

'Discipline is the armour of a man's soul,' Corbulo said.

Karlaen looked back and forth between them, vaguely concerned. When the summons had come, he had not known what to expect. Was the honour of leading the vanguard to be taken from him? The question would not have occurred to him, once upon a time. But now, after... His mind shied away from the thought. Shadows clustered at the edges of his memory, and voices demanded to be heard. He closed his eye and shook his head, banishing shadows and voices both. When he looked up, he realised that both Dante and Corbulo were watching him. Corbulo reached out and clapped a hand to his arm.

‘I hear them as well, brother. Do you wish to know what they say?’ he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, and his eyes full of quiet contemplation.

Karlaen ignored the Sanguinary Priest and looked at Dante. ‘I wish only to know what is required of me, my lord. I am the Shield of Baal, and I would serve as you see fit.’

Dante was silent for a moment. Then, he said, ‘You are still leading the assault, captain. And Phodia is still your target. But I require more than simple battlefield logistics from you this time.’ He looked at Corbulo.

The Sanguinary High Priest said, ‘Augustus Flax.’

Karlaen blinked. ‘The Governor of Asphodex.’ Part of his responsibilities as Captain of the First was to know everything there was to know about potential battlefields – everything from weather patterns to cultural dialects was of potential importance when planning for war, and Karlaen had studied and synthesised all of it.

He knew everything there was to know about the Flaxian Dynasty, and its current head. Augustus Flax had assumed the gubernatorial seat at the tender age of seventeen standard Terran years, after his father, the previous office holder, had been murdered by separatists in a civil war which had briefly, though bloodily, rocked the Cryptus System. Flax was an old man now, and his reign had been an unmitigated success, as far as these things were concerned. Karlaen felt a small stab of pity for the man – the system he had reportedly fought so hard to retain control of and hold together was now being devoured out from under him.

‘Yes. I – we – need him found, brother.’ Corbulo looked towards the vista-port. Silent explosions cascaded across the face of the void, as ships continued their duel. Karlaen cocked his head. Questions filled his mind, but he clamped down on them. His was not to question, merely to serve.

‘Then I will find him, Master Corbulo,’ he said.

‘He or his children will do,’ Corbulo said. ‘Failing that, a sample of their blood.’

More questions arose, but Karlaen ignored them. If Corbulo was here, and this mission was being undertaken at his counsel, then there could be only one reason for it. Corbulo’s overriding passion was no secret. The Sanguinary High Priest had one desire above all others: the elimination of the twin plagues which afflicted the sons of Sanguinius, whether they were Blood Angels, Flesh Tearers or Angels Encarmine. Corbulo had dedicated his life to unravelling the secrets of the Red Thirst and the Black Rage, and had spent centuries on the hunt for anything which might alleviate the suffering of Sanguinius’s children.

Karlaen bowed. ‘It will be done, on my honour and the honour of the First Company. Or else I shall die in the attempt.’ He straightened. ‘I will need to requisition a gunship, or a drop pod...’

‘Speed is of the essence, brother,’ Dante said. ‘Time grows short, and Asphodex dies even as we speak. This world will be consumed by the beast, and we do not have time for you and your Archangels to attempt an entry from orbit,’ he said. ‘Report to the teleportarium. Your men will be waiting for you there.’

‘Teleportation,’ Karlaen said. He grimaced. There were few things that could stir the embers of fear in Karlaen’s heart, but teleportation was one of them. There was something wrong with it, with how it

worked. There was no control, no precision, only blind luck. He shook himself slightly. He knew that Dante would not have authorised it if it were not necessary. Countless battles had been won with just such a strategy, and Karlaen reassured himself that this time would be no different.

He looked at Dante. 'As you command, my lord. I will not fail you.'

'You never have, captain,' Dante said.

Karlaen turned away and took one last look at the war-torn heavens and the dying world. There was nothing but blood and death lurking beneath those grey clouds. If Augustus Flax, or any of his kin, still lived, it would not be for long. Yet his orders were clear.

It was his duty to find Augustus Flax, and the Shield of Baal would see it done.

An extract from *Shield of Baal*.

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